

CRYSTAL
KASWELL



the
friend
zone
fiasco



It's just
practice...right?

AN INKED LOVE NOVEL

THE FRIEND ZONE FIASCO

CRYSTAL KASWELL

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THE FRIEND ZONE FIASCO

First Edition

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Written by Crystal Kaswell

Cover by Melody Jeffries

Also by Crystal Kaswell

Inked Love

The Best Friend Bargain - Forest

The First Taste - Holden

The Roomie Rulebook - Oliver

The Hookup Experiment - Patrick

The Friend Zone Fiasco - Dare

Inked Hearts

Tempting - Brendon

Hooking Up - Walker

Pretend You're Mine - Ryan

Hating You, Loving You - Dean

Breaking the Rules - Hunter

Losing It - Wes

Accidental Husband - Griffin

The Baby Bargain - Chase

Sinful Serenade

Sing Your Heart Out - Miles

Strum Your Heart Out - Drew

Rock Your Heart Out - Tom

Play Your Heart Out - Pete

Sinful Ever After – series sequel

Just a Taste - Miles's POV

Dangerous Noise

Dangerous Kiss - Ethan

Dangerous Crush – Kit

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Chapter One



Tenth Grade

“How many girls have you kissed?”

What? I ignore the *Friends* episode flickering on the TV and turn to Val.

She’s sitting on the leather couch, right next to me, in her usual after-school outfit—glasses, jeans, loose t-shirt. She has the same dark eyes, the same curvy figure, the same *don’t be stupid* stare.

But something else is different.

“Why?” I ask.

“We’ve been going out for two weeks.”

Not me and Val. Of course, not me and Val. We’ve been best friends since my dad moved in next door. We hang on his weekends. We text on weeknights. She helps with my math homework, and I, well—

I do things like this. I give her advice on guys.

“Dare?” She taps my shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“He’s going to want to kiss.”

“So?”

“So!” she huffs. “I’ve never kissed anyone.”

She hasn't? My heart thuds against my chest. But that's ridiculous. Of course, Val hasn't kissed anyone. She hasn't told me she's kissed anyone. And she tells me everything.

Doesn't she?

It's not like I send her play-by-plays of my liaisons (one of the American Lit vocab words for the week). I didn't even tell her when I punched my v-card.

It's just... weird talking about this with her.

"Will you help?" she asks.

"How?"

"How do you think?" She shoots me an *are you dense* look. Classic Val.

"Don't you want to kiss him first?"

"Why would I want that?" Surprise streaks over her dark eyes. To her, it's a totally absurd question.

"Cause you like him," I say.

"And all those girls you kissed... you liked them?"

"Enough to kiss them."

"Name three," she says.

I can name thirty. That's not my point. "If you like him, you should kiss him."

"Dare!" She folds her arms. "Don't be stupid."

"You don't want to kiss the guy you're dating and I'm stupid?" I'm the type to kiss and tell. She isn't. She knows that. She knows we're different.

"What if I do it wrong?"

"There isn't a wrong," I say.

"Oh, yeah, none of those eight million girls were bad kissers?"

"Guys don't think about that kinda stuff."

"None of them were bad kissers?" She raises a brow.

“A few.” Some used too much tongue. One had epic dry mouth. And there was the one girl who used so much teeth she made me bleed.

Not that I judged. See, my other friends, the ones at my school, call me Dare ‘cause “you have to dare a girl to kiss me.” The a-holes think they’re hilarious, so they dare girls to kiss me at every opportunity.

Of course, the joke is on them ‘cause I’ve kissed *a lot of* hot girls this way.

Or maybe that’s why they do it. Maybe they’re the world’s best wingmen.

“I don’t want him to think I’m a bad kisser,” she says.

“You only learn with practice.”

“Exactly.”

Oh.

“I need practice.” She undoes the band holding her ponytail, and dark locks fall all over her face.

She looks good. Feminine. Sexy even.

But that’s beyond weird. Thinking about Val as sexy? Uh-uh. No way. I don’t care how ample her chest is. I’m not going there.

“Why do you want to kiss me?” I ask. We’re just friends. We’re always only just friends.

“I trust you.”

Warmth fills my body. Val trusts me. It means something. It means everything.

She doesn’t stop to reflect. She stays on her mission. “If you don’t want to, I’ll ask Brian.”

Hell no. She’s not asking my kid brother to show her how to kiss. She’s not asking anyone else. “I can do it.”

“Really?” Relief spreads over her expression.

“Yeah, sure.” My heart thuds against my chest.

“If you don’t want to—”

I don’t wait for her to finish. I slide my arm around her waist; I pull her body into mine; I bring my lips to hers.

Val.

Valeria Diaz.

She tastes like mint ChapStick and Diet Coke and promise.

It isn’t like kissing other girls.

It’s like the fireworks on the Fourth of July. Loud and colorful and awe-inspiring.

Then she pulls back and looks at me with her usual *you’re a great friend* smile, and the entire world rearranges.

What the fuck am I doing?

“Thanks, Dare. You’re the best.” She jumps to her feet. “I’m going to call him now.”

“That was enough practice?”

“Do you think I need more?”

No. She’s perfect. “You’re a natural.”

She beams.

My heart skips.

She leaves and the feeling lingers.

I ignore it. She’s my best friend. She’s the only person *I* trust. I’m not risking that. Ever.

So I force myself to forget.

Really.

Until we kiss again.

Then...

Then I do something very stupid.

Chapter Two



Today

Thirteen Days Before the Very Stupid Thing

Houston, we've landed.

My cell flashes with Val's text. My lips curl involuntarily.

After four months in Barcelona, she's home.

I miss her.

I miss her like I miss—

There's really no comparison. Val is my best friend, my partner in crime, my other half.

If I skip coffee, I crave caffeine. If I skip whiskey, I crave a buzz. But I have options: tea, soda, beer, wine, whatever.

If I miss Val?

The guys here are barely a consolation prize.

"I see a smile." From his spot at the counter, Patrick shoots me a knowing glance. *A you want her in every way* glance.

At the moment, it's just the two of us at the shop. We're between appointments. Usually, that means an enjoyable silence. Well, an enjoyable lack of conversation, scored by whoever picked today's music. Since it's his turn, that means one of those melancholic singer-songwriters his girlfriend loved.

We're supposed to sit and work.

But now that he has a toehold, he's in full attack mode. Well, Patrick's very chill version of full attack mode. See, now that Patrick found love, he sees it everywhere. He wants it for everyone.

He doesn't understand romantic love is different for me. It's not whispered secrets and honeymoon suites. It's marriage, fighting, divorce, treating your kids as pawns in a war against your former spouse.

Better to stop before you start.

I tap a reply.

Dare: How was the flight?

Val: Long.

Dare: Like my brother's lectures?

Val: Worse.

Dare: That's possible?

Val: I didn't think it was, but here we are.

"You like her." Patrick slides onto the counter and stretches his arms over his head. Easy. Happy. Ready to torture me.

"Don't you have a client?" I shrug as if I'm unmoved by his accusation. No. I am unmoved. Val is my best friend. Of course, I like her. But I don't *like like* her. That's just ridiculous.

"You want her."

"I want coffee."

"If I buy you a coffee, will you admit the truth?"

"What truth is that?"

He laughs, amused by my response—our normal repertoire. Patrick and I have been friends for as long as Val and I have been friends. Only he's like me, too cool for school, sitting on the sidelines, laughing at everyone taking everything too seriously.

Or he was. Until he fell in love.

“How about one of those?” Patrick nods to the Keurig on the counter.

“Coffee from a pod is going to extract my secrets?”

“So you have secrets?”

I roll my eyes.

He smiles, certain. “You’re a bad poker player.”

“When have you ever played poker?” I ask.

“That’s your tell.”

“What’s your tell? Saying stupid shit?”

“Nah, that’s my default.” He shifts back to our usual *I’m dumber than you* banter, but he doesn’t drop it. “How is she?”

“How am I supposed to ask if I keep talking to you?”

“It is hard, doing two things at once.”

I nod *exactly* and turn my attention to my texts.

Dare: Heading to your mom’s house?

Val: I want to shower, then sleep, then dive into the Pacific Ocean.

Dare: In that order?

Val: It might be 3 a.m.

Dare: Call me.

Val: Wake you at 3 a.m.?

Dare: Better than waiting until ten to see you.

Val: I’ll call that bluff.

Dare: When have I ever bluffed?

Val: When you said you’d kiss Alex if I didn’t!

Dare: I would have done it.

Val: Uh-huh.

Dare: Try me.

Val: Where are we going to find him?

Dare: Instagram.

Val: So, what? We message him on Instagram, say, "remember the girl you dated for two weeks in ninth grade? Val? She needs to talk to you."

Dare: You should probably lead with the kiss.

Val: "Either Val or her best friend Darren is going to kiss you. If you're lucky..."

Dare: He'll get me.

Val: Obviously.

Patrick laughs and shakes his head *why don't you see it?*

"Aren't you here to work?" I ask.

He glances at his watch. "In ten minutes."

There are fifteen until my next appointment. Just my luck.

Most days, I'm happy to trade barbs or banter. Most days, I'm happy to linger at Inked Love for hours. This place is home as much as Val is.

But it's a different kind of home. One where I access a different part of myself. And I need the other part. The Val part.

Val: We're at the gate! Finally. I need to move.

Will she hate me if I wake her up?

Val: See you in the morning.

Dare: At 3 a.m.

Val: I'll do it.

Dare: I'm waiting.

The bell rings, stealing my attention. My client. She's early.

Perfect.

She asks for the bathroom and slips away, leaving Patrick far too long to attempt to torture me.

“Do we need to look at this again?” He holds up his cell phone to reveal Val’s Instagram. A picture of Val on the beach, in Barcelona, specifically. In a very skimpy string bikini.

And, sure, yeah, objectively speaking, she looks good. But there’s no reason to linger over the image. Val is Val. I love her, whether she’s a dork with a ponytail and braces or a knockout with curves in all the right places.

(She’s still a dork, even if she can now pass for a plus-size model).

“Keep it for your spank bank,” I say.

“Really? You don’t mind me spankin’ it to your bestie?”

“It’s a free country.”

“Uh-huh.” He shoots me a *get real* look. One of his signatures. Only his green eyes are sparkling with teasing energy. (Really, sparkling, like a vampire in a cheesy teen romance). “And you don’t say that just because you know I’m saving my juice for Imogen.”

“TMI.”

“Since when is there a TMI here?”

“Since you referred to your juice.”

He laughs. “You haven’t *really* looked at it.”

“Your juice?”

“The picture of Val. Or the others.”

“I looked,” I say.

“Oh, yeah? Used it last night to take the edge off?”

I roll my eyes.

He smiles, still certain.

“Why do you care?”

“I care about my friends,” he says.

“You care about torturing your friends.”

“That’s care,” he says.

The bathroom door swings open. My client emerges. An out from this conversation. Finally.

I need the distraction anyway. There's too much energy buzzing in my body. All the anticipation of seeing Val. Four months of anticipation.

Patrick's stupid assertion fades as I slip into the zone. Chitchat, ink to skin, aftercare, checkout. Another appointment. The rhythm of the day.

Gym, dinner, shower.

A nagging voice in my head. *What if he's right? What if the image does belong in your spank bank?*

No way. Patrick is never right.

And I can prove it.

I pull up Val's social media and look at that photo of her on the beach.

The joy in her eyes (she loves the beach), the wavy hair falling over her shoulders, the white bikini struggling to cover her ample chest.

She's gorgeous.

And I'm hard.

But that doesn't mean anything.

This is because of the format. The photo. My body responding to an abstract image. An image that barely resembles my best friend.

Sure. Her smile is radiant and sassy and completely the Val I know.

But that doesn't mean anything.

We're just friends.

Everything is the same.

No problem.

Chapter Three



Huge problem.

And I mean huge.

Okay, maybe not *huge*. Maybe more *average to slightly above average*. But women don't actually want a jackrabbit with eleven inches.

That's painful. Porn is BS. Mainstream porn anyway. People believe it because they want to believe it. But then, that's true of anything. And I'm not exactly an expert.

I can't stomach the mainstream stuff. Too much like Dad's *Playboys*.

Those images should be burned into my brain since he handed me his stack of magazines the day I turned thirteen. "*You're a man now, Darren, so it's time for you to enjoy the perks of the male libido.*" His version of "the talk." But they make me think of him, and there's nothing less sexy than a pathetic, divorced dude who treats women like shit.

But, hey, I need release *now*, and beggars can't be choosers.

I find my phone to pull up something, anything, that will do the job before Val arrives.

The device buzzes on my dresser.

Val: Parked. Two minutes. If you're still asleep, I'll let myself in.

Two minutes?

How did she get here so fast?

I can do a lot, but I can't finish, clean up, and collect myself in under two minutes.

Deep breath.

Slow exhale.

Unsexy thoughts.

Dad's girlfriend crying in her car after catching him cheating. My kid brother, Brian, crying in his closet because he didn't want to spend entire weekends with Dad, at a new house, in a new area, surrounded by his bachelor pad bullshit.

Val, sitting under the tree next door, crying because her parents fought again.

She was going through the same thing. An ugly divorce. Only she was a few years ahead of me—her parents had been divorced awhile—and she knew how to guide me through it.

There were other kids at my school who channeled their anger into drugs, booze, petty crime.

With Val's help, I knew how to work through mine.

She didn't just teach me algebra. She saved me.

Beautiful, smart, tough as nails Val.

She can't see me in this state.

Dare: You know I sleep in the nude.

Val: You do not.

Dare: Wanna find out?

What if she says yes?

What if she comes in here and finds me with my hard dick poking out of my boxers?

It's not nude but it's close enough.

Val: Sixty seconds. Get dressed. In a swimsuit. I meant what I said about the ocean.

Dare: It's freezing.

That's exactly what I need. Frigid water to send blood away from sensitive places.

Val: The water is sixty-seven degrees.

At least it's not sixty-nine degrees.

Dare: I gotta find my suit.

Val: I warned you.

Dare: Walk into my bedroom if you wanna see my dick.

I swallow hard.

She doesn't usually call my bluffs. But she might. She—
Shit.

One more time, I channel the least sexy image I can muster. It's the same thing it always is: one of dad's girlfriends asking if he ever loved her, him saying "you really think I'd let a woman like you be my kids' stepmom?", her crying all the way to her car.

She was a sweet woman. Young and uneducated, sure, but it's not like he has a PhD.

There.

My dick doesn't deflate, but it settles enough I find board shorts and a sweatshirt. An extra-long sweatshirt. Just in case.

Val gives me two minutes, then she knocks. "Are you decent?"

"When have I ever been decent?"

"I'll take that as a yes." She unlocks the door and steps inside.

Even in the fluorescent light, she's gorgeous. She's unmistakably Val—the same dark eyes, the same round chin, the same wicked smile—but she's different too.

She's wearing shorts with her bikini top.

Tiny shorts that hug her lush hips. A tiny bikini top that invites vivid mental images.

“You’re supposed to greet me with a hug.” She brushes a wavy lock behind her ear. “At least say, ‘I love your haircut.’”

“It looks great.”

She takes a step toward me.

I try, hard, to keep my eyes on hers, but my eyes refuse. They trace another line down her body, studying every single curve.

‘Cause I’m an artist. We study the human figure and turn it into a series of lines. That’s why I’m fascinated by the shape of her hips. Not for any sort of untoward reason.

“Dare.” She takes another step toward me. “You’re making me self-conscious.”

“You look great.”

“Not too much?” she asks.

“Too what?”

“The swimsuit?” She snaps the halter strap.

My head immediately finishes the scenario—her, undoing the strap, tossing the bikini top on the floor, and climbing into my lap.

Not sure how she climbs into my lap when we’re both standing. But I don’t picture the, uh, more physically plausible scenario. I don’t imagine her pretty lips around my—

‘Cause that’s just not—

Is she wearing lipstick?

I’m absolutely, positively not picturing it on my—

Get ahold of yourself, Dickson. (Yeah, my name is Darren Dickson. But at least it’s honest. I’m the son of a massive prick).

“What about it?” I close my eyes, but that’s too obvious. I don’t want her to think I’m avoiding looking at her, so I stretch my arms over my head and let out a yawn.

“Were you sleeping?” she asks.

“Who can sleep when they’re anticipating their best friend’s return?”

She smiles, the Val I know, only with the poise and body of a confident knockout.

Don’t get me wrong. Val has always been confident about her brains. But her body?

We were teenagers when we met. I’m oblivious, but I’m not that oblivious. Most teenage girls harbor a few insecurities. Val doesn’t exactly fit into the Los Angeles ideal (a more subtle take on the *Playboy* playmate. “Natural” light hair, trim waist, large saline breasts but not so large they’re obviously fake).

She’s always been cute, but she’s never been thin. She doesn’t talk about it much now, but she went through phases where she was sure guys wouldn’t like her because she’s bigger. (Which is ridiculous. She’s got fantastic tits. Not that I notice).

“You look sleepy,” she says.

“It’s five a.m.”

“I gave you two extra hours.”

“Get your sassy ass over here.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She practically skips to me.

I catch her in an embrace. It’s the same embrace I normally offer her. A tight hug. A hug I reserve solely for Val.

For a moment, it feels normal. My best friend, in my arms. The smell of her citrus shampoo in my nostrils. The familiar sound of her breath.

The softness of her chest against mine, her hips against mine, her lips inches from my neck.

Red alert. The flag is flying in 5, 4, 3, 2—

I release her, turn, force another yawn. “You want something to drink?”

“At five a.m.?”

“Isn’t that time for after-dinner drinks in Spain?”

She lets out a low groan. “Not far from it.”

“Poor, baby.”

“I can’t wait to eat dinner at six for once,” she says. “Or maybe even five.”

“Live a little, yeah.”

She laughs as she flips me off.

I move toward the kitchen. Caffeine isn’t a great idea—I’m wired already—but I need a distraction. “Coffee?”

“You’re going to make coffee?”

“I was taught by the best.”

“That is true.” She lets out a low yawn. “Can I steal a sip?”

I shoot her an *obviously* look.

She smiles, comfortable, happy, content, and we settle into our usual routine, fixing coffee together.

We’re home.

She’s home.

After I fill the French press, she rests her head on my shoulder. “I might fall asleep here.”

I motion to the coffee. I try to ignore how good she feels.

“Even so.”

“Take the bed,” I say.

“Not until I dip.”

“How are you going to fall asleep after that wake-up call?”

“A nine-hour time difference.”

I laugh.

“You’ll be the one suffering next week.”

“I know.”

“You excited?” she asks.

“To drink gin and tonics in Barcelona?”

“They call them gin tonics there.”

“I sound like a tourist?” I ask.

She nods. “I think your lack of Spanish will give that away.”

I tried, really. It never took. “I can’t wait to see your room.” Say, the sheets on the bed, the underwear in her drawer. Ahem. “Do you have a One Direction poster there too?”

“Dare!”

“It hung for three months.”

“You swore silence,” she says.

“Who’s here?”

“That’s secrecy, not silence.”

“Which of the guys is the hottest, you think?” I try to remember their names. One starts with a Z, and there’s a guy with a pretty normal name too. Harry, maybe?

“Please. You listen to Michelle Branch more than I do.”

“Cause she’s hot.”

“Oh, yeah, I bet that really comes through.”

“Hot voice.”

“Uh-huh.” She shakes her head with a smile. A Val kind of smile. An *I love you as a friend, my ridiculous best friend* smile.

Only there’s something else in it, something I can’t place.

The timer beeps. I pour the coffee into a thermos and offer my hand.

She takes it.

We head into the dark street, hand in hand.

The same as always.

Except, no matter how hard I try to think unsexy thoughts,
I keep picturing her bikini top on the floor.

Chapter Four



I need your help with the area most in your expertise—Sex.
Casual sex.

I need to get laid.

And I know you know how to help.

I need to say it fast. All at once. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

But, hey, I'm not too fond of the Band-Aid metaphor. Because what if this is a Band-Aid? It's not going to do anything to stop the bleeding.

My medical knowledge should be better with my future career as a brain scientist. I'm about to start a PhD with a focus in the neuro-biology of story. Only my undergraduate education is all on the narrative side of things.

IS THERE ANYTHING BETTER THAN LOSING YOURSELF IN A book, falling into the pages, coming out better and smarter, and more content?

Stories are magic. They teach us how to struggle, how to survive, how to love.

Not that I know how to love.

No, no. I may watch classic romantic comedies on repeat, but I never really believe them.

Roses wilt.

Silk wrinkles.

Champagne goes flat.

Love is bullshit. The typical Hollywood idea of it, anyway.

“You there, Val?” Dare nudges me with his entire body.

And it feels good. Too good. Warm and safe and butterfly inducing.

For three years, we’ve avoided the topic of sex and all the ways it complicated our relationship.

Will we survive tackling it head-on?

I can’t lose Dare. I can’t. He’s still the only guy I trust, the only guy I’ve ever trusted.

And, yes, maybe I don’t put much stock in romantic love. But platonic love? Friendship? That’s everything. (See: *The Shawshank Redemption*).

Unfortunately, there aren’t many movies about sex. Not really. There’s porn, sure. There are documentaries about the history of sex or the bio-mechanics of sex or the sexual norms in various countries.

But movies about women overcoming their well-earned hang-ups to find fulfilling sex lives?

There’s nothing on my list.

“Val?” he asks again. “Do I need to take you home and put you to bed?”

“Just thinking.” I’m too in my head again. I take a deep breath and focus on my surroundings. The dimly lit streets of the residential part of Santa Monica. Big houses, wide streets, large lawns, Teslas as far as the eye can see. So much like the Los Angeles suburb where we grew up, only closer to the beach.

“About...”

I cross the quiet street and step onto the sidewalk. “Movies.”

“Shocker.” Dare lets out his usual low, easy chuckle. The one he only shares with me.

Yes, he plays cool with most people. He chuckles at most things. But the way he laughs with me is different. More honest.

We’re honest with each other.

We can discuss this.

We can.

“What did you watch on the plane?” he asks. “No. Wait. Let me guess.”

“Go ahead.”

“*Casablanca*.”

Am I that obvious? “Maybe.”

He smiles *I knew it*. “How many times is that?”

“Enough times.”

His smile widens.

“Everyone loves *Casablanca*.” Seriously, it’s the most iconic movie of all time.

“Ask at the shop. You’ll get a different answer.”

“You love it too.”

“Only ‘cause you love it.”

My chest warms. There’s so much affection in his voice. I missed it. I need it. I can’t risk losing it. “That’s the opinion that matters,” I say.

He looks both ways at the next street, takes my hand, leads me across the pavement. “How many movies did you watch?”

“Three,” I say.

“Comedies?”

“It’s not Twenty Questions. You said you’d guess.”

He nods *fair*. “Were they all filmed before 1965?”

“Dare!”

His fingers brush mine as he takes the thermos and sips. “That’s a no. Hmm. Something modern. Something weird, I bet.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Means you’re a freak.”

“And you’re not?”

“Oh no. I’m a super-freak.” Intent drops into his voice.

Or maybe I’m imagining that. Maybe, now that I’m dealing with my issues head-on, I see sex everywhere.

And let’s face it, Dare is sexy.

He’s not my idea of sexy. He’s never been my idea of sexy. Conventionally attractive? Absolutely. With the dark hair and dark eyes and inked muscles, he’s a bad boy wet dream.

See. Look at me.

Saying sexy things.

In my head, sure. About my best friend, sure.

But it’s effort.

The point is, even though Dare is extremely conventionally attractive, he’s not attractive *to* me. He’s my best friend. That trumps everything.

“How are you a freak?” I try to keep my voice neutral, but it feels loaded too. Like I’m asking him to list his kinks.

“I’m afraid those records are sealed.” He takes a long sip, shifting away from the sexual energy (or maybe I’m imagining that too) and into the film guessing energy. “*Josie and the Pussycats*.”

“Okay, how did you know that?” Seriously, that is way out of left field.

“I know you.”

Maybe.

“And the last... well, that’s a gimme. *Sabrina*.”

“Guilty.”

“Why do you love *Sabrina* so much anyway?” he asks.

“Did you need to hear this the three-hundredth time to understand?”

“Five-hundredth.”

I flip him off.

He laughs and leads me across another street.

“What isn’t to love? *Sabrina* is a hopeless romantic,” I say.

“And you relate to this how?”

I appreciate her passion. “She stays true to herself.”

“And you get to see the heartless, evil brother won over by her charms?”

I clear my throat.

“Your secret wish?”

Not exactly. Not anymore. But right after the divorce? I wanted, so badly, for someone to rescue me from my own ugly thoughts. To show me the magic in the world solely by existing as themselves.

“And Sabrina is the ugly duckling—”

“Oh, yeah, Audrey Hepburn is hideous.” Is *Sabrina* the original *let’s pretend a gorgeous actress is ugly because she wears her hair in a ponytail* movie or were there earlier incarnations?

“And she comes back from Europe a sophisticated babe.”

“She was always a babe.”

“But she didn’t have the style.” His eyes flit to my chest.

My swimsuit, I guess. I did go to Europe and come back with a more sophisticated look. Well, maybe not sophisticated, exactly, but stylish and sexy. The bikini is an especially sexy pick. I usually prefer much less revealing attire.

This is part of my healing. Dressing in clothes that make me feel good. Clothes that show off my body.

But I don't want to talk about that. Not really.

Why is he staring?

Is it that surprising I'm capable of wearing a triangle top to the beach?

Sure, it's rather skimpy, but that's the life of the well-endowed woman. Unless we buy a sixty-dollar bra-sized swimsuit, we're showing a lot of boob. And even then, we're showing a decent amount of boob.

Dare doesn't comment on my chest. He rubs my upper arm with his hand. "You're shivering."

Am I?

He shakes his head and pulls his sweatshirt over his head. "Here."

"Really, Dare—"

"I'm not gonna wear it. You might as well." He hands me the sweatshirt.

"I'll just hold it then."

"Uh-huh."

For three blocks, he calls my bluff. When we get to Ocean Avenue, I give in. I slip into the sweatshirt. I let the soft fabric envelop my body. I let the familiar scent fill my nostrils.

Cotton and laundry detergent and Dare.

The scent of him isn't sexual, but it's visceral all the same. Safety, home, love. All straight into my body.

I move closer.

We walk in time, talking about nothing as we find the bridge over PCH, walk the beachfront sidewalk, brave the sand.

We slow as we approach the water.

He shoots me an *are you sure about this* look?

I return my own *of course, don't be ridiculous*.

Our routine. Whenever we do this.

I slip out of his sweatshirt. Then my shorts and shoes.

He kicks off his sandals.

I take his hand.

And, together, we run into the Pacific.

Without the heat of the sun, the water is freezing, but that feels good too.

Familiar and safe and dangerous all at once.

A ceremony with my best friend. Maybe my *last* ceremony with my best friend if this screws everything up.

I soak in every drop of salt water. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach, the reflection of the moon, the deep midnight blue hue of the ocean.

The feeling of cold water enveloping me.

The Pacific in all its glory. Peaceful at a glance (that's what pacific means, after all), but ready to unleash a torrent of power.

And the people who underestimate its force—

Well, we all know how those stories end.

Dare has to drag me out of the water.

We both forgot to bring towels, so we fight over who gets his sweatshirt (I lose and take it, of course), and we run back toward home.

I let the sounds of the ocean fill my head. I channel every drop of its power.

And then, right as we pass the still-empty Third Street Promenade, I say it, "I have to ask a favor."

Chapter Five



Fuck me.

Right now.

Let's go back to your place, strip in the shower, do it against the tile wall?

Ridiculous on every level. On levels invisible to the human eye and inaudible to the human ear. And, yeah, I'm pretty sure the science doesn't check out there, but the point stands.

There's no way Val is about to say *I realized I'm madly in love with you. Let's go back to your place and celebrate by removing the rest of our clothes.*

My reasoning evaporates as Val's eyes meet mine. There's intent in her dark eyes. Enough to overshadow her nerves. Almost.

"I, uh..." She plays with the fabric of my sweatshirt. "I want Philz and they won't let you in without a shirt, so I need you to put this on." She pulls off the sweatshirt.

My eyes go to her chest reflexively.

When did she develop those? Sure, I remember the rise of Val's, uh, peaks, but she never looked like this.

She's a centerfold. She's a million times more gorgeous than a centerfold. She's not a manufactured image of the ideal blonde bimbo (I can say it because I'm a bimbo too). She's real.

Curvy and tall, with a wicked smile instead of a come-hither one.

She pushes the hoodie into my hands.

“And you?” I ask.

“A bikini top is a shirt.”

It’s not like the employees are going to argue. Not the straight men, anyway.

Like them, I can’t seem to verbalize an objection. I want to see her in this. In less. In my bed in nothing.

Ahem.

She motions to the coffee shop, currently empty except for two twenty-something guys behind the counter. “Shall we?”

We probably should. There’s nothing else open. There aren’t any other signs of life on the quiet street. No yellow lights in the other stores, no one walking along the sidewalk, no cars circling for a space. “After you.” I open the door for her.

She steps inside the shop. “Thank you.”

“You really need coffee this minute?”

“Of course.”

“We’re soaking wet,” I say.

“We’ll take it to go.”

“They make pour-overs,” I say.

“I’ll meet you at your place if you don’t want to wait.”

I should say yes. I should race to my apartment, rub one out in the shower, spend enough time under the running water to find some hint of sense.

I don’t.

“When have I ever turned down coffee?” I ask.

“When have you ever shown an interest in coffee?”

“Junior year,” I say.

“Because I decided to investigate dark roast beans.”

“And I volunteered as your taste tester.” It meant a lot of free, high-quality coffee. And I got to help Val. Win-win.

She doesn't argue. She goes to the counter and orders a dark blend with a touch of cream and sugar.

I request the same.

Val shoots me a knowing look as we move to the register.

I pay.

She doesn't fight me on it. She moves to a low table next to the wide window and slides onto one of the hip metal chairs. “How tired are you?”

Don't look at her chest.

Don't look at her, period. She's sitting. I'm standing. It's far too easy to take this visual to other places. Out of the question places.

Better to look at the street outside. The dark blue hue of the sky. The empty sidewalk. Hey, see, there's a car driving down Santa Monica Blvd. Look at that.

“You're out of it.” Her soft voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

My eyes go straight to her. Somehow, I manage to keep my gaze above her neck. “You woke me up.”

“Is that it?”

No. “Yeah.”

“Is everything okay with Brian?”

My kid brother. “He's good.” My kid brother is at Cal State Northridge. Maybe it's not up to Diaz standards, but it's damn good for a Dickson (I humored Mom with an associate's degree from Santa Monica Community College). “He'd be better if you said hi.”

“He's at your dad's?”

“He crashes with me some weekends.”

“Oh, yeah?” She smiles. “You and Bri, staying up late, talking about girls.”

“How’d you know?”

“So he’s my replacement?”

“Nah. You smell better.”

She laughs.

“And better taste in movies.”

“And he makes you listen to metal,” she says.

“Nu-metal.”

“What makes it ‘nu’?”

“Not quality,” I say.

She smiles. “Is he seeing anyone?”

“Not that I know about.”

“Are you?”

“I’d tell you.”

“Would you?” she asks.

It’s a fair question. We haven’t talked about relationships much over the last three years. Not that my flings qualify as relationships.

It’s not that I’m some sort of slut—I don’t sleep with all the women I date. Just that I know what everyone wants from me:

Fun.

Val is the only person who’s ever seen me as capable of more than a good time.

And right now—

I need to channel the more, move this conversation to any other topic. Because relationships involve sex, and my dick is way too excited to hear her talk about sex.

In any context.

Even the time I brought out a cucumber to demonstrate proper hand job technique. (Women always think they need to be gentle, for some reason. They don't).

Maybe that's it.

Maybe she wants another demonstration.

Only live this time.

Say, how to give a hand job in the bathroom.

Right now.

No. That's ridiculous. What twenty-something goes around giving hand jobs?

And Val doesn't need—

We're not—

“Valeria.” The barista butchers her name. Ridiculous—this used to be Mexico—but I can't curse the man.

Her eye roll saves me from my dirty thoughts.

I offer my hand. When she takes it, I pull her to her feet and lead her to the counter.

The barista passes our drinks. Hers is perfect. I ask for more cream and sugar.

She smiles *called it*.

Some of my friends live and breathe coffee. They need the best roast every time they so much as sip java.

Val enjoys the ritual. She loves the dark, bitter brew. I love the bite of the beans, the warmth, the robust flavor.

But I need the mix of sweet and bitter.

The best combo in a drink or a life.

Like my relationship with Val. Our friendship is all sweet. Knowing she's destined to outgrow me?

Not so much.

But that, too, is life. She's smart, educated, witty, gorgeous. And I'm a lot of things—conventionally attractive,

charming (in my own way), funny, successful, and absolutely not the kind of guy who stays in her life forever.

Did you ever hear the one about the PhD student and the tattoo artist?

Me neither.

SOMEHOW, I PUT MY THOUGHTS IN LINE FOR LONG ENOUGH TO walk Val to my place.

I let her take the first shower.

I try to ignore the way my blood races as she steps out of the bathroom in only a tiny blue towel.

I slip into the space after her. I run the water cold. Then hot. Then cold again.

But the low temperature isn't enough to send blood where it belongs. So I close my eyes, and I let my thoughts go to places they shouldn't.

Her towel on the floor.

Her body in my bed.

Her groans against my neck.

The images form too easily. My body responds too quickly. I want her too badly.

My grunts dissolve in the water. I tell myself it's someone else. I tell myself I don't hear her name on my lips.

I don't believe it for a second.

Chapter Six



DARE

Val convinces me to take a catnap. Despite my best efforts, said nap lasts three hours.

The sun wakes me. It has two modes here, cloudy beach morning and blazing. We're far enough into the day we're at blazing.

I rise, I wash, I wait for my hard-on to recede. Morning wood. Normal. And even if it wasn't normal—

My body responds to her body. I concede the point.

What difference does that make? Even if I did like her, if I realized I was madly in love with her, what would that change?

Nothing.

And even if it did change something, changed everything, now isn't the time.

We're about to spend two weeks in Europe together. And I'm not about to ruin that by confessing my desire to see her come.

So I want to see my best friend come?

So what.

I can get over it.

In theory.

But just in case, I hide out in the bathroom, rub one out in the shower, wash up. What it takes to get my head on straight.

When I move into the kitchen, Val is sitting on the couch, reading on her Kindle, sipping coffee from an Inked Love mug (looking adorable in my Inked Love t-shirt and a pair of my boxers. Too adorable. Like she belongs in them).

“Morning, sleepyhead.” She looks to the clock. “Almost afternoon.”

“You could have woken me.”

“You looked cute.” Her eyes flit to her Kindle. “Besides, you need the sleep bank. You’ll be lacking for a while.”

“Oh, yeah? We’re hitting the clubs every night.” On our trip to Barcelona. Together. The two of us, touring her favorite city, making use of the pre-paid rent on her apartment.

“Maybe.” She looks up at me like she’s going to say something important, then she shakes her head and takes a long sip of coffee. “Are there clubs in Barcelona?”

“There are clubs everywhere,” I say.

“In Santa Monica?”

“Bars with dancing.”

“That’s not a club,” she says.

“You want to argue? Or you want to pick the music for the party?”

“I can’t let you pick the music.” She stands and stretches her arms over her head, pulling the fabric of her t-shirt (well, my t-shirt) up her torso, exposing the tan skin of her stomach. “I already listened to Vanessa Carlton today.”

“When?”

She laughs. “On the flight.”

“You did not,” I say.

“Really. She’s on my bad-ass-ladies playlist.”

“Your one playlist?”

“Who needs variety when you know what you want?”

I swallow hard. This can't be what I want. It just can't.

She rights her top, drops her Kindle on the couch, moves to the kitchen portion of the main room. “What's that look?”

“The party.”

“What about it?”

“We can cancel—”

“And miss you and Patrick trying to one-up each other? Never.”

“He's dating someone now,” I say.

“Is it serious?”

“I think so.”

“What's she like?” she asks.

“Like you,” I say.

“A lover of classic film?”

She is, oddly enough. He talks about her a lot. Too much. I don't catch every detail. Only the ones that make me think of Val. “Smart,” I say.

“That's my defining trait?”

Smart and gorgeous. “You prefer cynical?”

“Realistic.”

“Pessimistic,” I offer.

“Realistic.” She holds firm.

“Witty?”

“I'll take witty. But what about you?” She turns to me. “Suggestions?”

How would I describe myself to a stranger? I work hard, sure. I'm a good friend. Mostly. I care about the world. But I don't shine the way she does. I'm not destined for great things. “Handsome.”

She laughs. “*V-a-i-n.*”

“What was that? You know I can’t spell.”

“You’re not, actually.” She shoots me a knowing look. “I don’t know why you pretend.”

“I’m not handsome?”

“Obsessed with how you look.” She moves toward me. “Except for this.” She traces the tattoo on my biceps. My first. The tree in her yard, the place where we always sat as kids, where we traded tears and hugs and secrets. “You are obsessed with these.”

“That’s my job.”

She looks up at me—she’s only a few inches shorter, but it’s enough. “It’s funny. I can barely remember you before the ink. It’s like you were waiting for it all that time.”

“When I was thirteen?”

She nods.

“Is that a compliment?”

“You know you look good.”

“I like to hear it,” I say.

She smiles, but this time, I can’t place it. “What do I have to do?”

“Huh?”

“To get ready for the party?”

Right. No time to stare at her tits (not that I can see much with the baggy tee). Time for tactical retreat. “I set up here. You get snacks and drinks.”

“Anything I want?”

“Go wild.”

“Oh my god, an American grocery store for the first time in four months.” She lets out a loud sigh. “What a treat. Thanks, Dare.”

She moves into the bedroom and returns in a sexy-as-sin sundress. Some blue number that shows off her perfect cleavage and allows *very* easy access to her lush thighs.

Not that I think about diving between her thighs.

Not that I think about dying between her thighs.

Nothing like that.

“Can we talk?” she asks. “After the party.”

“We can always talk.”

“But this, uh... it’s something important I have to ask you.”

Fuck me. Let’s go, right now. I’ll be ready in three seconds, flat. Two. One—“We can talk now.”

“I’d rather talk later, if that’s okay.”

“Is it a big deal?”

“I don’t think so. But you might.”

So it is a big deal. Which means my dick needs to calm the fuck down. “Okay. We’ll talk tonight.”

Relief fills her eyes. Her shoulders drop. Her lips curl into a smile.

She hugs me goodbye (I make sure it’s one of those chest-only hugs) and leaves, and I spend an hour turning over her words.

There’s no way she’s about to say *let’s spend our two weeks together in bed*.

But what else could she possibly have to tell me?

FOR AN HOUR AND A HALF, I SET UP IN THE COURTYARD. I hang streamers, I drape towels, I arrange lounge chairs.

The place is nearly perfect when Luna arrives to help finish the preparation.

Like Patrick, Luna works at Inked Love (she's our admin for the summer). Like Patrick, she's certain I'm madly in love with Val. And, for some reason, my usual argument *that's ridiculous* feels as hollow as the chest cavity where my heart is supposed to be.

"So..." She meets me at the cooler carrying a massive bag of ice. "Where's Val?"

"Picking up stuff."

"You sent her away?" She frowns and brushes a silver-blond strand behind her ear. She's in one of her typical cool girl outfits. High-waist jean shorts. Crop top over her bright bikini. Chucks. Enormous sunglasses.

"She wanted to pick snacks."

"And you couldn't do it together?" she asks.

"You want to help with the party or gossip?"

"That's a stupid question." She fills the cooler with ice and a twelve-pack of sparkling water (her boyfriend is a recovering alcoholic) and slips onto a lounge chair. "You're basically ready."

I can't argue with that.

"So..." She raises a brow. "When did she arrive?"

"Last night."

"When did she get here?" she asks.

"Five a.m."

"She couldn't wait to see you?" She presses her hand to her chest and lets out a dreamy sigh. It's *very* unlike her. But, hey, love makes fools—or assholes—of us all.

"We have a ritual."

"Oh?"

"What do you want?" I ask.

She motions to the chair next to her. "Come on. Sit. Talk. Let me advise you."

“How will you do that?”

“You like her.”

No comment.

“Oh my god, Dare! You didn’t deny it.”

“Cause you’re a broken record,” I say.

“Okay, okay. But allow me a hypothetical.”

“You’re way off base,” I say.

She shakes her head.

“She wants to tell me something.”

“That she’s in love with you!”

“Really? You think that could wait?” I ask.

“She’s probably nervous! You’ve been friends for so long. How can she risk that? She loves you that much. How romantic.”

“You’re going to make me throw up,” I say.

“Are you drinking this early?”

I shoot her a look.

“You’re scared.”

“It’s probably a guy.”

“A boyfriend?”

“Yeah.” Which isn’t a big deal. She dated a guy junior year. I was a little worried about her, sure, but I was never jealous, not of their romance.

His ability to see her every day, keep up with her intellectually, sleep in her room?

That, sure.

But not their kissing. Or touching. Or fucking.

It’s not like I imagined I was the one in her bed, with my hand up her shirt and her lips on my neck.

Fuck.

“Oh my god.” Luna laughs. “You have it so bad.”

“I do not.”

“You’re thinking about her right now.”

“How do you figure?”

“I know the look of a man in need.”

“Oh?” I raise a brow. “Something I should ask your boyfriend.”

She smiles with pride. “Ask all you want. He won’t tell you.”

“Will you?”

“I enjoy making him wait.”

“Orgasm denial kink?”

“Not denial,” she says. “Just... dragging out the pleasure.”

She’s not usually this upfront with me, especially about sex.

Don’t get me wrong. We’re friends. But we have a pretty typical male/female friendship. Despite the general level of horniness at Inked Love, Luna and I rarely discuss sex in specific terms.

There’s a weirdness to it.

Because there might be an implication she wants me. Or I want her.

I don’t.

And I’m pretty sure she doesn’t.

But now she’s not worried because she knows I want Val.

“What were you picturing?” she asks. “Sex in the pool?”

I shoot her a *really* look.

“It doesn’t work, you know. The water washes away the friction.”

“You think this is my first rodeo?”

“You’ve had sex in a pool?” she asks.

A memory fills my mind. A woman I dated for a few months in high school. She was aggressive and pretty. Thin and blonde. Sorta like Luna, only shorter, less muscular.

Then I blink and the image shifts to Val. Tall, curvy, dark-haired, dark-eyed, tan, gorgeous Val, naked in the pool, motioning *come here*.

Not. Going. There. “No comment.”

“How?” She arches a brow. “No offense, Dare, but have you ever been in a monogamous relationship?”

“A long time ago.”

“Was that when you did it?” she asks.

“What’s it matter?”

“You need oil-based lube to make it work. And oil-based lube can cause tears in latex.”

“Thanks, Dr. Ruth,” I say. Seriously, I’m not an idiot. Not anymore. I know how condoms work. Water-based lube only. And water washes away water-based lube. This is 101 shit. “We didn’t finish there.”

“So, what, you started in the pool and...”

“Do you need a play-by-play?” I ask.

“Sure. A few mental images will make my afternoon more fun.”

No. Any additional mental images will make *my* afternoon torture. “So you can think of me when you screw your boyfriend?” I ask.

“How’d you know?” She laughs. “Should I tell him how much I want you now or when he gets here?”

I call her bluff. “Depends on whether or not you want to suggest a threesome.”

This time, Luna laughs with a tone that says *that’s so absurd I can’t even imagine it*. She shakes her head *no way*

and shifts back to the topic at hand. “How did the pool sex go?”

“We took it to the pool house.”

“You dated a girl with a pool house?”

I nod.

“Before or after the tattoos?”

“I was seventeen.”

“So, after most of them.”

Some of them. “Didn’t you have a point?” I ask.

“I did, didn’t I?” She studies me. “Val. What were you picturing with her?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

I don’t have a comeback. “None of your business.”

“Do you want to play the who’s more stubborn game? I’m good at it,” she says.

She is. Even so, I shrug.

She shrugs too. Settles into her chair. Waits. “Clothes on or off?”

“Whose clothes?”

“Hers?”

“Some on. Some off.” Denim shorts on. The bikini top off. Fuck, the thought of Val in only denim shorts—

“Go on,” she says.

No. I’m too far gone already. I see it vividly—Val in my lap, in only her denim shorts, her legs wrapped around my waist, her perfect tits in my hands as I slip my tongue into her mouth. “We were making out, that’s it,” I say. “Not that exciting.” I’m not excited. There is blood left in my brain. If I say it enough times, I might believe it.

“Aw, that’s sweet. You like her so much you want to make out.”

Is it really sweet to want to tease someone until they beg for your dick? I’ve never heard that take.

I close my eyes and channel unsexy thoughts. The guy who lives next door who plays some shooter game way too loud. He’s annoying. That’s not hot.

Okay. There. I can speak. “I want her, yeah, but that’s it.”

Luna doesn’t accept the suggestion we end the conversation. She makes a *yeah right* noise, sits up a little straighter, removes her sunglasses, and looks me dead in the eyes. “Let’s do a hypothetical.”

“Why?” I ask.

“How about this? If you do it, I’ll drop it.”

Fine. I need her to drop it. “Swear on something.”

“I swear on my love of Billie Eilish.” She offers her hand. After we shake, she continues. “Okay, close your eyes.”

I do.

“I know you’re going to object, but try it first.”

“Fine.”

“Picture yourself in a suit.”

“Why would I wear a suit?”

“Dare!”

“What color?”

“Darren Dickson!”

A laugh spills from my lips. It’s fun to rile Luna. And it’s got nothing to do with whether or not I want to screw Val. Which makes it exactly what I need.

But this isn’t about sex either. I’m in clothes. No sex there.

I let the image form. The suit I wore to Brian’s graduation.

“I rock navy,” I say.

She makes a *so-so* noise and continues, “You’re standing on the sand, next to your brother and Tricky, of course.”

There’s a picture of Brian and I in suits at Mom’s house. Something from dinner after his graduation. But Tricky? I can’t picture him in summer wool. Only his usual leather jacket and jeans getup.

“You’re nervous but you’re excited. Then music starts and you just feel it. *She’s here*. And you see her. Radiant in a white dress, smiling the stupidest, happiest smile in the history of the world.”

That explains the suits. But it’s ridiculous. A fantasy. “This is your vision of weddings?”

“Who is it?”

“Nobody. I’d never get married.”

“Never?” she asks.

“Yeah, never. I thought you’d get that. If you want to do this, pick another scenario,” I say.

She softens as she studies me. “This is a big thing for you.”

“Luna!”

“Okay, okay. Give me a second.” She taps her chin, thinking. “I got it. Eyes closed.”

I close them.

“Imagine you’re in a beautiful hotel room. It’s nice, way nicer than where you usually stay. Sheer white curtains, soft breeze, smooth sheets.”

“This sounds like the start of a porno.” I’ve done a lot, but I’ve never recorded myself, alone or with someone. If I did, I would keep it classy. Sheer white is a nice look.

“I thought you didn’t watch porn.”

“I don’t watch mainstream porn,” I say.

“It’s tasteful. Like your indie porn.”

“Do you watch porn?” No. I can’t do this vision game anymore. I need to distract her. I need to move on to a different topic.

“Dare!”

“Do you?” I ask.

“Occasionally.”

“You like it? Really?” I ask.

“Darren Dickson.”

Okay, fine, I get it. She’s not distractable. I have to play along and give her shit about this later. “Go on.”

“Where was I?”

“A hotel room from a classy porno.” I envision some big, open room with white walls and wide windows. A beach view, maybe. The stars at night.

“Okay, yeah, maybe you’re making your own classy porno.”

That’s a little too interesting.

“Yeah, you’re there, in those smooth sheets, waiting for someone to arrive.”

“Do I take it out?”

“Sure, why not?” She doesn’t take the bait. “You’re listening to music that sets the mood. Whatever that is for you. And you’re nervous, ‘cause you’re waiting for someone special, someone you really want to show a good time. Then the bathroom door opens and she steps out in sheer white lingerie. Who is it?”

Val. Of course. Who else would it be? “Just ‘cause I want her—”

“You don’t just want her. You want to rock her world. You want to express your love, physically.”

Fuck. That sounds way too good.

“It’s her, right?”

“She’s my best friend.”

“And you want more.”

“I’m attracted to her, sure.” It falls off my lips. I like her. Fine. I like her. “But that’s a physical thing.”

“Is it though?”

I swallow hard.

“You’ll feel better if you admit it.”

Footsteps steal our attention. Then the gate. Val, with two giant grocery bags (both reusable, of course).

Luna jumps to her feet. “Let me talk to her.”

“What are you going to say?”

“Nothing that gives you away. Trust me.”

I don’t. But I’m too tempted by potential discoveries to stop her.

Chapter Seven



“Hey.” Dare’s friend rushes to me. “Let me help with that.” She grabs one of the grocery bags. “Val, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Luna.” She looks around the quiet courtyard. “Actually, I don’t know which one is his.”

“He’s not throwing parties?”

“Not usually.”

Really? Dare is *always* up for a good time. The more drinking and dancing, the better. Have things changed since I left? Or did I not notice them change before that? “This way.”

She follows me across the courtyard. Thankfully, the door is open, so I don’t have to wrestle with the bag and the keys (I’ve had a copy since he moved into the place).

She helps me put all the cold stuff in the fridge, arranges the other snacks by the pool, and drops a few bottles in the cooler.

When she returns to the apartment, she studies me with curiosity, like I’m a surrealist movie she can’t begin to understand.

Luna. She’s familiar. We’ve met at a few Inked Love parties. She’s in their circle somehow. Through her best friend, I think. (Parties aren’t really my thing. I show up, sure, but only because Dare bribes me with promises of movie marathons).

Luna is a lot like Dare, actually. Tall, fit, impossibly cool. Like him, she radiates *I barely try energy*. Silver hair, hipster style, forearm tattoo.

They make sense together.

Oh.

Shit.

Is this why things feel so loaded? It's not my need for a wingman. It's Dare finally dating. Actually dating.

My stomach flutters.

My cheeks flame.

She's so pretty and cool, and she has that sexual, open-minded energy, like she's totally down to have a threesome or do anal or whatever.

Everything. Anything.

Not that I judge.

I don't judge.

Good for her, really, for not drowning in hang-ups.

I'm happy for her. For him. For them.

I'm nauseous for a totally different reason.

