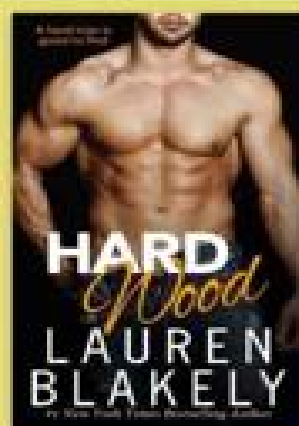
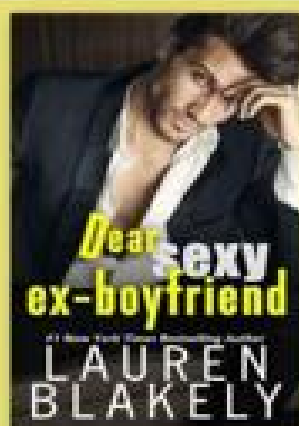
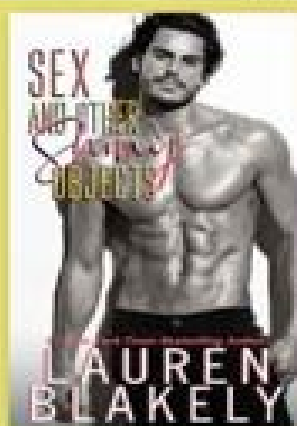




*The*  
FRIENDS-TO-LOVERS  
*Collection*



**#1 New York Times Bestselling Author**

**LAUREN  
BLAKELY**

# **THE FRIENDS TO LOVERS COLLECTION**

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# LAUREN BLAKELY



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*Mister O*

*Well Hung*

*Full Package*

*Joy Ride*

*Hard Wood*

### **Happy Endings Series**

*My Single-Versary*

*A Wild Card Kiss*

*Shut Up and Kiss Me*

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### **Hopelessly Bromantic Duet (MM)**

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*The Virgin Rule Book*

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# ABOUT

**A hand-picked selection of Lauren Blakely's signature friends-to-lovers romances!**

The Friends to Lovers Collection includes some of #1 NYT Bestseller Lauren Blakely's bestselling and fan favorite friends-to-lovers romances. In these three standalone romances, you'll enjoy some of what Lauren is best known for – helping friends fall in love with heat, heart and humor.

**SEX AND OTHER SHINY OBJECTS...** Peyton asks her best friend Tristan to help her with a project to test the premise of sexy scenes in romance novels. When the buttons start flying, all bets are off!

**DEAR SEXY EX-BOYFRIEND...** Summer never expected the letter to her sexy best friend Oliver would go viral. But now she needs him to pose as her fake fiancé, and he needs her to save his business.

**HARD WOOD...** Mia just hired Patrick's adventure tour company for her business, but things are about to get hard in the woods when they're stuck in a tent...and a cabin...and the shower.

# THE FRIENDS TO LOVERS COLLECTION

By Lauren Blakely

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**PRO TIP:** Add [lauren@laurenblakely.com](mailto:lauren@laurenblakely.com) to your contacts before signing up to make sure the emails go to your inbox!

Did you know this book is also available in audio and paperback on all major retailers? Go to my [website](#) for links!

# SEX AND OTHER SHINY OBJECTS

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The second the test-the-sexy-scenes offer landed in my lap, I said yes.

After all, I've been damn curious about a few things I've read in romance novels. Do buttons truly go flying across the floor when you rip off a guy's shirt? Is staircase nookie hella hot or does it leave you with a big old bruise mark on your back? And don't even get me started on all that panty shredding, and whether it even works.

Time to find out as I embark on Project Romance Novel Scenes Research, at the request of my hotshot book editor bestie.

All I need is a willing scene partner. Enter Tristan, my best guy friend. The witty, tell-it-like-it-is, bearded hottie volunteers for the experiment.

He's also the guy who gave me the most devastating, toe-curling kiss of my life ten years ago. But nothing has happened since then.

And nothing will come between my panties and our friendship now since we have a plan to keep it PG.

But once the buttons start flying, all bets are off...





# PEYTON

There's just something about white lace.

Though red lace is delicious too.

And I can't forget about pink lace.

Who am I kidding? From satin to silk to cotton, every shade and every style, it all entices me.

There is nothing quite like lingerie to make a girl feel pretty.

My grandma instilled in me this appreciation for intimates. An elegant aficionado of both class and undies, she took me shopping for my first bra when I was thirteen—a white cotton number with lacy embroidery. Lace and I fell in love at first touch, and I haven't looked back since.

My grandmother also taught me the most important thing to remember when choosing indulgent undergarments: “Whoever said sexy lingerie was more for the man seeing it than the woman wearing it had it all backward.”

Or, put another way, if you buy a Kelly-green panty and bra set, it damn well better be because you love St. Patrick's Day.

*For you.*

As one of my semi-regular customers tries on the matching set, I'm hoping the confident and brainy Daniella is keen on all things Irish for her underthings.

From the privacy of the dressing room suite in the back of my Madison Avenue boutique, she shouts out to me, even though I'm only feet away, sorting through an order of bustiers. "Peyton, I need your prediction. What is the likely outcome of me wearing this set?"

"Let's see what we're working with." I set the gorgeous black satin darlings in their box as Daniella opens the scalloped door a smidge.

A nagging worry pricks at the back of my mind, since she's not a shy woman.

She nudges the door the rest of the way.

"You look like a gorgeous four-leaf clover, and it fits you perfectly." It's true, but something is still off.

She giggles, and my Spidey senses tingle again. Daniella isn't a giggler. She's chatty and analytical, a statistician who loves to talk about outcomes and probabilities, not the type who titters demurely at a compliment.

*Hmm.*

If this color and this style make her giggle, is it right for her? I don't want her to go home with something that makes her feel anything less than fabulous. Some women love bright green. Others do not. And if Daniella's not enamored, this lush ensemble will wind up in the back of the drawer, aka the lingerie graveyard. It's a fate no sexy underthings should suffer.

And it's not good for the peddlers of them. Let a customer go home with something she won't wear, and you might as well say sayonara to that client.

So, for both our sakes, I pose the key question. "How does it make *you* feel?"

With the door open, she regards herself in the mirror inside her dressing room. "It's an odd color, but Jamie says he loves this shade of green because of ..."

I wonder what goes in the blank that she hesitates to say.

*Money?*

*Christmas?*

Wait. No. I've got it.

"The Green Lantern!"

She swivels around, her jaw falling to the plush rose carpet of my shop. "How did you guess?"

I smile, because now we're getting to the heart of the matter. "I can tell you, but you're going to have to keep it a secret. Pinky swear?"

Her eyes glitter with the promise of intel. "Of course."

I cup my mouth, whispering, "I have lingerie ESP. It skips a generation, but it's passed on through the women in my family."

She laughs, then gestures to her pile of clothes on the pink cushion in the corner of the dressing room. The top item is a pair of gray panties that look like they've seen five too many years. "As you can probably tell, I don't have any predictive power of the sort. But seriously, did I tell you about his *Green Lantern* obsession last time I was here?"

I shake my head. "No, but you did mention his predilection for comic books the other week. You said he likes it when you dress up as Wonder Woman, right?"

"He's obsessed with her," she says in a whisper, then shudders, like the thought makes her skin crawl. "And that's the heart of the issue right there. He wants to rip my panties off when I wear red and blue. I bought a pair of bright-red satin panties last time, and I wore chunky gold bracelets on my wrists to complete the look. He went crazy for it."

"And do *you* love that?"

She shrugs, a disinterested look in her eyes. "It's not really *my* thing, nor are ripped panties, because ... hello! All I can see are numbers, numbers, numbers of how much money I'm setting on fire. Can you say 'expensive habit'?" She fiddles with her bra strap. "But aren't relationships about give and take?"

“Of course. But the underwear is on *your* body. Turn around. Look in the mirror. And tell me how *you* feel in this set.”

She screws up the corner of her lips and makes a strange clucking sound as she regards her reflection. One eyebrow lifts. Then the other. She narrows her gaze then gasps, horrified. “I’m the Keebler elf.”

I clutch my belly, laughing, till I collect myself. “First of all, you don’t look like the Keebler elf. He wears red and yellow with his green jacket, and I would never let you pair those colors.”

“You are a good woman to look out for potential color mishaps.”

Smiling, I meet her gaze. “However, if you *feel* like the Keebler elf, then the question is—is that what you want? If so, I say to each her own fetish and kink, and nom-nom-nom.”

She cringes, shaking her head. “I’m all for kink, but I assure you, a little elfin magic doesn’t go a long way for this girl. Or any way, for that matter.” She appraises herself once more, studying her reflection. “Nor does leprechaun kink. Admit it: I kind of look like I’m about to skip over the rainbow with a pot of gold.”

I laugh, flicking my red hair. “Preach, sister. I can’t wear green lingerie for that same reason. And it’s a shame, because I love emerald, but I also love sapphire, so I wear that instead.”

“For your ...?”

She waits for me to fill in the dots—*husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, lover*.

I shake my head. “I’ve been single for some time now, but that doesn’t stop my lingerie habit. I wear sexy undies every day because they make me feel fabulous. And I suspect they’ve played their part in making me feel like I’m finally ready to date again. But listen, I’m willing to bet that your guy doesn’t *actually* care what color your panties are.”

“You think he’ll be fine without the Green Lantern thing?”

I smile softly. “If he loves you for you, and I bet he does, he’ll be happy if you’re happy. Because pretty panties don’t have to be for him. They’re about what you like. What type of panties make you want to march up to him and rip off *his* shirt?”

“That’s a smart way to look at it. What does get me going?” She repeats the question like she’s thinking about it for the first time. “Besides, of course, when he cleans the kitchen and the bathroom.”

“That’s a turn-on, for sure. Keep thinking along those lines. And when it comes to lingerie, ask what style gives *you* the confidence of Athena? What look makes you imagine you’re a Botticelli? For some women, it *is* green lingerie. For others, it’s sapphire or ruby. I could bring you a cranberry-red set if you want.”

She shakes her head, and I keep going.

“Some prefer sheer nude. Others feel sexiest in a sports bra. Maybe it’s a cami and a tank and boy shorts. Or perhaps it’s a festive little novelty set.”

She points at me excitedly, like she’s found the winner in three-card monte. “Yes. *That.*”

I had a feeling I’d pique her interest. She likes unconventional answers, and I bet she’d want unconventional underwear. “Would you say you like numbers?”

“However did you know?” she asks dryly.

“Just a lucky guess,” I tease. “Okay, I’ve been on the hunt for some fun patterns. Let me grab something from a shipment that came in the other day that I think is perfect for you. I suspect you’re a big fan of purple.”

“Is that your lingerie ESP again?”

My eyes drift down to her handbag. It’s a bright shade of eggplant. “Or it could be that your purse was the giveaway.”

“Look at you, using observable possibilities.”

I curtsy. “But let’s make sure you like it first.” I step toward the back of the shop, then I stop, going for the *pièce de*

résistance—the proof that I will always put my money where my ESP is. “And if you don’t feel gorgeous in this set, your next purchase is on me.”

Her eyes pop. “Whoa. Thank you.”

I send a silent wish to Grandma Mimi that I’m not wrong here with my lingerie magic eight ball as I fetch the items I have in mind from a box in the back. As I pass, I glance toward the shop floor where my sales assistant, Marley, is gift-wrapping a purchase for a woman in a camel trench coat. *I bet it’s red and lacy.*

I return to the dressing room and hand the silky items to Daniella.

A minute later, she gushes her praise from inside the room. “This. Is. So. Me.”

*Yes.* That’s what I want to hear—her own confidence in what she wears underneath her clothes.

That’s what matters. She doesn’t even need my seal of approval as long as she’s given it to herself.

She opens the door and strikes a ta-da pose, owning it. The lavender bra and panties decorated with numbers, formulas, and mathematical symbols fit her personality like a glove.

“There is a one-hundred-percent chance of me loving this and feeling hot in it.”

“Then I’d say it’s a sure thing that you’ll be ripping his shirt off when you see him, and he’ll love that too.”

Her eyes twinkle with naughty mischief. “He will. Because I’m not Wonder Woman.” She gestures to her body. “I’m a sexy statistician. Thank you for helping me see that.”

“It’s my pleasure. I’ll be up front when you’re ready.”

A minute later, she’s practically floating as she brings the new ensemble to the register. “Now I only have one thing I want you to remember,” I say as I ring her up.

She clasps her hands, waiting for my wisdom. “Tell me.”

My expression turns full-on serious. “As much as I want you to come back and buy a new set every single day, remember if Jamie rips this off you, you’ll be spending a fortune. Don’t do that crazy stuff unless you want to start wiring half your paycheck directly to me.”

“I do like your shop,” she says with a smile, glancing around You Look Pretty Today, settling on the other patterned bras I recently added. “But I’ll take the advice, and I’ll tell my friends all about this place. My best friend is a novelist, so I bet she’ll dig that typewriter-style over there.”

*Cha-ching.* “She’ll look like a decadent wordsmith when I’m through with her.”

As I fold tissue paper around the garments, Daniella tilts her head and asks, “What makes you feel like a Botticelli?”

Sliding one finger under the shoulder of my shirt, I show her a hint of the coral-pink lace bra. “Lace. It’s my kryptonite, and it’s my armor. I’ve worn lace every single day since my fiancé left me earlier this year. Lace helped me get over him, because every day I had a secret, and the secret was how I looked and felt.”

Daniella slowly claps. “When you get back out there, some guy is not going to know what hit him.”

I smile as I tuck the tissue paper—covered bra and panties into a bag and hand it to her. “A girl can dream. Thanks, Daniella. Go be the statistical goddess you are.”

“That’s the only kind I know how to be.”

After she leaves, Marley scurries over to the counter, beaming. “You sold the math bra. I thought for sure that was going to wind up in a pile of regrets.”

“Regrets are for haircuts and exes. Never underwear. Not if we can help it.”

She offers a hand to high-five. “You’re like the lingerie guru. Just like you were in your old blog.”

I high-five back as my chest twinges with a smidge of regret. Fine, regrets are *also* for shuttering blogs for the wrong

reasons.

But I'm on the other side of those wrong reasons, and the other side of heartbreak, hurt, and doubt.

And there's no time like the present to let the many months of lace work its restorative magic. Perhaps it's finally time to ask out that sweet guy in my favorite yoga class. The one who spreads out a mat for me every time. The guy who also does the best downward-facing dog, and I'm not just saying that because his butt has been carved by angels.

Though those are the best kind of rears to stare at in yoga.

When the bell rings on the pink door, I set aside my yoga-guy musings. A leggy brunette in skinny jeans and a half shirt strides inside, her trimmed abs on display. A honey blonde in a leopard-print skirt is next to her.

My internal radar beeps, and I size them up based on first impressions alone. *What would they like most from my store?* I just stocked the cutest black-and-white animal print that I bet the blonde will go gaga for, and I have new demi-cup bras that I suspect the half-shirter will dig.

"Happy Saturday. If you need any help with styles, sizing, or recommendations, just let me know."

"Thanks, babe," says the half-shirter.

I head to the counter, Marley by my side, and we set to folding the last of the most recent shipment of bustiers we recently added to our wares.

The blonde drags her finger along a shelf, considering the displays. "Oh. This is so fab," she says when she finds the black-and-white bra.

"It's *so* you, sweets. So totally you," her friend echoes. "You have to get it. Seriously, I command you. Now. Get it. Wear it. Be hella hot." She finishes her order with a snap of the fingers.

Marley nudges me, a gleeful grin on her young face.

I simply smile, hopeful for another sale.



“I’m doing it, I’m doing it!” the blonde says, her hand darting into the stack, hunting, I presume, for just her size.

But she freezes.

Flinches.

*Gasps.*

She calls her friend closer, points excitedly out the window, and whispers. “Babe. Oh my god, look! Do you see what I see?”

The half shirter squeezes her friend’s arm. “Your eyes. They’re like the best. The best of the best.”

“We are so there.”

In a split second, the blonde tugs the half-shirter out the door. The two *babes*, as they call each other, race off, the bell tinkling sadly behind them. I have a sinking feeling I know what caught their attention.

My gaze follows them.

The chain store behemoth a city block away sports a new sign in its window: *Half off Lingerie at Harriet’s Wardrobe.*

My shoulders slump. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

All these years of busting my butt to give customers beautiful underthings and personal service, and here’s the specter of the Lingerie Warehouse threatening to devour my little boutique like the blue-plate special.

That’s what I’m up against—a wasteland of bargain-basement polyester and panty lines.



# TRISTAN

It can only be a Monday.

Consider the evidence. An email from a pasta supplier to say he's running late with his gnocchi delivery. *By a week.* A note from my wine guy saying he's out of the chardonnay I ordered. Then a text from my dishwasher calling in sick—for his shift on Thursday.

Not anything I want to see when I check my phone after I get out of the shower. Definitely not all at once.

I need coffee. And I need it stat. After pulling on jeans and a Henley, I brew some French roast and sink into a chair at the kitchen table, fueling up to tackle the rest of today's inevitable flat tires.

"Good morning." My brother, Barrett, strolls out of his room and grabs a box of cereal from the kitchen counter.

"What's so good about it?" I grumble.

He shakes some cereal into a bowl, pours some milk, then joins me, nodding at my coffee mug. "You should stop drinking that. It stunts your growth. We learned that in health class the other week."

"You're seventeen. I'm twenty-nine. I'm fully grown."

"But *what if?* What if new scientific research emerges proving our potential for growth doesn't end when we turn eighteen?"

I give him a stare and my best *I can't even with your sass this morning* face. "That. Won't. Happen."

"It could though. Science expands the boundaries of knowledge every day. Heck, you can clone a dog now. What if we can grow into our thirties?" He shoves a spoonful of cereal into his mouth and crunches hard.

"I'm six feet tall. So are you. We're good to go in the height department."

He shrugs. "If you say so, but I won't stop hunting for new discoveries."

*Ah, youth.* "My brother, the painter-slash-scientist."

"I'm a Renaissance man. A regular Leonardo." Barrett digs again into his bowl, going from crunching to slurping so loud he might be sucking each Cheerio up with a straw.

I aim a withering glare over the rim of my coffee mug. "I'm pretty sure Leonardo was not a savage at the breakfast table."

He slurps more. "But are you certain?"

"I'm positive. Also, there are these things called manners. You've heard of them?"

The corner of his lip twitches. "Hmm. *Manners*. Sounds vaguely familiar."

"Here's a refresher, then: don't slurp cereal."

He narrows his eyes, making a show of analyzing my wisdom. "But is soup okay? What about ice cream? Is it okay if I slurp ice cream?"

"I see you took an extra dose of sarcasm this morning. Is this because I told you to shut it down and stop watching *Doctor Who* at midnight?"

He scoffs. "Doctor Who is so last year. It was *Stranger Things*, and I watched it with Rachel." A small smile flits across his lips but disappears so quickly I could have imagined it.

Except I don't think I did.

And it's more evidence that my brother has it bad for his best friend, and has for some time. But he's afraid to make the first move, so I've been hunting for gentle ways to nudge him.

But I'm not feeling so gentle this morning, so I stay on topic. "Point being, it was a school night, and you still have classes."

He answers my remark with another slurp.

Groaning, I drop my head in my hands. "Dear God, grant me the patience to handle this child raised by wolves."

"Maybe you're the wolf." He laughs, and then the seventeen-year-old little shit proceeds to throw back his head and howl at the top of his lungs. It lasts for a full thirty seconds and incites a frenzy of barking from the terriers who live down the hall.

"You should definitely consider a career in animal impressions. From the slurping to the howling, you've got a handle on the call of the wild."

His hazel eyes, the same shade as mine, twinkle with mischief. "Know what else I could make a living at?"

"What's that?"

He leans on the elbows he's parked on the table. "Getting your goat. Doesn't matter how much I dangle the bait—you still bite. React like I'm the most teenaged teenager ever put on earth. But no. I'm your wiseass brother, sent here to wind you up forevermore. And doing it most excellently." He lifts his spoon like a hoity-toity society dame and proceeds to finish his cereal ever so elegantly.

*Damn.* He got me again. I was sure he was a mannerless, cereal-slurping adolescent. I didn't consider he was being uncouth on purpose. And I do ride him hard on civility, since there's no one else around to tell him when he's oinking too much.

"Fine. You win," I concede.

He pumps a fist. "And it's not even seven."

He picks up his bowl and takes it to the sink, and I get a look at what he's wearing.

No effing way.

I hate to go all *kids today*, but I swear. Kids today. They dress like gym class will break out any moment and they have to be prepared. He might have won the slurping showdown, but I draw a hard line at gym shorts on a school day.

He heads to the bathroom down the hall and turns on the sink tap to brush his teeth. I follow him. "Do you have sports practice today?"

He shoots me a look like I'd said it in Martian. "I don't play sports."

"Oh." I furrow my brow in exaggerated confusion. "Then why are you wearing basketball shorts to school?"

His *duh* look is well-honed from practice. "Everyone wears basketball shorts. And I have a pair of jeans in my locker in case I get busted."

"That's my point. We don't need to tango with the law—not when you go to a freaking magnet school."

"But I look good in these shorts."

I lift a brow. "Are you sure?"

He recoils, jerking his head back. "Are you saying I don't?"

I shrug, scratch my jaw, adopt a casual stance. "I'm saying there are ladies who prefer a sharp-dressed man. One lady in particular."

He spits the rest of the Crest into the basin and snaps his gaze to me with keen but wary curiosity. "What do you mean?"

My brother lights up whenever Rachel is around. Hell, he sparks at the mention of her. But she won't wait for him forever.

I know what happens when you wait too long—the window of opportunity slams shut and you lose your chance. I

won't let him make the same mistakes I've made. Not if I can help it.

Ever so casually, I stroll out of the bathroom, trailing the bait a little. "Just that a certain someone might have remarked she likes a well-dressed man."

"Who?" He's on me like sticky tape.

I stare at the ceiling in the living room, tapping my chin as if thinking hard to recall. "Let me see. I believe it was the sweet and funny girl you had over last Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and so on. She and Peyton were talking about clothes, and she remarked how much she likes a dapper look."

"'Dapper'? She said 'dapper'?"

I nod. "She definitely said 'dapper.'"

He weighs this, then nods. "Sounds like her."

"And it can't hurt to impress the woman. Speaking of, how did it go when you asked her out the other night?" I ask, since he'd hinted that he had something to tell her—that he has feelings for her, I presume.

He huffs. "It takes time. It's like a painting. It's not something that's going to come together all at once."

I grab my coffee cup and take a fortifying drink before I turn more serious. "Look, Barrett. I'm not saying it's going to come together all at once with you and Rachel. And maybe it never will. Maybe her feelings aren't the same as yours. But let's be honest—you've had it bad for her for a while. Do you think you might want to ask your best friend to—oh, I don't know, call me crazy—go out with you before you graduate?"

He sighs, sliding a hand through his floppy brown hair. "Maybe you don't get it. It needs to feel right. When I tell her, it needs to be perfect. Know what I mean?"

The question gives a glimpse of the vulnerable underbelly that he rarely shows. I let down my guard to match.

"Yeah, I do. And I hear ya." Oh, hell, do I hear him. "I've been there. But I don't want you to wait too long and then

regret it. You could ask her to the upcoming dance. Worst case is you go as friends, and you're already friends."

He shoots me a look like I just opened his medicine cabinet without permission. "How did you know about the dance?"

I tap my chest. "Guardian here. It's my job to know what's going on."

"You read entirely too many school emails."

"Yes, I do. Such is the fate of a responsible adult. And since I read my emails, I learned of the tragic shortage of chaperones for the homecoming dance and volunteered."

He groans. "You're joking."

"I'll pretend I don't know you. Fair?"

"How does that constitute fair? I think fair would be more along the lines of me having the apartment to myself for a week."

I roll my eyes. "Anyway, wouldn't homecoming be a great opportunity to ask Rachel to go with you? And maybe you'd want to look a little more ... dapper."

Muttering under his breath, he stomps off to his bedroom. A minute later, he returns wearing jeans and a Henley. Just like me.

*Victory is mine.*

Standing, I scan his attire with an approving nod. "Well done. You look sharp, my man. Very sharp." I squeeze his shoulder, meeting his gaze. "Now, I know you like this woman. Think about finally asking her out. I don't want you to look back and wish you had."

Slipping away from my grip, he grabs his backpack from the floor, shouldering it. "If I ask her out, you'll stop bugging me about my clothes?"

"News flash: I'm always going to bug you about your clothes."



He smiles then brings me in for a hug. “I know. I appreciate it.”

In moments like this, I can handle the insanity of his now-I-like-you-now-you’re-the-worst-person-ever teenage ways. I hug him back and ruffle his hair. He grumbles about it because that’s what we do—rib each other and fake-grumble about it—and have ever since he was born, a whopping twelve years after me.

He heads for the door, then turns around, flashes me a grin, and says offhand, “And maybe you should finally ask out Peyton?”

I don’t say anything for a minute. Just hearing that name in that context makes my heart beat a little faster than it should.

“Why would you say that?” I ask carefully.

With a gleam of triumph, he points at me. “Why don’t *you* just admit you have it bad for her?”

Ah, but there are a million reasons why I don’t do that.

Or, really, one.

*I tried.*

It was too late.

And that was long ago.

That ship sailed, and I had to figure out how to move on. Mostly I do a good job on that front. Or so I thought.

I shake my head. “I don’t have it bad for Peyton.”

One eyebrow shoots all the way to his hairline. “Really? You sure about that?”

I heave a sigh. “Yes. I’m sure.”

“That’s not what you said one night many moons ago ...”

My brow creases. “What are you talking about?”

He taps his temple. “I remember lots of stuff. Including what you told Mom that time.”

I wince, a memory taunting me from wherever memories go when you'd like to delete them but can't. "I didn't say anything," I bluff.

"No? You didn't say, 'I've been dying to ask her out since college, and I think I'm finally going to do it'?"

"Doesn't ring a bell," I say stoically, willing my expression to give nothing away.

"Maybe you remember Mom answering." He does a spot-on imitation of our mother. "'Good. You've only wanted to since the night you kissed her during your sophomore year of college.'"

He'd heard that entire conversation? Remembered something I've spent the better part of a decade trying to forget?

Not so much the conversation with Mom, but the kiss that prompted it. Stuffing it into a mental trunk, locking it, and then throwing away the key.

Barrett opens the door and leaves. But two seconds later, he pops back in. "How about this? If you ask her out, I'll tell Rachel how I feel. Deal?"

I know better than to make deals with the devil, aka little brothers, and say nothing.

He waits, tapping his toe.

I raise an "I've got all day and you don't" brow.

"Think about it," he says, not giving up. "You just said you don't want me to have regrets. Because regrets suck rat tails, right?"

Then he's off, down the hall to the stairwell, and I give the empty doorway the answer to his question about regrets.

"Hell, yes. They abso-fucking-lutely do."



# PEYTON

Forty-eight hours, and freaking Harriet's is still running its obnoxious sale.

That's why Monday is not the day for me to follow my yoga instructor's advice.

*Let go of your worries*, Nadia encourages us during our sun salutations in an early evening class after work. I'm sure there's a time for that, but it is not now.

Nor is it the day to finally ask the sweetie-pie guy in class to join me for coffee.

Because, well, he's not here.

And I suppose it's for the best. If I tried to ask him out today, I'd likely botch it. Again. On my first try a few months ago, I was so tongue-tied that he thought I was on Molly.

After class, I sling my yoga mat over my shoulder and say goodbye. "Thanks for a great class, Nadia."

"Thank you for coming. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"That's the plan." I head to change and pop the mat into my locker before I head uptown in the fading twilight of an early fall night.

My Mary Janes slap the sidewalk of Lexington Avenue, and I stretch my neck, wishing the class had Zen-ified my thoughts. But I'm still thoroughly un-Zen, thanks to Harriet's horrific sale.

There are only two people I can turn to at times like this.

First, Amy.

My friend answers immediately when I call her. “I’m about to run into a meeting,” she tells me, “but are we still on for late-night lattes?”

“I’m always up for caffeine. But when did you start having meetings at six thirty at night?”

“I had a brainstorm this afternoon about the next book we’re launching, and I want to run my crazy idea past my boss. If she likes it, I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“I love your brainstorms and your crazy ideas. See you later.”

I end the call, turn the corner, and head straight for the other person on my shortlist.

Tristan.

My best guy friend ever.

\* \* \*

I cock back my arm, and with narrowed eyes, I take aim, imagining Harriet’s Wardrobe. I picture cloying pink polyester satin, pajama tops dropping silver glitter like dandruff, and cheap ruffled panties that shred on the second wash.

“Porcupine,” I curse, grabbing something that Mimi would pull from her handbag of *acceptable* swears.

Then I fling the beanbag at the board.

It misses the hole, skidding past to hit the concrete floor with a splat.

Someone clears their throat, which I can hear because the bar/restaurant is closed on Mondays. A masculine voice rumbles across the game room. “A little less firepower is more sometimes when it comes to cornhole.”

“Thanks. Let me see if I can dial myself down.”

“It’ll be tough,” Tristan warns soberly. “Lawn games are played by many but mastered by few.”

“Why can’t you have ax-throwing here? It would be so cathartic.” I can’t picture that trendy sport in his eatery, but teasing him is always rewarding. His verbal sparring is on point, one of the many reasons he always resets my mood.

He drags a hand across his scruffy square jaw. “Call me crazy, but I feel like ax throwing mixed with liquor is a recipe for, oh, I dunno, severed limbs and lawsuits?”

“That’d be a no, then?”

His hazel eyes narrow as he puts on a no-nonsense, stern face. “Beanbags are as deadly as you get with me. Take it or leave it.” He scoops up a handful, dropping them onto the floor next to me.

Grabbing one, I catapult it and watch as the beanbag careens past the sweet spot. I stomp. “Who made this game so hard? Axes. I want axes.”

He laughs at my plight. “If you’re having a hard time with beanbags, what makes you think a deadly blade would be better?”

“Maybe I was a lumberjack in a past life.” I finger the hem of my short skirt. “After all, I’m wearing plaid.”

With an arched brow, he eyes me up and down, taking in my red V-neck top, my black-and-gray plaid skirt, and my patent leather Mary Janes. I’ve never met a day of the week that wasn’t improved by a skirt.

“A princess lumberjack maybe,” he says with a wry grin.

“Great! So you’ll have ax throwing installed in time for my birthday, then? Because cornhole is killing me.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Cornhole is easy, Peyton. I swear.”

I bat my lashes. “Show me, pretty please.”

“You want me to show you how to play the game hipsters can do drunk? You, the badminton champion?”

“Different sport. Also, I’ve never played before. I’m a cornhole virgin.”

“All that time with underthings has really honed your innuendo game.” He walks behind me, scoops a beanbag from the pile, and drops it in my palm. I raise my hand to lob it at the sloped board.

“That’s your first issue,” he says, stopping me before I let loose. “You need to do it underhand.”

“Ah!” I knew there must be a trick to it.

“To put it in badminton terms, you’re *not* trying to smack the birdie over the net.” He covers my hand with his. “You’re gently batting it.”

He’s closer than I’m used to, and for a flash of a second, it registers that Tristan smells good.

Like pine and soap.

Like the opposite of my ex.

But I push away all those highly distracting thoughts and chant, “Nice and easy.” Trying not to inhale another hit of his yummy scent, I gently toss the bag across the board.

It slides into the hole.

“Woo-hoo!” I spin around, thrusting my arms in the air. “Victory! I feel better already.” I drop my arms, thinking about the awful last two days. “As soon as that Harriet’s sign went up on Saturday, my traffic slowed to a trickle. Today too.” A fresh wave of frustration wells up as I picture that stupid banner. “*Half off*. It’s a slap in the face to the brand image I’ve tried to build.”

“I know, and we’ll figure out a plan. For now, I have something that’ll cheer you up more than chucking beanbags.”

I rub my palms together. “Is it the owner’s special?”

“It is indeed. Close your eyes.”

I hum in excitement. This is one of my favorite parts of my visits—when he makes a drink just for me. Each time it’s different. Some days call for liquor; others require only soda

or tea. Nearly all are delish, and on the mark, because the man has a gift.

I shut my eyes as his hands drop onto my shoulders. He spins me around, guiding me from the game room to the bar.

“Sit,” he says, but I’m not entirely sure where I am. I know the general layout of his restaurant, but I’m blind right now, and don’t want to fall on my face.

Story of my life—I don’t want to trip, and yet I still do.

Like when I stumbled on my cork-heeled wedges during my eighth-grade graduation.

Or that time I went to my first job interview with my zipper down.

Or, say, the night I tried to treat my fiancé to a sexy surprise.

Even though I’m a lace or bust girl, I donned a satin corset and thong, ready to give Gage what he wanted. He longed for the showgirl look, and I longed to keep him happy, especially since he’d been working so hard, on so many late nights. Time to surprise him with his fantasy, I’d reasoned, and slipped on a trench coat, let myself in at his place, dropped my coat, and struck a pose.

And discovered his executive assistant in a pose too.

Reverse cowgirl, to be precise.

And she looked better in a bustier than I did.

All those late nights working, he’d been cheating on me with her. I bite back the shame that crawls up my throat at the memory.

That was nearly nine months ago. Now I’ve sold the ring, licked my wounds, and taken up yoga to make peace with my inner jilted woman.

But all things being equal, I’d rather not land on my ass again.

“What if I fall?” I ask Tristan.



“I’ve got you.” He helps me onto the barstool, his calm voice reassuring. “Just sit.”

He moves away, then there’s the slide of glass across the wooden counter. My nose twitches happily at the scent of sugar.

“Open your eyes.”

I do, and I gasp at the frilly pink drink in front of me, complete with sugar on the rim of the martini glass and raspberries swirling across the top.

“Aww. You made me a girlie drink. And you hate sweets. You must love me, and this drink is proof.” Tristan has so much Eeyore in him, and I’m all Tigger. I love poking at that seriousness, and he loves to pretend to be annoyed at my exaggerated shows of affection.

He narrows his eyes and growls. “If you tell a soul I made this drink, I will deny it until the end of my days. And this doesn’t change my stance on sweets.”

I raise a hand as if swearing an oath. “Harriet’s Wardrobe can stick it in their cornhole. And I will keep your secret if your drink is as delicious in my mouth as I suspect it will be.”

He shoots me a *did you really just go there* look. “Do you even hear the things you say?”

I blink. “What was inappropriate? The cornhole bit or your drink being delicious?”

“The way-my-drink-tastes-in-your-mouth part.” He holds up his thumb and forefinger together, showing a sliver of space. “Just a little naughty.”

“Oops. Forgive me.” I wink, then take a drink. My taste buds sing a chorus of heavenly aahs, and I shimmy in my seat. “Who knew you could make such a fabulous sugary drink?”

“No one, and that’s how it’ll stay.”

“Wait. All kidding about sweets aside—you’re really not going to put this on the menu? This is a perfect cocktail.”

He waves like it's no big deal. "Nah, the menu is good as is. The owner's special is just for you."

*Just for me.*

Those words make my heart glow a little bit.

I down another delicious sip. "Then I am a lucky girl. Because I love the owner's specials. Each one has been amazing."

He raises a skeptical brow. "How is that possible? They can't all be amazing."

"Don't rain on your praise parade. Your drinks make me happy; therefore, they're amazing." I drop my pitch to near his masculine tone. "*Thanks, Peyton. You're the best for saying that. I accept your heartfelt compliments.*"

A wry smile tilts his lips as he organizes glasses behind the bar. "Thanks," he says crisply, ready to move on. He's never cared for flowery praise. No surprise—he didn't grow up with *everything you do is awesome* parents like I did.

"You're such an Oscar," I tease.

"And you're such a ..." He takes his time before he says in an offhand way, "*Pudding.*"

I nearly spit out the drink. Speaking of my parents, I scowl at him, wagging my finger. "You're not allowed to call me *Pudding*. Only two people can call me *Pudding*, and neither of them is you."

His brow knits in mock confusion. "No? How about *Dumpling?*"

"You're evil."

"And grouchy? I'm evil and grouchy, right?"

"And you love to make fun of me."

"Can I help it that I have so much to choose from in the childhood nickname department?"

I glare at him. "Just because you know all my family's embarrassing pet names for me doesn't mean you can use

them as ammunition.”

He shrugs, reaching for a rag and wiping down the counter. “Why do you assume I’m using it against you?”

“*Pudding* is not a compliment.”

His hazel eyes—the color of honey—have a *give Peyton a hard time* twinkle. “Maybe I like pudding. Maybe I like dumplings.”

A blush sweeps heat across my cheeks, then down my neck over the rest of me. That’s strange. Why would Tristan’s remark set off a flash of heat on my skin and a fluttering in my belly? A warm and affectionate glow I understand. A hot wave I don’t.

I ignore the tingly sensation and reiterate my point. “You can’t call me *Pudding* or *Dumpling* or any of my dad’s other silly little nicknames for me.”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll behave ...” He adopts an innocent look, which must pain him, then hits me with *Pie*.

I lunge for him, pretending I’m going to throttle him. “You *especially* can’t *ever* call me that.” It’s the worst of all the hated nicknames.

He darts away but puts on his best contrite face. “Forgive me for calling you *Pie*, Peyton Marie Valencia.”

I lean my elbows on the bar and pretend to sulk. “Now you sound like my mother when she’s mad at me.”

“Yes, but are you distracted from your problems?” he asks with a laugh.

It takes me a moment to realize what he means, and my frown clears. “You did all that to lift my mood?”

“It worked, didn’t it? You’re not radiating hate fumes like when you stormed in here a half-hour ago. Am I right?”

“Oh, *you*.” I tsk, and I smile. “Look at you. Doing that thing where you needle me out of a bad mood.”

He blows on his fingers. “When you’re good, you’re good.” He shifts gears to serious though. “But let’s tackle the

work situation. You're mad at Harriet's Wardrobe for undercutting you. You took it out on the cornhole board, which I approve of as a means of catharsis, even though you're literally the worst cornholer I've ever seen. Now we need to deal with the reality. Your competition isn't going away, so what are we going to do about Harriet's?"

He puts it so bluntly that my chest pinches, my heart giving an anxious pulse. I've only begun to turn the corner on You Look Pretty Today, and it wasn't easy. I did it with elbow grease, love, and an extra ten grand in new stock—ten grand that came from selling Gage's engagement ring.

Most of the time, I feel like I know what I'm doing when I run the store. But some days, I'm wearing my heart outside my body from the sheer Herculean tasks of the last few years: moving Grandma's lingerie shop from Queens to a new location in Manhattan, slinging it into the twenty-first century, and carrying on her legacy.

Yes, it's a legacy of panties, but it's one the Valencia women love. My grandmother believed in female empowerment before it was cool, and hell if I'm going to break that chain.

Sometimes womanly strength comes from underthings. I want women to feel beautiful, to be their best selves, to ask for what they want in work, in love, in life.

*And in bed.*

I use underwear to deliver that message to the world.

Lately, though, the task has been tougher, as Harriet's has slowly encroached upon my customer base. But the half-off sign is the last straw.

I could learn from Tristan.

I survey the familiar restaurant, admiring his establishment even after-hours. Tristan has run this place for a number of years, and it's wildly successful. He rolls with the changes too. Operating as a wine and tapas bar at first, he expanded to a full bar recently, and the switch has ramped up sales. Plus, his place is a true neighborhood eatery, enjoying great word-of-

mouth and fantastic reviews. He's a whiz at social media, with his fifteen-second time-lapse videos of food prep proving quite a hit on Instagram.

I take another drink and gather my thoughts. "I need to do something to stand out. That's the key." I lower my voice to a confessional tone. "Because these last few months since Harriet's moved in, I feel like Meg Ryan when Fox Books came to town." I frown at the image of the character's shuttered book shop in *You've Got Mail*.

Tristan leans onto his hands on the counter and levels me with a stare. He's not an *everything is going to be okay* kind of guy, so I steel myself.

"This is 2020," he says. "The world isn't so enamored by big box stores anymore. And local business isn't all about discounts. You already have to compete with Amazon and online shopping, so when you're running a brick-and-mortar store, you can't focus on the same things that Harriet's and other big box stores do."

I draw a deep, fueling breath, nodding. "You're right. I need to remember it's about connections. It's about the customers."

"And it's about what you as a business owner can offer that's special, that the others can't. That's how you need to face the competition."

"I need to do something that stands out. Like what you do with your videos."

He gives me a wry leer. "You could post fifteen seconds of you trying on lingerie."

I grab my napkin, ball it up, and toss it at him. "Smart-ass."

"Kidding, kidding. But seriously, you already have a successful social presence for the store. You're always posting photos of the latest merch, of bras and teddies draped over that chaise lounge." My heart skips down a garden path at finding out he actually pays attention to my social posts. It's kind of endearing to think about him logging into Instagram and

scrolling across a photo I snapped of a black lace bra draped on a pink cushion.

“Why not build off that?” he asks. “Or how about doing more on *The Lingerie Devotee*?” He pauses, tilting his head like he’s just realized the blog went the way of the dodo. “You only share photos there now. Why did you stop writing posts?”

I sigh with a pang of regret that’s chased by a full measure of annoyance. I study my toes while I think, then I meet his eyes, bracing myself to admit a truth I’m not proud of. “Because of Gage.”

He frowns like my answer doesn’t compute. “Seriously?”

I take another fueling sip of the pink concoction, owning my mistake, even if it made sense to me at the time. “Yes. At first, he thought it was fun. His girlfriend wrote about intimate undergarments, and all that. But when it started to take off, he was worried that my blog was too risqué for his conservative Wall Street world.”

My stomach churns with remembered embarrassment. On *The Lingerie Devotee*, I used to weave in tales of how the different items made me feel when I wore them out to dinner or even to the movies. That was too much for him. “Babe, I need you to cool the personal deets for a bit,” Gage had said. “When we go to John Fitzgerald’s home in Connecticut for dinner or to the Wentworths’ fundraising gala, I don’t want the partners looking at you and thinking about how you fill out a sheer nightie. That’s for me and only me to know. Can we keep it that way?”

Taking a sabbatical felt like one small thing I could do for him. I stopped writing and restricted myself to only posting pics of lingerie.

But since he’s no longer in the picture, perhaps I can bring the blog back for me.

“I do miss writing it,” I say, running my finger along the rim of the glass.

“Perform a resurrection, then. You don’t need to worry about what *he* has to say anymore.”

Rekindling the blog sounds like it'd be good for me, and potentially great for business. "True. And this is something I can do that Harriet's can't."

"Let me know if I can help in any way."

"I will. I promise you'll be the first one I call on when the zipper from my bustier gets stuck on a tablecloth as I try on new items."

An eyebrow lifts in question. "How did we get from the bustier to the table?"

I laugh, shrugging. "One of life's many mysteries. Also, you're a genius."

I pop up from the stool, race around the counter, and throw my arms around him. He flinches for the barest of seconds, then wraps his arms around me, inhaling.

Let the record reflect that no one hugs better than this guy. His hugs are warm and comforting, maybe because he's tall and broad, or maybe because he seems to put all of himself into the embrace.

When we separate, I sigh happily. "Have I told you how much I missed this when I was with him?"

"Missed what?" His voice is a little rough.

"You. Me. Hanging out like this. I wasn't able to see you as much as I liked then." I'm acknowledging aloud a truth we're both aware of—we didn't pal around as much when I was engaged.

"He didn't like you hanging with me." It's a statement, not a question, but I answer it anyway.

"He never said as much, but whenever I was going to see you, he'd come up with something for us to do. In some ways, I can understand. It's hard to accept that a man and woman can be such great friends. But you and I are, and I would be devastated if we weren't, Tristan." I haul him in for one more hug.

This man has been in my life since I started college, and we've seen each other through ups and downs over the years

—the loss of his father then his mother, the loss of my grandma. We were meant to be friends, and we've only ever been friends.

That is, except for the night before winter break during our sophomore year of college, when he planted the most intense kiss I'd ever had on my lips. A kiss that made my toes curl, made my knees weak. One that haunted my late-night fantasies every single night over the holidays.

But then his father passed away during the break, and when he returned to school, he was understandably devastated. I'd sensed he needed my friendship more than a budding romance, and I offered that—my shoulder, my support. We reverted to the way we'd been before and never spoke of the kiss again.

Now, as we separate, the door swings open. Barrett takes his key from the lock, looks at Tristan, then at me, then back at his brother.

Barrett's grin spreads wider than the Hudson River. "I see you took my advice."





# TRISTAN

I want to throttle him.

And to think I was simply hoping the little punk would follow his heart's desire and go after the girl.

This is my thanks? No way do I want Peyton knowing she was the subject of a dare to ask her out.

But Peyton can't resist the gumdrop. She perks up, her gaze sliding back and forth between Barrett and me. "Advice? What sort of advice?"

Time to improvise. I can't give my brother a chance to serve up a single tantalizing detail, not about this morning and not about what he overheard years ago. What I'd said then had been true, but I'm not that guy anymore.

I refuse to be the guy pining for someone he can't have. I am most definitely not the type of sad sack who harbors feelings for a woman for a decade.

"He said I should ask you to homecoming," I blurt, falling on the conversational grenade. "That was his advice." Good thing I read those school emails. Good thing I signed up to be a chaperone. "His school has a homecoming dance in a couple of weeks. I offered to chaperone, ergo ..."

Peyton's eyes glitter with excitement. No surprise. She's outgoing and friendly, vibrant and popular, and has always loved *events*. "Homecoming! Gah! Next thing I know you're going to tell me they're playing badminton there, too, and we all have to wear fancy costumes."

Barrett chuckles. “Sorry, Pey. We won’t have your favorite sport at the dance. But it’s still going to be hella fun when you come. Isn’t it, Tris?” My little brother targets me with a satisfied smirk.

“It’s going to be rad,” I say, piling it on.

“Absolutely,” Peyton chimes in. “And seriously, Barrett—that’s so sweet that you told Tristan to invite me.”

My brother pastes on a devilishly delightful grin. “I am definitely a sweetheart.”

Sweetheart, my ass. “If by sweetheart, you mean he said it’d embarrass him if I went alone, then yes, you can call him a sweetheart for saying I’d bring you to stave off the embarrassment of me.”

*There.* Cover-up achieved.

“Whatever the reason, I’m happy to go.” She turns her attention to me, wagging a finger. “And you’re in big trouble for failing to mention this sooner. You know I love dances.”

It’s like she’s stabbing me in the heart.

Of course I know she loves dances. The night I kissed her was at a dance party in December. A retro eighties shindig where she rocked out to The Human League and A-ha. Nearly every time a new tune began, she’d shout, “I love this song!” Except every now and then, she’d whisper it. Right in my ear. Making my skin sizzle. Making me nearly lose my mind with longing.

When her favorite Cyndi Lauper song began, her voice turned softer, almost crooning as she’d said, “I always wanted to kiss to ‘Time After Time.’”

She’d had a few drinks. Same for me. With liquid courage, I’d said, “So do it.”

“Yeah?”

I’d nodded, buoyed by desire and tequila. “Yeah.”

She’d inched closer, I’d slid a hand around her waist, and we’d kissed like it was the entire purpose of the dance, of the

night, of the entire year.

I'd never wanted to kiss someone so badly. Not before, and not since.

She'd melted against me, sighing and murmuring in my arms.

Now, in the restaurant with Barrett, I shove the memory away, clear my throat, and lean a hip against the bar, presenting my most casual front. "Actually, I forgot how much you like dances. And homecoming nearly slipped my mind, so thanks for reminding me to ask her, Barrett."

"You're so welcome." As he strides to the bar, the look on my brother's face is priceless. It says *You are full of shit, and I love it.*

Meanwhile, Peyton's expression zooms into further delight. "I loved homecoming when I was in high school."

As Barrett plops himself onto a stool, he turns to her. "I bet you were homecoming princess. Did you have a tiara and everything?"

"I was *not* homecoming princess. I was the arty girl playing around with fashion design. I was the girl who made her own dresses. Including my homecoming dress."

"No way," Barrett says, his eyes lighting up.

She straightens her shoulders. "And the yearbook committee named me 'Most Likely to Costume Period Dramas in Hollywood.'" Her expression is pure deadpan. "It was not a compliment."

"What kind of dress did you make for homecoming?" he asks.

She runs her hands over her plaid skirt, as if recalling. "It was a Marie Antoinette style, if you must know."

I stifle a laugh.

"What? I liked frilly things."

"And you still do," I point out.

“It was baroque with poufed sleeves and lace. So much lace. The skirt was so big I could have hidden a small family under it.”

Barrett raises a hand. “Peyton, any chance you can still wear that to the dance?”

“Will you be needing to stow away small families under my dress?” she asks.

Barrett laughs, and it’s such an honest sound that it surprises me. So much of our conversations straddle the line between brothers who love each other and a parent figure who has to look out for a kid. With Peyton, he lets down his I-love-you-I-hate-you armor. “Sounds awesome,” he says.

I point at her. “She’s going to wear a costume, and you’re worried *I’ll* embarrass you?”

He hums, tapping his chin. “Sounds about right. Besides, Peyton’s cool. Unlike some people I know.” He cough-laughes, then smiles at Peyton, lingering, and a warning light flickers.

Does my little brother have a crush on Peyton?

Is that why he hasn’t asked out Rachel? Because he’s harboring a crush on an older, unattainable woman?

I groan privately. That would be foolish, but it’s entirely possible.

Peyton is ... well, she’s Peyton.

If I were seventeen, she’d be precisely who I’d long for.

She’s generous, gorgeous, and one of the kindest people ever.

Her big heart was obvious before, and especially after, we kissed. The next day, school let out for winter break, and I went home to Colorado and helped with my sick dad. I’d planned on asking Peyton out when I returned to school, but the day before I left to go back, my father took his last breath. I didn’t go back to school right away, and once I did, I wasn’t in a good frame of mind to ask out the most beautiful woman I’d ever met.

Besides, we came from different worlds. She was high class and prep school, with a mother who ran an art gallery and a father who shaped young minds as a professor. My dad had been a construction worker, my mother a bank teller. I was the scholarship kid, and there were plenty of guys in our dorm who had no problem dropping subtle hints that Upper East Side Peyton would only want someone from her fancy neighborhood, not the guy on financial aid who worked in the school cafeteria.

Soon enough, she met Gage from Greenwich, Connecticut, and she dated him that spring. When he graduated, he went to work at a bank in London and told her he'd look her up again when he returned to New York.

A few years later, he did. They rekindled and the rest is history.

Now he's out of the picture again, but it doesn't matter because we're friends—*great friends*—and you don't throw that away on a Hail Mary shot at romance.

Plus, Barrett is my priority. I'm busy finishing the task my parents started—raising him to be a good man.

I return to the topic. “So, the first rule of homecoming is Peyton wears a dress big enough for stowaways and I don't embarrass you. Anything else?”

Barrett drums his fingers on the bar. “That about covers it.”

“Count me in. In case I haven't made that clear already.” Peyton pushes back from the stool, grabs her purse, and checks the time on her phone. “I need to go meet Amy and Lola, but the night is young.” She flashes me that killer smile then points her fingers at me like a gunslinger—*pow pow pow*. “And thanks to you, I will be blogging tonight. *The Lingerie Devotee* is back.”

I mime an epic explosion of awesome with my hands. “*Boom*. The resurrection is upon us.”

Barrett even chimes in with an imitation of a heavenly choir of angels. At least, I think that's what his long, sustained

*Ahhhhhhh* is supposed to mean.

With a flourish, she waves goodbye, heading out into the New York night. I watch her till the door clangs shut.

“Do you think she knows?” His voice is soft, the question earnest.

“Knows what?”

Barrett’s eyes lock with mine. “That it was all a cover-up? That you wanted to ask her on a date for real?”

But that’s where he’s wrong.

Once upon a time, I did.

Maybe I even planned to try again a few years ago. Perhaps I’d even prepped to walk up to her door with a bouquet of flowers, to swallow down all the nerves in the world, and to ask her to dinner at last. But before I could, Gage returned from London and captured her heart again.

I was oh-for-two, and every baseball fan knows you don’t swing on that kind of count.

“That was the past, man,” I tell him. “Let it go. I have.”

Barrett nods decisively. “That’s why you didn’t ask her out tonight? Because you let it go?”

“I asked her to the homecoming dance. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“No. I thought you were going to ask her for real. I legit thought you had asked her out. That’s why I said ‘You took my advice’ when I saw you hugging her. But instead, you made up the whole lame excuse about asking her to be a co-chaperone. You’re always telling me to go for it with Rachel, but then with Peyton, you make it seem like it’s this thing you *have* to do, like with homecoming. Why?”

“*Because.*” I draw a deep breath, searching for words. “Because whatever happened in the past, whatever I said to Mom once upon a time, is the past. Peyton and I had a moment, and the moment is over. We are great friends, and she doesn’t need to know we were talking about her this morning,

okay? That's why I said what I did about homecoming. I don't want her thinking she was the subject of a dare." I drag a hand through my hair, my jaw ticking. "Know what I mean?"

He's quiet for a beat, mulling this over. "Fair enough. I get you." He shoots me a crooked grin. "I mean, I get you by maybe, like, ten percent."

I reach across the bar and tousle his hair. "I'll take ten percent. Anyway, you hungry?"

He pats his stomach. "Always. We were working on sets all night. I'm starving. And since you're the best brother in the world, I was hoping you'd be willing to make me some chicken kebabs."

I smile, because cooking is easy. Whipping up a meal is a walk in the park compared to sorting out the twists and turns my heart undergoes when I think about missed chances with Peyton.

As I cook, he tells me about his day. This is my favorite part of the night—when Barrett relaxes and lets me into his world, a world I never expected to know so intimately.

After we eat, I lock up and we head home.

\* \* \*

Around midnight, I brush my teeth and plug in my phone.

It's dying, down to only 5 percent, but a message blinks at me.

**Peyton:** Thanks for the nudge! I saw Amy and Lola, and when I returned home I wrote my first post. Here it is.

When I read the blog, I like it more than I should.





# PEYTON

Amy is buzzing.

She's practically bouncing off the coffee shop walls when I spot her at a table at Doctor Insomnia's after leaving Tristan's.

She launches herself at me as soon as I'm through the door, and our friend Lola, who's joining us, shoots me an apologetic look. "I tried to put a leash on her, but some animals can't be controlled."

"Peyton!" Amy clasps her hands on my shoulders. "I. Have. To. Tell. You. Something."

"You don't say," I say dryly. "Let me guess—you want us to try goat yoga with you? Because you don't need to command an audience with me to get me to say yes to that. I'm there."

Amy's green eyes dance with delight. "Goat yoga! Yes. Sign us up now. Like right now. But this is better."

Lola clears her throat, narrowing her pretty brown eyes. "But is it better than the Cirque du Soleil class we took a few months ago?"

"Ah, memories." I shudder, as if they were of anything other than the torture Amy exacted on us. I take a seat on the couch, and they follow. "Remember how we all hung upside down in huge swaths of fabric and looked as gorgeous and talented as aerial artists?"

Amy's brow knits with confusion. "Wait. You didn't like the cirque class?"

I shoot her a *you can't be serious* look. "We were terrible. We were like a pack of octopuses on Xanax, climbing curtains."

"But the point was to be terrible. It was cathartic to move like Ursula. We were getting Gage out of your system, and it worked," she says, bopping her shoulders. "He's gone. He's so far out of your system he's practically living on Neptune."

"Amy," I chide. "Don't you know? He resides on Uranus."

She cringes. "Eww. That word is wrong. In my revision of the dictionary, I will abolish Uranus."

Lola cuts in, fanning her forehead. "Please stop saying *Uranus*. It makes me want to pucker my lips, and I suddenly feel moist, so moist all over."

Amy and I crack up, pointing at Lola.

"You win, girl," I say. "Best use of the worst words ever."

Amy mimes removing her tiara. "The crown goes to the esteemed Lola DuMont tonight." She turns to me, handing me a latte she must have ordered for me, then taking a drink of her own. "And I might have another crown for you if you say yes to something."

"Tell me more," I say, rubbing my palms. "What have the two publishing Bobbsey Twins cooked up?"

With her dark hair, carved cheekbones, and chocolate eyes, Lola looks nothing like Amy's cutie-pie next door, but I like to call them twins when they're cooking up schemes. "Are you two starting a new line of lingerie guides and you want me to craft them?" I flutter my fingers against my chest like a delighted starlet, all gracious and surprised. "Because the answer is yes, yes, and more yes."

Amy's eyebrows rise. "Actually, that's not a bad idea." She grabs her phone and dictates a voice memo: "Consider lingerie guides. How the hell is a bra supposed to fit? How do you know what style of undies to buy? And do you have to wash each one by hand and hang them on the balcony to dry?"

“Um, hi. I know the answers to all of those,” I say, waving to offer my service.

“I know, but for now ...” She sets down her phone, takes a breath, and declares, “*Sex and Other Shiny Objects*.”

I look to Lola for an explanation. “I don’t have my Amy translator on. Care to tell me what that means?”

Lola flicks her corkscrew curls off her shoulder. “It’s a book she’s working on. I’ll be doing the cover. It’s a sexy romantic comedy.”

“One of my regular authors is writing it, and I had this crazy idea,” Amy adds.

“As you do.”

“As I do,” she echoes, then pauses for dramatic effect. “To include a companion guide with it. A *Don’t Try This at Home* pamphlet, so to speak.”

“Don’t try romance at home?”

She waves her hand. “No. Of course they should try romance at home. Try it in the office. Try it on the subway. Romance is awesome. But we thought it would be fun to include top tips on how—and how not—to pull off some of the scenes that unfold in romance novels. How to rip off a shirt, how to tear off lingerie, how to disrobe on the staircase without falling on your face. I mean, that is capital *H* hard. How are they all so agile?”

“And you need someone to do what exactly? To write this pamphlet?”

“Yes. Someone daring, willing to try new things. Someone who can make it funny, tell a story. What should you try at home? What shouldn’t you try at home?”

Amy’s always been wildly inventive, and I’m thrilled she has an outlet for her ideas. Thrilled, too, that she’s invited me into her professional world. “Or how about when the hero pulls off the heroine’s dress in a split second?” I snap my fingers. “Voilà. One quick move, when I’ve had to practically

can-opener myself out of some of my dresses. How is the hero just whisking it off her?”

“Yes! That’s what I want to explore. And all that panty ripping in books. There is so much of it. And in this one—*Sex and Other Shiny Objects*—the hero has a total thing for it. He’s obsessed with lingerie, and with taking it off her with his teeth. The heroine calls him the panty shredder.”

I clasp my hands to my cheeks, à la Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. “The horror, the horror.” I drop my palms. “I was telling a customer this weekend to abstain from that or else she’d be buying out my whole store.”

“And that’s where you come in,” Amy says, her smile brightening.

“You want to buy out my whole store?”

She laughs, shaking her head. “No, but I was thinking perhaps you sometimes have inventory you can’t use for whatever reason. Overstock, or maybe damaged goods? Please say yes. It’ll help my idea so much!”

“Sure. Of course.” Now I see where she’s headed with this. “You can definitely use it to test all that panty shredding.”

Amy breathes a huge sigh of relief. “Thank you. That helps immensely, because we’re on an insane time crunch.”

“Problem number one solved. Now we just have to find someone who’ll write it,” Lola says as she lifts a mug of what looks like chai tea.

“Why doesn’t your author write it?” I ask.

“She’s busy with the novel itself,” Amy says, sighing heavily. “We want someone else to do the companion book. I’ve scrolled through my list of writers for hire to try to find someone else who has just the right sense of fun and daring.”

*Someone else.*

Those two words hover in the air, swirl around me like smoke wafting through a crisp night. They smell like possibilities. Like turning a corner, like putting yourself out there.

Like standing out.

“You need a writer?” I muse.

“Like a buckle needs a belt,” Amy says, sounding urgent.

“Someone to test these ideas?” The wheels are turning, the mental locomotive chugging out of the station and gaining speed.

“Yes. I need to work on finding the right person lickety-split. Because—deadlines!”

“Someone who maybe has done something similar before,” I posit, the train speeding headlong down the track.

“Sure. If that’s possible,” Amy says, tilting her head like a curious pup. “Do you know anyone? I would do it, but my boss wants someone who hasn’t read the story yet to test the scenes with fresh eyes and hands.”

Maybe it’s crazy, but maybe it’s not. Perhaps this is exactly what I need to make my blog shine again. To help my store stand out as one of a kind. And, honestly, for me to put myself out there.

Pictures of bras and panties are only so fascinating. The readers seemed to relish the stories behind them, and I did too.

I raise my hand, wiggling my fingers. “I can try it.”

Lola nearly drops her cup of chai and blinks at me, her mouth opening soundlessly.

Amy’s face has gone stony, my chatty friend uncharacteristically quiet.

I sit back on the couch and savor having rendered two friends, who work in publishing no less, speechless.

A few seconds later, Amy recovers, speaking slowly. “You’d do it?”

“Does that surprise you?”

She nods vigorously. “Yes. A thousand times yes. You stopped doing the blog posts. I know it was because of Gage,

but since you haven't picked it up again, I thought you were done with that type of writing?"

"It surprises me too," I say, smiling. "But I'd like to do it."

Her smile stretches around the earth. "It never occurred to me you'd want to. But, oh my stars and garters, you'd be freaking perfect."

"I'm starting to post again tonight. I'm so excited to get back to it." I take a beat. "And I'm going to start dating again. Today I planned to ask out the hot, nice yoga guy. But he wasn't in class."

Amy pumps a fist. "Yes! You've been looking for a new intro with him. This will be perfect."

"Oh, hey, want to rip lingerie off me? I'll be wearing a tiny thong underneath, though, so no worries—you won't even see my lady parts. 'K? Thanks."

Lola's tone goes serious. "Truth though—that's kind of a perfect intro."

"Seriously?" I lift a skeptical brow.

"Why not? It says you're daring. It says you're fun. It's better than 'Want to go out for coffee?'" Lola says in the blandest tone ever.

"It's definitely a conversation starter, and an unconventional date," I say.

Amy's eyes shift from Lola to me. "You'll do it?"

"As long as I can blog about it too."

Amy thrusts her arms up in victory. "It's like you can read my mind. That's perfect. Blog to your heart's content. My boss literally just asked me to find a writer who'd be willing to talk it up in advance, drive interest before the book's release. In fact, the pamphlet can simply be a compilation of your blog posts, with a little tweaking or expanding. You teasing your work with some of these romance novel tropes in real life will actually help build buzz for the upcoming book. Win-win." She takes a breath. "But you're sure you don't mind testing out these scenarios?"

“As long as they don’t involve sex,” I say, then rattle off a list of sexy times tropes that I could test without getting in the buff.

Amy’s grin takes over her face. “This is perfect. Because honestly, we’re running behind and we need these, like, end of next week.”

I blink, swallowing down the deadline.

“That soon?” I ask, my pitch rising.

“Yeah, we’re a little behind. But we just want five common sexy tropes and to demystify them.”

That means I’ll need to get started tomorrow.

I nod, a dutiful soldier.

“And one more thing,” Amy adds.

I brace myself for an even closer deadline.

“Before you do the panty shredding, there’s a scenario that’s sticking out in my brain that I want you to try first.”

She tells me what she wants.

I say yes, praying yoga guy will be downward-facing dog in the morning.





# PEYTON

*The Lingerie Devotee Returns*

*Blog entry*

Hello, my pretties!

I am back!

Did you miss me? I missed you madly.

*Exquisitely.*

I simply won't let that kind of absence happen again, and that's why, in this installment of *The Lingerie Devotee 2.0*, I give you my solemn oath, sworn on lace, satin, and silk, that I will bring you tantalizing new tales of lingerie, and how it can make you feel.

A picture is worth a thousand words, but words matter too, so I'll be giving you my tales from the lingerie drawer.

For tonight, let me tell you about this lush little number I'm going to wear to bed. It's the kind of outfit that makes you want to turn on Sam Smith, pour yourself a glass of wine, and gaze at the lights of the city.

*Solo.*

Yes, I have the perfect ensemble if you're enjoying a table for one in bed, because let's be honest, sometimes you only want to bring yourself to the party. You slide into bed, wearing only a pretty little new pair of sleep shorts and a cami tank.

Then you let your fingers do the talking under the covers.

Oh, did I say that?

Yes, I did.

Own it, ladies.

We are owning our bodies and the lovelies we drape ourselves in.

Here's a collection of some of my favorite camis and boy shorts. I chose a pink tropical floral print pattern for its hint of the exotic and paired it with the boy shorts, because it's nice to feel sexy but comfortable too. Here's a pic, all laid out on my bed.

And this is only the start. I have a brand-new series planned for this blog, and it's going to be sexy and funny and clever.

I'm going to test-drive some fabulous scenarios, and I'll report back to you.

Tonight I'll be having sweet dreams indeed.

Stay tuned ...

Xoxo

*The Lingerie Devotee*

Find me at You Look Pretty Today on Madison Avenue



# PEYTON

My tree pose is a thing of legend.

I'm rocking it today, determined to win at yoga, at business, at blogging.

I woke up to five comments, all from prior followers welcoming me back. Go, me.

When the early morning class ends, I roll my mat, turn to the guy who looks like Michael B. Jordan from *Black Panther*, and launch into my best yoga wit. "I'm patting myself on the back today for staying awake during Savasana," I say.

*Whoa. That was smooth. Fun and chatty.*

"Good for you. Confession: I caught twenty winks during that pose," he says with a smile that lights his face.

"Yoga has many benefits, they say. Catching up on your Z's can be one."

His gaze drifts to the instructor, and he brings his finger to his lips. "Just don't tell Nadia. I'll be in big trouble for snoozing during the most important pose."

"I'll keep your secret."

"Under lock and key, please."

"But of course."

I am buoyed by his replies despite the flock of nervous bird wings that flutter through me. Because the next step is hard.

I've been with one guy for the last few years, and holy hell, trying again is nerve-wracking.

But I remember the yoga instructor's words. *Let go of the worries.*

"So, I have this project," I begin. "It's kind of like a work thing and kind of like a fun thing, but also, like, a cool thing."

His eyes are intense, focused on mine, and I bet this man is a therapist with that whole *I'm listening* vibe going on. "Color me intrigued," he says.

If he's curious, I must be doing this right. "And this is going to sound a little crazy, but I was wondering if you wanted to—"

"Hey, lovey buns."

I jerk my head in the direction of the smooth, sensual voice of ... my yoga instructor? Why is Nadia talking to me that way? Does she like my butt?

Michael B. Jordan swivels around, meeting her gaze. "One second, sweet ums. I'm just talking to the master practitioner of downward-facing dog."

The instructor beams at us both. "Oh, yes, Peyton is excellent at that pose." She presses her palms together and dips her head. "Namaste." Then to her man she says, "See you soon, and we'll grab some breakfast at the organic cafe?"

He blows her a kiss, and it's like the zipper at the job interview all over again.

He's freaking involved.

And I have egg on my face.

"See you in the next class," she says to me.

His warm eyes return to mine. "Now, you were saying you had a project? How can I help you?"

*How about inventing a time machine so we can erase the last two minutes?*

I giggle. And, like Daniella, I am not a giggler. But I need to think fast and yank myself up from this pratfall.

“I have this project to ...” I say, taking my time to regroup and connect some thoughts. What sort of project would I truly talk to him about? I go with the first thing that pops into my mind. “It’s a project to encourage couples to shop for lingerie together,” I blurt out.

An eyebrow lifts. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” I say, taking a breath because I can’t get enough air right now. “I have a shop on Madison Avenue. And I would love if you and Namaste came by.” *Oops*. That’s not her name. “You and Nadia, I mean. I thought you and Nadia might want to come into the shop. And it’s half off for you two. Just tell them you know the owner.”

His smile ignites. “Wow. Thank you. That is so kind. We will be there. We are all about exploring sensuality.”

“Awesome,” I say with a fist pump, praying my face is not the color of a tomato in July.

I give him a business card with the name and location of the shop, then press the gas pedal, hightailing it out of the scene of my latest dignity *kersplat*.

As the morning sun hits my face, I exhale a massive sigh of relief as I rifle through my bag for my phone and turn it on.

I’ll just tell Amy I spoke too soon. That I’m not the best woman for the job. That some more adventuresome gal will have to get the job done for her.

She’ll understand.

Of course she will.

As soon as the phone boots, I’ll send her a note.

But when my phone beeps on, the first thing I see is a text from Amy blinking at me.

**Amy:** You saved the day! My boss is so excited about the panty shredder!!!

“Porcupine. Cornhole. Fudgsicle,” I mutter, then gaze at the sky. “What would you do, Mimi?”

In between the chug of a bus and the squeal of a cab, I listen for her reply. *There is always a plan B. Just make sure your zipper is zipped and your blouse is buttoned.*

As I walk home, I cycle through options.

The delivery guy who drops off packages of silky goodies?

Asking my brother if he or his wife know someone? But they live in Seattle now, so I doubt they’ve kept up on New York single men.

Do I ask the apps?

Trouble is, I don’t know which poison I want to pick.

\* \* \*

Before I open the store, I weigh these choices, toying with Tinder and Match and even Boyfriend Material when I’m in the office paying bills.

But I can’t quite pull the trigger. Something feels off about asking for help testing romance novel tropes via an app.

These types of scenarios involve trust.

And there’s someone I trust completely.

How did I miss the obvious? He’s not plan B. He’s plan A, and I should have asked him from the beginning.

I open my texts.

**Peyton:** Remember that time last night when you said you’d help me with my blog?

**Tristan:** Why do I feel like you’re about to cash in on that right now?

**Peyton:** Because I am.



\* \* \*

My phone buzzes fifteen minutes later.

The text from Tristan says *Knock, knock*.

The store doesn't open for another hour, so I rush from the office, unlock the door, and let him in.

He smells like the fall breeze, and in his jeans and work boots, his pullover shirt hugging his chest, he looks like he's auditioning for a role on *Hardy Men from Alaska*.

He drags a hand through his dark hair. "Let me guess. This is when you tell me you want to do the lingerie videos."

I smack his shoulder, even though he's not far off. "No. But I'll call you when I do."

"I'm going to hold you to that." He surveys the store, his eyes widening as he takes in the sea of pretty goodies. He points to a red bra. "Maybe write about that one next? That gets my vote."

"You love red, don't you?"

"I'm like a bull."

I can't resist. I head to the rack, grab the red bra, and wave it like a matador.

He snorts and kicks his foot.

Laughing, I shake my head. "I swear, you must have driven Samantha insane with your lingerie obsession," I say as I hang the bra back on the rack.

He flinches. "Samantha?"

"Your last girlfriend? Pretty blonde. Ice-blue eyes. Dry sense of humor. Ring a bell? She was the workaholic attorney who drove you crazy because she expected you to be available at midnight to service her."

"Did I say that bothered me?" he asks wryly.

A plume of jealousy rises out of nowhere. What the hell is that about?

I turn around so he can't see my face. But that doesn't change this odd sensation like my shirt is too tight or my skirt is scratchy, when neither is the case at all. But his question leaves me out of sorts. Why the hell am I bothered that Tristan enjoyed sleeping with his ex-girlfriend? I squirm uncomfortably, needing to eject that idea from my brain before it takes hold.

I adjust a pale-pink bra, focusing solely on the here and now, sweeping away images of him with someone else.

"Glad you enjoyed it," I say with the reserve of a hostess at a fine restaurant.

"What I didn't enjoy was her expectation that I pay more attention to her than Barrett," he adds.

I spin away from the rack and look at him again. "Oh. I had no idea that she said that."

"She was oddly jealous of my little brother." He lifts his hands in a shrug.

I rein in the sliver of a grin, even though I'm more pleased than I have reason to be. "And I guess that's why she's the ex."

"Indeed it is." He parks his hands on his hips. "What's the blog idea? And how can I help? If it involves me lifting heavy boxes, you're going to owe me lunch, woman."

I smile—he's eased my nerves just by being himself. "No boxes. I promise." I grab his wrist and guide him through shelves of camisoles and undies, bustiers and stockings, marching him to the dressing room area, since it's a good place to chat.

"Fashion show?" He stretches out his neck before he parks himself on the pink chair in the corner.

"Not exactly. But ..." I take a deep breath, hoping this goes better than my attempt this morning. "I'm hoping *we* can test fashion."

One brow climbs in curiosity. “Explain. Because you should know, I’m not wearing any of that stuff.”

A laugh bursts from my throat. “I know. Of course. Definitely not. The testing would be on ...” I flutter my fingers toward myself.

He blinks, like something is stuck in his eye. “You? You want to test lingerie with me?”

“Sort of,” I say, my throat dry because this is much harder than I’d thought it would be. Gage’s betrayal did a number on me, and my trust in love, romance, and men is at an all-time low.

I repeat my mantras, though, since I’m trying to move into my future, whatever that entails.

*Put yourself out there.*

*Do the hard things.*

*Go for it.*

“Let me start at the beginning,” I say.

“That’d be helpful because I’m a little lost.”

I park myself on the ottoman, facing him, and I cross my legs. His eyes drift briefly to the black boots that I’ve paired with a short purple skirt.

“We will be testing various kinds of fashion. And their resilience under certain conditions.”

“*We?*”

I adopt my best sales-y smile. “Well, you know how my good friend Tristan said I should blog again?”

“Smart guy. Also, I read the blog last night. It was ... interesting.”

Wait till he finds out what I’m about to hit him with next. *Deep breath.* “And I need to take it a step further,” I say, pushing out the next words. “Amy needs someone to test out a few tropes from romance novels to go along with a book she’s publishing, and I volunteered as tribute.”

The look on his face is inscrutable. “What sort of things?” Each word comes out like it occupies its own latitude and longitude.

“I’m starting with lingerie stuff, and I was going to ask this guy at yoga class—”

“A guy at yoga class?” His tone could slice a statue.

“There’s this nice guy at yoga. He always puts out a mat for me. And you know how Amy and Lola have been telling me to put myself back out there and try again?”

Tristan nods crisply, his jaw set.

“I decided to try, and I started to ask him out, thinking maybe it would be just what I needed. Oops. Turns out he’s involved with the instructor, and I need someone I can practice ripping a shirt off of who’ll also rip off my panties.”

And that came out like a five-car pileup.

Tristan doesn’t break eye contact. He gazes at me, unflinching.

His hazel eyes are darker than I’ve seen them in a decade. They remind me of that one night. The night I can still recall with perfect clarity.

It was only a kiss. It lasted a mere twenty, maybe thirty seconds.

But every second is indelibly etched in my memory.

A shiver runs down my spine as I remember how he wrapped his hand around my waist. How he dipped his mouth to mine. How I felt his kiss radiate in my bones that whole night, and for weeks to come.

But if something more were going to happen, it would have happened already.

He scrubs a hand over his stubbled jaw, his words a command. “Don’t ask anyone else.”

“Why?” I ask, my voice breathier than I’d expected.

“Because I’ll do it.”



# TRISTAN

This fashion show raises an interesting question.

As I leave her store to head to my restaurant, I wonder, *Where does a guy buy a shirt he doesn't give a shit about ripping?*

Clothes are not my forte. Most of mine come from a one-minute search on Amazon, where I buy ten of the thing I like and wear them to tatters.

That makes this shirt quest a quandary.

But it's a quandary I'm glad to have because I don't want any other guy picking out a shirt for Peyton to rip off.

That's why I said I'd handle shirt procurement. Why I volunteered to go to her place tonight. Why I said yes to her request.

No, this isn't my big chance to win her heart. That's in the past.

But this project matters to her—for her store, for her blog, and for her reinvention.

And there's no way I want her to find some other guy to test-drive scenarios with. What if she found someone who didn't respect her? Who tried to take advantage of her?

I shudder at the thought as I return to work, heading for my small office in the back to review orders. Before I start, I send a quick message to my buddy Linc. He's a savvy cat, so I bet he'll know where to find the ideal item.

**Tristan:** Where do I get a shirt that I can use for ripping off?

**Linc:** Why, I thought you'd never ask.

**Tristan:** Yeah, same here.

**Linc:** Also, I'm going to assume you have a good reason why you want one, and assume I don't need or want to know. I would suggest a trip to Duane Reade. In fact, I'm on my way there right now.

**Tristan:** Duane Reade sells shirts?

**Linc:** Duane Reade sells everything.

**Tristan:** Including button-down shirts?

**Linc:** Yes. Have you ever tried going to a store rather than Amazoning everything?

**Tristan:** No.

**Linc:** Fine. I'll help you. Meet me there.

Fifteen minutes later, I find him waiting for me inside.

“Cue the music for the romantic-comedy shopping montage where the cool guy helps the dorky dude buy a shirt.”

I scoff. “I'm the dorky dude?”

He gestures to his charcoal slacks and pressed button-down, in contrast to my jeans and pullover. Fine, he cleans up well.

“Obviously, I'm the cool one,” he says. “Ergo, you're the dorky fellow.”

“Just help me with the shirts. Also, how the hell did you know they sold button-downs here?” I ask.

He raises a finger, his tell that he's prepping to tell a story. “My sister challenged Amy and me to what she likes to call her Presto-Chango game for a Friday Night Game Night and we had to find and buy items with the clock ticking,” he says,

rounding the corner of the aisle as I keep pace. “We had to report back with completely changed looks in fifteen minutes.”

“Um. Like a new costume?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know how we could do it. I was freaking out, to put it mildly.” He stops in front of a rack of socks like he’s a game show host. “It was like a whole new world. The drugstore had undershirts. It sold scarves. Socks. Hats. Sweatpants. And, wait for it, dress shirts. Who knew the drugstore had literally everything?”

“Wow. This really changes my life too,” I deadpan.

“And since I became a New Yorker, I like to think of Duane Reade as Crisis Solver Central. After all, we won the challenge and now I know where everything is.” He guides me a few more feet to a pack of three dress shirts.

I read the label. “They look like they’re made of tissue.”

“You wanted something shitty,” he points out. “This is for Halloween, I presume? You’re doing costume planning, right?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

He narrows his eyes, studying me over the top of his glasses. He snaps his fingers. “Ah. They’re for Barrett. Something for the theater tech he’s doing?”

Another shake. “Not that either.”

“Okay, I know I said I didn’t want to know. But that was a lie. I love weird shit. You have to tell me now.”

Briefly I weigh telling the truth versus evasion.

But since Peyton’s blog is public, and since Linc is involved with Amy, I decide to own up to it. “Amy asked Peyton to test some things for her because of her new book and—”

I don’t even have to finish. “Yes, of course. That tracks. That’s exactly what Amy would do.” Linc hands me a pack of shirts, smacking me on the chest with it. “So, you’re the guinea pig?”



“One certified lab rat right here, ready and waiting for Peyton’s instructions.”

He doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, then simply claps me on the shoulder. “Good luck with that.”

“What do you mean?”

He levels me with a knowing stare. “I mean, good luck with that.”

I don’t press. I don’t need to. Because I don’t need luck. This project isn’t about luck.

It’s about friendship. That’s all.

\* \* \*

But just so I’m fully prepared, and just in case she’s keen to know the difficulty involved in ripping off a fancy shirt versus a cheap one, I google where to buy expensive dress shirts, then stop at Barneys on the way home and pick up a few more.

Good thing my restaurant is in the black, because now it’s not only funding my brother’s school, but also this insane project where the girl I was once crazy for wants to tear clothes off me.

And have me tear clothes off her.

All in the name of research.

Later that night, I shower, trim my beard, pull on jeans and a T-shirt, and text Barrett that I’ll be home late and that I’ve left some chicken parmigiana in the fridge for him, along with a green salad.

His response?

**Barrett:** Can I slurp the chicken?

**Tristan:** If you can, more power to you. Also, you’re welcome.

**Barrett:** Thank you. I'll record a video of my success with the chicken consumption.

**Tristan:** I can't wait.

I leave, stop in a specialty store along the way to pick up a gift for her, then I head to Peyton's with the gift and the shirts in hand.

It's good that I have extras. After all, if she likes tearing the shirt off me once, maybe she'll want to do it a few more times.

Can't hurt to run through the scenarios more than once.



# PEYTON

To wine or not to wine—that is the question.

But the answer is obviously wine.

After all, what's the point of alcohol if not to smooth over the awkward moments between friends researching the practicality of different scenes from romance novels, right?

*Right.*

Or maybe the answer is ... tequila.

As I stare at the shelves in the liquor store near my brownstone, I consider all the liquid options to take the edge off tonight. Lord knows I'll need a little something to smooth over the jitters.

I'm a jack-in-the-box and have been with each tick of the second hand. Since Tristan agreed to be my test partner this morning, my heart's been hammering at triple-espresso speed.

Fine, I'm *only* ripping off his shirt. But my hands will be on him. I'll be undressing my best guy friend.

A friend I kissed ten years ago.

The thought of removing his shirt makes me ...

I pause before the tequila, asking myself how it makes me feel.

Nervous? Excited? Scared out of my mind?

I haven't undressed a man since Gage. He's the only one I've been with for the last few years.

*Just focus on the mission, not your mind-set.*

That's what I tell myself. Besides, liftoff begins in less than two hours, and I need to prep. No time to noodle on squishy feelings that have come out of nowhere.

The question of the hour—tequila or gin. Gin or tequila?

Maybe it's a martini kind of night. Except my talents don't lie in making drinks, shaken or stirred, for super spies, so I bypass that old James Bond standard.

While I *could* ask Tristan to make a special beverage, a good hostess would have a cocktail ready. That's what my mother taught me growing up—*never ask your guests to bring a thing but their presence.*

Tristan insisted on buying the shirts, but everything else will be on my dime.

It should be a simple task to select the ideal drink for our research.

As I wander down the next aisle, I mentally mark the whiskeys and bourbons in the no column. I don't have a fire extinguisher big enough to put out the flames in my throat from those liquors.

When I reach the rum options, I can hear the tinkle of kettle drums in my head, and I smell the sea breeze as I imagine strawberry daiquiris and piña coladas.

*Hmm.* Do I want an island drink, a city drink, or a classic drink? Why can't I decide?

I scan the aisles up and down, but I don't know what liquor sends the right message. What exactly does one imbibe to get in the mood to reenact scenes from a sexy rom-com with her best friend?

That persistent flock of nerve-birds descends on me once again, flapping annoyingly, winding me up.

This won't do.

I need to calm down.

I need to relax.

What I truly need, though, is help, so I call for reinforcements, FaceTiming Lola.

“Hey, coolest chick I know,” I say when her face appears on the screen.

She flashes me a flattery-will-get-you-everywhere grin. “*C’est moi*. What can I do for you?”

I spin around, showing her the shelves behind me. “I’m faced with a bewilderment of choices. I don’t know if I want door number one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, or five hundred.”

“I assume this is your lubricant for tonight?”

My jaw falls open, and I whisper out of the corner of my mouth. “We don’t need lube. We’re not doing that. Also, hello? I’d like to think I don’t require lube. When it’s DTF time, I’m GTG.”

With the most epic of eye rolls, she laughs. “It was a metaphor—the social lubricant of liquor. But I’m glad you’re all ready when it’s down-to-fuck time.”

“Ohhhhh.” Well, fine. That makes more sense. I wave a hand like I can erase my last comment. “Pretend I didn’t say that.”

“Oh no, I can’t pretend, because there’s a lesson here. Don’t dismiss a little assistance, sweetie. Even if you’re good to go, you should try it sometime. It can make sex even better. Sex with yourself, sex with a partner, sex in general. Just because Gage wasn’t into experimentation doesn’t mean you can’t try new things.”

I bring the phone to my ear, lowering my volume. “Okay, how did we get from liquor advice to sex advice?”

“Sometimes they’re one and the same.”

“Also, I’m not having sex with Tristan,” I say, quiet but firm. I need to quash that notion. “We’re friends, and this is a research project.”

“It was a tip for the future. Or, really, for now, since you have the chance to try all sorts of things that your ex wasn’t

into.”

True, Gage wasn't the most sexually adventurous guy. He was a typical horny, three-position, twenty-something guy in the city. That worked well enough for me at the time, and our sex life was ... standard. But since he'd been two-timing me for months, perhaps he was more experimental than I'd thought. But that also means the sex I did have with him was sex without real intimacy.

Sex without a true connection.

I'm not looking for a sex dungeon or a kink parlor. But at some point, I wouldn't mind knowing what it's like to sleep with someone I can trust.

Someone who isn't looking the other way.

Someone who wants to be with only me.

That's what I truly missed out on with Gage.

“I don't think the issue was that Gage wasn't into trying new things,” I say to Lola as frankly as I can, since the memory still hurts at times. “He wasn't into trying new things *with me.*”

Lola pounces on my reply. “Don't go there. Gage lost out on you. Don't ever forget that.”

“I'll try not to.” When I linger too long on the man I thought I'd marry, the wounds can be tender, the betrayal appearing as a fresh bruise. “But it's hard, Lo. I put so much of myself into that relationship. I felt so sure about us for so long. He was smart and clever and doting. Until he wasn't, and I didn't see that coming.” My voice wobbles, threatening to break in front of the row of Bacardi.

“Sweetie,” Lola says softly, “you weren't supposed to see it coming. He's a cheater, and he pulled off a double act for a long time. You loved him, because you're a true and honest person. But he wasn't a good guy. And even though it hurt like hell, you regained something beautiful when he showed his true colors—yourself, your independence, and your romantic future. The world is your oyster. The bedroom is your oyster.”

A smile claims my lips, unbidden and unavoidable, as I wander toward the vodka. “Okay, how did we get from my liquor choices to my vulnerable underbelly to my oyster of a bedroom?”

Switching back to FaceTime mode, I catch her smiling serenely. “It’s just something I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time, and the moment seemed right. Don’t dwell on him. Keep moving on. You’re doing great.”

My heart glows a bit from the love of a good friend. “Thank you. Maybe I needed to hear that right now.”

“And you need to have some fun tonight.” She peers closer to the screen and points behind me. “Pick that.”

I spin around. “The Ketel One?”

“Yes. Make a Moscow Mule. Get some copper mugs, some limes, and start ripping that lumberjack’s shirt off.”

I laugh. Tristan definitely has the whole tall, strong, and bearded look working for him. “Okay. But why a Moscow Mule?”

She stares sharply at me. “Did you want a dissertation or a decision, Miss I-Can’t-Pick?”

I draw a deep breath, grinning. “A decision.”

She smiles, as satisfied as a cat taking a bath. “Good. Also, the heroine makes a Moscow Mule before the hero comes over, so it’ll help you get in character. Maybe read the scene before you rip off his shirt.”

“I already have, but don’t you worry. I have a plan for making storytime a part of my night.”

I say goodbye and snag the Ketel One along with some ginger beer, lime juice, and a couple of limes, then head to the snack aisle.

*There.*

I pick up a bag of popcorn. This is just like the time this summer when Amy’s brother gave me his extra Yankees tickets and I brought Tristan with me. He adores the boys of



summer, and I made a big event of it, picking up pumpkin seeds and peanuts, and we snacked to our heart's content as we rooted for the home team.

Nothing like snacks to recalibrate a girl's pulse.

And to thank a guy for doing her a favor.

I check out, and as I sling the bag over my shoulder, I text Lola, feeling proud of my accomplishment.

**Peyton:** I have the lube!

**Lola:** Great. Then why don't you try out chapter twenty-two, page two hundred?

With cheetah speed, I click open the working doc Amy sent me, scrolling to that page in the manuscript. Last night, I read the scene Amy wants me to reenact, but I didn't reach page two hundred. I'm betting Lola is sending me down the rabbit hole of some wildly intense sex scene involving toys or places where the sun doesn't shine.

Instead, I laugh as I enjoy a scene involving door hinges and a handy hero. *Literally*.

**Peyton:** Hot damn. He fixed her squeaky door like nobody's business.

**Lola:** WD-40 for the win.

**Lola:** Also, Moscow Mules are fun ... and you should have some fun during your research. Now, stop talking to me and get ready.

That's good advice, so I follow it once I'm home.

Even though my clothes aren't coming off tonight, I shower, primp, and snap a photo of a new lavender lace bra

and panty set, with an embroidered butterfly between the breasts and at the top of the undies.

Then I slide into the soft fabric.

I stop in front of the mirror, checking out my reflection, savoring the way the new lace feels against my skin, how the bra boosts my breasts.

I feel like me, but a better version of me. The me who's turned the corner. The me who no longer hurts because of the past.

I'm a woman starting over.

Maybe not tonight, but that's who I see. A woman who couldn't have embarked on this quest a few months ago, or even a few weeks ago.

But I'm ready now—for my business, for Mimi's legacy, and for me.

I want to be the woman in lavender and lace.

And I can tonight, because I've healed.

Because when I open the door, I'll be opening it to a man I trust. A man who's willing to do me a favor. I let a smile play across my lips, feeling it deep in my soul.

Turning away from the reflection, I slip into a peacock-blue skirt that hits above the knees and pull on a top the shade of eggplant.

I mix the drinks then find an alt-rock station that seems to be on Tristan's wavelength, and when he knocks, I yank the door open without hesitation, and there he is, looking ... *wow*.

I can say, even without the benefit of the lube known as liquor, the man can wear the hell out of a white button-down and jeans.

Those nerves? They aren't nerves anymore. They're something else—the flutter of something new.

Or maybe something I felt long ago and had to let go.

That kiss. That incomparable, knee-weakening kiss, miles ahead of any other kiss.

I play it back, and I can still feel the shivers that radiated down my spine that night.

Ten years later, and that kiss still does it for me, and I have an answer to my question.

*How do I feel about undressing him?*

I feel excited.

That's the trouble.

There's no room for that between us.

But for friendship, there is plenty. After all, this guy is coming through for me, and that means the world to this girl.

"Hey, you!" I say with a grin.

He waggles a gift bag. "I got you something."



# PEYTON

My best friends know I can be bribed with chocolate.

A mere morsel will convince me to accompany you to that awkward work dinner with colleagues.

A square, and I'll help lug your bags of old clothes to the Goodwill blocks away.

A whole bar, and I'll paint your bedroom wall periwinkle. No, you don't need to help. Sit down, relax, and drink your wine.

When Tristan presents me with not one, not two, but three bars from my favorite chocolate shop in the city, I squeal in delight.

And, even better, he doesn't need to bribe me.

"These. Are. The. Best." Glee doesn't begin to describe my mood right now.

"It's just chocolate," he says, amused, as I clutch the bag.

"It's never *just chocolate*," I correct. "It's my favorite thing in the world. And you also did not have to bring a gift."

He shrugs a little sheepishly. "It's nothing."

That's where he's wrong. I set a hand on his arm, stopping his attempt to dismiss his own kindness. At moments like this, I can see the divide between our upbringings sharply—my family is all warm and fuzzy, giving out gifts and hugs with abandon, and his was sterner, the opposite of effusive. "It's not *nothing*. I love chocolate. I'm in love with chocolate.

Chocolate might be my soul mate, so this is not *nothing*. And I love that you did this.” I shake the bars of dark chocolate at him till he smiles. And when he does, my heart dances a little jig. “Also, these are Lulu’s Chocolates. They’re decadent and heavenly and delicious ... and I can’t wait any longer.”

I tear open the wrapper and pop a square of Earl Grey chocolate into my mouth. It melts on my tongue, and I roll my eyes like I’m a chef on TV. “This is what dreams are made of.” I break off a square and hand it to him. “Try it.”

“I was never a chocolate guy.”

“I know you’re a salty, but I swear, you will not regret this sweet,” I say, goading him with a morsel. I want him to experience the goodness of this treat, the richness of the flavors. I want him to feel what I feel, even about chocolate.

“Not my thing,” he says.

“Tristan, this chocolate is conversion-level good. What’s the worst that’ll happen? You’ll hate it and spit it out? Just try it.”

He narrows his eyes, huffing. “I’m only doing this so you’ll stop asking.”

I laugh, loving that he’s bending. “I know. Trust me, I know.”

He heaves a sigh, like this is too much. He plucks the chocolate from my palm, pops it into his mouth, and chews.

Anxiously I wait. For a few seconds, he says little. But when he murmurs and moans, I nearly bounce. “Good, right?”

“Fine, this is fucking awesome. Can we eat the whole bar now?”

I wag a finger, smiling like I told him so. Because I did. “This is what happens when you’ve only ever tried Hershey’s. You needed the good stuff. And now you’ve had it.”

“Guess I can’t go back now,” he says with an easy shrug.

“And why would you?” I ask as I usher him into the kitchen, gesturing to the drinks, grateful I made them. Even

with the chocolate, my nerves are resurfacing. Because he's here, and this is happening. This strange crossing of lines that's not quite crossing is starting any minute. "Moscow Mule?"

He lifts a brow in question. "You're making drinks now?"

"Hey! I can handle a basic cocktail. Call it the owner's special," I say, gesturing to my apartment.

"I'm sure I'll love it, then," he says, lifting the mug and offering a toast.

"Also, I thought it might help," I admit, before I take a drink.

"Are you nervous?"

I nibble on the corner of my lips, glad to admit the truth. "A little."

He taps his mug to mine. "Don't worry. We've got this, Peyton."

With that, with his strength, his confidence in our friendship, he defuses the tension. I'm so damn grateful, and I can feel my shoulders relax. "We do, right?"

"Absolutely. May the buttons fly."

"Let the floor be covered in them." I clink back and take a drink.

Tristan does too, nodding in approval at the beverage. "You done good, Cookie."

My brow quirks. "Cookie?"

"I figured it was the only nickname I hadn't heard your parents give you, so I thought I'd give it a shot."

"I like cookies," I say, smiling as I take another drink.

"Also, isn't that what all those romance novel heroes do? Don't they have pet names for heroines? Sugar Lips and Cute Tush and Bumpkin ..."

I nearly spit out my drink. "I'm positive they don't call the women they're courting *Bumpkin*." I set down the cup and turn

to grab the treats I picked up for him. “And I have something for you too.” I show him the salt-and-vinegar popcorn, along with a bottle of his favorite IPA. “See? I know you’re still a salty guy.”

He whistles appreciatively. “Let’s get this shirt ripping going so we can have some popcorn.”

“Snacks are the way to your heart,” I say as I set the bag back on the counter.

He grabs my arm, dropping his tough-guy armor as his voice goes a little softer, more vulnerable. “Thanks, Peyton. For the popcorn and beer. And for knowing I’m a salty.”

It’s a small thing, but it feels like a big thing too—this acknowledgment that we know what makes each other tick.

That we intrinsically understand each other.

He holds my gaze a beat longer, his hazel eyes warm and intense. My chest has the audacity to tingle. I lick my lips, trying to keep my tone friendly, playful, as I reply, “Once a salty, always a salty. But I’m glad to see you’re liking sweets too.”

He swallows, his voice a little rough. “Yes, I am.”

And it makes me happy that he does.

He reaches behind me for the copper cup, finishes the contents, then declares, “It’s showtime.”

I’m so ready it nearly scares me.





# TRISTAN

She's given me gifts before, so I don't let the popcorn and beer go to my head.

She's a gift giver—always has been. Thanks to Peyton's birthday-buying extravaganzas, I have a panini grill, a coffee maker, and a drone.

For various holidays, she's doled out a range of cards: playing cards, Cards Against Humanity, and a gift card to the new Korean restaurant in the East Village that she gave me after I split up with Samantha several months ago.

Over the years, I've received countless gifts from this woman, so I'm not going to read anything extra into something as simple as popcorn and beer.

Do that, and you open yourself up to a world of hurt. After all, when she gave me cologne for Christmas four years ago, I misread the hell out of that. For months, each time I wore it, I was convinced it was her secret way of telling me to go for it with her.

Because each time I wore it, she said I'd smelled *so good*.

That was when I decided to try again with her. Or really, to try for real. To ask her out on a date, once and for all.

And that was when Gage came back to town and won her heart.

I'm not wearing the cologne tonight. I'm not barking up that tree another time.

I'm here to help—that's all. I bought her chocolate because I'm a good guy. Because that's what my mom would have told me to do—*make sure to let a woman know you appreciate her.*

Fine, it's not like I would have asked Mom, or Dad, for input on Peyton's unusual request. And I don't need advice. But I could sense it took some ovaries for Peyton to ask for help, and I want her to feel comfortable.

Hence, chocolate.

I stride into her living room, where she gestures to the couch. This is her show, and she calls the shots. As I sit next to her, she reaches for her phone. "Ready for storytime?"

"I am."

She clicks open a document and reads in a sultry tone.

*"I was pent-up from the night we'd had. From the way he'd talked to me at the concert. From how he'd looked at me in the cab."*

She stops, purses her lips, and coos. "Ooh."

My curiosity is piqued. "Go on, Cookie. I want to know what kind of night they had, don't you?"

"Oh yes, I do." She returns to the story, shimmying her shoulders like she's having a good time.

I am too, and that both surprises me and doesn't. My e-reader looks like a high school English teacher's shelf: *A Separate Peace*, *A River Runs Through It*, *The Catcher in the Rye*. That's what I dig, as well as the occasional memoir from chefs like Anthony Bourdain, or food blogs that focus on the food rather than the sprinkling of ridiculous adjectives.

I didn't think I'd enjoy listening to a romance.

But I do.

I like listening to her read to me.

*"Weeks of this back-and-forth, this cat and mouse, had me so wound up that I was afraid I'd pounce on him. And when considering pouncing, my rule of thumb was better safe than sorry. Otherwise, you could end up with claw marks."*

“Claw marks are bad?” she asks with an arch of a brow.

My eyes drift to her nails—not too short, not too long. My mind drifts to possibilities I shouldn’t entertain, but I do anyway. “I’m not opposed to them,” I admit.

Maybe it’s a confession she likes, because her breath seems to hitch as she returns to her reading.

*“He dragged a hand through my hair and kissed me deeply as the elevator rose. ‘I’d really like to tear your clothes off when we get to your apartment,’ he murmured.*

*“‘Oh, good. I was hoping you were ready to pounce too.’*

*“‘So damn ready.’*

*“Seconds later, we stumbled into my place, the door slinking shut behind us.”*

My mind assembles images of elevators; of hands in red hair; of hot, deep kisses.

And I need to wipe my brain free of these dangerous thoughts, so I hold up a hand, stopping her. “How does a door slink shut? Do doors slink?”

She blinks, surprised. “I don’t know. Do they? I guess that does sound weird.”

“People slink. And animals. But doors? I think they *snick* or *fall* shut. I don’t think they slink shut.”

She sits up straighter. “I should tell Amy this sentence might need work. *Slink* is a weird word, right?”

“Yeah. Let her know.”

She clicks over to her notes app, jots down a reminder, then returns to the document. But before she begins, she shoots me a glance, her eyelids lowering. “You don’t like the story?”

“What? Why would you say that?”

“Because of the *slink* thing.”

I don’t want to admit I like it a lot. But neither do I want her to worry. I set a hand on her leg. “Just read, Cookie.”

“I’ve always enjoyed reading out loud,” she says, her tone less nervous, more playful.

*“I grabbed his shirt—”*

She stops speaking, reads the next lines quietly, then tosses the phone onto the cushion. With a deep exhale, she points to her door. “Let’s just do it. Go stand against the door.”

*Holy hell, that is hot.* And it seems to be what we both need. “What the lady wants ...”

I oblige, heading to the door.

She dims the lights halfway and walks to me, her heels clicking loudly against the floor, the sound reverberating like a countdown. To what? To button blastoff?

Maybe.

It’s just buttons, but still, my muscles tense because when she’s inches away, all my fantasies from years ago flash before my eyes.

Her. Me. Tangled up together. *Touching, kissing, fucking, feeling.*

I bat them away. Far away.

*This. Is. Research.*

She slides her fingers over the top button of my shirt, unhooking it quickly.

Then the next.

My skin sizzles. From *that*. From two buttons. I try to redirect with a question. “I thought you were going to rip—”

Her finger lands on my lips. “Shhh.”

I fight off my desire to nibble on that finger. To kiss and suck and bite.

I grit my teeth as her hands return to our main business.

She takes a fistful of each side of my two-cent shirt from the drugstore and goes for it, tugging hard.

Nothing happens.

Not a single thing.

The shirt stays on.

“Okay, let’s try again,” she says, her eyes intense and serious. She grabs hold of each side of the shirt once more, pulling, yanking, and grunting. “This is actually ridiculously hard.”

I raise a finger. “Can I give you a tip?”

“Are you an expert on shirt ripping?”

“No, but logic would suggest you might want a little runway. Maybe build up speed unbuttoning the first two then dive into the rip.”

Her mouth forms an O. “Yes! That’s brilliant.”

She buttons the shirt back up, then shimmies her hips, blows out a long stream of air, and sings softly, “Bow chicka wow wow.”

I laugh, once more feeling like we’re friends who help each other, even with absurd requests.

She undoes the first one, moves a little faster with the second, then yanks at the shirt.

Ripping one side down the middle.

We burst out laughing.

The buttons are all intact, but the shirt has been torn asunder, hanging open.

“Holy shit, Peyton. You did it.” I stare at the carnage of the Duane Reade clothes. She’s staring too.

Not at my shirt.

At my chest.

Then at my abs.

She looks at my face, her breath stuttering like she’s trying to collect herself. Then her eyes roam down. “You. Work. Out.”

Every macho instinct in me tells me to preen, to show off muscles that sweat and time at the gym have carved.

But I resist those urges. “Every now and then.”

“Shut up. These are religious abs. These require daily practice.”

I laugh at her assessment. “Yes, my abs are quite devoted.”

She laughs too, then smacks me with her palm. Almost like she’s trying to cop a feel. But her hand darts away so quickly that I decide it’s just Peyton’s usual fun-and-games routine.

Her eyes twinkle with unbridled enthusiasm. “Want to do it again? Since you brought spare shirts. We should definitely do it for research. We need to test the hypothesis more than once,” she says, like she just got off a roller coaster and wants to ride it again.

So do I.

All night long.

“Absolutely.” No wonder those heroes in romance novels like this so much. It’s just fucking hot when a woman wants to get you naked.

It’s hot even if it’s for research.

I remove the torn shirt and head to the kitchen, where I left my bag.

She’s quiet, and the silence is sexy. It says she’s watching me. She’s looking at me.

When I turn around, my hunch is confirmed.

Her eyes focus on my chest as I slide my arms into another shirt and button it up. She doesn’t take her gaze off me. The entire time, she watches, and it’s heady. It makes my pulse roar.

I close the distance between us until we’re a foot apart. The air is charged, crackling. I can’t stop thinking about what happens next. After the heroine rips off the hero’s shirt. After

she slides her hands along his abs, up to his pecs, around his neck.

When she presses her sweet, lush body to his.

My brain skyrockets ahead, picturing crushing her lips to mine, sliding my hands under her skirt, walking her to the wall.

Having her and pleasing her.

I force myself to stay rooted to the project. This desire is borne out of the moment. It's a normal reaction to a beautiful woman taking off my clothes. Nothing more.

I'm a researcher—that's all.

The renewed focus helps.

Like a diligent scientist, she runs the experiment again, unbuttoning the first button, then ripping at the rest of the shirt with all her strength.

One button comes loose, but it doesn't fall. It hangs by a thread.

She stomps her foot. "I want the buttons to fly off. That's how it happens in the books, and it seems so sexy."

*Ah, hell.* I need to find a way to deliver for her. "I have one more shirt to try," I say, but I'm not thinking of the third one in the cheap pack. Time to lean on the pricey shirt. "Want to see how an expensive shirt holds up?"

"I do." Her voice is breathy, eager.

Is this turning her on too? If it is, join the club.

Grabbing the Barneys one from the bag, I slide my arms into the sleeves. She stares at me again, her eyes traveling over my biceps, my chest, my abs.

Like she's seeing me for the first time.

Like she's drinking in the view.

She's mesmerized, and her stare heats my blood, driving me on. I stalk over to her, park my hands on my waist, and wait.



Her lips part, and my memory serves up the delicious reminder of how intoxicating she tastes. How sweet she kisses. How softly she sighs.

I clench my fists, staving off my desire.

She lifts her hands, but she doesn't undo the top two buttons. She *plays* with them. Her fingertips fiddle with the first one, toying with it, and with me. With each stroke of her fingers on the buttons, she's also running her fingers over my body, across inches of my chest.

Even through my shirt, she's turning me on.

Like that's a surprise.

"I like these buttons," she says, as if hypnotized.

"Yeah," I say, since I can't really form any other words, let alone thoughts.

She's transfixed, fondling the fucking buttons, and it's driving me insane with lust. If she keeps this up, I might die from it.

"They're so shiny, and they feel so good," she whispers, like she's in a dream. "Who knew buttons felt like this?"

Her voice is like honey, and I want to taste her lips again. Taste her skin. Kiss her everywhere.

*That's the problem.*

This experiment needs to end before I hit indecent levels on the arousal meter.

"Take it off," I tell her, because I can't handle this much longer.

Slowly, seductively, she undoes the first button. A flash of heat crosses her blue eyes. Maybe it's *desire*.

Did I imagine it?

Is she feeling it too?

Her hands move quickly but strategically, and she undoes another button, then one more, and when she tugs this time, there's a *plink* on the hardwood.

She flinches in delighted surprise.

Another button.

This one goes *ping* on her floor.

And then the rest are flying across her apartment.

*Ping, ping, ping.*

She's laughing and grinning and staring at the button carnage. "Holy smokes. It worked. It really worked."

I've never seen her this excited. "Damn, woman. You did it," I say, taking in the trail of shiny objects on the floor of her place.

She gazes at them, then at me. "I guess it was the fancy shirt?"

I cock my head. "Was it?"

"Actually, no." She shakes her head, like she's processing what just went down. "For that last one, I think I felt like the heroine in the novel, and that's what did it."

*Oh God.*

*Oh hell.*

*Oh, fuck me.*

I want to dissect that six ways to Sunday. I want to read all sorts of meanings into her remark.

No, I want to read *one* particular meaning into it. But I have to protect myself. This is merely acting.

None of this is real.

After she snaps a picture of the buttons, I put on my armor, pick up the carnage, and pull on a gray T-shirt. I turn the evening in another direction, because it's the only way I can survive this project.

By *not* reading into it. "Want to have that popcorn?"

"I do," she says with a smile, then she raises the lights and grabs the beer she bought me. We head to the couch and break open the snack bag.

“Ladies first,” I say, and as she dips her hand into the bag, it feels like a postcoital cigarette.

I grab a handful of popcorn and chew. “I am indeed a salty forever.”

“I know you so well,” she says, and that’s the real postcoital afterglow. Because the popcorn isn’t only popcorn. It’s evidence that she knows me.

That she wanted me to have what I like.

That she wanted me to enjoy this night.

As I regard her on the couch, legs tucked under her, munching on snacks, grinning happily, I hate that I’m aware once again of how different she is from every other woman I’ve ever been attracted to.

How warm and open and honest. How giving and caring and loving.

How wonderfully, fantastically different she is.

But learning that anew is exactly what my heart doesn’t need. If I stay here, I’ll let the popcorn and beer trick me, like the cologne did years ago.

And popcorn is just a snack. Beer is only a drink.

None of these gifts are signs.

Life doesn’t give you signs.

Life gives you potholes, and you have to navigate around them without crashing.

After a thirsty sip of the brew and a few more handfuls of kernels, I scoot away from the pothole of desire. “I have to take off.”

Her expression morphs into sadness. “You do?”

“Barrett will be home soon,” I say, fashioning a plausible excuse.

She frowns. “Too bad. I was going to see if you wanted to watch *The Walking Dead* or something,” she says, making me wish once more that I could convince myself to stay.

“Rain check?” I take the empty bottle to the kitchen, setting it in the recycling bin.

“Of course. Go see Barrett,” she says, shooing me to the door.

“Let me know when the next session is.”

“How’s Thursday?”

Grabbing my phone, I make a show of looking at the calendar, tapping my chin, and frowning my brow. “Let’s see. If I move this meeting with a supplier, then if I change my Zumba class, and maybe I can skip flower arranging—”

She clears her throat dramatically.

“Ah yes. I can fit you in at seven fifteen on Thursday. Seems I have an opening then,” I say, hoping a little humor will sweep away the lust cloud chasing me.

“Thanks for finding a window,” she says, laughing. “Now leave before I kick you out.”

“You’d never kick me out.”

“I know,” she says softly, so softly.

And I know it’s true. I grab the bag of clothes, and I go.

\* \* \*

Barrett’s not home when I return. He’s still at play practice, and he won’t be back for another hour.

I knew that.

This little white lie is for the best.

Trouble is, I can’t wait for Thursday. Especially when she texts me and tells me how much she’s looking forward to the test she wants to run that night.

So am I.

God help me, so am I.



# PEYTON

*The Lingerie Devotee: Do Try This at Home*

*Blog entry*

Lavender is for possibilities.

It's what you wear when you're an explorer, traveling across new boundaries, entering a new land.

Lavender's not brash. It's subtle, encouraging you to try new things.

And try I did.

Last night, I conducted a tasty new experiment.

After all, who hasn't wondered if life could play out like the pages of a romance novel?

The ones where the good stuff goes down.

Where shirts come off and buttons fly.

And I am here to tell you, they can indeed soar.

Powered by lace and lavender, I put on my best bold self, walked across the living room, and tore at a handsome man's shirt.

Okay, moment of truth.

The first time, nothing happened.

The second instance? I ripped the cheap shirt down the middle, leaving two sad shards.

But the third time?

Oh yes, it was a charm.

The buttons flew.

One, two, three, and more.

All of them landing on the hardwood floor.

And the trick I learned is *wanting it*.

Do you want to tear his (or her) clothes off? Then *mean* it. Believe it. Go for it. But do set the stage. Put on some music. Have a drink. Get in the mood.

Wear something that brings you pleasure.

Let yourself feel like the heroine in your own story.

Own it.

And then ... *do it*.

Whether the buttons fly or fall or stay in place, what matters is what *you* want.

Last night, I wanted to tear this guy's shirt off like I've never wanted to disrobe a man before.

It worked so well, and here's the evidence. A photo I shot of the buttons on the floor. And here's what I wore—my ensemble for my shirt-shredding mission.

When he was gone, I luxuriated in this sexy set a little bit longer, and in the prospect of the nights ahead of me.

Xoxo

*The Lingerie Devotee*

Find me at You Look Pretty Today on Madison Avenue





# TRISTAN

**Barrett:** Dude. She called you “handsome.”

**Tristan:** What are you talking about?

**Barrett:** Don’t act like you don’t read her blog.

**Tristan:** And you do read her blog???

**Barrett:** Duh. Obviously. Rachel and I are reading it now. We’re laughing our asses off. Can you wear that ripped shirt to homecoming? *Handsome.* :)

**Tristan:** Shouldn’t you be in school?

**Barrett:** It’s lunchtime ... *Handsome.* :)

**Tristan:** Go eat lunch, then.

**Barrett:** Go man up. *Handsome.*

**Tristan:** Goodbye, Barrett. Good luck on your history test.

**Barrett:** How did you know I have a history test?

**Tristan:** It’s my job to know what’s going on with you. Now finish your sushi, drink your LaCroix, and get your butt to fifth-period history to take your test on United States foreign policy in the Middle East.

**Barrett:** You’re obviously a spy if you know I’m drinking LaCroix and eating sushi.

**Tristan:** Either that or I actually pay attention to your likes and dislikes.

**Barrett:** I’m going with spy. *Handsome.* :)



## PEYTON

“That’ll be two hundred twenty-one dollars,” I say to the petite blonde with a soft Southern accent, who’s gobbling up three camis, two baby-doll nighties, and a black slip.

She plunks down her credit card, then flashes a pink lip-glossed grin. “And I’ll report back tomorrow. Because I have plans for these darlings tonight.”

Arching a tell-me-more brow, I wrap the purchases in tissue paper as Marley scans her card. “Plans with lingerie are the best kind,” I say.

Leaning in closer, she offers a whispered confession. “Tonight, I’m thinking of wearing the baby doll, making margaritas, playing D’Angelo, and ripping off my man’s clothes.”

“And I suspect your report card will include a big *S* for tonight—*S* for satisfied.” I slide the shopping bag to her, and she takes it, swinging it back and forth.

“I can’t wait. Loved your post. Thanks for the tips, and thanks for the suggestions on these sexy little numbers.” She tips her forehead to the bag of items I helped her select. “Now, I’m off to pick up a few shirts for tearing off.”

All I can say to that is: “You go, girl.”

After she leaves, Marley grabs my arm, clutching my wrist. “She’s the second person today to say something about your blog.”

“And it’s barely past noon,” I add, a frisson of excitement darting through me.

But I’m not going to get ahead of myself. Yes, the blog generated more comments today. Yes, two customers have mentioned it. But one resurrected blog is not enough to combat a big box store with a discount sale. I eye the banner in Harriet’s window across the block.

“See? Harriet can’t mess with us. We always take care of our ladies,” Marley says, full of fire and pep, and I love it.

“Exactly. We have a ways to go, but we’ll keep it up.” I’m a glass-half-full person, though, so I’m choosing to be happy that a handful of customers are devouring my posts and buying some goodies.

Including, evidently, my yoga teacher’s beau. Because he strolls in next.

“Namaste,” I say playfully, hoping humor will defuse any remaining bits of awkward from the other day.

“Namaste to you too,” he says with a grin. Then taps his chest. “Michael.”

“Peyton. Glad you could make it in,” I say and maybe the awkwardness was only on me. Yes, it was definitely on me.

“I read your blog this morning with Nadia. We are officially lingerie devotees now. Well, she wears the lingerie. I just admire the view.”

“That definitely makes you both devotees,” I say, and for a fleeting second I’m reminded that I was going to ask this guy whose name I didn’t even know till a moment ago to be my scene partner. I’m so glad he turned out to be involved. “Are you looking for anything in particular for Nadia?”

“Something indulgent. She loves satin and lace and I love to spoil her.”

“That’s our favorite kind of men,” Marley chimes in.

“Trouble is—I don’t have a clue what to get her. No idea where to start.”

“Then you are doubly our favorite kind of guy,” she adds.

“Marley, can you help him choose a few potential items?” I ask.

“Would love to. We have some fantastic new items in both satin and lace.”

“Take me to them,” he says, eagerly.

When they’re done, he brings a huge haul of goodies to the register. Whoa. I’m definitely glad he’s a customer.

“Glad you found some lovely items. And half off like I promised,” I chime in.

He shakes his head. “You support my love’s business at her yoga studio. I will support you. No discounts. Just good, honest patronage. It’s that simple.”

“I’m touched,” I say, my heart warming. Maybe Tristan was right—the personal connection is what matters.

And I’m a little richer too when he leaves, a couple bags of goodies in tow.

It’s a reminder that I’m on the right path with the blog project.

I need to walk that path tomorrow night too, but the experiment I have in mind requires a different setting than my place.

“Can you man the front for me for a few? I need to make a call?”

“I can *woman* the front,” she says with a saucy wink.

“Good catch. My bad. Work your magic.”

She makes *abra cadabra* hands as I head to my Lilliputian office in the back to make the requisite arrangements with my mother for session number two.

She answers on the first ring, and her warm, confident voice is always good to hear. “Hello, sweetheart. What are you up to?”

“Oh, you know. Just causing trouble.”

She laughs. “As if. You were never my troublemaker.”

“Nor was Jay. Admit it. You raised two good kids despite your best efforts.” “True, I did try to corrupt you. But you were so stubborn, insisting on actually listening to me and whatnot.” She heaves an exaggerated sigh, and I laugh, enjoying that I don’t need to brace myself to make my out-of-left-field request. She’s the model of a supportive mom, even when I ask for the unusual.

“Speaking of corruption, I need to borrow your apartment tomorrow. Please tell me you and Dad still have your Thursday-night Scrabble contest at the Bridgertons’?”

“You act like we’re so predictable.”

“And the verdict is?”

She huffs indignantly. “Fine, we’re set in our ways. But why do you need our place?” I hear her snapping her fingers. “Oh! Is it for your blog? I read your newest post this morning. All I can say is *ooh la la*.”

I cringe, the fire flaming my cheeks. I’d nearly forgotten my mother was a devotee of *The Lingerie Devotee*. While my love of undies isn’t a secret, my blog veered in a much more personal direction last night—one that’s not exactly fodder for the family.

Yet I need to own it. This project involves putting myself out there, so I square my shoulders. “Yes, I’m conducting a research experiment,” I say, then I dive into the rest of the details—how I’m helping Amy, and that the unnamed man is my best guy friend.

There’s a pause, the silence unnerving, till my mom fills it, her pitch rising. “The guy in the blog, the handsome guy—that’s *Tristan*?”

She says his name like she’s never heard of him, even though she knows him well. She’s met him many times.

“Yes, Tristan.”

“He said yes to being your partner in crime?”

“Well, obviously. You read my post.”

“Interesting.” She says it the way a detective on a TV show would comment on a twist in a case. As if the word can be rolled out on a red carpet.

“Why is it interesting?”

“It’s interesting that he’s the one you enlisted.”

Her logic is a bit circular, so I press further. “Who else was I supposed to ask? He’s a friend. A good, trustworthy friend.”

“True. Then be sure to have fun tomorrow with ... *your friend*,” she says, a wink in her voice.

*A wink that winds me up.* “What’s that supposed to mean, Mom?”

She chuckles like I’m oh so silly. “Sweetheart. I’ve seen how you and Tristan are together. You’re great friends, but you also have this ... what’s the word ...?”

“Yes, what *is* the word?” I’m desperate to know.

She takes another beat, then answers crisply, “Call it a vibe.”

A familiar doorbell rings in her home. “I have to take off. There’s a package I need to pick up downstairs. You know the code to get in. And feel free to have dinner when you’re done.” The sound of the fridge opening reaches my ears. “Let’s see. Looks like we have plenty of dishes ready for you. Edamame and roasted mushrooms, veggie lasagna, and some polenta with red peppers. Just don’t eat the quinoa. I need it for a cranberry salad I’m making for Friday night.”

“I’ll do my best to resist the quinoa,” I say, making a barfing sound. “I mean, it’ll be tough, Mom. But I’ll try.”

“Quinoa is irresistible, so do try to show some self-control,” she says, not taking the bait. “Hands on the man, hands off the quinoa. Gotta go.”

She hangs up.

That’s how the call ends? With advice to keep my paws off her quinoa?

Staring at the screen, I shake my head, trying to shake off her comments, but one word in particular echoes.

And it's not *quinoa*.

It's *vibe*.

What sort of *vibe* do Tristan and I have? I wasn't even aware we had one.

I tap out a note to Amy.

**Peyton:** Do I have a vibe with Tristan?

My finger hovers over the send button. But I don't hit it. Instead, I delete the text, letter by letter.

I don't know that I'm ready to hear someone else's opinion when I haven't formed my own yet, so I ask myself that question the rest of the afternoon as I take care of customers, into Thursday, and then later that night as I select my underthings.

Do we give off a sense of *something*? An energy?

I reflect back on the way it felt to tear off his clothes, to discover his strength, to find that flash of heat in his eyes.

Goosebumps rise on my arms, and my breath catches, giving me my answer.

As I slide into a lace plunge teddy, I think my mother might be right.

If there's a vibe, I'm betting it's the boomerang effect of that kiss from ten years ago.

Because Tuesday night, I wanted *that* again.

And I wanted to tear his shirt off for more than knowledge.

For more than the blog.

I didn't simply want to undress him for research. I wanted to undress him for me.



As I find a black dress in my closet, I pause, running my hand over the soft fabric, contemplating, wondering.

What am I supposed to do with this desire?

How am I supposed to manage this new bout of wanting?

I don't know what to make of these feelings. Except this much I know for a fact—it would be a mistake to act on them.

Long ago, we had our chance. Now, we have our friendship, and it's back on solid ground again.

He means too much to me. He matters too much. I won't let anything topple us.

Not even the shiver of desire that shoots down my spine as I head to my parents' Fifth Avenue apartment.

After all, he can't practice whisking off my little black dress while we walk up the staircase at my place.

I don't have a staircase.

My parents do, though, and it's carpeted.

That's great because I suspect I'm going to fall on my ass.



# PEYTON

The first time we try the scene, my shoe catches the carpet, and I nearly twist my ankle.

The second time, Tristan laughs so hard while trying to tug up my skirt from three steps away that we both fall into a fit of laughter.

The third time most definitely isn't a charm. It's a tumble as he lunges for me and I shriek while we slide down the steps.

On our asses.

But I don't mind falling with him. It doesn't feel like a failure. It feels like a spectacular fail with my best friend. On the bottom step, I collect myself and hold out my hands, flummoxed. "How the hell do they pull it off in the books?"

"Don't you know? In romance novels, everyone is suave and coordinated."

"Are you saying I'm not coordinated?" I ask indignantly as I untangle my legs from his feet.

"You? *No*. Never."

I give him the gentle shove on his shoulder that he deserves. "You're not exactly Fred Astaire."

He grins from his post next to me on the bottom step. "Fine. Let's call a spade a spade. I'm not Fred and you're not Ginger." He smacks his forehead. "Ginger! You are *a* ginger."

I finger a strand of my red hair. "You're just realizing this now? I've known you for ten years. Might want to work on

your powers of observation, Fred.”

He rolls his eyes. “No, I’m figuring out the perfect nickname for you.” He stands, offers me his hand, and pulls me up. “You’re Gingersnap.”

There’s a note of pride in his tone, like he’s delighted he devised this term of endearment. And I don’t mind Gingersnap. Maybe it’s the way he says it—with a touch of affection.

“Fine. I’ll be Gingersnap to you... *Fred.*”

“Then let’s do it one more time ... Gingersnap.” His voice is a little rougher, a bit sexier, and it makes my chest tingle.

Exactly what I don’t need.

I shake it off, trying to stay loose, to stay in the friend zone.

But maybe I’m too loose, because when he’s ready to make the waist-grab move, I wiggle away.

Unintentionally.

Which means my elbow bonks the wall.

“Ouch!” I rub my elbow.

“You okay?” There’s genuine concern in his voice.

“I’m not sure I’ll live,” I say with a pout as the joint smarts.

He reaches for my arm, inspecting it then softly rubbing. “What do you want me to say at your funeral?”

He’s deadpan serious, and I nearly crack up. But I rein in my laughter, affecting a high-brow tone. “Please say she died trying to escape a most dangerous staircase undressing. Also, let my death not be in vain.” I lift my finger, an orator making a point. “Let it serve as a warning to all those intrepid readers tempted to reenact staircase disrobing.”

“You’ve given your life to a good cause,” he says with a solemn nod. “I will carry your warning to the masses.”

“You do that.”

We make our way back down the stairs, where I try to regroup. We need to fully test this scene before I can report on it in the blog and in Amy's guide. "Okay, let me review the choreography so I know I have it straight," I say, so I don't mess up again. I gesture to the staircase. "I head up the stairs. I glance behind me after three steps. You give me a sexy smolder. I sashay my hips. You reach for my waist, spin me around."

"After that, I lift your skirt," he says. "You take two more steps up. I slide the skirt up your body. Another step. Over your head. You do this all with heels on, and boom. Top step. Birthday suit," he says, dusting one hand against the other.

"I'm not wearing my birthday suit," I point out, but the thought has me flustered. Or is it flushed? Is that a flush spreading over my chest at the prospect of nudity? But flushes and blushes are precisely what I want to avoid in this scenario. "I'm definitely not wearing it," I say, to drive the point home.

"Actually, you are. We always wear our birthday suits."

I sigh dramatically. "You know what I mean."

"I'm wearing my birthday suit," he says, gesturing to his frame, and for a few deliriously erotic seconds, I imagine him naked.

Strong muscles, carved abs, that sprinkling of chest hair that's the perfect amount of manliness.

My mouth waters.

My stomach flips.

And I reprimand the hell out of my brain, the indecent wench.

*Friends don't picture friends in the buff.*

"Let's try it one more time," I say with a crisp nod and a cool tone. "We'll do it by the book."

He clears his throat, his tone shifting. "Peyton, I have another idea."

I blink. "You do?"

“I do.” He pauses, scrubbing a hand across his chin. “Do you trust me?”

The question is rhetorical. “Of course I do.”

He shakes his head, like that’s the wrong reply. “I know you trust me. But *can* you trust me right now? To take the lead?” His voice is gentle but somehow commanding at the same time. It’s soothing, and the question says he knows me, but he also needs me to let go. To give in to him.

Can I?

Will I stumble if I do?

His eyes lock with mine, and the intensity in his gaze is reassuring, like the security he gave me at his restaurant the other night when he said, *I’ve got you.*

I give the only answer I can. “I trust you.”

“Good. Then let’s do it.”

“If you say so, Fred.”

His lips curve in a crooked grin. “I do say so, Gingersnap.”

He hits play on “Wicked Game” on his phone and sets it on the table at the bottom of the stairs, and the smooth, sultry strains of Chris Isaak float through the air.

The music pulses, low and sexy, like it’s playing in my body, beating inside me. The effect is heady. It sets the mood for the scene.

A scene we’re simply acting.

That’s all this is. Acting and reenacting.

He arches a brow, glances at the stairs, then says in a rumbling, sexy voice, “Been thinking about you all day. Need to get you upstairs and get this off you.”

He has? Oh, dear God. That’s not helping me think friendly thoughts.

*Wait.*

That’s what the hero says in the book.

He memorized it. He learned his lines.

I'm a little relieved he didn't mean it, and a little disappointed too.

But I zoom in on the job. Fortunately, I know my lines too. "Then come and get me," I say, taking that first step in my Louboutins.

The second. And the third.

I glance back. He's right behind me. I wiggle my hips, feeling daring, seductive.

This is when the hero is supposed to tug up the skirt.

But Tristan doesn't lift his hands. Instead, he gestures faintly to the steps ahead of me.

*Keep going, they say.*

I take another step, unsure of how this scene will play out when he's not quite following the choreography.

"Need you all the way naked," he says, gruff and wildly sexy, reciting the hero's next lines.

"So you can have your way with me," I say, like the heroine does. I take another step, then one more.

He's right behind me, and I don't know what's coming next. He's supposed to yank my skirt up.

But he hasn't touched it.

Instead, I feel a faint brush of strong fingers on my waist.

I shudder. The sensation is almost too much for me to make it to the top of the stairs.

But he nods, urging me on, his hands on me till I hit the landing.

This isn't how the scene unfolds in the book. I should be naked by now. I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to be doing when he joins me at the top. I feel every sensation in my body, keenly aware of him behind me and of the thread of possibility that winds around me. What will happen next? What will Tristan do?

I look up at him, my breath in my chest, my heart in my throat, his eyes on me.

“It’s safer here,” he whispers.

And I understand completely what he did.

He abandoned the moves to get me up the stairs safely.

My heart thumps harder.

“And this is where I take your dress off like he does in the book.” His words send a shock wave trembling through me.

I know what to do. I know what to say. I don’t recite the heroine’s lines. I use my own.

“Take it off,” I say, feeling daring.

And daring feels spectacular.

Like taking a chance. Like putting myself out there.

His hands dart out to the hem of my little black dress. With a rough swallow, he slides it up. He’s not hesitant. He doesn’t delay. He lifts it to my waist, only pausing when the bottom of my black teddy appears. His gaze lingers for a moment, then he’s back to the job.

The whisking off.

He yanks up the dress to my breasts.

The trembles I felt before? They’re nothing compared to the full-body shudder I experience as I record this moment.

His hands. The set of his jaw. The fullness of his lips.

One more swoosh of fabric and the dress goes over my head. His fingers brush my arms, my shoulders, my hair. The faint little touches set me aflame as he lets the dress fall to the floor.

I’m hotter than a sidewalk in summertime as I stand before him wearing only a lace plunge teddy and black heels.

The question he asked at the bottom of the steps reverberates in my mind.

*Do I trust him?*



He must know the answer. He must know how much.

Because I'm here, nearly naked, and he made sure I didn't fall.

But sometimes you need to say it twice.

"I trust you." It feels like jumping off a cliff.

"Same," he says, like it's hard to speak even that one word. My gaze slides down his body. His fists are clenched by his sides, and it's as if I've walked in on him in a private act, so I return my focus to his face.

But that feels even more personal because he doesn't stop staring at me, nor do I want him to.

I know that look. It's how I devoured him the other night.

*With hungry eyes.*

He's drinking me in, eating me up, and I want everything about this moment to stretch long into the night.

I want to be gazed at this way forever—with adoration, with lust, and with something I've never seen before.

Something I don't know how to name.

The air is thick with desire, wrapped up in the fading notes of one of the sexiest songs I've ever heard and its final warning not to fall.

He breaks the trance. "Nice teddy." His voice is a mere rasp.

"Thanks," I manage to say.

For a long, delirious moment, the hero's next words hover between us.

*Now let me see how sexy you look on my bed, wearing nothing but that naughty grin.*

I can feel them pulsing in my body.

But he doesn't say them. We've already gone off-script. We're writing new lines, trying new scenes.

And I don't know what happens next.

Tristan scrubs a hand over his stubbled jaw, swallows, and glances away as if it pains him. He bends, grabs the dress, and hands it to me. “Want to go get something to eat? I’m starving.”

*No, I want to shout. I don’t want to eat. I want to finish the scene. I want you to find me on your bed, wearing nothing but a naughty grin.*

And yet, I can’t want that.

My disappointment is chased with relief that he suggested food, an exit.

I need to get out of this zone with him. This lawless land where I’m entertaining wildly dangerous thoughts about my best guy friend.

I have to reset right now. Or else I’ll do something we’ll regret.

“Yeah, I’m ravenous,” I say.

But not for food.



# TRISTAN

Greasy food.

That's the only solution to tonight's dilemma.

Cheap, grungy, hole-in-the-wall grub.

Something to kill the mood of the black dress, the send-all-the-blood-rushing-south teddy, and that precipice.

That fucking precipice at the top of the steps where all I wanted was to haul her in for a kiss. To slide my hands through that silky curtain of hair. To bring her close and tell her I can't stop thinking about her and *need* to have her.

Instead, I choose a Mexican joint that's as dingy as winter is long. We order tacos, chips, guac, and two Diet Cokes, then snag a Formica booth at the back of the shop, the sharp scent of cleaning supplies from a nearby closet making my nose sting.

I'm not thinking of sex now. I have bleach nose.

Nor am I picturing that teddy I bet she's still wearing under the hoodie and jeans she changed into. Fine, I am thinking of the teddy, but I'm trying not to.

I divert all my brain cells to the guacamole as I dip a chip then crunch into it.

"What's Barrett up to tonight?" she asks.

"More play rehearsal. The theater department at his school is intense, especially as the show gets closer. He's working on the set designs. He seems to really like it."

She picks up her taco and takes a bite, then says, “I could see him being a set designer someday. Like for Broadway.”

I smile as I snag another chip then chase it with a drink of soda. “Definitely. And if not that, he’ll be a scientist. He digs science a lot. But hell if I know what it takes to be a scientist. I was terrible at any science classes.”

“Same. I wish there had been a way to be a psych major without taking chemistry. But alas, I couldn’t escape it.”

“You were dead set on studying psych,” I say, recalling our college days—business for me, psychology for her. “Did you ever want to be a shrink or a therapist?”

She shakes her head. “No. I just like understanding what makes us tick.”

“Ah. Have you figured it out yet, Gingersnap?”

“Still working on it.” She digs into her taco, taking another bite and swallowing before she says, “How is he doing though?”

I wipe my mouth with a napkin. “What do you mean? With the set design?”

She shakes her head and sets down her half-eaten taco. “No. Just in general. I know it’s been two years since your mom died, but how do you think he’s holding up?”

Ah, the million-dollar question. I ask myself that daily, but hardly anyone else does anymore. A few months, maybe half a year, seems to be some kind of statute of limitations on grief, when people stop inquiring.

But Peyton never followed those rules. She didn’t follow them in college when my dad passed away, and she didn’t follow them, either, when I lost my mom.

Ironic, in a terribly cruel way, that my mom died right when she’d finally started dating again. She’d met a guy she liked. She was moving on from her own grief, moving ahead into the next phase of her life.

But fate has a way of fucking with you, and the bitch had a field day screwing with my mom. One sunny summer

afternoon, as she was heading to see her new guy and Barrett and I were at the movies, my mom suffered a heart attack in the park.

She died on the way to the hospital, no one with her but the paramedics.

Watching my fifteen-year-old brother break down, kneeling, bawling, clutching the hospital bed when we arrived damn near broke me too.

I was twenty-seven, and the pain of losing her was excruciating. But I'd lived a quarter-century already. I'd made it through my teenage years with both parents, and through most of my twenties with one.

My kid brother was fifteen and had no one but me. I'd have to be enough.

He moved in with me a few days later, and somehow we've fumbled our way through. I found a therapist for him, and over time, he navigated to the other side of grief.

I take a bite of my taco, putting it down before I answer Peyton's question. "I think he's doing okay. And I mean the good *okay*. Not the *eh* non-committal *okay*."

She smiles softly. "Good *okay* is definitely all right." She takes a sip of her drink and sets it back down. "A lot of that is because of you. You know that, right?"

The praise feels undeserved, and I wave it off. "Nah, he's a good kid. We had good parents. And he had a good shrink."

She reaches for my hand, squeezing it. "Yes, that's true. But mostly what he has is you. You've been there for him. You've helped him."

I shake my head. "I didn't do anything special. I did what anyone would do."

She shoots icy death rays at me with her stare. "Stop. Seriously. Why is it so hard for you to accept a compliment?"

I shrug, sliding my hand away from hers. "Maybe because I don't feel like I did anything. And maybe because that wasn't how I was raised."

She doesn't back down but grabs a chip, scoops some guacamole, and lifts her chin defiantly. "Well, I *was* raised that way. And I believe in draping the people I love in compliments. Heck, I give compliments all day long at my store to strangers. But you?" She points at me with the loaded chip. "I want you to hear this. You need to hear this. You're amazing. And you've given your brother support and security. That you feel it's what you had to do doesn't negate that."

She stabs the air again with the chip, the scoop of green wobbling on the edge. "You're there for him every day. You listen, and you encourage him. You set boundaries and give him what he needs. You're only twenty-nine, and you've had to be a parent—and not at a starter level. You need to accept this compliment. Because you're incredible." She finishes her speech with a final jab of the chip, and the dip splats onto the Formica.

A laugh bursts from my throat.

She stares fiercely at me again. "Don't think the errant guacamole exempts you from taking my compliment."

I chuckle. "It kind of does." Reaching for a napkin, I clean the mess. When I look up, the stern stare is gone and she's looking at me sweetly.

"Tristan, you've done good with him. I'm so amazed. And I admire you so much."

Her kind voice, her good heart, together they unlock something in me. Maybe it's the seven layers of self-protective armor. Or possibly it's plain stubbornness.

"Thanks," I say, finally accepting what she's giving me, emotion clogging my throat. "I appreciate it. I'd do anything for him."

Her smile is so soft, so endearing, that it nearly makes me forget I was *this close* to claspng her face on the stairs and growling, *Kiss me*.

Right now, she's the friend she's always been—warm, caring, loving.

She's everything she's ever been to me.

And I have to steer this conversation far away from warm fuzzies and mutual admiration. “So, what do I need to wear to homecoming?”

She wiggles a brow, going with my 180. “Depends if you want me to rip off your shirt.”

*God, yes.* I pick up my taco and bite into the rest of it, putting off a response with a full mouth.

“But I think wear what you usually wear,” she says.

“All I own are Henleys and jeans. Some sweatshirts. And the shirts I bought for the button experiment.”

“You’re not wearing a sweatshirt.” Peering at my eyes like she’s studying them, she hums, then says, “My vote is for a forest-green Henley. It’s very you, so you’ll feel good in it, and it’ll also make your eyes pop even more.”

I laugh. “You sound like you’re talking to a customer.”

“Is that so wrong? Besides, you would look good like that.”

“Yeah?”

“You always look good, Tristan.” There goes my heart again, skipping beats like the idiotic organ it is.

“I don’t think I have one that color,” I say, needing to segue to brass tacks. “I’m not even sure what forest green is.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’ll handle it. Don’t think twice about it.” She sets her chin in her hand. “But what should I wear?”

“I thought you were going as Marie Antoinette?”

“I was just playing around. But I do think I’ll wear a dress.”

“Color me shocked.”

“Barrett will be so bummed I’m not in costume,” she says with an aw-shucks snap of her fingers.

My mind latches onto Barrett’s comments the other night. “I think he has a crush on you.”

She scoffs, her answer emphatic. “He doesn’t.”



“How can you be so sure?”

“He just doesn’t. He likes me in a friendly, big-sister way. The way you turn to the sister of a buddy.”

“Some guys like the sisters of their buddies,” I point out.

She shakes her head. “He doesn’t think of me like that. His interests are elsewhere. Trust me, I’d know.”

My eyebrows rise. I’m intrigued by her comment, curious if all men are that transparent to her. “How would you know?”

She nods, taking another bite. “Younger guys tend to give that stuff away easily.” She gestures to her face. “You can see it in their expressions, their eyes, their gestures.”

Ah, that makes sense. “Do older guys do that too?”

She stops, studies me, then shakes her head. “No, they don’t give away their feelings so easily.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

\* \* \*

After I walk her home and say goodbye on her steps, she yanks me in for one of those classic Peyton hugs.

When I’m this close to her, inhaling her scent, feeling her body, I wonder if I’m giving anything away.

If I’m transparent.

But then, what would I have to be transparent about? What I felt tonight is what any guy would feel when a pretty woman stripped down to nearly nothing. Just a normal bit of lust, that’s all.

After we pull apart, she waggles her fingers goodbye. “See you Saturday, Fred. Isn’t that your busiest day?”

“Of course it is. But I’ve hired good people, so I’m all set.”

“Then I’ll see you on Saturday. I’ll be the woman wearing red.”

The image of her in that bra I picked up the other day flashes before my eyes. Taunting, teasing.

*It's just lust. It's just desire. Nothing more.*

I can't act on it.

For so many reasons, but chief among them is this: I don't want to lose another person I love.

I care about her too much as a friend to risk what we've built. That's what matters.

When she reaches the door to her brownstone, I call out in my best friendly, sarcastic, buddy voice, "See you this weekend, Gingersnap."

I hope it fools her into thinking I only see her as a friend.



# PEYTON

*The Lingerie Devotee: Don't Try This at Home*

*Blog entry*

The name says it all.

A lace plunge teddy.

And plunge I did.

I plunged to my butt. I plunged to my elbow. I plunged nearly all the way down the stairs.

Wait.

Is “plunge” one of those cringeworthy words?

Now that I write it over and over, I fear we might need to send “plunge” the way of “moist,” “pucker,” and “Uranus.”

Let's not use words like “plunge” when referring to sexy lingerie, shall we agree?

So what if the makers of this satiny garment call it a lace plunge teddy? I say we give it a new name. The lace V teddy, because it cuts a V down my neck, between my breasts, to the top of my belly button.

V indeed.

And last night, it gave me confidence. It helped me radiate desire, and it boosted my spirits.

But the thing is, asking a man to disrobe you while you walk up the stairs in heels is like trying to run the egg-and-spoon race while also carrying a wily cat in your arms and balancing a bucket of water on your head.

IT DOESN'T WORK.

Or, really, it works phenomenally well if your goal is to twist your ankle.

My handsome scene partner and I reenacted the staircase strip four times last night. Each time, we landed on our butts, elbows, hips, or the wrong side of our feet.

The problem is, you're *not* supposed to land. You're supposed to parade upstairs, looking sensual, shooting sexy-times eyes at your lover, and sashaying to Sade.

But where there's a will, there's a way.

We were determined to make this scene work, so we found a way. Or, rather, he did.

He took the lead, whispering naughty words and deeds in his smoky, gravelly voice as he followed me up the steps.

Then, when we reached the top step, he whisked off my dress.

In one bold, swift, commanding move.

Like a hero in a romance novel, casually, coolly dropping the fabric to the floor.

And my silky black clothes pooled by my feet as I stood wearing only heels and a teddy that exposed most of my flesh.

Most.

But not all.

Plenty was left to the imagination.

And that's why I say don't try the staircase shimmy at home. But *do* indulge in a piece of clothing that will make you feel adored when the one you want tugs everything else off you.

In short? