

BAD IDEA
BILLIONAIRES

That One
FLING

DANIELLA
BRODSKY

THAT ONE FLING

BAD IDEA BILLIONAIRES BOOK 5
DANIELLA BRODSKY

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Epilogue](#)

ONE

BEC

I *will not yell at my boss. I will not yell at my boss.*

But I've done all the positive things. I've meditated. I've yoga'd. I've burned sage and worn happy colors. I even ate a shiny red apple, which is supposed to give you tolerance and patience by some miracle of fiber and a blood sugar boost.

And yet, I'm glaring at him as he stands at the back of the library angrily gesticulating at Teresa to wrap up the children's storytelling hour because it's going over by twelve minutes, and I can't stop myself anymore.

I mean, she's even got little Louie engaged. Louie is *never* engaged. Usually that five-year-old is running rings around the children's area, his mother's brow so creased I want to run over and hug her. But at the moment, he's in the front row, quiet as anything, hanging onto Teresa's every word. It's something about the way she speaks so animatedly and uses her hands like a shadow puppet to act out the crocodile. Pure talent.

I make my way around to the back of the room, where Noah King is tapping his watch face and has his jaw so set, I'm afraid it might lock up. Which, honestly, would make my

day. I'm so sick of his negativity ruining my dream job as head librarian in the brand-new library in my own hometown.

A year ago, I never would have believed it was possible that such a world-class library would exist here. But the Wheatley billionaires have changed all of that, investing in the community so that the people who love it as much as I do won't have to leave just to make ends meet. And here's Noah King, trampling all over the good fortune.

I should keep my mouth shut for a number of reasons. But, I'm a people fixer. And part of me screams that I can get him to come around. Though I don't do that anymore. Because people are meant to solve their own problems. I have evolved.

Are you sure, though? I mean, look how hot he is.

And that is precisely why I need to stay away. His personality mixed with mine? Disaster. His personality and my personality and a boss/employee relationship? Super-duper disaster.

I slowly walk toward him along the side of the crowd, trying to keep calm. "Noah, I know you're concerned about the time going over, but Teresa has made incredible progress with some of the kids in this group, and it's worth us being a bit behind."

His tight smile twitches on one side as he inspects me with that disarming chocolate gaze of his. How do his eyes *do* that? It's like they're looking all the way inside my brain. He opens his mouth to speak, and my breath catches at the sight of his lips parting.

What was I going on about?

“Schedules are for scheduling, Becca,” he says.

I can already see me and Teresa laughing hysterically at that, imitating his serious tone and that posh accent he brought back from Cambridge University. Thank God for her because if I couldn’t make fun of him at the Re-Surf club after work, I don’t think I’d make it through.

“Bec,” I correct for the fiftieth time, as I’m snapped out of my momentary lapse of attraction. *See, you’ve got this under control.* “Of course, there’s a schedule. But this is a people-centered space. And—”

“And people like to know that when they show up to hear an author speak about kitchen gardens at 11:15 precisely, that this is when it will begin.”

I don’t like being spoken over. In fact, it’s one of my biggest pet peeves. It shows complete disregard for what the other person has to say. And God help me, I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize my job, but I cannot keep my mouth shut. “*Nolan,*” I begin, with a dramatic pause, which is what I do every time he gets my name wrong.

He rolls his eyes, which I read as an attempt to make me feel childish, but it doesn’t work. When it comes to the right thing being done, and unfortunately, to *convincing* people of the right thing needing to be done, I’m like a dog with a bone. “—I know exactly which members will be attending the author appearance. Half of them are here already. And the other half come more for the coffee and cookies than the main event.

Most of the time, it's impossible to get them to move to their seats so the speaker can get started."

"Well, if you know so much about all of this, I might just promote you to my job and head back to Sydney, where I should be."

He smooths down his tie and rebuttons his suit jacket, doing this thing with his shoulders that reveals the muscles hiding beneath. I try not to look. I think I succeeded. *Maybe. Probably.*

I can't fuck this up. This is my dream job. And a asshole is not going to be the reason I lose it.

"If you don't want to be here, then you *should* go back," I say. As soon as the words are out, I regret them, and not only because of the flinch he responds with.

He inspects my face in a disarming way that freezes me in his gaze, then taps his watch once more and walks off without turning back.

FIVE HOURS LATER, Teresa and I are side-by-side on leather barstools at the Re-Surf club bar for half-price happy hour. The place is spectacular. To think a couple of years ago, we didn't even have a pub in Magnolia Shores! Well, look at this place now.

Vintage surf posters are everywhere in the vastly lofted space, which is mostly glass, to make the most of the beach views. And, boy, does it. The sea is crystalline, and the surf is soft and lazy, lapping at the shore and slipping back like it's

napping. Watching the foamy edge ebb and flow along the sand is hypnotic and makes the crisp glass of local pinot gris that much more delicious.

“I can’t believe I’m back,” I say, leaning my back against the bar to scope out the crowd.

“And *I* can’t believe I didn’t have to move away to work as a librarian,” Teresa says. She’s twenty-three, just a couple of years younger than me, and had reached out through her graduate program’s mentor initiative at just the right time.

With her ultra-long braids of pink-blond hair and expertly applied cat-eyeliner, Teresa has the cool factor of an off-duty supermodel. Her skin is tanned from being back here in her hometown, and she’s got a smile on her face that betrays how truly happy she is.

“You did so well today. You’re really gifted, you know?”

“Yes, I know,” she says. I’ve never met anyone with her brand of confidence and directness. “But Noah didn’t seem to think so.”

At the sound of his name, I choke on my sip. She pats my back and leans over on her barstool to see if I’m okay. I catch my breath and wave her off. “Thanks. I’m fine. It’s just that you shouldn’t pay any mind to Noah King’s ideas of how things should run at a library. He doesn’t understand that it’s not about bottom lines, schedules, and figures like the rest of the Wheatley businesses. I don’t even understand what they were thinking putting him in that job.”

“Beats me. I mean, what’s this?” She does a professional-quality impression of Noah tapping his watch face.

“A bosshole?” I say a bit too loudly and deliver my emphatic imitation of the line I’d been waiting to share with her all day. “Schedules are for scheduling, *Becca*,” I say, tilting my head with emphasis, just as I see the bosshole in question make his way toward us at the bar.

I clamp my hand over my mouth, but Teresa doesn’t catch on. She’s too busy jabbing her index finger aggressively against her watch face.

I gulp when I realize he’s onto us—something about those chocolate eyes, I couldn’t say what exactly—but Teresa’s back is to him and she doesn’t take note when I shake my head, my eyes wild.

“Becca!” she continues, harnessing her best proper Sydney private-school accent, “it’s just that I’m in love with you and your sexy little vintage vixen look. And I don’t know what to do with those feelings. I’m a man, after all.”

Instead of pretending it hasn’t happened and sitting as far away as humanly possible, Noah makes his way straight toward us.

TWO

BEC

His chiseled jaw twitches as he scrubs at it, but he gives us nothing else as he leans against the bar, one elbow propped up so his arm looks obscenely muscular in that suit sleeve.

There's also a view of his white shirt underneath and it's hugging him in such lovely ripples that I nearly forget we just insulted him and laughed really hard while doing it. Teresa even snorted just as he approached.

His default look is pissed-off, so it's hard to tell how angry he is.

“Ladies,” he says. There is no inflection. Like zero.

I gulp.

“Did you like Bec's impression of you?” Teresa asks.

We both turn to stare.

There are no words. None.

I blink. A lot. And from the corner of my eye, I swear one side of his mouth curls.

“She does that for all the people we work with,” she says.

“Oh, yeah,” I say, nodding slowly, trying to uncrease my brow.

“Why don’t you do that one of me?” she says.

My eyes pop like coins. “Yeah, the one of you,” I say, trying to buy some time. “Nah, I’m sure Noah isn’t interested in that.” I shake my head and toss a palm for emphasis.

“Oh, come on, Bec. We’re not on the schedule now.”

I turn purple.

“Oh, I see what you did there,” Teresa says, pointing a pistol finger Noah’s way. Why isn’t she more nervous? The girl *cannot* be wobbled. I need to be more like her. But since Noah showed up, I can’t manage to be anything *but* wobbled.

“So?” Teresa says.

I don’t mean to, but I kick her under the bar.

Of course, Noah catches it and bites his bottom lip in a way that smooths his chin dimple.

Oh, that’s so cute. Now you miss that little indent in his chin.

What? No, I don’t.

Uh-huh.

I HAVE no choice but to do an impression. “Look at me, I’m Teresa. I’m so outrageous. I say whatever’s on my mind.”

Teresa sneers.

Noah emits a throaty laugh.

Shit, he is trouble.

Thankfully, he orders a scotch, neat. Then takes it outside.

“I’m so *sorry!*” I say to Teresa when he’s out of earshot. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Well, I do! You have the hots for him.”

“What? I. Do. Not.”

“Oh-*kay*,” she singsongs, waggling her brows ridiculously.

I let out a sigh. “Please forgive me. I didn’t mean that unkind impression I did of you.”

“You did.”

“You’re right. I did. But it’s just that I’m in awe of you. Nothing seems to faze you. You say what you need to say and forge ahead. You remind me of my cousin, Amy.”

“*The Amy?*”

“Yup.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. She’s legendary.”

“Well, you’re pretty legendary yourself,” I say, meaning it. “You’re so good at your job. And you...you just occupy your space in this world in such a natural way. It’s very special.”

“I forgive you.”

“Thank you.”

“But only because everyone gets tongue-tied in front of their crush.”

“I—”

“Uh-huh.” She raises a palm to my face so I don’t embarrass myself by lying.

THREE

BEC

Twenty minutes later, I sigh with relief as I leave Re-Surf. That whole thing with Noah was so awful.

But I have the gallery opening tonight and I'm thrilled. I don't even know who the artists are. Amy invited me and I'm so excited to spend time with her. Since she's just had her first child, this is a rare social event for her.

She said this is a work obligation—something to do with Lucas's new hotel that he can't stop talking about. He's bought a whole bunch of these paintings for the newly constructed villas and gathering spaces, and this is just another way he's helping this community to really come into its own.

I couldn't say if I'm going to see photographs, paintings, or, I don't know, bubble wrap sculptures. (Which is an actual thing I saw in Boston.) And that is unlike me. But I've been so busy with the library, I haven't had a second to open the email invite she forwarded to me.

There is a slight chill in the air now that a purple shade has pulled itself over the late summer sky. Soon it will be time to bring a jacket to work. *Jacket* makes me think *Noah's jacket*,

and then *Noah's muscles*. And I finally realize I'm pressing the button on my car's key fob, but nothing is happening.

Wait, what?

My battery must be dead. But I'm good about charging it. In fact, it's so easy because Finn made sure to put charging spots right in the first row of the library's parking lot. How can my battery be dead?

I check the connection at the charging point, and it seems to be hooked up properly, but there's a blue light illuminated on the charger, and I don't remember seeing that before.

I pull it out and reconnect to see if that helps. I feel like I'm working the computer help desk, suggesting yet again that the person shut down and restart, then check that everything's plugged in properly. Only, in the blazing sun, on yet another hottest day on record, I'm a fair bit less patient than I would be with the library patrons.

I wait, and sure as shit, the blue light goes right back on.

Grumbling, I try once more, this time with a bit more aggression to my movements. Shove charger in, see blue light, remove charger, jab key fob. Nothing happens.

"Problem?" Of course, it's Noah.

And his muscles. Hee hee.

Now you're just being mean.

"Nope."

"Really? Because it looks like you're pressing the button to open the car, but nothing's happening."

“Well, looks can be deceiving.”

He screws up his mouth and nods, but the rumpled brow is so annoyingly not buying it.

So, what do I do? Keep talking. “I’m just trying something.”

More nodding.

“With my car.”

Nodding, rumpling, and now, wait, is that...*smiling?*

“Are you *laughing* at me?”

The nodding stops abruptly. Well, at least I’ve achieved something.

Only the rumpling gets *rumplier*. “Not at all. I’m just trying to offer some help.”

“*Are you?*”

He jerks. “Yes.”

Oh, now I feel bad. Is this some kind of game he’s playing? Or *is he* trying to help? And do I *want* his help?

I stand there, trying not to look at his pecs. Not knowing what to say.

“Well, okay then. The charger doesn’t seem to be charging.”

“It’s not actually a charger. It’s a converter. Common misconception. I believe this blue light means the car is not accepting the charge. Can you pop the hood?”

“I think so, but gosh, I’m part of the *commonly misconceiving*, so...” I roll my eyes.

“You don’t know how to?”

“I didn’t say that.” I press the little button to release the hidden key from the fob, then fumble to open it manually for the very first time in front of my infuriating boss, then slide into the driver’s seat, looking all around the dash. Jesus, there are so many buttons. *If I were going to put a button for opening a hood somewhere, where would I put it?*

“Can’t find it?”

“I’m just—” I let it hang because it’s so obviously a lie, I’d rather spend the effort trying to find the damn button than coming up with a pointless excuse.

Where is it?

I make the mistake of looking out the windshield. The smarmy look on his face while he scrubs at his chin makes me want to scream.

An idea pops into my head. Maybe it’s down beneath the steering wheel. I lift the bar to release the seat and it goes back so quickly, popping at the last setting, that I let out a little scream.

“Okay?”

“Of course.”

Then, as dignified as I can, I lower my head under the steering wheel. This pushes my ass in the air. Nothing. I feel around in the darkness.

“Ahem.”

“Do people actually say that in real life?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you with your head all the way down there, and your—”

Don’t say it. Do not.

I untangle myself and smooth my hair down. “I—”

I’m taken aback because he saves me the humiliation of asking and reaches down—in the most infuriatingly effortless way—and flicks a lever without even looking at it. The hood pops right up.

If he can be dignified, then so can I. “Thank you.”

One side of his mouth quirks. “That couldn’t have been easy for you to say.”

“Ah, there it is. Thank God, because I thought you were losing your touch.”

“Not yet.” Is it me or is his stare a dare?

He fiddles under the hood for a few minutes.

“Battery look okay?” I ask.

“This isn’t your battery. It’s the power control unit.” He points to the steel box with the orange cables running from it, formerly known to me as the battery.

Then walks around to the side and squats down to look underneath. I want to stop staring at the way his pants hug and crease around his thigh muscles, but I can’t seem to. “Everything looks fine under here where your battery is, but

we'll need to get your car fixed because you don't seem to be taking a charge. If this was a normal car, I could charge it with my Range Rover."

"Awesome."

"It's probably nothing major. I hear these things are often software update issues. Imagine your transportation being at the whim of constant software updates." He shakes his head. "But in the meantime, why don't you let me give you a lift home? Then you can deal with a tow in the morning."

"That's surprisingly kind of you, even if your delivery is confounding. But I was going to take my abnormally planet-friendly car all the way to White Sands for a gallery opening."

"What a coincidence," he replies, sarcastic as hell.

"*You're* going to the opening at White Sands Gallery?"

"Well, yes. As a matter of fact, I am."

"Oh, it's a work requirement or something, right?"

"Or something. So, are we going to do this?"

"Do *what*?"

"Drive together. Why, did you have something else in mind?" He quirks a brow.

All of my blood rushes to my face.

Run away. Run away.

"Let's go." I know there's meant to be a *thank you* there, and I tell myself I'll get there. But that first time has really taken a lot out of me.

THE RIDE along tree-lined country roads to the exhibition is roughly twenty-five minutes, which I discreetly check on my watch every time I think five minutes have passed. The first time it was two minutes, this second time it's only one and a half more.

Nobody has said anything yet in the three and a half minutes. I look at my watch. And ten seconds.

While I squirm in the leather seat and readjust my dress for the tenth time, Noah seems okay with it. He's got blues music playing through the expensive sound system and he notices before I do that I'm tapping my fingers on my thigh.

I gulp. Noah's eyes, my thighs. Oh my.

I gurgle a throaty laugh at my rhyme, then make it worse by covering my mouth with my palm like I'm hiding something.

"Good music," I say because if somebody doesn't speak, I might spontaneously combust.

He nods.

Well, he certainly has plenty to say at work. All negative. So maybe the silence is preferable.

Only, the jabs I can fight back against. This silence, on the other hand, is totally disconcerting.

Noah's silence feels solid, like something I need to wade through. Only I'm not in the proper gear. And I have no idea what that gear would be.

And why do you need to wade through it?

I don't.

“I should listen to the blues more. Every time I hear some, I think that. I especially love all those songs that the rock bands covered, like Led Zeppelin, and the Yardbirds. They sound so different, but they have that essence of...” I hold up a finger like I’m waiting for the word to be conducted in that solid silence toward me.

“Soul,” he answers for me.

“Yes!” Did I just exclaim in delight at Noah? I clear my throat and reach for safer ground. “Do you know anything about this show?”

“I do.”

“And *that* would be?”

He shoots me a look like he doesn’t appreciate me explaining to him how a conversation works.

He exhales loud and long. “My parents.”

At first, I think this is the artist’s name: My Parents. My brain teases at that until it works out that he’s talking about the people who raised him.

I turn to him. “Your parents are the artists showing at the gallery tonight?”

“Yup.” This time he doesn’t even take his eyes off the road.

Oh, this is interesting.

“That’s cool. How can I *not* know this about your parents?”

“I’m older than you. And we’re not exactly friends. My parents mainly concentrated on out-of-town traffic because there was no in-town traffic. But that’s changing.”

“And you’re part of that change.”

“Ironic. I have thought about that.”

There’s something there, but since I can’t even bring myself to say *thank you*, I’m certainly not going to push him to spill the drama of his childhood. *And you’re not ready for the kind of generosity of spirit and empathy that is bound to bring out.* And that.

“What type of art are they showing?”

He thumbs back at the covered haul in the trunk. “Mum’s a painter. Dad’s a sculptor.”

The way he says *mum* and *dad* is too humanizing. I don’t like the way my view of him is transforming before my eyes. “A man of many words. Are you purposely wanting me to draw each and every syllable...out of you?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On how you’re going to draw them out.”

“Are you *flirting* with me?”

“Do you *want me* to be flirting with you? Because from the way you keep blushing and staring at my chest, it makes me

think you might. But that you're just holding back because I'm your boss."

"I'm not—"

"And because you don't like me."

"—I don't *not*—"

"Stop. I have a fairly attuned bullshit meter."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yeah. And it was going off like crazy before when you and Teresa were trying to act like you treat everyone the way you treat me."

"Well..." I huff.

"I'm glad we straightened that out, then."

"Has anyone ever told you how infuriating you are?"

"Once or twice."

And now the time's flown. We're nearly there. I can tell from the turn we're making onto the Princess Highway, which is where the exhibition is located—in an awesome old barn turned gallery, replete with hay floor, weathered timber walls, and lofted steel roof.

"Well, maybe we *should* straighten this out," he says.

I gulp. Mainly because I picture him dragging a finger up my thigh. That's probably not what he means, though.

And it's *definitely* not what I should be thinking.

He veers off onto a lookout turnoff and we park facing the view. From our high position, the ocean appears to go on

forever. The moon is full and low, and the reflection sends glittering ripples over the water's surface. For a second, we sit in silence taking it in.

“Hmph.”

He sounds surprised. What? Has he never seen a breathtaking view that makes you question your own existence and why you feel like your whole life is changing in that very moment because of the person next to you, who is simultaneously making you furious and so turned on that you're squeezing your thighs together because you don't know what else to do?

Just me, then.

“I actually like you,” he says.

“But it's your first time talking with humans, and you don't know how to do it properly?”

That throaty laugh of his is followed by a smile. And that smile puts a big old grin on *my* face. Until I notice. And force it down.

Then he laughs and smiles again. And the whole thing happens again.

It's my turn to harrumph. “Fine! I actually like you, too.”

“But you don't know why?”

“Bingo.” Damn, can I say anything lamer?

“Oh, thank God, because you are driving me crazy. I can't stop thinking about you. It's like—”

“A sickness, right?”

“Exactly.”

Something breaks between us. The air in here is suddenly lighter and more flowy. My chest fills with it.

“Shall we see if there’s anything to it? I’m putting in my resignation tomorrow,” he says.

“Oh, you are so sexy right now.”

Again, his laugh. I watch his mouth, predicting the grin, feeling my own—but this time, he reaches out to trace the corner of my mouth, then along my bottom lip.

I will it not to, but it trembles beneath his touch.

I hear a gasp.

It’s mine.

My lips part and the pad of his finger explores the pillow of my lower lip. Oh, the gripping thighs have gone to Jell-O. And my chest heaves from lack of air.

Noah’s hands slip into my hair, grasping. Are they *shaking*? He tangles the length of my coiled ponytail in his fist and gently caresses the fluffy flyaways around my temple with his other hand.

My eyes shut, savoring the sensations. Suddenly, his nose is touching mine. The tips slide up and down, side to side. We’re like animals, feeling our way in an intense need to know each other. This taste gives me a hunger for more.

I let my fingertips trace that squared jaw. The slightest hint of a five o’clock shadow sends shivers up my spine. A tiny moan escapes.

Oh, he likes that.

Noah. Noah freaking King, grabs the side of my face, and with that other hand tightens his grip on my ponytail, and nudges me closer, closer. Time stops. His lips touch mine, soft, then searching, urgent. Oh, he knows what he's doing. I lose my mind a bit and writhe closer to him, stretching my seat belt.

He undoes it and yanks me closer. His arms are around me.

I'm lost in his kiss.

A passing car radio screams a loud punk howl and I suddenly realize what I'm doing.

I have to stop.

Only I can't.

I get as far as retreating my tongue from Noah King's mouth, but he promptly grabs the back of my head and regains his ground.

And now, he's slipping his hands underneath my ass and guiding me to sit on his lap.

And. I'm. Doing. It.

When I land on his lap, there's a solid erection ready for me. And knowing there's just a bit of material between us works like a lightning bolt to jolt me back to reality. My eyes pop open.

And there he is, holding me in that incomprehensible gaze. Only this time, an unmistakable layer of desire shades those brown eyes.

“What are we doing?” I whisper, breathless.

“Do I need to explain it to you? Aren’t you a librarian? Well, we started with some pretty intense touching. Then we —”

I put a finger to his lips. He kisses it. He’s shutting down my *shut up*. And it’s effective.

Now I let the finger slide between his lips and he’s sucking on it. And we’re both watching, and that solid erection is grinding into me. No. Wait, I’m grinding into *it*.

And yup, now it’s grinding back.

Fire spreads from the point of contact, curling my toes tightly in my round-toe patent leather pumps.

I try to pull my finger from his mouth, but he sucks harder.

I moan.

He yanks my finger out and starts kissing me again. This time it’s harder. Greedier.

I whisper into his mouth. “Are you really quitting?”

“Yup.”

I pull away.

“Why?”

He cocks his head. “Do you really want to have this conversation now?”

Nope. “Yes. Is it because of me?”

“Do you want it to be because of you?”

“Yes. Wait, no. I don’t know. You’re not really suited to this job, are you? I mean, is this some kind of punishment you’re being doled out?”

“Do you always say what you want to?”

“Yes.”

“Is it liberating?”

“Sometimes.”

“And other times?”

“Terrifying. I’m like, *get back in there, you judgmental, distance-creating commentary!* But it’s too late.”

He shakes his head.

“What?”

“I—I don’t know.” He smirks.

“But you’re still quitting?”

“You still want me to?”

I nod. Yes. This is too messy. He cannot be here in this... whatever this is.

He chews his bottom lip, his eyes still veiled in want, their insight otherwise illegible.

Did he want me to tell him to stay? That’s just ridiculous. I’m getting carried away in the ludicrously explosive connection between us. And that’s all there is to it. There’s a difference between lust and...and whatever other kinds of things my brain is reaching toward. And I’m not going to let either of those things get in the way of my job, which enables

me to help people—the people right here in Magnolia Shores—in the best way I know how.

“Yes,” I say. Only it comes out croaky and weak.

We kiss for another twenty-five minutes.

My lips are sore and tender as I roll my Cherry Dreams hi-gloss lipstick over them in the rearview outside the gallery.

I watch him watching me like I’m *his* cherry dream.

I smack my lips.

He growls.

I’m stupidly aware of his eyes on me as he holds open my car door, so I can get out.

My legs wobble. But his hand braces my forearm almost the second I realize my balance is off.

I pull my arm away.

He stares at the sight, obviously confounded by what he could have done wrong.

Yup. Me too.

But I’ve got enough to worry about at the moment.

“Not a word of this to anyone,” I say. I’m holding two small fabric-wrapped canvases he’s handed to me. “Just pretend everything is normal.”

He’s got four larger ones under one arm like they’re light as a feather. “Is this one of those times when you’re wishing your words would ‘get back in there?’”

I shoot him the look of death.

“Too soon?”

I quirk one side of my mouth because what the hell am I so angry about? I shared something and now he knows it. This is the way intimacy works.

But he’s Noah, the *Scheduler*.

A laugh slips out.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, I’ll get it out of you.”

“Oh yeah?” I hike a brow. “How?” We’re approaching the door of the gallery, which is lit outside by soft lights that make it look like a special present we’re about to peek inside. Noah leads us past that entrance and around to the back.

“Well, you seemed to really like the way I sucked on your finger.”

I try to roll my eyes, but my core clenches and my stomach drops at the sound of his voice saying the word *sucked*. I lose my balance. He’s there again, this time his hand around my waist.

“Thank you—for everything.” I recall how I bristled at his help earlier and found it so hard to say these two simple words, and try to be more gracious. It *is* nice, what he’s done. And mind-blowing. And naughty. But it feels so good. Why shouldn’t I let myself enjoy it?

“You okay?”

“As long as you don’t say the word *sucked* again, I will be.”

He throws his head back with laughter, then pulls me closer.

We’re nose to nose again, and if anyone’s looking out the window, they’ll see us.

“As long as you let me have a replay after this show, I won’t say anything about *sucking* you.”

“You just did!”

“And you loved it.”

My lips flutter. “You’re infuriating.”

“You love that, too.”

I cock my head like *what am I supposed to do with you?*

“Meet me after. Tomorrow, I give my notice.”

“Well, it would be a celebration, then.”

“Really?”

I nod. But already I’m not sure. It *has* been, well, *different*, having someone to dress for, to flick my curls just right for—if only to taunt him with how hot his enemy is. Maybe *because* I was his enemy. And liked it. The rivalry put a spring in my step and dug deep into something inside of me that needed challenging.

Well, challenge accepted. “But only if you let me take you to the library to pick out your book.”

“What do you mean, ‘my book?’”

“It’s my superpower.”

“You mean like mine is making you crazy in my front seat.”

“Stop it.”

“Deny it.”

Oh lord, I wish I could.

FOUR

NOAH

We go in through the back, so I can rest the frames against a wall. The room is dark and cold, and as Bec passes me the two canvases, I feel gooseflesh on her arm.

I lower the paintings to the ground, and run my fingers up and down her skin. Suddenly, I pull her into my arms, wrapping her close. I bury my head in her hair and breathe her in. Frenzied, I guide her lips to mine. The touch of her soft lips zaps straight through me. I graze my palms over her back and yank her closer. I need her to see what she's doing to me, but I stop short of pressing my rock-hard dick into her. Instead, I squeeze her upper arm. She moans and swipes a molten kiss at my eager mouth.

I hear my breath rushing, my chest rising and falling too rapidly. With a palm at the back of her head, I bring her deeper, plunge my tongue inside her eager mouth.

Things go blurry. Her cherry print dress is squeezed in my fist. I feel a slip of silk under there. I growl.

She dips her fingers beneath my collar, grabs at my back, hikes a leg around my waist and feels that rigid dick of mine. "Noah," she whispers, breathy, into my mouth.

That sends me over the edge. I hike her other leg up and back us into a wall, kissing her, running my hands over her curves like I need them.

Outside, there's a break in the music and I'm suddenly very aware that anyone could walk in. I try to pull back. But that only lasts a second until I'm back at her, devouring her mouth, claiming her for mine. I nearly say it: *mine*.

But I stop myself. And that seems to bring me back to reality.

"We should go," I say, lowering her down, and brushing off the front of my pants, like what we were just doing was perfectly normal, and what I'm doing now is also perfectly normal.

"Ready?" I say.

She looks shocked.

"We'll, umm, finish picking out my book later?"

She swallows, smiles, gets a wicked gleam in her eye, then nods. It's perfection.

I squeeze her palm, then lower it to her side, smooth my fingers over it, then put a few inches between us, and make my way out to the gallery.

The moment we step into the crowd, we've crossed a threshold. If my skin wasn't buzzing from that slight graze of my fingers along Bec's arm as she walked left and I went right, I'd think I'd imagined all that heat.

“Noah!” Mum’s in a flowy, paisley dress like Stevie Nicks, her long wavy hair unapologetically gray. Still willowy as ever, she cuts an enchanting form for anyone who looks her way.

I’m *still* taken by her. I mean, just look at these canvases. This latest show is full of oversize, moody abstract paintings, which appear to tame color to say exactly what she wants it to. Even as a kid, I knew she was blowing smoke up my ass when she praised my clumsy attempts to mimic her art.

Her hug is as expressive as her work. Mum is pure love. And that’s why she made sure I’d have a secure life instead of the precarious one she traveled in service to her muse. Sending me to a serious boarding school in Sydney was par for the course. And it worked. I got the message. Don’t be like your father and me.

Oh, no one needed to warn me about idle hands.

“Great show. I see lots of red sold stickers.”

“It’s not just about the sold stickers, Noah.”

“I know.” But, I don’t want *you* to know that I know.

“Your father’s over there. His work is doing well, too, but you know him—always comparing himself to me.”

“But his work is so much pricier. It’s not a like-for-like comparison. How many times have we been through this?”

Mum shrugs. “At least I’m not going through it as his wife anymore.”

I don't know what to say to things like that. They're true. Mum and Dad seem so much better apart. But I don't pretend to understand their relationship. They work together most days, travel together. But not as husband and wife.

Dad's contribution to the show is darker than usual, his sculptures more formless. And yet, more expressive. He's distilled some deep, unsettled sensation, evoking more with less. Art confounds me. How can so little say so much?

"It's more about what *isn't* there," Mum says, gazing at the same piece of Dad's that I am—a long, matte stone bat—fat and uneven on the bottom, wider and perfectly cone-tipped at the top. "He's so refined, your father. He's at the top of his game. But he'll never be happy with his work."

"And you treat all your new stuff like a revelation."

We share a warm smile. Mum's always played sunshine to Dad's darkness, but we both know it isn't that simple.

"Well, *look* at it. You said it yourself. So many red dots."

"And you said it yourself. Sold stickers aren't everything." I lightly elbow her. "I'm proud of what you've achieved, Mum. So few people can make a living from their art."

"And so few people have a son who bought each of their parents a house."

"*And* a car."

"Well, after this show, maybe I'll be the one splashing out on everyone." Her features straighten and I know she's about to get serious. "But the likelihood it would have worked out

this way—regardless of talent—is incredibly low. Which is why—”

I finish for her. “—we made sure you followed a more stable path. And look at you. I’m so proud of you.” I know she is. In the parents department, I’ve lucked out.

I know she only wanted the best for me, didn’t want me to suffer or feel the sting of insecurity, which is why they shipped me off to boarding school the second they could see I was spending more time surfing than studying. What they didn’t know is that no matter how many trophies I won, I would never have allowed myself to follow that dream. They hammered that reality into me very effectively. Too effectively. All the way to Cambridge. But now that I’ve achieved everything?

A question I’m unable to get past since I’ve been back. The familiar surf of my childhood after work is part of it, sure. I had surf right there in Sydney, but I had no time for that, working my way to the top. And when I did, there was always this clock-watching vibe. When the swell started coming just right, I had to go. It always felt like a badge of strength.

She shakes her head at me, a gleam of love in her eye, her sparkling teeth on display with her warm smile. “It’s true. I am incredibly proud of you. But—” She cocks her head.

The *but* is new.

“You seem different since you’ve been back in Magnolia Shores.”

I've always forced myself to do the right thing over and over again.

You can still do it.

But here, now, it isn't so easy. This place is a whole other ballgame. For one, I don't *need* to work all hours. This job is cruisier. The library is not a money-making venture. And in a way, that blows my mind. It's about the experience of the place, but not with an eye on the bottom line. It is literally everything I've been conditioned to push away my entire life. Spending hours with one customer, lifting fines, offering programs that benefit only a couple of people.

The plan was to get my twelve months done here as soon as possible. It's what Finn wants. And that's always been sixty percent of my job description. I'm the guy you can stick in any situation and he'll sort it, get it in top shape, and be able to pass it on smoothly to the next guy.

“That's why you're the guy for this. You'll work out why it's so important. And you'll work out what needs to be emphasized to make it the best it can be.”

I've been bombarded with all kinds of thoughts about coming full circle, about life having its own plans, and the timing of this gig coming up right when I was starting to struggle to keep up the hyper-efficient workaholic act.

The truth is I have everything I could ever want. I'm the kid who bought his parents each a house. And a car. And much, much, more. So, it's pretty natural that a bigger bottom line just isn't doing it for me anymore. Only, I don't know how to operate without that.

Add in the saucy librarian who's been haunting my dreams and the whole Noah system has broken down. Is this why the words *I'm quitting* came barreling out?

I can't explain why, but I twist my gaze over my shoulder, searching for Bec. Mum catches me.

"Ah, okay. I get it now."

"Get *what?*" It's one thing for me to be blindsided by my inexplicable attraction to the woo-woo Bec with her staff picks *about healing the inner child*, but it's something else completely for someone else to notice it.

"Never mind."

"Exactly." I pull at my jacket cuffs. That's the other thing about the shift in me. Bec lives her life according to every way I've been taught is anathema to success. And yet, she's got this irresistible draw, this natural aura that makes life fuller, richer, *fun*.

I've survived this uncomfortable attraction to her by being extra Noah-ish. Only, that riles her up. And now I seem to have developed a thing about riling her up. Yup—like a schoolboy who doesn't know what to do with his feelings.

Is it any wonder that catching Bec mocking me has brought me to the point of no return tonight? And from her reaction to my touch, I'm guessing she has also been piqued by our rivalry.

"Why don't you take a look at the work?" Mum says.

I take the tour, but each canvas says the same thing: *get back in there, you judgmental, distance-creating commentary!*

Imagine *me* saying something so honest. Suddenly, being unable to speak so freely feels like a liability instead of a strength.

Bec is well and truly stuck in my mind. And worse, I think she might be in my heart, too.

So, what did I go and do instead of speaking freely? Tell her I'm going to quit.

Why did I do that again?

Because everything you're wanting is scaring the absolute crap out of you.

And you, my friend, do not say what you're thinking. Never have.

But maybe I should start now?

I see nothing when I try to picture such a Noah. And that blackness is terrifying. The kind of terrifying that propelled *I'm quitting* to fly out. It looks so much like the dreaded instability Mum and Dad always warned against that even if I wanted to ignore it, my body would revolt. Instinct would take over.

The problem is, once I've made a stable life for myself—a wealthy life, with enough security that I don't need to worry about money ever again—why can't I stop the ruthless focus and have fun?

It's like the universe sent Bec to taunt me about it. And if that's the case, the universe plays *dirty*.

Which is why I need to get the hell out of here.

Need or want?

This situation has danger written all over it. The kind I don't want to touch with a ten-foot pole.

So, yeah. One night. A book to remember her by.

And then back to the safe life, where tomorrow may be boring as hell, but at least I know exactly how it plays out.

FIVE

BEC

The whole night is punctuated by desirous gazes. In between, I feel his eyes on me. I take a sip of champagne, conscious that when my fingers push through my ponytail, that he's watching. And that he's thinking that his hands have been there.

My breath catches. I choke on my frothy mouthful. Even while I struggle to breathe, I turn to him. *Please don't let him see the effect he has on me.* Whoever I was pleading to wasn't listening because he is unabashedly watching.

His eyes crinkle at the edges and his mouth quirks like he assumes he's the cause. One part of me says, *of course he does. He's cocky as hell.* But another part argues, *it feels like he knows me.* And I don't know what to do with that. I'm already thrown by this weird guilt I have since showing how gleeful I'd be at seeing the back of him.

"Oh, what is *this*?" Amy says.

"What is *what*?" I scrunch my face like I'm mortally wounded.

"The way you and Noah are checking each other out?"

“Ha!” I yell it too loud and people turn to look. Including fucking Noah.

“Okay, you’re not ready to admit it. I get it. Took me years to admit I was in love with Lucas, so I can’t really talk.”

“So, let’s call it even and change the subject.”

“Because it’s true and you feel embarrassed.”

“Right. Wait! No! Because it’s silly.”

“You mean *hot*.”

“You might be a mum now, but you have not changed, Amy Green.”

“Yes, I *have* changed. But when it comes to you putting yourself on the line, I’m always going to push because I wouldn’t have what I have if it wasn’t for your calling a spade a spade with me.”

“Because it *was* a spade. But this—” I wave my palm to indicate Noah, “—is a rake.”

“I see what you did there.” She claps.

I take a bow.

“And he is a rake. But this looks different.”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

“Can’t I?”

“No.”

She shrugs, sips her white wine. “Then let’s take a tour of your boyfriend’s parents’ art.”

My nostrils flare. But I smile, blinking maniacally until they go back to normal.

I take in the buzz of chatter, music, and clinking glasses. Even six months ago, I couldn't have imagined such a showing. The Wheatley billionaires have injected so much vibrance and life into this town. It's incredible to witness.

Magnolia Shores is barely recognizable. Our social spirit was always strong, but it showed itself in potluck dinners at the fire station function room and community markets full of crocheted tea cozies and lamingtons. This is on a whole new level. So many surprises around every corner. "Why didn't I know they were his parents?"

"He doesn't advertise it. And they use the names Mr. And Mrs. Smith, so you'd never know."

"What's that all about anyway?"

"Veronica says it's to do with art being separate from the artist, that once it goes out into the world it belongs to the world, that who the artist is, any intention they may or may not have had is of no consequence. All that matters is what you actually see here. That art should stand on its own."

We wait behind a group in front of the first painting, and our eyes catch on the sculpture across the room, next to you-know-who. From the shape, it's clearly a tree trunk. But it doesn't have the bark, the branches, the texture. Its overall impression is sad, devastated even. It's in such contrast to the jolts of color I see in the paintings that my head spins.

And when it stops, I know why the jarring sensation feels so familiar. Opposites—like me and Noah. Everything about this night is so strange. If I woke to realize it was a dream, I wouldn't be surprised.

But it's not. It's just a series of random events that seem to be lining up to mean Noah and I should explore this thing between us—because that's what I want them to do. Yup—as distasteful as the idea of having a proper thing for my boss is, there's no denying it.

We have to wait a couple of moments before the group moves on to the next canvas so we can see the first painting. From the back, none of the people are familiar. Which means this event has brought people from out of town. Which is just what we want. And since I'm here, I can tell people about events at the library that would also interest them. Which is why there's a stack of flyers in my purse to put at the exit table.

But you were too distracted by Noah to remember to put them out.

The space before us clears and we step forward to take in the huge canvas. Tonal, but textured, layered, like it's moving. Undulating in uncolored, mesmerizing pulses.

“It really sucks you in, doesn't it?”

“I know. I feel like my mind's gone blank.”

“That's funny because that's the name of it: *Blank*.”

“That's what I need right now. To stop thinking so much.”

“About Noah.”

I shoot her the look of death.

She raises her palms. “Okay, so not ready yet.”

I’m doing the blinky thing again. “It’s just the small matter that I have everything to lose—I’ve only just arrived here. It’s like the universe was like, here! You can have everything you ever wanted, but we’re also going to torture you with this irresistible roadblock.”

“You should get that.”

“Amy! Are you listening to anything I’ve said?”

“I don’t mean you should *get that*.” She hikes her brows suggestively. “Although you should. I mean the painting.” She points at the canvas.

“I can’t afford *that*.”

“But I can. I’m a billionaire.”

“I’m not letting you buy me a painting.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s weird.”

“So, let Noah buy it for you.”

“I’m outta here.” I turn and there he is, across the room, but tethered to me all the same.

She catches us in our—whatever it is. “Fine. There’s something there.” My shoulders deflate. I’m surprised by what a relief it is to say it out loud.

“Well, I bet you that painting, it’s something real.”

“I can’t buy it for you if I lose.”

“Oh no, I don’t want you to buy it for me if I lose.”

“Well, then what do you want?”

“I want you to announce to the whole town that I was right.”

“You are the worst.”

“Do we have a bet?”

“No! Why would I agree to that?”

“Because you’re so sure I’m wrong.”

She’s baiting me. But this is what we do. I signed on for it long ago. We know each other so well, and we don’t allow bullshitting. If that’s what we’re after, we can go to someone else. And yet, it was so much easier back when she was the one on trial—before she admitted that Lucas was the one.

My brain whirls, but I finally settle on a reason to accept the bet. I hold up a finger. “You’ve got a deal.” He’s leaving tomorrow, so even if she were right, we’ll be going our separate ways anyhow, so we’ll just never know.

I’m sure that soon enough, the hollow feeling in my chest at the idea of a Noah-shaped hole in town will go away. Because what I’m feeling now is probably lust, and once the urge is satisfied, it will fade away like it always has before. And then I won’t be feeling like I want to vomit every three minutes. And I won’t be bullshitting either.

Like you’re bullshitting yourself right now.

I watch as Veronica sticks a red dot on the wall beside the painting and takes Amy’s details. But that dot changes

something. Its bright, symmetrical presence is like a dare. I dare you to make the most of this night because it's all you have.

Maybe it's more than choosing a book.

Well, duh.

Maybe it's...again, I'm blank, like my mind refuses to go there. Like it's already gone further than I could have imagined mere hours ago.

For the next ninety minutes, I ride the blankness, becoming almost grateful for it as I lose myself in our sultry stares, indulge in the heat and desire coursing through me. The feeling is novel.

I am not a one-night stand kind of girl. In all my time in Chicago, I dated only two guys. And neither of them were worth the subway fare it took to meet them. But Noah is the kind of man one-night stands are made for.

Right?

My phone jingles a text message. I dip my hand into my purse to check who it's from.

The notification flashes NOAH KING (BOSSHOLE). I press to read the message.

Time to book me?

How did he manage to turn the word *book* into something obscene?

You asked for it.

Meet me at the door.

Amy waves a hand in front of my face. “Hell-o.”

“Hey.”

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

“Him *who*?”

“Can we just save the energy on this farce? I’ve got a newborn who already takes up all my time.”

“Fine. Yes, it was him.”

“Him *who*?”

“I thought you didn’t want to waste any more time?”

“Right, but teasing you is the best part. It’s what made the whole thing worth it in the first place.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Bye.” I reach around and squeeze my cousin-slash-best friend.

“Remember, you don’t want this to last, so just enjoy! Do whatever you want.”

“I plan to.”

“I know *exactly* where I’m going to hang my painting,” Amy says loudly to Veronica, for my benefit. I don’t give her the satisfaction of looking back. Instead, I make my way to the door, my head spinning.

Noah’s standing there, looking like he wants to *book* me, his liquid, brown eyes holding me in their solid gaze.

“Ready?” he asks, tracing a finger over his lips in a way that makes me certain about our new meaning for *book*.

I nod because I don't trust my voice.

Or anything else about myself.

Blank. Shit, Mrs. Smith is a damn good artist.

Noah pushes the door open and the still air cocoons us. He places a palm on the small of my back as I pass through the threshold. My skin tingles. My breath catches.

Aside from the hand spreading fire through my body, he's all business as he leads me to the car. I almost believe I imagined what happened earlier.

At the car, he walks around to my side, opens the door, and waits for me to get comfortable before he closes me inside.

Time slows as I watch him make his way around the front and wait for the sound of his door handle.

My breathing is labored. The steady click, when it does come, startles me. The blankness gives way to white-hot desire.

His clean, spicy scent fills my senses, supercharging the desire so that when he lowers himself into the seat and reaches for my neck, I'm lunging, my lips already open and wanting his tongue as it thrusts deep inside my mouth with an almighty growl.

I don't know how long we sit that way, exploring each other's lips, tongues, the planes of faces, his fingers along the bareness of my legs.

Noah places a hand on either side of my face, slowly breaking the kiss. My chest heaves, panting to find breath.

“You.”

“You,” I respond.

“Shall we get to booking?” The curl of his lip is devilish. And, shit, does it make me want him more.

I run a fingertip along his chiseled jaw, ending up at that mouth again.

“Ah, I get it. Just one more *suck* before we go.”

He takes my finger in all the way, and my core clenches so hard, it echoes through my whole body.

Between the sucking and the booking, this is going to be one fling I’m never going to forget.

IN THE CAR, our hands sit close on the center console. My pinky shakes along the smooth leather, I want to touch him so badly, want him to touch me. In seconds, I’m satiated. His hand reaches for mine. Our fingers explore, curious, nosy, boundless. I’m under his shirt sleeve; he’s teasing around the cap sleeve of my cherry print dress, making my heart bang in my chest.

We drive to the sound of the Tuesday night dance party on the local radio station. It’s new, hypnotic music and each track is sexier, more throbbing than the previous one. In the absence of familiar beats and riffs, my brain is connecting this song to

Noah, going rogue and making memories even as I shore myself against feelings.

A light drizzle taps on the windshield. The wipers swipe. Everything has a pulse, a beat. It's the most alive I've ever been. Noah takes a curve a bit too fast and instinctively braces his arm in front of me. It's a reminder of the danger, I think, laughing because the truth is not something I'm ready to face. I want him. And I'm not prepared to call it reckless. It's just a fling. Tomorrow he'll be gone.

His palm clamps on my knee, then slides north. I squirm into his touch.

He bites his lip.

My core clenches. My brain flashes to an image of his lips taking over where his hand is now, my head thrown back. Blank.

ONLY THE DIM security lights are on in the library's lobby. The sculpture in the middle, which is a Mr. Smith, is illuminated reverentially. We both take a minute of silence to regard it, even though we pass by it every day. It's a stack of books—messy and dog-eared, but if you look closely, they're arranged in the shape of a heart.

“So that's your dad's work! I can't believe I didn't know that.”

“Well, you're forgiven.”

“I don't remember apologizing.”

“Tomato *tomahto*.”

“Why don’t you tell me something else about you, since we’re on a roll?” I say.

“Like what?”

“You pick.”

“You’re just going to laugh because it’s such an old thing that just won’t seem to go away.”

“Okay, now you *have to* tell me.”

“Do I?”

I nod.

“Well, what are you gonna do in return?”

I lean in and kiss him, our tongues twirling erotically. Then I break the kiss.

“Anything. Anything you want to know is yours.”

“Just that old thing you hinted at, please.”

“You really want to know?”

“More than I can say.”

“I always wanted to get an earring.”

He’s so serious and, I don’t know, a little mortified, and wistful, that I can’t help but soften toward him.

“You should get one.”

“No.”

“We’ll see.” I inhale and the smell of books and the lemon verbena cleaning spray fills my lungs. It’s about as close to

perfection as a moment gets.

Noah King in an earring.

I don't know why, but the image keeps me grinning all day.

SIX

NOAH

“Look at you getting high off books,” I say. She’s looking at my dad’s book sculpture. Mum and I gave him a hard time about it because we both thought it looked like an ass.

“I’m not *getting high*.”

“No, I dig it. I really do. You love this place.”

“What do you know about me and this place?”

“I’m the one who approved your hiring, first off.”

“You are?”

“Guilty.”

“Because you think I’m hot?” She walks close to me and teasingly lifts the lapels of my jacket.

“What kind of asshole would that make me?”

“You’re not—wait. Did you *hear* that at Re-Surf?”

“Guilty again.”

“Why do I feel like I judged you too harshly now?”

“Because my parents are artists, and you let me feel you up in the front seat, and you *loved it*.”

“Thank you for the reminder.”

“Hey,” I say, and reach out to either side of her face. “The truth is that I haven’t been my best self since I’ve been back here. And I’m sorry for that.”

“Well, apology accepted.”

“Listen, library lady, I’m not finished yet.”

“Oh, well, I just thought maybe that was enough talking. And we might get to something more fun. But you’re the one who’s an expert at flings, so maybe you should tell me how it works?”

Our gazes lock in a stand-off.

“You really want me to leave?”

She doesn’t answer right away. “Well, that’s what we agreed to, isn’t it?” Her eyes are searching like she’s looking to see if that’s still what *I* want. Of course, it is. I can’t stay here. I’m liable to start questioning everything I’ve ever known. “And it’s what *you* want, right?”

“Right.” Something breaks in my chest, as if I’ve just given the wrong answer in a very dangerous test.

“So first, your book.”

“I thought when you said that was enough talking, you meant something different.”

Her lips curl in a wicked grin that looks absolutely breathtaking on her. Bec blinks, her long lashes meeting several times, suggestively. Then she presses herself into me.

I'm sure she can feel my heart pounding and my erection straining.

She plants a quick, but intense kiss on my lips. When she tries to pull away, I show her I've got other ideas. I wrap my arms around her and use my mouth to say all the things that I should have said instead of *right* when she asked about me leaving town.

I break the kiss and she sighs deliciously. I work my forehead back and forth gently against her satiny smooth skin. "Weren't you meant to book me?"

Her eyes shoot open, then she remembers our little joke, and clears her throat in an attempt to distract me from her blush. "Yes, your *good-bye* book. I know just what I'm going to give you."

She stands straighter, like her inner librarian has come out to play.

"This way." Bec grabs my hand and tugs me toward the mezzanine, which is my favorite spot in this place. It's got a wall-to-wall banquette facing the ocean, which must be the best place to read on earth.

On the other side of the mezzanine is the poetry section. I can't say I've spent much time there. Bec makes her way past the first three rows, then slips into the fourth, like she knows exactly what she's looking for.

"Poetry? Are you trying to woo me?" I ask, watching her luscious curves glide with determination.

"I'd say you're already wooed."

“Well, certainly if we’d had more experiences like this together, I wouldn’t be so keen to leave.”

She stops, swivels back to look at me. “But you are, right?”

“Yes.” *Maybe.*

She starts sauntering down the aisle again.

“Let me guess—Shakespeare?”

She shakes her head.

“Emily Dickinson.”

“Nope.”

“Banjo Patterson—Australia’s best poet. For sure, he’d have some words of wisdom for a Scrooge too focused on the bottom line. But,” I lift a finger, “would he have something enlightening about a Scrooge who’s got a thing for a sexy librarian?”

“A, it’s not Banjo Patterson. And B, he’d never write about something so cliché.”

“What’s cliché?”

“Oh, you know—the fantasy about the saucy librarian who tugs out her tight bun and slides off her cat eyeglasses and becomes a sex goddess.”

“I’d rather hoped you’d leave the glasses on.”

Her throaty laugh guts me. What is it about being the cause of it that makes me immediately hunger to make it happen again?

For my benefit, I'm pretty sure, she lowers the glasses down to the tip of her nose and looks out over them onto the middle shelf. Then she bends over, playing the saucy librarian to a T, that apple ass tipped out for me. Slowly, she slides out a volume, shaking her rear like a minx and holds up the slimmest book I've ever seen. "Ah! Here it is."

I look at the cover. It's old, worn on all four corners where it's clearly been taped, and taped again, bubbled layers of clear plastic holding the tattered thing together.

"William Carlos Williams? Never heard of him."

"I figured. He's an American poet."

"And what, pray tell, about me screams this bloke *needs* William Carlos Williams poetry? Is it because it's short, so you think it's at my level?"

"No. In this case, less is more. It's the way he finds pleasure in the everyday."

"If you arranged all of this just so you could say the word *pleasure* to me, let me stop you right there. You can say it anytime you like. Hell, you can have it anytime you like."

"Like right now?"

"Like right now." Our lips meet and this time our kiss and embrace rocket to turbo speed in no time. Things get breathy and serious, and I realize we're in the library at night. I also happen to know that the security system is being revamped, and that tonight, of all nights, there's no footage of what happens here. We're the only ones who will know. It's like it's meant to be.

I trail my thumbs up her thighs. I can't help but smile at the way her skin quivers at my touch. I hook a thumb under either side of her panties and stretch the elastic away from her skin. She gasps. Tracing small, slow circles on the exposed skin brings a breathy moan from her throat. Then I shock us both by tugging the panties to expose her pussy.

“Yes,” she says. “Touch me.”

That's all I need. I slide my palm between her legs and apply pressure. She pushes into my touch. I crook a finger and graze her swollen nub.

“You're ready for me,” I say.

She reaches out for my arm and squeezes. I slip back and forth, then part her folds to explore more. Using one ruby heel, she tugs her panties down to her ankles then kicks them off.

I drop to my knees and yank her dress up to reveal her perfect, bare pussy.

“This is every schoolboy's dream, you know.”

“You naughty, naughty boy.”

“Yes! That's exactly how the fantasy goes.”

“And then what?”

“And then, I lift this one knee over my shoulder to get a proper view of your pussy.” I put my words into action and take a second to admire the incredibly sexy sight before me.

I've never had the librarian fantasy, but at this moment, I don't know why I've wasted all those years without them. I trace a line down the crease of her thigh. The trembles my

touch creates are a drug. I want more. She is fucking perfect. I lean in and flick my tongue at that swollen nub.

“Noah!”

A chill flashes all the way to my toes. *It's just your name, mate.*

And yet, it functioned like the password to another dimension. I barely know myself as I feast on her slick folds. I need to feel and explore every inch. Bec grinds into me with abandon. It's like every verbal match we've ever had—dowsed in rocket fuel.

All I want to do is make her come. I need it. I can tell she's close because her legs are shaking and her moans pick up in volume and intensity. She's rocking into me when I slip a finger into her opening.

For a second, she freezes. Too much for her?

“I don't want to come,” she says.

“Oh, well, too bad. That's literally the only thing I care about at this moment. But don't worry, there's so much more where this one's coming from.”

“Not ye—” I cut her off with a massive swipe with the flat of my tongue, making every bit of her pulse. I plunge two fingers into her hot, tight channel and the way they hug me makes my cock twitch.

Her body is mesmerizing as her hips dance instinctively to her climax. I can't remember being taken by a woman so intensely before. She is absolute perfection.

“Noah!” Does she know the effect that has on me, screaming from her lips as she trembles and climaxes on my face? In case she doesn’t, my hands—without any permission from me—pull her in tightly. A hug. I’m freaking hugging my *fling* as I lose myself in waves of sensation from my name on her lips.

This is so bad.

And at the same time, so fucking good. Too fucking good.

Her body bucks and shivers in waves. And she says my name two more fucking times. That’ll be branded on my memory forever.

Which is helpful, because I expect now that she’s on the other side of orgasm that she’ll realize who *Noah* actually is, and be out of here so fast that there will be a Bec-shaped hole in that massive wooden door.

Only, in seconds she’s yanking me up, and we’re kissing so fiercely, the taste of her tang between us like evidence this is actually happening.

She leans into my steel cock, rubbing herself against the right spot.

“You want more, sweet little librarian?”

She pulls away so I can get a good look at her, then cocks a smile, and dramatically pulls her hair free from the ponytail. Shaking it out slowly and running her hands through it like a goddess, she knows she’s got me mesmerized.

“Wait, why are you so good at that?”

“You wanna talk, or you wanna let me be the naughty off-hours librarian of your fantasies?”

“Excellent point,” I say.

“But wait—my fantasies or yours?”

“We still talking?” Fuck, that ping of intimacy gluing our smiles and gazes is strong. If I were a stronger man, I’d step away right now because this has disaster written all over it. But me? I use my mouth to kiss that feeling away.

Only it doesn’t go. It just deepens the kiss until we’re both lost. I’m a man possessed as she feels at my buttons and tugs them free, exploring my naked chest as she goes. The mewls coming from her show me how much she’s enjoying the tour. But it feels like more than an appreciation of my physique. It feels like the possession that’s overtaken me.

Suddenly, I yank the rest of the buttons free. One pops. But I couldn’t give a fuck. I need to get close to her. She watches me pull free of my sleeves, then I wrap her in my arms and hold so tight, I worry I might crush her in my embrace. And she’s holding back and lapping at my neck and ear in a way that makes me think she feels that desperate greed to get closer than she knows how.

That animal need kicks in and I have to have her. I ring her thigh with my grip, and in no time, I’m hiking that dress up over her curves. My fingers pause at the apple of her ass. A growl escapes my lips and she sighs, pressing back into my touch.

From there, things flip to hyper speed. I raise her dress up and over her breasts, encased in the kind of lacy hot pink bra that is going to haunt my fantasies for life. I take a second to languish in the sight of her—bare pussy, curves in hourglass perfection, begging for me to trace them with my hands.

She reaches behind and unclasps her bra, enjoying unwrapping herself for me. Her full breasts free, I reach out to cup their creamy roundness, then pinch at her taut nipple while she shudders under my touch, swanning her neck and body into my touch. Her confidence in her body takes my desire to nuclear.

I grab the condom from my pants pocket and let her enjoy the view as I roll it down my throbbing cock. She seems to enjoy the show, so I pump myself a couple of times, already imagining what it will feel like to bury myself inside her.

Her fingers move to her mouth, and she bites down on them. And I can't wait another second. In one swift move, I lift her by the waist and wrap her legs around me so that the length of my cock is pressing on her pussy and her belly. Oh, it's a thing of wonder between us, like we've just invented sex and finally, we're gonna take it for a test drive, and we know we're in for a hell of a ride.

I back her up against the wall, taking a second to appreciate that we're under the sign for Modern Poetry. Yes. It. Is.

She twists and hikes her hips up against me while I run my length up and down those beautiful lips, grazing her clit, stopping my tip at her opening so she shakes with need for me

to enter her. I mean to only enter the tiniest bit, but I can't stop myself once I'm inside her tight channel. I drive myself into her all the way, devouring her mouth as I do, needing every bit of her. Frantic and hungry to take this as far as it will go.

I hit so hard, she screams out, tightening her grip on the back of my neck. "Fuck me," she says. And the last shreds of humanity are trampled by my animal need to have her take my cock, over and over again.

And what does she do? Bucks her hips up to meet my every thrust. She takes me so deep, I see stars.

"Noah, you're gonna make me come all over you," she says.

"Fuck!" I pick up the pace, easing in deeper and feeling the release spiraling up tight, ready to spring.

"Come for me, baby," I say.

And she orgasms in great spasms that hug my cock so tightly that I can't hold on anymore, and in one final push inside her, I come in a great rush, my fists tugging hard in her hair.

I can't explain the frenzy of kisses we erupt into, my cock still spurting inside her. Like, instead of crossing us safely to the other side of whatever this is, it's only driven us deeper in.

Over the next hour, we kiss and nip and lick, lying on the reading couch. It's like I've stepped inside another world.

After one long, languid dance of our tongues, I break the kiss, needing to plant short kisses before our lips can part, and just when I'm done, finding I have to do it just three more

times. I force myself to stop and then lie back, bending an elbow behind my head. I exhale loudly.

“What are you thinking?”

There’s no fucking way I’m telling her any of that. I don’t even want to know it myself. “Well, I’m going through some of the greatest hits from our show earlier, and I’m thinking, maybe that’s why my dad made a sculpture of books shaped like an ass.”

“It’s not an ass! It’s a love heart.”

“Sure, it is. That’s what he said.”

WE TALK a bit about winding up back in Magnolia Shores, staring at each other because the shore and the stars and the moon have got nothing on the beauty of this moment we’re sharing.

And because I’ve stepped so far outside myself, I hear this other Noah say that he would like to hear more about the everyday beauty of this poet she thought was perfect for me.

“I can’t believe we forgot all about the book!” she says. Her smile is pure happiness. If I could bottle it up, I don’t think I’d ever have a solemn day again.

“Well, you were very distracting.”

“Thank you.”

I lean in and kiss her, slowly, tenderly. “You’re welcome.”

I retrieve the book and catch her looking at my ass through our reflection in the windows.

Then I snuggle her back in my chest and start flipping the pages.

She stops me about halfway through.

“This one! You have to read this one. It’s the one that came to my mind when I thought of your book.”

“Let me guess, it’s about a sexy boss.”

“Ha ha.”

She takes the book from my hands and clears her throat, then starts to read the shortest poem I’ve ever heard. It’s more like an apology, like a handwritten note a husband would leave to a wife about something trivial, but it reveals intimacy, a real moment, a palpable *pleasure*, to use Bec’s word.

“So?” she asks.

For a long moment, I’m quiet. I’m no poet and therefore don’t know how to do justice to the majesty of the effect it’s had on me. And I certainly couldn’t separate it from the situation in which it was introduced to me. In fact, I may never eat a plum without dirty thoughts again.

The simple, spare words, capturing a beautiful, ordinary moment resonate in a way that takes me somewhere new. I’m swimming in the disorientation when she begins stroking the inside of my palm in a way that is more than sexual.

I look down at her crimson-nailed fingers on my skin, and the beauty of the image—two hands, one of the most common sights on this planet—knocks me out.

I don't know a thing about poetry—couldn't tell a stanza from a simile, and yet, in this moment I've not only understood, but permanently lodged, that handful of words into every fiber of my being.

How could she know the effect they would have on me?

Because she's special. And what's more, she sees you in a way no one else ever has. Not even yourself.

Stopping to appreciate the simple moments of beauty and joy. I haven't thought to do it in over fifteen years. And this woman crashes into my life. And here I am, spellbound by a couple of hands.

“What do you think?” she prompts me again.

“Plum, I think you're something else.”

All night, I tell myself the feeling will pass. But it doesn't. If anything, as we talk—about why she became a librarian, about my house in Sydney, what it was like to study in England, things I never discussed with a soul because they were over and I was too busy looking at the next thing—the feeling that this woman has cracked a deep fissure in my worldview gathers in size and momentum, and barrels over everything in its path. A beautiful, inevitable trajectory that I appear to be powerless in stopping.

SEVEN

BEC

When Noah pulls up at my house, all I want to do is go to bed and sleep for about a week.

“See you in an hour,” he says.

“*Ish*,” I say.

“No special treatment, Bec.”

“But you’re resigning.”

In place of an answer, he grimaces.

“Okay, fine,” I say, which makes him laugh. I swish my hips more than usual on the way to my door.

“Hi, honey, I’m home!”

My cat—a snowy white fluff ball with long pink ears, called Frosty Fluffy Muffin—is nowhere to be found.

“I know you’re deaf. But you know I hate it when you knock things all over the floor—”

In the kitchen, the Cheerios box has been knocked over from on top of the fridge, and there are little Os everywhere.

I open the pantry cupboard to retrieve the broom, but as soon as I set to sweeping, I realize how shaky I am. I barely

ate anything except a few canapés last night, and I certainly didn't sleep a wink. I lean the broom against the countertop and head to the bathroom at the back of the small cottage.

I reach into the shower to turn the hot water all the way up and set to brushing my teeth while I wait for the stream to heat.

Frosty comes prancing in, and rubs up against my leg, curling his tail under my knee in what I've come to think of as his version of hugging.

"I'm really mad at you. We talked about knocking stuff onto the floor. Remember? I mimed a whole show of you tipping oatmeal onto the floor and me sobbing. You said, 'meow, meow, meow,' which everyone knows translates to 'I will never do that again.' So, what am I supposed to think?"

"Meow, meow, meow."

I look down in shock. If anyone tells me this deaf cat doesn't hear me, I'll never believe them.

The electric toothbrush emits its three angry pulses and I turn it off and spit. Then I lean down to give my Fluffy Muffin a cuddle, even if I know I'll come home to—if I had to guess—pasta, all over the floor tonight.

By the time I get into the shower, I've already got no chance of getting to work on time.

"I know, Frosty, this is just one of a million reasons why I shouldn't have started something with my boss. But don't worry. It's just a *fling*. And thankfully, he's leaving before it can put my dream job and life at risk."

“Meow, meow, meow.”

“Exactly.” With the echo of the word on my lips, I can’t help but be pummeled with the idea that there is nothing *exact* about any of this. Because as much as I want him to leave, I feel absolutely sick at the idea of him going.

Every time I think of him calling me *plum*, I’m afraid I might swoon. It’s ridiculous. A whole lifetime without feeling that way about anyone—and it has to be *him*.

EIGHT

NOAH

I don't know why, but the first thing I do when I get home is grab my surfboard and get out on the ocean. The surf is epic. Probably too high for a rationally thinking man, but today, I barely recognize myself. I'm running on pure feeling. It's new territory for me, so I go with it.

Whether it's the lack of sleep or the high from my night of bliss with Bec, my inner headmaster seems to be off duty. I slip my legs into my wetsuit and leave the top unzipped. With the windows rolled down, I breathe in the crisp morning air, thread my fingers through my hair and think I might let it grow a bit instead of going for my regularly scheduled cut today.

I shake off the image of Bec's approving appraisal of my untamed hair and step on the gas.

In minutes, I'm parked next to a mint green Volkswagen Kombi van and then paddling out past the break. The water's never warm here, but today its icy temperature shock is a welcome jolt.

I stay too long so that I don't have time to go home and shower. Instead, I drive the two blocks to Re-Surf and use the

locker room there to shower and change into the extra suit I keep in my locker there.

I can do this, I think, as I order my coffee to go in my charity Keep Cup from the cafe on the ground floor. I've never been one to wash my own cups, but what can I say? It gives me a little buzz when I clean this one, knowing I'm continuing to do good with this small gesture.

The cup is from the Surface Marginalized Voices Initiative at the café. The side of each one has a direct quote from someone whose struggles we would never know about otherwise. Not only do the proceeds of the cup sale go to the person, but so do half the proceeds of each refill. And I mean, it's donated directly into their bank accounts, which the program creates for them.

It's taken off like rocket fuel. They even started stocking them at the Re-Surf Club, at Amy's Picnic Basket, and at the Magnolia Shores Hotel. We're currently adding more sponsorees.

Then I have a thought and send a message to Bec.

Large soy latte?

The three dots swirl nearly instantly. The dopamine hit from even this miniscule level of interaction with her jars me.

That would be awesome. Someone kept me up really late and now I'm afraid I'm gonna fall asleep on the job.

Bosshole isn't gonna like that.

That's okay. I love it when he calls me a bad girl.

And I have a raging erection.

I tell myself she'll be glad I'm staying, though I know it's the furthest thing from the truth.

It'll be waiting in my office when you get in.

The dots swirl, stop, swirl.

Let me guess: you're quitting? LOL

Aside from the baristas, I'm the first one in, carrying my Keep Cup and the second one I bought for Bec, even though I know she already has one, thinking this can be the one I buy her coffee in before I catch myself. Now the gesture seems clumsy, and stupid, because I'm resigning, but it's too late now.

So I beeline to my office and sit in front of my computer to write my resignation immediately. It should be easy. I know what Finn wanted and I've given him that. I'm sure there are plenty of great candidates to pass this onto now that the major library initiatives are in motion.

DEAR FINN,

Please accept this letter as my official notice of resignation, effective—

MY FINGERS STOP. They just won't type anything. Which is why, despite the fact it should be easy to write, it's not about what Finn wants. It's not about my job at all. It's not even about going back to Sydney. The idea of my own life now

feels alien. I can't make it fit. Awesome. If I can't fit there, and I can't fit here, then where does that leave me?

All I want to do is fix this mess I've made. I just want to run away as fast as I can. The last thing I want to do is put Bec's job and happiness in jeopardy. But my gut tells me that I need to do something different than quit. That the solution is here in Magnolia Shores. The question is how do I make her see it that way without actually putting her career at risk? This is not the way I operate. Business and personal life do not mix. It's dangerous and illogical. And yet, here I am, playing with fire.

I minimize the document, but it's there on the bottom corner of my screen, forcing me to face the fact that I can't bring myself to do it.

It's still there when Bec makes an appearance in yet another floral dress that manages to be both flirty and chaste all at once. She twists her torso around the door and peeks in. Her hair is coiled in flirty waves and one swings as she cocks her head.

"Knock, knock," she says, sultry, like she's pleased with herself, with what we shared.

And I'm about to ruin that.

For a moment, I think she's going to walk around to my side of the desk and kiss me.

Think or hope?

But she grabs her coffee and drops into one of the guest chairs. "Thank you for the latté." She holds it up in cheers and

takes a sip. “Yum. Boy, I needed that.”

“Worked pretty hard last night,” I say, immediately regretting it. Yuck.

But she doesn’t seem fazed. “My boss is a real stickler for quality.”

“He really wears you out.”

“You could say that.” She shrugs.

“So *not* worn out?”

“Well, that depends.”

“On what?”

“On how hot your resignation letter makes me.”

“Have you ever seen one before?” I cock a brow, but I’m just wasting time. As soon as she hears the truth, she’s going to be done with this, and I’ll never have this kind of banter with her again.

The thought shoots me back in my seat with a dramatic sigh.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who’s worn out.”

All I want to do is toss everything off this desk and ravage her on it.

She wraps a second hand around the takeaway cup. Those red nails mesmerize.

“Hello!” She waves a hand in front of my face to wake me from my reverie.

“Sorry, where were we?”

“Your resignation letter? Let me see it.”

“Oh, you don’t want to see that.”

“You didn’t write it, did you?”

“Of course, I did.”

“Please don’t lie to me.”

“Okay, no, I didn’t.”

“I knew it. I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you. You’re gonna stay here, aren’t you? This is a disaster. I don’t even know what to do.”

“Is it really so bad if I stay?”

“Yes. Yes, it is. It’s messy and it’s dangerous and it puts everything that’s important to me in jeopardy. And I trusted you with that, and I shouldn’t have.” She’s out of her seat, her jaw set.

I, too, rise, but I’ve got nothing to say. She glares at me and then turns and stalks off.

After that, the day is long and slow. The mojo that led to my morning surf has vaporized into a blurry fog that just won’t lift. I feel awful.

I have never been distracted from work before, but when I look at the computer screen today, I can’t make sense of anything. I print out hard copies, despite our policy on paper usage, and the problem persists. In meetings, words come at me, but fuck if I know what they are. It’s like my world has come to a halt. And it won’t budge until I make a move. Only I can’t seem to.

Bec won't even look at me when we pass on the mezzanine. And yet, in my mind, I see the two of us on that couch, in the throes of passion, every bit of her open to me. It's like a dream. And at moments, I'd question whether it happened at all, if it weren't for the way she's permanently branded me during our...our...*night together* doesn't seem to say it. Our *eating of the plums*, I think.

AT THREE O'CLOCK, I have to get out of the library, so I grab a coffee at Amy's Picnic Basket, and when Amy asks if I want that for here or to go, I find myself surprising us both. "I'll have it here."

I step out onto the patio and grab a table in the sunshine. It's an absolutely epic day. The sun is high in the crystal sky and unapologetically beaming everything in its clear brightness.

But that isn't why the world is completely unrecognizable today. That has everything to do with the saucy librarian who's left a mark on the base of my neck. When I put it to her that she'd given me a love bite, she called it a "fling bite."

"A *flea* bite?" I mocked. And fuck did we laugh. In fact, after the explosive orgasms and the wolfish hunger for her, the pure joy is what stands out most.

I watch Amy's teenaged waitress bring my coffee and think, what *is it* about Bec?

The waitress has her pink hair braided into a fancy crown. She's so coolly confident as she places my coffee in front of

me, then tucks her tray under her arm and retreats.

On the back of her scissored black tee shirt is a picture of a yellow legal pad with the words, “Just to say...” written right next to a plum with a healthy bite taken out of it.

I blink, but when I open my eyes, that picture is still there on her shirt.

What are the chances? The William Carlos Williams poem. Right now.

My chest shudders.

I can't leave.

I know what I said.

But I can't leave.

Every little bit of me is clanging with that truth.

As if I needed another reason, my phone chimes that I've got a new email, and I glance at the screen, catching the word, “Grant Application Successful” in a notification before it disappears.

Two months ago, each librarian applied for a grant for the library to produce a public relations video that would run on the ABC. Everyone was encouraged to apply because we need all the publicity we can get if we're going to make this library world-class the way Finn wants.

This will be a great way for me to go out—pass in my resignation and humbly brag about the success of the grant. Boom, perfect segue to explain Dr. Fixit's job is done and it's time to pass this onto the next guy.

I tap on the email application and wait for it to load. It doesn't take long since the mobile and internet are top-notch around here, care of the Wheatley billions. This is after years of having to walk to the top of the hill to get even a single bar to have a mobile phone conversation, which would inevitably be interrupted, frozen, and eventually hung up.

CONGRATULATIONS on your winning grant application! The librarian with the superpower to choose the perfect book for every reader has won the hearts of each and every judge. The decision to grant the funding to Bec Thompson was unanimous. We especially love her enthusiasm.

ME TOO. How can I leave now? The shirt, the grant, last freaking night—every cell in my body is screaming for me to stay.

I try to picture what it would be like back in Sydney. But my mind goes blank.

Blank—like Mum's painting. Shit. Even that reminds me of Bec. She kept going on about how incredible it was. If someone hadn't bought it, I probably would have given it to her myself as a parting gift.

Only you don't want to part.

I close out the email.

All I can think is that I need to give her the good news first. *That will help ease the fact that you ruined her dream job. Sure it will.*

The library is stunning in the afternoon sun, the blonde wood seems to go on for eternity. I'm even growing fond of the way the children's area gets ransacked by now, and of the reliability of a queue of people struggling to log onto the internet, or using the self-checkout machine.

I *like* it here. There's a hum of simple pleasures ready to reverberate through the shelves that you can't put a price on. That's Bec's poetry lodged inside me already.

I make my way to the mezzanine to see if there are more poetry books by Williams.

It's ridiculous. Me. Reading poetry. Hungry for more of the buzz it gave me.

The problem is I'm *not* sorry I ate the plums.

Slowly, I retrace our steps from last night, her red nail gliding along the spines is burned into my memory.

I turn into the third row and look down to the bottom shelf, recalling how she bent over, giving me the best view I've ever had.

I don't know what I'm looking for exactly, but by the time the announcement for the Alzheimer's Support Group buzzes over the speaker, I have three hardback books in my hand and a wicked urge to walk right out the door and spend the day pawing through them for something unknown I sense is within their pages.

AFTER THE SUPPORT group finishes up, I call Bec's line to ask her down to my office, but she doesn't answer. I look

for her in the children's area, in circulation, and even at the scene of last night's life-changing escapade. I don't see her. So I email a meeting request.

Forty-five minutes later she knocks, but there's no flirty banter like before. She's stiff as a board.

"Do you remember the grant applications from a couple months back?" I begin before she can ask about the resignation letter.

"Yeah?" There's a smile around her eye like she's hopeful. It's the most glorious thing.

"Well, you won it." I can't help the grin stretching my face.

"Heck yeah!" She whoops. Forgetting how angry she is, she smacks the desktop and runs around to my side.

I'm pleased with my plan until she freezes, probably realizing what she's doing. And that we aren't doing *that* anymore. And that I've proven I'm the exact type of boss-hole that she suspected.

We hold the gaze so long that it's clear neither of us knows what to do. Bless her, she's stronger than me. "I'm so pleased," she says. "So, let's see that resignation letter."

"That sounds—" A thought breaks through the frenzy. What if she doesn't *know* I'm staying?

Well, that would be lying.

But what if it isn't lying?

Like, if you are going to leave, but you just need a little time?

Yeah. We both know I don't belong here. I'm just flung from this fling.

Dangerous territory.

No more dangerous than leaving the one thing that's ever felt right, without forcing any pieces.

WWWCWS?

You lost me.

What would William Carlos Williams say?

He'd say eat the plums, mate. Eat the plums.

“SOUNDS LIKE WHAT?”

“Sounds like the best idea I've heard all day, but I haven't had time to write it yet.”

“You *what?* Still?”

“I will. I'm going to write it, but I've been busy dealing with other stuff all day.”

At least she grants me the dignity of not asking what other stuff I've been doing. Which would be procrastinating, flashing back to last night's greatest hits, and picturing her saying the word *suck* more times than I'd care to admit.

I take this moment to steer the conversation to what I'm proposing. “All the things that need doing properly around here make me worry. You see, I want to make sure this film

gets done properly. I don't feel comfortable passing it off to someone new. And the logistics won't even work because they want to run it next month. Apparently some other story they had scheduled fell through, which means we'll have to start filming right away."

She shakes her head. "This is not a good idea."

"Why not?" It's so obvious we're not just talking about the filming.

"Because—there's just too much at stake."

"I agree. There is so much at stake. There's everything at stake." I've said nothing, but somehow managed to say too much.

"Well, then what are you saying?"

I wish I knew. "We'll do the film and then I'll go."

"And *us*?" She points between us, then looks left and right nervously like someone might be watching.

"We'll just put it behind us," I say. I don't know how I manage to get the words out. Each one feels like passing a boulder through my throat.

"Can you really do that?" she says.

I nod because I don't trust words at this particular juncture. I believe that even my gaze betrays me.

Her posture deflates—with disappointment or relief, I couldn't say. "Me too. In fact, I think last night worked it all out of my system. It turns out that underneath that rivalry was just a bit of good old-fashioned lust."

“That makes things easier,” I say.

“Yup. Well, get to work, boss. I’ll schedule us a meeting to discuss the video production.”

“Deal.”

“So we agree this is the official end of our fling?” She extends her hand for me to shake. But I don’t want to take it.

“It was a very special night,” I say because I can’t not.

“But now it’s over.” She glares, and so all I can think to do is join my hand to her outstretched one, which she shakes. Does she notice I’m not shaking back? For a second, I’m relieved, as if I can get off on a technicality. As if things are good now, when in truth, they are so far from good, I can barely remember what good looks like.

Or comfortable, for that matter.

All I can recall at the moment is the way I felt watching our fingers trace invisible paths over each other’s hands last night, after we shared the most sublime sexual experience of my life. It can’t possibly be that she feels nothing now, that she can turn it off just like that. Can it?

Because I couldn’t shut this feeling down even if I could bring myself to try.

Which I can’t.

I watch her walk out the door. She doesn’t turn back, doesn’t slam it either. The quiet, careful click she closes it with feels worse.

I lean back, stretch my arms up, and cradle my head in my hands to take stock of the personal red lines I've crossed over the past twenty-four hours:

1. Lying

2. Mixing business with pleasure (fuck, that word. I will never be able to say that word without thinking of her pout parting to form it ever again)

3. Allowing myself to stop putting one foot in front of the other and forging ahead because things don't *feel right*

And it's that third one that scares me the most because it's the only way I've been able to keep going these last couple of years, now that the goals of money, success, and security have been long ago attained.

And now, I couldn't bring myself to get back to stepping along my straight and narrow path even if I tried.

All I want to do is stop and taste the plums.

I am so fucked.

NINE

BEC

I wake to the sound of Frosty smacking his paper balls around the living room. It's a sound of pure joy. This is someone enjoying every tiny drop life has to offer. Though I dropped into bed last night never wanting morning to come, I hop out of bed and watch him, and I have to say, a smile curls at my lips.

Despite Noah.

And his devious plot twist. Staying!

Is that what I'm really most upset about?

Because another line of his is the one that replayed in my mind all night—even in my dreams, in which I kept making mortifying scenes about how he made me think it was more. No matter how many tantrums I throw, no one will listen to me.

We'll just put it behind us.

How could I have felt so much when it was just a fling he could *put behind him*?

I waste thirty minutes tugging at that string, and find there are so many tangles, I can't seem to work it free.

And *this* is why I shouldn't have given in to what I felt for him.

Because I *knew* it would ruin everything.

How could I be so stupid?

Oh, I could sit and tug at that thread all day, but it's not going to take me anywhere different than where I am at the moment: needing to get to work. Needing to find a way to keep my personal feelings tucked away and follow through on this film project because it's going to bring prosperity to this town. And that goal is bigger than me and my...whatever this is.

"Right," I say to myself and Frosty, though he's stone deaf. I get up, resolved to focus on the larger goals.

I know I should avoid Amy's Picnic Basket this morning, because the restaurant's namesake is going to poke at the tender spot. But maybe that's what I need because the second I hop on my bike I know that's exactly where I'm headed.

Sure, my car being out of commission is inconvenient, but the garage said it should be all fixed up by the end of the week. Turns out it was the heat that screwed it up. The lithium-ion battery could have actually caught on fire! It's a rare thing that happens in extreme temperatures, but in the heat wave we've been having, it's not unimaginable. I could just imagine Noah saying he saved my life. Which is an annoying thing that's been happening since our night. I quash him down in real life, only for him to pop up in my subconscious.

Actually, it was the mechanic who saved my life, I tell the Noah in my head, because he was able to get the manufacturer to fund a brand new battery.

Imaginary conversations aside, it's nice riding my bike again. I used to pedal around on this thing all the time before I had a car. In Chicago, it was my lifeline. Things can get so claustrophobic there. And riding this lovely, vintage-style bicycle through my favorite park gave me a taste of the freedom I experienced pedaling my way around Magnolia Shores all those years ago.

There was no question of including it in my container of belongings that set sail back here when I got the news of my hiring at the very first public library in Magnolia Shores.

In fact, there weren't many questions, full stop, back then.

Today, I've got Magnolia Shores in my lungs, and I'm pedaling hard, my 1950s-inspired floral dress flowing satisfyingly with my velocity. And yet, I feel more claustrophobic than I ever felt in Manhattan.

Despite myself, I check to see his car is parked in the Director's spot at the library before I glide past the impressive concrete, steel, and wood structure that means so much to me and this town, and everything I hold dear in this life. And my heart sinks, because I know the person at fault here isn't Noah. It's me. I'm the one in charge of my destiny. I knew what I was risking, and yet, one taste of my Noah fantasies going live, and I risked everything I held dear.

I think of all the advice I've given lovesick friends in the past, and all I want to do is smack myself.

What would I do if it were a friend coming to me with this problem? I'd point out the hero's journey is following what we need instead of what we want—even if it's painful—and then give them just the right book to help process the feelings whizzing beneath that skin they feel like tearing off.

I've got a few books I go to again and again. But for once, the idea of comforting myself that way doesn't seem to fit. I never thought I'd see the day. It seems like lately, I can say that about a lot of things.

I slot the bike into the rack out front of Amy's Picnic Basket and climb the three steps of the patio and step inside. She's got checkered tablecloths on at the moment, and with the open windows leading to the sea and the cane brasserie chairs, it's like a little slice of heaven here.

“So, getting your speech prepared for when you tell everyone I'm right?”

“That is the absolute worst greeting in the history of human interaction.”

“Oh, I'm sure there's worse.”

“It'd be a stiff competition.” I drop my elbows on the counter and lower my head into my hands as Amy takes my Keep Cup and starts grinding beans for my double shot. She looks down at the cup. “Did you get a new one of these?”

“No it's the one No—*body* else wanted, so I got a second one.” I just managed to stop myself saying his name.

She looks at me funny, but thankfully drops it while I try to refocus the conversation. “Besides, you aren't going to win the

bet.”

“How do you know I won’t win?” I sigh and lift my face, weary.

Amy tamps the coffee expertly. It’s a pleasure to see her in her element, so happy with the space she’s occupying in the world. There’s all of her passion with none of that angst that was always dripping from her. Nothing can stop her now.

I wish I could say the same for myself. “You won’t win because he’s a liar.”

“He has a girlfriend?” Her eyes are saucers.

“What? No! Not that I know of anyway.”

“Then what did he lie about?”

“If I tell you that, I’ll have to kill you.”

“Eh,” she hikes a shoulder. “I feel like this might be worth it.” She turns up the steam wand, then dips it into the steel milk carafe, the noise loud and a welcome pause in the conversation.

Do I want to share this? Me, reckless. It’s mortifying. No. I can’t say it out loud.

“Never mind.”

She shuts the steam and taps the carafe onto the counter before pouring a mesmerizing design that I can’t quite make out into the foam. She finishes and turns it around.

“An open book,” I say.

“Yep. Been working on that one just for you.”

“I love it.”

She takes a bow. Just then the baby starts to cry. “Excuse me for a sec,” she says, and disappears through the swinging door into the back, only to emerge a moment later with Harry at her breast.

“Hello, little angel,” I say.

“Now, are you going to tell me about how you two hooked up and how it’s a disaster that seems unsolvable, so I can enjoy the HEA even more when this conflict is resolved?”

“And I thought I wouldn’t be able to bring myself to say it.”

She winks. “Ouch!” she winces. “He bit me.”

“Men,” I say.

“Yep. But they’re not all bad.”

“But you have to say that. You made one. Noah said he was quitting, going back to Sydney. And I never would have, well, *you know*, if he was staying. But now he says he’s changed his mind.”

“That *is* quite a pickle. But you know, I wouldn’t prepare to hang your painting yet.”

“Did you hear what I said? He *lied*. I am now working for a man I slept with. How can this end well?”

“Crazier things have happened.”

“Besides, he said it was just a fling.” I don’t mention that was my word, that it was a thing. And that the way we

inspected each other while those words were said in his office was not exactly a decisive ending.

And that omission is what I think about all day.

Because it's not the only thing I'm being dishonest about.

And that deep rage I'm feeling? I get the sinking sense it's somehow wrapped up in those omissions. Which means I might be more at fault than I would like to admit.

IT'S A FRIDAY, thank God, because I can't face another day of this wall of silence between us, I think as I wheel the cart around to the cookbook section to shelve returns. I don't usually do this, but today, I needed a break from requests because I don't trust myself with the words that might fly out of my mouth.

A half hour goes by peacefully, amidst the simple satisfaction of following the Dewey Decimals in order, finding the exact spot where a book fits, and then slotting it in, enjoying the look and feel of completion.

Before I know it, the cart is empty and I'm wheeling it back to the information desk, where Teresa is ready to switch places so she can take her lunch break. She stands, pulling at the hem of her *Harry Otter* tee shirt, and goes over a few outstanding hand-off items on the desk.

"Don't forget we have that meeting to brainstorm ideas for your video this afternoon," she calls over her shoulder as she stamps her Doc Martins toward the exit.

How could I? I've been dreading it all day.

Two and a half hours later, as I walk along the length of the long driftwood table that Amy's dad built for the library, I'm thrown. I meant to sit as far from Noah as humanly possible, but he hasn't sat down yet, so I don't know what to do. I dawdle, futzing with the papers in my hand, when Noah enters the room and pulls out the seat beside me like a gentleman.

Well, of all the underhanded, sneaky moves.

"Thank you," I say, sitting.

Teresa looks from me to Noah, so obviously aware that something strange is going on.

Well, so much for all the effort I've put into keeping my distance.

To make matters worse, he sits directly across from me. Not only can I not avoid looking at him, but I can't avoid *smelling* him.

Three other staff members congregate around the table, eager to grab one of Amy's famous croissants from the basket at the far end of the table.

I try to focus on my anger, but it's dissipating as Noah takes control of the meeting and begins by congratulating me on my *incredible* grant proposal and going on to say all kinds of complimentary things about me.

"We're honored to have Bec be the official ambassador of the Magnolia Shores Public Library. Who better to share the word about our book lover's beach than Bec?" He lets that hang a bit too long, so that I feel Teresa's eyes pinballing

between us. “It’s so important to have a personal angle to hang this literary travel destination push on.” He comes and sits two seats over from me.

I’ll give you something to hang on, I think before I shoo the thought—and his incredible fresh scent—away. If this is how lost I am after only a couple of days trying to hate him, then what hope do I have?

“She’s so good at what she does and the story of how she does this thing with picking the right books is amazing. Raise your hand if Bec’s worked her book curator’s superpower on you.”

I look around the table, and yep, everyone’s got a hand up. When I look at them, I can *see* their books. I feel a bit sheepish because it’s such a natural thing to me. I mean, should there really be such a fuss over it? I know which books to give to someone the way I know what I want for breakfast. It just comes to me. I hear my mother in the back of my mind reminding me that graciously accepting a compliment is an important skill. So, I stay mum, regardless of my inner critic.

As the meeting comes to a close and everyone files out, I know it’s now or never for approaching Noah about a detente.

“We can do this, right? Well, obviously we need to *really* not—you know.” That so came out wrong.

His smirk is maddening. “Oh, I *know*,” he says, just to make matters worse.

Why are we going ahead with this, like it’s a resolution we’ve finally achieved, when the him-not-leaving part hasn’t

changed a bit and it's so obvious neither of us believes that the thing between us was just a fling that has been flung?

Because you can't help it.

“Of course, we can help it!” My eyes bulge with the knowledge I've said that out loud.

He bites the side of his lip to keep from laughing.

TEN

NOAH

The next production meeting is scheduled on Monday. I took a cold shower in preparation, but I'm not sure that's going to do the trick because today Bec is wearing a hot pink dress that's hugging her curves, bow tied at the waist, and twirling out above her knees in a way that makes her look like a present waiting for me to unwrap.

The patent leather Mary Janes take the whole thing to unbearable, but all I need to concentrate on is why we're here: to put together a master list of who we should interview in the documentary.

This time it's just Teresa, Bec, and myself.

"Oh! We need to interview Mrs. Stratfield," Teresa says.

"How do you know about Mrs. Stratfield?" Bec asks.

"Everyone around here knows about her. It's legendary."

"Well, tell me, please. I'm at the edge of my seat."

Yup, I catch Bec looking over our side of the table at my ass.

Look at that, I can still have my fun.

“Well, as the story goes,” Teresa says, “Mrs. Stratfield lost her husband about five years ago after a shock cancer diagnosis. It all happened very fast.”

Bec nods, blinking back tears.

“And the town was there to support her—you know, bringing her food, inviting her to holidays, dropping in for tea, helping her with the legalities. But she was despondent. And after a while, she barely left the house. So Bec did her magic and left just the right book at Mrs. Stratfield’s door.”

“Where is she now?”

“She moved further north up the coast. About five hours drive from here. Always said she hated the cold.” Bec smiles, revealing how genuinely happy she is about this woman’s happiness.

“And what happened to her?” I ask.

“She became a nudist, but that’s not the point of the story! Once I set them in motion, I can’t control what happens. I’m not playing *God*, I’m just giving them a nudge.”

We all laugh.

“Anyway, she’s super happy.”

“We’re definitely putting her in the video.”

“She also cooks.”

“Okay. Interesting. Don’t tell me what her business is called: The Naked Chef?”

She shakes her head.

“Copyright issues since that one’s already a thing?”

“You got it. She’s the Nude Chef.”

“Is it me, or is that somehow worse? More *graphic*.” I shiver.

“So, why don’t you guys put together a list of all the people you think we should interview and I will get this going.”

They both stand to leave, but long after they do, I feel Bec’s presence in the room.

The Nude Chef. I mean, is it me, or is being with Bec like walking into the world I never dared to dream I could exist in?

I’ve got lots to do and none of it has to do with my resignation letter. And it’s not by design. It’s just that every time I think of doing it, I can’t.

The next week’s meeting is just the two of us and I find myself both thrilled and terrified at the idea of us being together. It’s a battle between want and need, but these days, I keep flip-flopping between which is which.

“Okay, so transportation,” I say. “We can use the Wheatley jet.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little bit unseemly for a library grant trip?”

Is it the jet that’s unseemly, or me? And why do I care so much what she thinks? “I see what you’re saying. Optics are important. What do you suggest?”

“Driving?”

“Well, we do have quite a record in cars, don’t we?”

“Ha ha.” She smiles, one of those glinty-eyed ones I keep conjuring from our night together. But she doesn’t scold me. And she doesn’t stiffen or make some excuse to leave. Is she softening toward me?

And is that what I want despite what she’s clearly explained to me is at stake for her? So, what is it? Do I think I know better than she does what the right thing is? And that right thing is being with me? Or is it that underneath the work ethic and the steadfastness, I’m just such a selfish prick who can’t stop myself to think what’s right for her?

Neither of those feels like the right answer for my dangerous, unrelenting need to see where this thing with us goes. But I’m starting to really dislike myself because all the righteousness and responsibility I’ve stood behind my whole life seems to have dissipated in a cloud of Bec, nudists, poetry, and saucy floral dresses.

“Sounds good. You’re right. And if there’s anywhere that you’d like to stop along the way that would be good for the documentary, let me know.”

“Yeah, okay.”

In the following week, we fall into a friendly but painfully chaste coexistence, and put together a stellar itinerary for the trip, and hammer out the details. Yet somehow the day to set out on the road with Bec comes around without me having sent the letter.

ELEVEN

NOAH

The morning I pick Bec up for our production trip is bright, but there are swiftly moving clouds taking up half the sky.

It's not the kind of thing I used to notice, but since Bec and WCW, which I've taken to calling my new favorite poet, I can't help but notice the small stuff. Like the fact that I have a freaking favorite poet.

Or that she's in a dress I haven't seen before, but fuck, does it suit her with a long row of dainty buttons from top to bottom that I'd better not think about too much. The pattern is the most delicate pink buds, and as soon as my eye catches there, I know I'd better not linger.

"Ready?" I say, hauling her yellow rolling suitcase into the trunk. A yellow suitcase. It literally would never have entered my mind. Suitcases are black. When I need one, this is the default option. I've never thought to scroll through and see what else is on offer.

She's already let herself in the car before I could open the door for her, and I feel my first pang of heaviness. My need to do for her runs that deep.

“I made us a travel music playlist,” she says, rummaging through her huge handbag. “Would you like to listen to it?”

“More than anything,” I say.

Instead of huffing or stiffening, she smiles like she’s decided something on her part about how we will coexist on this trip. Which is good because I’m plum out of ideas.

Her music spans from Dolly Parton to The Cure and everything in between. And each song has a story. Which she warms my heart by sharing with me. God, I’ve missed her easy company, her passionate runs of words.

At the halfway mark, we stop for lunch at a place she’s been talking about the whole car ride, but it’s boarded up.

“I can’t believe it.” She walks up to the door anyway. The sign says *Thank you for your patronage. It has been our great pleasure to serve this community and all who visit it. But unfortunately, after eight years, we have to close our doors.*

“They need the Wheatleys,” she says, her heart so obviously heavy that I ache to reach out and comfort her. But I gave my word I would stay away because that’s what she wanted.

I keep my distance. “You know, my whole life when I saw things like this, I was very ungenerous. I’d think, this is a fairy tale approach to life, and if you’re going to go the entrepreneur route, well then, it’s gonna fail ninety-nine percent of the time. Everyone knows that.”

“I’d say it’s not ungenerous because I know you uphold the same standard for yourself. But it makes me want to crawl

into a hole and never get out. What would life be like without these enchanted, soul-satisfying places to inspire us?"

"Bleak. Very bleak."

I nearly startle when she takes my hand in hers.

I look down at it, using all my will not to stroke her creamy skin. "So thank you for opening my eyes."

Slowly, tenderly, our eyes meet, and in front of that dashed dream of a cake shop, the man who I am very rapidly realizing is falling in love whether or not it's convenient, or right, or good for any parties involved, says, "I'm glad we have this trip together before I go." When I catch his reflection in the empty restaurant window, I barely recognize him.

Two and a half hours later, we take Mrs. Stratfield's long winding drive through the bush and her brightly restored worker's cottage comes into focus through the foliage. It's painted a pale green that fits right in with the tall, leaning gumtrees around. But a beautiful red door with a glass pane in it says it's not all about blending in around here.

"Don't you think she should have a higher fence?" I say, having fallen into the rhythm of our old banter during the drive.

She smiles, and the sight is a great relief. I have so missed that smile.

We park and walk up to the glass pane in the door, and her raised eyebrows mimic mine. It's clear we're both thinking a nudist should have a bit more privacy. Just like that, something between us softens.

I want to reach around her tiny waist and pull her to me.

And it's in moments like these I'm most tormented
because how could something that feels this good be wrong?

TWELVE

BEC

“Are you ready?” he says at Mrs. Stratfield’s door, teasing me in that way I love.

I can’t help but feel softened toward him. It’s a pretty special thing we’re doing together here, and he’s been keeping up his end of the bargain over the past weeks. Aside from the intimate looks that pop up when someone mentions the mezzanine, or poetry, or anything that could be interpreted as sexual or romantic, and the moments when our fingers accidentally brush, or he walks in right when I’m thinking about him, we’ve managed to keep our relationship professional.

It’s award-winning stuff.

In certain moments I can even tell myself it looks like he’s truly put that thing between us behind him. But when I do, a heaviness weighs down my chest and muddles up my thinking. That’s what I wanted, isn’t it?

I hear Mrs. Stratfield padding down the hallway. “If I remember correctly she likes to wear slippers and nothing else,” I warn Noah.

His furrowed brow is priceless.

I can't help but place a reassuring hand on his arm. Like, *we got this*. Only what it seems to say is *we got this, together*. And what's worse is that even after I yank my hand away, I still feel the phantom touch between us. And it settles over us in a way I'm sure will be obvious to Mrs. Stratfield. Which makes me blush. Which makes Noah more aware than ever that I'm being affected by the proximity this trip sees us in.

"Hello!" Mrs. Stratfield embraces Noah in a hug, and his reaction makes my shade of crimson look pastel in comparison.

"Thank you for having us," he says when he can speak. "I understand you've got a great story about a book that Bec chose for you." The way he's looking at anything but her generous naked form is priceless.

"Oh yeah. This woman changed my life."

Behind us, I hear the camera crew's van pull up the drive. I turn quickly to see them come to a stop a few feet from where we stand.

"What did she pick for you?" Noah asks. "Shakespeare? Dante?"

"Nope."

He turns to me and we share another one of those deeply confusing glances. "Williams?" he asks, his gaze at a nonexistent stain on his shirt, which he pretends to wipe off.

"I'm sorry. Who?"

Noah palms off the need for a response, which is just as well, because the image of us reading through those verses, his

strong arms around me, is overwhelming.

“Nah! She picked me a romance novel called *The Hottest Night*. I’d never read a romance novel in my life, believe it or not. I don’t know how I went so long without one! There’s Bec, holding out this book with a man’s chest on the cover, and I laughed right in her face.”

“You’ve got me on tenterhooks, Mrs. Stratfield, but I’m gonna press pause so we can set those cameras up and get this all down,” he says, as the crew begin hauling their gear in our direction.

“Sounds like a good idea. I’ve got time,” she says, leading us to her sitting room before she heads into the kitchen.

Noah lets out an almighty sigh of relief and looks at me. It’s still there, our easier connection from the car. And I realize I am having so much fun. There’s something to the work I love and being with this man that elevates everything.

Mrs. Stratfield emerges, thankfully wearing an apron, and a tray of chocolate chip cookies that look so good I think he just might be able to ignore the image of undress in which they were prepared.

Or not.

I take one as she holds them out, but Noah doesn’t seem to be able to move.

“Go on, take one,” she says, holding them out to him.

We both watch him as he ever so slowly lifts the cookie to his mouth. He hesitates, but then seems to decide something and truly gives himself over to enjoying the cookie.

But it's more than that. The moment seems to have created a tipping point in which our feelings for each other outweigh the anger and the common sense, and suddenly I see in his eye that unbridled passion for this thing between us, for *me*, that brought this crazy affair into play in the first place.

THIRTEEN

NOAH

For a second after eating that surprisingly fucking delicious cookie, I almost feel relief from the weighty guilt that's been plaguing my chronic inability to send in that resignation. It's as if fate was guiding me to continue in this shameful way. Because we share a moment in that nudist's living room that is impossible to ignore.

Then I remember I'm not built that way. Even if being with Bec makes me want to see if I could be.

I force myself from this thinking—because it's got all the signs of something I could lose days on, and yes, those are days in which I won't be handing that letter in. I squeeze my fist tight and that snaps me out of it enough to remember that Bec and I are not the only people in this room.

That tips my brain back into the moment, muddying my questions about fate and love enough so I couldn't concentrate on them even if I tried.

The crew happily munch the baked goods, chewing in thoughtful, smirky ways that make me think they're probably more intrigued than they should be. But, hey, I doubt if public television documentaries are ever this colorful, so you can't

help but be generous, in my opinion, as two nerdy camera guys share a grin.

And I sneak a peek at Bec, and she catches me again.

Thankfully, Bec and the nudist whose life her book recommendation changed take their places on the sofa. Bec doesn't seem the least bit concerned about how much time Mrs. Stratfield's bare ass has spent on the very spot where she's sitting.

The filming begins, so I can focus on listening to Mrs. Stratfield's story, and looking anywhere but at her naked form, which, is starting to feel like another way that fate, or a higher power, or one of those forces I never allowed myself to explore because they would take control away from me, was working to bring all my shorthand survival techniques into relief.

“When my Ned died, I was a mess. And everyone in Magnolia Shores pitched in the way they always do. Sometimes I miss that place something fierce.”

Please don't move back, I find myself thinking. Because imagine if you had to face someone whose ability to follow their passions was so starkly in your face every day.

Plus, all the surfaces you'd have to avoid sitting on.

This time I reflexively turn to Bec—like this is what I once again do, share jokes with her. Or worse, *need* to share jokes with her.

Mrs. Stratfield continues. “Bec comes over about a month after Ned left us, with a romance novel! This gorgeous burly

man's chest on the cover." She holds up the well-thumbed book, and yes, more unwelcome images come to mind. And there I am searching out Bec again. It's pointless, isn't it? Trying to fight this connection between us so fiercely. Surely *looking* at each other won't harm anyone. I give in.

And just like that, my body feels lighter.

"And what would I want with someone else's happily ever after when mine's been stolen from me? I thought, this girl doesn't have a superpower! How could she come to me with this kind of book? I know that sounds so terrible. But I was so mopey and after I did all the paperwork and admin, I was just left with my thoughts pinging around in that old, empty house.

"But I'll never forget this—I woke up in the middle of the night and there was that Fabio-looking guy on my bedside table, and I thought, *ahh I'll give it a crack*. I turned my light on, started reading, and would you believe, I stayed up all night and finished that book? I laughed, I cried, I wanted good things for the heroine, and *I* felt good. After *The End*, a calm peace settled over me, and I slept, which to be honest was something I'd never really done—even when Ned was with us.

"It was as if her happiness was making *me* happy. And I don't know—I was able to process my grief through the experience of reading about the possibility of happiness. I'm sure it didn't hurt to step outside myself for a second either."

Mrs. Stratfield went on to explain how one book led to another, and another, and eventually one in which a woman became a nudist.

“I did a bit of research, and I loved the idea of being so comfortable with life and your place in it that you let it all hang out. I shocked the hell out of everyone. Especially myself. But you know, it’s the best thing I ever did.”

WHAT STICKS OUT MOST, when all the cameras have been packed away, and the awkward goodbye hugs given, as we make our way to the small but quaint hotel where we are staying the night, is how Mrs. Stratfield said, “The thing I love most about naturism—a word I prefer to nudism because that’s what it is, natural—is that it forces you to be comfortable with something so far outside of most people’s comfort zones. Like you can do anything.”

FOURTEEN

NOAH

After naps in our separate rooms, we drive to the restaurant Bec booked the two of us into for dinner. Though she'd invited them, the crew opted instead to hit the local pub for pizza and wings. We pull into the lot of a beautiful restaurant you never would've known was there. It's in an old stone building replete with a fountain out the front. Of course, the water is cascading from a little boy peeing.

It's the last thing we need after Mrs. Stratfield's uniquely poignant interview today.

"Don't even say the word 'nudist,' please." One side of my mouth quirks.

"As long as it's noted."

Her smile tells me this trip was a good idea. I've missed it. More than I ever would have admitted to myself mere days ago.

But now? I don't know. I can make peace with that—even if I'm not exactly ready to unpick the true meaning behind my resistance to quitting.

Maybe I *can* make this right. For the first time, I truly feel that.

“And before we let the topic go, please tell me the people making this dinner are wearing clothes.”

“One hundred percent. Well, maybe ninety-seven percent.”

“Ninety-seven?”

“Well, I have heard that—”

“You know what? Don’t tell me.”

“Just kidding anyway.”

Inside, it’s like a treasure chest. There are charming antiques arranged thoughtfully amongst modern oil paintings and large close-up photos that must be from fifty years ago, judging from the clothes and the hairstyles and the quality of the images.

Right away, the sounds of a soulful French songstress boost the pleasurable sensations. It smells like heaven. “You know what? This place looks so awesome that I don’t even care if these people are letting it all hang out into our food.”

She chucks me in the arm. And I laugh.

Ah, there it is.

Are we back where we were?

Except she thinks that you’re actually leaving.

But you don’t anymore, do you?

Just enjoy the night.

A man in his fifties approaches the table in formal black-and-white restaurant attire. He's got a British accent. I always wonder what brought someone so far from their home, all the way to our land Down Under. But this place he made here, it's perfect. And I never would have come to it without her.

"Ah! Bec! Lovely to see you. And who's this handsome man you're with tonight?"

"Don't get too excited. It's just my boss."

That stings more than I can say.

"Oh, well, you never know. And what is it they say about business and pleasure?"

"Never mix!" Bec says at the same time I say "When pleasure interferes with business, give up business." I may or may not have been doing some research in my solitude.

"I see. Well, Raymond won't say a word, loves. Let's go get you your table. Best one in the house, obviously."

We sit, sipping the sparkling water Raymond poured for us before he left us to look over the menus.

"You know, you've really surprised me," Bec says.

"Have I?"

She nods. "I can admit it when I'm wrong. I just didn't think you had it in you to be like this."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, able to roll with things, let go."

“I can be fun.” *You know that. Or maybe I need to keep rolling with things and let you in a bit further so you understand.* It feels like a now or never moment. “You know what they say—work hard, play hard.” I feel my walls crumble, and I have no choice but to speak the truth. “The question is what do you do when you’re done working hard, and you don’t remember how to play?”

She’s quiet, like my frankness has caught her off guard. Well, that makes two of us.

“Surely there’s a book for that, isn’t there?” I tilt my head, reflecting the lightheartedness I feel.

“Ha ha.”

“I’m not making fun of you. It’s amazing actually.” Then I roll some more and shock us both by telling her about the day I saw that waitress wearing the WCW plums shirt, and why I didn’t resign. *The first time.* “You’re too good at your job. Like you said, you just put these things in motion. You don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“Amuse Bouche?” Raymond brings out tiny, round puff pastries topped with cream, salmon, and a sprig of dill. And after he introduces the bites to us, he goes over the local wine list with her.

I’ve never seen someone have so many questions about wine. Most people like one or two kinds and stick with that. But she wants to know what’s new. What’s different.

We wind up with a regional biodynamic orange wine—a thing I’ve never heard of before. And you know what? It’s the

best damn wine I've ever tasted. And it's not even expensive.

I tell her how impressed I am.

“Well, you surprise me too.”

“Oh yeah, how?”

“For starters, you made me question every single thing I always knew for certain. And now I can't seem to go back.” I don't know if it's the nudism—excuse me, *naturism*—or the thawing between us, but honesty appears to be my only setting with Bec tonight.

“And that makes you mad?”

“Mad isn't the right word. Uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“You know what they say about discomfort?”

“That it's uncomfortable?” I can't help but think of Mrs. Stratfield's words: *nudism forces you to be comfortable with something so far outside of most people's comfort zones. Like you can do anything.*

She gives me a half-grin before saying, “I think the motivational speaker, Michael Hyatt, put it best, though many others have incredibly illuminating takes on the topic—like Mrs. Stratfield, today, for instance. But Hyatt says, ‘Discomfort is a catalyst for growth. It makes us yearn for something more. It forces us to change, stretch, and adapt.’ So, if you feel like that, it's a pretty good bet that you're on the right track.”

I'm speechless. Where did she *come from*? And how did I get so lucky as to cross her path? And after all the bumbling, reckless ways I've nearly destroyed any possibility of exploring this thing between us, how am I going to fix things?

"Why didn't you give me his book?"

"You strike me as the kind of person that needs to come to conclusions on his own."

She's so got your number. She wins! Why don't you just give in and throw your hands up in defeat?

Because I want to win, too.

And she's right.

I need to do it on my own.

WE TAKE Raymond's advice and order the two specials on the menu. "Why do I get the feeling you're going to ask to split these dishes because you want them both?"

"Guilty." She raises her palms.

"Fine. But only because I'm trying to explore my discomfort."

"You don't like sharing food?"

"I mean, how hard is it to pick an item on a menu?"

"A menu like *this*?" She gestures to the menu she asked to hold onto because she wanted to look at it some more. "Nearly impossible. I believe it would be simpler to choose which live

bomb wire to clip without any knowledge of what I was doing. At least in that case, there're only two options."

"In real life, you don't disarm bombs by cutting wires. That's just a Hollywood thing."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm that guy."

"Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*?"

"No. The guy who can do anything. Who can get it all done. Anything and everything."

"I can see that."

"But I don't think I want to just be that guy anymore."

"Then why don't you do something crazy?"

"Like what? Become a nudist? Is this whole book recommendation thing really a vehicle for a worldwide nudist takeover?"

"Yes. Yes, it is. But I prefer the term *naturist*."

I smile and shrug. "Okay, I'm in."

"You mean on the nudist thing?"

I want to say, *with you, sure*, but I take a sip of wine and breathe through the urge. "I mean on the something crazy."

She reaches for my hand. I don't move but I stare at it. She stares at me staring at it.

"Isn't this against the rules?" I say, wanting so hard not to make things harder for her. And yet, for the first time in days,

that feeling of discomfort is bearable. How can this be so wrong?

“I think it is.”

“What’s this all about?” I lean in.

“Well, if you’re going to do something crazy, I thought maybe I could, too.”

“Is this about you? Or me?”

“Can it be about both of us?”

“You mean, like, together?”

“Yes.” My heart pounds, but I try to keep it light. “As nudists?”

She shakes her head.

I roll my eyes. “Sorry. I mean *naturists*.”

She grimaces.

I shrug “It was worth a shot.”

Dinner is incredible, though I definitely would have ordered the filet mignon with no regrets, I have to admit, sharing her seafood pasta steps it up a notch.

Before I know it, we’ve eaten, nearly finished the bottle of wine, and our dessert comes. And we’re still holding hands. With my other hand, I pick up the largest dessert spoon I’ve ever seen. What is it with people and dessert? I can count the number of times I’ve eaten it outside of birthdays on my hands. “Holy shit, that is delicious. If I was going to be crazy and have dessert, then this was the time to do it.”

“Hold on.” She waves her spoon “Are you telling me you don’t eat dessert?”

“Nope.”

“Never?” Her eyes are large as coins. “Stop it.”

“There is zero nutritional benefit to dessert.”

“Uh, yeah. That’s the whole point!”

“I don’t do indulgent. I mean, look at this *spoon*.” I raise it, which feels embarrassing. “Me plus this spoon is not an equation I can compute.”

“This is worse than I thought.”

“There is something else, though.”

“What?”

I should’ve kept my mouth closed. “Never mind. It’s silly.”

“How do you know if it’s silly if you don’t tell me?”

“What if it *is* silly?”

“Then you’ve shown me something real. Like you did before. And I *really* appreciated that.”

“I’m already reeling from being seen with this spoon.” I can’t help my eye-roll.

Oh, hang on a minute. There’s something new in that smile of hers. A new level of intimacy. And it’s pretty obvious it’s because of the fucking spoon. I give in to the worst fears I have and this woman feels close to me. It’s a mind-blower. If I were WCW, I’d be composing my next opus on silverware.

But I’m me.

And what you can do is lean into this honesty. Tell her what kind of effect the closeness with her has on you.

“Okay, how do I put this? What I mean is, I’ve really been *seen*. By you. And we aren’t supposed to be really seeing each other that way, and feel—” I mime a head explosion, then place a hand over the one she’s got on the table. “Not when it was just a fling.”

“What are you saying?”

I reach under and raise her hand, then squeeze. “I’m saying that *this*, my gorgeous, world-opening, mind-altering Bec, is no fling. I didn’t mean that and I think you know it.”

She swallows, her throat bobbing with the effort.

Her gaze cuts right through me. A fresh slice. Exquisite pain. And there’s only one thing this can be. “It’s the real thing, plum. But you and me, I think we keep calling it a fling, only because it seems to turn you on so much.”

“Does not.” She flutters her lashes in a way that betrays how deeply it does.

“That’s okay. You know how much I get turned on by my naughty librarian.” I shake my head. “And every time I get to know her more, I find out she’s just that little bit naughtier.”

She sinks her tooth into that plush bottom lip of hers. “And what are you gonna do about it?”

Fuck, I want her. “I guess I’m gonna have to teach you a lesson. Make that body of yours understand what’s really going on here.”

Her chest heaves like that body of hers is more than ready. If there's one thing I've learned about the two of us, it's that our physical connection is a lot better at working out how we work together than our brains could ever be.

Things happen fast after that. Who knew that the truth really can set you free? Because I am soaring as I stand, lift her from her seat, and kiss her for all the restaurant to see.

Each press of our lips, each swipe of my tongue in her eager mouth, is like being reborn.

I'd ask what it means, but there's only so much honesty a person can take in one night. And though I've gotten close, I still haven't told her the truth—that I never resigned. And though I want to more than anything, I can't seem to cross that final line. I keep telling myself I will resign and then it will be true. But it doesn't take a moral expert to know that's one fuzzy line I'm walking.

AFTER DINNER, she suggests we go to the quaint outdoor marketplace this town is famous for. It's stone-lined and strung with fairy lights.

Hand in hand, we stroll past a French patisserie, a jeweler, a florist, and at the very end is a tattoo parlor.

“Hang on a second. I'm sorry. I'm not getting a tattoo.”

“No, but you are getting. . . an earring!”

“No!”

“It’s the perfect *something crazy*. You said you always wanted to get an earring.”

“Well, I didn’t mean it.”

“You can’t do that.”

“What?”

“Lie when things get uncomfortable. Let’s not do that anymore.”

That hits a little bit too close to home. And in the interest of changing the subject quickly, I move forward. “Well, then, what would I get?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see what they have.”

“You want me to get an earring? Everyone’s just going to say, ‘Oh, look at him completely whipped.’”

“And?”

“They’d be right.” I pull her close and kiss her the way I’ve been desperate to all these weeks.

Her sigh when I break the kiss goes right to my soul. I take her hand, bring it to my lips, then lower our held hands between us, and lead us into the shop. We go through all the glass cases, and though I learn a lot about the kinds of things people want to say with their ears, I don’t find anything I want to say. “Maybe the time is already passed for this. I mean, is it even in style anymore for men to have earrings?”

“Oh, is that what you’re worried about, not being trendy?”

“Wouldn’t say I’m worried. It’s just, have I gone too far down the straight and narrow path to now go the earring

path?”

“The earring path? That’s ridiculous. There is no earring path.”

“Oh, there’s an earring path.”

“Are you going to chicken out?”

“No. It’s just, what are *you* gonna do?”

“Well, why do *I* have to do something?”

“Because it’s more fun that way.”

“Are you suggesting we get matching earrings?”

“No.”

“Then what *are you* suggesting?”

“How about you do something that *you’re* afraid of.”

“Well, there’s only one thing on that list. And it’s going to take an army to get me to do that.”

“I have military connections. Tell me what it is.” I pull her into me so we’re chest to chest and sweep her hair behind her ear.

“Of course, you do.”

I have so missed the way she looks up at me like that—sexy and desirous, looking like she wants so badly for me to stake my claim, but doesn’t want me to know how badly.

I press my lips to hers. “So, what is it, plum? Tell me what scares you.”

She hesitates so long that for a moment I fear she's going to say it's me. But she inhales dramatically, then lets go a great whoosh of air and says, "Swimming in the waves."

"Really? You don't go in the ocean?"

She shakes her head.

"Why not?"

"I nearly drown when I was young. It was terrifying. They actually had to resuscitate me. I still dream about it all the time—that feeling of being totally out of control, just having to give in and let the sea take me out wherever it rushed."

"Deal," I say because I've got chills hearing that story, and it seems to explain so much about her need to be self-contained, maybe even why she doesn't seem to want *me* to need *her*. I want to be the man who frees her of this fear.

"I didn't agree to anything."

"I get an earring and you let me take you in the waves. I've had my lifesaving certificate since I was sixteen."

"Of course, you have."

"Is that a yes?"

"Do I have a choice?"

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, plum, it doesn't look like either of us does."

I walk out pierced with a tiny gold cross, like an 80's bad boy, or someone entertaining the idea of surrendering some control to a higher power. I do probably look ridiculous, but it feels right. And she says it's sexy as hell. And from the way

she wriggles against my cock outside the car door, I'm positive I made the right choice.

FIFTEEN

BEC

While our previous encounters were urgent and frenzied, this time is different. It starts when we leave that earring shop. We hold hands the whole time—on the walk to the car, and across the leather seats in the Range Rover, making it very *environmentally friendly*, at least to me.

His earring catches the moonlight. I trace my finger over it while he drives. And then I watch that finger play at his ear, neck, down his shirt, like it knows all the moves. All I can think about is the lesson he's going to teach me. My thighs clench, my belly hollows out.

I follow the line of his jaw, feel at that bad-boy dimple in his chin. The one that—from the very beginning—made me wonder about the disconnect between his watch tapping and something his body seemed to be saying to me.

Our brand of fling is throbbing through me, showing me what it means, even if *I* haven't quite worked it out yet, my body doesn't seem to be worried about anything at all.

My hands work south, painfully slowly, the desire building between us as I explore the tight, muscular planes of his shoulder, biceps, chest. When his arousal strains at the brush

of my fingers along his waistband, I feel strong, tall, and shockingly powerful.

My hands dip inside his pants and he groans. “Looks like you’re ready for your lesson,” he says. I tease my fingers over the ridge of his bulging erection.

“Yes, sir.” Fuck, am I turned on.

“Say that again,” he says.

“Yes, sir.”

He lets out an almighty growl.

“I’m not sure if I can take all that, sir,” I say, then release my grip, tucking my hands in my lap like a good girl.

“I’ll show you how to take it.”

Thankfully we’re approaching the lot of the hotel. At my door, he holds out a hand and grips mine inside it like he’s in charge. I don’t know what’s come over me? Who is this woman?

My core throbs. My chest pounds, my pulse races.

Two kangaroos rustle the grassy patch in front of his room as they hop off, their massive tails trailing behind.

He holds me to one side, his grip tightening as he works the key in the lock.

Inside, he takes his time locking the door, placing the key on the entry table. He lowers my hand to my thigh and smooths his hand over it before stepping back.

“Now, stand at the foot of the bed and take your clothes off.”

I tremble, savoring the effect his words have on me. I do as I’m told, slipping one skinny strap, and then the other, from my shoulders. Then I untie the bow tie at my waist and let the whole thing slide down my body, landing in a puddle at my feet. I place two flirty fingers over my mouth.

“That’s it,” he says, walking right up behind me.

In my shiny peep toe pumps, I step out from the dress.

My hands reach behind me to unclasp my bra.

He waves a finger like I’ve been naughty. “That’s my job,” he says, the scent of his cologne driving me mad.

He moves behind me so I feel his cock against my bare back. “Look what you did.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I think you did.”

“Maybe I did. It’s just, I have these naughty thoughts.”

“Tell me,” he says, releasing the hook and grabbing my tits firmly in his palms, pulling me to him that way. I squirm as he pinches my sensitive, pebbled nipples.

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Maybe I can help you.” He lets one of his hands run the length of my ribs and belly, creating goosebumps along the way until he smooths over the satin of my panties to cup my mound.

I wriggle to get his touch where I want it.

“Tell me what you want me to do *here*.” I throb as his finger traces along my seam.

“I want you to dip your finger along that path you’re tracing.”

“Like this?” He stretches the soaked gusset aside and nudges my legs apart with his knee. I watch his finger slide in just the right spot. I shamelessly arch my back against him, and he rocks that throbbing length against my back with more pressure. Electricity shoots through me.

“Yes.”

He slips his finger slowly along that needy, wet place, up to my clit, which he circles with just the right pressure—achingly light, then down again, this time circling my hot opening until I’m bucking into him, urging him to plunge inside.

“What a filthy girl you are. I suppose you want me to fuck you with these fingers?” He presses the tips of two of them to my opening, but doesn’t penetrate. The sight of him there shoots white-hot need to my toes.

“Yes, please.” I watch as he slips them inside. Slowly, my channel hugs him as he pulls them out, then inserts them all the way, curling to touch my G-spot just right.

“You are so fucking tight. I can’t wait to bury my cock in your wet pussy.”

I clench twice uncontrollably, afraid I’m already close.

“You don’t want to come yet, do you?”

I shake my head.

But he doesn’t let up, slamming his fingers in and out to the sound of my wetness. I shudder as he starts working his thumb in mind-blowing circles around my clit. The combination is taking me to the point of no return.

“It’s too much. I’m going to come.”

“And you don’t want to come.”

“No. No!” But I can’t stop the tsunami as it rises, crashing through me in violent spasms, throbbing tightly around his fingers as I come.

“I knew you couldn’t control yourself,” he says, sliding his fingers from me. “Which is why I’m going to take control now. Let me show you what’s best for you.”

I rock my hips back into him as he slides my panties down my legs.

Behind me, I feel him undo the buttons of his shirt and then free his cock from his pants and boxer briefs. I hear the rip of the condom wrapper and the rubber rubs against my back as he leans in to sheathe his length.

He bends me over the bed, a firm hand pressing my shoulders into the blanket. Though I’m still pulsing from my orgasm, the need to feel him inside of me is overwhelming.

“I’m going to fuck you now.”

I gasp.

“See? I know what you need.” There’s no teasing. In one swift thrust, he fits his entire length inside my pussy. And fuck, is he right. He knows exactly what I need, fucking me so hard, so good, that soon enough, that whiteness blanks out any thoughts, and I’m spasming around his hardness, losing myself in him.

“See, plum. I know all about what you need. Just like you know what I need.” He comes in an almighty explosion, pistoning his hips against me so I don’t know where he ends and I begin.

SIXTEEN

NOAH

After the trip, we spend every night together. There are no plans. Instead, we just wind up together somehow, and I tell myself that this makes it still count as a fling.

The filming for the project is nearly complete. We've got Amy Green and Bec's parents left—the most personal stories. And though they will be at the beginning of the documentary, for scheduling purposes, we had to get the others done first.

Today, Amy's filming is at her restaurant, Amy's Picnic Basket, and Lucas is there, watching the baby for her. They're two married people like so many I've seen before, and yet, from where I'm standing inside my *fling* with Bec, I can't help but feel an unrecognizable urge inside me.

You want that.

I don't know what to do with that, so I look at my watch and say we'd better get started. Amy goes back to when they were young, and I picture little Bec with her braids and her missing teeth. I must have crossed paths with her at some point. I wasn't home much back then but this is a small town and there are only so many places for a kid to go.

Every memory Amy shares just serves to lead me to the same kind of ache at having missed those times with Bec. She cares so much about other people. I feel so *proud* of her.

“Bec had me read a memoir of this woman I had never heard of, someone most people never will because she wasn’t famous or anything, just an ordinary woman. This was when I went back to New York for the second time; that move was a giant mistake. I was miserable, but I didn’t know why. That book helped me to work it out. I hate to admit it, but I owe her a fair chunk of gratitude for things finally working out with me and Lucas.”

She holds up the well-worn paperback, strangely titled, *And Then*.

“So what did you think when she got all this so right?”

“I thought, she’s got something special. I told her—picking the right books is your superpower. I got her a tee shirt with that printed on it. She still wears it—a *lot*.”

“Not that much,” Bec says, then dramatically tugs at the snaps of her linen shirt to reveal the shirt.

Amy shakes her head. “I knew it.”

My chest jumps at the loving connection between them. The warmth in the room is infectious.

Afterward, we wind up at her place after yet another long lingering dinner out at Re-Surf.

Night after night, we stay at that club, eating, drinking, pretending no one can tell we’re hot for each other, coming up with increasingly ridiculous innuendos about hardcovers and

surfboards and the remarkably familiar shape of Amy's baguettes. Until one of us takes it too far and we're like cats in heat, desperate to end the charade and tear each other's clothes off.

Sometimes we don't even tear the clothes off.

Sometimes we go commando.

Sometimes we don't even make it inside.

Each night, Bec insists we go to my place, even though she seems to look around it for reasons to dislike it. Maybe *because* she's looking for something like that. The only thing I like about it is the mug she bought me on our trip, which says *I Left My Heart in Stockton*.

I'd always assumed she preferred to go to my apartment because it's outside of town and poses less risk of us being spotted. But tonight is different. Tonight she says she wants to go to her place. I think of how it felt being with Lucas and Amy, the *I want that* feeling that hasn't gone away like I told myself it would.

"Did you see Amy's baguette today?" I say, taking over for her when her front door lock appears to be stuck. I push the key in firmly and pull the door toward its frame. Sometimes these old doors just don't line up properly. Once it engages, the barrel turns and the door gives.

Out of some animalistic instinct to protect her, I look inside the dark house first. "It's like I could mod—" I bar her from entering the house with my arm when I notice the state of

disarray in the kitchen across from where we stand. “It looks like someone broke in.”

She peeks around me. “What? The Cheerios all over the floor? That’s just my cat.”

“Are you sure? I don’t see a cat.”

“Yes, I’m *sure*. He’ll be up on top of the bookcase on his leopard.”

“Of course. That sentence makes perfect sense here in Wonderland, Alice.”

“Ha ha. Go have a look. You’ll see what I mean.”

I try not to smush the Cheerios beneath my shoes as I cross the kitchen. And, yes, as I enter the living room, which is chock-a-block with books arranged by color, I am struck by the image of a snowy white cat sleeping like he’s got rigor mortis, belly-up, limbs splayed, atop a stuffed leopard. I sit watching the cat. *That’s Bec’s cat* confoundingly keeps looping through my brain. *Yes*, I tell it. But logic seems to have an ever-decreasing role in my life these days.

I’m still thinking about it when Bec comes over to the table, crunching her red shiny heels over every bit of cereal in her path, holding two steaming mugs of tea. Mine says *Librarians do it better*.

I hold it up and nod. “I’ll drink to that.”

“That one’s mine,” she says, swapping them out.

The one she hands me has a picture of a scowling cat on it. “Is this meant to be me?” I ask.

“Hey. Why should we end a good rivalry just because we’re having sex?”

“Hey, it’s a *fling*, remember?” But the word sounds ridiculous now. I can barely remember the logic we used to keep using it for this thing between us.

“I’m pretty sure if you look up *fling* in a dictionary, drinking tea in significant mugs is not allowed. Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of expert in those?” So, I’m not the only one who’s been thinking about it.

“Yes, but this is our kind of fling. And this is brand-new territory for me, plum.”

“Can we just go around changing the meaning of things?”

“A *naughty* librarian can.”

“You would say that.”

“Of course, because you know I love it when you look saucy for your boss in all those floral dresses.”

“Playing with language is one dangerous game. I don’t know which end is up, Mr. King.” She comes over to my chair and straddles me, leaning her arms on either of my shoulders. Fuck, does she fit perfectly there.

“That’s okay. Just leave it to your body. It’s very good at making me crazy and proving that you can’t stop thinking about me.”

“I’m pretty sure the research is not going to point me in that direction.”

“Then maybe you’re doing it wrong. This is field research.”

I manage to slide her straps down during this face-off, and then reach around and free her beautiful tits.

“Well, that’s not fair. I want to see something, too.”

I stand, undo my fly, and in one swift tug lower my pants and briefs so my erection bobs free.

“Better,” she says.

Every time we fuck, I think, it can’t possibly be that good again. But somehow, our bodies go to further and further lengths to join us, proving over and over again, they know better.

SEVENTEEN

BEC

When my alarm goes off, I snooze it. Today's the day I reciprocate for Noah's ear piercing. If I oversleep and don't answer when Noah comes over, maybe that will be enough to send him away. And I won't have to go through with the swimming in the ocean thing.

I know that's rubbish. If I don't answer the door, Noah's the kind of guy who will keep knocking. And if that doesn't work, he's likely to get a ladder and lean it against my window and climb up to extract me that way.

This is the first night we spent apart since our reconciliation. It was his idea, and instead of thinking how healthy and adult that was of him, my mind played tricks on me. I felt needy and lonely, like I couldn't remember how to be by myself.

How much of that was just anxiety from my fears that letting Noah play a key role in my happiness and security would prove too big a risk?

I went where I always go when I'm in need of wisdom: to my beloved books. I spent the whole night with the short stories that had always tugged at my heart, reinforcing the idea

that happiness is illusory for most of us, and that beauty is more often than not, found in the beautiful devastation of missed chances for happiness.

Only last night, they didn't resonate the same way. I read them as the story of an old version of me. And while I felt for the characters, I'd grown away from them. And I lie awake, staring at my ceiling for a long while, thinking how I'd actually grown, *changed*. Even if I was scared, maybe *especially* if I was scared.

And yes, I was missing a bit of the self-contained Bec, but she would never have opened herself enough to experience something so sublime.

When my eyelids finally grew heavy, I drifted off at peace with this new phase of my life and slept like a log.

I woke to a message ping on my phone.

Be there in twenty. Don't forget to apply extra sunscreen. The sun's really strong out in the ocean.

It all comes rushing back to me. I let him talk me into taking me to swim in the sea. I'm pretty confounded by Yesterday-Bec at the moment because this one is scared shitless.

What was I thinking? That this man makes me feel like I can do anything?

Yeah, unfortunately, it was something like that.

I let out a giant groan and throw the blankets back. You'd think one of the benefits of adopting a cat would be someone to snuggle up with at moments like this, so it's too hard to get

out of bed. But no. Frosty Fluffy Muffin sleeps on that plush leopard atop my china cabinet full of priceless family heirlooms. I'm aware this doesn't make any sense.

I'd read in some book on cat training that if you put something like a large stuffed animal somewhere, the cats won't go there. And from the second that cabinet entered our lives, he was determined to jump on top and shake the thing to within an inch of its life.

As a deterrent, the leopard was a major failure. But it *did* work to soften Frosty's landing so the cabinet doesn't shake when he pounces on it. And now it's his bed. Strange as it is, I just have to accept it as a win-win. No broken china for me, and access to a favorite spot for him.

Downstairs, I spot him there, arms and legs sprawled out like he's in the throes of rigor mortis.

Frosty doesn't wake from the whirring of the coffee bean grinder because he's stone deaf, so I find myself smiling at the crazy sight of him across the open plan room.

Maybe there is something more to our truce than just a way to coexist. If you look at it differently, I'm trusting Frosty with something fragile and cherished, and in return, he brings joy and a unique intimacy to my life with the knowledge that this arrangement is one-in-a-million that is ours and ours alone.

If he were a different cat, or I a different person, there wouldn't be a deaf, white ball of happiness sprawled out in a death sleep over a leopard, atop precious symbols of people who've brought me to this place.

I know if I look hard enough, there's something there that smacks of the delicate balance of trust Noah and I are gifting each other with, too. Our journey has been messy, and the irony that when he's finally leaving, it's the last thing I want doesn't sit well.

Boy, I really need this coffee.

The milk froths to perfection and I pour two of the Keep Cups from the library's sponsorship program with one the way I like it—with a spoonful of coconut sugar, and one the way Noah likes it—black and strong.

I shake my head and smirk at the knowledge that his drink order is a dead ringer as far as coffees matching their drinkers.

That would make a great book, I think, and make a note in the fluffy spiral notebook Mom bought me for this purpose back when I was eight and sure I'd be a writer. Most of the glitter has come off of the label I'd marked in my best bubble letters *Bec's Book Ideas*. But it's still legible.

At Noah's knock, I put the notebook on the kitchen table, next to the coffees.

He looks stupidly sexy in board shorts and a Re-Surf tee shirt draped over his muscled chest and hugging his strong arms.

"I thought you'd try to chicken out," he says.

I grimace. "Just so you know, I'm not a big fan of the tough love approach to these things."

"I wasn't going for that. I just really thought you'd chicken out."

“Well, that’s not very encouraging.”

“Okay, I lied. I was going for tough love. That’s sort of my signature.”

“Does it work?”

“On a lot of people, yes.”

“We’re so different.”

“Are you trying to start an intense argument so we don’t go to the beach?”

“Maybe?” She shrugs.

Noah bridges the space between us and pulls me into his strong arms and chest. I try to tell myself it doesn’t feel as good as my entire body is making me think it does.

It’s just that I’m scared and this is comforting.

And he’s the cat on your china cabinet.

Noah kisses me and that argument I was halfheartedly attempting to inspire goes off the rails. I deepen the kiss and let my arms roam where they want.

But he pulls back. “Now you’re just trying to get me into the bedroom so we don’t do this thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be in the bedroom,” I say hiking my brows twice.

Tenderly, he strokes my shoulder. “I know you’re scared,” he says.

“I’m not—”

“This is *us*.”

Okay, now I'm scared. Because those three words resonate. Me, Noah, the priceless china that is my life. There is a real, solid thing behind them. And there's no more denying it. Tossing myself into the sea, for better or worse, seems about right.

On the walk, we sip our Keep Cups. "Another day in paradise," Noah says.

Ahead, a dozen kangaroos graze on the grass on the sloped lawn of Mrs. Sanders' house.

As we approach, they look up. Their slow, exaggerated chewing never ceases to amaze me.

"Look, there's a joey." I point to the svelte 'roo with a pair of feet sticking out of her pouch.

"Isn't it amazing that they just chuck those babies in there, and we humans overthink our approach to parenting so much that we screw up every chance we get?"

"That's interesting," I say.

"What's interesting?"

"Well, how do you know that upside-down feet in a sticky-outy position isn't the most comforting thing in the world to those babies? *And* it's quite a thing to say that parents screw up every chance they get."

"Just mine, then."

"Have you ever spoken to them about this?"

"What am I going to say? 'I know you wanted to protect me from a life of heartbreak and poverty, but in the process,

you totally fucked me up?””

“You could probably refine that, but yes. I think you’re at a point where some honesty might help you.”

“Yeah? Well, you know what’s been helping me?”

“What?”

“You.”

Even a couple of days ago, that would have scared the living daylights out of me. But now? It’s only scaring *some* of the daylights out of me, realizing his happiness is linked to mine. But it’s impossible not to recall those worries over being the woman who helps Noah through a specific time in his life and then watches him move on. How will *she* fare when he’s off in Sydney?

I don’t know. But it’s clear I’ve reached a moment where I can’t lie to myself much longer. Despite the fears, I want to make this work.

As we get a clear view of the ocean through the tall, sparse pines, the proposal of facing my fears and jumping right into the uncontrollable, crashing waves holds the weight of so much more than swimming. I kick off my jelly sandals, and the task is more daunting than ever.

Noah pinches the back of his shirt and hikes it over his head. His bare chest is a sight I will never tire of.

“You ready?” he asks, squinting as he slides his sunglasses off and tosses them on top of his towel and tee shirt.

“No.”

“Will you ever be ready?”

“Unlikely.”

“Why don’t we just start by stepping up to the water?”

“That doesn’t sound like tough love.”

“I’m going rogue.”

“I like you rogue,” I say.

“I like you every way.”

He smiles and there it is again—that solid non-fling thing between us. “And I like you facing your fears.” He reaches for my hand and together we slowly approach the surf. If this was one of the stories in the book I was reading last night, a tsunami would come and swallow one of the lovers up into the sea.

But here, it’s calm and the waves don’t look too rough. And yet, my heart pounds, my guts swirl. I want to tighten my grip on his hand, but I feel childish.

Like he can read my thoughts, he squeezes my hand. “Let’s take three steps.”

I can do that, I think. I put one foot in front of the other, then repeat. The water is cool. It always is here. “Look,” he says, pointing to the far right, to the ramp where the boats launch.

At first, I don’t see anything. Then my eyes fix on a dark shadow. No, two shadows. Manta rays! I’ve heard of them hanging out around here, but since I don’t spend time in the water, I haven’t actually seen them. I was starting to think they

were something people made up to give me a water-phobia-busting case of FOMO.

But there they are in their glory, swirling, dancing just beneath the surface. Suddenly, a fin ripples, breaking through. I gasp and feel myself take three more steps in the manta rays' direction at Noah's gentle nudging. Before I know it, we're waist deep. It's the farthest I've ventured into the ocean since that day I was swallowed by the wave. That sense of being out of control, being swept away with absolutely nothing I could do about it, twirls up my body and pulls tight. I stiffen and start to step back.

"Hey, breathe. Of course, your body is bringing up the past experience you had here. But we're gonna get through that and make a new experience. Like getting back up on a horse after you fall off."

I'm still leaning toward the shore, stiff-backed. But I'm also letting Noah lead me deeper. He slips his arms around me and pulls my back into his chest. Little by little, my muscles relax.

Suddenly, I'm standing on tiptoes. If I go any farther, I'll have no choice but to surrender control. I'll literally have my feet knocked out from under me. But I'll have Noah here with me. And though my resistance gives everything it's still got, something in my gut allows me to trust him, to let him share the burden.

I'm taking the plunge. I'm swimming in the deep. And I turn, start to paddle my feet, face-to-face with Noah, smiling, *swimming*, feeling freer than I can ever recall.

EIGHTEEN

NOAH

It's been a busy library week. The Alzheimer's Group is hosting a guest speaker, children's hour is holding two extra sessions because of school holidays, and one of the local holiday care programs is bringing eighty-five kids in for a tour on Thursday. We filmed Amy's documentary footage yesterday, and today, we're filming the last segment of the documentary at my parents' place.

It's the strangest way for Noah to meet my parents. But the odd thing is, I don't think I'd ever be ready, otherwise. It's like the documentary project is forcing my hand.

Which, surprisingly, takes a lot of the pressure off.

Behind him, Mom points maniacally, and fans herself like he's hot. I bare my teeth, but she just shakes her head, dropping her jaw. If he turns around, I will die.

Dad takes him into the living room, and I pull Mom to the kitchen.

"Stop that!" I whisper scream. "He's my boss."

"And word on the street has it you're dating."

"Word on the *street*?"

“Nobby, Mrs. Stratfield, Mrs. Sanders, who probably knows better than anyone as your driveway goes right past her house, and Amy.”

“Amy!”

She clucks her tongue. “There are no secrets here. You want secrets? Go back to Chicago.”

“I should!” I say, flustered. We’re not ready to know, much less for anyone else to. She always says that thing about Chicago, like my going there for a few years was done to hurt her. I’m lucky to have two passports. It meant I was able to get a librarian job when they were hard to come by.

“We are *not* dating, Mom. Trust me. So please,” I squeeze my hands in prayer position, “please don’t say anything like that to Noah.”

“Do you think I would embarrass you?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” I prop a hand on my hip, a gesture I only seem to do around my mother.

“Well, that is never my intention. I just want you to find someone to share your life with, the way me and Dad have. You’re always so hell-bent on being independent. Yes, we all know you can do it on your own. Hell, you do this life thing better than most people. ”

“I know.” I flutter my lips. “But—”

“But nothing. You just need to—”

I cut her off. I have no desire to hear her interpretation of what I need.

“Fine. I guess it’s totally normal for a boss to be at his employee’s house at *midnight* on a Monday.”

I try to shake it off, but it’s a wake-up call. People know. And that means we can’t control the narrative any longer. I ignore her comment and put the tray of cheese and crackers in the fridge. “This is not a social call,” I say. “We’re filming.” I walk into the living room, where thankfully, the video crew has just arrived.

Mom comes out with the cheese tray, offering it around like it’s her little way of bringing things out in the open. I ignore it.

“Oh, you *must* try the gouda!” she says to Noah. “Amy *loves* it.”

I shoot her a look, and on cue, he catches me. And smiles in a way that I can’t help but mimic. Jeez, it’s getting hard to deny the intimacy in our smiles, our gazes.

At my urging, my Dad leads the way upstairs to my bedroom, where we start the filming. I love my old room, all the books. Dad says, “Her talents at finding the right books for people started when she was young. We’d be going to a friend’s house for a barbecue and she’d say ‘we need to bring something. I want to bring a book. And I want to choose it.’ She took it very seriously. And people would always follow up and let us know how remarkable it was that she chose that book at that time because of some reason or another.”

I imagine what it must look like through Noah’s eyes. There are books everywhere. All four walls are bookshelves—even lining the windows. I look around at every book I’ve ever

read, and the old card catalog like a proper library, which I've cherished since we bought it at an auction when I was twelve.

What pops into my head is our conversation from last night.

"Can I go up to your room?" he asked.

"Another one of your fantasies?"

"Definitely."

"Well, since it's one of mine, too, I'll allow it."

THE CREW POSITION Mom and Dad where they want them and adjust the light and camera angles. Then the filming starts. "This was from her actual elementary school," Mom says, alongside the large wooden chest of tiny drawers. "They were having an auction because they were trying to raise some money and they had gone to a computerized system and she begged me to get this. And I just said, 'What are you going to do with that?' 'Mom,' she said, 'I know exactly what I'm going to do with this. Trust me.' And every time she says, 'Trust me,' you just have to. There's something in her eye, a sparkle."

I try not to let that sting. I said that to her in the kitchen and yet she went off about me and Noah anyway.

"She is part of these books. These books are a part of her. I would love it if they could live with her, but then at the same time, I don't want to part with them."

An hour later, the filming is done. It's been a long day and I tell my parents we have to be going.

"Well, I bet you we'll be seeing a lot of you," Mom says to Noah, with a warm hug.

"Oh, well, I'm going to be going back to Sydney pretty soon," he says. My gut swirls the way it always does at those words.

"Okay," Mom says.

She is in so much trouble.

"You don't believe me?"

"Do you believe you?" she says, while I shoot death rays at her with my eyes.

"Yeah, that's the deal."

"I bet you Bec's got a book for you about that might just change your mind."

It's a quiet ride home. Because what do you say when someone's just said all the things you've refused to?

NINETEEN

BEC

The next night out for dinner with Amy and Teresa, I poke at a piece of sashimi, then pinch it in my chopsticks, dip it into the soy sauce and, lean over to stuff it into my mouth.

“So, what? You’re just sleeping together again like it doesn’t matter?” Amy asks.

“I wouldn’t say it doesn’t matter. We just don’t need to worry about labels and all that.” *Except last night. When you couldn’t stop thinking about what your mother said.*

“Am I missing something? You two really like each other, don’t you?”

“That’s just you wanting to win our bet. When Noah leaves, everything will go back to the way it should be.” I’ve been telling myself this all day, since the trip and the sleepover at my place, and the unsettling visit with my mother.

The way he pats Frosty just the way the crazy fluffball likes and reads poetry to me under the open windows are like something out of a dream.

“Because you have no feelings for him.” Amy moves Harry to her other breast. He smacks at the fullness with an

open palm while he latches on. When we hear his greedy gulps, she turns back to me. He continues to hit at her breast, like he's the most comfortable that any being could be.

I know that feeling, I think. But whether I'm talking about pre-Noah or the version of me that can't stop thinking about this new cat-patting poet, I couldn't say. "No, because he's leaving, so then I can *think* about having feelings for him." I don't even know what I'm saying. The rules of our fling are quite clear. *Yeah, right*. We came up with them after the sex on my couch, followed by the sex in my shower, the walk to do something that wasn't sex, which led to sex on the beach, following by drinking and feeling pretty good about ourselves giggling over sex on the beach cocktails at Re-Surf.

To be honest, thinking about the rules has become a Pavlovian stimulus to get me hot for more of his touch.

The rules are:

1. This is only a fling.
2. It is a secret fling.
3. No letting attraction affect work.
4. When Noah heads back to Sydney, it's over.

Only the reality of putting them into practice isn't quite so straightforward.

Which is why two out of four have definitely been broken. And here I am openly talking about it with Amy and Teresa as if number 2 never existed.

And they're not the only ones. I'm ninety-nine percent positive that the local Uber Eats guy knew that the degree to which my hair was fucked up could only be from sex. And on Thursday, Noah called my extension on the library phone system and said, "I didn't bring any lunch. And I'm not hungry because all I want to do is head back to yours and take you from behind. Are we on?"

I'm ashamed to say we *ate lunch* early that day, like 9:45. I barely recognize this sex-crazed girl. But she's sure enjoying a lot of orgasms these days.

When we raced back so I could host the Alzheimer's Families Support Group, I was more energized than I've felt in years. Two group members commented on how bright and engaged I was. Is it possible that sex with Noah makes me better at my job?

These are the kinds of questions I ask myself because it is rapidly becoming clear that this fling has flung me. I don't know which way is up. I went in thinking I'd have a hot night with my Type A Bosshole and get whatever these inconvenient feelings are right out of my system, and then return to the way things were before Noah came sexy grumping into my life.

Namely—living out my dream job in my dream location and making Magnolia Shores Library a beacon for how libraries can be—we're talking about bringing outreach activities to the whole community, world-class technology, a place where marginalized voices surface, where kids can always feel safe and supported, and even cutting-edge stuff like maker spaces where regional folks can learn to master 3D

printing, video editing, and traditional arts and crafts in the experimental, peer learning way that the very best libraries are spearheading.

And though the attention from the documentary means my dream is more powerful than ever, getting to the other side of this Noah thing doesn't seem to be happening. And these rules we've put into place seem like more of a distraction than anything. There are several theories I have about *why* I would continue to willingly play Russian Roulette with my beloved career:

For one, Noah's being less grumpy. Like a lot. Or maybe I'm getting used to it and losing my sense of normalcy? No. He's definitely less grumpy. In fact, when Frosty Fluffy Muffin nipped his hand so he'd pat his head, Noah *smiled* like he was over the moon that the cat had finally warmed up to him. He went right off and got one of Frosty's favorite treats and held it out in his hand just the way I showed him.

I was a freaking puddle.

I explain the rules to Teresa and Amy, even though my eye starts twitching at Number Two, because it's so obvious we aren't paying them any heed.

"If rules one and four get broken, I'm in big trouble," I hear myself say, as if that's going to help me save face.

Teresa points at me, her mouth puckered in distaste. "Don't do that."

"Do *what?*"

“Make light of that. You *are* in big trouble. I don’t even understand what’s going on here. You do realize this is *Noah*, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did he hypnotize you in your sleep?”

“No!”

“Well, how do you *know*? If you were sleeping, then—”

“I think it’s fair to say that you don’t know the real Noah.”

“Oh, so he only bossholes on demand? It’s not like a consistent bossholing? I didn’t realize *that*. Then I guess you should just keep sleeping with him, pretending it’s nothing serious. I’m sure it will all work out *fine*.” She rolls her eyes so intensely, I grit my teeth. It’s not like I need any more reasons to be alarmed.

“Can I interrupt here?” Amy speaks in hushed tones because her little darling has fallen asleep on her breast. She gently removes her nipple and straightens out the top of her dress without disturbing his soft breathing.

She continues. “Noah is a great guy. Sure, he has his *ways* of doing things. But he’s the guy you want in an emergency. He’s the guy who comes around without being asked when there’s a problem. He’s...”

“Reliable?” I finish for her.

“Punctual?” Teresa says, tapping her watch face.

We exchange our *WTF is wrong with Noah* face and have a throaty giggle. But even that feels wrong. And I’m pretty sure

I didn't even *want* to make that face. Like I made it just for Teresa's benefit.

Out, damned Noah!

But I don't want him out.

But you should!

"Okay, so he's a bit of a grumpy pants," Amy whispers, "But I have seen a change in him since he's been what he calls 'marooned at the library'—"

"Hang on," I cut in, "did he *say* that? Do you know how many people would *kill* to have a job like that? Head of a brand-new, state-of-the-art library in a regional town, positioned—if run correctly—to be a world leader in regional libraries? Ugh." I cross my arms tightly across my chest. And then I realize it's the first real distaste I've had for him in days. "Say more stuff like that."

Amy shakes her head. "I thought I was bad about letting people in, but you, cousin, take the cake."

"I—"

Amy raises a palm. "You're worse, though, because you're pretending you have to think about something you already know, and looking for any excuse to run the other way."

"First off, you've literally just described yourself with Lucas. How many years did that go on? And second of all, have you *met* this man? He's having a come-to-Jesus moment, sure. But he's lived his whole life in opposition to everything I've lived mine *for*. And yet . . . I can't stop picturing him naked. Or worse, holding me in his arms while we sleep."

I drop my head onto the table and bang it a couple times for effect. And also in anger about yet another violation of Rule Two.

“Me neither,” Teresa says. I laugh-snort into the tabletop and dramatically drag myself back upright. I’ll pretend that pang of irrational jealousy doesn’t punch in over the amusement. I’m so good at pretending these days, I may even believe it if I try hard enough.

“But maybe you can help him to see that he, too, deserves to enjoy life the way you do.” Amy straightens the linen blanket around Harry.

“Did!” I cut her off. “The way I used to just enjoy life. Now I’m always worried about the repercussions of everything. And I don’t even know which would be worse—losing the library or losing Noah! There! I said it!”

“It’s so ironic,” she shakes her head.

“Yeah, let’s sit around and appreciate that for a few minutes, why don’t we?”

Teresa shakes her head. “You’re right, Amy. *She’s* becoming the grumpy pants. And Noah is—”

Amy finishes her sentence. I’m so glad my misery is bringing these two into a budding new friendship. “He’s learning to loosen up and go with the flow. To not be responsible for the whole world. It doesn’t sound like he’s ever allowed himself to before.

“You know, it’s funny. I always just thought of him as the private school dickhead. But I never stopped to think what he

thought of any of it until this whole fling.”

“*Secret fling!*”

In my periphery, I see a few barstools swivel our way. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Yeah, look how she’s losing her temper so quickly! It’s really remarkable,” Teresa says.

“All I’m saying,” Amy continues as baby Harry sighs contentedly and makes a loud lip-smacking noise, “is that my parents did everything they could to keep me here and all I wanted to do was go. You’d think I’d have considered his perspective a bit more.”

“You’d think! And then I would have known he had a heart inside those perfectly sculpted muscles and that annoyingly punctual—”

Teresa leans forward. “Oooh, punctual *what?* Is this, like, a sex thing?”

I clear my throat and deliver a pretty impressive death stare, then turn my attention back to Amy.

“But you *can* consider all that. You should. You *have to*,” she says.

“I have. And you’re right! He’s missed out on a lot. And he’s having an awakening of some sort.”

“But in the face of all that, you need to at least consider the possibility that this might be the real thing.”

We have. And it is. But for some reason, we only work if we dance around it and slap it with a fling sticker. “Well, there I’ll

have to disagree. No. I don't do that kind of talk. I don't need love to complete me. I have books. I have Frosty. I have my friends and family, and my dream job, if my fling with Noah doesn't mess that up irreparably. And before you say it, yes, I do sound grumpier. And yes, it *is* remarkable!" As the words come out of my mouth, they sound repetitive and unconvincing. I mean, what the hell am I so afraid of? Am I convincing Amy or am I convincing myself?

Is it worth it to risk all of those treasures for love?

I used to be abso-fucking-lutely sure it was not.

But now?

Now, I go on like it is, when the truth is I just don't know.

The more time I spend with Noah, the more the question is unanswerable.

And at this point, I can't even say it will be easier when he leaves because if I'm being honest, I couldn't picture all of those treasures without him anymore.

Amy puts her free hand on top of mine. It's amazing how she balances that baby like it's nothing. Amy! A mom! I still can't believe it. This new world of Magnolia Shores is unrecognizable.

"Well, maybe this is a matter of putting out into the universe what you want to receive. And what you want to receive is a whole lotta Noah."

I lift my cup then realize I'm all out of water. I reach for the bottle and pour myself a refill. I can't help thinking that if

Noah was here, he wouldn't even have let my glass get empty.
And that would have been lovely.

TWENTY

BEC

After my talk with Amy and Teresa—the angel and the devil, I’ve taken to calling them, and they seem to like it—I’m so mixed up. I tell myself, *do not call this man on your way home*. So I don’t.

But all along the walk, I’m so antsy, desperate almost to call him for some punctual, I don’t know, *petting*, maybe? *You’re kidding yourself. You’re so beyond petting. You want some rough, urgent thrusting. The kind that will satisfy that desperate need you have to take him inside of you, so deep that none of these questions matter anymore.*

Somehow, I manage to convince myself that I could get away with a text. You’d think a librarian could come up with something good to text to the man they are kind of trying to not have sex with/fall for in fear of losing everything she holds dear.

But nothing comes to mind.

Then I have an epiphany. I think, surely someone else has been here. And that means there’d be a GIF I could choose.

I type in *flirty* to see what comes up. I swipe past cheeky orangutans, elephants, and dogs, and then one loads that’s so

over-the-top direct—a woman in sexy lingerie, crooking her finger seductively. I watch it three times, thinking, *imagine if I sent that?* Exactly what I want. With no regard for the consequences.

I laugh, but I also somehow tap twice and send it.

I thought you wanted a day off.

Me too.

Can't get enough?

Apparently.

Look at me being honest about my struggles. Maybe there is something to this putting out into the universe what you want to receive.

And then I panic. *I'm sorry*, I type.

No you're not.

And we're going to wind up in bed together again.

What's worse, I find myself searching out the window for his headlights, like a—I don't know how to finish the sentence, but then I turn to my right and there's Frosty Fluffy Muffin perched right alongside me gazing out the window.

“So this is why they say people turn into their pets.” I get close to him and start rubbing between his ears. Bless him, he crawls into my lap and puts his little furry arms around me. My cat is a hugger. And I never thought I was until he came into my life. This is why I forgive the knock-everything-onto-the-floor game, which makes people think I've been robbed.

A terrifying calm settles over me as Noah pulls into the driveway, which goes past gossipy Mrs. Sanders' house, who is quite obviously telling the world about these visits, making tonight a Rule Two breaker of the worst kind. Why didn't I think about this?

Because you want yourself a whole lotta Noah.

But I can't dwell on how confusing it all is. I *literally* can't.

My heart does this thudding thing and my whole body reacts to his proximity. I have to swallow around the lump in my throat even as my thighs squeeze tight.

Out of control.

And you love it.

Is it addictive—gazing through the window, our eyes locked, the desire a physical thing between us, penetrating glass?

Hell to the yeah.

I always told myself I'd know if I found it. The L-word. But at the same time, I assured myself it was something relegated to my beloved books and wasn't *actually* going to happen.

But now?

What other reason could there be that I'd be so careless with my life in search of another Noah rush?

Before I know it, he's inside my living room and all the ruminating over him comes out in greedy, fierce kisses. A

shocking, searing heat pushes me deeper and deeper. Noah growls and hikes me up, wrapping my legs around him.

Up against the door, he lowers me just enough so he can get at his running pants, tug them down.

We fumble, jerky, desperate, to free ourselves so we can free the parts of us that can't seem to get enough. He rolls the condom down and enters me with a thrust that shoots fire through me. My hips rock into him. He braces me there, and when I look down and see his hands on me, the passion doubles through me.

This urgent fucking is sublime. I'm so close, so fast. When has anything ever felt like this?

"That's it," he says. And fuck, if that doesn't bring me closer, my pace so rapid, I barely recognize myself. I've certainly never done it like this.

"I'm gonna come," I hear myself rasp.

And I start to spasm, milking his cock in shocking waves that rock my whole body. And all the while, he's sliding into me, and coming with an animal grunt that, in my wanton state, feels like catnip. I explode into kisses, so deep, so sensual, all while his cock is still emptying inside me. And I already want more.

Eh, maybe I've had enough library for one life. And now I'll be doing this.

This is how bad I've got it. For Noah fucking King.

And does he go home like a proper flinger should?

Nope.

He stays over and we laugh and talk all night.

And I like him *more*.

TWENTY-ONE

BEC

“I think the fling plan backfired. It took all the pressure off. And you know what happened? We wound up getting close, showing our true selves, and really *liking* each other.” It’s a couple of days later, and I’m having lunch at Amy’s Picnic Basket with the place’s namesake, just to show myself I *can* do this, rather than run home for a quick romp with Noah.

“The horror!” Amy rolls out pastry dough while her little one naps in his reclined black stroller, a pacifier hanging precariously from his lips. Amy’s prepared me a baguette sandwich of mozzarella, tomato, and basil that is just divine. I can hear Noah laughing in my head. I try to push it out and concentrate on how yummy this sandwich is. The soft, gooey cheese is made one town over. The tomato and basil are grown by her parents. The bread is even local. Food does not get fresher. Puts my days of sad overpriced Chicago sandwiches to shame.

“Aren’t you in the least bit concerned about my life falling apart when this goes south?”

“Bec,” she drapes the long, thin pastry dough over the pin like an artist, then turns it over, tossing a sprinkle of flour over

the top. “Yes, things can go wrong. But they can also go right. And I am positive you’ve given me this exact advice in the past. Why can’t you believe it yourself?”

My lips flutter. “I don’t know why. But I’ll feel better when he goes back to Sydney next week.” My stomach does that flippy thing it’s started to every time I think of him leaving.

“What?”

“He’s going back to Sydney. It was our deal.”

“Oh, honey.” She drops the pin and walks around to my side of the stainless-steel workbench. “I heard Finn say just yesterday that Noah will be representing the library at a global conference on private industry and public library partnering best practices in two months’ time. He’s not going anywhere.”

I see red. He *lied*?

As I drive my one-cylinder car, distracted and shaky, back to the library, I am fuming.

Am I a little *happy* that this out has been presented to me? Like an *easy* out? I write that off as one of those rubbish thoughts our brains throw out every now and again and refocus on being furious. Because that would make Amy the Superpower Librarian the kind of hypocrite she couldn’t stand.

I park and plug my car into the *converter*, thinking how much easier life was before I knew it wasn’t a charger. And there he is in my memory, squatting to see under my car, looking all irresistible doing it in his suit, like some kind of

Harlequin novel mirage, and still confoundingly being a grumpy know-it-all.

If you think about it, that heat wave, which screwed my battery, was the start of all the trouble.

Or the heat wave burnin' in your loins since the day you met him.

And wouldn't you know, the temperature has taken a substantial nosedive this afternoon?

Gleaming conspicuously like the cause of all this, Noah's Range Rover is parked three spots over. But now I've verified what he said: it's true that Range Rovers are friends of the environment. I can't even hate SUV drivers anymore.

If he's right about that, could he be right about other stuff?

I try to picture when someone else's car is there. Hopefully someone I would never in a million years be attracted to, since I clearly can't be trusted with professional boundaries anymore. Because he might have lied, but he's going to fix this. He has to.

But does he?

My imagination takes a snooze. I can't picture anything but his car there.

Because you don't want to.

I let out a frustrated grumble and shake it off. I'm going in there and calmly nipping this in the bud.

The foyer is quiet. The part-time librarian Sheila is on the desk this morning and she never gets here a second before her

shift starts. I remember being young, but she is cut from a different cloth. If I were cut from that cloth, I probably wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

I walk beneath Mr. Smith's love heart sculpture, now forever a butt made of books. Noah's mark is everywhere here. *And now he's leaving, like you wanted. So what are you so angry about?*

I try to breathe through the feeling of nothing quite fitting properly anymore. My own words, quoting Michael Hyatt, come echoing back to me.

"Discomfort is a catalyst for growth. It makes us yearn for something more. It forces us to change, stretch, and adapt."

I told Noah that if he was feeling like that, it was a pretty good bet that he was on the right track. But *I'm* not the one meant to be on the track. It's Noah's track. And he's chosen to get off it. Secretly. As if it was only a fling after all.

I walk through the main reading room, trying my best not to look up at the spot of that sordid night we shared here, and turn left to the offices.

Breathe, breathe, breathe. Do not fly off the handle.

I enter without knocking and close the door behind me. "You didn't *resign*."

So much for staying perched on the handle. I'm miles away from it, and approaching his desk, looking at things on there because I *so* have the urge to throw something.

Anger at him. Anger at me. It's all too tightly pressed together and ready to blow.

His eyes bulge. “Bec.”

“Yes, Bec. The woman you have been lying to while pretending to care and understand about why she needs you to go. And you were so sloppy about it! It’s like you *wanted* to get caught.”

Yup, I hear the echoes of my own actions in those words. How many times have I crossed the line over Rule Number 2? But that just fuels the fire.

He stands and walks around to my side. His calm, safe presence makes my anger feel childish. Which only makes me double down. When he reaches out, I flinch and take two giant steps back.

“I *do* care and understand why you want me to go.”

“*Need* you to go.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.”

TWENTY-TWO

NOAH

My words echo in my head. They're smarmy and all the things she teases me about. *Let's agree to disagree.* Jeez, I can be a real windbag.

"I don't think you're in any position to be disagreeing at the moment! And none of this matters because you don't work here anymore!" She raises her voice and emphasizes the *don't*, like that will change something. Even in the middle of the spectacular tumbling of the facade I've erected to allow us to act on our feelings, I appreciate how adorable her indignation is.

"I changed my mind."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

I take the hand she's been waving around furiously and run my fingers over it. My words come out jumbled. "It's because of what you said about me riding through the discomfort. Remember, it started when you made me take you to the

library to show me the book you recommended. And then we, well...”

“Okay! I know what we did! And I know we did it *a lot*. And then we did it some more. And it was amazing.” She stops like she lost her train of thought. And I feel encouraged for a second, like she’ll stop fighting. Then she inhales and loudly breathes out. “This can’t be. There’s too much risk.”

“Hey, there’s a lot at risk for me, too. Because more than anything, I want to run from here, get back to where things are easy, safe, where they make sense. But with you—I just see life can be so much more than that. And though I keep watching myself make these dangerous decisions, it’s like I can’t stop myself from exploring this thing with you. You make me the kind of man I’ve always wanted to be, but didn’t know how to be.”

“But you need to make *yourself* that kind of man.”

I don’t know what makes me say it. Something about how offended she is about me staying, like we both really know that someone like me can’t be with someone like her. Deep down, I feel the same way.

Oh, this cold Noah. I recognize him instantly. He’s gotten me through plenty. But I don’t like him. And for a second there, I thought I might be able to flip him off for good.

But now? It feels like the world is mocking me. *As if you could be anything other than what you are. Oh, Noah. This life isn’t for people like you. You know that. You’ve always known that.*

As if underlining my deepest fears, she says, “And you know what? Mrs. Stratfield knows about us. She wrote me an email and directly asked how our love affair has progressed. People *know*.”

People know, like it’s a dirty, horrible thing; someone like Noah King, having a life like this.

“Look, like we keep saying, it was just a fling,” Cold Noah says. And, fuck, is he convincing. I almost believe it myself. “I kept saying that, even after we were both unsure where this was going. I meant it. In fact, you said it even more than I did. So if you’re so upset by the fact that I’m leaving, then maybe I’m not the only liar here.” I can’t look at her when I say the word *liar*.

She opens her mouth to say something, then changes her mind, grabs the *Left My Heart in Stockton* mug off my desk and storms out. My chest does a little jump when she trips slightly over the carpet and grumbles. But she straightens herself and refuses to look at me. And I try to tell myself this is what I wanted, this is why I didn’t tell her.

But that argument won’t stick.

And I miss my mug more than I’d like to say.

A LONG EVENING of silence passes between us. This serviced apartment feels as sterile and empty as I kept telling myself my life should be. I’m just about to tear my skin off, drinking from my slogan-less coffee cup when Bec shows up at my place and starts the whole circle again.

She wants me, but she doesn't want to want me. I get it. What did I expect?

“Respectfully, there are things you don't know. And that's on me because I haven't shared them with you,” I say.

“You think? Do you know how irritating it is when you're seeing red because you're so angry at someone and they go and take responsibility right away? There's no room for satisfying, rage-tinged declarations of self-righteousness at all! How do you expect me to get past this if I can't process things?”

I cock my head. “I wanted to tell you I hadn't resigned. So many times I wanted to tell you. And even more, I wanted to put that letter in. But I—couldn't.”

“Of course, you could. You drafted the letter. It was just like the first time. All you had to do was hit send.”

“And all you had to do was *not* see me.” That sits between us for a long moment because we already went over this. Neither of those things was cut and dried. And neither of us can handle it. It's time to say it. “I think you, the Librarian of the People, know more than most that sometimes things just aren't that easy. Like how my anger at myself turned into anger for you when you confronted me in my office. And I'm sorry about that. Now, would you like to know what those things I've been holding back from sharing are?”

“No. Yes.”

TWENTY-THREE

BEC

“Will you sit down?” Noah repeats when I don’t budge.

“No.” I cross my arms so he understands where I stand.

“Okay, fine. I understand you’re mad.”

“Can you please stop saying things like you understand me?”

His eyes squeeze at the corners in place of an answer. “When Finn told me he needed me to spearhead this project, I was resistant. I’d spent my whole life leaving this place. But as soon as I got used to the idea, all these unrecognizable thoughts started to pop into my head.

“I was starting to really look forward to coming here. But the more I felt that way, the more confused I got. That’s not right, I told myself. It took me a long time to unpack what was going on there. And whether or not you like it, you were key in helping me to begin working it out.”

“Can you not use words like ‘unpack’?”

“Why?”

“Because that’s so *evolved*. It just makes me want to hug you.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Yes, Noah. You *lied*. A lot!”

“Well, at least *that’s* not very evolved.” He shrugs, looking unusually sheepish.

“Are you sorry?”

“More than you can ever know. I hated lying to you. But it seemed like the only way to explore this thing between us. You were so dead set against it.”

“Because you’re my boss!”

“I know. I know. And the only way the pressure eased with us was when we called it a fling. I mean, you nearly jumped me in my own car, it made you so hot.”

“Like you weren’t.”

“I know, it’s a mess. A sexy, hot-as-hell, life-changing mess. But if it’s any consolation, I feel even more confident that the way forward for me is here. With you. And I don’t mean in a fling.”

“How dare you, Noah.” I hear my childish retort.

It’s so blindsighted. Here he is baring his soul to me, saying the exact opposite of the thing that made me so angry, and here *I* am, leaning into my anger, ignoring all my instincts, because it’s *easier*. Safer. Comfortable. What am *I* so afraid of? “I need to walk away before I say more things I will regret.” Finally, something true.

“I will make this right,” I hear him say as I go. But if either of us knew what that meant, we wouldn’t be in this situation, would we?

THE NEXT FORTY-EIGHT hours are pretty freaking awful. I can’t eat. Then I devour a pint of Ben and Jerry’s. I can’t sleep, then I fall into such deep REM that I miss my alarm clock and arrive at work fifteen minutes late. I want to talk to Amy and Teresa, but I know what each of them will say, and I don’t want to hear either of those things.

I’m stuck on being furious that he isn’t leaving.

And then I draft a text message.

Don’t go.

I delete it and retype it ten times.

I don’t send it, but leave the draft in the text box so that if I accidentally send it, then that’s what fate had in store for me. I mean, how else would a research-and-fact-based librarian decide on a plan of action for a decision that will impact the fate of her entire life?

So, I wait. Stay quiet and keep my distance until I know what to do. It’s a busy day, and since we’re in a smaller library, I have the benefit of varied roles to keep me constantly stimulated and learning new things. People think librarians just deal with books, but it’s so much more than that. This morning alone, I spent some time cataloging the new acquisitions, attended a Zoom meeting about using new technology to

surface marginalized voices, and finalized the syllabus for the program targeted to the digitally excluded.

I tell myself these things fill me up just as much as Noah ever could.

Regardless of my feelings, life here at the library goes on. And on Monday at ten o'clock, that means Children's Story Hour.

And today's story hour is going to be a cracker, even if my whole world is crumbling.

The Lint Makes a Home has just launched this week, and as it's the long-awaited sequel to the international bestseller, *The Lint Goes Camping*. Everyone's gone gaga for this ball of dirty dryer fluff all over again.

The author is British, so she won't be here for ages—maybe next year, if we're lucky—so Teresa has planned a big party, and even created the main character from what looks like a year's worth of dryer lint.

I'm sure there's someone up there laughing, because at this very moment, I feel like nothing so much as a year's worth of dryer lint.

But this isn't about you. It's about the library. And social justice. And things more important than the individual desires of me and Noah. Though I can't stop thinking about those for a minute straight.

If I'm doing all of this for noble causes, to make sure I don't do anything to hurt the work I do here, then why do I feel so *selfish* denying Noah? Like the pursuit of those things

is hurting *him*? And why does that feel—no matter which way I try to look at it—wrong?

The likeness of Teresa's stuffed effigy of *The Lint* is striking and the kids keep going up to touch it, while the mums pull their hands away.

When she showed it to me this morning, I worried that we should have an asthma alert on this event, but if we're clear the lint is for display purposes only, we will probably be okay.

But will you be okay?

After the reading, the kids will make their own with wool spun from local sheep, so that should distract them from the original.

But will it distract you?

I head over to the children's area early to help arrange the chairs in a semicircle around Theresa's platform. And also because if I sit at my desk one more minute, I'm definitely going to accidentally send that text message. What I need is to see how *The Lint Makes a Home*.

I'm just unfolding the third red saucer chair when Noah emerges at the top of the staircase in his suit.

I'm sure there's a joke in there about the Lint and Noah's pristine suit, but all I can think is how incredible he looks under that wonder of gray wool and pinstripe. And ridiculous as it sounds, how he's too *sexy* to be at a children's story hour. I'm literally sideswiped by the stab of anger that overshadows all of that. The sight of him brought so many pleasant feelings that I forgot for a second.

But now I remember. He *lied*. He put everything I hold dear in jeopardy.

Just like you did.

And then he went on to explain that he took that risk on for a reason he felt truly passionate about.

And again, this is sounding familiar.

I want to forgive him.

But I can't.

What if it's just the stupid attraction ruling my thoughts? Making me see it in a way that ends with his heavenly body draped over mine, hitting all the spots that make me into a frenzied, sex-crazed, glowing, giddy girl I don't even recognize?

And then it all goes bad and I'm left to pick up the pieces.

Like this version of Bec's life is too good to be true, so it won't be.

He walks over and starts unfolding seats.

Of all the devious tricks! Helping?

I hear my desperation to maintain this anger and I know I won't be able to hold out much longer if he keeps proving that he actually does care.

We wind up back at the seat rack at the same time.

"Hey," he says sheepishly.

"Hello."

"Are you avoiding me?"

“Yes, I mean, no. I mean, this is not the place to discuss this, Noah.”

“Okay, I can respect that.”

Oh, now he’s gone off and respected me? How am I meant to have any hope of staying angry?

Behind him, Teresa looks over and bends her Lint doll’s arm, so he taps his watch.

I can’t stop the throaty laugh that erupts.

“What?” he asks.

“Oh, nothing. I just, um, think that Lint doll she made is so funny.”

“I was thinking about that,” he says. “I mean, why is a ball of lint so popular?”

“Because he’s the underdog. Really, what kind of hope does a ball of lint have?”

“I never would have looked at it that way.”

“I guess that’s why I’m the librarian of the people.” I smile—again nearly forgetting how angry I’m meant to be. And how much I’ve fallen a long way from my quest for knowledge.

“Does this mean you forgive me?”

“Absolutely not.”

“That’s okay. I’ll wait.”

“Well, what about the schedule?”

He shrugs. “Some things are worth waiting for.”

I don't know what to say, especially with my face heating. So I slide my glasses over my nose and grab another chair to unfold.

The kids show up and bound to the seats they want. Mums fill their reusable coffee mugs from our Surface Marginalized Voices Initiative at the library café. I was so proud of that, but the truth is, I was thinking small when I came up with the idea of donating a tip with each coffee purchased. It was Noah who suggested the specially designed Keep Cups and was able to get Re-Surf on board as a co-sponsor, as well as a major national bank sponsor who set up the direct debit accounts.

He's making it very hard to hate him.

Noah starts greeting the mums, who play with their hair and unwittingly go into mating mode with their tinny laughs and suggestive smiles. You can't really blame them.

How many are here for the Lint and how many are here for the view of the sexy billionaire?

He backs up into a corner, the picture of professionalism. You'd never imagine he'd be the kind of guy who'd lie, so recklessly, the way he did.

Teresa makes her way to the beautiful high-backed timber chair the library commissioned Amy's dad to build. There's a wacky rainbow cushion on the seat, which she sits down on with The Lint, who is calmly, with excellent posture, sitting on her left leg. She lifts her hand and calls, "Three, Two, One, hands up!" And when the children have all quieted down and raised their hands, she begins. It's magic.

“The Lint was outside. And it started to rain!”

She tosses dozens of cut bits of yarn over Lint’s head. It must have taken her ages to snip all of those.

“I need a house!’ he yelled.”

“But everyone was already inside their homes and no one could hear.”

The kids gasp.

“Oh no!”

“Poor Linty!” one little girl in three pigtails exclaims. If I ever have a kid, I want her to be just like that. I catch that thought before it can go anywhere further, and imagine shoving it so hard down the bottom of my clothes hamper that it will never see the light of day.

“I don’t know where I can live,’ he thought.” Teresa’s interpretation of Linty’s voice is at once croaky, weak, and hopeful. I don’t know how she does it. Every child is completely rapt.

“First, he came upon a very tall apartment building made of gleaming steel. At the door was a man dressed in a white shirt and black pants. His hat said, ‘Security.’

“‘What is security’ he asked the man, who didn’t seem at all surprised by a talking lint the way most people did.

“‘Security? Well, let’s see. I guess it’s safety, being free from danger,’ the man said.

“‘Yes, that is just exactly what I need,’ The Lint said. ‘Give me that, please.’”

I can't help it; I look at Noah. It's too uncanny. That's what we both want, isn't it?

Only it doesn't exist. I have to hold myself back from telling all these children that security is an illusion, that once you grow up, all the things you think will offer it, really, really don't. And the things you really want require you to step so far away from security that not everyone will make it.

There is no guarantee that finally, truly exploring this thing with Noah will work out well.

But I need to find a way to do it anyway.

I breathe through the lump in my throat and somehow get through the rest of the day.

My own words come back to me—conflict stands between what you want and what you *need*.

TWENTY-FOUR

NOAH

I don't know what I expected would happen when I finally sent in that resignation letter, but right before story hour, I clicked SEND and...nothing.

There was none of the relief of finally being free of that lie, no sense of doing the right thing.

Just nothing. *Blank*. Like Mum's painting. But without the beauty.

Linty appeared to know more about making his way through life than I did.

But soon enough, I'd be gone, and then things might start making sense again.

At least I could hope.

TWENTY-FIVE

BEC

Three days later, I finally hit *send* on the ***Don't Go*** text.

Too late, sugarplum.

My heart plummets, my stomach swirls. *Did he resign?*

I already left the library to go home.

My relief is palpable. But is it because he isn't leaving? Or because he misunderstood my desperation? That I don't want him to leave town. That the idea makes me want to curl up in bed and never get out.

You okay?

Yeah, just you know, missing you.

Honesty? What's this? Now you're really scaring me.

Well, I was too busy being mad at you to look inside myself. There are no guarantees. But I want to take the leap with you, anyway.

Linty?

Yep. That little dirtball. He's really onto something.

And now you realize you can't live without me.

That quick? Really? Back to the snark just like that?

What can I say? I missed our banter.

Me too.

You're only human.

Are you trying to get me to change my mind?

Nah, that's why I've already turned around toward your place. Be there in five to pick you up.

To go where?

To my place.

To stay the whole night at the evil lair?

Yup.

And don't forget to bring Frosty Fluffy Muffin.

I get a strange image of the three of us—a family.

I don't know how he'll be at another man's house.

He's gonna have to learn to share. Best to start now.

TRUE TO HIS WORD, five minutes later, Noah's headlights illuminate my driveway. My heartbeat picks up. But it's more than just the lust and excitement of our pre-argument state of affairs. I'm nervous.

“We got this, Frosty,” I say, though he's busy swatting his favorite paper ball around the timber floorboards, oblivious to the emotional threshold I'm crossing.

I watch from the peephole as Noah emerges from the car, thumbs the key fob, and pockets the ring of just three keys—one is clearly the car key, the other I recognize as the library front door key from its old-fashioned oversized design, and the third for his apartment. I've watched him twist that one before. But this time, once that lock is unlatched, I'm going to spend the whole night behind it.

Though I'm just on the other side of the door, I wait for him to knock. Just to have those extra few seconds to slow my racing pulse. Things feel so different from the last time he was here.

I shake my hair out and pull the door open, seductively draping myself alongside it. "The Librarian of the People, huh? That has a nice ring to it."

"You know what has a nice ring to it?" His eyes scan me from head to toe.

"What?" My body responds to the proximity of his. Heat. Is. Everywhere.

He leans in, places his mouth right on my ear. "You, on my lap, doing that long, beautiful moan you do, your beautiful body riding mine into that oblivion you take me to. I've been jonesing for you, just like that, these past three days, ten hours, and twenty-seven minutes."

"Well, I applaud your articulate response as well as your detailed time reporting."

"Well, you know how important punctuality is to me."

“And I also know just where you like to brace your hands on my hipbones when I’m taking your cock from that position.”

“You’ve been thinking about it, too.” He adjusts his pants, then regards me, full of desire.

“I’ll never tell.”

“That sounds like you want me to make you.”

“Sounds like you wanna give it a try.”

Noah nips with his teeth at the lobe of that ear, then with a languid lick, sends shivers down my spine. Without realizing, I moan the way he described. This is one way of getting the truth out.

“That’s it.” He lifts me under my knees and arms and carries me into the house to my bedroom.

In my room, he tenderly lowers me onto my bed. His eyes don’t leave mine for a second. There’s all the heat of our past encounters, but something more. We’ve gotten past a major hurdle together, in our own messy way, we’ve hurt and mended, and our reward is this—a deeper connection, a heat layered with something binding our hearts. A shared step out of the security that’s kept us safe, into the unknown that won’t seem to stop beckoning us.

He pulls his jacket from his arms, lowers the knot of his tie, slips it over his head, then works the buttons down his chest. I’m rapt as he rips his shirttails from his pants. And I reach out to touch him above where his fingers unzip his straining fly, my chest heaving. I can’t contain the cocktail of

desire, need, and relief at the spectacle of Noah, honest and baring himself for me.

I hadn't realized how *scared* I was that we'd lost our shot for good.

As he frees his cock from his obscenely tented boxer briefs, I feel unblocked, clear, free-flowing.

There's nothing holding me back as I rise to my knees, take his glorious length in my hand, circle the liquid at the tip, and watch the effect I have on him. He's transformed as I fist his girth and pump up and down his thick, solid shaft. Noah's groan encourages me, and before I know it, I'm lapping at that wet spot at his crown. My mouth opens wide and I push his length between my lips.

When his hands twist in my curls, and pull me the way he needs, pumping himself through my lips, down my throat, I pulse with the need to please him, to show him how deeply I require his presence in my life, and the lengths I have decided to go to make this happen.

"Take it. Take it all," he says.

Yes. Yes. I want it—no, need it, all.

My pussy clenches and I take him deeper down my throat, at his direction, as he pushes his length farther than I'd imagined possible—all the way. "That's it," he says.

I ache with the need to make him come, to taste his release, swallow it down, lick my lips with satisfaction. My heart beats so loudly, my core hot and tense with need.

His thrusts pick up in pace. A guttural, animal sound rumbles from my lungs. His thighs tighten in glorious, taut muscle contractions, his hands tighten in my hair, but even without those signals, I feel his release coming. And then in one final thrust, his hot liquid rushes down my throat and I swallow it like I can't get enough. Which I can't.

“Bec. My Bec.”

He slides himself from my mouth, indicating his enjoyment of the view with a disbelieving shake of his head, and I watch, feeling sexier, and more alive than ever before. And don't I know it's this newly forged connection between us that's making it happen.

He tips my chin up and I straighten so we're zipped—my curves against his tight, strong muscles. His cock lined up with my throbbing, needy opening. He pushes his hips and his slick cock brushes my swollen nub in an eruption of sensation. Though he's just emptied himself inside of me, his cock strains toward me, already filling with blood for me, for us, for this thing between us.

He kisses me, and my body goes limp with relief. His tongue dances with mine, searching out, giving, taking. I rub my clit against his cock and swell with pride at his hardening response.

He pulls me close, his hands around my back like they were made for holding me. I writhe against him, hardly aware of what I'm doing and yet sure of it, like some ancient knowledge is guiding me.

Noah breaks the kiss and works his tongue and teeth along my neck until I'm shaking with the need for release.

He steps back, traces my breast, pinching my tight nipple hard, then drags a line down to my pounding clit. I scream out when his thumb ever so lightly brushes that needy nub, then traces languid circles. My heart stops. The expectation of his hardness pushing inside me is the only thing that will do.

But he has other ideas. And thankfully, I gasp in a great breath as he lowers me onto the bed and parts my legs, which shake uncontrollably, as I watch his mouth bridge the gap. "Look at you, bare for me. I can see everything. Like this part —" he says, and swipes at me, setting off electric shocks through my belly. "So wet."

Lights race behind my eyelids as he feasts on me. My belly trembles as I thread my fingers through his thick black hair.

Noah plunges two fingers inside me and I feel my channel squeeze around him.

"So tight," he says.

My pulses around his fingers pick up their pace as he expertly works my soaked folds and my clit, reaching all the right places inside, places I didn't know existed.

My belly tightens, nerve endings heighten, like my limbs are going to lose all feeling. And then I'm gone, over the edge, drowning in feeling, squeezing in uncontrollable spasms around him as my fingers yank unrelentingly at his hair.

The way his finger glides over his bottom lip as he lifts himself from between my legs makes my orgasm pound out a

series of echoes. He rises over me and I feel his erection in its full glory travel over my thigh, and rest just under my still-spasming cunt.

“I don’t want anything between us, sugarplum. Never again. Are we okay if we don’t use anything? I’m clean, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

“And I’ve had an IUD for years, and I’m clean, too.” As soon as the last word dies on my tongue, a reverential silence lowers over us. He rests his weight on his arms, caging me between them, taunting me with his hardness, teasing his crown at my opening, pushing in slightly. He growls at the sound of my wetness, then pushes a bit more. I squirm as he rocks back, anticipating taking all of him, but again he only allows the tip, a look of mouthwatering bossiness about him.

“Please,” I say. “I want all of you. Give me all of you.”

And in one almighty thrust, he’s stretched me to fit his generous size. My hips hike up to meet him as my belly hollows out with pleasure.

“Like this?” he groans.

“Yes!” I say.

Our bodies run away at an instinctive pace.

“You like that?” He braces a hand at my hip, and the sight of his strong fingers there nearly bring me over the edge.

“Yes.”

“You’ve been dreaming of me pushing my cock inside of you all this time, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

He shakes his head.

“What are we gonna do with you?”

He plunges deeply, then slides from my wetness, turning me over and pushing me onto my knees.

He spreads my legs, lines himself up to my opening, and pushes in from behind.

“Is this what you want?”

“Mmm,” I moan.

“Oh baby, I love it when I make you moan.”

The circuit overloads. I come in great waves, milking his cock while he calls out, then spills his warmth inside me. Noah, me. Nothing between us. Security is miles behind us. So far, back I can't even remember what it felt like. But I have a feeling that even if I did, I couldn't do a damned thing to stay there. Not after this. Because our bodies so clearly say everything our words won't allow. And it's perfect. The very thing I don't believe in.

We collapse on my bed and he pulls me onto his chest. No pillow has ever felt this right.

Like that, soaked in each other, his strong arms around me, my leg slung over his thigh, we sleep.

It's the best rest of my life.

IN THE MORNING, I wake to the smell of coffee and the pleasant sound of milk frothing. I feel sated, calm, truly in the moment despite the barriers we crossed last night.

My body is deliciously sore. I shake my head at my glow as I brush my teeth in the vanity mirror.

How can anything be this good outside of fiction?

I swat the thought away. This isn't the time for worrying. Not about that, and not about the fact that we didn't sleep over at his place after all. That's just an oversight of passion.

It's the time to step up, be courageous, and honor this attempt at having the kind of life I never believed possible.

Am I scared?

Fuck, yeah.

But this is worth fighting for.

And I'm going to do everything I can to win this war.

TWENTY-SIX

NOAH

I'm making coffee when Bec grabs a step stool and climbs up to an out-of-the-way cabinet above the fridge, right behind the infamous Cheerios. She pulls out a matching *I Left My Heart in Stockton* mug.

"Now what is this?" I say, deeply affected by the revelation. Especially in light of what I'm about to tell her about accepting the job in Sydney.

"That was a very special trip," she says, looking at the side. How did I go my whole life only using mugs with no slogans? From here, it feels like a gross oversight.

"You're so sneaky. You bought this that night for yourself, too?"

She shrugs. And even with that slight gesture, I can see some of her protective layers have been shucked.

"Okay, so what does it mean that you're revealing this to me now?"

She exhales loudly.

"Wait, you want to go public?"

"Yup. Definitely."

“With our fling.”

“I think we both know this isn’t a fling. But—”

I cut her off because I have to tell her now. “I know there are so many buts. There always will be. But something like this, my plum, only comes around once in a lifetime.” I tell myself I’m working toward it, that the words will come.

“And then what?” she asks.

“This is the hard part.”

She lets her mug drop to the table with a bang. “What is it?” I hate that look in her eye, like deep down, she was still waiting for me to screw this up.

“I finally made an honest man of myself. I sent in my resignation. And I accepted another job at a startup.” The minute it comes out of my mouth it feels wrong.

“There’s a startup here in Magnolia Shores?”

“No.”

“You’re going back to Sydney.” The fear in her voice is evident to me.

“That was always the plan. It’s what we agreed to—I’d resign after the film production was complete. And we don’t have the best track record. This will take some of the pressure off.” I don’t know what I’m saying. Or why. And yet the words come tumbling out.

“Right,” she says.

She smiles sadly, and I swear I see her bundle herself back inside those layers, like she’s already scolding herself for

trusting me. She doesn't speak.

"Let's just go with it. See what happens."

I feel like I'm waiting for something, but I don't know what. Maybe I did leave my heart in Stockton. The question is will I ever get it back?

As I gather my keys and wallet, feeling my whole world crumble, I finally work out what it is I'm waiting for. Two little words. ***Don't Go***. And not just about leaving work for the night. Not anything but *I need you, Noah. I need you to stay*.

But she doesn't say that. She says, "Or even better, why don't we just take all the pressure off? I think we've already said all there is to say. So I'm going to ask you to leave and please, for the love of God, take this mug with you."

She shoves it at me and pushes me and the mug toward the door. She opens it and starts to yell. "You know what I think, Noah?"

"Please, enlighten me." There's so much distance between us, I barely recognize her.

"I think you've been *waiting* for a reason to distrust this thing between us. Because it would be so much easier. That's really why you took another job. Now you can just go back to your safe, lonely life, and never have to put yourself out there to be vulnerable. You can look back on this fling with Ms. Fly By the Seat of Her Pants and be glad you got it out of your system."

I'm sure my eyes are cold as ice, as I angrily scrub at my chin, over the longest scruff I've ever had.

“I guess your superpowers don’t work on me,” I hear myself say.

“Congratulations. You finally uncovered my kryptonite. I guess I should thank you. And stay far, far away.”

A CLUSTER of about a dozen kangaroos stare at me as I back out of my parking spot at the library for the last time. It’s been a week since Bec and I last spoke. Half of the ‘roos shake their heads and the other half have really judgmental expressions.

“What are you looking at?”

If I had Frosty Fluffy Muffin with me, he’d scare them all away with his albino cat gaze.

But I don’t.

And I won’t.

It all feels so wrong.

The kangaroos don’t even move when I drive right by them. Like I’ve somehow lost all my influence and they always expected me to leave this way.

Or maybe it’s just me.

The view of Magnolia Shores in my rearview mirror haunts me when I return to Sydney.

TWENTY-SEVEN

BEC

And just like that, the day comes when Noah's leaving. I've tried to put it out of my mind. But the gaping hole in my life is impossible to sidestep. He's on my mugs, he's in the book-butt sculpture at the library, in my dreams, my old work emails, the text messages I keep scrolling through. I picture him shaving off that lovely scruff he'd allowed to grow the second he crosses the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

But none of that leads me to a way to make peace with the fact that he's gone. Just when I trusted him, he went and proved to me that I never should have trusted him in the first place.

Only now, I can't seem to go back to the way I was.

TWENTY-EIGHT

NOAH

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me.” Finn shakes his head.

We’re in his Sydney office like we’ve been hundreds of times over the years, but nothing feels the same.

Since I left Magnolia Shores, I fill up as many hours of the day and night as I can with work, pouring everything I am into the startup, so I don’t have to think about how empty I am.

But the satisfaction of the work seems to drain right out. It doesn’t fill me the way my time with Bec did.

“I never thought I’d see the day. It’s going to be impossible to replace you.”

“Well, you think I’d leave you that way? I already know the right person to head up the library. She’s a hero of Bec’s, and probably the person we should have hired in the first place.”

“Nah, man. It was always you. Look what you did there. No one could have made the place what it is except you.”

“I appreciate that. It was certainly life changing. I mean, look at me—about to work for a startup!”

He chucks me in the arm. “It suits you. But, you’re gonna have to tell them you’ll need to give me six months to replace you at Re-Surf.”

“Way ahead of you, man. Been grooming my replacement since I started moving up the ranks all those years ago. Can’t have silos in business. I wouldn’t be doing my job properly if I left a huge hole in the company when I left it. Dude’s been doing my job the whole time I’ve been out there. And he’s hungry. Reminds me of myself once upon a time.”

“I thought you were trying to sell him to me.”

I smile. “Was I that bad?”

“I wouldn’t be here without you. But if you kept going at the rate you’ve been working these past ten years, there’d be nothing left of you. First one in, last one out. That’s no way to live. Not when you’ve got a place like Magnolia Shores beckoning you.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think I’ll be settling there.”

“Is this because of the Bec thing?”

“You knew about that?”

“Everyone knows!” I don’t know why, but the thought warms my heart.

“Well, it’s over.”

“How do you feel?”

“As uncomfortable as humanly possible. Which is how I know I’m about to fix this and do the right thing.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

“You’re a dark horse, Noah King. I have a feeling we’re going to see great things from you.”

“We shall see, my friend. Thank you for putting up with me all these years.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

TWENTY-NINE

BEC

I should have called in sick the next day because I don't think I slept for more than a three-minute stretch the whole night, thinking about Noah driving home. But I'm not built that way. And besides, if I don't find something encouraging at the library, I won't find it anywhere. And I have never needed to be encouraged so much in my life.

At lunch in my office, Teresa unwraps the sandwich she said Amy made just for me, and hands it over. "I mean, do people really change?"

I accept the sandwich and inspect its filling, trying to ignore any of Noah's dick jokes that come to mind. A gooey, pale cheese with some kind of fruit chutney between two pillowy slices of sourdough. I take a bite. It's a shot of bliss—salty, sweet, decadent. Amy knows how to pick me up. Emotional sandwich comms are definitely her superpower. "I always thought they could, yes. In fact, it's the main reason I became a librarian," I say. "I saw how deeply knowledge could change people."

"Oh, see *I* did it so I could shush people all day—only to find out, we hardly do that! People are encouraged to talk in

libraries!”

“Yes, Teresa, we went over this so many times; it’s because—”

She covers my hands in hers. “It’s because we want to encourage the library as a safe, positive space for kids, so we foster a lifetime of knowledge that they can come to the library whenever they need anything.”

And just like that my anger bursts and reveals a deluge of sadness underneath it. Once the waterworks start, there’s no stopping them.

“Are you happy now?” I say as I accept the napkins she passes me.

“Yes, my one goal in life is to make my favorite librarian cry.”

A weak smile emerges beneath the salty tears. Teresa sees her chance and embraces me in the hug I deeply need. I let myself go limp in her warm embrace, the waves of sadness crashing over me.

“You know,” she says over my shoulder, “this thing between you and Noah could still work out.”

It takes me a blinky moment to think about what she said. When I process it, I recoil, untangling myself, leaning way back. “*You* believe in happily ever after?”

“Are you telling me that you took one look at my pink hair and combat boots and assumed I couldn’t possibly believe in happy endings?” She clucks her tongue, shaking her head.

“You of all people should know you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“You’re right, Teresa. I misjudged you.”

“Thank you. It takes a big person to admit when they’re wrong.” She raises her palms defensively. “Now, don’t shoot the messenger and all that, but if you misjudged *me*, do you think it’s possible you misjudged Noah’s reaction, too?”

THIRTY

NOAH

The biggest difference at my house in Sydney is that it feels massive. Was it always this big? I resist untangling that too much because I sense there's an emptiness, a lack of a certain person at play in this change in perception.

My mother has sent me one of her new artworks, so I hang it opposite my sofa, where I seem to spend the most time feeling like something is missing. I call it being proactive, like I'm reframing my space, sending out new vibes to start fresh, and manage to spend ten focused minutes looking at it until I realize why it's called *Full*, and that once again, Mum's managed to nail it with her work.

While two weeks ago, I would have got a *fuck yeah* feeling looking at that sinfully indulgent shade of blue, smearing everything in its sight with depth and richness and bursting pigment, because *I* was full—full of Bec, full of life and possibility, and sex and desire, and yes, *love*—now I want to pull the thing off the wall and drive my boot into it.

Because I am completely fucking empty.

The way you wanted it, douchebag.

Yup. Exactly the way I wanted it. Because Bec was right. I needed someone to blame. Been blaming my parents for my problems all my life. Only now, it's too late to fix it. Could she be right that she was simply a stepping stone for me? If so, why does it feel so shitty without her?

So I sit with my painting, feeling sorry for myself, and wake up the next morning with a stiff neck, unable to look at my sorry ass in the mirror.

When I call Mum to thank her, Dad answers. I don't think I'll ever work out their relationship. "It's a great painting," he says when I explain why I'm calling. "I'm glad you rang. You know you're mother is turning fifty-five soon, and I've been doing some reflection. When we were twenty-five we'd always talk about being fifty-five," Dad says. Their new living arrangement seems to have thawed something in both of them, and I can't help but wonder, with equal parts awe and disgust, whether this isn't the inspiration behind *Full*.

"Back then you were waddling around in diapers. And we were pinching pennies every way we could. Mum grew whatever fruits and veggies she could and then declared she was a vegetarian so we wouldn't have to keep buying meat. Turned out she decided I was a vegetarian, too. We worried so much about money that we were always coming from a place of lack. We'd stay up late at night and come up with a plan to stop trying to make it as artists when we'd hit a certain threshold that was too risky for parents of a little boy. When we had only a thousand dollars in the bank, when we hadn't showed in six months.

“And, you know what happened? I freaked. Paced that garden out back so much I wore a track in the grass. I couldn’t raise a family that way. So I lied to my wife. I told her I had lost my inspiration. That I no longer wanted to sculpt.

“I got a job at the university teaching art and hung up my own passion to create. Turned out I liked teaching. I was lucky in that way. But I grew to resent my decision. And eventually, like I knew she would, Mum started to make some waves, and then some more waves, and finally, she made it big. And I grew to resent that, too.

“But the thing is, when you love someone so much, you can sometimes forget where they end and you begin. Her success was my success. And I deeply regret how many years it took me to see that. But it was as many as it took me to see that my failure was also her failure.

“And now here we are—Marilyn’s actually turning fifty-five, and she has everything she ever wanted. And without one ounce of regret or jealousy, I can truly say that means I have everything I ever wanted, too.”

Dad’s words hit home. That connection is what I had with Bec. And yeah, I was too scared to admit it. And though this time away hasn’t dulled the feelings I have for her, it also hasn’t magically changed me into someone I’m not. So I won’t be riding a white stallion up to her granny flat to gallop her off into the sunset today.

And maybe it’s time to face the fact that perhaps I never will.

I've made my decision. Here I am. Back to the life where I fit. Where everything makes sense. Where days start with a quick surf, a shower, a smoothie, and hours of maximizing discovery and profits for someone else's ventures.

The first morning the surf is shit—messy, frothy waves that break too fast to take you anywhere. When my watch alarm goes off to signal the end of surfing time, I've barely done more than paddle for the thirty minutes. My shower is steamy, but also stupidly big. Why do I have two shower heads? I turn the second one on to see if there's any benefit, but it just seems to be missing Bec more. Like I've run her shower but she's never going to step into it.

At the office, I catch my PA grumbling in the kitchen. She taps at her watch face, rolling her eyes at the other girl I don't recognize. But she's got nothing on Teresa's impression.

Lunch is healthy and carb free, but don't I find myself missing Amy's prosciutto and mozzarella sandwich, and yes, my dick jokes Bec pretended to hate.

I'm left hungry and unsatisfied. But I get back to work, sure that will quell the feeling.

Only it doesn't.

So what do I do?

I leave my cutthroat marketing job at five o'clock on the dot. I have never in my life done this before. And where do I go?

To the freaking library.

I had to Google it. Didn't even know where my local library was.

I walk there like a religious man headed to church, my gold cross earring bopping in the breeze. This place will have the answers. I can't explain it with reason and logic, but I have faith that it will. And faith is new for me.

So I don't know exactly how to feel when I see the library in the distance and instantly know it's different from Magnolia Shores' Library in every way. As I get close, I see a gothic-style building with columns out front. It's proper and stuffy and staid and feels nothing like *my* library.

I have an aversion to the place straight from the start. I already know it's going to lose in a library-off with *my* library.

I look through the glass panels of the double front doors and nearly turn around. But, in the end, I decide to go inside. They have a greeter and she's handing out treasure hunt activity packs to the kids. It's a good idea. We should do it. I remember there is no *we*.

I tour the foyer, which features a display of local high school students' portraits of their favorite characters. A couple are pretty good, giving an impression that I know I'll associate with those characters from here on out.

Following the signs above, I head to poetry. It's a comprehensive selection, and I wouldn't know ninety-nine percent of the poets, but I head to the Ws to see if there are any WCW collections here.

Nothing.

I go down to the front desk and inform that greeter, a little too loudly, that there's a gaping hole in their poetry collection.

She looks at me like I'm nuts, but the opposite is true. Stepping out of that alternate library universe, I can see the final missing piece.

THERE'S ONLY one thing that will. Blaming others for my fuck-ups? That ends now.

I know just what I have to do to fix it.

I ring the documentary producers immediately and explain I have to add something.

"But that film is done. It's in the can, as we say in the biz."

"We've got to record something else, and it has to be now."

"Dude, it's going to cost so much extra money."

"That's fine. I'll pay for it out of my own pocket. I don't care. Whatever it is, double it."

"Okay, if you say so."

"Just don't say anything to Bec."

Finally, when I end the call, I know I'm going to fix this. I may not have a white stallion, but I'm Noah fucking King. And they don't call me Dr. Fixit for nothing.

I RIDE off to the ABC studios to film one last bit of the superpowered librarian documentary. And explain that kryptonite has been known to be overcome when someone becomes stronger than its kryptonian powers, or when the kryptonite powers begin to wane. My studies have shown that we are seeing evidence of both of these phenomena. Why? Because we're connected. And that's the real deal.

"Are you sure you want to go with the Superman crap?" Teresa asks. I still can't believe she drove out to their Sydney studios to help me with this.

"It's not crap. And it will mean something to her."

Teresa shakes her head. "You are one lucky man that she feels this way about you."

"Believe me," I tell her, "I know that, which is why I'm going on about all the Superman crap."

After the Superman crap, I go on about a whole lot of other crap that I never thought would leave my mouth. And I feel better than I have in ages. Settled. The *shoulds* I've been plagued with my whole life seem to have gone on vacation.

And if that's wrong, then I don't want to be right.

Me and the *Full* painting have a new understanding, and I finally get some sleep.

ONLY I LEFT her the message about the video, and I haven't heard from her since.

THIRTY-ONE

BEC

I heard what Teresa said. There is definitely something to her direct approach that cuts right through.

I allow my mind to wander around the grooves of the idea that I may have misjudged Noah. I sit with the deep discomfort of that. And I wear his shirt to bed. And I drink from his grumpy coffee cup, wishing I hadn't given him the one we bought in Stockton. I even try his black coffee.

But I can't bring myself to go any further.

On Monday, I get my first message alert from Noah. My stomach plummets even as my heart soars with hope.

I just got a call from the ABC. The final cut of the documentary is coming on Thursday.

I toy with a plethora of answers...

Thanks.

My new boss could have told me that.

I guess they should cancel it since my superpowers have been destroyed by you, Mr. Kryptonite.

But I know they aren't right. I've had a part to play. And I need to own up to that. Why couldn't I give him a chance to explain why he was going back to Sydney? Why did I automatically shut it down and refuse to see it any other way?

I can't seem to get my response quite right, so I ignore his text, loathing the genius who came up with the *delivered* status.

At Children's Story Hour, I hear the scrap of a conversation between two mothers that includes, "hot billionaire guy in the suit."

At night, I crack open my old fluffy story ideas notebook and sit in my armchair. At first, I walk through my old ideas, noting patterns, darker titles. When had I decided that I didn't believe in Happy Ever After?

I go and talk to my mother, of all people, because even if I'm sure I won't like what she has to say, she'll know more about it than anyone.

She takes me out to the garden, which is looking spectacular, her roses in full bloom, the casual clusters of potted grasses creating a comforting space.

"You know, Bec. I know this sounds like one of those things you're just going to poo-poo, but that near-drowning in the ocean changed you. You were always happiest with your books, but after that, it was like you decided you'd leave the real living to your imagination. When you went off to America, I thought, well, maybe she'll leave all that behind. But you were always so keen to come home. And I'd say to

your dad, she's got unfinished business here. Just you watch. She'll be back."

It's an emotional, painful day. But I leave Mom's house feeling sure of one thing. I need to make this right.

THIRTY-TWO

BEC

I'm driving to Sydney to tell Noah I'm sorry. That I played a major role in standing in the way of making this relationship work. I started out making good time, my Keep Cup full of much-needed caffeine, but now the traffic is standing still.

I'll never get there. I put my car into park when I get another message from Noah. This one is a video clip. Since I'm parked, I click play, even though I'm in the driver's seat on the highway.

On my phone's screen, Noah comes into focus behind his name typed in the font of the ABC documentary. My heart races as I watch.

"Everyone knows a satisfying story ends with a happy ever after," he begins. "We're wired that way. Some of us have become experts at denying we really want that because it seems too hard to find. But that's fear talking. Some might even say it's like their kry—"

He looks up and nods his head, then stops what he was going to say and changes gears.

"So here's my, um, *Achilles' heel*. I want it. With everything I am, I want it. And more than that, I want to give it

to my lovely Bec, the star of this film. So let me start by telling you the book she recommended to me.”

He picks up the little, worn volume.

Overdue, I think, despite the effect it has on me.

“Yup. I’ll have to pay a replacement fee for this one. But it’s worth it. This one’s mine. You can see it’s had an effect on me. Now, don’t be fooled by how skinny this little book is. That’s part of the whole point of William Carlos Williams’ poems. Simplicity, taking time to seek out the beauty of life. This man has shown me how to look for it and the kind of payoff you get from that type of appreciation of the small things is worth more than all the riches in the world. More powerful than krypto—”

There’s a deep throat clearing from someone off camera and again he stops himself.

“My world has gone from monochrome to technicolor. That is the superpower of this woman. She doesn’t make you see things the right way. Nope. She’s too smart to think there’s one right way. Instead, she gives you the tool, the book, and where you go with it is up to you.

“But you see, this Bec book recommendation is different. Because the result affects her more than most. And here’s the way it’s gone, Bec.”

He’s talking directly to me. My hand goes to my chest.

“I’ve taken the time. I’ve gone back to my life. And sure, I *can* live it without you. But I don’t fucking want to. I want to

appreciate those delicious plums. And not just with any free-spirited woman. With you. And that's the way it is.

“Yup, we met each other at a seriously unique point in each other's lives, and yes, we helped each other to get where we needed to go. And like all growth, it wasn't easy. But it was real. And I'm not going back to where I was. But I know one thing for sure. This new version of life? I want to live it with you. Not because of what I am or am not. Not because of what's expected of me. Because of you. *You*, Bec, are the beauty in my everyday.

“You were right. I did try to fight what we had. And words have meaning. You taught me that. Which is why I've written to the lovely folks at Oxford English Dictionary and formally asked that they change the definition of the word *fling*. Here's what it *should* mean: a life-altering, wondrous experience, that will, if you let it, lead you to realize you've met the one you want to spend your life with.”

I message him back.

Don't go anywhere. I'm on my way to your place in Sydney to start our happy ever after.

You just made me the happiest man in the world.

I DON'T KNOW what it is about this *putting stuff out into the universe* thing, but as soon as I send that text, the traffic clears right up, and I'm pulling up to his building in no time.

He's outside with my mug, and he opens my car door and pulls me out and into his arms.

“Fuck, I’ve missed you,” he says into my ear, holding me tighter than ever before.

“Me too,” I say, then his lips search out mine and claim them in that way they’ve always been so good at. Only now I need to tell him what I’m feeling, too. So after the kiss ends, I say what I’ve been wanting to for so long.

“I was scared to tell you not to go, and then I left it too long, and thought I’d missed my chance because I was too busy being mad at you to look inside myself.”

“I would have waited my whole life for you, plum. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Have from the beginning, but now I’m not afraid. Because I know how it is—you do you, and I do me. Only together, it’s a whole new thing. And that is where I want to be. Always. Because I *need* you. And I’m okay with that. Because I trust you and I love you.”

“Two *I love yous*?”

“Making up for lost time.”

He grabs my bags and takes me up to his loft apartment. “I know, it’s sparse and lifeless. Doesn’t feel like me anymore. Except this painting.” He takes my hand and leads me into the living room where a breathtaking blue canvas is vibrating with life.

“Wow,” I say.

“It’s called *Full*.”

I arch a brow.

“Are you having naughty librarian thoughts about how I’m going to fill you up?”

“You know me so well,” I say, my breath taken by envisioning the many ways in which his body knows how to fill me.

And then we spend forty-eight hours doing just that.

I GET a call that night that drains the color from my face. I offer a lot of *mmm-hmms*, and *okays* and not much else, so I don’t worry Noah too much until I can explain what’s happened.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” I say, “so I’m just going to blurt it out. The version of the documentary that went out is the one with your bonus ending.”

I search his face while this sinks in.

He shrugs. “Okay.”

“Okay? That’s it?”

“Yeah.”

“What about *work is work*?”

“The man who said that didn’t know what he was talking about.”

“But—”

He continues making our coffees, unfazed. “Funny enough, I’m *happy* it’s gone that way. I want the world to know. I want to scream it from the rooftops. I might even get a

customized *I Love Bec* tee shirt. *Oooh*, or a *mug*. That grumpy one feels dated these days.”

And when it goes viral, and I’m offered a television show in which I recommend books and then they follow up with the effects they have on their readers, we’re both thrilled.

When the television show leads to a book deal for a compendium of book recommendations for every occasion, with the option of publishing more books if I write them, he says, “I know just what Dad meant when he was talking about his relationship with my mother. Your happiness is truly mine, too.”

“Look at me—making actual *bank* from what I love.”

“Money isn’t everything, Bec.”

I shake my head, then put out a bowl of plums, and I lean over it to kiss him.

“This is just to say, that if that kiss is my new everyday thing, you might make a poet of me yet.”

THIRTY-THREE

BEC

We've been living together at my place for a little over a month now when Noah comes into the library for a surprise visit. He knows the schedule there, so he chose a time that he knew would be convenient. I hate to admit it, but the scheduling thing *does* come in handy.

"You picked the perfect book for me once, but for the sake of the scientific method, let's try again. Let's call it a one-month moving-in present. You know, just to make sure it wasn't a fluke," he says.

"Is that a challenge? Because believe me, you're going to lose."

"How do you know that even if you get it right that I won't lie," he asks.

"Because I'd know."

"Another superpower?"

"No. You have a give."

"What is it?"

"You scratch at the left side of your neck when you lie."

“*Do I?* I don’t even care anymore. No more secrets. I want to scream from the rooftops how I’m so glad to be back here where I belong, with the woman I love. Even if I have no clue what I’m going to do with my career.”

“You do belong here with the woman who loves you right back. But, for the sake of science let’s test this, theory of yours. I’ll say something and then you’ll tell me if I’m lying.”

“Go.” I shoot my finger like a pistol.

“You are sexy as fuck in that dress.”

“Truth.”

“I want to rip it off you.”

I inhale sharply. “True.”

“I like the way—” he steps closer, so our bodies are zipped together, “your skin quivers when I brush you ever so slightly right—” he grazes my clavicle and achieves the desired effect, “here.”

I turns my cheek, and he follows my lead. Our lips meet in an explosion of feeling. He sucks and licks and bites at my lips like they are treasures and he is the only one in the world with access. Like he can’t get enough. When I open my mouth to let him in, he kisses me and my body shudders in response.

When the kiss breaks off, I have a thought. “Imagine if you took everything that surfing means to you and you put it in a book. Like—”

I go to the bookcases, run my fingers along the spines of the art books, then pull out an enormous hardbacked volume,

called *Making Faces*. There's a model on the front who is made up with a powder-white face and red lips. It's intriguing, beautiful. But I can see the question in his eyes even before he asks.

"Is this a book about makeup?" He flips through a few of the full-page glossy photos of women made up to look like different celebrities, but in a way that hones in on the essence of what makes us love that person.

I stop him at a particularly inspiring page. "Look at this one."

"I love it," he says, scratching vigorously at the left side of his cheek.

"No, it's a bit lower." I move his hand down a bit. Then he plants a kiss on my neck.

"Hear me out," I say when we're again face to face. "This man was a legend. He took an art form—makeup—and showed people how to transform it into something spectacular. And he made a shit load of money doing it. His legacy brand still makes the best mascara in the world."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying there's something out there that blends the passion you're so hungry for—"

"Plum, let me stop you there. You fill me up in the passion department."

"I mean in your professional life." I push free of his arms so I can step back and really see him. "There's a way for you

to apply that to the business wizardry that makes you the ultimate go-to guy.”

There’s a cold flash in my chest. I don’t yet know what it means, but I can tell we’re onto something. “How do you do it?” I say.

“Like she said, it’s my superpower.”

“But that’s not the only one, is it?”

“Are you talking dirty to me right here in the stacks, Noah? This is outside the boundaries of our agreement.”

“And don’t tell me that doesn’t make it that much more thrilling,” He says. My gaze lasers in on his tongue curling around that last word. His cock stirs.

I swallow, trying to cover my reaction with a casual shrug.

“What if I were to just—” He approaches me and lifts my bra strap from under the shoulder strap of my floral dress, “run my finger along here? Right here in the section for Creative Passions?”

“Well,” I gulp. “I’d probably say you have a filing problem. I mean—” My eyes roll back, my lids heavy. “You’re getting into a racy subject area, and it might be more of an *erotica* situation.”

“So let’s go over there,” He says.

“We can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because the new boss might not like it.”

“Don’t tell me that doesn’t make you want it more. I know all about librarians and their dirty fantasies. You taught me all about it.”

“That was you.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.”

THIRTY-FOUR

BEC

The Town Hall is held on the first Thursday of each month in the fire station's function room, where most people had their weddings before the Magnolia Shores Hotel and Re-Surf came to town.

It's an old simple brick building that has always been impeccably maintained by the firies. Firefighting is no joke in these parts. Bushfire seasons of the last few years have seen some catastrophic burns that stretch far and wide, engulfing trees, wildlife, and homes indiscriminately. If it weren't for the Magnolia Shores firefighters, the house I'm currently living in wouldn't even exist. There are still blackened trees right up to the periphery if anyone needs a reminder of the risk. Nearly every bloke in this town volunteers or has volunteered at one time or another. And even those who don't lend a hand when it's needed.

Photos of the historical firies of Magnolia Shores line the walls along with prints of some of the worst fires in the town's history. The one of the charred koala always lodges a lump in my throat.

But tonight isn't about fires. It's about the future of the town, and things have never looked so bright. I know the library has a major role to play in that, and the ABC documentary is going to seal the deal—sending bookish travelers here right alongside sun worshippers. And once they arrive, there will be plenty for them to enjoy, and lots of ways to invest their story-loving dollars into the local community.

I know Amy's designed an incredible menu inspired by four classic Aussie writers who wrote stories that took place in this area. She joined forces with her husband to put together a package for his hotel guests, and even Mr. And Mrs. Smith have created capsule collections of works inspired by the writers.

Once the Sydney Writers' Festival folks saw the documentary, they finally gave in and added two days of events right here in Magnolia Shores. And the headliner? The Superpowered Librarian, who will give a talk on why certain books speak to us at specific points in our lives and how our relationships with them can change over time.

Breaking down what has always been intuitive to me is a mind-blowing, satisfying experience. And I'm not sure I could have done it before Noah's influence on my life. He's made me see that a little planning and analysis is not such a bad thing. In fact, I might even argue that it supercharges my superpower, primes my intuitive direction to take flight.

But I certainly wouldn't tell him that.

He's still Noah.

As he sits alongside me in the first row, Teresa saunters in looking like the cat who ate the canary. What's she up to now? As if secretly helping Noah to win me back wasn't enough.

I can only imagine what's next for her. I just hope it doesn't get me into trouble at work. I've certainly had enough of that for a lifetime.

A bell signals the start of the meeting and the chitchat dies down.

"We have several issues tonight, so we will try to move swiftly through some of the more usual business," the council president says. True to his word, it goes quickly. Everyone is thrilled about the writers' festival, and there's a terrific buzz in the air. Even so, soon enough the platform is open for new business updates.

In such a small town, we'd certainly know if something was in the works, so I take this moment to pull out my phone to check in on the nanny cam Noah set up in his unflagging attempt to work out why Frosty Fluffy Muffin likes to throw all our stuff on the floor.

I'm just getting a view of a rare, clean kitchen floor when, out of the corner of my eye, I see Teresa stand and make her way to the podium.

I knew it!

She looks cool in her Doc Martins and pale floral sundress and I find myself literally inching up to the edge of my seat to hear what she's going to announce.

“Hello everyone,” she begins. The microphone squeals with some awful feedback, but she just looks annoyed at it instead of mortified, the way I’d be. “I’ve been so taken with the way books have become central to Magnolia Shores. It is such a wonderful twist and yet it feels so natural for a place where so many artists have made their homes over the years. Working at the library, with the incredible Superhero Librarian herself—” She raises her hands and applauds, to my utter mortification. And the entire audience follows in a standing ovation. When it dies to a dull roar, she continues. “Working with Bec has been a great honor. And I have learned so much. Been so inspired.”

Oh, please don’t leave, Teresa! You’re the best storyteller in the world. And such a good friend. How will I replace you?

“Which is why—” she stops expertly for a dramatic pause. “I’m going to open a bookstore on the new Main Street South extension.”

“OH, TERESA, YOU DARK HORSE,” I say after. “What a wonderful idea.”

“I know. I love the library and everything you’ve done for me. I learned more in my short time there than I could have in a lifetime anywhere else. And not just the Noah crap! But I’ve got an entrepreneurial spirit. And I need to build something—that’s mine.”

“You always know exactly what you want. I admire that. And what’s more is that you go for it.”

“It’s a curse,” she says, shrugging.

“No. It’s *your* superpower.”

Teresa smiles so brightly, so pure and unabashedly, it’s like peering inside her soul. I can’t help but throw my arms around her. She hugs back so tightly, my heart expands. Our friendship is yet another gift my life of books has bestowed upon me.

“What will you call it?”

“Speaking Volumes.”

“That sounds awesome. I’ll look forward to your order of Surface Marginalized Voices Initiative Keep Cups.”

“Already on the to-do list.”

“And the student becomes the master.”

She darts her eyes toward Noah. “I was just about to say the same thing.”

Now it’s my turn for a soul-revealing smile. Only, as we both assess him, he stands. “Wait, why is Noah taking the stage?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we’re behind on the schedule? Took too long on the coffee break?” Teresa taps her watch and, yup, even now, I still break into laughter.

She shrugs. “I guess I have more than one superpower.”

We turn to the podium, along with the entire crowd, as Noah taps the microphone to get everyone’s attention. I have a hunch from the way she looks at me that it’s about to become the next impression in Teresa’s repertoire.

“We’ve gone a bit over the break time, so I just want to ask that you take your seats for one more new business announcement,” Noah says.

Teresa elbows me. We take the closest seats. Noah’s looking right at me while we wait for the crowd to be seated.

“Most of you know I was heading up the library until recently. And most of you also know how that turned out.” He smirks as the hoots and hollers ricochet over the crowd. From the heat emanating from my cheeks, I can only imagine the shade of purple they have turned.

“Since I decided to come home to Magnolia Shores permanently, I’ve thought long and hard about what I want to do here. And it came to me when Teresa entrusted me with the idea of her bookshop.”

My mouth flies open as my eyes bulge. My gaze darts from Noah to Teresa, and back again. “Later,” Teresa mouths, then does her Noah watch tapping impression.

Those two.

He continues. “I’m going to take everything I’ve learned about running a successful business—top to tail—and offer that expertise to existing and prospective Magnolia Shores and surrounding area business owners.”

It’s perfect. Really, really perfect. And it smacks of fate. The quintessential hero’s journey—venturing out to see what needs to be seen, then coming home again. Victorious, wiser, a better version of yourself. I couldn’t be prouder.

BY NOW, I should have known that nothing could be that perfect. Just as everyone starts talking loudly amongst themselves, there's yet another microphone tap.

This time it's Amy, holding bub in her arms. Bub squeals in delight at the sound his mother made, then continues to bash at the thing, creating a feedback situation that gets everyone covering their ears and cringing.

What is this? The night of a million surprises? I wonder, just as it hits me exactly what this is about.

Amy smiles wickedly and looks directly at me. "I believe my lovely cousin, Bec, star of the film that's brought so much good fortune to this town, has something she'd like to say."

I shoot her the death stare and shake my head rapidly, hoping she'll let our bet go. She is a mother now, after all.

"Now, Bec, don't be shy. Everyone loves a good, satisfying ending." She beckons me, and Noah turns to me questioningly. I hand him my purse and make my way up to the podium.

"You must be wondering what this is all about," I begin. "Well, if you know Amy, you won't be surprised that she's got a reputation for being pretty sure of herself."

There's a good amount of hooting and howling. I lean back into the microphone. "So, she made a bet with me a while back. And—"

"Oh, never mind," Amy says. "It's much more fun if I do it. I was *right*. And Bec was *wrong*. God, that never gets old. The thing between her and Noah was *not* just a hot fling."

And I'm back to purple face.

Noah, on the other hand, quirks a brow, playing into the whole debacle as if it's amusing. As if my omission of that little statement is par for the course.

"Just in case anyone forgets, or couldn't make it tonight, I took the liberty of having these tee shirts printed." She holds one up. *Amy was right* is slashed across the back, in graffiti-style hot pink print. "I'll be selling them at my shop, too. All proceeds go to the Support Local Artists Fund, which I founded in Bec and Noah's names."

"Just when I thought I might finally be able to stay angry at you," I say when she finally descends the stage and tosses me a tee shirt.

"Never. Home is where the people who drive you crazy are also the people who love you."

"Now *that* should go on a tee shirt."

"I am pretty good at this writer thing. You'd better watch out, Bec!"

"I actually have to finish something before I can even think of calling myself a writer. And even then—" I shudder.

"Imposter syndrome? Very normal. I know someone who can definitely recommend a book about that. You should listen to her. She's very insightful when she wants to be."

AFTER THE MEETING LETS OUT, Noah and I are walking to the car and my face is still burning.

“I should have told you I’d called it a fling too,” I say.

“I know!” He stops walking and my guts swirl.

“We could have really gotten her. Why didn’t you let me in on the bet?” Noah says.

“Because I never wanted to win,” I say.

“You’re so sexy when you lie,” he says.

“Okay, I’m glad I didn’t wind up winning,” I say.

“Me too,” he says, tugging me into an embrace, “although, if the folks at Oxford get onto that change to the fling definition, we might have a case for winning.”

I shake my head. “I think we know we’ve both won.”

“Don’t ever go,” I say.

“Now you say that?”

“Well, now you’re ready to hear it.”

And he pulls me into a kiss that proves it a million times over, as if there was ever any doubt.

EPILOGUE

NOAH

“**Y**ou’d better get in here,” I call into the bedroom where Bec is changing out of her swimsuit, once again caught in front of my mother’s painting, *Blank*, which of course, Amy gave to her anyway. We hung it next to *Full*, and together, they balance each other out in a way that’s infinitely more powerful than each individually.

“Frosty Fluffy Muffin’s got into the Cheerios again.”

“Oh no! I thought I was so careful when I put them away this morning!” She comes barreling out, holding her bikini top strings in her hands. We’re going for our weekend swim.

“You were. But I left them out on the table.”

“What? Why?”

She looks down and there’s Frosty Fluffy Muffin, nosing the velvet box amidst hundreds of cheerios.

Bec’s eyes bulge, and it’s like she doesn’t know what to do—let the straps fall to engage in the moment or take the time to tie them. So she freezes. It’s adorable.

“Let me help you,” I say. “As much as I’d like to see your beautiful breasts while I propose, I fear it won’t be a great

story to tell the grandkids.”

“Grandkids, huh?”

“Why not? I can teach them how to surf. You can give them the books that will change their lives.”

“Are you saying I changed your life?” she asks, as I tenderly sweep her hair aside and tie the bathing suit straps. I place a gentle kiss right beneath the bow.

“Of course, you did. By showing me how to trust myself. You finally turned my power up all the way. I often think of that first night we kissed. Your car stalled out, and that’s what set me on a path to finally harnessing the current coursing through me.”

“It’s no WCW, but that’s some impressive wordsmithing.”

“I told you, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“You’d better be careful or you might wind up in one of my books.”

“Look at you talking about writing more.”

“Well, what can I say? You changed *me*, too.”

“And look at us being okay with admitting that to each other. The world is a wonderful place.”

“With you,” she says, catching my heart and somehow opening it even more.

I kneel and pat Frosty on the head. He stretches into my palm. With the other hand, I scoop up the red leather box. My dad helped me to design the ring. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

The gold is from Mum's wedding band and engagement ring. They'd decided together this was the gift they wanted to give us.

"Something from our untraditional relationship that you can make your own," Mum said. Dad nodded with his eyes squeezed shut, which I know is his version of emphatic agreement. Our relationship has transformed so much. What I saw in that moment was a couple of passionate, brilliant people who loved me so much that they twisted themselves inside out to give me the kind of life they thought I deserved because all they wanted for me was joy. That turned out to be a royal mess in a lot of ways, but in others, it brought me right to Bec and the library, and to the freedom to embrace the life I know deep in my soul is just right for me. Because all I see is possibility, a deep motivation to scoop up every bit of life, and yup, the joy they both wanted for me.

I hinge back the ring box cover to reveal the vertical set rectangular diamond, clear and sparkling, in its spare geometrical perfection, set high between two cigar band gold rings so that a third, open gold cigar band wedding ring fits between both sides. Linking them forever.

"It's like the shape of a book!" she says.

I beam. That's just what I had in mind.

"And it's *huge!*" Her fingers fly to cover her mouth. "Did I just say that out loud?"

I laugh from the undistilled happiness and *fun* of the two of us together. "You did. Which is why I'll come right out and say, I know how much you like big things." I bite down on my

bottom lip because even joking, even after all this time, the idea of Bec and my cock still makes it throb.

She shoots me a coquettish look from beneath those lashes. She knows what she does to me. And that turns me on even more.

I lift the ring from the box and slide it onto her finger.

“Oh, you and Frosty! A couple of mischievous men. What am I gonna do with you? I love it!” she says.

“And I love you.” I lift her hand and bring it to my lips. There’s something ethereal about seeing my ring on her finger. I never thought of myself as possessive, but there’s something to this official statement that brings out the animal in me. I have never wanted her more. “Which is why I want to marry you, the old-fashioned way, and make you as happy as I am right this moment, every single day of your life. Will you marry me, Bec Thompson?”

She blinks back tears. “Yes! Of course! Yes, I will marry you, Noah King. I have increased my strength, like Superman in the famous 1971 issue, and I am now immune to your kryptonite.”

“I knew you liked the kryptonite thing.”

“I don’t. But you do. And according to the *real* rules of this fling, your happiness is my happiness. And you know, our own road test has proved that to be true.”

“I love you, Bec Thompson. And I don’t know what I’ll be doing to fill them, but I want to spend every day of my life with you.”

I lift her hand which looks dainty and beautiful with the massive ring.

“You look incredibly sexy wearing my ring,” I say.

“You think I look sexy in everything.”

“Guilty.”

Frosty begins his meows again, a notch louder.

“He’s such a scene stealer.”

“Nah, nothing could steal your spotlight. You shine so bright. You can’t blame Frosty Fluffy Muffin for trying to get some of the attention,” I say.

“If you want to give me some attention, I’ve got a few ideas I can show you. Because that ring on your finger is making me very turned on.”

“Oh yeah?” She links her hands behind my neck and I pull her in at her waist, so she can feel just how turned on I am.

“Yeah. You can’t blame me for that.”

“True. But I can blame *you* for these Cheerios all over the floor.” I hand him the brush and pan.

I make a face but squat to sweep the crumbs into the pan. This was part of my plan, after all.

“You look so sexy cleaning my kitchen.”

“You think I look sexy everywhere.”

“Guilty.”

I stand to empty a full pan into the trash, then turn to her. “You know what this means, right?”

“What?”

“You’ve still never had an actual fling.”

“Keep cleaning, fiancé.”

“You look so sexy calling me that.”

“We can go on like this all day,” she says.

I make my way to her perch on the chair, lift her to me, and wrap my arms around her. “I hope we go on like this every day. For the rest of our lives.”

BONUS EPILOGUE

BEC

“Did you see? There’s another bookshop opening. Right across the street from mine!”

“What? That can’t be right.”

“It’s true.”

“Why would the council approve that?”

“They said something like, it’s excellent for competition, and that since it falls within the arts development focus of the town, that they were excited about the guy’s application, and pushed it through the approvals process!” She mimes the mind-blown explosion at either side of her skull.

“Well, we will just march right over there and see who we’re dealing with. Best to know your enemy, right?”

“I guess. But I’m not going to be responsible for the words that come out of my mouth.”

“Me neither.”

We drive the couple of blocks to the future site of Teresa’s shop. And sure enough, there’s a construction crew erecting a chain link fence around a site right across from Teresa’s store. It’s alongside the new produce Co-Op on Main Street South,

which is the extension project to the existing three-shop Main Street we had before.

I shake my head. “Nu-uh. We’re gonna tell this guy exactly what we think.”

We watch through the windshield as a guy with longish blonde hair, who can only be described as some kind of god, spikes a sign into the ground in front of the fencing. Reaching for his tool belt, he pulls a hammer from behind his back.

Teresa gulps.

I know exactly why.

This gesture brought attention to this man’s ass, which is magnificent.

He taps the top of the sign with his tool and then steps back, giving us a clear view.

Indie Books Do It Better, it says. Underneath in brackets are the initials IBDIB.

“Well, you gotta hand it to him—he’s pretty awesome at branding,” I say. “The indie community has been waiting for something like this.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“I’m just saying, it’s smart. I’ve been paying attention as the publishing landscape has evolved, and this is an excellent next step. We want to support independent authors at the library, but often our hands are tied.

“The aggregators these books are distributed through require us to purchase expensive packages if we just want one

or two books, and it's often just not possible to get them. I'm sure things will change, but something like this, where the indie authors can sell directly to a brick-and-mortar retailer, well, that's pretty huge for them."

"Bec, do you not understand this guy is my *enemy*?"

"Is it possible it's not as black and white as that?"

"No, it isn't."

"Perhaps the competition *will* be good for both shops—you know, a rising tide lifts all boats, etcetera?"

"You know, you have a really annoying habit of always looking on the bright side. And as a lifelong pessimist, I very much resent it."

"Understood."

"So can you just try to say something awful about him?"

I watch his glowing smile as one of the crew takes his photo with the placard.

"I've got it! He's *too* good-looking, like he can't be real."

She turns to me with the evil eye. "How is *that* helpful?"

"Well, at least you have a lovely view."

"Of the man who's trying to ruin my business?"

"*Or* creating an abundant environment where everyone can be successful."

"Are you trying to make me punch you?"

"It's a real thing, Teresa! The law of abundance. You put it out there and you get it back. If you're gonna be negative, then

negative things happen. Noah's dad talks about it a lot. I believe there's something to it."

"Are you saying I manifested this guy into my life?"

"Would that be so bad?"

Teresa's gaze is captivated as the guy gives a warm, grateful hug to the tradie who snapped his photo. He's so genuinely happy. If I didn't know better, I'd say Teresa was forcing herself *not* to smile.

I, on the other hand, can't help myself. I'm a sucker for a joyful moment.

Just then, he turns, his strong, tanned hand shading his eyes under his dusty Akubra hat.

And looks right at us.

I swear Teresa grumbles something about kryptonite.

Oh, this is gonna be good.

Next Up...

Read Teresa and Archer's story in *That One Mistake*, coming May 2023.

For a free copy of Daniella's novella *Hot for the Matchmaker*, sign up for her Readers' Group by clicking

below. You'll get access to more free books, launch info, giveaways, and lots more insider bonuses.

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/8rrdlhafy4>

Copyright © 2022 by Daniella Brodsky

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.