"How long have you two..." I try to find the words to express it, but I can't. I don't want to say it. It's one thing for Dare to sleep with someone, with a lot of people. But an actual girlfriend?

This is just... weird. And it's hot in here. When did it get so hot in here?

"Dare is a great guy," I say.

"Yeah." She studies me with her grey-green eyes. "He loves the whole *I'm hot and dumb* routine, but he's so sweet under that."

"He is." My throat is dry. I need water. Coffee. Gin tonic. Absolutely gin tonic. It's not day drinking if it's dinnertime in

Spain. Dinnertime in Spain is nine o'clock. And no one thinks nine is too early for cocktails.

“You must have missed him.”

“A normal amount for a friend.” Wow, that sounds natural. And believable. I move to the sink, fill a glass, swallow a sip. Then another. Another. “You look good together.”

“We do?” Her brow furrows.

“Yeah. With the cool style and the tattoos. It fits.”

“You’ve met my boyfriend?”

Do I really have to say it out loud? “Yeah... Dare and I...”

“Oh my god, ew. No.” Her face scrunches in distaste. “No way. No offense. I mean, Dare is handsome and everything, but we’ve been friends so long. And I’m over the moon with Ollie.”

Ollie? Is that... Oliver? Another tall, dark, handsome, brooding type. Only without the playfulness. More grumpy.

If I remember correctly. And I might not. After a while, all these handsome tattoo artists run together.

She continues swooning over her boyfriend. “I notice other guys, sure. Sometimes women, even. But I never think about them romantically. I’m too in love. You know how it is.”

No. Not really.

There isn’t a Sabrina Fairchild out there to brighten my cynical spirit (I still say realistic), much less ease me out of my inhibitions.

What’s the equivalent there? A man so attentive and vibrant and loving he coaxes me from my very hard shell?

Does anyone like that exist?

Probably not.

Which is why I need Dare’s push.

Just a nudge or two. He’s good for it. He always is.

That's all it has to be. Normal friendly support. Sure, I keep thinking about a different option for support. A more hands-on, clothing off option. But I can't ask that.

That will ruin our friendship.

This is normal friend stuff. Even if it's about the one topic we almost never discuss?

"And you," she says. "Is there anyone in your life?"

Where is she going with this? "Not right now."

"For any reason?"

Uh, yeah, but not one I'm sharing with someone I barely know.

"It's just... I know it's none of my business, but I... he talks about you a lot. More than people talk about their platonic friends."

"Who?" What is she talking about?

"Dare."

"What about him?" I ask.

"All those years and you're still friends."

Okay... It's nice to reminisce, I guess, but it's really no concern of hers.

"Do you ever think... there might be more?"

Oh. That. When we were kids, everyone wanted to know when Dare and I would finally realize we were in love. Then we got older, started inhabiting different worlds, and no one asked. Especially once it became obvious he was smoking hot, and I was cute, for a bigger girl. "We don't see each other that way."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you know something I don't?" It comes out bitchier than I mean it. But, hey, she is being a little nosy.

"No." She doesn't take any offense. "But I see the way he looks at you." She leaves it there. Smiles. Brings the last batch outside.

And it lingers there all afternoon, through gin tonics and coleslaw and barbecue and a walk to the beach.

It's not just Luna.

All his friends see something that isn't there.

They see a connection between Dare and me.

And there is one, yes, but it's not the one they think. It's not that he wants me in his bed.

It's that he agonizes over what happened in mine.

BETWEEN THE SUNSET, MY THIRD GIN TONIC, AND HALF A BAR of French chocolate (orange peel and hazelnut), I relax into the evening. Then Dare's friends leave, and I *really* settle into the space.

My first full day in California.

Even though this is home (I grew up twenty miles away; I spent winter break in this very apartment complex; I'm attending grad school an hour south of here), I don't feel rooted. I'm still in transit. A week and change here. Then back to Europe to make use of my pre-paid rent, to get a break from my family, and, mostly, to show my best friend all these places I love.

The thought of Dare taking in La Sagrada, diving into the Mediterranean, downing four-euro sangria by the glass—

It fills me with joy. I want to share what I love with the person I love. The way my dad showed me *Casablanca* (and I showed Dare), I want to show my best friend all these amazing, beautiful things he'll love.

There's just that one tiny wrinkle.

I want to get laid while we're there.

Really, it's not a big deal. Back in high school, Dare coached me through a lot. He came over the morning after I punched my v-card to give me a high-five.

Things only got weird after The Incident.

But, hey, there's really no facing this without facing that.

Which is a big deal.

After half an hour on a lounge and a fourth gin tonic, I dive into the pool. It's small, one of those hourglass-shaped, backyard sized pools, but it's perfect all the same. Cool and safe and encompassing.

Dare dives in after me. He swims to me. Right to me.

He gets close, really close, like he knows the gravity of what I'm about to say, like he knows I can only whisper the words.

Shit.

This is a big deal.

The biggest deal.

A huge-ass-fucking deal that might ruin our trip and our friendship.

There's a reason why we don't talk about it. Because when we did—

It didn't go well.

"You okay?" He brushes a wet lock behind my ear.

"Me? Yeah. My hair?" I shake my head.

His laugh is easy. Friendly. "You still look gorgeous."

"You think?"

"Yeah." His fingers skim the strap of my bikini top. "I never thought I'd see you rock something so sexy."

"Hey—"

"After what happened."

Oh. Well. As long as we're going there, I might as well dive into the deep end. "It's part of therapy."

"You're in therapy?"

“I told you.” I shared a lot of details with him. Technical ones, yes, but details all the same.

He shakes his head. “Way back, yeah, but not recently.”

“A lot of therapy. So much.” Too much.

“And that’s helping?”

A lot, just not all the way. “Thus the outfit.” I wave my hands over my chest.

“Therapy is helping you show off your tits?”

My cheeks flush. “Yes.”

“Thank fuck for therapists everywhere.”

A laugh spills from my lips. It doesn’t ease the tension in my chest, but it helps. “Pig.”

“I’m kidding.”

“Are you?”

“This is part of your healing.”

It is.

“That’s all I want. Healing.”

“Uh-huh.” There’s a flirtatious tone to my voice. One I don’t intend. One I can’t take back.

“Yeah-huh.” Seriousness drops into his voice. “You are doing better?”

Right. This is an important conversation. This isn’t time for flirting or teasing. Maybe just a little teasing. “I am.”

“So have you...” He swallows hard. “Have you been with anyone?”

Okay. This is it. I need to say it. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

His eyes fill with surprise. “It is?”

“I need your help.”

He nods. “Of course. You know that.”

“This is a big ask.”

“What is it?”

“I need to have sex.”

Chapter Eight



I *need to have sex.*

The gears in my brain turn slowly. They're dulled by gin and laughter and an intense desire to remove Val's bikini.

She needs a favor, a big favor.

She needs to have sex.

She needs to fuck you.

What's the wait? Let's go right here, right now.

All right, inside, like Luna said. Gotta be safe. But as long as we're here, might as well get her off.

"You want to have sex?" I repeat the words, expecting them to change, to somehow make sense.

"Yes."

"With..." I can't say it. I just can't. "With someone in particular?"

She swallows hard. "It's an assignment from my therapist."

"Fucking a rando?"

"No. She wants me to focus on *ménage-à-moi*."

That's a vivid mental image. Val, splayed over her bed, naked, hand between her legs.

Snap the fuck out of it. She needs you.

I take a deep breath and push out a steady exhale. Calm thoughts. Unsexy thoughts. Friendly thoughts.

She continues, “She said, when I’m ready, I should try again. In a safe environment.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“With your help?”

I try to find an explanation in her eyes, but *my* eyes ignore my command. My gaze goes right to her chest. Her incredibly perfect chest.

These are new. Better.

I know.

And I know I need to touch her exactly how she needs—

I *know* how she needs. She was too embarrassed to talk to her boyfriend, so she talked to me, asked if it was okay if she wanted the guy to play with her tits all evening. Or if that was selfish.

Be as selfish as you want, Val. I’m happy to torture both of us.

“My help...” I still can’t say it. There’s no way she means she wants to have sex with me. That’s my dick depriving my brain of logic.

“There’s a guy.” There’s hesitation in her voice.

But I’m too relieved to mention it. There’s another guy. Someone else. This isn’t the end of our friendship. Thank fuck.

“Archie,” she says. “My roomie. He’s only going to be in town for a few days, then he’s leaving, back to London. And he’s always liked me, I think. Well, he likes me as a friend. We talk. We hang.”

“You hang?”

“He and his ex, Zelda, they invited me into the apartment. They broke up and they wanted an intermediary. So I know a little about his, uh, tendencies.”

“And what, you know he’s a gentle missionary lover?”

“Basically.” She says it without embarrassment or hesitation.

“Do you even like him?”

“Don’t be stupid,” she says.

“You want to screw a guy you don’t like and I’m stupid?” This is just like her first kiss. Only it’s with someone else, someone I can’t vouch for.

“I can’t have that be the last time.”

The last time... Wait a second. “What about the guy junior year?”

“We didn’t have sex.”

“You didn’t?” She told me they had sex. Okay, she didn’t say those words exactly, but she let me believe they were having sex. She let me believe she was over it enough to have sex.

If she hadn’t—

I know I don’t have the right to get pissed about that, but I am.

How could she keep that from me?

How could she go three years without sleeping with anyone after that?

How could she not, asshole? You think you’re the one who dictates how she moves on?

“We made out a lot,” she says. “He was religious.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

Her voice gets stern. “I wasn’t obligated to tell you.”

I swallow hard.

“Can we please not make it weird?” she asks. “If it’s too much for you, I respect that. But if not... I’ve spent all semester in therapy. I don’t want to focus on the ugly parts. I want to have fun for once.”

And that's why she needs my help.

With fun.

Val is the serious one, the studious one.

I'm the one who brings the fun.

"What exactly do you want?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter. It doesn't even need to be good. As long as he's not the last person who touched me," she says.

I'm a person. I can touch you. And I already know everything. You don't have to explain your limits. Your needs. Your desires.

Well, maybe that last one.

Maybe a few dozen dirty texts.

A night.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she says.

"And you're doing this with or without me?"

"I don't know if I can do it without you. I need the push." She looks me in the eye. "Please, Dare. I need your help."

How the hell can I say no to that?

Chapter Nine



Between family dinners, late nights with my sister, unpacking and repacking, I barely have time to talk to Dare.

It's not as if I'm avoiding the topic of my Spanish tryst. More that my body refuses to fall in line. Every time I steer my thoughts to Archie, they skew to Dare.

Which is weird. Dare is hot, sure, but he's not my type, and I'm not his. He sleeps with girls like him, girls who prefer casual arrangements.

My body is just confused. Because it's been so long since I've wanted anyone's hands on my skin. And Dare is the only guy I trust.

The signals are all crossed. Desire and trust are all mixed.

Okay, maybe I only said I wanted Archie so Dare would go along with this. He was clearly not going to help me screw a stranger. Maybe I only said I wanted Archie so Dare wouldn't volunteer as my teacher. Or so I wouldn't ask him to tutor me on this particular subject.

Burt Archie is a good pick. He's handsome. And I trust him. And he's perfect for this—tame.

Which is why I make it through my entire time home in California, all the way to the airport, past security, to the chairs at the gate, before I attempt to woo my roomie.

Archie: What time do you get in?

I shift in my seat—one of those odd black airport chairs. I sip my overpriced fizzy water. I check my surroundings.

Dare is at the duty-free shops—he's still excited by international air travel.

I have privacy. I can flirt. I can start this on my own. Even if it's a little awkward to pick up the conversation after three days of silence.

Or maybe that's good. Maybe it shows I'm in demand.

Val: I'll forward the flight details. How are my cacti doing?

Archie: I watered once.

Val: Only two drops each?

Archie: Of course.

Val: Do anything fun while I was away?

Archie: If struggling to follow my coworkers' Spanish is fun.

Val: Dare tried to learn too.

Archie: You really call him Dare?

Val: That's his nickname.

Archie: He's our age, isn't he?

Val: And?

Archie: Isn't that a little silly?

The question is normal—Dare is a ridiculous nickname for an adult man—but it still sends protective energy through my body. Dare has a great sense of humor, especially about himself. That's why he still teases *yeah, you gotta dare a girl to kiss me*.

He is a fun guy. And he's a caring, thoughtful friend. He can be both. He can be a smoking hot, tattooed bad boy who also makes me feel safe and comfortable and at home in my body—

And so not going there.

Friendship with my, uh, best friend.

Flirting with my roomie.

I'm not mixing all that up.

Val: He's a little silly. But he has a serious side, too. He's a good guy. A good friend.

Archie: Only a friend?

Is that a sign of interest?

Footsteps draw my attention. Dare.

He moves through a spread-out family in matching mouse hoodies, past a couple sharing headphones, and reaches me. Best of all, he's holding two large iced lattes. "The best chain at the airport."

Caffeine. Yes. Now. "You spoil me."

"Oh, you don't want this?" He brings one of the drinks close to his chest. "Happy to take it off your hands."

"Dare!"

"I wouldn't want to burden you—"

I reach for the takeout cup. "Gimme."

He laughs with pure *I love teasing you glee* as he sits next to me and hands over the drink.

"Thanks." I take greedy sips. It's not the world's best coffee, but I need the energy. My body never really adjusted to Pacific time, but it's not on Central European Time either.

"Talking to your future boy toy?"

"Who else do I talk to?"

"Your sister?"

And a few friends in Europe. But really, I've been too busy with school and therapy to socialize. So many older people tell me their best friends are from college. Sometimes, I worry I'm missing out.

I guess that's life. I can only focus on a few things. Right now, my emotional energy goes to healing, not building

friendships. Besides, I have Dare. I always have Dare.

My phone buzzes in my lap.

Dare looks at it expectantly. “That must have been a fun text.”

My cheeks flush.

“Is that how you flirt with him from across the ocean?” he asks.

My chest flushes too. It’s strange, discussing romance with him, but I don’t want to let on. I want to banter the way we normally do. “How’d you know?”

“Did it with a girl once.”

“You really needed to keep the spark alive on your eleven-day relationship?”

“Oh, yeah, day ten, it all fades.”

A laugh spills from my lips. It’s easy and good and normal and totally difficult and abnormal too. There’s a strange feeling in my stomach. An excess of nervous energy.

“No.” He sits back, sips his drink, motions *not bad*. “It was a request of hers.”

“How’s that?”

“To keep a boring dinner interesting, by texting at random times, in random intervals.”

“Really, a text?” See, I can talk about sex. We can talk about sex. It’s not weird at all. It’s totally normal.

“She didn’t want to spring for the vibrating panties.”

“That’s not—”

“There’s an app too,” he says.

“And you’ve used it?”

“It’s on my list for your next birthday.”

My blush deepens.

His laugh deepens too. “I looked it up. To see if there was an easier way.”

“And?”

“I kept texting.”

“You didn’t like her enough to spend, the, what, fifty bucks?”

“A hundred fifty bucks.”

“Are vibrators really that expensive?”

He raises a brow. “Don’t tell me you don’t have one.”

I do have one. Two, actually. But I don’t really use them. Until recently, I didn’t spend a lot of time noticing sexual feelings, much less enjoying them.

Then I went through a million years of therapy, so I could notice them without cringing.

Actually enjoy them.

And then Dare touched me and—

No, this is my first time back home after heavy duty healing. I’m reacting to familiar circumstances in unfamiliar ways.

I’m not lusting after my best friend.

I swallow a sip of coffee. No one is arguing with me. There’s no need to shout, if only in my head.

Now. What were we saying?

Shit. Vibrators. Great.

“They were all gifts,” I say.

“You still have that one?”

Oh. Right. “It’s in California.” In my bedroom at my mom’s house, at the bottom of my underwear drawer.

“Still works?”

The vibrator Dare bought me when I went to college. As a joke. Well, not a joke, exactly. More a Dare sort of gesture.

Hey, now that you're discovering yourself, how about this too?

"Last time I checked," I say.

"When was that?"

"No comment." I do masturbate now, but I typically take a more manual approach.

"Oh, yeah." He smiles. "That's something you can enjoy if you stick with this guy."

"What is?"

"Phone sex."

"Why would we have phone sex?" I ask.

"Cause you're attending grad school in the fall?"

"And?"

"And you're going to keep seeing Mr. Smarty-pants," he says.

"I'm not looking for a boyfriend," I say.

"What if it takes a while?" he asks.

"To woo him?"

He chuckles. "Did you just say woo?"

"Would you prefer seduce?"

"He's a guy. You can say 'do you want to have sex,' and he'll say yes."

"No." Maybe that's how it goes in Dare's world. Dare is a perfect ten. I am... not.

"Yeah." His eyes flit to my chest. "He'll do it just to see you naked."

My cheeks flame.

"But you'll probably take a while to get comfortable."

"Can we not?" Seriously, I do not want to spend the entire trip, or even the wait until boarding, examining the intricacies of my feelings. I'm tired of examining my feelings. I want to stop thinking about feelings and start fucking someone I like.

“Fuck no. We can and we will. This is what we’re doing.”

Maybe it’s somewhat necessary, but only somewhat. “We’re seducing Archie,” I say.

He motions to my phone. “Give me that and I’ll have you in his bed in twenty-four hours.”

“You will not.”

“You want to bet?”

No. I shake my head.

“You’re the holdup. Not him,” he says.

“Maybe he’s not into casual sex.”

“It’s goodbye sex. And, of course, he’s into it. He’s probably been touching himself, thinking of you all semester.”

“Based on what?”

“Do you ever leave the shower in a towel?”

What does that even mean? “What else would I wear?” I ask.

“And you still have those short pajamas?”

“It’s hot in Europe.”

“Is he gay?” he asks.

“No,” I say.

“Then he’s thinking about you.” He doesn’t press the matter. He moves on to the subject of my hesitation. “How far did you go with the religious guy?”

“I’m twenty-two.”

“Second base?”

“Yes.” My cheeks flush.

“Third?”

“No.” Nerves fill my stomach. I don’t want to say this. I don’t want to admit how much time I’ve spent hiding.

Dare swallows hard. Surprised.

I think. It is sorta odd for two college juniors to date for six months without sleeping together, much less making each other come.

“Were you comfortable?” he asks. “Making out with him?”

“Not the first few times. But, after that, I guess... I trusted him.”

“Did he get hard?”

“Dare.” This is not a normal conversation.

He stays firm.

Shit, now I’m thinking of him firm.

“Do you want to do this or not?” he asks.

My phone buzzes in my lap again.

He softens by about five percent. “Is that the target?”

“Probably.”

“Should we flirt with him?” he asks.

“If it ends this conversation.”

“Nothing ends this conversation.”

Another text buzzes in my lap. It is located very close to a fun place. Not close enough to distract me from the horror of the conversation but close enough to add to the nerves in my stomach.

Dare raises a brow. “You gonna get that? Or you want me to add to the fun?” He pulls his cell from his pocket.

My blush spreads to my chest. My entire body buzzes.

Dare thinks about the vibration in my lap. Dare thinks about my orgasm. And, yeah, it’s certainly in the same *I want you to have a full life, my best friend* way it was when he gave me a vibrator (a pretty good one too).

But my body, my ridiculous body, gets other ideas. It dives, headfirst, into those other ideas, and sends heat to every molecule.

It’s still confused with this whole trust versus desire thing.

“We can table it,” Dare says. “If we start flirting.”

“Deal.” I pull out my phone. “You won’t be weird, right?”

“When have I ever been weird?”

“Jason.”

He chuckles. “Jason was into it.”

Jason *was* into the whole *you’ve been a bad boy* thing. “I think he was in love with you.”

“Who wasn’t?”

“Has anyone ever told you to work on your self-esteem?”

“Everybody, yeah.” He taps something into the phone. Smiles. “This is juicy.”

“Do I want to know?”

“I’ll be good. I promise.” He reads again, studies, types something else, and shows me.

No. There’s another guy I like.

“Too much?” he asks.

No. It’s smart, actually. Really smart. But—“I don’t want him to think I’m looking for something serious.”

“Aren’t you?”

“No. I want to leave it in Europe.”

“He’s your friend, though. It’s different.”

For him, it is. “He’s not like you.”

“Handsome?”

“He doesn’t sleep around.”

For a split second, hurt fills Dare’s eyes, then he blinks, and it’s gone.

Or maybe I imagined it.

This is... awkward, to say the least.

“I don’t judge you for it,” I say.

He shrugs like it doesn't matter. "How about this?" He taps another text.

There's someone else I want.

"Too direct?" he asks.

"No. It works."

He hits send.

My phone buzzes with a reply right away.

But, for some reason, I don't feel the excitement I expect. I don't care how Archie replies, if he wants me too, if he's interested in this whole thing.

"Oh, that's good." Dare smiles. Happy. Excited. A totally platonic wingman.

Which is exactly what I want. "Can I see?"

"Not until I'm done with him."

Chapter Ten



Dare has a little too much fun flirting with Archie.

He plays coy about my potential crush, dropping hints I want Archie but never coming out to say it.

I take my phone back to wish my roommate goodbye, then I turn my cell on airplane mode, board, settle into my seat.

The space isn't exactly luxurious, but it's nice enough. We're lucky. We're next to each other without anyone on either side. Dare has the aisle; I have the window. Thank goodness for two-seat rows.

I rest my head on Dare's shoulder, studying one of the books on my summer reading list.

"What are you reading?" Dare interrupts.

I shoot him a death glare.

He smiles. He loves riling me.

And, well, I love it too. Right now, I need it. I need the reassurance from the person I trust more than anyone. I need to feel like things are normal between us.

"A book," I say.

"Called..."

"Why do you think I have an eReader?"

"Because you love when men interrupt you to ask what you're reading?" he asks.

“Damn. You found me out.”

“You’re predictable,” he says.

“*Frankenstein*,” I say.

“Really?”

“It invented the modern horror genre,” I say.

“You hate horror.”

“I hate modern horror.”

“Oh? Should we watch *Night of the Living Dead* on the plane?” he asks.

“I’m trying to broaden my knowledge.”

“Books by women?”

I clear my throat.

He laughs. “Predictable.”

“You know, in some cultures, horror is considered more of a woman’s genre. Because it’s so visceral. The other side of romance.”

“You want to bone someone or you want to run from them?”

“Sorta.”

“I see that.”

Me too. Especially after everything. But there we are again. The topic I don’t want to, but totally have to, touch.

Dare doesn’t force me to dive in. “Is it good?”

“So far.”

“How many books have you read on this mission?”

“Four,” I say.

“In five days?”

“Two weeks,” I say.

“Wow? Two weeks? Those are rookie numbers, Diaz.”

“Oh, yeah? How many books did you read in the last two weeks?” I ask.

“Well, there was *Spider-Man Number eight hundred sixty-six* and then eight hundred sixty-seven, eight hundred sixty-eight, eight hundred sixty-nine. I fell way behind,” he says. “They’re into the nine hundreds now.”

“And you read all of those?”

“I read eight.”

“Doubled my numbers,” I say.

“Yeah. Pretty embarrassing for a future public intellectual.” He beams with pride.

It’s flattering. But it’s overwhelming too. I don’t know if I can live up to Dare’s idea of me as the smartest woman in the world. I’m smart, sure, but I’m not a genius or a visionary or an iconoclast. I’m just a girl who wants to find a way to marry brain science and movies. “I’ll have to borrow your iPad and get up to date.”

“You’re going to read comic books?”

“When have I ever objected to comic books?”

He shoots me a *really* look. “When have you not?”

“Do they have to draw the women in such ridiculous poses?” I ask.

“Yeah. Someone put a gun to the artist’s head.”

“That would explain it.”

“It is annoying,” he agrees. “These dudes are professionals and they don’t know basic anatomy.”

“Are you trying to butter me up?” I ask.

He motions *a little*. “It’s true though.”

“And tattoo pinups?”

“You don’t like this one all of a sudden?” He pushes his t-shirt up his shoulder to show off the pinup.

She looks kind of like me, actually. Dark, wavy hair, glasses (I wear contacts half the time now), curvy figure, wicked smile, and she's sitting on a stack of books.

If it was a film canister, I'd have ideas, but books are generic enough. I read a lot, but so do lots of women. Film is my thing. Our thing. Since the first weekend I met Dare, I've taken the time to show him my favorite movies, discover new favorites together.

"I'm still surprised you got that," I say.

"Why?"

"Cause of your dad. And the magazines." I do love the tattoo—it's totally right for him, somehow, but it still surprises me. "You don't think it's similar?"

"No. She's sexual, yeah, but she's not a sex object." He taps her glasses. The book in her hands. "She's a character, with interests, a personality."

"She likes to read?" Is that an entire personality?

"Cause hot girls don't like to read?"

"When have you dated a girl who likes to read?" I ask.

"We don't get that far into conversation."

"You don't notice bookshelves?" I ask.

He shoots me a *where are you going* with this look.

"I'm curious."

"Reading habits aren't a top factor," he says.

"What is?"

"Don't know. I'm on a break."

"Why?" I ask.

"Cause I don't know. That's kind of fucked up."

"That you don't know what you want?"

He nods, like he doesn't really care one way or another, but the frustration in his dark eyes gives him away. "And I don't know if I want to keep going through the casual sex BS."

“The what?” I ask.

“Oh, Val, if you’re about to enter the world of casual sex...” He shakes his head. “You have no idea how much BS. there is.”

“Really?”

“Imagine a party where you only know one person.”

“Okay.” This is a pretty likely scenario. Well, a party where I only know one person well. Dare’s friends love parties. I recall one of their apartments—I want to say Forest—and the loud rock-style music and the cheap liquor and the total inability to make conversation.

He waits until I find my vision, then he continues, “You’re making small talk with someone who has an opinion you find ridiculous.”

“Say, that Spider-man Comics are the height of literature?”

He smiles. “No, no, no. Worse.”

“There’s something worse?”

He nods. “Superman comics.”

A laugh spills from my lips. Of course, Dare considers that worse. “Sure.”

“But you don’t want to tell them they’re stupid, ‘cause it’s not worth it. And you know, if you try to argue *The Avengers* isn’t the greatest movie of all time, you’ll get stuck in a long conversation about Thor’s hammer.”

“This is too horrible,” I say.

“Oh yeah, it’s awful. And they’re going on about how much they adore Iron Man. And, more, about how smart the writing is, how MCU movies are cinema. And why would anyone care about cinema anyway? That’s boring black-and-white shit.”

Damn, he knows my weaknesses way too well.

“Only you’re not at a party. You’re in their room—”

“And there’s an Avengers poster on the wall?” I offer.

“Of course.” He nods. “And you’re already taking your clothes off, and he’s not wearing a shirt, and he’s got a great body. Your body wants his body. But your head? You’re not sure you can let someone so stupid touch you.”

“This is common for you?”

“Not this scenario,” he says.

“Don’t tell me you secretly love The Avengers.”

He laughs. “No way. They’re a bunch of squares.”

“So if it was Spider-man?”

“Who doesn’t love Spider-man?”

That’s true. I don’t like action movies or comic book movies, and I still enjoy when Dare picks Spider-man movies. We take turns picking movies. But, of course, I protest a little. For effect.

“He’s jizz-tastic.”

“Okay, I’m vetoing the next one.”

He smiles. “It happens. Not a woman hating Spider-man either. But realizing I don’t particularly like a girl I’ve taken home, yeah.”

That’s kind of sad. Really sad, actually. I don’t usually judge Dare’s habits. I’m not judging his habits now.

I grew up next door to his father. I get why he eschews commitment.

But I don’t get why he jumps into casual affairs.

Isn’t that what his dad does?

Really, I’m not judging him. If he’s having fun, he’s having fun. I assume he’s straightforward with women.

But if he’s not having fun, why is he doing exactly what would make Mr. Dickson proud?

“You’re judging,” he says.

“No.”

“Yeah.”

I'm trying not to judge. Really. "As long as you're safe and you're honest. That's what matters."

"Of course, I'm safe. I'm not gonna have unprotected sex with the kinda girl who'd have unprotected sex with me."

I don't even know how to reply to that.

"I'll make sure you're safe too."

"You really think that?" I can't tell if he's joking or he's hurt.

"Yeah, of course. If someone will have unprotected sex with you, they'll have unprotected sex with other people."

Oh. Well, that is reasonable. And less self-loathing.

Which is good. We're good. "I'm just surprised. I thought you enjoyed it more."

"Sometimes. Sometimes not."

"Maybe I need to help you find a girlfriend," I say.

"Maybe."

My stomach flip-flops. From the surprise. Dare actually considering a girlfriend? That's a career first. "Really?"

"Maybe."

"Oh, I can't wait to make a wish list." Okay, yes, a wave of nausea is hitting me at the thought of Dare dating seriously, but that's the stale air on the plane. Really. Why is the air so stale while we're boarding? We're on land.

"What the hell is a wish list?" he asks.

"The traits you want in your future girlfriend."

"Does she come with Prime shipping too?"

I ignore his joke and press my hands together. "She has to like tattoos, and as long as we're in Europe, she has to speak English."

"Am I moving to Spain?" he says.

"Don't tempt me," I say.

“Don’t dare me,” he returns.

He’s not serious. “Would you really move to Spain?”

“If it’s with you, yeah.”

“Really?” This means something. A lot. But my brain isn’t putting the pieces together. It’s distracted by the subject at hand.

“They must have tattoo artists in Spain.”

“You’d have to learn to speak Spanish?”

“Nah, I’ll get by on looks and charm.”

A laugh spills from my lips. We’re being silly. I can do silly. I love silly. “It wouldn’t be too different than now.”

“Obviously.” He lets his sleeve fall over his pinup tattoo. “I’d move wherever you asked.”

“Like that?”

“What’s keeping me in California?” he asks.

“Brian?”

“He’ll visit,” Dare says.

“Inked Love?”

“I’ll visit,” he says.

“The Pacific?”

“My top source on oceans says the Atlantic isn’t so bad.”

“The Mediterranean is gorgeous,” I say.

“First stop.”

“Yeah?” My cheeks flush.

“Of course.” He pulls out his cell. “Should we invite your crush?”

My stomach turns. “Why would we do that?”

“Flirting.”

“No. Of course not.” That’s our thing. How could he suggest that? “Never.”

He smiles. “Okay. We can wait until after for you to have a little fun with him.”

“I’m going to start right away?” I ask.

He motions to my cell. “There’s time.”

“Oh my god, Dare. We’re wheels up in ten minutes.”

“That’s eight more than I need.”

My cheeks flush. A vivid mental image fills my head—Dare, in his bed, unzipping his jeans, wrapping his hand around his cock.

It’s too vivid.

Way too vivid.

“I know, I know. Not speaking to my skills. But I can go longer if I want.”

“Not when you’re alone?”

“Depends on my mood.” His eyes flit to my cell. “Are you masturbating?”

Someone behind us snickers.

“You’re asking me that here?” I ask.

“Where else would I do it?”

“Anywhere.” Or nowhere. Nowhere is also good.

“Okay, I’ll ask at La Sagrada.”

The famous cathedral by Antoni Gaudi. Probably the most famous landmark in Spain. It is gorgeous. And a church. “You’re the worst.”

“So, here is okay then?”

Fine. “Not as often as you masturbate,” I say.

“Maybe I like to wait,” he says.

Why is this mental image even more vivid? “Do you like to wait?”

“You shouldn’t assume.”

“You’re right.” I shouldn’t assume, and I shouldn’t imagine. But I see it now—all that anticipation spread over his face.

His laugh eases the tension. “You’re admitting that?”

It’s time to tease. Not time to picture his o-face. “I’m normally right.”

Again, he laughs. “Normally.”

“Are you saying I’m wrong now?”

“Oh, no, Diaz, those records are sealed.”

“No.” I shake my head. “If I have to answer, you have to answer.”

“How is this going to help me find love?” he asks.

Helping Dare find love... what a strange idea. “It’s all connected.”

He shoots me a *bullshit* look.

“How about you tell me your number and I tell you higher or lower.”

“Once.” For the first time in ages, I wanted to go more than once. I went to bed revved every night. I don’t know why. But I liked lingering in the feeling, savoring the desire. It’s bright and vibrant.

“More.”

“How much more?”

“More,” he says.

“So I was right?”

“You want a prize?” he asks.

“Of course.”

He chuckles. “I’ll buy you a gin tonic.”

“They’re free.”

“Once we land then.”

“They’re cheaper than a pour-over at Philz most places.”

“That’s not saying much.”

A laugh spills from my lips. “When did you get so fancy?”

“Me? You’re the European babe.”

Has he ever called me a babe before? My cheeks flush. My chest too. We’re not moving toward more platonic subject matter. But then, I guess we won’t, given my mission. “These things aren’t fancy in Europe. They’re normal.”

“Your premium tonic water?”

I nod. “And the sangria. Cheap and fantastic.”

“What else?”

“So many things.” I start listing the perks of life in Barcelona: premium tonic water, four-euro sangria, easy public transit. Then the downsides: total lack of ice, for example—really, did they lose the recipe? But my head keeps going back to his question.

Do you masturbate?

It was a therapy assignment, actually. At first, it felt awkward and strange and dangerous. Which made no sense. How could I feel danger alone in my room?

But it wasn’t from someone else.

It was my own head.

And even now—

I worry about the place my thoughts will go.

Even now, after months of practice and therapy, they still go there.

And, somehow, Dare knows.

Maybe not the details but the truth behind them.

I’m struggling, and I have no idea how I’m going to accomplish this goal.

Will I ever trust another man as much as I trust him?

Chapter Eleven



We chitchat through taxiing. Then I let Dare squeeze my hand, and I distract him through takeoff.

He's a nervous flier. He didn't tell me, but he couldn't hide it when we flew to New York together, senior year of high school—a gift from his dad. I'm pretty sure his dad thought it would help him seal the deal with me, but hey, it was a free trip to the cultural center of the country. I didn't complain. Much.

He was his usual too-cool-for-school self through security and as we shopped for last-minute snacks at the gate. Even as the doors closed and the plane moved.

Then the engines revved for takeoff and he tensed.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to say anything. I took his hand, squeezed it, and talked about the book I was reading.

He found enough distraction to tease back until we were in the air.

Today, it's the same. Only I ask him questions instead.

“What if I wanted a pinup?” I ask.

“You'd never.”

“What if I did?”

“What if?” He looks to the window. Watches the position of the sky shift with a nervous stare.

“What would you recommend?” I need to move his gaze. “Right here.” I shift out of my sweater so he can see my shoulder.

Ah, victory. His eyes go to the motion. Then my skin.

The neckline of my dress (not especially low, but, hey, when you have larger breasts, a lot of normal necklines look indecent). My collarbones.

Finally, my shoulder.

My cheeks flush. My chest too.

It’s been so long since he’s looked at me this way. I’m not sure he’s ever looked at me this way.

Definitely not since The Incident.

That changed something. Changed everything.

And this changes everything too. I’m straight-up asking him to view me as a sexual person, to help me find satisfaction.

“What would suit me?” I push the concern aside. Right now, I have to keep him distracted. Everything else is secondary.

“What do you want it to say?” he asks.

“What does yours say?”

“It’s a mix of new and old-school pinups are classic, right? The Sailor Jerry is iconic and artists have been riffing off that forever. I’m bringing in that history and making it modern.”

“So it’s an homage?”

“Yeah, and it’s cheeky. Pinups always are. They’re not sexy in a *Penthouse* way.”

That suits him. “What about this one?” I trace the tattoo on his forearm. The matching circles, one on each arm, a wave and a bird stretching its wings.

“It’s not supposed to mean anything.”

“Why did you get it?”

“We talked about it.” His eyes return to the window.

“Remind me.” I trace the wave.

His attention goes to my touch, so I keep tracing. It’s probably too much, but I don’t care. I need to help him stay calm.

“I forget,” I say.

“You don’t.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“The ocean always felt like a happy place to me,” he says. “But there’s a power to it too. I guess I got that from you.”

“I don’t own the concept.”

He nods. “And the bird was supposed to be a seagull. Not most people’s idea of a majestic animal, but I admire them. They’re scrappy. They’re fierce. They’re in the water and on land.”

He smiles. “That would suit you, something with the ocean. And a movie.”

“A babe watching a movie on a surfboard?”

“Yeah,” he says. “She’s sitting on a wave, watching the movie projected into the sky.”

“Will all that fit on my shoulder?”

“Yeah.” He traces a circle on my upper shoulder. “The moon can be the screen. Then the wave.” He traces that too. “The girl. The board.”

My eyes flutter closed. My chest flushes. This is intimate. Alarmingly intimate.

But why?

We used to do this all the time. He used to draw on my skin with permanent marker. There was never anything sexual about it.

“Topless maybe,” he says.

“Topless?” Why is that so hot?

“Yeah. More European.”

My laugh breaks up the tension in my shoulders. Mostly.
“Is that why you’re on the way?”

“Why did you think?”

“Boobs and absinthe?” I ask.

“Of course. It makes you horny.”

The ding of the fasten seat belt sign interrupts. It flashes and disappears as the plane straightens. The captain announces beverage service.

Dare eases. He’s not the picture of relaxation, but with an incoming cocktail, he’s not wound tight.

For a while, he discusses options for my tattoo. Once he finishes with an outline of a pinup, he starts pitching other ideas. Something big, with the ocean, to speak to my love of its power. Or maybe something small. A film reel. A pen. A camera.

As long as it fits in with my other work.

The three pieces he convinced me to get.

The Latin quote, the bird, the ribbon.

The cart arrives. I order a club soda. Dare orders a gin tonic.

Once he’s sipping, he settles into his seat.

“So... about masturbation,” he says.

I nearly spit out my club soda. “You could have warned me I’d need a drink.”

“You don’t day drink.”

“Airplanes don’t count.”

“You’ll get motion sick.” He shoots me an *obviously* look.

It’s true. A little anti-nausea medication is enough to keep me stable during turbulence, but not if I add alcohol.

“Is that going well?” he asks.

“Better now, yes.”

He nods *the truth feels good, doesn't it?* “You using your hand or toys?”

“Do we really need this level of detail?”

He nods, yes. “Your hand is more intimate.”

“With yourself?”

“Hell yeah, with yourself. Why would it be any different?”

That’s a good point, actually.

“A lot of women pull out their toys and use them on themselves. They don’t care if we have any intimacy and they don’t want to waste time training me.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Nah. We’re both there to get off and get out. Besides, I like when a woman takes charge of her own pleasure.”

My chest flushes.

“Lets me know she’s having fun.”

“Is that what you’re after?”

“More or less.” He takes a long sip and lets the silence fall. Even though we’re normally comfortable together, the pause is awkward. Finally, he pushes forward. “What are you after?”

“I want to replace that memory.”

“That’s a lot to ask of one night,” he says.

“I want to prove I can.”

“Do you actually want to screw someone?”

“Yes.” There’s no conviction in my voice. I don’t want to sleep with Archie the way Dare means. It’s not because I want him. It’s not even because I want sex. It’s to prove something.

“Someone? Or this guy?”

“What if I say I want to pick up a guy at a bar?” That might be easier. Better.

“You’ll never make it happen,” he says.

“Hey.” I know I’m not as conventionally attractive as some women, but I never expect Dare to remind me.

“You could make it happen, yeah. You’re hot, you’re smart, you’re funny.” He says it casually, as if it’s obvious to anyone who looks at me. “But you’ll never get comfortable with a stranger.”

“I could drink enough to get comfortable,” I say.

“Is that really the idea?”

“Why do you have to make such good points? It’s annoying.”

He smiles, proud and protective at once. “You’re welcome.”

My chest warms. My stomach churns. It feels good, letting him look out for me, even if the situation is odd. “So Archie it is.”

“Do you actually like him?” Dare asks.

“Yes.”

He looks at me like he doesn’t quite believe me, but he still nods and moves ahead. “So. Toys or hands?”

“I don’t have any toys here.”

“Hands.” He nods. “That’s a start. You have to be intimate with yourself before you can do it with someone else.”

Why is he making so much sense?

“And, well”—he finishes his drink with one swig—“what else is happening for you? During the act?”

My cheeks flush. “I think of scenarios.”

“What kinds?” he asks.

“Normal scenarios.”

“You don’t have the cash to pay for a pizza?” he asks.

“How did you know?” I deadpan.

“Really.” He looks to me. “What sort of scenarios?”

“Is this necessary?”

“I need to know your comfort level,” he says.

Or he’s deranged. That seems more likely. “How would you know that?”

“Scale of one to ten. One is missionary with your long-term boyfriend. Five is a hookup with an exciting stranger. Ten is you’re sold to a mafia boss who will use you however he pleases.”

“Where do you even get that?”

“BookTok.”

“You don’t read. And don’t say comics count.”

He chuckles, ready to tease me. “I read books you recommend. But, yeah, you’re right. I’ve heard all this from Daisy.”

One of his friend’s girlfriend. The bookworm at the party. I think. He has *a lot* of friends. “And she’s into this?”

“She won’t admit she’s into it, but Holden says... well, I promised not to repeat that.” He mimes zipping his lips.

“No. I don’t want to be sold to a mafia boss.” Hey, look at us talking about a coercive scenario without any mention of the incident. We’re doing great.

“Anything weird?”

“What’s weird?” I ask.

“Hmm. I’m not the judge.” He shrugs with a painful amount of confidence.

It’s way too sexy. He’s way too sexy. Usually, I don’t see him that way. Right now, I can’t see him any other way. I need to shift to something that makes sense. A joke. “Do you want to be sold to a mafia boss?”

“Hmm. A female mafia boss who wants to use my body like a toy... don’t hate it.” He chuckles. “Never seen one of those, though. Why is it always the men dominating the women?”

“Cause women are reading the books.”

“And... you don't ever fantasize about being the one in control?”

“I don't read those books,” I say.

“Cause they're too...” He doesn't say *close to the bruise* but it stays in the air.

“They're not my thing,” I say. “But I sorta see it. When you're reading, you're letting the author drive the story. So the activity is naturally more appealing to people who want to let go of control. But you can close the book at any time, so you feel safe testing out a taboo.”

“Smart.”

“It's only a theory.”

“No. It's fucking brilliant.” He beams, proud. “How'd I end up with the smartest woman in the world as my best friend?”

“Dare.” My blush deepens. “You'll embarrass me.”

“My favorite pastime.”

“We uh...” No, I don't want to go back to talking about masturbatory fantasies. Damn. The conversation is too much in every direction.

“Need to discuss your vanilla visions?”

“People like vanilla.”

“People, yeah. You?”

“Sorry to bore you,” I say.

“Nothing weird?”

“Sometimes.”

“Go on...”

I try to lower my voice to a whisper. “The guy behind us is listening.”

“So?”

“Well...” The image forms in my mind. My chest flushes. My entire body flushes. This is one rather vanilla vision, but it *always* gets me there. Fast. “You remember what I asked you... about the guy I was seeing in high school?”

His eyes go to my chest. “That guy?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what gets you off?”

“Do we need to talk about it?”

“So that’s what you imagine?” he asks. “A guy taking his time toying with you?”

I have to look out the window to keep my composure. “Can we not continue this?”

“Okay.” He chuckles. “But that’s good. That’s specific. That’s sensual.”

“That’s basic as fuck?”

“A little, sure, but so what? You’ve got fantastic tits, Val.”

The guy behind us does, in fact, gasp.

“Won’t be hard to find a guy who wants to worship them.”

Oh my god.

“You think Archie is into it?” he asks.

“How would I know?”

“Does he look?”

“I don’t know.”

Dare taps my shoulder. “Not gonna have this conversation with the back of your head.”

Why is that such an evocative turn of phrase? “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

I force myself to look at him.

He smiles as I make eye contact. I’m blushing. I’m probably as red as a tomato.

And he's all cool and collected and Dare about it. "He'd probably be into it."

"Can we not?"

"No." His smile widens. "We have to strategize. What do you want out of this, physically?"

"Normal things."

"His hand?"

"Maybe," I say.

"Oral?"

"I don't know. Probably not. Too personal."

He nods with understanding. "It can be."

"Wait. You think that?"

"Why would I think otherwise?"

I guess I assumed. "Most of the women I know talk about giving blow jobs like it's pretty common."

"Maybe. I don't really hang around enough for that."

"Is it that time consuming?"

He chuckles. "I don't hang around long enough to mix it up."

"You're the one always doing it in missionary?"

Again, he laughs. "I want to get in and get off, but I'm not selfish about it."

"So you'd stop someone?"

"Honestly?"

"Why would I want a lie?"

His eyes meet mine. "Now, yeah? If I didn't want to stay for round two, I'd move things along."

"But before you wouldn't?"

"Yeah."

"Before... what?"

“Before.”

Oh. Before. Of course.

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“It’s not?”

“It made me re-evaluate some shit.” He sucks the liquid from the ice. “I started thinking... how would I want someone to treat Val?”

“Oh.”

“And I wouldn’t want some guy to expect you to suck him off. Or let you leave without getting off after. Not that I expected it. More that...” He looks to the window. “I didn’t think about it that way. I didn’t understand what it was like for women.”

“Do you miss it?”

“It happens often enough.”

“Do you... make oral arguments?”

He chuckles. “What’s that? The debate team?”

“Dare!”

“Not as often as I’d like.”

As he’d like. He wants to go down on more women.

And now that’s the vision in my head—Dare, pushing my legs apart, pressing his lips to my thigh, murmuring some dirty talk I can’t even begin to imagine.

“You know, three of your girlfriends asked me about that senior year,” I say.

“About...?”

“They asked me if ‘the rumors were true.’”

He stares at me blank-faced.

“About the pineapple juice. If you really drank so much you tasted like—”

“Heaven?” He laughs and drifts into a memory. “If they asked, they didn’t know.”

That’s a good point, actually.

“I thought you were smart.”

“How am I supposed to reply to that?”

He smiles. “Where’s your logic?”

I flip him off. I shift away from the overly explicit topic at hand. “Was that the last time you had a girlfriend?” I ask. “Senior year?”

“Probably.”

I start to ask a question, but I stop myself. Even with the air-conditioning booming, the thought of Dare’s past and future girlfriends makes me nauseous. “Can we watch a movie now?”

“Only if it’s *Sabrina*.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

I grab my iPad, hand him an earbud, and set up on the tray.

After we watch *Sabrina* and (almost) line up viewings of Dare’s pick (*10 Things I Hate About You*, because it’s “relevant to our mission,” not because he actually loves high school rom-coms) on the entertainment system, we take turns napping, sleeping on each other’s shoulders, trading blankets and snacks.

The flight is easy. As easy as any thirteen-hour flight can be. Even as I hold his hand through descent, even as we move through customs.

All the way until I slide in a cab and turn my phone on and see a text from Archie.

Archie: Well, I hope you’ll confess soon.

It’s exactly what I want. A chance at an easy summer fling.

So why does it feel wrong?

Chapter Twelve



T rue to her word, Val suggests we go straight to the beach. It's a sweet offer, but she's barely awake—she never sleeps well on airplanes—and I want her to savor our dip.

After we agree on her place, she gives the driver the address and falls asleep on my shoulder.

I hold her close—probably too close—as I take in the scenery. Barcelona is gorgeous. Sunny and bright, with a mix of old-school architecture and modern buildings.

There's something quaint about the city. Like San Diego or Mission Viejo. But then, I guess this was the template for both. The Spanish came to Mexico, took the land from the natives, built what they knew.

Val mentions the similarity—mostly to complain she never wants to hear someone compare San Diego and Barcelona again—but she never talks about how it feels to her.

Her mom is from Mexico. Her dad is from Spain. They met at work, at a Spanish-language TV station in California, and things were good for a while. When they weren't, their cultural difference became an issue.

It mattered that her mom was darker, from a less prosperous country.

The same way it mattered my mom didn't have the money my dad did. Well, not the same, exactly, but the threads overlap.

Val never talks about it. She never talks about her parents, not anymore. Even when her mom met another guy, got remarried, she only really talked about her mom taking the guy's name.

The politics went over my head. I try to keep up with her, but she's smarter than I am. She understands nuances I don't. It's different for her. As a woman, as a racial minority, as a survivor.

We've barely discussed it in the past three years. Ever since she told me I was hovering, that she didn't want to hear about it anymore, and went a few months barely texting me.

I know she didn't do that to hurt me, the same way I didn't obsess over protecting her to hurt her, but the memory stings.

What if I push her too hard again? If, this time, she decides she'd rather go a few years without talking to me?

I can't lose her that way.

I can't.

So, yeah, I'll play by her rules. The way I have since she went back to school, earned another set of straight As, insisted she didn't want to date because she was focused on school, the GRE, grad applications.

She's going to do amazing things. And I'm so fucking proud of her. A grad program on the neuroscience of film. Who else would think of that?

One day, I'll say I knew her when.

Or say, have you met my whip-smart wife, Val? She's an actual brain scientist, you know?

Fucking Luna.

She's infecting my mind. And she's probably there, on my cell, waiting for details, or delivering lectures, or some other bullshit.

What the hell is wrong with her anyway? Trying to convince me I'm in love with my best friend.

Ridiculous.

Val stirs as we park in front of her complex. She looks around and lets out an adorable yawn. “Already?”

“Slept through a lot of traffic.”

“I did not.”

She didn’t. The drive went fast. It’s early evening. At least, it looks like early evening.

We spent almost an entire day in transit. Well, minus the time difference.

Val yawns again. “Let me check if Archie is here.”

Right. He’s her roommate. He’s here, all the time. He sees her in her pajamas, in a towel, in nothing.

She doesn’t dive into dirty thoughts. She stays on task. “He’ll probably want to meet you before he lets you in.”

It’s reasonable, but I don’t like it. “Does he water your cacti?”

“He probably drowned them.” She shakes her head.

A memory fills my mind—the summer she spent traveling with her dad and sister. Even though her mom promised to take care of her plants, even though cacti can survive without care for a long time, Val came home to a windowsill of dead plants. She cried over them, but it wasn’t really about the succulents. More about her mom breaking promises. About how she’s the one who has to take care of herself.

I hate the thought of Val coming home to another set of dead plants, even if these drowned rather than dying of thirst. Or maybe because they did.

Overdoing it is just as deadly as underdoing it.

“Who’s watering the ones in your bedroom?” I ask.

“My sister.” She opens the door, slides out of the car, stretches her arms over her head.

I copy the gesture. It feels good. It feels better than sex, actually. Fresh air and movement after thirteen hours of stillness.

I want to run around the block.

I want to drop and do fifty push-ups.

I want to shower and sleep.

How can I be exhausted and ready to move at the same time? This international travel thing is exhausting. Too exhausting.

Val finishes a text as I help the cabbie with the luggage. When I'm finished setting the suitcases on the wide sidewalk in front of the building, she's frowning.

"He's not here?" I ask.

"No. He is. He's just..."

I raise a brow.

"He didn't realize you're staying here."

He's jealous. Of course he's jealous. She's gorgeous, and I'm every nerdy guy's idea of competition—a smooth player with tattoos and a leather jacket. At least, that's how they see me. That's all they see.

"I told him," she says. "But he... he's being stupid."

"Men often are." Especially when they're thinking with their dicks. Which is good for our mission. She wants him. So I want him to want her.

"You can stay in my room if he makes it into a thing."

In her room.

In her bed.

Next to her, in her pajamas, sleeping together.

Why does that sound so enticing?

She slips her cell into her purse and surveys the luggage, deciding what to carry first. After she checks everything, she wishes the cabbie well and gathers her hot pink bag.

"I can get that," I say.

The front door swings open, and a guy in light Bermuda shorts and a green short-sleeved button-up shirt steps outside.

He's good-looking in a dorky way. With a slight air of *I know better than you*.

But that might be me. I stereotype educated guys because they've mostly treated me a certain way. They're nice to other smarty-pants. But lowly tattoo artists?

We're cute, to them. As if our entire career and culture is some sort of silly whim. *Wow, tattoos, what a neat hobby? I love craft beer. Or, worse, did you know the first tattoo was performed in some historically inaccurate context. Or with some inaccurate device.*

If I had a dollar for every white guy who told me tattoos are popular with the Yakuza and somewhat taboo elsewhere in Japan, I'd have enough money to upgrade my return flight to first class.

"Hey, V." Archie greets Val with a smile. "I missed you." He takes the suitcase from her and pulls her into a hug.

After he releases her, I shoot her a *really* look. Since when does she let guys carry stuff for her without permission?

She shrugs *why turn down free help?* "Thanks, but maybe say hi to Dare first?"

"Oh, you go by that in person too?" He takes one hand off the suitcase and offers it to me.

"Yeah," I say. "'Cause you gotta dare a girl to kiss me."

"Funny." He doesn't laugh.

I shake his hand. "True."

"Maybe when you came up with it in middle school," Val says.

"Tricky came up with it," I say.

"Tricky?" His nose scrunches. He doesn't approve of Patrick's nickname either.

"Patrick," Val says. "Dare's other best friend."

"In his dreams." Yeah, Tricky and I have been friends a long time, but we've never shared openly the way Val and I

do. Until he suffered personal tragedy, then fell in love, he kept conversations surface level. The way I do with everyone besides Val.

Archie nods, not quite following or interested but playing along all the same. He's good at it. And he's handsome too.

I'm man enough to admit it. Sure, he's a little shorter (about Val's height), but he's well-built and well-dressed, and he's even got nerdy-hot glasses *and* a British accent.

Women love smart guys with British accents.

Good for Val.

Even if she's not feeling it, she can close her eyes and listen to him say *anything*, and she'll sink into some fantasy of banging a Brit. There's some American insecurity that has us swooning over the upper-class accent. Some classicism and cultural inferiority baked into our culture. Or maybe women can picture any guy with an accent as Tom Hardy. One of the two.

"No, in reality. You two are always giving each other shit," Val says. "Patrick is hilarious. And he has this girlfriend who's totally your type."

"What's my type?" he asks, confused.

Right. We're supposed to convince him Val is into him.

She stays off-topic. "Wait, did Tricky and his girlfriend make up?"

I should push back to flirting, but for some reason, I can't bring myself to do it. "I didn't tell you?"

She shakes her head.

"She came into Inked Love to talk to him," I say.

"Really?" she asks.

"Yeah. Forgave him in front of all of us," I say.

"You didn't ruin the moment?" she asks.

"I tried, but her love was too powerful," I say.

She laughs and gives her roommate a quick rundown of Patrick and Imogen's situation. Luna referred Imogen to the shop for a new tattoo (they're both on the swim team at UCLA), where Imogen met Patrick. She invited him to her place for a one-night thing, which turned into a friends-with-benefits thing, which blew up when she realized Patrick was reading her online journal (I'm not supposed to know that, but I got it out of Luna).

He was reading it first, before he met her (long story), but then kept doing it.

Messed up.

But totally understandable.

If I had that sort of insight into Val's head? That would be hard to resist.

Archie takes in the story with mild interest. "You find that romantic?"

"Val doesn't find anything romantic," I say. "Besides *Sabrina*."

Confusion spreads over his face.

"The Audrey Hepburn film," I say.

"I'm familiar with it." He looks to Val. "I didn't know you liked it."

How is that even possible? She has a poster in her bedroom at home. She talks about the movie all the time. She talks about Billy Wilder movies all the time.

"It never came up," she says.

"You're not watching it three times a week?" I ask.

"No. Only once this semester," she says. "With *Zelda*."

Okay. Maybe she doesn't need the fantasy of a European makeover when she's living it. Or maybe she's trying to let go of old things. Whatever it is, I don't like it.

But it's not my place to comment. I'm here to help her get laid. I need to use this info.

She watched with his ex, Zelda. The three of them were close.

Maybe he was picturing threesomes. Or waiting for his ex to leave to put the moves on Val.

Archie stays on topic. “Did she like it?” he asks.

“Not really.” She turns to me with a knowing look. “Zelda has dark tastes. She likes movies about murder and sadness. She was in one of my German cinema classes. We did our homework in the living room. Archie would come by and say, ‘I wish I was a film major,’ and we’d tease him back, because he’d never join. Not even for *Casablanca*,” she says. “Obviously, we weren’t watching that for the German cinema class. More for fun.”

She wants to sleep with someone who doesn’t like *Casablanca*?

I mean, sure, that’s a silly reason to pick a partner, and *Casablanca* might as well be called *Mansplaining: The Movie*, but this is Val. She lives and breathes classic cinema.

“He will occasionally watch some film noir,” she says. “But that’s it.”

“So you’re more into the movies where everyone is out for themselves?” I ask.

“A reflection of the world.” He nods.

Maybe.

And maybe Val believes that’s how she sees the world. But she isn’t watching *The Maltese Falcon* on repeat. She isn’t replaying *Double Indemnity* or *Strangers on a Train* or even erotic thrillers from the nineties.

She re-watches *Sabrina* and *Casablanca* (sure, duty ultimately triumphs over love, but the main character does the right thing) and *Bringing up Baby*.

She believes in love.

She believes in people.

And this guy?

Well, I guess this is what she wants. A guy who's looking for something easy.

And I'm fine with that.

Really.

Chapter Thirteen



To his credit, Archie doesn't go full dick-measuring contest over who can carry the heavier bags.

We help Val into the tiny elevator (common in Europe, apparently) with the two biggest bags, then we take the rest up the stairs.

No conversation, all grunting. Even though we have to hike four flights, we beat her there (European elevators are slow). I step aside, allow him to help her out of the tiny metal box, open the door for her, help her inside.

The place is gorgeous—a small kitchenette and a den with a TV, a low couch, and a coffee table—but it only has a few touches of Val.

Some of her mom's DVDs next to the TV, a few old books stacked nearby, cacti lining the window (which looks out to a courtyard, where, just like in the movies, people hang their laundry on their balconies).

The rest of the room is sparse. Bare white walls, beige couch, grey pillows, camel rug. There's no color, no life, no excitement.

Exactly what I expect from a guy like Archie.

“My bedroom is over here.” She motions to a sliding door. “And Zelda's is here.” She motions to a non-sliding door on the other side. “I put new sheets on the bed before I left. If that's still okay with you, Archie. If not, you can crash in my room.”

“No, of course it’s fine.” He jumps to keep me out of Val’s bed. “*Me casa es su casa.*”

This is good. Progress. He’s basically admitting he wants her. I should be happy about this turn of events, but I’m not. I have to force my “thanks.”

She moves to the second bedroom, pulls the door open, leads me inside.

The ex-roomie, Zelda, I guess, moved out when the semester ended, even though she’d paid through the summer. A lucky break. I don’t mind the couch, but I certainly prefer a bed. And privacy. Say, for taking the edge off before I go out with Val.

Ahem.

The bedroom is almost as sparse as the main room. A queen bed with white sheets and an ivory comforter, a small wood desk, a bookshelf packed with Spain travel books, and a few Spanish movie posters on the walls. Some of Spanish language art movies. Some Spanish versions of American blockbusters.

I have a hard time imagining the dark, German film-loving Zelda staring at a *Die Hard* poster, but stranger things have happened.

I set my suitcase next to the desk, then I follow Val into the living room.

Again, she stretches her arms over her head. “I should do a better introduction, but I’m dying to shower.” She lets out another yawn. “And nap before we go out.”

“You want to go out tonight?” Archie asks.

“You’re welcome to join,” I say. See. I’m friendly. I’m a wingman. I’m killing it.

“I have work tomorrow,” he says.

“How about dinner then?” I suggest.

“We’ll still be out until ten,” he says.

She laughs. “We can go to that pizza place you like. The one that’s open all day.”

She doesn’t like pizza (I know, she’s a weirdo), but okay, I guess she needs to sweeten the deal somehow.

She gives him a hug and turns to me. “There should be a towel in the bedroom if you want to take the next shower.”

“Thanks,” I say.

She rushes to the bathroom.

The ambient noises fill the space. The low chatter of nearby conversations, traffic outside, running water.

Absolutely nothing from Archie or me.

After a long, long stretch of near silence in the joyless space, he attempts small talk.

“How was your flight?” Archie asks.

“Long,” I say. “But otherwise fine. Watched a few great movies, drank a few gin tonics, slept a few hours.”

He nods. “I put on a pot if you want something.”

“Coffee?”

“The dark roast Val likes,” he says.

That’s considerate. He cares about her needs. And I appreciate that. Really.

See. I like him. I want this for her. I help.

“Sure, thanks.” I follow him into the kitchenette (only a few steps—the space is bigger than my apartment, but not by much).

He pours two mugs.

I find half-and-half in the fridge and sugar in the pantry. Ah, it’s not up to Val’s standards, but it’s not bad.

Drinking coffee after so many hours of waking feels odd, but I need the energy.

“Do you two have an itinerary?” he asks. “For your trip?”

“Just here and Paris.” About a week in each. Enough to see the major sights and the smaller ones. Not that I care about climbing the Eifel Tower or touring the Louvre. As long as I can wander the cobblestone streets with Val, I’m happy.

“Beautiful cities,” he says.

“Romantic too.”

“If you say so.” Sure, Paris is called The City of Lights, and sometimes, The City of Love, but no one is talking up Barcelona as a sexy or sweet spot. People know the city for two things: weird architecture and cheap sangria.

“Are you and V looking for a romantic mood?” His voice stays all business.

But I catch the jealousy anyway. And, well...

Jealousy is the best way to force someone to realize what they want.

Or a way.

Because if it was the best way, that would mean some unfortunate stuff for me. And I’m not adding those things together at the moment. Math isn’t my strong suit anyway.

“I’m even less romantic than Val,” I say.

“So you two are...”

“Old friends.”

He nods and takes a sip. “She told me she has a crush on someone.”

Right. That’s the story. That’s what I told her to say.

“Did she drop any clues?”

He studies me carefully. “She said, he’s someone she trusts.”

And he can see I’m someone she trusts. Right. I need to tell him that’s not it. But then, I can’t make him jealous if he’s sure she’s not into me. So I do what I usually do: I adopt a poker face. “Anything else?”

“Nothing I could piece together.” He keeps his voice steady and matter-of-fact. “She wasn’t talking about you, was she?”

He’s direct. I’ll give him that. “You’d have to ask her.” I shrug like I have no idea what he’s talking about.

He nods, accepting the answer without a hint of the typical male aggression I expect. There are hints of jealousy in his expression, but there’s no hostility to it.

He’s a well-adjusted, sweet, non-threatening guy.

He isn’t a terrible choice for this. He’s a great choice, actually.

Safe.

That’s what she needs.

“How did you and Val meet?” He makes perfectly pleasant small talk in a friendly-enough tone.

I play along. “My dad moved in next door when I was in middle school.”

“What was she like then?”

My lips curl into a smile. Val in middle school? Now, that was fun. “A dork. She had braces and these super-thick glasses.”

He smiles at the mental image. “She looks cute in her glasses.”

“She looks hot in her glasses.” Why the fuck did I say that? I bite my tongue, so I don’t say anything else I need to take back.

He looks at me funny, like he’s not sure if I’m staking a claim or not.

Shit. “Don’t you think?”

“They suit her.”

“They suited her at thirteen too. Even more, maybe. She rocked bright red frames. They screamed *nerd*.” And they

brought out the flecks of honey in her eyes. And announced her boldness and love of color to the entire world.

He smiles at the thought of nerdy teenage Val. “You have any pictures?”

“I could find some—” Okay, wingman duties, here goes. I don’t have to like it. I just have to do it—“If you come out with us.”

“Bribing me?”

I nod. “And this is well worth it. You’ll see what bands she secretly loved in high school.”

He laughs and sips his coffee. “What about you? What did you love in high school?”

“Girls.”

“Musically?” he asks.

“Anything that wasn’t nu-metal.” When he looks at me funny, I explain. “My brother’s favorite. You?”

He names a dozen artists I’ve never heard of. And Fiest. “It’s funny how women in the music industry are always gorgeous,” he says. “It’s not a fair world.”

That’s true. And it’s the kind of observation Val appreciates. Maybe he’s more than a safe fuck. Maybe he’s a decent guy for her. I swallow the thought and return to small talk.

“Are you a musician?”

“I’m in a jazz band, but I haven’t had time in a while. Pre-med courses were brutal. Then I went right into working at a lab.”

“How did you and Val end up living together?”

“Stroke of luck, I guess. She knew Zelda from a class. And, uh, Zelda and I used to date.”

I know her side of the story, but I want to hear his. I pretend I don’t have a clue. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Last semester,” he says. “We broke up but we didn’t want to find a new place, so we split the space.”

“The two of you were staying in a three bedroom?” I ask.

“My parents are generous with their help,” he says.

“That’s lucky,” I say.

“Yeah, and we were lucky to find Val. She’s a great roommate.” His voice is honest, sincere. He likes her, as a roommate and friend, at the very least.

“Besides the movies in the living room?”

He laughs. “She does go late, sometimes, but I’ll take that over nonstop parties.”

“Or loud sex.” I test the subject.

He doesn’t bite. “She ever bring anyone home?” Why am I asking? I trust her. And this is too aggressive for Bermuda Shorts.

“Not that I’ve noticed.” He looks me in the eyes, man to man, no aggression, no hostility, just a single question. “Is that because you two...”

Yeah, she’s been in love with me all this time. “We’ve only kissed once.” I swallow hard and force myself to explain. “Back in high school. ‘Cause she wanted to practice before she kissed her boyfriend for the first time.”

Archie lets out a nervous laugh and looks to the bathroom door. “Do you mind if I call you Darren?”

“It’s my name.”

“Val talks about you a lot,” he says.

That’s not a question, but I know what he means. I used to hear it often. *Val talks about you all the time. Are you sure you’re just friends?*

“It’s really not my place,” he says. “But I know you two are leaving for Paris soon. And she probably told you I’m leaving soon.”

“About a week, right?”

“Four days,” he says.

“Pretty soon.”

“I might not get another chance to say it.” He clears his throat. “If it’s out of line, forgive me. I just want the best for Valeria.”

“Me too.”

He nods with familiarity. “She really cares about you.”

There’s something odd about his tone, something I can’t explain. But there’s really only one way to respond. “I care about her too.”

“She’s worried she’s going to disappoint you.”

What? Why would Val ever worry about that? As long as she tries, she’ll never disappoint me. She’s the smartest, most capable, most badass person I know. “She could never,” I say.

“If the program is too hard. Or she decides she wants to do something easier.”

“Has she mentioned that possibility?” I ask.

“Not explicitly,” he says. “But it happens to a lot of people. A PhD is an ordeal. She’s going to spend a lot of years working sixty-hour weeks, barely making ends meet.”

“It’s what she wants.”

He looks to the door. “I know it’s not my place to say. And I... Well, you’re a tattoo artist, right?”

Here it comes. “Yeah.”

“So you’re a small business owner, basically?”

That’s more respect than I expect. “More or less.”

“Every month is different. Sometimes, they’re lean, sometimes they’re fat.”

That is accurate. I nod.

“My mom ran a business when I was growing up. Eventually, it did well, and she sold it for a lot of money, but I

remember how hard it was in the early days. I don't know if that's what Val wants."

I don't get the chance to respond.

Val steps out of the bathroom, wet hair falling over her shoulders, a tiny towel wrapped around her curvy body.

She looks sexy as hell.

And he notices.

He absolutely notices. I practically see the cartoon hearts in his eyes.

"Ooh, is that coffee?" She moves to the kitchen and fills a cup, leaving tiny drops of water on the hardwood floor. "You're a lifesaver, Archie."

"Of course." He beams from her praise.

He wants her.

And that doesn't bother me.

Not even a little.

Chapter Fourteen



After a short nap, I linger in bed for an extra twenty minutes. Then another twenty. The soft sheets feel far too good after thirteen hours in the air.

Then Dare knocks and everything feels good in a different way.

“Hey.” He taps the door again. “You decent?”

“What if I sleep in the nude?” I don’t sleep naked, but I don’t wear much. There is air-conditioning in this building (rare, for Europe), but it’s not California strength (common, for Europe). The room is warm.

And knowing Dare will see me in my skimpy tank and shorts?

Why is it so hot in here?

Right. The weak air-conditioning. Of course. That’s a perfectly reasonable explanation. The only necessary explanation.

“Then you should probably put something on.” He taps the door again. “Ten seconds.”

There’s no sense in waiting. “Come in.”

Dare slides the door open, steps inside, slides it shut behind him. He surveys the space with a smile. “No One Direction posters.” His smile disappears. “No posters.”

“I didn’t pack any.”

He nods, accepting the answer, but not liking it. He doesn't say it, but he communicates it all the same. *Is this lack of décor because of The Incident? 'Cause I don't buy the whole "I'm too busy" thing.*

It is, but I don't want to focus on the past. Better to consider the future. "Should I get a beefcake pinup?" I try to keep the mood light. I know where he wants to go. And it's fair to go there, sure. After a full night of sleep.

"Hell, yeah. Let's go to a sex shop."

"A sex shop?" I play dumb, as if I don't know there are a bajillion sex shops in Barcelona.

"They're everywhere here." He shoots me a *really* look. "You think I can't Google? There's even a Museum of Sex."

There's a mini sex-zone on the outskirts of the Gothic Quarter, actually. And it's on the way to the beach too. "Do we need to go?"

"First stop."

"The beach is our first stop," I say.

"It's on the way."

Damn.

"You thought I'd miss that?"

Thought? No. Hoped? Yes. The sheet falls as I sit up.

Dare's eyes go to the thin straps of my tank top. My shoulders. My chest.

My skin flushes. My thoughts scatter.

This feels intimate. But that's normal. I'm in pajamas. I'm in bed, in my room. I've never invited anyone into this space, much less a man.

And, yes, Dare is my best friend, but for some reason, I'm acutely aware of his masculinity at the moment.

He's still wet from his shower, and he smells like the soap he uses at home—something with pine, I think. His white t-shirt sticks to his broad chest.

Is he more built than he was six months ago? Ten days ago?

Why are his tattooed arms so appealing all of a sudden?

“I’m smarter than I look.” He moves across the room, motions to the bed *may I?* When I nod, he sits a few feet from me. “Of course, I don’t look too smart, so that’s not saying much.”

“You know the bimbo thing won’t fool me.”

“Bimbo is an ugly word,” he says. “Only us bimbos can say it.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, we’re taking it back.”

“You’re not dumb.” I don’t know why he pretends he is.

“Neither are most supposed bimbos.” He raises a brow *think about it.*

“You’re messing with me?”

He motions *a little.* “I’m outclassed here.”

“You are not.”

“Really? The med student and the PhD student and the guy with an associate’s degree?”

Does he really see himself that way? “How long did you apprentice?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“How long?” I ask again.

“Two years,” he says.

“That’s four years of education. Same as me,” I say. “And there are plenty of other ways to be smart.” I turn toward him. “Body smart. Life smart. People smart.”

“Sex smart?”

Is he proud of his skill? Or is this part of his whole I’m cute and dumb thing? “You have any idea how bad I am with people?”

“Some, yeah.” He laughs. “You shut down your new boy-toy, hard, every time he tried to flirt.”

“I did not.”

“You did. We’re gonna have to practice.”

“How will we do that?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Flash cards.”

“Okay, you work up flash cards and I’ll study,” I say.

“Run drills. Roleplay.”

“Now?” I ask.

He checks the time on his watch. “Almost dinnertime.”

“Almost beach time.”

“Let’s go in the morning,” he says. “I’m starving.”

On cue, my stomach growls. It’s more confused than hungry—between snacks on the plane, enough coffee to keep a small army awake, and the nine-hour time difference, it’s got no idea what’s going on—but it is hungry. “I could eat.” I’d rather go to the beach, but I’m willing to wait.

“In the morning, first thing, I promise.”

“Okay.”

“Well... after a sex shop.”

My cheeks flush.

“They’re on the way.” He smiles. “Don’t worry. We can hit the sex museum on the way back.”

“It’s really not that exciting,” I say.

“Have you been?”

“No,” I admit.

“Then you don’t know.”

Maybe.

He stands and stretches his arms over his head with his yawn.

It's contagious. I yawn too. But I still manage to catch a glimpse of his abs as his t-shirt slides up his stomach. Is that a new tattoo? Did I miss it at the party?

When did he get so... yummy?

"Shit, Val, is it too much?" He lowers his arms.

Yes, lose the shirt. It's definitely too much. "Huh?"

"The museum? There's explicit shit there. In an educational context, but still."

"Oh, no, I don't think so."

"You sure? 'Cause I don't mind skipping," he says.

"No, I think it's okay. But thanks," I say.

"We can leave if it's—"

"Dare—"

"Yeah?" he asks.

"I appreciate you looking out for me."

"But?" he asks.

"Can you take it down a notch or two? I'm a big girl. If I need a break, I'll ask." I don't even blink at the suggestion of my size. Sure, I mostly wear plus-size attire. What's it matter, at this particular moment?

When I was younger, I thought it meant men wouldn't be interested. Then, for two years, I wished it meant that. But it's not the case. Sure, I'm not everyone's type, but no one is. Most guys don't mind a little extra padding. Some are even into it. *Too* into it.

But hey, I'm not worried about what some random jerk thinks (a lot of guys think I'm easy because I have big boobs and a big butt). I'm seducing my roommate.

"I'm working through stuff," I say. "I have to actually face some of that stuff."

"There's a wall of dildos."

"Even so," I say.

“And a vagina chair.”

“Well, that’s just sensible.” I try to take the tone back to teasing.

His voice lightens. “I’m thinking about getting one for the Inked Love waiting room.”

“Oh my god.” A laugh spills from my lips. “Can you imagine?”

“It would fit right in with the pink string lights.”

“And draw absolutely no attention from the residents of Santa Monica.” The beach city is liberal, overall, but it has a family values streak too. The hipster coffee shop next door might love the vagina chair. The company that rents the space to the guys at Inked Love? Not so much.

“Absolutely.” He smiles and offers his hand. “Can you be ready in ten?”

“Sure.”

“Wear something hot. I convinced Archie to come.”

Disappointment fills my chest. Which is silly. I asked him to help with this mission. I’d just rather start tomorrow and spend tonight with Dare. Just the two of us, touring Barcelona. I force a smile anyway. Okay, not quite a smile. More of a neutral expression. “How’d you do that?”

“Trade secret.” He mimes zipping his lips. “You need help with the outfit?”

“You’re offering me fashion help?” I’m not *that* hopeless. I wear cute stuff.

“You have a problem with my style?”

My eyes go to the v of his t-shirt. The hint of the locked heart on his chest. I still remember the day he showed it off. *Really, Dare, a locked heart? Why not write I’m a cliché on your forehead?*

So you don’t like it?

Did I say that?

So you love it?

Maybe.

Then say it.

It's perfect for you.

“You know you look good,” I say. “But you wear the same outfit every day.”

“There are subtle differences. And it's not fashion. It's male perspective.”

I can highlight my assets while downplaying my less conventional appeal. Boobs, basically. I know men like boobs. Skirts too. That easy access thing. Usually, the idea of easy access makes me cringe—what an unsexy way to put things—but there's something appealing about the mental image of a guy slipping his hand under my skirt, between my legs.

No.

Not a guy.

Dare.

No. Not going there. “I think I know the gist.”

“The gist, maybe, but not the depths of our depravity.” He looks around the room until he spots the closet. “Let me see the choice. I'll close my eyes if you change.”

That's what we always do. That's normal. It should feel normal too. It shouldn't feel like he's asking me to do a strip tease.

He's not.

This is friendly advice. Friendly advice designed to help me score another man.

Dare makes a show of closing his eyes and putting his hands over them.

I stand and move to the closet. Most of my summer clothes are sitting in my suitcase, in need of a wash, but I left a few promising items here.

High-waist jeans I can pair with a white crop top or a red wrap top.

A breezy white sundress.

A casual pair of shorts and a tank.

And a snug sheath with a square neckline, a high slit, and a breathable fabric.

The sexiest thing here... well, besides the underwear.

The dress I bought as a homework assignment from my therapist. Something that makes me feel sexy.

And it does, really.

And that feels good.

But there's a place where it feels dangerous too. Because what if that attracts the wrong person?

Because it's too close to the dress I was wearing when I—

A different shape, sure, but the same color.

And for all my improved ability to accentuate my body without shame, I just—

I'm not there, yet.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask for a distraction.

"Boobs."

"Really?"

He shakes his head. "This is going to distract you."

Perfect. I need a distraction. "Tell me anyway."

He negotiates. "Pick an outfit. Then I'll tell you."

"Fine." I grab the jeans and the crop top. There. No "easy access" but a good amount of boob. Let's be honest, I'm not ready for "easy access." "Picked. Your turn."

"I was thinking about Archie." His voice is matter-of-fact, though it's sometimes hard to tell with Dare's deadpan affect, as if this is a typical subject. As if we're planning dinner, not seduction. "We need to flirt with him."

“We?” I shift out of my pajamas. I feel the air-conditioning on my skin. The sun streaming through the window. The possibility of someone’s stare.

Dare’s stare.

My cheeks flush. My chest too. It’s a good thing he’s not looking at me, because I’m turning a very unattractive shade of red.

“Yeah, we,” he says. “You need help.”

I take a deep breath and force my thoughts to our mission. “He’s going to think we’re after a threesome.”

“Oh? You think he’d be into it?”

“Dare!”

He chuckles.

My cheeks flare. He’s picturing it, isn’t he? And now I’m picturing it. Dare in my bedroom, in only his jeans, pulling me onto his lap and telling Archie to watch while he demonstrates proper technique.

Shit. I’m supposed to put these clothes on. Not think myself into needing a new pair of panties.

But this is progress. I’m picturing a high-risk sexual situation—a threesome—and I’m not freaking out.

Okay, maybe it’s not ideal that I’m picturing myself naked in my best friend’s lap, but it’s, uh—

It’s a very vivid image.

And that means something.

I’m healing.

Or I’m insane.

Maybe both. Probably both.

I slide into the jeans. Which only makes me feel more exposed. There is something erotic about wearing only jeans. As if I’m inviting him to touch me.

I want to stand here and luxuriate in it. Because he's here. Because he's between me and the rest of the world, and I know no one can get past him to hurt me.

But I can't. Because we can't. I need to focus. "One guy at a time is plenty."

"Work up to it, yeah."

"How'd you know?" I tease. I don my bra and wrap top and slide into my espadrilles (I know, I know, I'm a study abroad cliché, but they really are comfortable). "Done. But I don't need approval. I need mascara and lipstick." Maybe brow pencil and a little under-eye concealer to make it less obvious I've been awake for twenty-two of the last twenty-four hours.

"Confidence is good." He opens his eyes, meets me in front of the dresser, gives me a long, slow once-over. "Val—"

"Good?"

"Great."

"Thanks."

His eyes linger on my chest. "But you're right. Lipstick."

I flip him off.

He smiles. "Men are simple creatures. They see lipstick. They think *I wonder how that tastes.*"

"Men can't tell if you're wearing lipstick."

"Not if it's something neutral, sure. But a bright red? A dark wine? You'd look hot in raspberry."

Does he actually think about this? "Where did you get this?"

"Luna."

The gorgeous woman with silver hair. My stomach flip-flops. My veins surge. She's dating someone else, but she's talking to him all the time. She's his friend. She's the one in his life every day.

That used to be my role.

I miss it.

“You two are close?” I ask.

“Yeah, she’s annoying.” He shakes his head. “You want her advice too?”

“What time is it in California?”

“Late enough she’s awake,” he says.

“I’m good.”

He nods *smart choice*. “Do whatever feels natural for you.”

“I know.”

“The guy’s probably seen you in your glasses.”

“I look cute in my glasses.”

“You look hot in your glasses.”

My cheeks flame. It’s a normal compliment for him, but it feels more intense somehow.

“Is he into the smart girl thing?”

“I don’t know.”

“No? He hasn’t brought anyone around?”

“No, uh. I think if he was seeing someone, he’d do it somewhere else, since Zelda was always here.”

Dare nods *makes sense*. There’s something else in his expression, something I can’t place, but I don’t linger on it.

I find my makeup bag in my suitcase. Pick a lipstick that falls halfway between neutral and fuck-me red. “You promise we’ll do the water first thing?”

He offers his pinkie. “It’s here when you’re ready.”

“Are you really going to flirt with Archie?”

“No. You’re going to flirt with Archie. I’m going to help.”

“How?”

“You’ll see.”

Chapter Fifteen



After I perfect my makeup, we meet Archie in the main room. He studies us carefully—not me, us—but I can’t quite figure out why. It might be jealousy. It might be a desire to taste my lipstick. It might be a desire to taste Dare’s skin.

Who knows?

Archie has never really given any indications of interest in men, but he’s pretty uptight, so it’s not like he’s talking sex twenty-four seven.

He doesn’t even blink when the Spanish students make fun of British people for being pruders—and Americans for being loud, Dutch people for being blunt, French people for not showering often enough... it’s not the most clever humor.

“Ready?” Dare shoots Archie a friendly smile. Only it’s not just friendly. There’s something else in it. Some masculine comparison.

Probably.

My best friend is right. I’m really bad at this. I was bad at this before The Incident. Now, I’m even worse.

“You two sure you’re awake enough to go out?” Archie asks.

After we nod, Archie leads us outside.

Our street isn’t completely swarmed, but it’s busy. Too busy to dive into any sort of deep conversation, but Dare still

makes an effort to ask Archie the usual getting to know you questions.

The city looks different with Dare by my side. Or maybe it's the time at home. Has the street always been this packed with tourists? Why didn't I notice we're three blocks from the shopping capital of Barcelona? Well, it's not that I didn't notice. I just didn't really think about it.

It's easy enough to avoid the row of shops (and more tourists), but for some reason, Archie is leading us past it.

I guess I never walk anywhere with Archie. Only the subway, really, on the way to or from school. I don't know where he goes or what he does when he leaves the apartment.

I hang close to Dare as the guys talk. It's nothing too interesting, Archie's thoughts on medical specialty, where he grew up, how he likes Barcelona compared to his hometown a few hours out of London, how he's excited to be in London for med school, but Dare keeps the conversation flowing.

The fifteen-minute walk passes in a blink. Sunset, warm air, the proximity of the one guy I trust.

I feel so much safer with him here.

I didn't even realize I could feel this safe.

Is there any way I can beg him to move to Orange County with me? Into the no-doubt tiny apartment I'll share with at least one other student as I attend grad school at UCI.

Irvine is only an hour from Santa Monica without traffic, but then how often are we without traffic?

It's practically an hour from Dare's place to his dad's house, and he still visits when I'm home. It doesn't have to feel different.

But it will.

Archie pulls the door open.

Dare nudges me.

Right. I'm not here to mourn the changes in my relationship with my best friend. I'm here to flirt with my

future fling.

Only, right now, the idea is totally unappealing.

It's late. I'm exhausted. Flirting takes a ton of energy. But I don't have to kill it. I just have to try. I smile and step through the door. "Thanks."

Archie holds it open for Dare too.

I signal the server and ask for a table for three. She eyes us with curiosity, not sure whether we're a trio of friends, a couple meeting a sibling, a study group, a possible threesome, but she doesn't say anything. She leads us to a seat and drops off menus.

I ask for tap water and thank her.

"Has she always taken to Spanish easily?" Archie asks.

"Her parents were fluent," Dare says.

"Dad didn't want Mom to speak too much Spanish. He thought I'd get confused. But she didn't really listen." I still feel her love when I hear declarations in Spanish. That's Mom telling me she loves me. That's Mom holding me close, asserting her role as my guardian. That's Mom, period.

"Was that really why?" Dare asks.

"It's what he said." I smooth my jeans, try to keep myself halfway between the guys. We're at a round table, but for some reason, I'm a little closer to Dare. For some reason, I don't want to scoot closer to Archie. "But I think he was jealous of her skill."

"Is he American?" Archie asks.

"He was born in the States," I say. "But he grew up here. Well, in Madrid. He was fluent in Spanish and English, but he didn't know Spanish the way my mom did. She has the ear of a poet."

"You're fluent enough to notice?" Archie asks.

"No." I know the language, but I'll always think in English. "I hear from friends of theirs. They had different

ideas about what was important. I don't think it's that he's a bad guy, exactly."

Dare raises a brow.

"He's not." Yes, my dad isn't Father of the Year, and he's really not (ex) Husband of the Year, but he's not a monster either. He tries.

"I didn't say anything," Dare says.

He doesn't have to say anything. We both know the situation. "You don't like him."

"It's not that." It's not that Dare doesn't like the guy. It's something more. "I just don't think he's around enough."

I can't argue with that. "Dad wanted me to live the American dream. Mom saw more value in the arts, in doing something uniquely mine." And, sure, after the divorce, Dad moved far away and let Mom do most of the child-raising, but it wasn't an act born out of neglect. It was his old-school upbringing.

Don't get me wrong. I don't excuse his behavior, exactly, but I don't curse it anymore either. He is who he is. And I know exactly how much I can count on him.

"What about you?" Archie asks.

"Do you want to live the American dream?"

"Does anyone our age believe in the American dream?" I ask.

Dare shakes his head *no way* and changes the subject. "Are you excited to start school in the fall?"

"I am." And scared. But no need to focus on two overwhelming things at once. "I can't wait. I know it's going to be hard, and I am worried about that."

The guys share a look. Something at my expense. Or about me. They've already been talking about me.

I ignore the *what the fuck* question that forms in my mind. "But I just want to learn, you know?" My cheeks flush. "I sound like a real nerd, don't I?"

“You are,” Dare says. “Why hide it?”

“It’s cute,” Archie agrees.

My blush deepens.

The server returns with a carafe of water and three tiny glasses.

“You want to share two things?” Dare asks.

“Depends on the two,” I say.

“A salad and a pasta?” he asks.

“The Caesar and the Bolognese?” I ask.

“What else?” he asks.

Archie looks at us, a little lost, and orders a cheese pizza (personal size, of course, a la all Italian restaurants in Europe).

I ask the server to bring everything at once.

No one orders a drink. Archie isn’t a big drinker, I’m way too tired (I might crash right here after three sips), and Dare is always a “gentleman” with his orders. He orders the same drink as his partner in fun for the evening. Or at least a similar drink.

For all his talk about sleeping around, he’s always a gentleman with me.

Is he the same on his dates?

Is he sleeping with all the women he sees?

Maybe he’s flirting. Maybe he’s making out like a horny high school student. Maybe he’s rounding second and leaving it there.

Unlikely, sure, but the idea is appealing somehow. And terrifying in another way.

Because if Dare wants to have fun with someone he cares about and I’m not able to trust anyone else—

I really can’t consider what that means.

“You two always share?” Archie asks.

Dare raises a brow.

I kick him under the table. “Only sometimes.”

“My tastes aren’t as refined,” Dare says.

“Action movies and spaghetti and meatballs?” Archie asks.

“You do like action movies,” I say.

“Everyone likes *Die Hard*,” Dare says.

Archie laughs. “You saw Zelda’s poster? She had a soft spot for Bruce Willis.” He blushes. “I do too.”

A blush. That’s good. That means something positive, in flirting speak.

Dare raises a brow. “Really? Not exactly film noir.”

His blush deepens. “It’s my dad’s favorite movie.”

“A lot of dads feel that way,” Dare says.

“Yours?” Archie asks.

Dare tenses. “No.” He pushes the conversation along. He doesn’t like people noticing when he’s hurt or upset or frustrated. It took me years to learn his tells. He really rocks a poker face, especially with other people. “Did Zelda hate when guys talked down to her about movies? Val hates that.”

“Val is more knowledgeable about film than anyone I know.” Archie looks at me with affection.

I can’t tell if it’s friendly or flirty, so I smile, and say, “Thanks.”

Dare pushes the flirting forward. “Have you tried criticizing artists film bros love? Women love it when you insult the dudes their ex-boyfriends worshiped.”

“That sounds a little manipulative,” Archie says.

Dare shoots me a look. *Good answer*. He turns back to Archie. “Right. If you don’t mean it. But I legitimately hate Christopher Nolan.”

“Because his brother is obsessed with *The Dark Knight*,” I say.

Dare shoots me another look, but this time I have no idea what it means. He shakes his head and turns his attention to Archie. “What about you? What can a woman say to flatter you?”

“Anything, as long as she means it,” he says.

Dare nods with understanding. “Have any women tried to flatter you? Since the breakup.”

“I’ve dated a little here and there,” Archie says. “But no one special. Not right now.” He looks to me with a shy smile.

That’s a sign of interest. Even I see it.

“You have your eye on anyone?” Dare underlines the subtext.

“One person,” Archie says.

Dare looks to me, offering me the floor.

I’m supposed to say something here, but I have no idea what it is. Archie wants sincerity, and I can’t say, *well, I don’t really like you that much, but I think you’re a good choice for my mission here, so would you please consider having sex with me?*

When I fail to flirt back, Dare shakes his head. “Excuse me. Bathroom.” He stands and motions *something* to me as he walks away.

A moment later, my purse buzzes.

Oh. Right. We’re supposed to meet and strategize. I need his guidance. Maybe I do need him flirting for me. Not here. Some other way.

“Excuse me,” I say. “I should wash my hands.” I grab my purse and meet Dare in the hallway outside the bathroom.

We’re around the corner, out of view.

Dare shoots me a *what the fuck* look. “Why do you think I texted?”

“To rendezvous here,” I say.

He looks me up and down carefully. “Maybe flirting in person is too advanced for you. We can end this early. Text him from the bar.”

“We’re going to a bar?”

“After this.” He nods. “It’s a surprise. You’ll like it. I promise.”

My heart thuds against my chest. I trust him. I believe I’ll like it. I shouldn’t feel so nervous.

“Okay.”

“Good.” He nods. “I’ll salvage dinner. Keep the conversation going. I just need you to do one thing.”

“What?”

“Kiss him goodbye.”

Chapter Sixteen



Kiss him goodbye.

A completely reasonable suggestion that makes my stomach turn.

Which is ridiculous. I want to do this. I will do this.

Kissing. Touching. Casual sex.

It's happening.

I open my mouth to say, yes, of course, but for some reason, the word refuses to leave my lips.

"Can you do that?" he asks.

Again, I try to find the yes. Again, I fail.

"Val—"

"I don't know." That's the truth. I want to be able to do this, but I'm not sure if I can.

"Okay." He doesn't push. "How about a hug?"

"I can hug," I say.

"Hold it for at least five seconds," he says.

"How will I know?"

"Count," he says. "Ten is better. Twenty is great. But that's an eternity."

"Who did you hug for twenty seconds?" I ask.

"Brian," he says.

“Really?” The tension in my chest eases. He didn’t hug another woman for twenty seconds. He hugged his brother.

“Yeah. It’s a psychology thing,” he says. “Enough time to release oxytocin.””

Right. I know that.

“You’re the one who told me,” he says. “But Tricky’s girlfriend reminded me.”

She’s a psych major. Or was it econ? No, it’s both. We really do have a lot in common—her parents live in Orange County, don’t they?

We should talk. If I live through the trip.

Dare waits until I settle into the moment. “You want to feel the twenty second hug?”

“Yes. Please.” Not just for practice. Because I want to hold him for twenty seconds. Because I want him to hold me for a long, long time.

As a friend. Mostly.

Dare nods, slips his cell into his pocket, pulls me into his arms.

He feels good. Safe and warm and hard and dangerous all at once. But it’s not the danger I feel with other men. It’s the possibility of losing this.

“One,” he counts.

I rest my head in the crook of his neck.

“Two.”

He’s a little taller than I am. With the slight wedge of my shoes, we line up just right.

“Three.”

“Can you really count to twenty?” I ask.

He laughs. “Ten twice.” He taps his fingers against my upper back.

The fabric of my shirt is thin. I feel the heat of his hands, the pressure of his touch.

I want to feel more. I want his hands everywhere.

And, this time, I can't sell myself the idea of a friendly touch between the legs. I want that. I want him.

"I lost count," he says.

"I distracted you."

"I'm used to it." He pulls me a little tighter and releases me. "Now. Go back. Flirt. Or... talk about school or some shit, okay?"

I nod. It doesn't matter if I want Dare. That's a passing thing. I'll get over it, especially if I do manage to seduce my roommate.

He lets me go and moves into the bathroom.

I don't go back to Archie. I slip into the women's room, pee, wash, fix my lipstick.

There. I look good. And not just good for someone who stepped off an airplane this afternoon. Hot.

Of course, when I get back to the table, Dare is already there. He looks at me and shakes his head.

And even though I try to flirt, really, I never quite find the words.

I let Dare lead as we eat, pay, walk outside the restaurant.

"Are you sure we can't convince you to join for a drink?" Dare asks.

"Thanks, but I have an early day." Archie looks to me.

Dare clears his throat. "I'm gonna use the bathroom one more time. Meet you back here."

Oh. Right. I'm supposed to kiss him.

Hug him, at least.

I nod *no problem* and Dare leaves, and I'm alone with Archie in the cool evening air.

I don't feel anything. Not even nerves. "Thanks for coming out."

He nods. "Dare is a good guy. You were right." He laughs.

"The name is silly though."

"He's silly."

"Is he?" He taps his chin. "Yeah, he's got a sense of humor, but he's protective of you too. Almost like..." He looks to the restaurant and raises a brow.

I follow his gaze.

Dare isn't in the bathroom. He's in the front, pretending to look at his phone.

"He likes you," Archie says.

What? No. That's not possible. My entire body flushes. "We're just friends." It feels less believable than it usually does.

"No." Archie shakes his head. "You're not."

"I'm supposed to be flirting with you." Shit. Why did I say that? My cheeks flush.

Archie's laugh is awkward. "Why?"

"Because..."

"Because..."

Right. I should have a better answer. "It's been a while. And I... I don't want to make things awkward, but, uh, I want to have sex with someone before I leave Europe. I know I just left Europe and came back, but before I *really* leave. And you're cute and nice and you've always been sweet to me."

"You're a beautiful woman, Val."

Oh.

"But I don't want to get in the middle of whatever is happening here."

He looks to where Dare was standing. And, yeah, he's gone now, but the impression of him is obvious.

My best friend was here; he was watching; he was attentive and obvious and totally beyond what a normal friend does.

“If you two figure this out, you know where to find me.” He smiles and pulls me into a hug. “Good night, Val.”

“Good night.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’d make a great couple.” He kisses me on the cheek.

I nod good night.

And he leaves.

And I don’t feel any loss of him. Only the vague concern I’ll disappoint my best friend.

A moment later, Dare meets me outside. He surveys the area, noting the dark sky, the quiet conversations on the street corners, the total lack of Archie. “He already left? What happened?”

“He kissed me.” That’s true.

“You kissed him back?”

“On the cheek.”

He nods, good. “That’s progress. That’s great.”

I don’t tell him the rest. Because why should I? He thinks it’s great I kissed someone else.

That’s what we’re doing here. Dare is helping me sleep with Archie. Only Archie isn’t interested. So what the hell am I doing here?

“Don’t worry. We’ll seal the deal,” he says. “Just need to send a few flirty texts from our next location.”

“We need to send them?”

“Yeah, we. You ready?”

No, but here goes nothing.

Chapter Seventeen



The bar is a whirlwind of excess. Cotton-candy-like tissue paper clouds, twinkling lights wrapped around fake palm trees, comic-book-inspired art, neon signs.

A perfect place for my first night with Val.

Not because it's a gay bar—

Though, really, that's the ideal place for her to get her feet wet. She's not ready to flirt with her roommate. She's not ready to flirt with strangers. A friendly conversation or two with a man who isn't interested in screwing her is a good place for her to start.

It's not that I'm trying to c-block her. Sure, I hate the thought of Archie's lips on her skin, but I am doing this.

Eventually.

She has four days. We can take our time.

Why are you arguing with yourself?

We both know why you picked this place, and it's not the cheeky decor, as amazing as it is.

It's the lack of competition.

"I bet you've never been," I say.

"Well, yeah." She laughs. "We're in the gay neighborhood."

"The men's thong shop tipped you off?"

She nods. “Barcelona isn’t that big. But you’re right. I’ve never been. I love it already.” She studies the place with wide eyes and smiles. “It’s perfect. This time, when you threaten to kiss a guy if I don’t, you’ll actually have to follow through.”

A laugh spills from my lips. “True.”

She waves to the bartender, exchanges a friendly hello, turns to me. “He says sit wherever.”

Despite being a cool spot in a hip neighborhood, the inside of the bar is empty, there are a dozen patrons on the patio outside, smoking. And, sure, it’s early (ish) and a weeknight, but I’m still surprised the place is dead. And surprised I’m so relieved.

I want the quiet time with her.

Well, quiet is pushing it—this place might be in the dictionary under Loud Decor—but it’s still our space for the evening.

“The menu’s online.” She moves around the corner to a booth across from a mirror. “There’s a QR code here.”

“This is the second one today,” I say.

“They caught on here,” she says. “Not as much in the states.”

“You sound European. It suits you.” My eyes go to her red wrap top. The sharp line straight to her cleavage. “You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.”

I force my eyes to her collarbones. Her lips. “Sophisticated.”

She blushes. I think. Between the lighting and her skin tone, it’s hard to tell.

“Do you feel at home, here?”

“Sometimes,” she says. “Other times, not.”

“What times?”

“There’s a sense of history in Barcelona. It’s not as rich as London or Paris, or even Madrid. We’re more of a tourist spot. But I still love walking around and seeing buildings that have been here for generations.”

“Is it your favorite place in Europe?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes get hazy as she drifts into thought. “It’s too hard to pick. I love every city in a different way.”

“If you had to pick.”

She answers right away. “Here. It feels like home. Like California and like it’s a place I belong too. The city is so beautiful. I love the mix of modern stores and older buildings. The cobble stone streets and the Gaudi and the touristy parts of the harbor. And the beach. The beach... I can’t wait to take you tomorrow.”

I want to bottle her joy. I want to hold on to it forever. “Me either.”

“The vibe here is more laid-back too. There’s not the weird tension toward sex we have in the US. There are condoms on display in every single grocery store. They’re not hiding behind the counter as if they’re an embarrassment.”

“That’s never too much?”

The joy fades. Straight to concern over my concern. Val shoots me a *don’t* look. “You promised.”

I did. But I worry. The truth is, I don’t trust another guy with her. Not after what happened.

And, yeah, she’s my best friend, and I want her to have a fulfilling life, including sex with someone she wants, eventually, someone she loves.

I just—

I don’t want to picture it.

Even so, I nod, yes, I promised. I will try my best to not go full caveman. Tomorrow. When I’m over how much I hate the

thought of her with Archie. “Should we order?” I need to think about something else. At least for a minute.

“I need to survey my options.” She pulls out her cell and scans the QR code.

“Not straight to a gin tonic?”

“When I can have a cocktail served in a fake lollipop?” She flashes the menu from her phone.

“Or a moon,” I say.

“No. This is it.” She points to the image on her cell. “Perfect, right? And for you.” She scrolls to another drink and taps the screen.

“You’re ordering for me?”

“Just a suggestion.”

“Or I could order a vodka soda. Reject the entire premise of the bar.”

She laughs. “If you know what you like, you know what you like.”

I don’t really drink fruity cocktails. Not because they’re not macho. Because they’re too much. But, hey, when in Rome... Well, when at a gay bar in Barcelona. “You convinced me. This is it. The Elixir of Love.”

“That’s good luck.” She smiles.

Has her smile always been this beautiful? Has she always been this beautiful?

The deep red lipstick—that was a bad suggestion. It’s doing things to me. Sending my thoughts to places they absolutely shouldn’t go.

“Let me get these.” She slides out of the bar. “Since you got dinner.”

I nod. I try not to stare as she walks to the bar, but, hey, I’m right across from the mirror. And she looks fine as fuck in her snug jeans.

The position of this mirror—

There's so much potential to undo the tie holding together her wrap top, push the fabric over her bra, order her to watch as I toy with her.

Under her bra.

Then over her jeans.

They might be too thick. I might not be able to push her all the way. But the fun I'd have trying—

Red alert. Flag is flying.

I close my eyes, try to channel unsexy thoughts, but my body is too revved. My dick is in the driver's seat and it's not about to cede control.

No. This is worse. My head flits through memories of Val. All the times I noticed her curvy body and reminded myself *that's Val*.

The low-cut gown she wore to prom.

The breezy sundress she wore to graduation.

The summer she spent in her bikini, in her mom's pool.

The night she called me from school, crying, unable to get out a single word.

There.

That's what I need to remember. Val needs a guy like Archie. A guy as exciting as a vanilla latte. A guy who doesn't spend a two-minute interlude picturing her in a bikini.

Or out of a bikini.

Shit.

Back to the bikini.

Is my dick really this powerful? Since when can it override *that*?

"He's going to bring them out." Val's voice interrupts my attempt to corral my dirty thoughts. "You okay?"

"Tired." Too tired to put up walls between my sensible thoughts and my desire to see her naked.

“Me too.” She doesn’t notice my stare. She slides into the booth next to me.

Shit. Where’s my jacket? No, the leather jacket is too short. It doesn’t hide anything. And if I put it over my lap, I basically advertise the state of affairs.

I need to handle this the old-fashioned way. Thoughts of baseball and Mr. Dickson.

She rests her head on my shoulder. “I have to tell you something.”

I want to fuck you too. Let’s go back to the apartment right now. We can take it as slow as you want. I might come in my pants, yeah, but I can still take it slow. I love slow. I love the idea of drawing out your anticipation for ages. “Yeah?”

“This drink might do it.” Her voice is soft and sincere.

This drink might do it for me too. I might confess how much I want you.

“I might fall asleep right here.”

Oh. That’s a more reasonable warning. A warning from a friend to a friend. That’s what we are. Friends. “I can carry you home.”

“Can you really?”

“It would be easy,” I say.

“I’m heavy,” she says.

I shoot her a *get real* look, but my eyes only stay on hers for a moment. They go right to her chest. I’m at the perfect angle to stare at her cleavage.

“Don’t make me ask for a number, ‘cause I will.”

She clears her throat.

“Or make me offer to prove it.”

“You’d get tired.”

“I wouldn’t. But unless you’re ready to put up—”

“I better shut up?” she teases.

The sassy tone of her voice sends blood racing back to my dick. Val is gorgeous, yeah, and she's got a big, beautiful brain. I'm not sure which is sexier. I find my only hint of sense. "I wouldn't say it so rudely..."

I need to look somewhere else. To think of something else.

Finally, my gaze rises to her collarbones, neck, lips. Not that this is a better spot. I want to taste her. I really, really want to taste her.

"Should we text him?" I need a distraction. Now. "Or wait a few."

"Once we have drinks." She lets out an adorable yawn. "I, uh, I'm going to use the bathroom."

"Don't fall asleep in there."

"Not there. Here." She motions to the booth.

It is cozy. And she's acting weird. There's something in her voice, something I can't place.

Maybe she's tired.

Maybe my dick is desperate to find a clue of her interest.

Either way, I'm ignoring the desire racing through my veins. I'm helping her flirt with this guy. Period. The end.

I pull out my phone in search of something to send my blood back to my brain. Instead, I see a group text from Luna and Patrick.

Great.

Luna Locke: Did you kiss yet?

Patrick: No way. He can't sleep with her until the end of the trip.

Luna Locke: Why not?

Patrick: Because, after she gives into the desire, she'll see his personality.

Luna Locke: Not funny.

Patrick: Is it not?

Luna Locke: Yeah, he really likes her. It's pretty obvious.

Patrick: It is obvious.

Luna Locke: And, for some reason, she likes him too.

Patrick: Are you sure? I didn't see it.

Luna Locke: Are you kidding? When she thought I was his girlfriend? She was staring daggers.

Patrick: I didn't see that.

Luna Locke: You were distracted. You were distracted almost the entire time she was here!

I'm tempted to let them continue without me. But I don't.

Dare: You do realize this is a group text?

Luna Locke: Nice of you to finally join! I'll call Tricky ASAP.

Dare: Not necessary.

Luna Locke: So? Did you kiss her?

Dare: No. She's into her roommate.

Luna Locke: Is she though?

Dare: Yeah. I'm helping her flirt with him.

Luna Locke: How's that going?

Dare: Poorly. She's a terrible flirt.

Luna Locke: Or she's not actually into him?

Dare: You're crazy.

Patrick: Don't say crazy as an insult.

Luna Locke: Oh, yay, three-way!

Patrick: I'm not into you two that way.

Luna Locke: Don't even.

Dare: What should I say then? Luna is seeing shit that isn't there.

Luna Locke: It's there.

Patrick: Is it?

Luna Locke: Don't join if you won't help.

Patrick: The truth helps.

Luna Locke: You don't think he likes her?

Patrick: Of course he likes her. The question is if she likes him.

Luna Locke: Oh, I know! Let's text her.

Dare: Over my dead body.

Luna Locke: You can't stop me from texting a friend.

Dare: Actually, I can. I'm with her.

Luna Locke: Then why are you talking to us?

Dare: She's in the bathroom.

Patrick: Taking the pressure off?

Luna Locke: What?

Patrick: So she's not too excited?

Luna Locke: Women don't do that.

Patrick: You speak for all women?

Luna Locke: I thought you were into teasing your girlfriend, drawing it out for ages?

Patrick: She told you that?

Luna Locke: Maybe.

Patrick: What else did she tell you?

Dare: Should I let myself out?

Patrick: Maybe he needs to go to the bathroom and relieve himself.

Luna Locke: Where are you?

Dare: A bar.

Luna Locke: Right. Nine-hour time difference. How was the flight btw?

Dare: A little bumpy.

Luna Locke: And her place? What's it like?

Dare: Nice.

Luna Locke: And how sure are you she's in love with you too?

Dare: Nice try.

Patrick: It almost worked.

Luna Locke: He answered in his head.

Patrick: You read minds now?

Luna Locke: Always.

Patrick: What am I thinking now?

Luna Locke: You want to toy with your girlfriend.

Dare: Really, Tricky, any of us could have guessed that.

Patrick: Nice of you to rejoin us.

Dare: Why join when you two do such a great job without me?

Luna Locke: Aren't you running out of time with her in the bathroom?

I should be, yeah, but she's not back.

Dare: I'm not sure why I'm talking to you two.

Luna Locke: It's because you want someone to push you to admit your love.

Patrick: Maybe wait for day two.

Luna Locke: Sure, sleep on it.

Dare: She kissed this other guy.

Luna Locke: On your advice?

Dare: Yeah.

Luna Locke: Maybe that's why she's doing it, because it's your advice.

Dare: So, what? I switch my advice to "kiss me"?

Luna Locke: No. You find a reason.

Patrick: Didn't she ask you to show her how to kiss?

Luna Locke: She did? That's adorable!

Patrick: Yeah, when they were fourteen or something. It was her first kiss.

Luna Locke: Was it amazing?

The bartender interrupts with our drinks. He smiles knowingly, says something in Spanish, leaves.

Dare: I gotta go.

Luna Locke: We'll continue without you.

Dare: I know.

Luna Locke: She's your best friend, right?

Dare: Yeah.

Luna Locke: Be honest with her.

Dare: I can't do that.

Luna Locke: Why?

Dare: We'd never work. And I'm not going to mess things up.

Luna Locke: Suit yourself.

Patrick: Just keep your eyes open for a request to show her how to kiss again.

Luna Locke: A follow-up lesson?

Patrick: Imagine all the follow-up lessons you could have.

“Sorry I took forever.” Val slides into the booth next to me. “Had to fix my makeup for the ‘Instagrammable Cocktails.’”

Isn't the point to take a picture of the drink?

And since when does Val post drinks on her Instagram?

But, hey, that's a more plausible explanation than Patrick's.

“Ready?” she asks.

“To photograph the drinks?”

“Us first.”

That makes more sense. I nod.

She turns her cell to selfie mode and snaps a few shots. Normal smiles at first. Then something silly, like we did when we were kids. She sticks her tongue out. I give her bunny ears.

We laugh; she snaps a few photographs of the drinks, sets her cell on the table, raises her drink (in the disco ball and everything) to toast.

“To your future love.” She motions to my drink.

“To love.” Somehow, I say it with a straight face. To love. The possibility of me falling in love, staying in love, not fucking up love. I don’t believe it. But I don’t cringe the way I usually do either.

Chapter Eighteen



The so-called elixir of love is the stereotypical hue of passion: blood-red.

The color attracts some attention but compared to the mini-disco ball in front of Val? Or the LED light panel beneath said ball?

This isn't our usual dynamic. Sure, I prefer to stay on the sidelines. But I don't have blood-red intensity. I don't shrink under attention. I don't pack a massive punch into a tiny size.

And, sure, she sparkles as well as the silver container but doesn't call attention to herself.

Get a grip. They're cocktails, not manifestos.

Val takes a long sip and lets out a groan of pleasure. It's deep and pure and visceral. The sort of inhibition lowering sound caused by exhaustion. "I expected cheap fruit punch, but this is great." She offers me the disco ball. "You want to try?"

I nod and offer her my drink in exchange.

She tries mine first. Lets out another moan of bliss. "That's even better."

"Oh?" I need to hear her groan again. I need to fuck myself to it tonight.

No, I need to keep my thoughts in line.

This is a taste test, not foreplay. I bring the drink to my lips.

I ignore the feel of her lipstick on the straw. I ignore the knowledge she tastes like the liquid in the mini-disco ball.

Fruity and sweet. But not too sweet. A light tropical taste. Passionfruit.

What an aptly named fruit for Val.

She's the most passionate person I know when it comes to movies. If she can channel that passion somewhere else—

Red alert. Red alert.

I straighten my thoughts, return her drink, sip mine.

She's right. The Elixir of Love is better. Deep and rich, with the perfect mix of bitter and sweet cherry.

That's my motto, isn't it? Bitter and sweet is better than one or the other.

It feels empty at the moment. But, hey, I'm here for a reason, and it's not getting my rocks off.

"You ready?" I motion to her cell.

"Right. Yeah. Is it not too soon?" She unlocks the device, taps the screen a few times. "Oh. He texted." Surprise fills her voice.

An odd amount, but hey, I'm not exactly at peak observational skills. "What did he say?"

"He asked if the bar is fun."

"Is it?"

She shoots me a *get real* look. "How else would you describe this place?"

A perfect place to watch you come. "Loud."

"Eclectic?"

"Exciting." *An exciting place to undo your jeans.*

She taps a message into her cell. "How about this?"

It would be more fun if you were here.

“Perfect.” My stomach churns. I don’t want to watch her flirt. I don’t want to help her flirt. I want to down my elixir, then three more, then three more after that.

She hits send. He replies right away.

Maybe next time.

I take another sip. “You should make plans. Specific ones.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Perfect.”

She texts.

How about we go out tomorrow?

He replies.

Just you and me? Or the three of us?

She looks to me for a suggestion.

“Do you need me there to feel comfortable?” I ask.

Her eyes fill with something I can’t place. “It helps.”

“I can’t be there in the room when you screw him.”

She presses her lips together. “I know.” She sends a reply.

Just the two of us.

I finish my drink in one sip.

Just the two of them. Fucking perfect. Absolutely, completely perfect.

THANKFULLY, ARCHIE SIGNS OFF QUICKLY. HE HAS AN EARLY morning, and he needs time to prepare.

Time to fuck himself, thinking of Val, probably.

Or maybe that’s me.

I push the idea aside as I order another round. Val plays with the LED panel under her disco ball as we wait—they let her keep it. She tries every setting, all red, all green, all blue, all purple, then every mix of colors, in every direction, flashing or moving back and forth.

After two rounds, she settles on the simple all red pattern.

The one that best matches my drink, her lips, the color of passion.

It's an LED panel, not a confession of lust. Get a grip.

The drink arrives quickly this time. I take another round of pictures, make a rough plan for tomorrow, ask what we should watch when we get home.

“I’m too tired,” she says.

“What do you want in the background while you fall asleep on the couch?”

She smiles. “You know me too well.” She takes a long sip. Lets out a soft sigh. “What about *Bringing up Baby*? Or is that too zany for this time of night?”

“Nine thirty?”

“Don’t say that.” She looks at the time on her cell. “It feels like three a.m.”

“We’ve barely slept.”

“Still.” She takes another sip. “I can’t believe I’m going to do this again in two weeks.”

“Fly six thousand miles?”

She nods. “And adjust to the time difference.”

“That’s the last time for a while.”

“Maybe. I’ll miss it here.”

“Enough to come back?” I ask.

“Once I have the miles,” she says.

“Your mom will gift you the miles,” I say.

“I know, but I want to be more independent.” She turns toward me. “I’m starting grad school.”

“Is that feasible?”

She arches a brow.

“Financially?”

“Sorta. The stipend isn’t generous, but I have school housing and loans.”

“Your parents will help.”

“I don’t want to wait another four or five years to become a real adult.”

“Who feels like a real adult?” I ask.

“You have a job and an apartment,” she says.

So does she. “Where are we staying tonight?”

“My parents pay the rent. You know it’s different. You’d never ask your dad for money.”

“My dad is an asshole,” I say.

“My dad is an asshole too. Not as much as yours, sure, but he is.” She takes a long sip. “I don’t like needing their help. I don’t like being so far behind at everything.”

“Val, you’re twenty-two.”

“I know.”

“That’s how it is for everyone I know.”

“What about Patrick?” she asks.

“He inherited his place.”

“Oh.” Her lip corners turn down. “Right. Shit. I’m an asshole.”

“You don’t need to have his personal life memorized.”

“But—”

“No, but. You work harder than anyone I know.”

She presses her lips together.

“Is this about”—I take a deep breath and push an exhale through my teeth—“sex?”

Vulnerability streaks her expression. It is sex. It’s all about sex. “It’s been three years.”

Which is an eternity, yeah, and this is hard, yeah, but we can make it happen. No, she can make it happen. “And you’ve got a plan.”

“But maybe it’s too planned, you know?” She turns another few degrees toward me. “Flirt via text, flirt in person, kiss, proposition him.”

“When did we make that list?” There’s something here, something I’m missing.

“Isn’t that the idea?” she asks.

“The idea, sure,” I say. “But it’s not an instruction manual. You can do what feels right.”

“How do I know what feels right?” she asks.

“How did it feel when he kissed you?” My stomach churns at the mental image.

“Odd.”

My shoulders fall.

“Like when you kissed me?” Shit, I need to stay away from that topic.

“No.” She laughs at the memory. Her cheeks flush. Her chest too. “That was different.”

“How?”

She brushes her hand through my hair. “It just was.”

“Was it odd?”

“Yeah, but in a good way. I knew I could trust you.” Her fingers brush my temples. “Could I?”

“Huh?” That feels way too fucking good.

“Were you honest about my skill?” she asks with a smile in her voice.

It does things to me. Things I need to ignore. “I’m always honest.”

“I was a good kisser?”

I nod.

“The best?” she asks.

“I don’t remember.”

“I never thought you’d spare my feelings.”

“I don’t.” It’s not true. I remember every second. It’s just I try to forget. So I won’t do something stupid. Well, stupider than usual.

“It was a long time ago,” she says.

“You still remember?”

“It was my first kiss.”

My dick is way too excited to hear that. My heart too. Usually, the bastards aren’t aligned.

“What makes a good kiss?” She says it as if it’s a normal question. As if it’s all theory, not a blazing memory of our lips connecting.

I try to match her energy. To keep it hypothetical. “Depends on the kiss.”

“For you?”

“Why?” I down half my drink in one sip.

“If I have to step out of my comfort zone, you have to step out of your comfort zone.”

“That’s an odd way to thank someone for doing you a favor.”

“By returning the favor?”

Damn. She’s right. How can I argue? “I don’t really think about it that way.”

“Think about it now, then,” she says. “About someone who you liked, who you liked kissing.”

It's hard to picture anyone else with her so close. But it's smart. Really, anything that gets my head anywhere else. I try to recall an enjoyable enough short relationship, but nothing recent hits. "Janice."

"From high school?"

"You didn't specify a time period."

"Okay." She takes a long sip. "What did you like about dating Janice from high school?"

"She was pretty. I liked to look at her. I know that sounds shallow, and I guess it is, but it's not too. I like to look at you."

"Oh my god, that's the meanest backhanded compliment I've ever heard."

"Shit, it does sound that way." I don't mean it that way though. I love to look at Val because she's Val and because she has a wicked smile, intense brown eyes, and perfect tits. But then I'm not thinking about her tits. I'm trying. "You're beautiful too."

"Not conventionally."

"Maybe in high school. But now?" My hand goes to her temple instinctively. "And even then. Yeah, the ponytail didn't flatter you, but the glasses? They were smart hot."

"You miss them?"

Now, she wears contacts. I only see her glasses when she's waking up or going to bed. I love the intimacy of that, but I miss seeing nerdy Val every day too. "They were you."

"This isn't?"

"It is too." *Don't look down. Don't look down. Don't*—Too late. My eyes flit to her cleavage. "I'm just not used to it."

"My boobs?"

"They're bigger."

She laughs. "A little."

"How'd that happen?"

"I gained weight. It's not rocket science."

“Did it all go to your chest?”

“You’re not supposed to ask these things,” she says.

“This is a fucking elixir of truth. It’s strong.”

She smiles. “It’s okay if you didn’t think I was pretty in school.”

“I did, but it was the way I think my brother is good-looking. It wasn’t an attraction thing.”

“Me too.”

She thought that too and she doesn’t now? Or—shit, I’m getting too many ideas. I need a new topic. Any other topic. “Where were we?”

“Janice. You liked looking at her.”

“She had a nice face.”

“She did,” she agrees.

“And she was pleasant. I know that sounds like an insult, but it was what I wanted then. Something totally different than my house. A nice girl with a nice smile.” I can almost remember the afternoons at her parents’ place. The evenings in the back seat of my car. The date at the movie theater. I see the rough sketch but not the details, not the sensations.

“Is that all? She was pleasant?”

I try to dive into the memories of simpler times. They were never easy, but they were less complicated. And that was my relationship with Janice too. Uncomplicated. “We never really had a lot in common, but she always tried. She asked about my day before we started making out.”

“Did you answer?”

“Sometimes. But I didn’t need to answer. I just needed someone to care.”

“Did you ask about her day?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t exactly talk a lot. We both knew it wasn’t a lasting relationship. We liked kissing each other and that was enough.”

“That was everything?”

“I was sixteen.” And I had Val. I didn’t need a woman to fulfill me emotionally or intellectually. I had Val.

All these years, I never needed to look for someone else. I had her.

“She was a good kisser,” I say.

“Ah. Now, we’re getting somewhere.” She drops her hand and looks up at me, interest in her dark eyes. “What made her a good kisser? Was it technique?”

“Partly.”

Val raises a brow and motions *go on*.

“She did this thing where she’d drag her teeth over my lip. It was aggressive. It was fucking hot.”

“Really, sweet Janice was into biting?”

“The sweet ones are the freaks.”

Her laugh fills the space. “Did she get freaky?”

“We didn’t have sex,” I say. “Just a lot of kissing.”

“You’d had sex then.”

“Only a few times.” First, when I was fourteen. I was too young. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t even think about whether or not I was ready. Everyone expected it, so I went with it. It wasn’t horrifying or anything—not like what happened to her—but it didn’t feel the way it was supposed to either.

“But you didn’t mind just kissing?” she asks.

“Kissing and touching,” I say. “Above the belt.”

She lets out a noise of surprise.

Which sends my thoughts to Val’s history. She was kissing and touching the religious guy. She could kiss and touch me. I did it before. Sure, I was sixteen, but if I did it before, I can do it again.

“Was it just the technique?” she asks.

“It was everything. I was comfortable with her, but I wanted more too. And not having sex—that made it more exciting.”

“There was something to look forward to?” she asks.

“Yeah, but it was more than that. I felt like... fuck, this sounds stupid.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Like I was better than my dad somehow. ‘Cause I was happy to just kiss this nice girl. I was happy to do things on her timeline. I didn’t push for more. I didn’t care that she didn’t want more.”

“That’s not stupid.”

“It’s the bare minimum, really,” I say. “Not pushing someone to do shit.”

“Yeah, but a lot of guys don’t realize that.”

Or worse. So much worse. “I try.”

“I know you do.”

My chest warms. My stomach too. I can handle all sorts of compliments. But Val telling me I was a great boyfriend? That’s not one of them.

“I can’t imagine that... the teeth thing. How does it go?”

“I can show you.” Fuck. *Red alert. Red alert. Missile loaded.*

“You can demonstrate?”

I keep my voice calm. I keep the last bit of blood left in my brain. “Yeah. If you need a new trick.”

“I am curious.”

Red alert, red alert. The missile is ready to launch. The button has a hair trigger. “It’s not as exciting as it sounds.”

“You can say no.”

I should. That would be smart. Instead, I say, “No. I want to show you.”

“Okay.” She takes a long sip and turns to me. “Then show me.” Her eyes meet mine. “Kiss me like you mean it.”

Chapter Nineteen



Kiss me like you mean it.

What the hell is wrong with me?

This is well beyond duty. Well beyond lessons or practice or anything remotely sensible.

“You sure?” Dare’s eyes meet mine. His voice fills with intent.

No, of course not. This is a bad idea. Our friendship is the only stable thing in my life. I can’t risk that for anything. “You already asked.”

“We’re drinking.”

“If you don’t want to—”

“I do.” He moves carefully, like he’s afraid I’ll spook if he’s too aggressive.

With anyone else, I would.

With him? It’s still scary but it’s not overwhelming.

Then his fingers brush my collarbone, and desire drowns my nerves. Sure, my hesitation doesn’t disappear, but it feels muted and small next to my need for his touch.

He pulls me closer as he brings his lips to mine.

A soft brush. A hint of a kiss. The taste of cherry and vodka and Dare.

His lips close around my bottom lip. He sucks softly. Then harder.

His fingers curl into my neck as he drags his teeth against my lip.

Not hard enough to draw blood. Not even hard enough to hurt. Only enough, I feel it.

And, god, how I feel it. Electricity surges through my body. It's new and scary and thrilling and intoxicating.

He scrapes his teeth against my lip one more time, then he releases me.

My eyes flutter open. My surroundings return slowly. The soft music. The framed pop art. The fake clouds.

The mirror reflecting the desire in his eyes, the heat between us.

Only this isn't a normal kiss. This is practice. The desire is all part of the lesson. I can't take it personally.

"Thanks." My fingers curl into the fabric of my jeans. Practice. This is only practice. And I do want to study. "Can I try?"

Surprise fills his dark eyes. "On me?"

"Yeah."

"Sure," he says.

"You'll tell me if I fuck it up?"

He nods. "Not too hard."

"I know."

"I don't want to leave here bleeding."

"Am I that helpless?"

"We'll see." He tries to keep the humor in his voice, but he doesn't quite manage.

He wants to kiss me too.

I ignore the need in his voice.

“How about this?” I bring my hand to his cheek and bring my lips to his.

It’s different, kissing him, instead of him kissing me. Safer in some ways. Dangerous in others.

I drink in the taste of his lips, the feeling of power. There’s something thrilling about leading him, knowing he’s following my movements.

Only it’s too thrilling. Overwhelming. I pull back with a heavy sigh.

“Sorry.” I keep my hand on his cheek. “Let me go again.”

He nods intently, the perfect teacher, ready to train for hours.

I start with a soft kiss. Slowly, I part my lips, wrap them around his bottom lip.

I suck softly.

He groans against my mouth.

I reach for his t-shirt instinctively. Fuck, the vibrations of his groan against my throat. I need that. It’s terrifying how much I need that.

I dig my hands into his chest. The soft fabric of his shirt is in the way, but I can still feel the heat of his skin, the hardness of his muscles.

Gently, I scrape my teeth against his lip.

There. I pull back with a sigh.

His eyes flutter open. His expression stays dazed. It’s quick, a few seconds, but I feel it everywhere.

“Good?” I ask.

“Harder,” he says.

Why does that sound so good on his lips? “Fifty percent?”

“A hundred.”

I nod, close my eyes, bring my lips to his again. Practice. I repeat it like a mantra. *This isn’t real. This is a training*

exercise.

The world disappears as I kiss him. What practice? This doesn't feel like a rehearsal. It feels real.

Desire fills my body, but it doesn't overwhelm me. Even as I wrap my lips around his, even as he groans against my throat, even as he brings his hand to my waist.

I scrape my teeth against his lips with the same softness.

Then a little harder.

Harder.

Hard enough, he groans against my mouth again.

Enough he pulls me onto his lap.

I forget about the lesson. I part my lips for his tongue. I bring my hand to his hair, hold his head against mine as I kiss him back.

I'm not sure who's leading anymore. Only that I need to kiss him forever.

For the first time in forever, I'm completely in my body, feeling every ounce of want. Maybe the first time since it happened.

It's different than it was with my ex. I didn't want him the way I want this.

The way I want my best friend.

Fuck.

I find a hint of sense, break our kiss, slide off his lap.

"Shit." He blinks his eyes open. "I got carried away."

"Don't apologize," I say.

"No, Val... I shouldn't have—" He looks around the room, like he'll find the rest of his sentence hidden behind one of the fake palm trees.

"We're practicing." Okay, the word has officially lost all meaning. I carry on anyway. "And you said I shouldn't plan things. I should feel them."

He nods.

“That’s all we’re doing.” *Let’s practice some more back in my room. With less clothes. Well, less clothes for you, at least.* “Like with the cucumber.”

His laugh breaks the tension in the air. “Not the cucumber.”

“Your demonstration was helpful.”

“Is that what... shit, what was his name?”

“The one who benefited from your knowledge? Or the one after?”

“Did the other guy not benefit from my knowledge?”

“I had more hands-on experience at that point.” Ah, high school. When it was normal to kiss and touch and not expect anything more than that. Not that I ever felt normal.

Dare smiles, but there’s something off about it. “How much?”

“First my weight gain. Now, my number of partners. What’s next? My social security number?”

“I know your social security number.”

“How?”

“Your mom made me memorize it when we went to New York,” he says. “In case something happened to you.”

“How would that help?”

He shrugs. “She was worried.”

“Okay, what personal thing are you going to ask next?”

“I asked the amount of practice,” he says. “Not the number of guys. I know your number.”

“You do not.”

“It’s not hard to count that high.”

“Lucky for me I kept it under ten,” I say.

He holds up both hands. “Very.” Then he holds up four fingers. One for each guy I touched.

There’s no need to debate whether or not The Incident counts. I’d touched him before. We were dating. Casually, sure, but still dating.

On our second date, we got too drunk at a party, a common freshman experience at UCSD. It’s not a party school, exactly, but it’s a big school with plenty of parties. We hooked up. And, yeah, I only wanted to kiss, but I wasn’t against touching him, exactly.

I didn’t really consider it an invasion.

No, that happened later. The night he offered to walk me home and I thought, *what a gentleman, he’s sweet when he’s sober.*

Even when we watched a movie together.

But after that—

After that, things were different.

“Val.” Dare’s hand brushes mine. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I was just... thinking.”

“What did I say?”

“Nothing.”

“Val.” Concern drips into his voice.

“Really, I’m just... It’s more about sex and power and men and... it’s not you.”

He takes my hand. Runs his thumb over the space between my thumb and forefinger. “Look at me.”

I do.

“Talk to me.”

I open my mouth to speak, but words don’t come out. They never do. I barely talk about this in therapy. Dare knows. He knows enough. But I’ve never given him the play-by-play.

I never even told him who it was.

That it was a guy I'd touched before.

A guy I wanted.

I'd asked for Dare's advice on our date. On what to do, how to tell him I wanted to move slowly, if that would be a total boner killer or not.

"You're freaking out," he says.

"No. I'm just thinking."

"About him?"

"Yes."

His eye corners turn down. "Because I pushed you."

"No."

He doesn't believe me.

"Really."

"Then why?"

Chapter Twenty



Then why?

A perfectly reasonable question I can't begin to answer.

Because I'm still a mess.

Because I can't handle my ill-advised plan.

Because I don't want to tell him the truth.

What would he think of me if he knew?

That's not fair. He's a good friend. He's my best friend. The only guy I've ever trusted.

But he's still a man.

"I can't explain," I say. I wish I could. I really do. But I don't even understand it sometimes. How could I ever communicate my tangled feelings to someone else?

His eyes go to the floor.

"But, please, trust me. It wasn't that. You're a great teacher."

His shoulders relax. His lips curl upward. Well, less downward.

"It was... your other question. About my number. I just thought—"

"That doesn't count," he says.

"I know."

“Then what?”

“I don’t know.” My shoulders tense. I shrink back into the wall.

“Fuck, Val, I’m sorry.” Dare reaches for me. Stops himself. “I don’t want to make it about me.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t want to push.”

I nod.

“Are you okay here?”

“Okay how?”

He doesn’t explain. “Let’s go home.”

I nod.

“We can talk there if you want. Or not.”

Not is good. I nod.

“I’m going to pay. You want to come with me or sit here?”

“I’ll come with you.”

He nods, slides out of the booth, offers his hand. But it’s not like before. It’s not easy and smooth and fun.

It’s strained with the weight of my history.

Even with my best friend, I can’t do this.

How am I ever going to do this?

Dare doesn’t muse over the oddity of paying in Europe (they bring the card reader to you instead of taking your card to it), and I don’t have any better small talk.

Outside, the air is cool and crisp. I wrap my arms around my shoulders reflexively.

He shrugs his leather jacket off his shoulders and drapes it over mine.

“Thanks.” I slip my arms into the sleeves. They still fit well. I’m a bigger girl, sure, but Dare is tall, broad, and jacked.

There's plenty of room for my softness where his hardness usually goes.

Fuck, that sounds dirty.

It's not enough to send my ugly thoughts away, but it dulls them. If things were normal, if we were talking like two people who didn't have the weight of *history* between them—

“It's nothing you did or said.” I stop at the light. “I promise.”

“It's okay.”

“No, it's not.” The light turns. I take his hand and lead him down the street. We have a twenty-minute walk home. I don't want to spend it with this tension between us.

“How is it not?”

“I can't... I can't have things weird.”

“I'm helping you fuck your roommate. It's weird.”

“Not that.” That's no longer happening. When I snuck to the bathroom and texted Archie to play along, he made it very clear he's on team Val and Dare. He's totally willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen, including flirting with me (well, with Dare, really) via text in front of Dare.

Or with me (actually me) in front of Dare.

Or even kissing me in front of Dare.

So many guys want to kiss me as part of a ruse to help me sleep with another guy. That says something about me, but I have no idea what it is.

And I need to say something here too. I need things to be less weird.

For a few blocks, I walk in silence. Then I find the words to start.

“I think about it sometimes, especially around the subject of sex.”

“It was the experience comment?”

“I don't want you to watch what you say around me.”

“I don’t want to send your thoughts there,” he says.

“They go there sometimes. It happens. I know how to deal with it.”

He nods with understanding.

“Let me deal with it.”

“If you talk to me.”

“What if I say no?”

“I’m not going to push you to do something you’re not ready to do.”

Damn. He’s too considerate. I can’t argue with that. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“What’s the rush? What will it change if you sleep with Archie?”

Or with Dare. “I’ll remember that.”

“Will you?” He chuckles, shifting to an easier topic and an easier tone. “No offense, Val, but he doesn’t seem like a memorable lay.”

“How could anyone not take offense to that?”

His laugh breaks up another ounce of tension. “It’s a good choice, for your first time at bat in years, but it’s not like he’s going to rock your world.”

“He’s quiet.”

“And?”

“That’s what you said. It’s the quiet ones.”

“Sometimes it’s the loud ones,” he says.

“Maybe it’s him.”

He shoots me a *please* look. “You really think that?”

“It’s possible.”

“So, no?” He motions to the street, left or right?

“Scenic view or shopping street?”

“That one is more populated.”

Less dangerous. Not that Barcelona is dangerous, we do have a lot of pickpockets, but that’s not the kind of danger he means.

Usually, I’m grateful my best friend is attuned to women’s fears.

Right now?

I don’t want to think about it.

“Sure. If you’re that desperate to see Mango again,” I say.

“Absolutely.” He smiles. “I need one of those hot pink suits.”

“They’re women’s suits.”

“That’s bullshit,” he says. “Men can wear hot pink too.”

Yes, but I don’t have the energy to argue about the way the patriarchy oppresses men by limiting their sartorial choices. And the reverse, where women are expected to dress fashionably, at all times, in all places. It’s not my battle. “Take it up with the head designer.”

“You think I won’t?”

If he’s going to play this part, I’m going to call him on it. “How about this? I buy you a hot pink suit, but you have to wear it every day.”

“You think I won’t?” he asks.

“Do you think I won’t?”

He nods *of course not*, stops in front of a busy bar, pulls out his cell, sends a text.

Uh, what?

“My suit measurements,” he says.

What man knows his measurements offhand?

“Do I want to know why you have this info?” I ask.

“Luna.”

Of course. The sexy, cool girl with the silver hair. Not that I'm jealous. Not excessively jealous. "You two are pretty good friends." The lack of jealousy does not come through in my voice.

He smiles *you are so filled with envy it's funny*, but he doesn't say anything.

And I... well, I need some excuse. "It's not fair. She gets you every day."

"You can have me every day."

He means it in a *as a friend* kind of way, but I hear *you can screw me every day* and it's enough to send my thoughts away from all the ugly places.

Dare, in my bedroom, without his clothes.

The two of us, as one.

Why is that such an appealing image?

"It's only an hour drive," he says. "I'll be there any day you invite me."

To talk. To hang. To keep things platonic. "Every day?"

"If you ask," he says. "But we both know you won't."

For a few minutes, we walk in quiet comfort. We turn onto the shopping avenue. We pass rows of designer outlets. And Mango.

Dare stops to marvel at the women's suits. Pastel blue, ivory, fuchsia.

"You'd look good in this." He motions to the photo of the extremely thin model in a pastel blue suit jacket and slacks, no shirt.

I don't think so. The model is itty bitty with the flat chest to match (no judgment; small boobs are cute). The no bra thing looks good on her. On someone my size? Not so much.

"It looks different on bigger girls."

"Yeah, hotter."

I shake my head.

He offers his hand. “Wanna bet?”

“Bet what?”

“We go tomorrow. You try it on. I bet it will look hot as fuck.”

He thinks I’ll look sexy in the ridiculous polyester suit. My blush returns. My ugly thoughts fade away. I find the space between serious conversation and flirtation. The normal Dare and Val banter. “And you get to decide if it looks hot or not?”

He nods.

“How is that fair?”

“I’ll be honest.”

“They don’t have my size.”

“They do too.” He motions to an image in the corner, a larger model advertising a plus-size collection. “If not... you look good in this.” He taps his jacket. “We can do a men’s suit jacket, nothing under it, instead.”

“And what is it we’re betting?”

He looks me in the eye. “You tell me why you got upset.”

So much for normal banter. “Dare—”

“I lose, I drop it. Help you.” He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “If you’re sure it will look bad.”

“How can I trust you to be honest?”

“If you don’t agree with my assessment, we’ll ask Luna. She’s stylish.”

Luna, again! I know I shouldn’t feel any envy—she has a boyfriend, not that it matters, since Dare is my best friend, not my future boyfriend—but he doesn’t have to bring her up two times in one conversation or say her name like she’s the most stylish woman in the world. “She’s gorgeous.”

“So are you.” His eyes flit to my chest. “And you have better tits.”

My cheeks flush. “Since... what... I don’t even know where to object to that.”

“You’ve got a great rack, Val. Get over it.”

Uh... Okay. I guess that is the sensible thing to do. I won’t linger on the erotic implications of his comment. Or the feminist ones.

He holds out his hand. “Are we on?”

“Okay.” This is the only way he’ll drop it. And, sure, he’ll pick it back up again. But not until after we make it to Mango. “But I want something better.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. If I win, you have to show me whatever I want to know.”

“With a cucumber?” he asks.

“However I want to learn.” A cucumber is as far as I’ll go, but I want him to sweat it. Even if that’s not really the smartest decision in the world.

He swallows hard. “You won’t win.”

And I won’t push him here, either. I’m only pushing back a little. “Then what’s the harm?”

He shakes.

THE BET WORKS. WE MAKE IT ALL THE WAY TO THE apartment without a single word about sex, Archie, or The Incident.

Even inside, as we rush to lower our voices, we only mention Archie in a *let’s not wake him* way.

We watch a movie on the couch. Dare’s pick. A black-and-white film about war. I fall asleep halfway through the movie. Wake to Dare, laying me in my bed.

I look up at him with sleepy eyes. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.”

“I should brush my teeth.”

“You really should.” He smiles, teasing. But there’s something else too. Something I can’t explain.

I expect him to leave as I slide out of bed, but he doesn’t. He stays in my room while I clean in the bathroom, while I change into my pajamas (he turns and closes his eyes), while I slip into bed.

He sits down on the mattress next to me. “Promise me one thing, Val?”

“Depends what it is.”

“You’ll tell me if anything is too much.”

“If that means you’ll drop it.”

He nods.

“Good night, Dare.”

“Good night.” I lean in for my good night hug, but when I get closer, I close my eyes and bring my lips to his.

His fingers curl around my neck as he kisses back.

I wrap my lower lips around his. I scrape my teeth against his soft flesh.

Again, he groans against my mouth.

Practice.

That’s what I tell myself.

Even after he leaves and I do away with my pajama bottoms and I replay our kiss again and again.

Chapter Twenty-One



DARE

The last thought in my head as I fall asleep?
The taste of Val's lips.

The feel of her body melting into mine.

The need in her eyes.

She runs through my dreams, again and again. And, in dreams, the devil on my shoulder is in control.

She doesn't want slow. She wants you.

She kissed you unprompted.

She kissed you like she meant it.

She meant it.

Look at her demand? Learn any technique she wants, any way she wants.

What else could that mean?

I wake hard enough to cut glass. Morning wood is nothing unusual, but this is a whole other level. My entire body is hard.

Not possible, but, hey, that doesn't change the ache in my balls. In another circumstance, it would be the best kind of torture. Now?

I need to take care of this situation.

As soon as I piss and brush my teeth—I have some fucking standards.

I press my ear to the door to listen for activity in the main room. Nothing.

As quietly as possible, I sneak to the bathroom, wash up, move through the living room.

Only there's a noise in Val's room. The rustle of sheets. A soft groan.

No.

She's not—

There's no way.

I should go to my room, go to a coffee shop down the street, go anywhere else.

I don't.

I tiptoe to the door. I raise my hand to knock. I stop when I hear another groan.

There's no mistaking it.

Val is touching herself.

And it's sexy as fuck.

I shouldn't listen, I know, but I'm too shocked to move. My body refuses to budge.

It's like my dick took control of the entire vessel. *No way, Dickson, I'm the one in charge here. And you might deny me all of her, but you won't deny me this.*

She lets out another groan. Then another.

Then the sweet sound runs together.

Her breath hitches.

Her limbs collapse on the sheets.

I swear I hear my name on her lips, but there's no way.

Footsteps call my attention. Shit. She's moving.

But she's too fast. I don't have time to run, so I knock.

She stops. "Dare?"

“Yeah. You up?”

“Yeah.” Her voice is breathy. “Are you?”

In every sense of the word. “You want to leave in twenty?”

She lets out another confused murmur.

I try to ignore the way my body shudders in response to her need. “For the beach?”

“Oh,” she says. “Right. Yeah. Make it thirty. I need to get coffee. Archie used the last of it. I can grab you something while I’m out.”

Good. I need the time, here, alone. “Whatever you’re having.”

She moves toward the door. “I’m not decent, so I’m not going to say morning.”

Is she naked? In only her undies? Her jeans?

The thought of Val, in my lap, in only her jeans, my hands on her perfect tits—

Fuck, I’m going to come in my boxers at this rate.

“Me either,” I say.

“Why’d you knock then?”

“Coffee.”

“Oh. Right. I’ll pick some up. You get dressed.”

“I’ll get dressed, but I won’t get decent.”

She laughs, but it’s awkward, like she’s the one picturing me naked.

No. That’s my imagination. And, well, I better use my imagination before it’s too late.

I slip back to my room, I lock the door, I ditch my boxers.

And I let my thoughts drift to last night.

Val, in that sexy as hell wrap top and those tight jeans, sliding onto my lap like she belonged there.

Then, the shit that could have happened.

Me, unwrapping her top, pushing her bra aside, wrapping my lips around her nipple.

Her, unzipping her jeans, climbing onto my lap, demanding an in-person demonstration.

I don't remember how it feels to be touched.

Show me. Please.

Here.

There.

Everywhere.

I come way too fucking fast. Even so, when I hear her return with coffee, I go straight to a million vivid mental images.

I get hard.

Again.

And, this time, I know there's absolutely nothing else that will satisfy.

Only her.

THE SECOND I STEP INTO THE MAIN ROOM AND SET EYES ON Val, I lose every bit of sense.

She looks gorgeous in her white sundress.

Chic and feminine and sexy.

The top is tight on her perfect chest, loose around her hips, high on her thighs.

Those thighs.

How would they feel against my hands?

My hips?

My cheeks?

“Aren't you hot in that?” she asks.

I shrug like I'm wearing a long hoodie for no particular reason and not because it's the only way to hide my hard-on. "Cold in here."

"It's hot outside. You might want to lose it." She looks at me carefully, like she knows I was listening.

No. That's me imagining things. That's my dick, writing fantastical porn-tastic scenarios. That's not happening.

"I got you a latte." She sets a cup on the kitchen counter and takes a sip.

"Is that what you got?"

"No. I don't need as much milk," she says.

"Some people would find that sorta thing condescending."

"Some people." She smiles, at ease, not at all concerned with our kiss last night or whatever I heard this morning. "But not you."

"No." This is normal. I can be normal. I can look at my best friend without picturing her naked. "But only 'cause I like you."

She blushes.

Okay. Maybe we're not normal. Maybe, now that I've kissed Val, nothing will ever be normal again. But I can try to pretend. "I'll forgive you this time."

"You're merciful."

"That's what they say."

"Uh... how... you know what, I don't want to know." She clears her throat and sets a small bag on the table. "I got you a breakfast sandwich too. Egg and bacon."

"No Iberian ham?"

"Trust me. You'll beg for anything but Iberian ham after a week."

"Beg, huh?" *Red alert.*

"Yeah, beg." She smiles, but I can't tell if she catches the sexual implication or not.

How about I tie you to the bed and lick you until you beg me to stop? How's that for mercy?

Val doesn't mention the kinky conversation. She plates the sandwiches and brings them to the table. "Eat. You need your strength."

Visions of athletic sex fill my head.

"For the beach."

Right. Of course. We're engaging in our favorite best friend activity. Not orgasmic activities.

"You're quiet this morning. Even for you." She cuts her egg and avocado sandwich in half and takes a bite. "Are you okay?"

No. I want to hear you again. I want to kiss you again. I want to take you to my bed and claim you forever. "Jet lag," I lie.

I join her at the table, take a long sip, let out a way too satisfied sigh.

She notices. Her breath hitches. Her fingers curl into her cup. Her gaze flits to my crotch. "Are you going to wear that to the beach?" she asks.

Good. We're moving to a subject that isn't how much I want to see her come. "I'll bring a change of clothes."

"Okay."

"Are you wearing a swimsuit under there?"

"No. I have my bikini in my bag. It's a long walk. And you're going to want to stop a bunch of places on the way. The Gothic Quarter is gorgeous."

"You don't have to lie. We both know why we're stopping."

She smiles, *do I?* "Why's that?"

"There's a Mango on the way."

Val laughs.

I hold out my hand to shake. “A bet is a bet. Unless you want to concede.”

“Never.” She stares at my hand a moment too long, like she’s thinking of where it’s been, but she doesn’t say anything.

She shakes.

We pack our stuff.

And without a single additional word about what I overheard this morning, we leave the apartment and head toward the Gothic Quarter.

And even as I lead her into the Mango store and pick out clothes, I feel it in the air. I’m picturing her touching herself. Replaying the sound.

Wondering how it would feel to step into the situation.

And there’s no way to get my thoughts to appropriate places.

Chapter Twenty-Two



I 'm not sure how I find my way to the dressing room, with a stack of suit jackets and matching slacks, but here I am.

And there's Dare, standing fifteen feet away, outside the dressing room.

Not outside the area, of course, but outside the stall.

He's right outside the door.

He's in his clothes.

I'm taking off my clothes.

I'm not picturing him without his clothes. No, no, no. I did enough of that this morning.

And the timing, with how quickly he knocked after—

Did he hear me?

Was he listening?

No. He wouldn't listen.

Sure, that's someone's kink, but it's not Dare's. And Dare doesn't think of me that way anyway.

Even if we're here because he's sure I'll look hot in a pink suit.

Even if we're both replaying the kiss from last night again and again.

Really. It's just a kiss. Practice.

Like when he got out the cucumber.

And, sure, he picked a cucumber about the size of his unit (at my request), and I thought *holy shit, how will that fit inside me?*

Not because he was massive.

Because the relative size was massive compared to the largest thing I'd had in my vagina—a super tampon.

And that wasn't exactly a picnic.

Shit.

It's been three years.

And I haven't really, uh, dared penetration. I've never gotten off via penetration. Not on my own. And, well, I think I had a few internal clitoral orgasms in the brief time when I was having pretty good sex, but that was a long time ago.

And I—

I'm picturing Dare's hand between my legs and his other hand wrapped around his cock.

Not a vegetable.

His flesh.

Dare taps on the door. "You ready?"

That's right. Penis size. I never gave it much thought beyond the initial shock of the girth of the average unit.

Do women really think about it? It seems more like the province of men. But what do I know? I don't have a lot of girl talk in my life. Yeah, there were a few nights when Zelda and I drank too much sangria and started trading stories.

Hers were all about Archie, who "is surprisingly well endowed but lacking in creativity. Or maybe that's why he's lacking. He thinks a big dick means he doesn't have to try." And now that I think about it, she wasn't exactly a size queen, but she did express a certain fondness for the aesthetics of the penis. Fondness I never understood. Even before The Incident,

I wouldn't have understood. But then again, the thought of Dare with his hand wrapped around his cock—

“Val.” He knocks again. “I’m coming in if you don’t answer.”

Shit. “Still changing.” I double-check the lock. I can’t handle him walking in on me. Not at all.

Dare is hot. With the dark hair and dark eyes and the broad shoulders and all that muscled skin covered in ink?

And the way Dare looks at me now—

He does want me.

Maybe that’s the problem. Not that he doesn’t want me. That he does.

If he comes in here, I’m going to touch him. And I’m scared of what will happen.

That I’ll freak.

That I won’t.

Yes, he’s a man, and he’s a very sexual person, but his sexuality doesn’t feel threatening. Even this morning, when I thought he heard me.

I wasn’t scared.

I was turned on.

“You ready yet?” He knocks again.

“Not yet.” Right. I need to finish this bet, so I can leave this dressing room and go somewhere I can’t touch him.

He makes a *hmm, sure is taking a while* noise.

I slip out of my dress and into the first pair of slacks. They’re a little snug, but they do fit. They’re not flattering. Do these types of pants ever flatter curvy women? But hey, that means I win.

I win Dare demonstrating any technique I want to see, any way I want to learn it. This is a lose-lose proposition. Or maybe it’s a win-win. I’m not sure anymore.

After I slide on the blazer, I step outside the room.

Dare's eyes go wide. He looks me up and down slowly, studying the outfit.

"It's terrible," I say.

He nods in agreement, but he doesn't concede. "'Cause the blazer is two sizes too big."

"This is my size," I say.

"That's the size you'd wear as a jacket."

"It is a jacket."

"Or over your sweater. Not the kind of thing you wear with nothing under it." He looks at the button. "Are you wearing something under that?"

"My bra." And now I'm picturing the two of us in that dressing room, him peeling the jacket off my shoulders and staring at my bra with wonder.

He doesn't lose himself in dirty fantasies. He stays here, in the Mango dressing room, debating the suit jacket. "I'll allow it. If you size down."

And it will look bad and I'll win a brand-new lesson. Anything. *Screw kissing. Let's skip right to the good stuff. Your body connecting with my body. Show me how to do it. After all this time, I've forgotten.*

"You need the size?" he asks.

"No. I have it in here." I slip into the dressing room, ditch the jacket, try the smaller one.

And, well—

I still think the pants look awful.

But the suit jacket, nothing under it look, is kinda hot.

Kinda really hot.

Like I could easily strip for him.

Uh, for someone.

"It looks good, doesn't it?" He chuckles. "Called it."

“The jacket, sure, but not the pants.”

“It’s the whole vibe.” He taps the door. “Let me see.”

I unlock the door.

He taps again. “Should I come in?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

No. Absolutely not. But I would rather have him in here than the two of us out there. “Yes.” I open the door a little wider.

He slips inside.

He swallows hard as he looks me over. “Fuck, Val. You look sexy as fuck.” His eyes go to my chest. “Like you’re going to invite me into your office and demand I get on my knees.”

“Is that what you’re into now?” *Don’t picture him between my legs. Don’t picture him between my legs. Absolutely, positively, don’t picture him between my legs.*

“It’s not my go-to, sure, but a little roleplay can spice things up.”

“In your eleven-day relationships?”

“Are you judging?”

“Yes, sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He sits on the little stool in the corner. “I judge myself too.”

“For what?” I ask.

“Acting like my dad.”

“You didn’t.”

“I tried,” he says. “But I did. Sometimes. I don’t want to do that anymore.”

“Is that why you’re on a break?” That’s a good explanation. One that doesn’t lead to a change in our friendship.

“One of the reasons.” He looks me up and down again. “Are you going to take my word for it? Or do we need to ask Luna?”

Really, I don't want to involve her, or anyone, but I can't agree with his take either. The outfit is not flattering. “You know the answer to that.”

He nods *as you wish*, pulls out his cell, snaps a picture. “You gotta give the camera a little more love.”

“I'm not out to make your case for you.”

“Do you want to cheat or play fair?”

Maybe it's the time to cheat. “One flirty image. One unflirty. That's fair.”

He nods *fair* and snaps another pic. “Now flirty.”

I shoot the camera a smile.

He shakes his head. “No, Val. Bedroom eyes. Like this.” He lowers the phone and shoots me a smoldering glare.

My fingers curl into my jacket. That's... He... Woah.

“Easy.” He drops the seductive stare.

My body doesn't get the message. It stays tuned to his body. The entire room gets warm and electric. I want. I want so fucking badly and it feels so fucking good.

It's been a long time.

Too long.

I try to direct the energy to the camera.

Dare snaps a few shots.

Then I close my eyes, and I really try it. The smolder. No. It's ridiculous.

My laugh eases the tension in my shoulders. “That was terrible.”

“This is good.” He takes another pic. “This is you.”

“Awkward?”

“Playful.” Another. “A sense of humor is sexy. I know you have that. But the camera doesn’t.” He snaps another.

I cop one more pose with my hand on my jacket, just enough to show a hint of my bra.

He swallows hard as he snaps another photo. “Perfect. Sending.”

“It’s early in California.”

“You could take my word for it.”

“Or I could wait for an honest answer,” I say.

“We can wait if you want, but she’s going to give the same answer.” He gives me a slow once-over. “You look good, Val, and then adding your sense of humor? That’s sexy as fuck.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



The whole *mental image of Val asking for an in-depth demonstration* thing aside—and that’s a big aside—this morning is weird.

Walking through Barcelona is strange. Like walking through a bizarre-o version of Southern California. The same sunny skies, the same friendly people, the same mix of Spanish and English, the same chain stores, but the place still feels different.

Then the completely otherworldly, but somehow perfectly in place, Gothic Quarter. The neighborhood is straight out of a fantasy novel. Narrow alleys, brick and stone buildings with flat roofs, massive churches with sharp spires and stained glass.

Every time I turn a corner, I expect to run into a dragon. Or a merchant selling wares, talking up the princess. But, no, it’s another row of restaurants. A tchotchke shop. A bar. A shoe store with espadrilles on display.

Thankfully, the scenery keeps my thoughts off Val’s groan (mostly). Until we pass the first sex shop. Then the second. The third.

A month ago, I would have delighted in teasing Val about the vibrators on display.

Right now?

I’m way too eager to use one on her.

When she glances at the shop on the corner, I shrug. “On our way back.”

She agrees.

And we stick to small talk for the rest of the walk. The harbor is beautiful and very much reminiscent of San Diego, and when we get to the actual beach?

Fucking gorgeous.

We set up on the sand, strip, run into the ocean.

Our usual routine.

Only there’s nothing usual this time.

Because, this time, I need her in every way.

And I feel it everywhere.

All afternoon, it consumes my thoughts. As we dry and dress and tour the city—the subway, Casa Mila, another coffee on the way home. Even when we get to the apartment and take turns in the shower.

Up until I step into the main room in a towel and I see Val on the couch in a gorgeous tight dress, expectation in her eyes.

She looks me up and down. It’s a reflex. A visceral physical need. She wants me too.

But, even so, she says, “I need your help with my date.”

Right. Her date. “Sure.”

“We have an hour until Archie gets home.”

“You’re leaving from here?”

She plucks her cell from the couch. “Yeah, Archie texted. We’re going to meet someplace by his work for drinks.”

“No dinner?”

“No. I was thinking we could get something.”

“Now?”

“After my lesson.”

Fuck. “You didn’t win.”

“I only want the cucumber.” Insecurity drips into her voice. “I need the technique. I might have forgotten.” Val’s blush spreads down her neck and chest.

I tell my eyes to stay on hers, but they disobey me. My gaze goes straight to the neckline of her sundress. She looks too good in the soft white fabric. It’s criminal. “It will come back to you.”

“Dare.” She packs a million things into my name. I should know better than to suggest a learning curve with someone else—and I do know.

But that’s the thing. I can’t come into the bedroom with her. “If you want to avoid awkwardness, this isn’t the way to do it.”

“Less commentary. More demonstration.”

Fuck, the visions in my head. Val, stripping out of that white sundress, showing off her blue bra and panties, unzipping my jeans.

I can *feel* her hand around me. And my dick is way too excited to make my fantasy a reality.

There aren’t enough alerts in the world for this. What’s higher than red? I need a new color. Magenta. Fuchsia. Pink alert.

Deep breath. Unsexy thoughts. This is technical. Clinical. That’s it. “Like last time?”

She nods. “There’s a cucumber in the fridge. Two, actually.”

I can do that. Probably. Maybe. I might die of blue balls. That’s a strong possibility. “Grab one.”

Her shoulders fall with relief. No more negotiation, no more awkward setup. No, we’re ready for the big leagues now.

She moves to the kitchen, gathers the items, returns to the living room with two cucumbers. “Which speaks to you?” She offers me the vegetables.

I can't exactly guess the size of her rommie's dick. "I haven't seen him naked."

Her eyes flit to my crotch.

I pretend I didn't notice. "I don't want to be Goldi-dicks about it, but this isn't a range."

"Goldi-dicks?" A laugh spills from her lips. Her brow softens. Her entire body eases.

We're friends, doing something silly. It's loaded, sure, but we're still friends, helping each other.

Sure, her laugh makes my heart skip and my body buzz, but that's beside the point.

"I guess it's a better lesson if you have to work with whatever the guy is packing." It's not like she's choosing my dick pics here. I grab the wider, shorter cucumber and move a little closer. Until I'm close enough to show her the proper placement.

She blushes as she takes the vegetable and holds it to her pelvis.

I try to ignore the smell of her soap, the feeling of her body next to mine. It's different than with other women. It's overwhelming.

"Hold it there." I stay close enough to demonstrate. It's too close—I'm already losing my ability to think—but it's necessary.

She grips the vegetable tightly.

A more vivid image fills my head—her hand around my flesh—but I push it aside. This is teaching time.

"You want to start like this." I cup the head of the cucumber. "Explore the thing like you find it fascinating." I run my thumb over the vegetable. I ignore the feelings of ridiculousness. "A couple soft brushes." I demonstrate a few strokes with my thumb. "Then get firmer. Firmer than you think."

"I don't want to hurt him."

“He’ll let you know if it’s too much,” I say. “But it’s always more than women think.”

“I remember that.”

My thoughts drift back to our first time doing this. Way back in high school. It felt absurd then too, but it wasn’t laced with the sexual tension I feel now. I didn’t spend the rest of the day picturing Val’s hands around me.

I demonstrate with a few pumps. Slow, to start, then at a good pace.

She watches with rapt eyes. “Can I try?”

“Yeah.” I need to be smart here. I can’t hold the thing at my dick. I’m already fighting my pants. I hold the cucumber a little higher, near my belly button, and further out, so she can’t accidentally brush against me.

She doesn’t mention the strange position. She looks at the vegetable, wraps her hand around it, pumps once. “Like that?”

“All the way,” I say.

This time, she fists the thing until her fingers brush mine.

I swallow hard.

She watches her movements as she fists the thing again. A steady pump.

“Harder.”

She does it again, harder. “For how long?”

“Until he’s there.”

“What if he isn’t...”

“If he has a death grip?” I ask.

“Do I want to know?” she asks.

Probably not. “A guy who watches too much porn. Grinds himself too hard. To the point he can’t come from other methods.”

Horror streaks her expression.

“He’s not the type.” Really, the guys who are the type are bad lays. I don’t like picturing her with any of them.

“Okay. So, as long as he doesn’t have a death grip”—she shakes her head *how awful*—“this will do it?” She pumps the cucumber again and again.

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t it get boring?”

“Not if you’re feeling it.” *Red alert. Pink alert. Every alert.*

“If I get bored?”

Bad sex. That’s not hot. That’s good. “Take your tits out.” Fuck. It’s a great suggestion—they really are perfect—and a very inviting mental image.

“Dare!” She flushes red.

“It’s not a joke.”

She nods, taking in the suggestion, studying the demonstration device as she pumps it again and again.

I can’t look away. I can’t channel thoughts of baseball or Mr. Dickson or my brother crying on the couch.

I can’t do anything but picture Val working me with this sort of fascination.

Then she looks up at me with those big brown eyes and I nearly come on the spot.

“Thanks.” She drops her hand. “That was great.”

“You’re ready for the date?”

“Well, there is one more thing.”

“Oh?” I can’t find a single conscious thought.

“Kissing,” she says.

Okay, I can handle kissing. With a pillow between my crotch and hers.

“And, well...” She looks to her room. “Not just kissing.”

What do you want to know, baby? I can practice anything.

“I... I haven’t unzipped anything in a long time.”

“Okay.”

“You sure? I don’t want to ask too much.”

No. I’m not sure. But we’re way past too much. We’re way past red alert. I might as well go all in. “Let’s do it.”

She nods. “You should probably put pants on first.”

I should do a lot more than that, but pants are a good start.

Chapter Twenty-Four



VAL

Val: *Are you sure about this?*

Archie: *Absolutely.*

Val: *I still think he's not interested.*

Archie: *You spent the day with him?*

Val: *Sightseeing.*

Sightseeing and requesting erotic demonstrations, but still. There's a big difference between teaching technique with a vegetable and teaching technique with one-on-one training.

Archie: *And he never once looked at you like he wants you?*

Val: *There's a difference between physical desire and emotional attraction.*

Archie: *You like him.*

He's my best friend, yes, but I don't know where that ends and everything else begins.

Val: *If I decide I don't want more than friendship, you'll drop it?*

Archie: *I promise.*

Val: *Okay. I'll see you in two hours.*

Archie: *Good luck.*

I don't mention my off-script suggestion of practice. Not that I agreed to follow Archie's script. No. But he's doing me a

big favor, playing along, pretending he's really interested—

And I—

Well, I haven't got a clue what this means for tomorrow. But, hey, I have tonight figured out. Sorta. Mostly. Kinda.

Dare's knock interrupts my thoughts. "You ready?"

I lock my cell, slide it into my dresser drawer, stand. "Come in."

Dare pulls the door open and steps inside. He takes in the space with new eyes, as if he's seeing it for the first time or in a whole other context.

Maybe an *I'm going to fuck you here, how do I want to do it* context.

Or maybe that's completely ridiculous.

No. It's absolutely ridiculous. But what other explanation is there for the mix of curiosity and need in his eyes?

"We need a strategy." He pulls the door closed behind him and takes a step toward me. "For your date."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Another step. "Can you handle it on your own?"

"You saw me last night."

"You were terrible."

"I was," I say.

"How do you feel about a little backup?" He holds up his cell. "You can call me. I'll listen. Text flirty suggestions."

"Won't that be obvious?"

"Not if you're subtle about it."

"Do you really think I'm capable?"

He laughs. "How about this? I'll be close. You call me if you need help. Sneak to the bathroom or grab the next round or something."

"No. I like the flirty texts. Just... not nonstop."

He nods *sure*. “Are you going back to the bar?”

I shake my head. “A gin bar.”

“Will I have somewhere to hide?”

“It’s a busy area. You can hang outside.”

“Watch from the window like a stalker?” he asks.

“You did it for my first date.”

He smiles at the memory. “Shit. That went terribly.”

“Maybe we should try something else?”

“No. I learned from my mistakes.” He takes another step.
“Unless you’d rather go solo?”

I shake my head. “I like having you close.”

His eyes fix on mine.

“I feel safer.”

“You don’t feel safe with him?”

“I don’t feel safe with anyone else.” That is true. Really, really true. “But I want to get there.”

He nods. “I want that too.”

See. He wants me to feel safe with other men. He wants me to be with other men. Archie is wrong. Dare is happy to teach me lip-biting techniques, but he doesn’t want more than that.

“Did you have anything in mind?” He motions to the bed
may I?

“Let’s stay up at first.”

He nods *sure*. “It’s easier lying down.”

“What’s easier?”

“Zippers.”

“Are they?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “But you don’t have to know them inside out. You can tell him to take his pants off.”

“Isn’t that bossy?”

“Bossy is hot.”

“What if he’s dominant?”

“Could you handle that?”

“No,” I admit. But then it doesn’t matter. There’s no chance I’m sleeping with Archie.

He moves closer. “Are you sure you’re ready to do this, Val?”

No. Not at all. “I want to.”

“Okay.” He curls his arm around my waist. “Then you have to be ready to play defense.”

“Isn’t that fucked up?”

“Yeah. But I can’t fix that. I can only advise you with him.” He looks down at me. “If you really want to do this, he’s a good choice. Safe.”

Right. He’s safe. The way Dare is safe. Only this feels incredibly dangerous.

“And I’ll be here,” he says. “If anything is too much... we can have a safe word.”

“You’ll be able to hear?”

“I’ll make sure I can hear,” he says.

“So you’re going to listen to us have sex?”

His laugh breaks up the tension in his jaw. “You know what I mean.”

That is what he means. But I can’t linger on that.

I nod.

“How about whiskey soda?” he asks. “We’ll start at a bar. It won’t be out of place. And you’d never order a whiskey soda.”

That’s not terrible. I nod. “Whiskey soda.”

“You can use it here too.” He pulls my body into his. “If this is too much.”

“Okay.”

“You ready?” he asks.

“There are other details?”

“Are they important?”

They don’t feel important. “We can talk later.”

“Okay.” He nods. “There’s just one thing—”

“Yeah?”

“Friction.”

“Friction?” I ask.

“You put your hand on my jeans, I’m gonna have a reaction.”

Right. If I put my hand on his dick, he’s going to get hard, even with his jeans in the way.

“I don’t want you to freak out.”

“I understand the mechanics.” Even if it’s different right now. Because it’s Dare. But I can’t say that. I don’t even want to think it.

“If it is too much—”

“For you too.”

“For me?” he asks.

“Can nothing be too much for you?”

“I’ve done everything,” he says.

Yes, he’s slept with a lot of people. He’s tested out a lot of positions. He’s probably tried kinks and engaged in threesomes. But he’s never been with someone he loves. “When’s the last time you kissed someone you like?” I swallow hard. “Besides last night?” That doesn’t count, but I can’t bring myself to say that.

“It’s been a while.”

“That’s new for you.”

“Okay. Whiskey soda.” He nods. “You want to start with kissing?”

“Kissing. Then we’ll feel it out.”

“You have a limit here?” he asks.

“Only clothes. No touching under the, uh, underwear.”

“Got it.” He keeps his voice steady.

How? I’m already shaking. Kissing my best friend. Touching my best friend. Practicing removing the clothes of my best friend.

I’m out of my mind.

Completely and totally out of my mind.

Dare looks down at me like I’m the only thing he needs. His hand finds my chin. His eyes flutter closed.

A soft kiss to start.

Then a harder one.

Something longer.

After I pull back and take a deep breath, I hook my arm around his neck and bring my lips to his.

I try the soft scrape of my teeth.

He pulls back with a gasp. “Fuck.”

“Too hard?”

“Perfect.”

I try it again. I wrap my lips around his and scrape my teeth against his bottom lip.

He groans against my lips, so I try it again and again.

My lips part to make way for his tongue. He moves with the perfect mix of care and control. Not too fast, not too slow. Not too hard, not too soft.

Just right.

His tongue swirls with mine.

It's like we're in high school again. Not because that was my first kiss, our first kiss. No. It's the way he's kissing me, like the connection of our lips is everything.

He's not rushing to the next thing.

He's not treating our kiss as a prelude or a promise or an implication.

It just is.

My need pours into him. His need pours into me.

Is that all him? Or am I imagining things?

This feels so fucking good. Too fucking good.

I pull back with a sigh. "Too much?"

"No."

"Do you want to stop?"

"No." I don't stop to clarify. I bring my lips to his.

He backs me into the wall as he kisses me. He moves a little harder, a little faster.

Then his hand goes to my hips. My ass. Over my dress, yeah, but on my ass.

He pulls my body into his.

He's hard. From the friction. The biological reality of flesh against flesh.

Or is it more?

It feels like so much more.

It feels like everything.

For the first time in three and a half years, I need this. I need his hardness against me. I need my hands around him. Or my lips. Or my sex.

Even this, the physical bliss of him, hard against me—

I need that.

I'm not scared by his arousal.

I fucking need his arousal. I need to know he feels this too, wants this too, needs this too.

He kisses me as he brings his hand to the hem of my dress.
“This too?”

“Huh?”

“You need to practice this too?”

Right. Practice. I nod.

He lifts my skirt an inch, but he doesn't remove my dress. Instead, he curls his hand around my neck and traces a line down my skin, over my collarbone, along the neckline of my dress.

He pushes one strap off my shoulder.

Then the other.

“Take off the rest,” he purrs into my ear.

I push the dress down my torso. Then off my hips.

He takes my hand and brings it to the waistband of his jeans. “When you do this for real, take the shirt off first.”

“Huh?”

“It's not a sexy look for a guy.”

“Unzipped jeans?”

“Shirt, no pants. Unless you're into humiliating him.”

“Would that really stop you?” I ask.

“No. But I can get out of my clothes pretty fucking fast.”

“No. Shirt first.” My entire body flames. I'm on fire. I'm completely and totally on fire.

He nods and brings his lips to mine.

I kiss him back as I slip my hand under his shirt. A soft brush of his hard stomach. The waistband of his jeans. The fabric beneath the button.

Only low enough I feel the rise of the fabric. Not enough I feel him.

I want to feel him. I really, really want to feel him. All of him.

I force my thoughts to our task. Practice removing clothes. Practice for a date with another man.

Whatever this is—

I can't get too carried away.

My thoughts dissolve as his tongue dances with mine. Who cares what the hell we're doing as long as we're doing it together?

My body moves for me.

I lift his shirt. He breaks the kiss so I can bring it over his head. Then he takes my hand and brings it to the waist of his jeans. He does it slowly, like he's a present I'm desperate to unwrap.

He is.

I am.

I really, really am.

I undo the button of his jeans.

The zipper is snug, especially with the, uh, state of affairs, but I nudge it an inch at a time, until the denim falls away, and there's only that one thin layer between my hand and his skin.

Thank god he's wearing the boxer briefs with buttons.

Thank god my hand isn't on him.

Why isn't my hand on him? I need my hand on him.

"Val." His voice is pure desire.

And I need every ounce of it. "Is this..." I swallow hard. "Can I?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

He wraps his hand around my wrist and brings my palm to his stomach, to the skin just below his belly button.

Then lower.

Lower.

Until I can feel him hard against me. The stupid boxers are still in the way. There's that thin layer of cotton between us.

But he still feels so fucking good.

Over the underwear.

That's the deal, right?

This is over. This is fair game. This is a game with dangerous rules, but this is fair game.

I take his hand and bring it to my chest.

He cups me over my bra.

It's not enough. The fabric is too thick. I hate the stupid, thick fabric.

Why can't I feel his hands on my skin?

Why can't I feel him?

"Touch me." The words fall off my lips without passing through my brain. "If it's not..." I take his hand and bring it to my back, to the clasp of my bra. "It's been so long and I miss it so badly."

He undoes the clasp and pushes the garment off my shoulders.

He groans as he cups me. "How's that?"

Too good. Way too good. "Good."

"What do you like?"

"I don't remember."

"You want to find out?"

"Fuck yes."

He runs his lips over my neck as he traces my nipple with his thumb. Up and down. Left and right. Fast and slow.

Then circles, clockwise, counterclockwise.

“Slow,” I say. “Like you could do it all day.”

“Right,” he mumbles into my neck. “Like in high school.”

I nod.

“How long did you go with the religious guy?”

“Hours sometimes.”

“Did he last all that time?” he asks.

“Usually.”

“But not always?”

No. Sometimes he finished while we were making out. At the time, it felt like too much.

Right now, thinking of Dare wanting me so badly he comes in his jeans?

It’s so fucking hot I can’t stand it.

“I set a timer,” he says. “For when we have to leave.”

“In an hour?”

“Give or take.” He toys with me again. “But I don’t want to wear you out.”

“No. It’s good.” It’s way too good and completely wrong—my best friend revving me up for my non-date with another guy—I don’t care. “If you can make it.”

“Is that a dare?”

“Yes.”

“You know I can’t turn those down.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



DARE

Thank fuck for the alarm. For my sense to set the alarm half an hour early.

When my phone blares with Val's favorite song, I'm one more brush from coming in my pants. Or developing a permanent case of blue balls.

One of the two.

Of course, my body shares none of my logic. My hands stay on Val's chest, on her perfect breasts. My fingers make one last play—

One perfect tease that makes her breath hitch and her thighs shake—

Before I find the will to pull back.

I sit up, I right my jeans, I leave the alarm blaring until I'm all the way in my clothes, then I help her into hers.

And, yeah, the way she groans as I pull her dress over her head (thank fuck she fixed her bra herself) is exquisite torture, but at least she's in her dress now.

It's a little easier to think with the head above my waist. Barely. But that's for the best too, because I can't begin to consider the implications of this lesson.

Am I that big a slut she thinks this means nothing?

Or am I that good a friend?

But, hey, we're on a deadline here, and it's time to go and meet her new boy-toy for a date. Because I'm not here to get my rocks off. I'm here to get her rocks off.

Only maybe she doesn't need to use Archie for this particular task.

Maybe she can use me.

It will probably ruin our friendship, yeah, but that seems like so much less of a concern without any blood in my brain.

So thank fuck we're leaving.

Because this *is* a possibility.

And that is absolutely not a possibility.

THE SUBWAY RIDE PASSES IN AWKWARD SILENCE. THE SHORT walk to the bar too.

This is a new neighborhood, a little ways from the touristy spots. It looks like the rest of Barcelona, only without the rows of chain stores and random Gaudi buildings.

Shit. I need to get my head in the game. I need to stop drifting into my thoughts. Sure, it's the only way to keep my hands to myself. But it's not happening.

We're here to get Val laid, and I'm on board with that mission. One hundred percent.

"Can you order drinks?" I force my voice to something neutral as I step inside the bar.

"Do you want something to eat?"

No. I want the alcohol to hit my system as quickly as possible. So there's too much booze for my dick to work. But I'm not sure that's even possible at this point. Val is some sort of life and flesh Viagra.

Fuck, I sound like my dad. No, I sound worse than my dad. Even he isn't low enough to compare his best friend to a boner

pill.

“Dare?” she asks. “Are you hungry?”

No, but we should eat. “Let’s split something.” Otherwise, she’ll drink on an empty stomach, get too drunk, and make bad decisions I can’t stop. “The patatas bravos.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll find a spot inside.” I check the time on the wall. Thirty minutes to set up before her date arrives. “A place where he won’t see me.”

She nods and heads to the bar.

The interior is dark, with sharp corners and low visibility. I find a spot in the middle area and position myself so I can see the main room. As long as Val takes the seat facing me, we’re good.

For some reason, the victory feels hollow. Worse than hollow. It gnaws at something in my stomach. Or maybe that’s hunger. When did we last eat? What did we eat?

Except for the feeling of Val’s lips on mine, my memory of the day is fuzzy.

Ahem. Platonic thoughts. *Yeah, right, platonic thoughts? How about we think of the Platonic ideal of re-introducing Val to sex? The two of us, in her bed.*

That’s where the word comes from. Plato. The Platonic ideal of friendship.

She taught me that. Now, I can teach her everything.

Okay, fuck platonic thoughts. I pull out my cell to play a mindless match three game, only there’s a better distraction waiting, another set of texts from Tricky and Luna. Not really a change of subject, but it’s something.

Luna Locke: So? Did it happen? Did the second drink inspire you to confess your love?

Patrick: Two drinks? That’s not enough to give Dare a buzz.

Luna Locke: Yeah, what do you weigh, Dare?

Patrick: That won't offend him.

Luna Locke: No?

Patrick: No. It's the chance to say, "two hundred pounds of muscle, baby, and it's all ready to work for you."

Luna Locke: He's said that?

Patrick: Something similar.

Luna Locke: That's a dumb thing to say.

Patrick: Exactly.

Luna Locke: Too dumb.

Patrick: That a level for him?

Luna Locke: We're supposed to be nice.

Patrick: You're capable?

Luna Locke: I'm very nice.

Patrick: Since when?

Luna Locke: Real friends tell the truth.

Dare: Nice of you two to join me here.

Patrick: So we're both nice.

Dare: No.

Patrick: Then settle this for us. Do you no longer want the entire world to see you as hot and dumb? It's on your Instagram.

Dare: I don't have an Instagram.

Patrick: You didn't have an Instagram until Luna showed you the picture of Val in a bikini. Now, you have an incognito Instagram.

How did he find that?

Luna Locke: Wait, what?

Dare: Don't you two have social lives?

Luna Locke: It's barely noon here.

Dare: Jobs?

Patrick: Where do you think we are?

Luna Locke: We stopped talking about you to talk to you. That's friendship.

Dare: Is it?

Luna Locke: What happened!?!?!?

Dare: Nothing happened.

Luna Locke: Then why did you reply to our stupid texts?

Patrick: Maybe he finds us charming.

Luna Locke: Seems unlikely.

Patrick: Yeah, we're pretty annoying.

Luna Locke: You especially.

Dare: Should I let myself out?

Luna Locke: No! Talk! Did you realize you're in love with her?

Dare: I want her, sure.

Luna Locke: Did you kiss her?

Dare: Yes.

Luna Locke: !!!!!

Patrick: We're going to need details.

Dare: It was practice. It didn't count.

Luna Locke: Last night?

Dare: Yeah. And again today.

Luna Locke: Again?

Patrick: Yeah, again doesn't sound like "practice."

Dare: When you learned to draw, you sketched every day.

Patrick: Not with my tongue in someone else's mouth.

Luna Locke: Did it feel like practice?

No.

Patrick: Who suggested it? You or her?

Dare: She's always been the one asking for help.

Patrick: And round two? That was her?

Dare: Because she needs to prep for her date.

Luna Locke: And how much "prep" did she request?

Dare: Enough.

Luna Locke: Enough to get off?

Dare: Don't talk about her that way.

Patrick: He's defensive about her.

Luna Locke: It's really sweet.

Dare: You're idiots.

Patrick: Idiots in functional relationships.

Luna Locke: You're in love with her.

Dare: I gotta go.

Luna Locke: Wait! One thing before you go.

Patrick: Yeah, this is not a sign-off.

Luna Locke: If she asks for practice again, she doesn't want "practice," she wants you.

Dare: How do you figure?

Luna Locke: I'm a woman. I know things.

Dare: You don't know Val.

Luna Locke: I know enough.

Right on cue, Val arrives with our drinks. She sets the balloon glasses on the table and slides into the seat across from mine. "Patrick?"

"And Luna."

"Oh, wow, a three-way. That's old-school."

"We call it a group text now."

"Do people still text?"

“We can’t all be on top of international trends?”

She smiles, charmed by the compliment. “Do they want anything in particular?”

“Pictures.” Sorta. “They wish they were here with us.”

“That’s sweet.”

In their way, their snooping is sweet.

But Luna is wrong. Val asks for practice because she wants to learn, not because she wants to kiss me.

“Are you good?” She brings the glass to her lips and takes a long sip. “Mmm. That’s good.”

“Gin tonic?”

“They do infusions here.”

“What’s yours?”

She offers me the glass.

I take a slow sip. Let out my own soft sigh. The cocktail is good—the subtle herbs of gin, the unique taste of quinine, the mix of bitter and sweet, the faint hint of lime—and it tastes like her lips.

No, this is the taste on her lips. I know the taste of her lips now. I want to taste them again. Right now. Forever.

“Lime?” The garnish gives it away, but I can’t say I mind.

She nods. “Yours is more exotic.”

“Can I handle that?”

“I think so.”

I taste my drink, trying to place the flavor of the infusion. It’s similar to hers but with a hint of a tart flower. Between that and the garnish of petals and peppercorns, I guess, “hibiscus.”

“Perfect.” She takes another sip. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” If this is what she needs, I can find a way to be okay with it. “Are you?”

“Of course. Yeah. Absolutely.” She takes another sip. “I just don’t want you to feel weird if it’s too much.”

“No.”

“Good. Good.” She swallows another sip. “Great.”

“Did it help?”

“Huh?”

“The practice?”

“Help what?” she asks.

“You feel prepared for tonight?”

“For flirting?”

“If you go home with him.” I follow the words with a long sip. So I don’t say something stupid. Or throw up.

“More prepared than I was.”

“Did you want to talk about anything?”

“About us?”

I bite my tongue. “Technique.”

“Do I need tips?”

“No. You’re perfect.” Too perfect. The heat of her body against mine replays in my brain. The feel of her breasts in my hands. Her groan on my neck. Her thighs around my hips.

I need her.

Now.

And my body doesn’t give a fuck about the practicalities. It’s ready to slip under the table and dive between her legs. Or take her against the wall. Or screw her in the single-stall bathroom.

Anywhere. Everywhere. All the time.

I swallow another sip, but despite the plentiful ice—this is the first time I’ve seen a drink full of ice—and the cooling nature of gin, my temperature rises. I want to taste this on her lips.

“No notes?” she asks.

“I told you. Guys aren’t like that.”

“You told me in high school.”

“Nothing changed.”

“So none of the girls you’ve slept with were dead fish?” she asks.

“Dead fish, really? Who says that?”

“Okay, no one says dead fish. But there’s that one song...” She taps her glass. “The one on that album Forest is always playing, where the guy starts some weird stream of bad poetry at the end?”

“What song?”

“The two vocalists are trading off. And the one with the whiney voice says something... oh what is it?” She takes a long sip. “Something about how it’s hot to lie on top of someone.”

“Why do you remember that?”

“Because the first time I heard it, I was titillated. The very mention of sex was so exciting. And then, after I had some experience, I couldn’t believe the lyricist chose to portray his skills that way.”

“And you thought maybe Forest is a bad lay?” I ask.

She laughs. “It occurred to me.”

“Should we call Skye and ask?”

She shakes her head. “I haven’t seen her in forever.”

“She likes you.”

“Since when?”

Okay, sure, I don’t really talk to Forest and Skye much. Forest is older. He hangs with the other older guys, mostly the crowd at Inked Hearts, our parent shop. But his girlfriend, Skye, does like Val. In fact, she’s asked me, a few times, if Val would pose for her social media. She’s a plus-size fashion influencer. Though I’m not sure why companies pay her to

model clothes when most of her pictures are mostly naked. Does anyone notice the clothes she's removing? "Can I confess something?"

"You slept with Skye?"

"What? No." I shoot her a *where is that from* look?

"Why not? She's sexy."

And? There's something here, something I can't place. "She's been in love with Forest the entire time I've known her." Why did I say that? She and Forest were best friends. The way Val and I are best friends.

No, with way less intensity than Val and me. Because we've been friends since middle school. We've shared in a way they haven't.

"That's not a turn-on," I say.

"No? Didn't offer to make him jealous?"

I shake my head. "She asked if you'd pose for her Instagram."

"The naked one?" Her cheeks flush.

"Mostly naked, yeah. She had this new lingerie company that wanted to get a group together, and she thought you'd be perfect."

"Cause I'm bigger?"

"Cause you're sexy." I take a long sip. "Her words."

"Oh." She avoids my eyes. "And you disagreed?"

"No. You're sexy." Why did I say that? I bite my tongue so I don't make it worse.

She continues to avoid my eyes. "Why didn't you pass it along?" When I don't reply, she answers for me. "Did you not think I could handle it?"

That was part of it, yes, but there was more. Something else I shouldn't say. Something I have to say anyway. "I didn't want other people to see you that way."

"But you don't care if they see Skye?"

“She’s not my best friend.” It’s a weak explanation. Extremely weak. Pathetic.

“So, what, you only want to protect me?”

“I always want to protect you.”

“Because I’m your friend?” she asks. “Or for another reason?”

The words drop with a thud. It’s there. It’s not in bold text, but it’s there, and we both know it.

There’s another reason why I don’t want other guys to see her naked.

There’s a reason why I want to protect her, why I offer all this practice, why I can’t stop thinking about her.

But I don’t know what to say. And she doesn’t either. We’re here, with a plan, and that plan doesn’t involve feelings for each other.

Thankfully, the server interrupts us with a massive plate of potatoes.

The table falls silent as he sets them between us, delivers silverware, leaves.

“Would you have said yes?” I ask.

She unwraps her napkins. “When was it?”

“A year ago.”

“Probably not.”

“Now?” I ask.

Finally, she looks into my eyes. “I would.”

“I’m sure she can find a spot for you.”

“And you wouldn’t mind seeing me half-naked on the Internet?”

Seeing her? No. Knowing *he* could see her?

But I can’t say that. I can’t bring that up. Not now, when I’m supposed to help her into casual sex.

“As long as you know strangers are going to fuck themselves to you,” I say.

She flushes. “From Instagram photos?”

“A hundred percent.”

“Have you done that?” I ask.

“Looked at pictures of women in lingerie?”

“It sounds silly when you say it like that.” She stabs a potato and dips it in bravas sauce. “But with your dad... You do realize you asked me to help you burn his *Playboy* collection?”

That’s true, but—“I’m not opposed to porn,” I say. “I just want something real.”

“Like an Instagram model who is posing for other women?”

No, she’s right. The thought of jacking it to Skye is weird. And not just because she’s a friend. I’m sure she knows guys find her pictures hot, but they’re not intended for explicit use. “Amateur stuff.”

“I like amateur stuff,” she says.

Val watches porn? That’s a tempting mental image. Way too tempting. “You watch porn?”

“Sometimes,” she says. “My therapist suggested it. I thought I’d hate it and I did hate some of it. A lot of it. But she —” She laughs and takes a bite. “She sent me some videos that were ‘safe.’”

“Your therapist watched porn for you?” Really, this therapy thing is sounding better and better.

“She told me she knew a collection designed for people who needed something gentle. But maybe she watched them.”

“Do you think she got off to them?” I ask.

“Dare!”

“She might have.”

“Oh god, she might have.” She takes another bite. “You’re not eating.”

“Why would I eat when I can hear more about therapy porn?”

“It’s not that exciting.”

Agree to disagree there. “Did you fuck yourself to the videos?” I shove a potato in my mouth so I won’t follow up with something else that sends blood racing south.

“Some of them.”

The potatoes are good, especially for a bar. Crispy, warm, with a hint of seasoning. That’s right. My desire to groan is solely from the potatoes.

“Why? Did you want to screen some for me?” she teases.

Or is she teasing? Maybe she means it. I don’t know anymore. “What are friends for?”

“I could send you one.” She dips another potato in sauce. “If you’re curious.”

“Sure. Great.” I stab another, dip it in sauce, eat.

“Okay.” She pulls out her phone and sends it right now. Swoosh.

Ding. My phone buzzes with a link.

“There’s a paywall, though,” she says. “You have to pay for the premium stuff.”

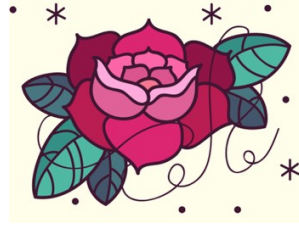
“Should I go so you can get ready this way?” I ask.

She laughs and takes another bite.

And, once again, I bury my words under a mouthful of potatoes. I find the sense to change the subject to practicalities. Where she sits. When to call. What she wants to say to Archie.

When he’s five minutes out, she moves to the front room. I order another drink and prepare to help her score a better man.

Chapter Twenty-Six



“**Y**ou look beautiful.” Archie greets me with a hug. Once he’s close enough to whisper, he adds, “Is he here?”

“In the back.”

“Can he see us?”

“The outline,” I say. “But he won’t hear until I call.”

“In that case.” He lets his hand slide to my hip, and he leans a little closer. He releases me with a knowing smile and shifts into fake-flirting mode (it’s very fake). “Is this our first time getting a drink?”

“Just the two of us, yeah.”

Archie surveys the room a little too obviously. He places his palm on the small of my back, and he leads me to the bar.

Unlike Dare’s hand, Archie’s hand feels strange. Wrong. Not in a sickening way, but enough, I want it gone.

But, hey, this is the plan.

Using Archie to make Dare jealous, while I pretend to use Dare to make Archie jealous.

Not confusing at all.

As planned, I take the seat at the table by the window. I can’t see Dare from here, really, but I can sorta make out the spot where we were sitting.

With his back to the rest of the bar, Archie absolutely can't see Dare. But I guess that doesn't really matter, since Archie is in on the whole charade.

How the hell do I play this?

"What are you thinking?" Archie slides into the tall chair. "A lot of laughing? Some of this." He places his hand on mine and leans in like he's whispering a secret. "Then call with something spicier?"

"Spicier?"

"What did Zelda tell you?"

"What? Zelda? Why would she talk about you?" I fail to feign ignorance.

"So that's why you're nervous." He laughs. "You're a bad liar."

Guilty. I nod.

"Don't tell me those movies didn't inspire conversation. What was the one with the guy who went to a sex dungeon?"

"No, he opened a sex dungeon," I say. "It was a romantic comedy."

"And that didn't inspire a few complaints about my lack of an open mind?"

For some reason, it's easier to talk to him about sex. Because I don't want him, I guess. Because it doesn't feel loaded. "It came up after a few glasses of wine."

"Don't worry. You won't offend me. I was uptight when we were together."

"Not anymore?"

"I had a fling over spring break."

"Something kinky?" I ask.

He blushes, actually blushes. "A little."

My phone buzzes in my lap.

“A lot.” He looks to the noise as my phone buzzes again.
“Is that him?”

It is.

Dare: Mood seems good. You feeling good?

Val: It's great. Archie is funny. I'm relaxed. Flirtation is happening.

Dare: I'm here if you need me.

“Is he jealous?” he asks.

“That doesn't come through in text form.”

“No?” He shoots me an *are you sure* look. “What did you do after we talked?”

“Huh?”

“You're flushed,” he says. “And your hair is mussed.”

“Mussed?”

He leans closer, wraps his hand around my neck, whispers in my ear. “I've lived with you for six months. I know how you wear your hair.”

“Are you flirting?”

“Isn't that the idea?” he asks.

“He can't hear.”

“Let him hear,” Archie says. “I'll make it good.” He stands, stretches his arms over his head, and very theatrically says, “I'll grab the drinks.”

Am I that obvious too?

I look to my cell.

Val: I'll leave it on, just in case, but don't send too many texts or it gets obvious.

Dare: It will spice up your night.

Val: You noticed that?

Dare: Might help get you in the mood.

Val: I'm already in the mood.

Because of my lesson with Dare, but, hey, I don't have to say that, even if I am thinking it very loudly.

Really, my entire brain is flashing *Dare Dare Dare*. I want to kiss him again, touch him again, touch him properly.

I stay on mission. I call him, set the volume to the minimum, and I place the cell in my lap.

Archie returns with the drinks, another round of infused gin tonics, orange for me this time, cardamom for him, and leans in for another hug slash whisper. "Are we on?"

I nod.

"Did you two kiss?" he asks.

"For practice." It sounds weak. Even I hear that. Who kisses for practice? "Only for half an hour." Only that's an eternity in kissing.

Archie's eyes go wide. "Only half an hour? Did you only have sex too?"

"We didn't even go below the waist," I say.

"So you touched above the waist?"

Right. It does sound a little obvious like that. But he's wrong. I think.

"It was over the clothes."

"Which clothes?"

"His boxers."

"Valeria!" He says my name the way my mom does, with a perfect Spanish accent (where did he learn that) and an intense *what have you done* tone. "That's below the waist."

"Right. Yes. That is where waists are."

"You practically had sex."

"No one came," I say.

He shoots me another *are you serious* look.

“He just played with my—” I motion to my chest. Blush from the memory of Dare’s hands on my body, “a little.”

“He played with you a little?” Archie’s voice drops to a firm tone, one I’ve never heard on him. “For fuck’s sake.” He shakes his head. “You should go to him. Right now.”

“It doesn’t mean anything to him.”

“Valeria!” Again, the perfect Spanish accent. “You’re out of your mind.”

“Probably, yeah.” I press my lips to his neck, which feels weird and wrong, but, hey, it looks hot.

“Go to him right now and tell him you want him.”

“You agreed to fake flirt.”

He shakes his head *you’re ridiculous*, but he releases me and returns to his seat.

“Really?” I pretend as if he told me a wild secret. “You did all that?”

“I know. I can’t believe it either.” He takes a sip. “And did you know? At first, I didn’t think she was interested.”

“No.” I take a long sip and let out a soft sigh. These drinks really are good. And this is not going well. “Was she subtle?”

“No. Not at all,” he says. “She kept looking at me like she was picturing me naked.”

“Why didn’t you see it?” I ask.

“She was off-limits. A friend’s mom.”

Did this really happen, or is he making it up?

He continues, “We ran into each other at the pub. She started asking about school. Somehow, we got to talking about women, relationships. And even when I told her I always wanted to sleep with an older woman, I didn’t think she’d have an interest.”

“What did she say?” I ask.

“Even when she told me she always wanted to sleep with a younger man, I still didn’t get it. Talk about oblivious?”

Are Dare and I really that obvious? Or is Archie seeing what he wants to see? “Pretty bad, yeah.”

“The next day, she sent me a text, and I still didn’t get it.”

“What made it happen for you?”

“She asked me to help her with something at home,” he says. “A leaky faucet.”

“Like in a porno?”

He laughs. “Basically. But I go over there thinking, well, I am handy, and she’s recently divorced, and her son is at school.”

“Did you fix her pipes?”

“Only in the euphemistic sense.”

“Do people say that still?”

He shakes his head. “I got there with my tool kit and she opened the door in a sheer black robe. But I still didn’t get it. Not until she kissed me.”

“Did you go all *The Graduate* and say, ‘Mrs. Best Friend’s mom, are you trying to seduce me?’” I ask.

My phone buzzes in my lap.

Archie raises a brow. He makes a show of taking a sip and looking away.

I check my text.

Dare: Don’t kill the mood with film references he won’t get. He’s the kind of guy who likes to feel smart.

Dare: And The Graduate is not sexy.

Dare: At least suggest something sexy in a basic way.

Val: What would that be?

Dare: Moulin Rouge.

I guess there is something obviously sexy about a famous topless show. And, really, the woman who plays Mrs. Robinson, the seductive older woman, was only ten or fifteen years older than the guy who played the recent college

graduate. So it's not even a great example of an older woman. More an example of the American film industry keeping older women out of work.

Which is probably not a sexy area of conversation.

Not that it matters. This is all bullshit. It just feels important to say. I need to tell Dare later. He always listens to my thoughts on movies.

That's one of my favorite things about him. He wants to know what I think. So many guys only pretend to care.

But, hey, back to fake flirting. "Did you like it?" I ask. "Being with an older woman?"

He nods. "It was like something out of the movies. She taught me all sorts of things."

My chest flames as my phone buzzes in my lap. Dare is listening. Dare is responding. My cell phone is way too close to where it needs to be. "What sort of things?"

The phone buzzes again.

He nods to the cell and mouths *check it*.

"Can I admit something?" I ask.

"Of course."

"It's been a while." I glance at the message.

Dare: Ask what his favorite thing was.

Dare: Wait. Is this too much?

Dare: Are you okay here?

I need to reassure him. "I'm not the picture of experimentation, but I am okay. I am okay with trying new things. And talking about trying new things." Not the most natural but it works. "What was your favorite thing?"

"When I tied her up."

My phone buzzes in my lap.

"But to be honest, she was more into tying me up."

"You're a switch?"

“Open-minded. I wasn’t when I was with Zelda,” he says. “I should apologize to her for some of that. I shot her down. I hurt her. But we all come to things in our time. And we weren’t right together, long term. She was in love with someone else.”

Okay, that’s not subtle. “How did you know?”

“There was a guy back home. They dated in high school. They broke up when she went to college, but they still talked all the time.”

My phone buzzes in my lap.

“That’s why I wondered about you and Dare.”

“Right. Yeah.” *Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.* “We’re just friends.”

He mouths *no way*. “I know.”

“I’ve got it.” I clear my throat. “I mean, I get that a lot. People always think we’re together.”

“Oh?”

“Since we were kids, yeah. It was odd to me then. I never saw him that way. And then we got older and he got really hot.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“But I’m bigger and he’s effortlessly cool. Have you seen those tattoos?” I ask.

“Are you into tattoos?”

“I never thought about it.” But I am. I really am. “They always seemed normal.”

“I have a few.” He makes a show of standing and tapping his thigh. “Not many people see them.”

I don’t know how much of this is real and how much is pretend, so I nod. I don’t care about Archie’s tattoos. I don’t care about his muscular thigh. I just don’t care.

He drops his voice to an undeniably flirty tone. “You can see them. If you want.”

Okay. We’re doing this.

“Isn’t that why you invited me here?” He looks to the general direction of my phone right as it buzzes in my lap. “If all you want is goodbye drinks, I’m game. But If you want more... what do you think? Should we finish this round and head home?”

“Yes.” My cheeks flare. “Absolutely. I just need to use the bathroom first.”

“Sure.” He smiles and leans in to whisper, “Go get ‘em, tiger.”

“Thanks.” I take a long sip, shove my phone into my purse, slip out of my seat, and walk straight to the back of the room. As I pass Dare, I nod *follow me* and move to the bathroom.

A moment later, he stands and joins me outside the single stall. “That was fast. Are you okay?”

“A little rattled,” I say.

“If you’re not ready...”

“I’m ready.”

“Oh.” He doesn’t hide his surprise. “Good. Do you want me to listen to the rest?”

“No. I’ve got it.”

He swallows hard. “You sure?”

Absolutely not. I nod anyway.

He smiles, but I don’t believe it for a second.

A guy approaches, looking at us funny. “Are you in the queue?”

“No. Go for it,” I say.

“Americans.” He shakes his head and slips into the door.

“I should probably sit.” Dare shifts back to teacher mode. He buries the disappointment in his eyes with another smile, a better one.

“You’re sure you’re good?”

I look into my best friend's eyes and I lie. "I've got this. Stay out for an hour after we finish our drinks. To give us time."

"I'd feel better if I was in the apartment."

Me too, normally. But for this? I look into his eyes, and I say the one thing I know will make him jealous. "I trust him."

And I see it in his eyes.

Wanting Archie is one thing.

Trusting him here?

That hurts more than anything.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



DARE

After I return to my seat, I watch Val slip into the bathroom, emerge with her makeup perfect, rejoin Archie at the table, leave.

I pay, walk home, find a bar near the apartment.

Another gin tonic in a balloon glass, with plenty of ice, and garnishes designed to bring out the subtle flavors. Lime and cucumber. Like I need the image of a cucumber in my head.

Really, the day Val asked me for hand job tips, then clarified *no, I need an actual demonstration*.

The image flashed in my head for a split second, yeah. *I can show her this way. I can teach her, even.*

Then I banished it as quickly as it arrived. There was no way I could cross that line with Val. The cucumber worked better, anyway. Sure, it wasn't the same level of hands-on experience, but I didn't lose my senses the way I would have

The way I did today.

But, hey, this is what she wants. She's back home with a nice guy who wants to treat her right. Maybe she's naked right now. Maybe she's in his bed. Maybe she's sucking him off. Maybe she's coming on his cock, screaming his name.

Maybe Archie really is the world's best fuck.

I check my cell again. Nothing.

She doesn't need me.

She's got this.

I should be proud. No, I am proud. This is a major step for her. She's overcoming a lot of baggage to get into this other guy's bed.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I finish my drink and order another, one without a cucumber garnish this time. Besides the lack of essence-of-phallic-vegetable, it tastes the same. There's all this subtlety in the Spanish-style gin tonic. This is the kind of thing Val loves, the endless depth of the simple combination of gin and tonic.

That's one of the things I love about her, but it's not something I understand.

All right, maybe I'm not making sense. The endless supply of gin is going to my head. But I know one thing: I'm not the guy who ends up with her.

And I fucking hate it.

After I order another round, I check my cell. Nothing from Val. More from my friends.

They're eager to know how things are going, what we're doing, when I'm going to finally realize I'm in love with Val.

But they don't get it.

It doesn't matter what I realize or when.

It won't happen.

The twenty-minute wait for her text feels like three hours, even with the drink.

Val: You're good to come home.

That's the entire message?

Val: Everything was good. I'm good. But I'm exhausted, so I'm going right to bed.

Did he wear her out?

Dare: You don't want to talk about anything?

Val: In the morning, if that's okay?

Did you fuck him?

I type the words, then delete them. I'm not ready to see the answer. I'm not ready to face the reality.

Dare: If you promise you're okay.

Val: I promise. Do you?

No. I'm going to throw up. But I need to get over it.

Dare: Of course.

Val: Good night, Dare.

Dare: Sweet dreams.

For her, maybe. But for me?

Not a chance.

ANOTHER DRINK IS A BAD IDEA. TWO IS WORSE. BUT, HEY, how often do you get the news your best friend boinked her roommate?

By the time I leave the bar, I'm swaying, but I'm not far gone enough to feel better. I walk back to the apartment, let myself inside, listen for sounds of life.

Nothing. Only the hum of the air-conditioning and the closed doors to both Archie and Val's rooms.

Is she sleeping in his bed? Is he in hers?

My head is fuzzy, but the mental images in my head are crystal clear. Val, in the throes of passion, groaning his name again and again.

Exactly what I want for her. What I'm supposed to want for her.

I brush my teeth, I strip, I climb into bed.

My sleep is restless. Dreams of Val in his arms, in his bed, in his life.

Sleeping with him is one thing, but trusting him?

I wake sweaty and exhausted. The place is still quiet. It's late enough I'm rocking a headache instead of a buzz, but it's too early for Val.

She's still in her room, sound asleep, dreaming of another man.

I go through my routine; I dress; I leave the apartment in search of distraction. Nothing in my aimless wander appeals, but somehow, I find myself at the beach.

I dip my feet in the Mediterranean—any more feels wrong without her. The water is cold enough to wake me up, but it doesn't illuminate anything.

The walk home is the same blur of familiar sights. It's strange. The Gothic Quarter is unlike anything I see in my normal life, but after two days, it feels passé. Another steep church. Another narrow street. Another tourist shop.

I guess anyone can get used to anything.

I can get used to this.

I grab coffee, one for her and one for me, and return to the apartment. The place is quiet. Still. Val is asleep.

In my room, I fail to straighten my thoughts.

They only want to go two places—The image of Val with Archie.

Or the image of Val with me.

It's a bad idea, I know, but I can't help myself. I need a break from the dull ache in my chest. I double-check the apartment—still quiet—and I set up in my room.

My heart is as eager as my body. I don't envision some dirty, depraved scenario. Not sex in the bar bathroom or diving between her legs under the table.

No, something soft and slow and intimate.

The kind of sex I've never had. Does it feel as good as it does in the movies? Or is that another bullshit fantasy, the way

Playboy is?

It's close enough, I taste it, feel it, see it. Val's body wrapped around mine, her lips on my neck, her groan in my ear.

The voice in my head—the one telling me not to imagine sex with my best friend—fades, and I surrender to the fantasy. I wrap my hand around my cock, and I move in time with my thoughts.

For a few moments, the world is bliss.

Then a sound interrupts.

A knock.

A gasp.

A door.

“Shit.” Val lets out a soft sigh. “Sorry. I’m getting coffee. I’ll be back soon.” She slams the door shut and races out of the apartment.

She needs to get that far away from my dick.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



T *hink unsexy thoughts.*

Think unsexy thoughts.

Really, anything that isn't Dare's hand around his cock. His bare ass and thighs as he pumps into his hand.

Nope. It's like telling someone not to picture an elephant. All I see is the trunk in action. And that's not even something I find appealing, usually. It's not that I have an issue with a sexual partner touching themselves. I just don't crave it.

There aren't any male-solo-sessions in my classy porn collection. Or my spank bank. Even before The Incident, before male desire felt more threatening than erotic, I didn't find the image of a male masturbatory session particularly appealing.

But Dare, with his hand around his cock, and my name on his lips—

It's hot in this coffee shop. It really is. And the warmth of my cappuccino doesn't help matters.

Maybe that's okay.

Sure, it's a little awkward to broach the *I saw you touching yourself* conversation, but it's less awkward than *I have to tell you something. I didn't sleep with Archie. I don't want to sleep with Archie. He's in on the whole thing, and he convinced me to pretend to make you jealous, but that's ridiculous, isn't it?*

The words sound hollow, even in my head.

The evidence is there in the text. And, sure, the events are open to interpretation, but the sheer magnitude of evidence is overwhelming.

Who watches *Sabrina* and thinks “money should triumph over love?”

At this point, the *Dare wants Val* evidence is nearly as strong. I can’t deny it anymore.

He wants me.

And, even if it ruins our friendship, he deserves the truth.

I ORDER TWO ICED LATTES TO GO AND RETURN TO THE apartment.

Dare nods *hey* as I step inside. From his spot on the couch, he studies his sketchbook. “Morning.” He keeps his voice neutral, as if I didn’t walk in on him this morning, or make out with him last night, or send him away to screw Archie between those two events.

With the same neutrality, I reply. “Morning.” I hold up the iced latte. “Oh. I forgot you had one here.”

“It’s in the fridge,” he says.

“Should I bring this over?”

“It’s a pretty long way for me to walk.” He shoots me a classic *I’m ridiculous and you love it* smile, but it’s lacking its usual spark.

“It’s dark in here.”

“Is it?”

Sorta. The blinds are down. “Hangover?”

He motions *kinda*.

“You kept drinking after I left?”

“When in Spain...”

“Drink gin tonics until the bars close?”

He nods *exactly* and looks at the floor. With great struggle, he asks, “Did you have fun?”

I want to tell him everything now, but I just can’t find the words. “It was a good night.” I set our drinks on the coffee table and open the curtains.

He squints and lets out a low groan. “Is that necessary?”

He is hungover. That happens. With too many drinks. Or your best friend pretending to sleep with someone else.

Dare grabs the iced latte, takes a long sip, lets out a groan of pleasure.

I can feel it in my throat, the way I did yesterday, the way I can today. If I tell him. If he forgives my deception.

If we risk everything.

I join him on the couch, take a sip of my coffee, try to find the words to confess. They jumble in my throat, so I try something easier. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He doesn’t ask for clarification. “Do you?”

“I’m okay.”

“Me too.” He doesn’t sell it.

And I don’t push him to expand. “Should we head out then?”

“We have a plan for the day?”

I nod. “Two museums.”

“Which two?”

“Would you rather see modern art or Picasso?” I ask.

He shoots me a *really* look.

“I thought so.” I ease into the conversation. Dare and I talking about paintings. Something I can manage. “Modern art. Then sex.”

“The Museum of Sex?”

I nod.

We gather our stuff; we head to breakfast; we talk about anything besides the elephant in the room.

The walk to the modern art museum is the same. Thankfully, the second we step inside, his attention goes to the work. The beauty of a best friend who adores the visual arts. It's easy to keep his mind elsewhere.

And, really, the place is arresting. The first floor is recent work, the sort of avant-garde stuff people criticize as pointless or childish.

Dare defends every piece. Not that they need it. The descriptions on the placards are surprisingly fanboyish. The street art exhibit upstairs is the same. We fall into a rare dynamic, Dare sharing his passion with me, inviting me into his world.

I bask in the intimacy, the familiarity of it. This is the way he talked when we were kids, when he was just discovering drawing, when we spent hours and hours sharing our passions.

The morning turns to afternoon. We talk about the world through an easy lunch (we share a chicken kebab plate). We sip cappuccinos and shop for fancy chocolate and walk through the Gothic Quarter at ease.

Then we arrive at the Museum of Sex and the elephant bursts into the room. We make it through buying tickets, past massive iron phallus, and the History of Porn: drawings, then photos, flipbooks and zoetropes, then short clips designed to excite the customers at a brothel, the explanation of kink—whips and chains and handcuffs galore, past the wall of dildos in every color, literally glued to the wall, and the pussy chair in the garden, past the wall of sex records, all the way down the stairs, into the gift shop, before he asks.

“How was it?” He swallows hard as he pretends to study a strawberry-flavored lube. “With Archie last night?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine



I 'm not ready to hear the answer, whatever it is, but I stay strong.

Val picks up a tube of cinnamon-flavored lube. "Wouldn't this hurt?"

"It might burn."

"And that's desirable?"

"Increases sensation," I say.

"Like one of those warming lubes?" she asks.

"How do you know about those?"

Her eye corners turn down, but she doesn't answer directly. There's something there. A hurt she doesn't want to discuss. "Do you remember the day your dad took us to the drug store to look at condoms?"

"I tried to forget that," I say.

"He looked at us like he was sure we were already having sex. Then he went into detail on every single type of condom. Latex, plastic, lambskin."

"Prevents pregnancy, but it's not a good idea with a girl who's easy." Fuck, I hate my dad.

"And he looked at me like, obviously, I wasn't one of those girls." She relays the facts without commentary or frustration.

“That was fucked up,” I say.

“Yeah, but he wasn’t my dad.” She sets the lube down. “I don’t really think about that, often, how much he must have fucked up your relationship to sex.”

She’s deflecting, but I don’t call her on it. “I don’t remember the part about warming lube.”

“No? Really?” She laughs. “After he finished with the condoms, he moved onto the aids. Some of it was great, responsible stuff, the reminder to use water-based lubes with latex, to use enough lube. Because otherwise the condom will break.”

“He didn’t say anything disgusting about wet pussy?”

“Not in front of me. He was almost gentlemanly, talking about how medication and age can leave a woman dry. Or if you’ve been going for hours, ‘cause ‘the body can’t always take as much as the spirit.’”

“Fuck me.”

Her laugh is awkward. “Then he picks up the cooling lube and he says, ‘this is fun if you want to go for ages, but it can be too much for women sometimes.’”

“I’m surprised he realized that was possible.”

“Can I admit something?”

“Of course,” I say.

“I got the sense he’s pretty skilled. He seemed like he understood the emotional and physical mechanics.”

“Yeah, like pretending he’s in love so a woman fucks him.”

“He’s an asshole, yes, but he might be an asshole who knows how to satisfy.”

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Me either.” She looks up at me. “Do you hate me?”

“How could I ever hate you?”

“For defending your dad?” There’s more there, something she isn’t saying.

But it doesn’t matter. Whatever it is, I could never hate her.

“I value your honesty, even when it’s not what I want to hear.”

“Right.”

“You’re always honest with me.”

Val smooths her jeans. “Usually.” She slides her hand into her pocket. “I should tell you this.”

“Anything.”

She’s about to say it. Whatever happened with Archie last night.

“This stuff.” She looks at the cinnamon lube. “I can’t stand the sight of it.”

Huh?

“The guy... he had that. The condom he used. It was one of those warming ones.”

The guy. All at once, the tension in my body shifts. I hate the thought of Val with Archie, but I want this for her so fucking badly. I want her to move on, to get over it, to feel *good* again.

She shifts into the story. Her voice softens. Her body too. “He was in one of my film classes.” She’s scared and vulnerable.

I need to shut the fuck up and listen.

“We got put together in this group project. The two of us and a few other people. Everyone else was trying to stay on track, finding examples of... I don’t even remember. Two person scenes, I think. One of the other guys sent this really awkward sex scene. And when he walked me home, the guy, he said he couldn’t believe how bad it was. I kinda laughed, like really? It didn’t seem so bad to me. But he said no, sex shouldn’t be like that. Sex should be intimate and loving.

He... he seemed so much like he got it, like he would be a caring partner.”

I hate the asshole.

“We talked about that a little. That night. And then, at a party. About our favorite sex scenes in movies, the ones that really seemed sensual. All the good ones. *Lust*, *Caution* and *Body Heat*. And even *Before Sunrise*, which isn’t explicit. We barely see them kiss. But we feel that charge, the whole movie. And I thought... I don’t know. Was it stupid I trusted him?”

“No.” There’s so much more I want to say, but no is a start.

“He recommended this French movie, as a perfect movie about sex and love, and it sounded interesting, so we went to his room and watched it. It was only after... we kissed there. Touched a little.” She looks to the ground. “I was scared, yeah, but I wanted to... All of that, I wanted it.”

“Okay.”

“But, after, I felt dizzy, like we were moving too fast. I told him and he said no problem. We went out again. He walked me home, back to my dorm room, and when he realized my roommate was out, he invited himself in. That seemed okay too. He was respecting my speed. We watched a movie on my bed. And, yeah, we were close, but we were just watching. Then... after...” She takes a deep breath and lets out a slow exhale. “We started kissing. I reminded him about going slow and he said, sure, but he unzipped my jeans anyway. And when I protested, he told me I didn’t want slow. I wanted this. He knew I was just playing coy.”

“Fuck, Val. I’m sorry.”

“I said it again, but without all the politeness, and it was like something snapped. He became this other person. This scary person. He pushed me onto the bed and he put his hand over my mouth and I just... he wasn’t a big guy.” She looks to me. “Shorter than you. Not nearly as muscular. He probably weighed less than I do, but he overpowered me easily. And after, he asked if I had a good time. He called the next day. He told me he was excited about our next date. Like what

happened was normal, like my protests were part of some silly mating ritual.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“He was so sure I believed him too. I thought maybe he was right. Maybe he saw something I didn’t. Maybe, deep down, I wanted it. I deserved it. After all, I kissed him. I touched him. I came. Did I ever tell you that part? That I came?”

No. And I hate hearing it. But not for the reason she thinks. Because I hate knowing anyone hurt her this way. I hate that I can’t find the bastard and kill him. But I love that she trusts me with this. And I need, so badly, to be the person she trusts, to be what she needs right now. “That doesn’t change anything.”

“For a long time...” She looks around the big, bright room. “I believed it.” She digs her fingers into my wrist, reaching for me, trying to find some steadiness. “Can we go home?”

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring it up. I just—”

“Don’t be sorry.”

“But you... I know what you want to ask about...” She doesn’t finish the sentence.

She doesn’t need to finish. Whatever happened last night, it doesn’t matter. It’s nothing compared to this. “It’s not important.” I take her hand and lead her outside.

She relaxes as we step onto the busy street. She’s no longer surrounded by symbols of easy pleasure. Or more difficult pleasure.

What’s it like for her to see a display of restraints after some guy held her down?

Does she hate that people love it? Totally fail to understand?

Or does some part of her find it thrilling?

She didn't tell me this when it happened. And we both know why. Partly, because she wasn't ready.

But because I wasn't ready to hear it either.

That changed a lot for her, but it changed a lot for me too. Before, I was living in blissful ignorance. Sure, I thought about how my dad was a pig. I aspired to treat women better than he did. But I didn't realize what that meant, not really.

I didn't know so many women go through shit like this.

I tried my best, yeah, but it wasn't good enough.

"Val?" I pull her closer as we cut through the crowded street.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for telling me that."

"You don't want to say anything? About how I should have known better?"

A part of me does, sure. A part of me wants to chide her for making bad decisions. Because she's my friend, and she's smart and she knows better. "But I know better too. Even if that's true—and I'm not saying it is—it's not on you. It's on him."

"You really believe that?"

"Don't you?" I want her to believe it. I would do anything to help her with this, to repair her relationship with sex. But it's not my battle. And I know better this time. I know I need to give her space.

"Usually, these days. But not always. I... I never told you, you know? That I'd been with him before."

No, she didn't, and a few years ago, I would have been pissed. Not at her behavior. Not because she'd been with him before. Because I felt entitled to the entire story. Now, I know better. We never get the entire story. Only what someone sees, only what they feel comfortable sharing. That needs to be enough. I need to trust her to share when she's ready. And I do.

“Are you mad?”

“Not at you.” Finally, we get past the crowd, stop at the streetlight. “At him, yeah? But you? No.”

“You promise?”

“Of course.” The light turns. I lead her across the street, through the pigeon-covered park, along the block. “He stopped when you said you wanted to take it slow, right?”

She nods. “Yeah, he fixed my jeans and said he’d keep it ‘above the waist.’ It was kinda cute. I thought I must have read him totally wrong, if I thought he was pushing too hard. ‘Cause what college student says ‘above the waist?’”

“He got it. He said yes, to get your guard down. Even if you hadn’t said no, and you did, he wore you down on purpose.”

Finally, I get to the apartment. I buzz the code; I open the door for Val; I follow her inside.

We climb the stairs slowly. The entire time, the question bounces through my brain.

Is it wrong to ask? Or wrong to ignore it?

I don’t know.

Val opens the door, steps inside, moves straight to her room.

I stop outside the door.

“Come in. Please.” She curls into herself. “If that’s okay.”

I step inside.

“I know I asked a lot yesterday.”

Maybe, but I’m not opposed to being asked for more. Well, my dick isn’t. Thankfully, the fucker is neutralized by the subject matter. For now. “Did something happen?”

“Huh?” She moves to the bed.

I close the door and lean against the wall. “With Archie?”

She sits and looks to me. “You mean, did we have sex?”

“No.” I want to ask that, but I won’t. Not now. “Did something trigger you?”

“No. That... We...” She shakes her head as she laughs.

What the fuck? I’m not following. At all.

“I... Last night, he didn’t mean any of that. He figured out that you were listening. He figured out we were trying to seduce him. Well, that you were trying to help me. And he wanted to turn it back around.”

I swallow hard, struggling to digest the information.

“It was his idea, but I went along with it too,” she says. “To prove him wrong, at first.”

“You lied to me?”

“I’m sorry. I feel sick about it. But I couldn’t tell you because that would mean...”

That would mean she made me jealous on purpose. “Were you fucking with me?”

“No. Dare. I like you.”

Val likes me.

“I didn’t see it before. I don’t know how. But I do now.” She looks up at me. “And I should have said something earlier, but I wasn’t ready to face it yet. That’s the truth. I never wanted Archie, and I don’t think I lied about that. I just didn’t want you to say no. I wanted you there. I thought it was because I needed your help, and I do, but not as a wingman.” Her eyes bore into mine. “I need you, Dare. I want you. In every way. And I get if you can’t trust me. Or you need more time. Or you find my interlude un-arousing. I’m not saying you need to take your clothes off right now, though I wouldn’t be opposed to it.”

Fuck.

“You’re the only person I trust with this, the only person I can trust with this.”

“You want to have sex?”

“Yes. And not for practice this time. For real.”

Chapter Thirty



VAL

“Fuck, Val.” Dare looks me in the eye. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“After what we talked about?”

I nod. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but that’s why I need this. Why I need you. Because I know you’ll protect me.”

He nods.

“I don’t expect you to go right now.”

“No?”

“If you want to...” I want that. I really do. But it’s hard to explain. I want to replace that memory. I want to share my body with someone I trust. Not someone. Dare. “I needed to tell you. I didn’t realize it, but I did. It was weighing on me.”

“About Archie?”

“No. That was fucked up, but it moved so fast, I barely caught up. And I am sorry I lied but I’m not too. Because it’s what got me to finally see this. And I needed to see this.” I swallow hard. “Are you mad?”

“A little.”

“Only a little?”

He nods. “You didn’t fuck him.”

“And that overrides everything?”

“You think I’m not a man all of a sudden?” he asks.

“You said sex didn’t have to mean anything.”

“It always means something to you.” He looks into my eyes. “It would have been a big deal.”

It would have.

“I want this to mean something. But I want it to be for us, Val. Not because I pushed you to fuck Archie or because you need to prove something to yourself or because someone else hurt you. Because you need me.”

“I do.”

“Yeah?”

“So fucking badly.” I flush. “I touched myself thinking of you last night. And the night before. And that morning.”

“I heard.”

“I knew it.”

“You walked in on me this morning.”

My flush deepens. “I knocked first.”

“And waited half a second.”

“I really wanted to talk to you, to tell you what happened.” I laugh. “I wanted to be able to share everything again.”

“That is the definition, yeah.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” He smiles. “But it qualifies.”

“It was kind of sexy. Not to objectify you. Or derail the conversation. Because this is important and I want to... I wish I’d told you earlier. I don’t know why I waited. I guess I was worried about how you’d react.”

His eye corners turn down. “I would have been stupid then.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I would have been mad at you for trusting him. For not fighting him. For all sorts of stuff that’s not your fault. That wasn’t fair to you.”

“Fuck, Dare, have you been taking best friend classes?”

He nods. “A Masterclass series, yeah.”

“Who teaches it?” I ask.

“Oprah.”

“Oprah?” I laugh at the absurdity of the media mogul teaching classes on relationship building. Even if she is known for her intimate friendship with Gail.

He nods. “Yeah, it’s a little focused on expanding your empire.”

“How is that going?”

“The Dickson Empire rises in the, uh, morning, and sets in the uh—this joke is not working, is it?”

“I can’t remember the last time you made a dick joke,” I say.

“You miss them?”

“I do.” My lips curl into a smile. My shoulders relax. We’re shifting back to a place I miss. A place I want to be. “I miss how easy things felt before.”

“Me too.”

“Can we get back there?”

“Now that you’ve asked me to fuck you?” he asks.

“What? Is that not a normal friend thing to ask?”

He shakes his head.

“You can say no.”

“No. I really fucking want to fuck you.”

“Right now?” Now is good. Now is great. Why are we talking anyway?

This time, his head shake is silly. “So impatient.”

“It’s okay. I’ve waited a long time.” I didn’t realize it, but I’ve been waiting for him all this time. “I think that’s why it never felt right, with anyone else. Because I wanted you.”

“Me too.”

He’s been waiting for me too. All this time, neither of us saw it. “That’s why you can’t stay with anyone for more than ten days?”

He nods. “I want you, Val, but I’ve never done this before. I can’t promise I’ll get good at it.”

“You’re not good at sex?”

He flips me off. “A relationship.”

“It’s like friendship. With sex. There’s more too, but I’m not sure I’m good at it either.”

“We can learn together.”

“It sounds romantic like that.”

I rest my head on his shoulder. “But later. This is enough talk. I know, it’s important to consider what this means for our future. But later. If you’re ready, I’d really like to have sex. Now.”

“No.” He cups my cheek with his palm. “You need to wait.”

A whine falls from my lips.

“Oh, yeah. I think you’ve earned that.”

“Because of the thing with Archie?”

“Because it’s fun to make you wait.”

Okay, he’s not mad. That’s good. He’s just teasing me. Which is great. And horrible. “For how long?”

“Hours,” he says.

“I can do hours.”

“Twenty, thirty minutes even.”

“What torture,” I tease.

“Is that a dare?” he asks.

I return my own knowing smile. “You know it is.”

AFTER A WALK AROUND THE BLOCK AND A SHORT STOP AT A coffee shop, we return to the apartment. Dare pulls out the French press and some freshly acquired ground beans and gets to work.

“This is a slow process.” He copies the words I taught him a long time ago. “It requires patience.” He fills the kettle with water and sets it on the electric stove top. “Utmost patience.”

I pick up the bag of beans.

He shakes his head. “No, Val. I’m fixing the coffee this time.” He motions to the chair at the kitchen table. “You’re going to sit and watch.”

“Didn’t we try that accidentally?”

He chuckles. “If you count a split second as watching.”

“I saw a lot.”

“Oh?” He steals the beans back and motions to the chair again.

Okay. I play along. I sit and turn my full attention to him.

“The full picture.”

“From that angle, really?” he asks.

“Enough to imagine it all day,” I say.

“You were motivated.”

“Very.” I can tease too. “Don’t tell me you didn’t replay what you heard yesterday.”

He smiles. “Oh, this is how we’re going to play it?”

“Play what?” I play coy.

“Val, you have no fucking idea what you’re in for. I have practice here.”

“With people you don’t particularly like.”

“You think that changes things?” he asks.

“Doesn’t it?”

His eyes fill with realization. It does. It might not have occurred to him before, but he sees it now. “Do you know how much I’ve wanted to touch you?”

“Today?”

“Since you showed up in my apartment in a bikini top,” he says.

“I was wearing bottoms too.”

“Not in my head.”

“Just the top?”

“Not that either.” He smiles as if he’s sure he’s driving me mad with desire.

He is. And, in any other circumstance, I’d crumble from the force of my physical need. But I know how to tease Dare elsewhere. It’s the same here. “So, what, just the shorts?”

“At first.”

“What then?”

“You climbed on top of me.”

“Right there, in the middle of the hallway?” I ask.

“Right there.”

“You’d fall.”

“Try me.” He steps back and motions to his body, as if he’s a tree, inviting me to climb it.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” He moves to the wall and motions *come here*.

And, well, I have no idea how the mechanics of this work. I want to mount him anywhere I can, but is this even physically possible?

No. No overthinking things.

I’m torturing him. Period. The end.

I stand, smooth my jeans, adjust my tank top for maximum cleavage, and I meet him at the wall.

He stays in place as I wrap my arms around his shoulders.

I hook a leg around his waist.

He slips his hand under my leg, pulling my body into his.

I lift the other leg.

He holds me.

“Fuck.” I gasp as I dig my fingers into his skin.

He pulls me closer, turning us around until I have my back against the wall.

Between a rock and a hard place.

Why is that a bad thing? It’s a good thing. A great thing. Everything.

“Like this.” He runs his fingers over my inner thigh. “No problem.”

I press my lips to his.

He kisses back, softly at first, then harder.

My lips part. His tongue slips into my mouth and dances with mine. That’s the only way to explain the push and pull of the motion.

We’re tuned to the same movements, the same music, the same need.

The kettle steams.

He pulls back and sets me on the ground. “Coffee calls.”

“Dare.” My voice rises to a whine.

He smiles, victorious. “Yes?”

No. I may not win this one, but I want to hold my own. “You’re right. We need the energy.”

He motions for me to sit again. When I do, he turns off the stove, waits for the water to cool to two hundred degrees, fills the French press, sets the timer.

Four minutes.

How can three minutes feel like a million years?

I need to make it painful for him too. “Is that what you have in mind?”

“That’s one way I want to fuck you.” He looks directly into my eyes. “But it’s not at the top of the list.”

“There’s a list?”

“A long one,” he says. “With bullet points.”

A laugh spills from my lips. “Is it in a Word Doc?”

“My sketchbook.”

“Can I see?”

“Sure.” He offers his hand. When I take it, he pulls me up, leads me to the couch, sits me down.

He sits next to me and pulls me onto his lap.

“This is number one.” He nudges my legs apart and sets his hand on the strap of my tank top. “Here at first.” He slides his hand between my legs. “Then here.”

“Then?”

He runs his hand up my thigh, higher and higher and higher. So, so close to where it needs to be, but not quite there. “Then I take these off and I do it again.” He brings his other hand to my chest and traces the neckline of my tank top. He taps the tank top and the button of my jeans. “Then this.” In one swift motion, he wraps his arms around my hips and pulls my body over his so I’m straddling him.

Fuck, that feels good. “You’re hard.”

“Very.”

“I like it.”

“You like it?”

“Don’t make fun of my bad dirty talk.”

He looks up at me with a smile. “Did I say it was bad?”

I nod.

He shakes his head and curls his hand around my neck. “I like it too.”

“I need it.” I shift my hips in his lap. “Now.”

“There’s another minute on the coffee.”

“Fuck the coffee,” I say.

“Sounds painful.”

“Please.” I shift against him again.

He lets out a soft groan. “This first.” He pulls the tank top over my head. “I’ve been dreaming about this.” He looks up at me as he unhooks my bra and pushes the straps off my shoulders.

The garment falls between us.

He presses his lips to my neck. Then my collarbone. Then lower. Lower.

He wraps his lips around my nipple and sucks softly.

That feels good. Too good.

“That too.” He presses a kiss right above my nipple. “I’ve been dreaming about your groan for too fucking long.” He places his palm on my lower back, cups my breast with his free hand, and brings his mouth to my nipple.

A soft brush.

Then a little harder.

His lips close around me.

“Fuck.” I reach for something to contain my pleasure. Get his t-shirt. I dig my fingers into the fabric, pressing the soft cotton into his skin.

Has it always felt this good to touch him? To soak in the sensation of his skin? The heat of it. The mix of softness and hardness.

I love it.

I need it.

I can't live without it.

He pulls my body into his as he toys with me again. Soft sucking to start. Then harder. Then the flick of his tongue.

He takes his time, testing different speeds and pressures, torturing me with the excess of sensation, winding me tighter and tighter. Then he moves to my other nipple and teases it just as mercilessly.

I need him to go forever.

I need him to fuck me now.

I need everything.

I rock my hips against him until he groans into my chest.

He teases me again and again. Every flick is agony and bliss. The best kind of torture.

He was right. He's good at this. He's really good at this.

I break the touch to do away with his t-shirt. I look into his eyes as I unbutton my jeans. It's not really possible to remove them in this position, so I shift off the couch and onto my feet and roll the denim off my hips.

He watches with rapt attention.

This time, I offer my hand. When he takes it, I pull him to his feet and lead him to my bedroom.

Dare keeps the door open. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Too fucking ready."

I push past him to close the door, and I take his hand. "Then shut up and kiss me."

He smiles. "I knew you were bossy." He pulls a condom from his pocket, tosses it on the bed, and wraps his arms around me.

In one swift motion, he lifts me. He carries me to the bed, lies me on my back, climbs on top of me.

There's something satisfying about the weight of his body against mine. His strength isn't overwhelming. It's comforting.

Because I know he'll always use it to protect me.

I trust him.

I really do.

I take his hand and slip it between my legs.

He rubs me over my panties. The friction is overwhelming. It's been a long, long time, and knowing Dare is the person touching me—

It feels too good.

Way too good.

My eyes flutter closed. My fingers dig into the skin of his back.

He brings his lips to mine as he pushes the fabric aside.

I nearly come from the contact of his thumb on my clit. It's intense. Almost too intense.

But I need more too.

I kiss him back. He draws slow circles with his digit. Again and again, pushing me closer and closer.

The tension inside me winds tighter and tighter.

With the next brush of his thumb, I fall over the edge. I groan against his mouth as I come.

Pleasure spills through my limbs, my sex pulsing, my thighs shaking, my entire body satisfied and in need at once.

"Fuck." He rubs me through my orgasm, then presses his lips to my neck. "That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Dare—"

"Yeah, vixen?"

Vixen. I almost want to laugh at the irony. But the pet name makes my stomach flutter and my heart race. I need that,

too. I love that too. “Fuck me.” I find the waistband of his jeans and undo the button.

“Lesson worked.” He smiles.

“Now.” I undo the zipper and rub him over his boxers. Soft fabric against hardness. The contrast is so damn inviting. Or maybe that’s the feeling of him in my hand. “Please.”

He lets out another low, deep groan. That’s what does it. The please.

He slides out of his jeans and boxers, rips the foil packet, rolls the rubber over his cock.

Why is that so sexy?

When did he get so sexy?

It’s wrong, but I can’t find a reason to complain.

He positions his body over mine.

I wrap my legs around his hips.

His tip strains against me. Then he sinks into me, one sweet inch at a time.

The sensation is overwhelming. The physical fullness. The pleasure. The softness of my body yielding to his.

I dig my nails into his back.

He runs his lips over my neck. “Too much?”

“Just right.”

He groans as he shifts back and drives into me again. “You sure?”

“No.” I arch my hips to meet him. “More.”

“Fuck, Val.”

“Now.”

He drives into me again. “You feel too fucking good.” Again. “Like heaven.”

My body yields in response. My lips find his neck. My hand finds his hair. My hips shift.

He rocks into me again.

Slowly to start.

Then harder and faster, until he's just right.

"Don't stop," I groan into his neck.

He kisses me as he drives into me again.

My lips part. My tongue dances with his. My need pours into him.

We're connected everywhere.

And I need him everywhere.

Every thrust winds me tighter.

Tighter.

Until I'm so, so close.

But that's not enough either.

So I shift my hips a little higher so he's right where I need him.

There.

Perfect.

We move together, in time, as one, until he's there, groaning against my lips, pulsing inside me.

There's something about the feeling of his orgasm.

Something pure and visceral.

It pulls me over the edge.

I hold him close as I come, groaning his name into his lips, pulsing around him.

He works me through my orgasm, then he pulls back, untangles our bodies, catches his breath. "Fuck, vixen."

"You mean that?"

"When do I say shit I don't mean?"

"All the time."

“Never after this.” He takes care of the condom and climbs back into bed. “You’re perfect.”

“Like our first kiss?”

“No.” He wraps his arms around me and pulls me under the sheets. “This time, we both know it’s real.”

Chapter Thirty-One



Have I ever felt this safe?
Is it even possible to feel this safe?

I close my eyes and reopen them to double-check my state of consciousness.

Yes, I'm in my bed, tangled in my soft white sheets and my best friend's limbs, but I'm not dreaming.

For a long time, I sink into the space. I soak in the sensation of his skin against mine. The sheer physical bliss of it.

A whole different side of desire.

The soft, emotional, intimate side.

Who knew either of us were capable?

Dare holds me close, running his fingertips over my outer thigh, tracing a line down to my knee, then back up to my hip bone, again and again.

"Are you falling asleep on me?" He presses his lips to my neck.

I shake my head.

"You can."

"I might miss round two."

"How does that work?" He laughs. "I get so inspired I leave you here and go fuck myself?"

“Maybe, yeah.”

He pulls me closer. “Why are you so fucking funny?”

“Movies.”

“Checks out.” He places another kiss on my skin. “You good?”

“Great.”

“The coffee’s fucked.”

This time, I laugh. “And it wasn’t painful.”

“Quite the contrary.”

“Did you just make a cheesy joke?”

“Oh, yeah.” He draws the line up my thigh, then over my hipbone, along the side of my stomach and chest, all the way to my chin. He shifts enough to lay me on my back and turn my head toward his. “You fucked the wit right out of me.”

“That sounds dangerous,” I tease. “Maybe we should hold off on round two.”

He shakes his head. “You’re not selling it for a minute.” He cups my cheek with his palm. He wraps his other hand around the inside of my thigh, just above my knee. “If I do this”—he traces a line up the inside of my thigh, an inch to start—“you’ll beg for round two.”

“Maybe I’ll finish myself,” I tease.

“Sounds win-win.”

“What were we talking about?”

“No fucking idea,” he says.

“I like your plan.”

His smile is serene. “I’m not that easy.”

“No? What if I do this?” I bring my hand to his wrist and slide his hand a little higher.

“What if?” He holds my gaze, daring me.

I slide his hand a little higher.

Higher.

Higher.

So, so close to where it needs to be, but not all the way there.

He brings his lips to my ear. "I'm happy to do this all day, every day."

Closer.

"But I'd rather watch you."

Closer.

"If you're game."

"Now?"

"Now, yeah." He runs his lips down my neck. "Later. Tomorrow. Every fucking day, forever."

"That often?"

"For the first few months, at least."

"You'd watch me every day?"

"Twice a day."

"Really?" I ask.

"Don't dare me, Val, 'cause I will call you on that one."

My cheeks flush. "I won't."

"If you're not game..." He presses the pad of his thumb into my skin. "I'd really fucking love to taste you."

It's been a long time. A really long time. Way too long.

"That's two and three."

"Huh?"

"On the list."

"Exactly like this?"

"No." He pushes himself up and looks around the room. "Two starts like that morning. I hear you, accidentally. Then

you invite me in to watch. Drive me out of my mind with desire.”

“Then?”

“Then you invite me onto the bed with you.”

“How does it go, exactly?”

“If we do down the list, we’ll spend the entire trip in this room.”

“Is that a problem?” I ask.

“Fuck no. Forget I said shit. Fuck Paris.”

“No. You’re right.” I look up at him. “I have to show you Paris.”

“No. Fuck Paris.”

“Fuck in Paris?”

He laughs. “And I’m cheesy?”

“Very cheesy.” I smile. “Tell me number three.”

He smiles. “We’re at a bar. You’re wearing that dress with the thigh-slit, the one that comes up to here.” He taps the spot on my leg. “And I make use of it to toy with you. I’m ready to tease you about your panties, but you’re not wearing anything under the dress, so I dive between your legs and bury my face in your cunt.”

Holy shit.

“And you have to stay quiet, so you’re tugging at my hair, pressing your thighs into my cheeks.” He looks to me. “You want to do it now?”

“We’re not at a bar.”

“We could be,” he says.

“It’s too early. We’ll get arrested.”

“Later?”

“Maybe.” Not today. But one day. “First, I need my own list.”

“You don’t have one already?”

A laugh spills from my lips. “What I want to try while I’m here.”

“Now that I’m the guy you’re fucking in Europe?”

Right. Now that he’s the guy I’m fucking in Europe. But this is more than that. A lot more than that.

I plan on fucking him here and back home and in my new apartment and everywhere.

“Because I trust you to help me with my inhibitions,” I say.

He blushes. Actually blushes.

Have I ever seen Dare blush? Fuck, it’s sexy. Why is it so sexy?

“You’re making me look like an asshole,” he says.

“That was all you.”

“Fair.” He brushes my hair from my eyes. “What’s on the list?”

“I don’t have one yet.”

“Let’s make it now.”

“That’s a lot of pressure on me. What are you contributing?”

“Two hands, a mouth, and another useful appendage.”

Okay, now I’m blushing. “Those are helpful traits.”

“They’re at your disposal.”

“I need more.”

“Brutal.” He mimes being stabbed in the heart.

“You need a list too,” I say. “A relationship list.”

“A relationship list?”

I nod. “The things you want to try. The boyfriend/girlfriend things.”

“What’s a boyfriend/girlfriend thing?”

“A picnic on the beach,” I say.

“Okay, that’s on the list.”

“You’re supposed to contribute the ideas,” I say.

“I have picnic. It’s your turn.”

Okay, I guess that’s fair. “I like your other idea. The first one, especially.”

“Right now?”

“After we finish the list,” I say. “Three items each.”

“Fuck, I better get cracking.” He rolls onto his side and looks into my eyes. “Okay, I got one. Cheesy pictures.”

“That is a good boyfriend task.”

“Back at Mango.”

“You’re obsessed with Mango,” I say.

“Cause it’s sexy.”

“I do... I was sorta thinking it’s a good place for public sex.” This time, I manage to fight my blush.

“You just want to get banned so we can’t go back,” he says.

That would be nice. “There’s another place I’d rather try.” But it’s a little more loaded. Not to mention more challenging on every level. “A movie theater.”

He nods. “Right now?”

“We can’t do everything right now. I’ll chafe.”

“I’m already wearing you out.” He beams. “All right, Val, I’ll go easy on you. One of yours today. One of mine tomorrow.”

“I’m not going to Mango today.”

“We have no reason to leave the apartment today.”

“What about dinner?” I ask.

“Dinner. That’s a boyfriend thing.”

“Eating dinner?” That’s a human thing.

“You’re not buying that?”

I shake my head.

“Making dinner together,” he says. “We haven’t done that in forever.”

We used to cook together. At some point, we stopped. I guess we knew it seemed too domestic. Or maybe we objected to the gender roles. Or maybe it was more practical. I was away at school. He was home, then in his own place. We didn’t spend afternoons after school together. We didn’t need to help out when our parents didn’t show up in time for dinner. “We can go out for groceries first.”

“We can go out for groceries second.”

After the sex. Which is after the lists. So I better get cracking. “I do have another one,” I say. “It’s kind of a joint item.”

He raises a brow.

“A sex shop. For real this time.”

“You looking for anything in particular?”

“A vibrator to use with you.” I press my palm against his stomach. “And something to wear if I find the nerve for number four.”

“We’re going to four?”

I nod. “A video. The two of us, together.”

“Let’s go. Right now.”

“No.” I look up at him. “After Mango. In case we need outwear.”

“Before we’re banned?”

“Exactly.”

He leans down and presses his lips to mine. “That’s three each.”

“Three and a half, each.”

“Should I go down the rest of my list?” He brings his hand to my hip and scoots me up the bed. “Or should we start at the top?”

We should. We should try out his fantasy, right here, right now. Even though it scares me. And not in an *I can't trust* him way. More *I'm not sure I can pull off this sort of sex* appeal way. But I want to try. I really do. I can do this. I will do this. “I want to try it just like you said.” I find a teasing tone. “Unless you lost interest.”

“I've been going easy on you, vixen. But if you dare me again...”

“Right back at you.”

Chapter Thirty-Two



DARE

Val asks for ten minutes to prepare. Even in her attempts to let loose and follow her intuition, she's a planner.

Not that I mind.

Ten minutes means ten minutes of anticipation. And what's better than that?

Despite my attempts to distance myself from my father's bullshit, I ended up falling into the patterns he wanted for me. I hate the way he talked about the thrill of the chase, the power of finding and seducing a woman.

But I felt it too.

There's something fun about a new person, a new place, an unknown. But there's something fake about it too.

Don't get me wrong. Casual sex doesn't *have* to be constant bullshit. It's possible to meet someone, flirt, have a little mutual fun. But how many people are real the first time they meet someone, even with a few drinks in their system?

Even the second or third tryst?

Sometimes, horniness trumps all. Sometimes, desire tears down the walls between someone and their inhibitions. I filled a few fantasies, and I had fun doing it—maybe the most fun—but I never asked anyone to fill mine.

That was too personal.

Too intimate.

People take time to open up, let their guard down, invite you into their world.

And I took plenty.

Have I ever invited a woman into my world here? Maybe, a long time ago. Maybe, before what happened to Val.

But not since.

And not on this level.

Never on this level.

She's right. Even though I'm the one with more traditional sexual experience, I'm the one out of my depths here.

She's loved someone, been with someone she loves.

I haven't.

Maybe I can't. Maybe my dad was right. Not that men aren't capable, but that I'm not.

Like father, like son.

I push the thought aside as I clean up in the bathroom. Even if I'm not good at this, I'm trying. Maybe that's not enough forever, but for now?

For now, I'm exactly the person Val needs.

And there's no better feeling.

I check the time on my cell. Five minutes.

Might as well torture my friends too.

They went on plenty long without me.

Patrick: How did it go?

Luna Locke: Did you finally confess?

Patrick: It's been an hour.

Patrick: Two hours.

Patrick: The entire night.

Luna Locke: That's a good sign, I think.

Patrick: Or a bad sign.

Luna Locke: No, it's good. He'd tell us to fuck off if it was bad. He's busy.

Patrick: When did you become an optimist?

Luna Locke: I'm assessing the situation realistically.

Patrick: I think he confessed.

Luna Locke: You don't think she was into it?

Patrick: No. You're right. It's been a while. She's into it.

This time, I don't roll my eyes. I laugh. That's the attitude that comes with victory. Silly shit feels good. It's not salt in the wound.

Dare: Doesn't seem like you need my input.

Patrick: It's the time zone, really.

Luna Locke: Yeah, we can't help it we're nine hours behind you.

Dare: You two are quick on the buzzer.

Luna Locke: What else would we be doing at this time?

Dare: Sleeping.

Patrick: It's not that early.

Dare: Your girlfriend.

Patrick: That is a good idea.

Luna Locke: How is Imogen? Is she at your place?

Patrick: Summer classes.

Luna Locke: Right. She's very dedicated.

Patrick: She is.

Luna Locke: You both like smart girls.

Patrick: Who doesn't?

Luna Locke: Are you kidding? Tons of guys.

Dare: Who are you counting as a smart girl?

Luna Locke: Excuse me?

Patrick: We know you're brilliant.

Luna Locke: Do you?

Patrick: But you don't come across as a "smart chick" the way someone like Daisy does.

Luna Locke: Because I'm not a bookworm?

Patrick: You're too hot.

Luna Locke: Go on.

Dare: Too stylish too. Guys are stupid. We see a babe in a crop top and shorts and we think, "she's cool as fuck." We don't think, "I bet she's smart too."

Luna Locke: Who's saying "cool as fuck?"

Patrick: Moonlight, he's trying to distract us.

Luna Locke: WHAT DID I SAY ABOUT CALLING ME MOONLIGHT?

Patrick: You said only people who you like can use it. You saying you don't like me now?

Luna Locke: Fine.

Patrick: Maybe if you let Dare use it, he'll realize he can admit everything to you.

Luna Locke: Seems unlikely.

Dare: Doesn't seem like you need my input.

I check the time. Two minutes.

Dare: But, yes, Moonlight. I told her.

Luna Locke: !!!!!

Patrick: What happened?

Dare: Actually, she told me.

Luna Locke: I called it!

Patrick: Then?

Dare: Then... I gotta go. Duty calls.

Luna Locke: Darren Dickson!

Patrick: No. See, when he says “duty,” he means “Valeria.”

Luna Locke: And when he says “calls” he means, “I’m going to fuck her now?”

Patrick: Exactly.

Luna Locke: Can you confirm or deny this?

Dare: I can. But I won’t.

I turn my phone on silent, and I let them debate the reality of the situation.

One minute.

I take a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. My shoulders soften. My stomach settles.

Val is fulfilling my fucking fantasy. This is supposed to be an evening of sensual delights.

Why am I so nervous?

You just answered your own question.

Because it’s Val.

Because it’s your fantasy.

Because you’re inviting her into a place you’ve never shared with anyone.

I trust her more than I trust anyone. But I don’t know if I can handle the intimacy. I don’t.

After one more deep breath, I cross the space to her room. Her door is open a sliver, inviting me to listen.

She’s quiet, inside. No orgasmic gasps or over-the-top moans. The same sounds I heard yesterday morning.

Val’s heavy breaths.

Val, in her space, touching herself, for me.

My blood rushes south. My hang-ups fade. This is everything I want, too much of what I want, but it’s what she wants too.

And she's in control.

There's no way for me to do too much, go too hard, hurt her.

I listen for another moment, then I knock, I slide the door open, I step inside.

There's Val, spread across the soft white sheets in nothing but her heels.

Where the fuck did she even get those heels?

The logic fails to appeal. I don't care where they're from or when she's worn them, or who she's kissed in them as long as I can feel them against my back.

"Dare." She lets out a soft gasp.

"Am I interrupting?"

"No." She blushes as she looks me in the eye. "Stay."

I take a step toward her.

She shakes her head. "You can look but you can't touch. Not yet." She holds my gaze as she slips her hand between her legs.

She rubs herself with slow circles.

Then a little faster.

Her eyes close. Her breath hitches. Her free hand tugs at the bed.

She fucks herself like she's alone, like she's only concerned with one thing: her pleasure.

She toys with herself again and again, pushing herself closer and closer.

Her movements speed. Her thighs shake. Her fingers dig into the sheets.

Then she's there, groaning as she comes, dissolving into the sheets.

She rubs herself through her orgasm, then she blinks her eyes open and looks up at me.

“Should I keep watching?” I ask.

“Yes.” She motions to the mirror next to the dresser. It’s not positioned quite right for where she is, so she shifts to the edge of the bed.

She sits up straight, her heels on the ground, her head high and proud, and she motions *come here*.

I join her at the edge of the bed.

She looks up at me, then she turns to the mirror.

And, bam, we’re *exactly* where we need to be. I can see everything I need to see.

Her curvy body on the bed. Her hair falling over her cheeks. Her hand as she slides her fingers into one of the belt loops on my jeans.

The mirror ends at my chest.

I could be anyone. Well, less the familiar ink. I’m not as vain as I pretend to be. I don’t study the patterns in the mirror, but I know them by heart. Every shape, every shade, every line.

She does too. She takes my hand, turns it over, traces the design on my forearm. The tree where we traded a million promises.

“Have I told you how much I love this?” She traces it again.

“Not today.”

“I do.” She brings my arm toward her and presses her lips to my forearm. “And this.” She places a kiss on the inside of my wrist. Then my thumb. “I know exactly where I want this.”

“Oh?”

She nods. “You got what you want.” She takes my hand and brings it to her chest. “Now I get what I want.”

“What do you want?”

“Everything.” She pushes my t-shirt up my stomach and presses her lips to my skin.

Fuck.

She can't mean—

Fuck.

“It's been a long time.” She undoes the button of my jeans.
“I might have forgotten.”

I swallow hard.

She taps the fabric again. “Off.”

I pull the t-shirt over my head.

She lowers my zipper and slides my jeans off my hips.

Then the boxers.

She looks to the mirror as she wraps her hand around me.

Val, naked, in her bed, with her hand around me, asking me to watch.

This is beyond any fucking fantasy.

I've died and gone to heaven.

Heaven is a huge porno.

Who the hell knew?

She runs her thumb over my tip, exploring me with different motions and pressure.

I struggle to stay in control of my senses. This isn't how I usually do things—I don't yield to anyone—and I want every perfect inch of her.

She takes her sweet time torturing me, then she pumps me with one stroke.

Then firmer.

Firmer.

There.

“Fuck.” I roll my thumb over her nipple.

“The first time I... A part of me wished it was this.” She pumps me again, then she brushes her lips against me. “You,

guiding me, teaching me, showing me exactly what I needed to do.”

Another soft brush of her lips.

Another.

Then she wraps them around me. She takes me into her soft, wet mouth.

My entire body shudders.

My other hand goes to the back of her head. I knot my hand in her hair. I toy with her nipple with my thumb.

She takes me deeper.

Deeper.

Then she pulls back and does it again.

“Fuck, Val.” I tug at her hair. It’s harder than I intend, but she doesn’t freeze.

She pulls back and looks up at me. “Do that again.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” She brushes her lip against me. “I like it.” Again. “I really like it.” Again.

Slowly, she takes me into her mouth. She glides over me, one sweet inch at a time.

I let my hand cup the back of her head. I tug at her hair as she takes me again and again.

She groans against my cock.

Again.

Again.

Again.

It feels too fucking good. I don’t have the will to insist I fuck her, come inside her, finish with her.

After all, I imagined this too.

I dreamed about this too.

I toy with her as she takes me, my thumb around her nipple, my hand against her hair.

We move in that perfect rhythm of pleasure, me toying with her, her pulling me deeper and deeper into her.

Then I'm there.

"Fuck, vixen." I tug at her hair. "I'm going to come."

She doesn't pull back. She brings her hand to the flesh of my ass and holds me against her, taking me deeper and deeper.

Until I'm pulsing against her lips, coming in her gorgeous mouth.

She waits until I spill every drop, then she pulls back, swallows hard, wipes her lips.

She looks up at me with an intoxicating mix of need and pride and affection. "How was that?"

"Huh?"

"That good?"

I barely manage a nod. "That wasn't the plan."

"The plan changed."

I shake my head. "We're gonna have to do it again."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Fulfill my fantasy right."

She smiles. "Okay." She motions *come here*.

I fix my jeans and sit on the bed next to her.

"You can lead next time." She presses her lips to my neck. "Once I decide you've watched enough."

"You liked it?"

"I did."

"You like being in control, don't you, vixen?"

"I do." She brings her lips to mine. "But I want to try losing control too."

“Whips and chains?”

“No. Well, eventually, maybe. But something like this...”
She rests her hand on my thigh. “Like... after I finish, I invite you into the bed, then you take over.”

“You sure?”

“No,” she says. “But I want to try if you do.”

I do. But—“I won’t forgive myself if I hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.” She looks into my eyes. “But I trust you.”

I trust her too. But I’m not sure if I trust myself.

“Tomorrow?” she asks.

“Tomorrow,” I say. “But I’m gonna need to hit item two first.”

“Oh?”

“Oh, yeah.” I wrap my hand around her thigh. “I’m going to need to taste you.”

“Right now?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Right now works.”

“Uh-uh.” I shake my head, shifting into teasing her. “Bad girls don’t get what they want.”

“Bad girls?”

I nod. “Bad girls who go off script.”

She smiles. “No one has ever called me a bad girl.”

“I’m happy to be your first.”

“Me too.”

I help her up; I help her into her clothes; I lead her to the main room with every intention of leaving and getting stuff for dinner.

But when she suggests a movie, I settle onto the couch with her.

And, after, when she climbs onto my lap and kisses me, well—

I'm only human.

I kiss her back; I do away with her top, then her bra, and I toy with her exactly the way I want to. For ages.

I'm ready to go forever when the door swings open and Archie marches inside with a bottle of champagne.

Val jumps out of my lap. She grabs a pillow to cover her chest.

Archie laughs as he sets the bottle on the table. "I guess you two started celebrating without me."

Val blushes.

"Should I leave you to it?" he asks.

"No," she says. "He's going to make me wait until tomorrow anyway."

"Really?" Archie looks to me and raises a brow.

I'm not sure what he's asking, exactly, only the meaning behind it. *Can I trust you to take care of her?* And that's an easy question to answer. "Of course."

As her best friend, it's a no-brainer.

As more?

Well, I don't fucking know how to do more. But he does. And this is my last night to make use of his knowledge, so I say, "Do you have last-night plans?"

"Only the champagne," he says. "But you two can keep it. It's not real champagne."

"You treat us right." Val laughs.

"Let's have dinner. The three of us," I say.

Val looks to me *really?*

I nod *really*. “Yeah. You owe me one. For fucking with me.”

He nods *I do*. “You too.”

“I guess we’ll have to fight over who pays,” he says.

“No,” Val interrupts. “I fucked with both of you. I pay.”

I lean in to whisper in her ear, “You’re going to pay with way more than that tomorrow.”

She smiles. “Can’t wait.”

AT NINE, ON A WEEKNIGHT, THE RESTAURANT ARCHIE AND Val pick is busy. Of course, this is nothing. Peak dinner time is ten o’clock. If there are seatings at eight and seatings and ten, all the eight o’clock seatings go to tourists.

This time, Val leads the conversation. She and Archie talk about school and their ex-roomie and what they’re doing next year.

They have big, beautiful plans for big, beautiful lives.

And I—

Well, I love what I do. I want to keep doing it. But there’s only so much space to climb. In theory, I could open my own shop or run a franchise or start a graphic design side hustle or some sort of fashion company with tattoo-inspired designs.

But I don’t want any of that, not really.

Even so, when Archie asks about my plans, I make up something about a temporary tattoo company. So people who aren’t ready to commit can try out actual badass art, not just the cheesy stuff in quarter machines.

“Since when?” Val asks.

“I don’t tell you everything,” I say.

She looks at me funny, like she’s not sure whether she’s proud or disappointed. “What kind of designs?”

“Riffs on classics. Pinups, anchors, sparrows. And modern updates,” I say.

“What’s a modern anchor?” she asks.

“A smart phone,” I say.

She laughs, and we slip back into dinner mode. We drink too much sangria, eat too much paella, linger through three plates of fancy Spanish cheesecake.

When we drop Archie at the train station, Val says goodbye. Then I take my turn.

“How do you do it?” I ask.

“Do what?” he asks.

“The boyfriend thing?”

“Seems like you have a handle on it.”

“How do you do it right?”

“You do your best.” He shakes my hand. “That’s all you can ever do.”

But that’s what I’m afraid of.

Chapter Thirty-Three



DARE

I keep my promise to Val.
I make her wait.

Even though I sleep in her bed, with my arms around her, I make her wait.

Despite the thoughts flitting through my head and the excess of sangria in my system, I sleep soundly. Wake rested.

The second I roll over and see Val, my worries fade. They're small and quiet compared to how much I love her.

I do.

Maybe I always have.

But that's never been the problem, has it?

It's always been the rest of the world.

We have another week together. Then, we go back home, to the real world, and all the questions in it.

The questions her mom asked a million years ago.

Is it really a good idea to spend so much time with Darren?

I don't like you in the Dickson house. There's something about Mr. Dickson.

It's not just his dad's proclivities, Valeria. He's not the kind of boy who stays friends with a girl like you. He's the kind of boy who expects things.

Everyone sees the gulf between the worlds we inhabit.

Everyone except Val.

She stirs, nestling into the pillow with a yawn, then settling back into slumber.

She looks gorgeous here. Peaceful and easy and honest.

I can do this here.

In our world.

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing after.

But that's a problem for after.

For now, I'm going to enjoy the ride.

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE WE ARRIVED, I MOVE THROUGH MY entire morning routine. The stretches, the strengthening exercises (I don't have a gym, but I have to keep up with shit—hunching over a canvas of skin isn't easy on the back), the shower, the sketches.

Val wakes in the middle of my third sketch. She stumbles into the main room with a yawn and smiles. "You're wearing a towel."

"Didn't want to wake you."

"Considerate."

I motion *come here*.

She takes a step toward me and stops. "Morning breath. I'll be right back."

"I might change out of the towel."

"I realize that." She gives me a long, slow once-over. "But you're probably going to make me wait either way."

"Probably."

"So I should encourage you to change. Lessen the torture."

“Isn’t it more fun to increase the torture?”

“Sometimes.” She moves toward the bathroom. “But sometimes, it’s too much to take.”

“That’s what she said.”

Val laughs. “Oh my god, Dare. Are you regressing to high school?”

“You laughed.”

“At you.”

“With me.”

She motions *a little* then disappears behind the corner.

She’s right, of course. Sometimes the torture is too much to take. And I hope to drive her right to the edge of that.

Of course, I have to survive myself. So I change into jeans and a t-shirt, and I meet Val in the main room.

She’s sitting on the couch, in her sexy as fuck matching pajama set—blue shorts and a tank—staring at my sketchbook. “May I?”

“Go for it.”

She looks up at me and frowns. “What happened to the towel?”

“I warned you.”

“You did.” She copies my *come here* motion. “So where’s the list?”

“The sex list?”

“No, the list of museums in Paris,” she says,

“Well, there’s the Louvre. The d’Orsay.”

She shakes her head *you’re ridiculous* and turns the page. She studies the image—a sketch of a cathedral in the Gothic Quarter. “Did you do this from memory?”

“Reference image.”

“It’s beautiful.” She flips through the book, studying the sketches of local sites, the space in the apartment, her. “When did you do this?”

“When we got here.” It’s a simple image, Val glued to the TV, all her attention on the movie she’s watching.

She moves on to the next, Val, laughing at some stupid shit I said.

Then the next, Val, standing in front of the mirror, studying her naked reflection.

“Oh.” She laughs. “So this is what you do instead of watching porn.”

“It’s for the challenge.”

“Right. The challenge of capturing my ass.”

“The perspective in the mirror.”

“And I happen to be naked?” she asks.

“Absolutely,” I say.

She flips through another few pages, noting the details in tattoo mockups. “Did you mean what you said at dinner?”

“Which part?”

“About starting a temp art business?”

“I’ve thought about it,” I say.

“Do you really want to do it?” She looks up at me. “Or were you trying to impress Archie?”

“I haven’t looked into the details yet.”

“You don’t need to do anything to impress him,” she says. “Or anyone.”

“Val—”

“Don’t say we’re from different worlds,” she says. “That is total bullshit. You’re my actual next-door neighbor.”

“We went to different schools,” I say.

“Your dad has as much money as mine.”

“My dad has as much money as your mom,” I say. “It’s different.”

She frowns. “You love your job. And you’re good at it.”

“Getting there,” I say.

“And you make enough to afford that sweet place in Santa Monica.”

“Are you arguing with me or yourself?” I ask.

“Why isn’t it enough for you?” She looks up at me. “You have no idea how impressive you are.” She turns the sketchbook to me, showing off a mockup of a gothic castle in a watercolor style. “This is beautiful. And it’s this perfect mix of weird and classic. It’s you.”

“Maybe I want it for me.”

“Do you?”

“Maybe I don’t want people to think ‘wow, Val’s really dating down,’ when you tell them your boyfriend is a tattoo artist?”

“Who would think that?” she asks.

“Everyone.”

“Dare”—she closes the book—“I get this is a big thing for you. And I get that people don’t appreciate the arts, in general, and certainly not more commercial art, like what you do. But you are being so fucking stupid.”

That’s not what I expect her to say.

She stands. “No one has ever replied that way.”

“When did you tell someone I was your boyfriend?”

“When I tell them my best friend is a tattoo artist, they’re in awe.”

“Because it sounds like a cool hobby,” I say.

“Because it’s a badass job. Because you run your own business, and deal with clients, and create designs. Because you’re impressive.”

“I’m not.”

“You are,” she says. “You impress me all the time. The way you ignored what your parents wanted for you. The way you went after your dreams. It takes courage. Not everyone is good at it.”

“Is this about me or you?” I ask.

“It’s about us,” she says. “You’re always so impressed with my mind and I love that about you. I do. But I wish you’d see your own skill there.”

“My mind?”

“Your mind. Your job. Just you. If you have these other ambitions, great. I want to support you there. I want to see your new business kill it. But if it’s about impressing some asshole with a master’s degree, don’t. Because nothing impresses those assholes.”

“Nothing?”

She nods. “Maybe a Nobel Prize. But nothing short of that.”

“They have one for tattoos yet?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Damn. There goes that.”

She stands and moves toward me. “It is a sore spot for you.” She shifts back to a serious tone. “Did I say something?”

No. It’s not that. It’s what she does. “You always date smart guys.”

“Smart guys are the ones who want to date me,” she says. “Besides, you’re smart.”

“I am?”

“In your way, yeah.”

“But not in the conventional way?”

“And if I said I’m not pretty in the conventional way?” she asks.

“I’d tell you to snap a shot of your tits and put it on Reddit and we’ll see how many dudes want to motorboat you.”

“Oh my god, Dare, I’m trying to have a moment.”

“I know.”

She nods *yeah, and I know you’re afraid of this kind of honesty*. “I love that you don’t try to prove you’re smarter than I am. So many guys do that. Especially in my film classes. If I recommend an American classic, they recommend an Italian classic. If I recommend a French new-wave film, they recommend a German film. Whatever it is, they have to prove they know more.”

“All of them?”

“A lot of them. And it annoys me too. Why can’t they acknowledge my contributions? My ideas? My mind?” She offers her hand. “But I can’t let it get to me. Because they do that with everyone, about everything. Whatever it is, it’s not enough.”

I take her hand.

“And I don’t want you to buy into that bullshit. Because you are enough.” She pulls me closer. “Even if you make less money or work a less prestigious job or score lower on the SAT.”

“You’re gonna bring the SAT into this?”

“You improved your score fifty points by studying,” she says. “I bet I could have got it up another fifty.”

“So I’d be right in the middle of the bell curve.”

“So?”

“So? Won’t you get bored with me?” There it is. The full story. She’s brilliant and I’m just not.

“Dare.”

“You’re used to hanging out with smart guys who have shit to say. Guys who stimulate your mind. I can’t do that.”

“You already do.”

“I do?” I ask.

“Yeah, stupid.” She wraps her arm around my waist. “Teasing you is my favorite stimulation.”

“I don’t mean that kind.”

“Me either.” She looks up at me. “The way you banter with me. The way we talk about movies. Yeah, I’m usually the one with more to say, but you have a different perspective, and I love that I get to hear it.” She slips her hand under my t-shirt. “Do you want to do it? The tattoo thing?”

“I might.”

She presses her palm against my skin.

“I don’t know if I want to work at Inked Love forever.”

“Really?”

“Don’t tell Tricky. He’ll miss me too much.”

She nods *he will*. “Because you want to live in Irvine with me?”

“In a planned community?”

“With an outrageous H.O.A.,” she says.

I can see it, actually, the two of us with a picket fence and a living room full of art films and neighbors who think we’re a bad influence. We can be misfits there, together. “I don’t want it now. But one day, I want more. I want to be able to go somewhere else, do something else.”

“You want it for you?”

“Do you only want to look hot for you?”

“That’s not the same,” she says.

“Isn’t it?”

She bites her lip. “Okay. There’s a comparison. I want to look sexy because it makes me feel sexy. But I also want you to find me sexy. And my idea of sexy is shaped by the societal ideas around me. Okay, I see that. But I don’t want to be a part of that.”

“Bad news. You’re sexy.”

She doesn’t take the bait. “I don’t want to be a part of you feeling bad about your ambitions.”

“You’re not.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Very.”

“And you’ll always make me feel sexy?”

“Of course.” I press my lips to hers. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to fuck you now.”

“It could.”

“It could, yeah, but it doesn’t.” I pull back and take her hand. “We gotta do our couple shit first.”

“Whose dumb idea was that?”

I point to her.

She makes an *ugh* face.

“We didn’t make dinner together, so we’ll get breakfast,” I say. “Then dumb pictures outside La Sagrada.”

She shakes her head. “We make breakfast. Then my turn. I want to try the movie theater.”

“On one condition,” I say.

“Since when did you get conditions?”

I shrug *take it or leave it*.

She motions *go on*.

“I get to eat you out first.”

Chapter Thirty-Four



My blush settles as I fix our coffee, but my thoughts struggle to stay in line. They keep flitting to images of Dare between my legs. Or over me. Or behind me.

Anywhere, really.

Everywhere, really.

Maybe he's right. Maybe we can wait to discuss heavy things.

Wasn't I the one begging him to stick to lighter topics? This is what I want. Only it feels off somehow, like I'm ignoring something important.

Then he wraps his arms around me and I forget about my objections. I want to stay glued to him, right here, forever.

He releases me and surveys our ingredients. Once we decide on a spinach and cheese omelet, he arranges everything on the counter and asks, "You want to chop or fry?"

"Chop." I rinse the spinach in the sink. "You're good at this."

"Making breakfast?" He puts a pan on the burner.

"Working together." I tear the leaves and lay them on the cutting board. "And, yeah, making breakfast. A lot of guys can barely boil water."

"I had to be," he says. "Not like Mr. Dickson was going to make dinner for Brian. When he had a girlfriend hanging out,

sure, he was happy to ask her to cook. But he burned frozen pizza.”

“Was that hard?”

“I never really thought about it. It was just another part of being an older brother. I made sure Brian had dinner every night. I didn’t realize that was weird until I saw other families. Saw the way your mom cooked for you and your sister every night. Or Tricky’s parents made everyone sit down to dinner. But it’s not like their families are sunshine and rainbows.”

“I know.”

“I sound defensive?”

“I didn’t say anything.” I chop the spinach into tiny pieces. Then the cheese.

“Maybe I am.” He cracks eggs. “Even though I fucking hate my dad, he’s still my dad.”

“You don’t want other people talking shit?”

“No. You can talk shit. It’s more... I don’t want people to think Brian had less. Or that I’m from a shitty family. Even though I think it.”

“I know what you mean.”

“You do?” he asks.

“Yeah, if Lucia is giving me shit, I might think she’s being bitchy, but if someone else says it, I’ll come to her defense.”

“She’s not an asshole though.”

“We’re all assholes sometimes.”

He nods *true* and spreads oil over the pan. “I guess I see his influence, sometimes.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” The pan sizzles as he adds the spinach. “After all, I made him proud all these years, sleeping with different women.”

“You noticed that?”

“Of course.” He sautés. “But it’s like *That’s So Raven*. I saw this vision of my future, right, and by trying to avoid it, I caused it.”

“That’s a throwback.”

“Bri got into it,” he says. “He loves all those shows. They’re sunny and bright and everything is okay.”

“Dysfunctional families work through their shit.”

“Every problem solved in twenty-two minutes,” he says.

“What if I create a family sitcom?” I ask. “Will you be proud?”

“Not if it’s bullshit.”

“Really? What if I win an Emmy?”

“I’ll be proud of our beach house,” he says. “But not in the work. Not if you don’t believe in it.”

“What if I do?”

“Then I’ll take you to the doctor to have your head examined.” He looks at me. “You hate that shit.”

“Maybe there’s a way to do it right.” I add the cheese. “To create a sitcom about a family who’s dysfunctional and solves their problems in twenty-two minutes, but they don’t solve all their problems. They still have others. But they try to love each other and that’s what matters.”

“It almost sounds sweet like that.”

“Maybe it is.”

“Do you want to write sitcoms?”

“It’s just a thought,” I say.

“Like the temp tattoos?”

“Like that.”

“Another idea of the person you could become.” He looks to me. “Archie said something when I got here. About school. That it might be too hard for you, too much. He thought you were worried about disappointing me.”

“I am.”

“Is that why you give me shit about work?”

“Part of it.”

He stirs the eggs.

“You have big expectations for me,” I say. “The way my dad does. And you both mean well, but I don’t know if I can live up to that.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“You sound like a cheesy sitcom.”

“Fuck, I do.” He laughs. “But it’s true. That’s what matters to me, that you’re happy.”

“That’s sweet.”

“No. It’s selfish. ‘Cause when you’re happy, I’m happy. And when you’re miserable”—he looks to me—“it hurts everywhere.”

“Don’t make me jump you.”

“Make you?”

“Yeah, if you’re going to say all this sweet shit, I won’t be able to control myself.” I press my hand to his chest. “And I’m trying to talk to you, because I know you’ll distract me with sex.”

“I will?”

“You keep doing it.”

“Or maybe I’m realizing how much I love sex with someone I love,” he says. “And I want all of it, all at once.”

Love. He’s said that before, but not in this context. Not since we kissed. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” He brushes my hair behind my ear. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Too late.”

“And don’t get ideas about ruining breakfast.” He motions to the table. “‘Cause this is our couple thing.”

“And that would be a bad sign.”

He nods. “Very bad.”

“Okay. I’ll be good.” I sit at the table and place my hands in my lap. “All manners, all morning.”

“Maybe not all morning.” He plates the eggs and brings them to the table. “Maybe for a portion of the morning.”

“Nope. All morning.”

“You’ll regret it.”

“Maybe,” I say. “I like talking to you.”

He drops off forks. “And you have to save your excitement for Mango.”

“No fucking way.” I shake my head. “Now, let’s do this.”

“Fuck at Mango?”

“Eat our first meal made together as a couple.”

“We’re a couple?”

“Aren’t we?” I ask.

“Feel like I need to give you something to make it official.” He smiles. “No. I got it.” He motions *one minute*, goes to his room, returns with a sharpie. “I always wanted to do this.”

He takes my hand, turns my arm over, and draws a heart on the inside of my wrist. He draws a line down the center and shades one half.

Then he draws the same design on his wrist, only with the opposite half shaded.

“Like a Best Friends necklace?” I ask.

“Exactly like that.”

“Would you really get this?”

“I’ll do it right now,” he says.

“In Spain?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Cause then you can’t do mine.”

“Vixen, don’t say shit like that and say you’re going to be good,” he says.

“No? I can’t talk about how I want you to be the person permanently marking my body?”

“Bad girl.”

My cheeks flush. I don’t know why I like the pet name, but I do. “How about if I get something right here?” I place my hand on my collarbone.

He watches as I trace a line down my chest, right between my breasts.

“Or here.” I shift so I can roll my tank top up my ribs. Then I stand and show off the skin on my hip. “Or there?” I sit and pick up my fork like this is a normal breakfast. “What then?”

“Val—”

“No.” I try a bite of the eggs. “This is our first breakfast. We have to do it right.”

“We do.” He takes his own bite.

The omelet is great, the perfect mix of Spanish cheese and spinach, and it feels good working together, knowing we made it together.

It’s a small thing, but it’s a big symbol, like the heart on my wrist. An actual couple’s tattoo?

That’s huge.

And it’s overwhelming on every level.

So, yeah, of course, the second we finish eating, I let him scoop me from my chair and carry me to the bedroom.

But I don’t give him exactly what he wants. Not yet.

I fuck him senseless, yeah, but I make him wait too.

AFTER, I MAKE GOOD ON MY PROMISE TO SHOW DARE SOME OF my favorite spots. I take him to La Sagrada. We tease each other about evening activities the entire time we wait in line (for ages), but we manage to avoid any explicit sexual talk when we enter the cathedral.

The place defies description. From the outside, it looks like some giant, majestic sandcastle. Tall spires topped with gold accents, a circular pattern as if the sand is caving from the water, everything shades of beige.

Inside, the place is all candy-colored stained glass. The hues from the windows and the ceiling cast everything in an ethereal light.

Sometimes, I roll my eyes at the worship of Gaudi, as if the man somehow invented architecture, as if he's the only Spanish historical figure of note.

But the building is truly breathtaking. Even the second time. Even the third, fourth, five-hundredth.

Dare is in heaven, of course. He marvels at the sharp corners and soft curves. He curses himself for not bringing colored pencils, then sits to sketch the angles, the way he did when we were in high school.

And I sit next to him, reading on my phone, glancing at his work every time I finish a chapter.

We don't stay in that beautiful, easy place for long, but I savor every second there.

When we leave, the mood lingers. The lightness stays. All through lunch, coffee, a walk around the neighborhood.

Until we stop in front of a movie theater and Dare points to an upcoming time for a bad American movie neither of us wants to see.

"What do you think?" he asks. "Are you ready to not watch the movie?"

Chapter Thirty-Five



My heart thuds against my chest. My fingers curl into my palms.

For a brief moment, I allow myself to imagine the action, the feeling of Dare's hands on my skin, his lips on my neck, the light flashing over our bodies.

No.

That's no good.

It's too close to what happened. It's a sick trick of fate, really, a bruise so close to the thing I love the most.

But that's what makes it tolerable too. Because I laughed when people started talking about "Netflix and chill." And even way back when, Dare teased me. *Poor guy is going to think you're there for sex, and you ask what do you want to watch.*

Of course, I'd arrange what to watch first. You don't ask someone, "hey, do you want to watch a movie" and leave it there. Even a broad genre. What if they think an action movie means *Die Hard* and I bring over a Chinese-fantasy martial arts film?

Of course, we always agreed it's better to be explicit about these things. Back then, I didn't get it. I didn't understand how much people like to play coy, to paper over their intentions, to hide from their desires.

Not in a bad way, necessarily. Just in a strange one.

Really, wouldn't it be better if we all said what we wanted? If we said *hey, do you want to come over to fuck? We can watch something after?*

But it's hard to admit what we want. Sometimes, it's hard to know what we want, much less verbalize it.

Like right now.

"Val?" Dare slides his arm around my waist. "You okay?"

I nod.

"Thinking?"

"I don't know if I can."

"Okay," he says. "Another time."

"But I want to try."

"You sure?"

No. Maybe. Sort of. "Yes." I swallow hard. "If that's okay with you?"

"Did you have something in mind?"

I rise to my tiptoes and whisper what I want in his ear.

He smiles. "I like that too."

"Can you lead?"

"Can you handle that?"

I don't know. "I want to try."

"You remember the safe word?"

"Does this really require a safe word?"

"If you want me to agree to it," he says.

"I always forget how stubborn you are."

"Do you remember?"

"Whiskey soda."

He nods, satisfied. "You ready?" He offers his hand. When I take it, he leads me into the building. We buy tickets and

soda (a movie in a theater requires a large Diet Coke; that's just tradition) and find seats.

The theater is quiet. A solo viewer in the front. A group of friends in the middle. A couple on the right side.

"Is this too big a crowd?" I take a seat in the middle of the back row.

"Up to you."

"You're not worried about rotting in a Spanish jail?"

"They won't arrest us."

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Well..."

"Oh." I swallow a sip of my soda. "You've done this before?"

"Yeah."

"You never told me."

"I didn't tell you a lot of things."

"Is that why?" I ask.

"No." He looks to the blank screen. "I knew you wouldn't approve."

"It's rude to the movie."

"I know," he says.

"But I always wanted to do it anyway."

"Really?" he asks.

"Yeah. But the way I imagined it was that I really tried to give the movie my all and it just didn't deliver. And so some handsome, giving man helped keep me entertained."

"Some random guy?"

"My date," I say. "But I don't really want to try with this one."

"I know."

I take another sip. “Did you get caught? At that movie?”

“One time.”

“There were multiple times?”

“The movies are a dark place to make out without parental eyes.”

“You could have made out at your dad’s place anytime,” I say.

He shoots me a *really* look.

Right. “You didn’t want him to know you were getting lucky?”

“I didn’t want to hear his stupid congratulations.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“It was what people expected from me.”

Is that really true? Sure, Dare is a lot of fun. I saw *for a good time call X* on a few bathroom doors a few times, but I always assumed that was a scorned ex fucking with him. (Or a scorned fling, I guess?) But he cultivates that reputation too. “How do you want people to see you?”

“As a guy who deserves a woman like you.”

My chest warms. “Dare.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re trying to woo me.”

“It’s true.”

“To make me forget my senses so I jump you.”

“Maybe.” He smiles. “It’s still true.”

“Are you trying to distract me?”

“Trying to focus on what I want to accomplish here.” He turns toward me and motions *come here*.

I turn toward him too. I bring my lips to his. And with every moment of the soft, slow kiss, my concerns fade away.

We kiss all through the trailers.

Then the movie starts, and he releases me. He motions to the screen, asking me to watch, to play this game where we pretend we're here for the movie.

Exactly what I requested.

For a few minutes, I try, really. I watch a thirty-something American actor run around with a gun. Then his love interest strolls on screen in a ridiculous pair of heels, and I roll my eyes.

Dare smiles *classic*. He's not watching the movie. He's watching me. This is another routine of ours. We know what the other will think. We check for the perfect reaction.

This is Dare.

I can trust him here.

I can trust him everywhere.

I return a *don't even* look and focus on the film. For a few scenes, I follow the story. Then my attention fades, and my thoughts go elsewhere.

To what I want to do for dinner tonight—maybe we'll make something. To our last day in Spain. Our itinerary for Paris (mostly “have a lot of sex” at this point).

The last time I watched a movie with a man I'd touched.

Well, a different man.

Then I feel his hand on my thigh and I'm there. I can smell the mix of cologne and laundry detergent, the one that came out of the vending machines at my dorm, the one I avoided for the rest of the semester.

I can feel the force of his hand on my shoulder. The threat of it.

I can hear his voice. *Don't pretend. We both know you want this.*

What I can't do is move. Or voice an objection. Or think of anything else.

Dare brings his hand to my shoulder.

I shrink back.

“Val—”

“Excuse me.” I melt enough to rise, rush to the bathroom, splash water on my face, trying to wake up from this dream.

I stand there for a long time. Until I notice the too-bright fluorescent lights, the too-cold water, the strange teal color of the stalls.

Until I check the time on my phone and I see a text from Dare.

Dare: I'm in the lobby when you're ready. Or we can meet at home. Whatever you need.

He's doing everything right.

And he's my best friend. He's the person I trust more than anyone.

Why is it I could do everything before? Why could I kiss him, touch him, fuck him?

Is that the only way it will ever work for me?

It's not the end of the world, being the one in control. There's something thrilling about it, really.

But I want this too. I really, really want this.

I do a grounding exercise—three things I can feel: the air-conditioning, the tile beneath my feet, the plastic laminate of the counter. Four things I can hear: the sound of my breath, the running pipes, the low mumble of a movie in the theater next to the bathroom, is using the air-conditioning again cheating? Five things I can see: the faucet, the ceramic of the sink, the white walls, the slightly less startled reflection in the mirror, the tips of my fingernails. Then I take a few deep breaths, and I meet Dare in the lobby.

He nearly jumps to his feet when he sees me. He takes a step toward me and slows, like he's approaching a feral animal, like he's afraid he's going to scare me.

This is hurting him.

This is asking too much of him.

This is fucking impossible.

“Hey.” He takes a slow step toward me. “You want to talk?”

“Do you?”

He nods. “But we don’t have to.”

I move toward him. “Can we get a drink?”

“Is that a good idea?”

No. Probably not. I meet him. I reach for him, get the back of his arm, the side. I take his wrist and find the heart he drew on the inside. The tattoo he promised to get for me. “We can do coffee instead. If you insist.”

“Can I confess something terrible?”

I nod.

“I’ve had enough coffee.”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

“I know.” He reaches for me with that same hesitation.

So I wrap my arms around his waist and bury my head in his chest. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“How much I’m asking you to do.”

“I volunteered.”

“Did you?” I dig my fingers into his skin. “Or did it just kinda happen?”

“I’m volunteering now.” He brings his hand to my cheek. “Best job I’ve ever had.”

I meet his softer tone. “What’s the position description?”

“Must love beautiful, intelligent woman.”

My cheeks flush.

“Must be prepared to let a sexy as fuck woman use you for her pleasure.”

“It sounds kinky that way.”

“It can be.” He releases me. “One drink if we talk.”

“Okay.” I take his hand and follow him out of the movie theater. And even though he promises this is okay again, I don’t know if I believe him.

Who can live with feeling like a predator?

With hurting the person they love?

I can’t.

And I don’t think he can either.

Chapter Thirty-Six



After a few days in Spain, I'm convinced fine tonic water is the way to go. Even here, in this dimly lit dive bar, the menu lists four different premium tonic water options and a dozen gins.

Sure, some of the dives in Venice Beach craft a fine cocktail, but they charge fifteen dollars for a classic with infused simple syrup. They try way too hard.

These places don't. They know what they want, and they go after it.

Or maybe I'm putting too much stock in drinks again. Maybe, this is a bar, not a statement on my relationship with Val or the differences between Barcelona and Los Angeles. But, hey, that's a better thought than *what if I'm hurting her*, so I continue contemplating the perks of Spanish life.

Val settles into the place slowly, shifting in her seat, studying the pattern on the wallpaper—diamonds in alternating shades of grey.

I order a sangria for her and a vesper for me. I know I shouldn't jump straight to a strong drink, especially after giving her shit, but it feels appropriately European. And, okay, yeah, I want something to dull the voice in the back of my head, the one that keeps asking what the fuck I'm doing.

Are you hurting her on purpose now?

Are you really going to help her through this and then bail?

Or is that what she wants? Deep down, is she like everyone else? Does she see you as nothing but a good time?

Nope. None of that shit.

The bartender works fast. I meet Val at the booth in the nearly empty room. And yeah, our bodies are mostly blocked by the table, and the wall to her back, but I don't linger on thoughts of the possibilities.

I consider them for a moment—I could dive between her legs or pull her into my lap—and I release them.

We're here to talk.

I'm not going to do anything to freak her out. I can't handle it.

She watches me slide onto the bench seat.

“When did you start drinking martinis?”

“When in Europe...”

She raises a brow. “Oh, you mean, like James Bond? You don't like James Bond.”

“I don't want to like James Bond.”

“Wait.” She perks. “You like James Bond? The books? The movies? The concept?”

“The movies.”

“The concept?” she asks.

“Not the part about Bond sleeping with a new babe every locale.”

“Cause your dad adores that?” she asks.

“Am I that obvious?”

“I majored in film because my dad would hate it.” She takes a long sip of her sangria. “We're all obvious.”

“The new movies are good.”

She shoots me a *really* look.

I return it. “They’re all about how much it sucks to be James Bond.”

“It’s so hard sleeping with beautiful women?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

She raises a brow.

“They look at the reality of the character. Here’s this guy who drinks his problems away, who isn’t able to form a real relationship because of his job, who makes these failed attempts at intimacy again and again.”

“Does he really try to have a relationship?” she asks.

“Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes, he falls hard. But it never lasts. And he can’t trust or be trusted, ‘cause he’s a fucking spy. He’s always on the lookout for someone with a secret, someone ready to betray him.”

“And he has to be ready to betray someone for his country,” she says.

“He’s tragic.”

She takes another sip, finding the subtext in my film taste the way she always does. “Is that how you felt? With all your flings?”

“Sometimes,” I say. “Sometimes it was fun and that’s all there was to it.”

“But you never tried to have more.”

“I didn’t believe I was capable.”

“Do you now?” she asks.

No. “Yeah.”

She takes another sip. “Me too.” She smiles, but there’s not a lot of heart in it. “I’m sorry about before. Really, Dare. I started to think about that and then I felt your hand and I went there. It’s not your fault. It’s something that happens sometimes.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“What do you want me to say?” I ask.

She looks at me with curious eyes. She doesn't know either. Or she thinks I'm being an asshole. Both, maybe. “How's the martini? Is it shaken not stirred?”

“You think my Spanish is that good?”

“Most people in the service industry speak a little English. Barcelona is a tourist hot spot.”

“A vesper,” I say. “Named after the villain.”

“Edgy.”

I flip her off.

She laughs. “What's in the edgy martini?”

“Gin, vodka, lillet blanc.”

“You needed a strong drink after all that.”

“Val—”

“If you're hurt, you can say that. I'd rather you say that than pretend it's okay,” she says.

“I'm hurt and it's okay.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” I say.

“Do you want to take a break?” she asks.

Part of me does. The other part wants to fill every one of her fantasies, every day, forever. “If that's what you need.”

“But what do you want?” she asks.

I don't want to hurt her. It's that simple. “This is new. How about we enjoy the magic for a while?”

“Right. We need to enjoy all ten days. I hear it fades on day eleven.” She smiles, teasing.

A laugh spills from my lips. “Why are you so good with humor?”

“Because I had to be.” She steals a sip of my drink and makes an *omg, that's strong* face. “Chubby girl with glasses. I

had to make fun of myself before people could do it.”

“Your glasses are hot.”

“I know.”

“You know?” I ask. “Does that mean you’re into a librarian fantasy?”

“What is a librarian fantasy?” she asks.

“Something about staying quiet?”

“No. I don’t like it quiet.” She turns to me. “I like the schoolgirl thing. I mean the professor student thing. One day. But anything like that would take me a long time.”

“I want to try every freaking thing you think of,” I say. “But I’m not in a rush. This is all new to me.”

“Sex with someone you love?”

“Yeah.” I don’t say it directly.

She doesn’t either. “Everything is new for me after that... and I want to re-experience it all. And try new things. I don’t want to wait, but I... I’ll try to be more honest with myself about where I am.” She swallows hard. “I still need to lead.”

“It’s not a problem, you know.”

“I know.” She looks up at me. “But I want to get there too... to a ten.”

“The mafia boss?”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Illustrate the scenario,” I say.

“Right now?”

“Do you need another sangria first?” I ask.

“You won’t tell me to stay sober?”

“No.” I try the drink. It tastes like too many parties where I was too ready to get fucked up. It tastes like someone I don’t want to be. I don’t like it. I fucking hate it. “I want something else.”

“Too strong?”

“Not my thing.” I try one more sip. I still hate it. “If you want another one, it’s on me, but I won’t fuck you if you’re drunk.”

“What if you’re drunk too?”

“Are you trying to take advantage of me?”

“Is that one of your scenarios?” she asks.

“Might be, yeah.” I stand and leave the martini glass on an empty table. “You want something?”

“A gin tonic.”

“Me too. They’re the perfect mix of bitter and sweet.”

She looks at me funny, but she doesn’t say anything. She checks something on her phone as I order the next round.

The bartender is fast, again. And this time, when I return, Val’s posture is soft, inviting.

She’s settling into this, to us.

I can get there too. I can trust her to share.

She smiles as I slide into the seat.

“You know the best thing about these?” I take a long sip and let out a groan of pleasure. “The ice.”

She laughs. “It is hard to come by.”

“And I can do this.” I pop a cube and run it over her collarbone.

She shudders. “Is that a bribe?”

“I want to hear about the fantasy mob boss.”

She blushes as she meets my gaze. “It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s sexy.”

“Is it?”

“See for yourself.” I motion downward.

Her eyes go wide. “Oh. Really? From that?”

“Yeah, from that.” I offer my hand. When she takes it, I guide her, slowly, to where I want her.

She takes over as she presses her palm against me, over my jeans.

“Keep talking.”

“But this...” She runs her thumb over me. “What if I want to do this?”

“Too bad.”

She pouts, and the tension fades from the air.

She’s still Val, and I’m still Dare, and I still trust her more than anything.

“Maybe,” I say. “But only after you tell me about this scenario. With lurid detail.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven



“Can that last indefinitely?” Val blushes as she presses her palm against me.

“You trying to kill me, vixen?”

“Should I have mercy?” She pulls her hand away.

I keep it there. “Never.”

She looks down at my grip, studying it, deciding how she feels about it. She must decide she likes it because she moves closer. “Should I torture you like this?” She runs her thumb over me again. “The whole time we talk?”

“Might come in my jeans, but yeah.”

“Really?”

“Or die of blue balls,” I say. “One of the two.”

“You always said blue balls were bullshit.”

“Bullshit if a guy is trying to guilt you into shit,” I say. “The pain is real.”

“But you want the pain?”

“I want you, but—” I take her hand and move to my thigh. “No fantasy, no fun.”

She pouts in a way that’s both adorable and sexy as sin.

I bring my hand to her cheek and pull her into a soft, slow kiss.

She presses her lips against me gently, then she moves harder, faster. Her lips part, her tongue slips into my mouth, dances with mine, demands more from me.

My blood rushes south.

My thoughts scatter.

I need her here. I need her everywhere.

But I need to stay in control of myself too. So I don't hurt her again.

I pull back with a sigh. "I'm waiting."

"Are you sure I can't convince you to share first?" She slides her hand up my thigh. "I'm getting good at this."

"Vixen, you have no idea how long I can wait."

She takes a long sip. "Does it have to be the mafia scenario?"

"Do you have another?"

"Sorta." Her cheeks flush. "It's just... it's stupid."

"Vixen, don't make me take your hand again."

"Still?"

"Five, four, three—"

"Okay, okay." She interlaces her fingers with mine instead. "Promise not to laugh?"

"Always."

"Well, I guess it got in my head after one of those Inked Love parties. I think Daisy and Luna were talking about BookTok, about some sexy mafia book they were sharing, and how the hero treated the heroine like a gift. It was disgusting how he objectified her, to their intellectual minds, but this other part of them thought it was really hot."

"And you?"

"I started thinking about it." She blushes and looks aside. "Intellectually, at first. There is something fucked up about being traded to a mob boss. But there's also something

appealing about the idea of being so sexy, a mob boss will call off a hit to have you.”

I can see that.

“And then I started to imagine it. This scene.” Her blush deepens. “I find some way to make it my choice. Like *Beauty and the Beast*, right? People always say it’s about Stockholm Syndrome, but Belle volunteers to take her father’s place. She chooses her fate.”

I love that she defends Disney as passionately as she defends Billy Wilder. I love her big, beautiful brain. “What did you decide?”

“Something like that. I volunteer as a bargaining chip to save my sister’s life. She has gambling debts.”

“Sounds like her.”

“Yeah,” she says. “And I do it knowing what I’m getting into. I do it with some small amount of control.”

“What about the mob boss? Why does he agree?”

“He’s not an evil guy,” she says. “Sometimes, he’s lonely. Sometimes, he’s stuck the same way—he has to accept because of pressure from his family. Sometimes, he’s playing his own game. He wants to toy with me.”

“Smart guy.”

She squeezes my hand. “I think about that one a lot. It’s a game to him, to win me over. I come into the room in sheer white lingerie, this vision of purity, and he looks at me with wonder. Then he tells me to strip and I lose the robe. He says come here and invites me into his lap. I sit. He asks if I know what he expects. I say I do. He asks if I want that. I say it doesn’t matter. But it matters to him. He wants to know if I find him handsome, if I want him. I try to hold out, to resist him, but he knows. He tells me he’s going to toy with me, to see how much I want him, and he does. He puts me in front of the mirror so I can watch, so I have to watch his hands on my breasts, or between my thighs. And when I’m wet, he whispers, don’t think this means I’ll fuck you. Not yet.”

“Fuck, Val.”

“Is it too weird?”

“No,” I say.

“It’s fucked up.”

“So?” I squeeze her hand. “It’s a fantasy. It’s allowed to be fucked up.”

“But after... after that... I know how awful it is for a man to say *I know you want it*. I shouldn’t find it sexy.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s wrong.”

“For who?” I ask. “This is happening in your head. Who are you hurting?”

“I shouldn’t want that.” Hurt seeps into her voice.

“But you do.” I move closer. “How does it help anyone to shame yourself?”

She stays soft, vulnerable. “It’s not that easy.”

“I know. But you could stop next time you catch yourself giving yourself shit.”

“You sound like my therapist.”

“Oh?” I ask. “Is therapy all dirty talk?”

“I don’t tell her specific details.” She laughs. “But she says the same thing. That everyone has a different reaction and would I judge someone else? So why am I judging myself?”

“She sounds smart.”

“She is.” She looks up at me. “Sometimes, I think about someone using me, playing with me while a friend watches, this tool to show power and status.”

“Because you’re that fucking sexy.”

She nods.

“I like that one.” I press my lips to her neck. “It sounds fucking hot.”

“It’s your turn.”

“Any fantasy?” I ask.

“The dirtiest one you have.” She shifts back into teasing. “I know you’re a freak.”

And I know that’s a compliment. My lips curl into a smile. My blood rushes south as my thoughts turn to dirty places. I want to share this with her, but I don’t want to scare her. I need to take it slow.

It might be too fucked up, but a promise is a promise. “It’s an old one. And it’s fucked up.”

“Perfect.”

I take her word she wants to hear it. “I started thinking about it after you asked for the lesson with the cucumber.”

“Oh.” She laughs. “Sorry. I made you promise.”

“It was funny.” My laugh breaks the tension in my chest. Yes, this is fucked up, but it’s hilarious too, and I love that we can laugh together. “That night, I tested my lessons, made sure they checked out.”

“Did they?”

“Oh, yeah. Then I started to think about other scenarios. What if you decided that wasn’t enough help and you asked for something hands-on? Then what if you needed more? To learn how to give head? How to fuck?”

“That’s not fucked up.”

“What if you wanted to do it in front of the guy you were dating?” I ask.

“That’s more fucked up. But not as much as mine.”

“Is this a kink off?” I ask.

“No. I like yours.” She smiles. “I don’t know about real life, but I like the image of it.”

“There’s an overlap.” Me, toying with her in front of someone else.

“I know.”

“There’s no one watching here,” I say. “But there could be.”

She nods.

“Or if that’s too much, we could do it at home, with the mirror.”

“It’s not too much.”

“Are you sure?”

She takes my hand and slides it between her legs.

I curl my fingers around her thigh. “Like this?”

“Dare.”

“Or here?” With a feather-light touch, I draw a line up her thigh. Higher. Higher. Higher. “Or here?” I press my palm flat against her.

“Yes.”

I rub her over her panties. “Take these off.”

She shifts her hips. “Help.”

I slide the fabric down her ass. Let it fall to her thighs. Keep it there. I draw a line down her thigh.

She wraps her hand around my wrist and guides me to exactly where I need to be.

“You’re wet.” I run my thumb against her slowly.

“Because of you.”

She’s too good at torturing me. Way too good. So I take her hand and guide it to where I want it. I go ninety percent of the way. Let her go the last ten.

“Here?” she rubs me over my jeans.

“No.” Maybe. “Keep it there.”

She nods and brings her lips to mine. She kisses me hard and deep, with every ounce of need in her body.

I toy with her with slow circles until she’s groaning against my lips, until she’s almost where I need her.

I pull back to whisper in her ear. “I want to taste you.”

She lets out a soft sigh. “Do you have room?”

“I’ll find room.” This is a lot less discrete, and I have *just* enough blood in my brain to care. I check the bar again. No one watching. No one nearby. Only a guy on a stool, chatting with the bartender.

I shift under the table.

There’s not as much space as I’d like, but it’s hard to curse the circumstances.

Val shudders as I curl my hands around her ankles.

Slowly, I push her legs apart, slip between them, place a kiss on the inside of her knee.

Then higher.

Higher.

Higher.

She curls her hand into my hair as I dive under her skirt.

The sight of her is perfection. Even with the lack of light, it’s obvious this is exactly where I’m supposed to be.

This is heaven.

I press my lips to the inside of her thigh.

Higher.

Higher.

There.

She shudders as I brush my lips against her. I pull her closer, until she’s pressed against me, and I lick her up and down.

Every inch of her is sweet and soft. I take my time tasting her, teasing her.

Then I go where she needs me and work her with soft flicks of my tongue.

She digs her nails into my shoulders. “Dare. Fuck.”

I toy with her again.

And again.

Until she's there, muffling her groans with her hand, pulsing against my lips.

I work her through her orgasm, then I release her, I check our surroundings, I shift back to the booth.

And once again, I'm exactly where I need to be, with the woman I love, giving her what she needs.

I'm not good at the rest of it.

But I know how to do this. I really know how to do this.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



We spend our last day like our first, walking through the Gothic Quarter on the way to the beach, diving into the Mediterranean, savoring the sights of the city.

After, we pack, we sleep, we wake early and take the train to Paris—slower than a flight but easier for him. The days blur into a haze of bliss and culture. A perfect montage of the City of Lights and his body against mine.

The walk from the metro, the quaint city street lined with cafes and people sitting at tables on the sidewalk, smoking as they sip wine. The just big enough hotel room. Dare wrapping his arms around me the second we finish unpacking, whispering *there's something else on my to-do list*.

The stone inside the Louvre. Dare's hand around my waist. The statue of the Goddess of Victory and the ridiculous line for the chance to take a picture in front of the Mona Lisa. The two of us in the shower, after a long day, struggling to fit into the tiny space, laughing as we spray water everywhere.

The palace-like architecture of an estate an hour outside the city. The thrill of sneaking around the gardens, finding hidden spots in the spiral staircases, kissing as the rest of the group tours, trading royal fantasies on the drive back to the city.

The sun shining on the Seine, the history of the Latin Quarter, the feeling of our limbs tangled in the bed.

The tree-lined, world-famous shopping street, the Champs-Élysées, half-naked pictures at Mango, French style absinthe at a specialty bar.

The anise flavored liquor is strong, even mixed with sugar and water. It's not magic, but it does give me the courage I need to storm the sex shops nearby.

After laughing at the Eiffel Tower shaped vibrators in pink and black, perusing the plus-size lingerie, and finding the perfect flavored lube, I face the one bridge we have left to cross, my ability to give up control.

I buy a pair of remote-controlled vibrating panties. For later.

And, as we take the train back to our room for our last night in Paris, I work up the courage. I wait until we're alone, in the safety of our space, and I say it. "I want you to lead this time."

Chapter Thirty-Nine



D are hesitates. “Are you sure?”
“Yes.”

He surveys the room with new eyes. *It's our last night eyes. Where do I want to have my way with you eyes.*

The words sound sexy in my head. But this isn't happening in my head. It's not under my control the same way.

And it's not like I trust my head, anyway. I trust him more than I trust my head.

“How sure?” He eyes the perfectly made bed, the window that looks out on the Eiffel Tower, the uncomfortable plastic chair at the desk.

“Medium sure.”

“I can't hurt you again.”

“You didn't.”

“Not for you, Val.” He looks me in the eye. “I can't take it again.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, you want to try anyway? Or okay, let's wait.”

“I'm ready.”

“There's no rush,” he says.

And maybe that's true for him. But it isn't true for me. I need to be okay. I need to escape my past. I need to have

access to every dirty fantasy I want to reenact with him. “You don’t want to?”

“Of course I want to.”

“What if we start slow?” I ask.

“What if?” His eyes bore into mine, demanding an answer to his real question.

But I don’t have the response he wants. “Please.”

“Val.” His breath hitches.

“How about this.” I turn my back to him and motion to my zipper. “We outline it first.”

He unzips my dress and traces a line down my back, then the strap of my bra. He undoes the hooks and slips his hands under the fabric. “No.” He groans as he cups my breasts. “I lead.”

“Fuck.”

“I do whatever the fuck I want with you.”

Why does it sound so sexy on his lips?

“You have no fucking idea what you’re in for, vixen.” He pushes the straps of my black mini-dress off my shoulders. Then the straps of my bra.

The fabric falls to my waist, exposing my chest.

He turns us to the mirror, then he brings his hand to my chin. He turns my head so I’m staring straight into my reflection.

One hand stays on my chin.

The other stays on my chest.

He follows my gaze, watching me watch as he toys with my breasts.

The image is almost too much to handle. My dress at my waist, my breasts on display for him, his body behind mine, his hands on my skin.

He toys with me again and again, sending waves of desire through my body. Every flick of his fingers builds the anticipation in my belly.

He winds me tighter and tighter.

Until it's too much to take and I have to close my eyes.

“Watch.” He rolls his thumb over my nipple. “Or I stop.”

I'm tempted to keep my eyes closed, to release myself from the blissful torture.

“Or is that what you want, vixen?” He rolls his thumb against me again. “Do you want me to stop toying with you? Finally give you everything you need?”

“Please.”

“No.”

Fuck.

“Not until I'm done with you.” He runs his thumb over my chin. “Open.”

I find our reflection.

“Watch.”

I follow the motion of his hand as he toys with me again and again. Slow circles, soft zigzags, rough rolls of his thumb. Exquisite torture on my right. Then my left. Then back again.

He winds me tighter and tighter.

Until I'm sure I'm going to break.

“Please, Dare.” I rock my hips against him, feeling his hardness against the flesh of my ass, soaking in every drop of sensation. “I need you inside me.”

He lets out a low groan, but he stays strong. He toys with me again and again.

Again and again.

Until I'm sure I'm going to break.

Then, finally, he slips his hand between my legs.

I don't freeze. I don't panic. No. It's much worse.

I unravel completely. I melt into his touch, into his body, into his need.

The friction of his hand is too much, too intense. After a few brushes of his thumb, I come.

He brings his lips to my neck, sucking on my skin as he rubs me through my orgasm.

Then he guides me to the wall, he tilts my hips, and he pushes my dress up to my waist.

He makes me wait as he unzips his jeans, rolls a condom over his cock, gets exactly into place.

Then he teases me.

A soft brush.

A little harder.

Again and again.

Until I'm dizzy. Then, finally, he drives into me, and somehow, I fall even deeper into him.

My world dissolves into his. The fullness of him inside me. The sound of his groan. The pressure of his hands. The perfect reflection of our bodies coming together again and again.

A montage of pleasure.

The perfect mix of image and sound.

Of his need and mine.

Again, I come quickly, pulsing around him, pulling him closer, taking him deeper.

He works me through my orgasm, then he moves harder, faster, using me the way he needs.

His lips go to my neck. Then it's his teeth against my skin. His nails against my thighs.

Enough to hurt.

To hurt in a way I like.

In a way that scares me.

But I like that too. Because it's him. Because I trust him. Because I need him. Because I need everything.

He uses me the way I asked him to, driving into me again and again, holding my body against his as he comes.

I can feel it in the way his breath changes, the way his nails sharpen, the way his cock pulses inside me.

It scares me.

And I like that too.

And when we collapse onto the bed, everything is perfect, and we are exactly where we should be.

All night, the world is perfect.

The morning, the trip to the airport, the flight—we stay in our space, watching old movies together, talking tattoos, drinking bad wine, and eating too much French chocolate.

The second we finish customs and step into what is officially the United States, he starts to shift. The distance grows on our ride home, as he helps me unload my stuff, even when we kiss in my room.

The second my mom arrives home and says hello to Dare, I see it.

Real life is different.

And all those questions we put aside are back.

And neither of us has the answers.

Chapter Forty



For three days, I re-adjust to Pacific Time. I stay up late. I wake up early. I bury myself in preparation for school.

Dare helps me pack, but he doesn't linger at my place. He leaves before my mom arrives, before he can make small talk with my sister, before we have the chance to have sex in *my* bed.

Day four, I wake up at eight with a sense of ease. School is starting soon. Southern California is beautiful. And the distance I feel between my best friend and me is in my head. It has to be.

He's tired too. He's adjusting too. He's busy too.

So, when my mom announces a going away party, I don't fight her. And when I say I'm inviting Dare, and she looks at me funny, like she's not sure why I don't want to invite my best friend, I don't dive into the subject.

So what if she doesn't approve?

It's my life, not hers.

When my friends from school arrive, and they start talking about French auteurs and PhD sessions, I don't think anything of it.

Even when Dare finally arrives and he looks around the room with curious eyes, when he gets that familiar look on his face—*what am I doing here*—I tell myself it doesn't matter.

But, deep down, I know it does.

Chapter Forty-One



Even though it's packed with Val's friends and family and humming with the mix of conversation and Spanish-language love songs, Val's mom's house matches the image in my memory perfectly.

The place is still the opposite of my dad's house. Framed art, clean carpets, soft furniture in shades of red and orange.

The place screams of Val's mom, of her unique mix of maternal fierceness and creative energy.

She doesn't just have the ear of a poet. She has the eye of a designer too. Everything fits together in just the right way.

Poor Val has no artistic talent. She loves visuals, images, the unique combination of the two on film, but she's a critic, not a creator.

She's too removed, too intellectual, too analytical.

She curses that sense, sometimes, but it's one of the things I love about her. She turns her passion to existing works of art, dissecting them, understanding them, putting them together in a new light.

And now, she has the perfect place to combine head and heart.

She has this big, beautiful future in front of her, and everyone here knows it.

Two of Val's friends—a girl in glasses and a sweater vest and a guy in slacks and a button-up shirt—study me carefully.

Even though I'm dressed up for this, even though my long-sleeved shirt is covering most of my tattoos, they see it.

I'm not from this world.

I don't belong.

The guy approaches with a forced smile. "How do you know Val?"

What did she tell them about me? "I grew up next door."

He nods *that makes sense*. "Do you still live there?"

"My dad does," I say. "I'm in Santa Monica."

"Are you in school too?" he asks.

"No." This is always the sticking point at her parties. I'm the uneducated guy.

"Oh. What do you do?"

I try to find some polite thing to say, some way to stay in his world, but I've got nothing. "Excuse me. I'm gonna get a drink. You want something?"

"No, thank you." He looks at me funny, but he doesn't stop me from leaving.

I move to the bar as quickly as possible. It's not stocked the way I need. There are a few bottles of wine, a bowl of chips, a cooler of beer.

Right on cue, Val emerges from the kitchen with a pitcher of sangria. She zones in on me immediately. Her lips curl into a smile. A pure, perfect smile.

All of it is *I love you. I want you. I want to be in our world, together.*

But that's the thing.

It's our world. Not her world.

I swallow the thought. I help her with the pitcher and greet her with a hug.

"Fashionably late." She rests her head against my chest. "As usual."

“It’s all that time at Mango.”

“If you ever say Mango again—”

“You’ll come instantly?” I tease.

“Exactly, yeah. Don’t embarrass me in front of my mom.”

“You don’t want your mom to see your o-face?” I ask.

She looks up at me with that same *I love you* smile.

She hasn’t said the words. Not since we kissed. Neither of us has, not exactly, but we both know it’s there.

“You look sexy in this.” She runs her fingers over the fabric of my collared shirt. “You’re my dirty secret.”

“How’s that?”

“Your art.” She runs her thumb over the inside of my wrist. “Like when you tried to talk me into the rib tattoo, saying it would be sexy, ‘cause people would only know if I wanted them to know.”

“It would.”

“This too. I like that it’s ours.”

Ours. Of course. “Go. Have fun with your friends.”

“You don’t look excited.”

“Cause your mom is watching me.”

“She is not.” She looks to the kitchen. “Well, maybe she is. But don’t take it personally. She was the same with all my boyfriends.”

“You told her?”

“I did,” she says. “Did you want to talk about it?”

“No. Have fun.”

She nods, rises to her tiptoes, presses her lips to mine.

She tastes good, the way she always does. For a long moment, I’m there too, in our world, that place where everything makes sense.

Then she pulls back and I feel the change in energy in the room. Everyone looking at us like we don't belong together.

I pour a glass of sangria. I watch her work the room. I listen to her friends trade gossip on teachers, movies, the two of us.

Did you hear he's her next-door neighbor?

The boy next door. That's cute. But he doesn't look like a boy next door, does he?

He's a tattoo artist.

No, Val wouldn't date a tattoo artist.

Maybe she likes dumb guys, the way you do.

Maybe he's got a great dick.

He's hot. Why the fuck wouldn't she want to take a ride?

I shake it off. I pour another glass. Then another.

The pitcher empties. I sneak into the kitchen to find something stronger. This too, looks the same as it did. Somehow, it's organized and messy at the same time. There's this sense the place is well-loved.

Because, for all our similarities, we're not the same here. Val grew up with a parent who took care of her, who put her first, who cooked her dinner, took her to the doctor, and taught her to value her brain over her looks.

There's still wine in the pantry and an array of hard liquor in the fridge. Vodka, tequila, gin. Val's mom does love to entertain.

I fill a glass with ice, pour two fingers of gin, then two more.

Bottoms up.

I down half the glass in one swig.

Voices interrupt my attempt at inebriation. Val and her mom, coming from the party.

I sneak to the other door, the one that leads to the dining room, and press my back against the wall.

“You can’t go kissing guys in front of your colleagues,” her mom says. “They get ideas.”

“What ideas?” Val asks.

“That you’re that kind of girl.”

“It’s not the nineties.”

“Things don’t change as fast as you think,” her mom says.

“Seriously, Mama? What kind of girl?”

“He’s not a nice boy.”

“How would anyone know that?” Val raises her voice. “And why the fuck should I want a nice boy, anyway?”

“Valeria.”

“One that didn’t do anything to protect me.”

“You can’t let one boy ruin your future.”

“He is my future.”

“He’s like his father.”

“And if people say I’m like mine?”

Val’s mom replies in Spanish.

And Val switches to Spanish too. She speaks almost as quickly and with almost as much emphasis as her mom.

I don’t catch much of it, but I catch enough.

Father.

Bad.

Love.

School.

“I want the best for you, Valeria,” her mom shifts back to English, her way of lowering the temperature. “We both know he isn’t it.”

“Mama.”

“Even if he was—is this really what you want? To be tied to him again?”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were. And look how it hurt you. You barely know your friends. You barely talk to anyone else. Your entire life revolves around him. He has that energy, the same energy as your father. Do you really want that? Do you want to be a planet in his orbit or do you want to be the sun?”

“Mama.”

She shifts back to Spanish, some equivalent of drop it, and she leaves the room.

Val stays for a moment, then she murmurs something to herself, and she leaves, and the words bounce through my brain.

Do you want to be a planet in his orbit?

She’s right.

She moves around me.

She melts into my life.

She hides from other opportunities.

And she’ll never do anything to change that. I have to be the one to change it.

Chapter Forty-Two



The party lasts for way too long. Most parties last for too long—who wants to be stuck in the same room with a dozen acquaintances for three hours?—but this one really drags on. The friends I like, the ones with more curiosity than superiority, leave first. They are also not party people.

For two hours, the room is all Mom's friends and judgmental jerks.

I blast one of Brian's nu-metal playlists to clear the stragglers.

Finally. The last *I'm so much smarter than you* student leaves. Mom retires to her room with her usual air of *I only want the best for you; we both know you'll come around*.

It's just Dare and me.

Wait. Where is Dare? When did I last see him?

An hour ago. Maybe more.

I lost track of my boyfriend.

I check the backyard, the kitchen, my room upstairs.

Nothing.

I tap a text.

Val: Did you go home?

Dare: Next door.

Val: You okay?

Dare: Just hanging with Bri.

Val: Come over?

Dare: Meet you at the pool.

Val: To my room?

Dare: Your mom is home.

Val: I'm an adult.

Dare: You'll never have sex with your mom home.

Val: I didn't say sex.

Dare: You meant sex.

Maybe.

Dare: Five minutes.

Dare doesn't leave parties early. But then, this isn't his kind of party. This is a gathering of dweebs and jerks who drop five-dollar words like they're going out of style.

I wash my face, I down a glass of water, and I head to the backyard.

He's sitting on the concrete, jeans rolled to his knees, ankles in the pool, eyes on the water.

He's quiet.

Too quiet. There's something wrong. I can feel it.

"Hey." I slip off my shoes and sit next to him. "You okay?"

He nods. "Just thinking about what I have to do."

We don't need to do anything. We need to enjoy our time together.

He turns to me. "I'm sorry, Val. This isn't working."

"What about it?" I ask.

"The two of us," he says. "I can't do it. It's not you. It's me. I'm not built for a relationship." He digs the heels of his hands into the concrete.

“But—”

“I’m sorry.” He pushes himself up. “I didn’t want to do it here, but it’s better to get it over with. So you can go to school and soar on your own.”

Finally, he looks at me.

And I see it in his dark eyes—I see his heart breaking.

“Dare, please.”

“This is the best thing for both of us.”

He leaves.

And I crawl upstairs and cry myself to sleep alone.

Chapter Forty-Three



DARE

At home, Dad is in the living room, sitting on the leather couch, swiping right and left on his cell.

The asshole took to online dating like a fish to water. He's charming, at first, and he's handsome, and now that he's rocking the whole silver fox thing, he's even more appealing to women.

They see him and think *I bet he can teach me a few things*.

They're right, of course. He can teach them a few techniques. He can teach them not to trust what any man says. He can teach them how to get over heartbreak.

And look at me.

My father's son.

He looks up to me with a smile. "Were you at Valeria's house again?"

"Yeah."

"All this time, really?" he asks.

"All what time?" What the fuck is he going on about?

"You two have been sleeping together," he says.

Fuck him. "Do you need something?"

"Are you going to tell me about your trip?" he asks.

"Another time," I say.

“It was a romantic atmosphere. There must have been some interesting moments.”

“Not the way you mean.”

“No? You didn’t sleep with your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I say.

“Really?” Surprise streaks his face. “Trying to be like your old man, huh?”

No. Never.

“You’re not like me, Darren. You’re like your mom. You think you want fun and excitement, but you want a nice girl who will put you first, always.”

“That was the problem with Mom? That she didn’t like excitement?”

“I know what you think of me,” he says. “That it was all me. I broke my vows first, sure, but it’s not that simple.”

“You fucked someone else. Seems pretty simple to me.”

“She knew what I needed when she married me. She knew she couldn’t give it to me.”

“Then you knew too.”

He nods. “I should have been more honest with myself.”

This is the closest he’s ever come to admitting fault.

“You’re like her. You want love and stability. You want what you know. Why else would you spend a decade with the same girl?”

“It’s called friendship,” I say.

“Is that really true, Darren? Is it friendship?” He stands and shakes his head *this guy*. “Or have you been in love with her all this time?”

Fuck. “Where was this wisdom five years ago?”

“I thought it was better if you let her go. I thought you’d get over it.”

“Fuck you.”

“She’s found someone else?”

Close enough. “It’s not gonna happen.”

“I’m sorry, son. How about a drink?”

Yeah, that’s a good idea. “Sure.”

He leads me to the kitchen, pours two glasses of vodka, raises one to toast. “To the best way to get over heartbreak?”

“What do you know about heartbreak?”

“I loved your mom. It killed me that I hurt her. That I lost her.” He downs his glass in one swig. “If I could do it over, I’d do it different.”

“We’re the same then.”

He looks at me funny.

“If I could do it over, I wouldn’t hurt Val again.”

Chapter Forty-Four



VAL

For a few days, the move steals my attention. Sure, when I climb into bed and close my eyes, I imagine Dare with me. I taste his lips; I feel his touch; I smell his shampoo.

Then I wake up cold and alone, and I bury myself in work again.

I text his friend Luna to ask if he's okay.

After a few days, she replies.

Luna Locke: He's not. But I don't know how to help. He says he ended things with you. Is that true?

Val: Yeah.

Luna Locke: You're sweet to check on him.

Val: I love him.

Luna Locke: My condolences.

But she's wrong. I don't feel any grief over my love. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

I'm the Humphrey Bogart character in *Sabrina*.

I finally learned to love and it broke my fucking heart.

And now, to prove it, I have to let him go.

Only he's not going to come back.

Not as my lover and not as my friend.

Val: Keep an eye on him for me. Please.

Luna Locke: I'll do what I can

Chapter Forty-Five



DARE

Even though Brian insists I'm being an idiot, he agrees to keep an eye on Val.

He checks her socials.

He texts her to ask if she's okay.

He keeps me completely in the dark, only responding to the most simple yes or no questions.

The same thing, again and again.

She's not okay, Dare.

I'm not going to lie to you and say she is.

If you want her to be okay, you know what to do.

For another week, I throw myself into sessions at Inked Love. I hit the gym for hours. I fill my time with busy work.

Anything to avoid thinking about Val.

She survives her first week of school; that's all Brian will tell me. Then her second.

That Saturday, he meets me at the shop at the end of my shift. The energy in the room shifts as he steps inside.

Which is weird. He fits right in—sure, he's not as heavily adorned in ink, but he volunteered as a canvas plenty of times—and no one here knows him well. No one but Patrick.

Right on cue, Patrick emerges from his suite. He wipes the sweat from his brow and nods *hey* to Brian. "Here to talk some

sense into your brother?”

“Is that possible?” Brian greets Patrick with a hug.

“You look good.”

“You too,” he says. “Darren says you’re in love.”

Patrick smiles. “I am.”

“I see it,” he says.

“You’re a romantic now?”

“I’m a romantic always,” he says.

“How’d you end up that way? Dare eschewing love and you running to it?”

“He takes after Dad.”

“You take after Mom?” Patrick asks.

My brother nods and looks to me. “He’s going to punch me for saying he takes after Dad.”

“He hasn’t punched anyone since high school,” Patrick says.

Brian raises a brow *is that the story he’s selling?*

I clear my throat. “I’m right here.”

“Yeah, I know, but this is a three-man mission.” He checks his phone. “Well, two men and a woman.” He looks to the window and waves at Luna.

The bell rings as she walks into the shop. She’s in one of her typical trendy outfits—cropped sweater, wool skirt, ankle boots—but she’s not wearing her usual ease.

She’s concerned.

“Should we tie him up?” She taps her chin. “Force him to listen to reason?”

“You’re not supposed to lead with that,” Brian says.

“We all know it’s your thing,” she says.

He blushes.

Which is adorable and all—my little brother, embracing his sexual preferences with shyness, good for him—but I don't have the energy.

“On three?” Luna asks.

Brian nods. “Three—”

“What the fuck?” I step backward.

But Tricky grabs me first. He holds me by the shoulders—when did he get so strong—while Brian wraps a belt around my wrists.

“This is kidnapping,” I say.

“So press charges.” Brian motions *follow me* and leads us outside.

I don't fight the fuckers on this. I let them guide me to Brian's car. Patrick helps me into the back seat and sits next to me on the other side.

Luna takes shotgun.

And Brian drives.

They wait for me to say something, but I keep my mouth shut as they take the side streets to the 10, take the 10 to the 405, drive south.

I wait until we're well into Long Beach, and I say, “I don't want to see her.”

“Bullshit. You do want to see her,” Brian says. “You think you shouldn't. But you want to.”

“Okay. I shouldn't,” I say.

“She's miserable, you idiot,” he says.

“That's a temporary pain,” I say.

“No, it's not. She loves you. She's loved you for a long time,” he says. “She's always going to love you. Luna, explain some shit to him.”

She turns toward me as much as she can. “Val asked me to keep an eye on you.”

My heart races. Val is checking on me. Val misses me. Val needs me. “She did?”

“Yeah. She’s worried about you.”

“What did you tell her?” It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter that she hurts now, that she misses me, that she wants the best for me. This is still what’s best for her. This is still what I have to do.

“That you’re an idiot,” Luna says. “And you’re obviously miserable.”

“You shouldn’t have said that,” I say.

“Those aren’t secrets.” She looks to Tricky for support. She whispers something to him. He whispers back. “We told her you haven’t been with anyone else.”

“How do you know that’s true?” I ask.

“A thousand bucks says it is,” Tricky says.

“You don’t have a thousand bucks,” I say.

“I will, if you take the bet,” he says.

“Whatever,” I say.

“It’s just like high school,” Brian laughs. “Any challenge to Darren ends with ‘whatever.’”

“He hasn’t matured at all?” Luna asks.

“Some,” he says. “Mostly because of Val.”

“She didn’t say why you ended things,” Luna says. “Actually, she said you didn’t really explain.”

“And?” I ask.

“Why did you end things?” she asks.

“How is it your business?” I ask.

“You’re stuck in the car until we get to her place either way,” she says. “If you’d rather pass it in silence, we can do that.”

“No, we’re going to talk about our double date,” Patrick says.

“Oh, right,” Luna says. “Can you believe I talked Oliver into dancing?”

“Why wouldn’t he go dancing?” Patrick asks. “He gets to grind against you for three hours straight.”

“He hates this kinda thing,” she says. “And hates inviting us more.”

“What kinda thing?” I ask.

“What was that?” Luna asks. “Sounds like someone who specifically doesn’t want to be part of the conversation.”

Patrick nods. “A shame for him.”

“Whatever,” I say.

Brian laughs. “See.”

“We’re going to a sober dance party,” Luna says. “It’s a thing Oliver’s sponsor runs. All the fun of the clubs with none of the alcohol.”

“Sounds like torture,” I say.

“Like you aren’t imagining Val in your arms right now,” Luna says.

No comment.

“What happened?” she asks. “Why did you end things? They were good, weren’t they?”

“In Spain, yeah,” I say.

“Did something happen in Paris?” she asks.

“No,” I say. “When we got back here.”

“When you got back here...” She motions *go on*.

“I saw it. I’m not part of her world. I’ll never be part of her world. And I’m not going to demand she’s a part of mine. I’m not going to be an anchor dragging her down.”

She and Patrick trade a look. “You want to take this?”

“No, I think this is one for Brian,” Patrick says.

“Me?” my brother asks. “You think I can talk sense into my older brother?”

“You know them the best,” Luna says.

“Okay.” Brian takes his eyes off the road. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“That’s where I’d start too,” Luna says.

“Do you even remember what Valeria was like when we moved in? How much she kept things to herself? How lonely she was? She blossomed around you. Why the fuck do you think she got the poppy tattoo on her forearm?”

“She loves California.”

“Cause that was what she felt, with you. She opened up. She unfurled. She learned how to have fun, how to access this whole other side of life, beyond books and keeping shit together for her parents and her kid sister.”

“She did?” I ask.

“Don’t pretend like you didn’t notice,” he says. “And that semester she almost dropped out of school... who talked her into staying?”

“It wasn’t that simple,” I say. “She was pissed at how I handled it. She barely talked to me for months.” How much does he know? Does he know everything?

“But she got over it,” he says. “And she spent the whole summer with you.”

“That’s the problem,” I say. “Her life revolves around me.”

“Where did the two of you go on your trip?” he asks.

“You know the answer to that,” I say.

“Where?”

“Barcelona and Paris.”

“Whose idea was that?” he asks.

“Hers.”

“Who loved those places?” I ask.

“Her?”

“Which of you adores the beach?” I ask.

“Her,” I say.

“And what do you do every Saturday night, when she’s in town?” he asks.

“Watch movies.”

“And who’s the one with the film degree, who adores cinema?”

“I get your point,” I say.

“I’m not sure you do.” He motions to Patrick *can you take it from here.*

Patrick nods. “She invited you into her life and you came. You don’t share nearly as much as she does.”

“I gave her three tattoos,” I say.

“So?” Patrick asks.

“She hangs out with you assholes,” I say.

“We’re great,” Luna says.

“And watches the dumb movies I pick,” I say.

“You pick from the Criterion Collection,” Brian says.

“Damn, Imogen is going to be jealous,” Patrick says. “Might be the first time I’ve been emasculated this way.”

“I thought she likes dumb guys,” Luna says.

I frown.

Luna and Patrick notice.

“Is that it?” Patrick asks. “You don’t think you’re smart enough for her?”

“I’m not,” I say.

“You’re not book smart, maybe,” Luna says. “But book smart guys are the worst.”

“She says that too,” I say.

“So maybe you should get the fuck over yourself and believe her,” Luna says.

I don't have a comeback, so I settle into the silence. I let their words bounce around my brain, melt the ice around my heart.

We drive through Long Beach, North Orange County, past the 55.

To the Jamboree exit.

“I need to do something first,” I say.

Patrick and Luna exchange a look.

“But there's no way I can do it here,” I say. “It's not like there are any tattoo shops in fucking Irvine.”

Patrick smiles. “Good thing I stocked supplies at Imogen's place.” He looks to Luna. “And he thought that excuse would delay us?”

“I don't know. He looks pretty happy to me,” she says.

“More scared than happy,” Patrick says.

“Shut the fuck up and put some ink on my skin, huh?”

Patrick laughs. “Your wish is my command.”

Chapter Forty-Six



There's one good thing about a breakup.

All the free time, and all the tension in my chest, need a physical solution. Since the thought of touching another man makes me sick, I'm here, at the school gym, for the fourth time this week.

And you know what?

Working out is great.

I avoided the activity for years because people always assumed I was incapable, or they'd say dumb shit like "good for you, for trying to be your best self."

And, sure, that's true of anyone undertaking a new hobby or trying to manage their level of stress in healthy ways.

But no one says it to thin girls.

After forty minutes of hills on the treadmill, I move through my full-body dumbbell routine. I thought lifting weights was boring, but it turns out I need intense concentration to maintain my form. Perfect for keeping my thoughts away from how badly I miss Dare.

When I finish, I'm too tired to hurt. I walk back to my apartment, I shower and dress, and I set up with one of my textbooks.

Sweet, sweet studying.

Another way to keep my thoughts in order. Only my concentration is shot. It's not just the breakup. My coursework is hard. Really hard. I'm great with film techniques and literary criticism. Psychology even.

But when it comes to diagrams of the brain, I'm way out of my depths.

I'm getting there a little more every day, but I'm behind, and I need to really devote myself if I want to catch up to my peers.

After half an hour, I take a break, I pop a TV dinner in the microwave, check my cell while I wait.

A text from Luna.

Luna Locke: Are you home? Because I have a delivery for you. I promise you'll like it, but you can return to sender if you're not in the mood.

An *I'm sorry, I can't* note. Or a love letter. Or a box of my stuff. Or another vibrator.

Or...

No.

Val: I'm home. But if I don't like it, I'll have to trash your ride.

Luna Locke: Brian's car? Or Brian himself?

Val: Bri is with you?

Luna Locke: And the other Dickson of note.

Val: Their dad?

Luna Locke: Guess again.

Val: Are you sure I'll like it?

Luna Locke: Unless you changed your mind about what you said last time.

Val: I didn't.

Luna Locke: Five minutes.

I check my outfit in the mirror. Leggings and a sweatshirt. Not cute. Whatever happens, I need to look cute.

I scan my closet. Grab the first thing that speaks to me.

The blue dress.

It feels right now. It feels safe in a way it didn't before. Maybe he sees that.

Maybe he finally sees how much he helps me, how much I need him.

I slide into my wedges right as the doorbell rings.

“Special delivery,” Brian calls. “It’s heavy. We’re going to need you to sign.”

Someone laughs. A woman. Luna, I think.

And someone else. A man but not Dare. This laugh is higher pitched, lighter, softer. Not the full-throated chuckle of Dare’s dark sense of humor.

I miss him.

I miss him so badly I can barely see straight.

I open the door.

My eyes go right to Dare.

He looks exhausted. Sexy as hell—his t-shirt is snug against his broad shoulders, and his jeans hug his hips just so—but tired.

“We took the belt off,” Brian says. “But we’ll put it back on if we have to.”

Dare opens his mouth to say something to his brother, but he doesn’t manage to find any words.

Brian laughs. “We’ll leave you to it.” He steps back. Joins Luna and Patrick in their spot on the sidewalk downstairs.

Dare watches them congregate then he turns to me. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You’re shivering,” he says.

“The sun is going down,” I say. “It’s getting chilly.”

“Give her the jacket,” Brian calls.

“You’re not supposed to talk,” Dare says.

Brian runs up the stairs with Dare’s leather jacket, then he runs back down and makes a show of zipping his lips.

“Sorry, they’re idiots.” Dare holds up the jacket *may I*.

I nod and offer my arm.

He slides the jacket onto my shoulder. Then the other.

It still feels good, like I’m safe, like I’m home.

“Can I come in?” he asks.

I nod and step inside.

His friends cheer as he follows. Then he closes the door and he blocks out the rest of the world, his world anyway.

We’re still surrounded by mine. The books on the shelf, the movie posters, the massive TV (well, as massive as my budget allows).

“I like your place.” He looks around. “You share it with someone?”

I nod. “A med student. She’s usually at the library.”

“And not interrupting your *Sabrina* watch parties?”

“I can’t watch right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because it finally happened to me,” I say. “I learned how to love and I broke my heart in the process.”

“I love you too.” He reaches for my hand, stops himself, turns over his arm. “I’ll always love you, Val.”

I try to find some response between *let’s celebrate this declaration with less clothes and so fucking what? I need more than I love you. I need you in my life.* Then I see it.

The design he drew on his wrist.

One-half of the best friend necklace.

It's new, fresh, still covered in plastic.

"You did that for me?" I ask.

He nods. "I'm sorry, Val. Everything was good in Europe, when it was us, and then we got back home, and I saw your family, the way they looked at me. I heard that shit your mom said to you."

"What shit?"

"That I'm no good for you."

"Who cares what she thinks?" I ask.

"You do," he says. "And I guess I do too. I hated the thought I was like my dad. That I was going to turn your life into something that revolves around me. I don't want you to be a planet in my orbit. I want you to be the sun."

"Dare—"

"But that was bullshit. Not all of it, but some. I was scared. I am scared. That I'm not enough for you. Not smart enough or ambitious enough or refined enough. That one day, you'll wake up and realize you want a guy who knows more than color theory and cunnilingus."

"Those are equivalent skills?" I ask.

He laughs. "Are they not?"

"Who's going to pick someone who knows color theory over cunnilingus?"

"Is artistic talent not important?"

"You're solid across the board," I say. "But yeah."

"Well, I do have that." He smiles. "And I have other shit too. I know how to cook. I run my own business. I'm honest. I appreciate your knowledge and your thoughts and I want to learn. And I can't promise I'll always feel like that's enough, but I'll try."

"Yeah?"

"Every day, I'll try. If you can forgive me for being an idiot."

“I can.”

“I love you, Val.” He offers his hand.

I pull him into a tight hug. “I love you too.”

“Fuck, I missed you.”

“Me too.” I bury my head in his chest. “Will your friends wait if we celebrate this properly?”

“With gin tonics?”

I shake my head.

He laughs. “Probably not. But I’ll just have to spend the night. Make you breakfast in the morning.”



Epilogue

Even from across the room, Val shines like a star. Right now, she is the sun, and we're lucky to bask in her light.

She looks gorgeous in her royal blue dress, her eyes lined in gold, her lips a perfect shade of raspberry. But it's not the flecks of honey in her irises or the way her outfit hugs her curves—

It's her.

She glows.

She looks up from her conversation with her PhD adviser, well, her former PhD adviser, and finds me. She smiles and shakes her head *can you believe she's at it, again?*

I nod *I can*.

She shakes her head *will she ever stop?*

No. Of course not. But the woman wants to gush over Val's progress. Who can blame her?

We're here, at her mom's house, to celebrate her accomplishment.

My fiancée is a doctor.

It's sexy as hell.

There are a few new paintings on the wall, a red couch instead of a burnt orange one, a brand-new TV, but otherwise, the place looks the same.

The way it did all those years ago when I worried I was snuffing out her light. And I was, just not the way I thought.

We both needed time and space to grow, together and apart. Only we didn't need to end our relationship to do it. We just needed to focus on our own worlds for a while.

As badly as I wanted to move into her tiny UCI apartment, I didn't. And I didn't let her spend the entire summer in my bed. Lots of nights, sure. Most weekends, yeah. But not the entire summer.

She followed her dreams. I followed mine. Then, once we'd tried hard enough on our own, found our own paths, we followed them together.

It's been a wild ride.

After playing with the idea for a while, I started a temp tattoo company. It never reached major heights, but I sold the business for a small sum. Those connections led to an opportunity to dabble in tattoo-inspired fashion. Which was fun, for a while. Eventually, it was too much bullshit, and it took too much space from the work I love, putting ink on people's skin.

At first, I did all that to prove I fit into Val's big, beautiful world. If I was a better man, I would have let go. But this worked too. As soon as I saw the check for my business, I understood.

Money changes a lot and it changes nothing too. It doesn't make me a better artist, a better partner, a better friend.

It is handy though. It paid for her ring. It's paying for our trip to Hawaii, my half of the ceremony (she insisted on splitting that, of course). It's not enough for a down payment in Santa Monica, but that's okay. We don't need four bedrooms or home ownership. We need enough, and with her new research gig, we'll have plenty.

In three weeks, Val continues her journey to world domination.

For the next two weeks, she's mine. Officially too.

And, yeah, maybe we won't travel as much as we should, but newlyweds are supposed to spend their honeymoon screwing.

My smile is involuntary. I'm a giddy asshole now. That's love: it makes fools of us all.

Val catches my gaze again. She notes my joy and her smile gets wider in return. This time, she breaks from her conversation and crosses the room to me.

"Hey." She wraps her arms around me. "Are you bored out of your mind?"

"Only halfway," I say.

"Yeah?"

"Go. Work the room. Talk to your friends. Celebrate."

"What if I'm tired of celebrating?" she asks.

"Then you won't like my plans for tonight."

"Plans?" Her eyes perk. "Do they involve French chocolate?"

"Maybe."

"And not wearing pants?"

"You're in a dress," I say.

"So you'll be wearing pants. Interesting." She leans in to whisper, "Does that mean you finally want to try..."

"That's what you wanted as your graduation present."

"I was kidding."

"Were you?"

She pulls back with a blush. "Really?"

"If you have the energy."

"Yes." She throws her arms around me. "I love you."

"I love you too, vixen. Now, go, let your friends congratulate you."

"Do I have to? I'm wiped."

“Let’s compromise.”

“Five minutes,” she says.

“Thirty,” I say. “But I’ll give you the chocolate covered candied orange peel now.”

“Deal.” She shakes and pulls me into a slow, deep kiss. When she releases me, she looks at her mom and smiles *I don’t care if you think this is inappropriate*, then she releases me.

I watch one of her classmates gush over her work, then I sneak to my dad’s place, I find the stock of French chocolate I bought for her. Dad isn’t home, but I’m not worried about running into him.

Sure, he’s still an asshole sometimes, but that’s his problem. He makes his choices. I make mine.

Trying to run away from his influence is another way to let him rule my life. I’m done defining myself as *not like Mr. Dickson*.

I know who I am now.

And it’s not just the future Mr. Valeria Diaz. It is that—but it’s so much more too.

I’m a friend, I’m an artist, I’m a businessman, I’m a brother, I’m a fiancé.

And maybe, one day soon, a father.

But, hey, one major life event at a time. Well, two, but I tried to talk Val out of the timing.

She insisted.

BY THE TIME I RETURN TO HER MOM’S LIVING ROOM, VAL IS deep in conversation with her sister. She laughs at Lucia’s nerdy joke—Lucia is in the middle of a PhD program of her own—and looks to Brian.

Wait. What is my brother doing here?

He wants to celebrate Val. That's normal. That's great. But when did he sneak into the party?

And why is he blushing over Lucia's glance?

He would have told me about a crush. I'd have noticed.

Or has it been developing in secret, all those weeknights the two of them spent here?

She's not at Northridge, but she's close enough.

No. It's nothing. There's no way Brian is into Val's sister. He's blushing because he thinks they're gossiping about his love life. Well, his sex life.

After things ended with his ex—

He stayed discrete about their activities. She didn't.

Val spots me watching and shoots me a smile. She whispers something to her sister—which makes Lucia blush—then they embrace in a hug and Val scampers to me.

Really, scampers.

Love's made a fool of her too, and I adore everything about it.

She points to the timer on her smart watch. Fifteen minutes to go. "You brought my chocolate late. Let's call it even."

I offer her the wrapped box.

She takes it with a smile. "That was you accepting."

I slide my arm around her waist. "We still have to drive to my place." It will be our place soon—in a few days—but for now, we're living separately.

I know. Who the fuck waits until they get married to live together in this day and age? But there's something special about saving the milestone. There isn't a lot left to save these days.

She shakes her head. "Can we do it in your room?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, Bri is here. Your dad is out. Why not?"

“The twin bed,” I say.

She laughs. “I always wanted to do it in your room.”

“We have.”

“Not this.”

“We’ll have to be fast, unless you want Bri to hear,” I say.

She shakes her head. “He’ll talk to Luci for a while.”

“Is there something I should know?”

“Probably,” she says. “But I’m sworn to secrecy.” She offers her hand. When I take it, she leads me through the party, the living room, the backyard. Past the pool at her place, into the side yard connecting our childhood homes, the trampoline my dad bought a million years ago, the sliding glass door.

All the way to my teenage bedroom.

She flips the switch and takes in the room. “Gorgeous.” She points to the Taylor Swift poster she bought me as a dare. Then the other dozen pop art posters she bought me as dares. “But it needs one thing to bring it all together.”

“Oh?”

“A One Direction poster,” she says.

“Your One Direction poster?”

She nods *exactly*.

“That’s why I love you. Your brains.”

“I thought it was my boobs.”

“Might have been.” I wrap my arms around her. “Both start with *b*.” I pull her into a kiss.

She laughs against my lips for a moment, then she melts into our embrace. When she breaks, she looks up at me and runs her fingers over my suit jacket. “You look sexy in this.” Then the tie. “And this... can we?”

“Here?”

“Here.”

“You sure?” I ask.

She nods.

“Of course.” I bring my lips to hers again. I kiss her like I’m claiming her. In a way, I always am.

Tonight is no exception.

And, well—

She’s wanted this for a long time.

I play coy about it, but I have to. I want to fulfill every dirty fantasy in her head. This is only the start, but it’s a great fucking start.

After I break our kiss, I turn her around and undo the zipper of her dress.

She shudders as I push the fabric off her shoulders. As I do away with her bra. Her perfect pink panties.

Val, in my bedroom, in only her heels.

All my teenage wet dreams come to life.

And the deeper, adult desires too. The sexual ones. And the other forms of intimacy.

Because I trust her with this. I trust her to ask for what she needs, to tell me when something is too much, to come back to me if I ever push too hard.

And I trust myself too. I trust myself to let go if we move too fast for either of us.

I take in the sight of her for a long moment, then I wrap my arms around her and lay her on the bed.

“Hands here.” I tap the spot over her head.

She lifts her arms.

I undo my tie and wrap it around her wrists. She shudders as I cinch the knot. Her fingers curl. Her thighs shake.

She’s impossibly turned on and it’s the sexiest thing in the entire fucking universe. It dissolves the concern lodged deep

in my mind, the voice that occasionally pops in to ask what the fuck I'm doing with such a nice girl.

It's not gone. I'm not sure if it will ever be gone. But it's softer, less frequent, and I'm better at handling it.

We never escape our pasts, our upbringing. But trying to run from a part of our lives is another way to let it control us.

She deals with what happened to her.

And I deal with what happened to me.

And, together, we figure out what that means for the two of us.

I shift onto the bed and pin her arms to the pillow.

She groans as I bring my lips to hers. She kisses back hard, like she's claiming me, like she's taking something deep inside of me.

She is.

But then she already has it.

I take my time exploring her mouth then I dip lower. The lines of her collarbone. The peaks of her nipples. The soft skin of her stomach.

I push her knees apart and dive between her legs.

She moans as I lick her. After a few teasing strokes, I shift to exactly what she needs. The speed. The pressure. The spot.

She comes fast, shaking against my hands, groaning my name.

I work her through her orgasm, then I torture her by undressing as slowly as possible. She watches with wide eyes as I do away with my jacket, my shoes, my socks, my belt.

Then the shirt.

The slacks.

The boxers.

"You're evil," she breathes.

"You love it."

“I do.” She looks me up and down, savoring every inch.
“Now fuck me.”

Even though I’m in control, I do exactly as she asks.

We move together, in that perfect rhythm, tangled together, lost together, found together.

Her orgasm pulls me over the edge. Pleasure floods my body. And that unmistakable sense of being exactly where I’m supposed to be.

Right here, with her.

I’ve never had that with anyone else.

I don’t want it with anyone else.

Only Val, always, forever.

We stay tangled together for a long time. Neither of us mentions it—we’re not using birth control anymore, we’re trying, but it fills the room.

In three days, she’s going to be my wife.

And after that—

Who the fuck knows what the future holds? Whatever it is, I know I want to be there with her.

When I catch my breath, I untie her; I wrap my arms around her; I hold her close.

She sinks into me. “Can we do that again tomorrow?”

“First stop when we get into Maui?” Is it technically an elopement if we planned the whole thing? I’m not sure. I don’t care. I’m too giddy to care about other details.

“After the ceremony?”

“You can wait that long?” I ask.

“Good point.” She reaches back and intertwines her fingers with mine. “Besides, we both know what we have to do after the ceremony.”

“Dive into the Pacific?”

“In our wedding gear,” she says.

“And strip it off and fuck right there.”

“Even better.”

Want More?

Get another taste of Val and Dare with an exclusive *The Friend Zone Fiasco* bonus scene. [Sign up for my mailing list](#) to get it.

Have you read all of Inked Love? You can start from the beginning with Forest and Skye's story [*The Best Friend Bargain*](#). Two best friends + one fake relationship + sizzling chemistry = big problems.

All done with Inked Love? Keep your bad boy fix going with the men of rock band Sinful Serenade, starting with [*Sing Your Heart Out*](#). Virgin honors student Megara Smart wants nothing to do with cocky A-lister Miles Webb. In theory. Only she keeps thinking about his gruff voice. His piercing blue eyes. His massive... ahem.

Turn the page for a sample.

Sing Your Heart Out

Get Sing Your Heart Out Now

Between the throbbing house music and the dance floor full of beautiful people grinding, it's difficult to move. It's harder to think.

I need to pee. Now. Waiting in the line snaking around the corner is not an option.

How can there only be one bathroom downstairs? One hundred people plus one bathroom equals far too many tortured bladders.

Kara must know where the bathroom is. Wherever she is.

I push through the crowd, but there's no sign of my best friend.

Someone bumps into me, her hip pressing firmly against my pelvis. Dammit, my bladder is going to explode at this rate.

Screw upstairs being off-limits. This isn't a church. It's some up-and-coming band's Hollywood mansion. I'm not about to pee my pants respecting the sanctity of rock stars' bedrooms.

There's a couple making out on the curving staircase. I step past them and make my way to the second floor. The sounds of music and conversation fade to a murmur. I'm tempted to hang out here until Kara is ready to go home.

Parties are not my scene. Even my bladder hates them.

I scan the wall, trying to figure out which of the five doors is attached to the smallest room. There. Second on the left. That must be it.

I turn the knob and push the door open.

Not a bathroom.

Definitely not a bathroom.

There are two people on a bed. The woman is on all fours. The man is kneeling behind her.

They're naked.

They're having sex.

Then they're not. The grunting stops. Flesh ceases to smack together.

The man looks at me. There's no sign of embarrassment or awkwardness on his face. He's totally unmoved.

The woman shrieks. She scrambles off the bed, pulling a sheet over her chest. "Miles, you fucker. I told you I don't do threesomes!"

Miles. There's something familiar about him. I try to place him but my thinking abilities are back to zero.

He's tall, broad shoulders and chest, sculpted abs, and below his bellybutton...

He's hard.

He's hard and he's huge.

Save for the condom, he's completely and utterly naked.

A blush spreads across my cheeks. I stammer, attempting and failing to speak. I've never seen that before. Not in person. In movies, sure. Textbooks, of course.

But never in person.

I can't look away.

The guy, Miles, makes eye contact. His voice is even. Calm. "You mind?"

I take a step backwards. My foot sinks into the plush carpet. I only barely manage to hold my balance. “Excuse me. I thought this was the bathroom.”

“Next door on the left.”

I know I’m red. Beet red. “Thanks.”

I pull the door closed so I’m alone in the hallway. Next door on the left.

I step into the bathroom, lock the door, and die of embarrassment.

IT TAKES TWENTY MINUTES FOR MY CHEEKS TO RETURN TO A normal color. I slink back to the sprawling main room and do my best to blend in amongst the partygoers.

Every inch of the hardwood floor is packed with beautiful people talking, flirting, or making out.

It’s like the up-and-coming models, actors, and musicians are attracted to each other. They have a certain glow that mere mortals lack. And here I thought this was a normal college-students-with-a-keg-and-cheap-vodka kind of shindig.

Kara’s friend invited us. He’s in a band. Are they really this popular? I can’t remember their name, but then it’s hard to think of anything but Miles naked on the bed, hard and ready for action.

The lines of his hips and torso are burned into my brain.

And his...

Dammit, I’m not going there.

I find the closest thing to an empty corner and try to clear my head. I fail. My mind keeps going back to that vivid mental image.

Miles. He was unfazed, like the sex meant nothing to him. Like the girl on his bed meant nothing to him.

The man is a player. He's not the kind of guy I need in my life. He doesn't deserve my thoughts.

This stops. Now.

I scan the room for some better way to stay occupied.

It's no use. He's here. Miles is still effortless and aloof. He's still unaffected.

The guy has already moved on from the blonde in the bedroom. He's flirting with a redhead in a designer dress and stilettos.

She's model gorgeous with perfect hair and makeup. I'm standing here in an H&M skirt and blouse, my brown hair its usual frizzy mess, my black eyeliner doing little to enhance my plain-Jane brown eyes. Liner, mascara, and under-eye concealer are the extent of my makeup knowledge. I think I'm the only woman here who isn't contoured. Hell, I know I'm the only one wearing canvas sneakers.

I don't belong here.

It doesn't make sense that Miles is looking at me instead of the pretty redhead.

But he is. His clear blue eyes are fixed on mine. They're gorgeous. I couldn't see them in the dark but out here, they're practically shining.

Heat spreads across my chest. I'm gawking.

He smiles, reveling in my attention.

I press my eyelids together to temper my out-of-control blushing. It's no help. My head fills with that beautiful image of him in nothing but a condom.

Why did I let Kara talk me into coming to this party?

I push my way through the crowd, trying to get as far from Miles's gaze as possible. A dozen steps and I'm standing in the clean, modern kitchen. It's dark and mostly empty.

"You're not big on respecting people's privacy, huh?"

It's the same voice I heard upstairs. Miles.

I could swear I've heard it before. A lot, even.

I turn so we're face to face. Why does Miles seem so familiar? I don't go to parties. Hell, I've been MIA the last few months.

I wouldn't forget his strong jaw, his messy brown hair, or his gorgeous blue eyes.

Those eyes are fixed on me. He's staring at me, picking me apart.

I don't like the scrutiny. Sure, I'm hiding. But I'm not admitting that to him.

I clear my throat. "No, I'm not big on alcohol. Can't find anything else to drink."

He reaches past me. His hand brushes against my shoulder as he pulls open the fridge. He nods to a row of water bottles on the middle shelf. "Help yourself."

"Thanks."

Miles looks so familiar. And his voice is familiar too. Almost like he...

No. That's not possible.

There's no way this guy is the singer of alternative rock band Sinful Serenade, the guy who sings *In Pieces*, the guy who's been haunting my thoughts for the last three months with his breathy, tortured voice. With all the pain in his soulful eyes.

I try to recall the song's music video but my damn brain goes right back to the image of Miles naked on the bed.

Damn. I watched that video a thousand times. It was a massive hit. The song hit the top 40 for a week or two, a rarity for alternative rock in this day and age.

More importantly, the video and the song went right to my soul. The singer was whispering in my ear. He promised that I wasn't alone. He promised that I wasn't the only person who had ever felt this way.

I understood him and he understood me. We were the only two people in the world who knew how badly it hurt, losing everything that mattered.

The man who sings *In Pieces* is a tortured soul. He doesn't screw one woman, wash up, then move on to flirting with lay number two.

Kara keeps playing down how famous her friend is.

He lives here. I know that much.

This Miles guy seems to live here.

Fuck.

Why didn't Kara warn me her friend was in *that* band?

Miles clears his throat. "You okay?"

I nod a yes and attempt to hold his gaze. "Don't walk in on casual sex very often."

"Mhmm."

"I was looking for the bathroom."

He laughs. "Is that the best you can do?"

"I was." I take a half-step backwards. "Excuse me. I should go."

His voice drops an octave. "You're not going to let me formally introduce myself?"

"Okay." My stomach flutters. "I'm Meg Smart."

"Miles Webb." He takes my hand with a strong grip. His eyes pass over me like he's trying to place me. "How is it we haven't met before?"

"I don't go to parties."

"Guess that makes this my lucky day." His hand brushes against my wrist. Then it's back at his side. He leans in a little closer, his eyes on mine. "Why'd you decide to come tonight?"

I should be the one asking him that. "My friend convinced me I wouldn't hate it."

“What’s the verdict?”

“I still don’t like parties.” I take a deep breath. “Why’d you come tonight?”

“That was my bedroom you burst into.”

Somehow, my cheeks burn hotter.

His eyes rake over me. “Can’t blame you for looking. I’d do the same.”

My knees go weak at the seductive tone to his voice. That’s him, the guy who sings *In Pieces*, the man who has been haunting my dreams.

That song is the centerpiece of my *listen on repeat and fall apart* playlist.

I try to formulate some excuse for why I need to leave immediately, but nothing comes. “You’re um... you’re in the band? The one that is throwing this party?”

“Yeah. Sinful Serenade. I’m the vocalist.” His eyes pass over me again. He takes his time, like he’s sure I’ll be in his bed in thirty minutes flat.

A pang of desire shoots straight to my core. My damn body isn’t obeying my commands. It can’t help wanting Miles Webb. There’s something appealing about the tattoos poking out from under his t-shirt. About the confidence in his eyes.

It’s not like me to fall for the bad boy.

Even when he’s so tall. Two inches taller than me at least. I’m 5’11’, a giant for a women. I tower over most of the men I know.

But not Miles.

I take a deep breath, trying to convince my body it doesn’t want him.

He’s bad news.

A player.

A rock star even.

But I can’t stop staring.

I clear my throat. “I was looking for my friend, Kara. She’s tight with some guy in your band. They go way back.”

“Oh, yeah, Drew’s friend. Heard a lot about her last tour.”

“So, I should really find her.” I step aside. “And go home. I have to study. You know how it is. Or maybe not, being a rock star and all. But I have a test tomorrow.”

I turn and make my way out of the kitchen.

There are footsteps behind me. “Meg?”

I spin, eye to eye with Miles again. Once again, my mind flashes with the image of him kneeling on that bed, his cock hard, the muscles of his thighs and torso taut.

How is it possible that Miles is the guy who has been singing me to sleep? He’s not a poet.

He’s a manwhore.

“Yes?” I ask.

“Your friend isn’t in a state to drive.”

He points to Kara, curled up on the couch. Her dark eyes are filled with an expression of drunken excitement. She looks especially short and curvy next to her tall, muscular friend. That must be Drew. His black hair and intense brown eyes are appealing. No wonder she’s staring at him like she wants to devour him.

She bounces to her feet and throws her arms around me. “Are you having fun? Please, tell me you aren’t completely miserable.”

I hug back. “Only partially.”

She laughs. “That’s a start!”

Good. She still happy. Kara is an endlessly patient friend. She’s been dragging me out of mourning for months now. I’m not going to ruin her night.

“I’m about ready to go home,” I say. “I’ll take a cab.”

“No. I can drive. It’s getting late,” she says.

The dark-haired guy, Drew, butts in. “Kendrick, you are way too drunk to drive. If you even think about getting in your car, I’ll throw you over my shoulder, carry you to my room, and strap you to my bed.”

Her eyes light up the second he calls her by her last name. “I didn’t know you were into that. Do you have rope or handcuffs or what?”

“I’ll call you a fucking cab.” His voice is equal parts playful and protective.

She nudges him and points to me. “This is my friend Meg, who you are so rudely ignoring in favor of lecturing me.”

He pushes off the couch and offers his hand. “Drew Denton. Nice to meet you.”

I shake. “Meg Smart.”

“Miles giving you a hard time?” Drew asks.

“I can handle myself,” I say.

“If you won’t listen to reason—” Drew turns back to Kara “—then I will drive you home.”

Kara looks Drew in the eyes. “You were drinking too.”

“I can.” I bite my tongue. Dammit, Kara’s car is a stick. I can’t drive us home. “Never mind.”

Miles butts in. “I’ll drive you guys home.”

Drew’s eyes narrow. He shoots Miles an incredulous look.

“Not letting you drive tonight.” Miles throws back a stern look. “You’d do the same.”

Slowly, Drew’s protective expression melts. He and Miles share a look of understanding.

The cocky singer turns to Kara. “Your keys.”

“It’s a manual.” She digs through her purse.

“That’s fine.” He smirks. “I know how to handle my stick.”

Get Sing Your Heart Out Now

Author's Note

Sentiment isn't in my nature. I prefer sarcasm any day. But some moments really are, well, momentous. And this is one of them.

The Friend Zone Fiasco is the end of the Inked Love series. I started this series way back in 2019! And I started the original Inked series (Inked Hearts), way back in 2017! (This isn't goodbye forever, but it is goodbye for now).

Way back then, *Tempting* wasn't a full novel yet. It was a novella for a bundle, a bundle that totally ruined a few friendships. Not a fun experience. Almost enough to sour my love for the story, but not quite. Something about Brendon and Kaylee really spoke to me. The obvious bits—a best friend's hot older brother secretly drawing you tied to his bed + wanting to teach you everything he knows—but something deeper too. The beautiful and terrible parts of wanting to save someone, about wanting someone to save you. We all have these moments, but is that really how it works? Sorta. Sorta not too. (The same thing happens in this book, in most of my books. Two people help each other, but, in the end, they save themselves. Cause we have to heal from trauma on our own, for ourselves. Same for everything else we go through—mental and physical illness, betrayal, grief, parental hangups, whatever. We're the only ones in our own heads).

Something about *Tempting* spoke to me, even when I wasn't listening. I still remember sitting in an AirBnB in Paris, halfway through a trip to Europe with my dad, (and, yes, he was complaining a lot about the lack of AC and ice... he's a real ice aficionado. "Did they lose the recipe" is a direct quote from Father Kaswell), in desperate need of a fix... Yes, I needed to get the words out of my head and onto the page. I wrote the first scene, Brendon watching Kay at her birthday party, and shared it with my Facebook group.

In the five years since, I've been lucky to visit Paris (and London) again. And to see Rome, Barcelona, and Madrid for the first time too. There's something magical about Europe, like New York City, but older, more refined. There's a sort of history we don't have here on the West Coast. Not in the architecture anyway. Everything here is shiny and new and as much as I love that, I miss the sense of history and place I felt when I lived in New York City. I can only imagine spending months in a major European city. A lot of this book is inspired by my sister's time studying abroad in Madrid. A lot is from my travels. The rest is from the feeling I have (we all have) sometimes: the desire to run to somewhere different to find yourself (or lose yourself).

It's been a wild ride. The travel this job has afforded me. And the journey of this gig too. *Tempting*, and the rest of the Inked series, did better than I ever hoped. My career soared to heights I never expected. And even though the external markers of success wax and wane, I will always have that sense I got with *Tempting*: I did it. I wrote a book that people freaking adored. My people. And other people too. People who I never saw as my people, who could be my people if I did a better job reaching them.

The Friend Zone Fiasco was the perfect goodbye trip. Barcelona, Paris, friends to lovers vibes, banter, sizzling chemistry, tattoo talk, everyone at the shop in everyone else's business, not to mention a triumphant return to Southern California. Everything I love about the series. (Okay, not all the books are friends to lovers, but the heart of the trope, the MCs really supporting and loving each other, is what I love most about romance).

I hope you enjoyed Dare and Val's story. And while it's goodbye to the Inked world for now, it's not goodbye forever. So I hope to see you back in future installments. Who knows? Maybe we'll see a next gen story. One day...

If you've been here for the entire ride, thanks for the support! And if you're new to the world, thanks for that too :) May I suggest you read the rest of the series? (Start with [*Tempting*](#) if you want to enjoy all 13 books).

If you're caught up on the Inked universe and in need of a similar fix, check out [Sinful Serenade](#)— it's the most similar to this series.

(And if you're a diehard and you've read everything I've ever written, don't worry, I'll have a new book sometime soon).

Until then—

Love,

Crystal

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My first thanks goes to my husband, for his support when I'm lost in bookland and for generally being the sun in my sky. Sweetheart, you're better than all the broken bad boys in the world.

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Thanks so much to my editor Marla, and to Melody Jeffries for the cover design.

As always, my biggest thanks goes to my readers. Thank you for picking up *The Friend Zone Fiasco*.

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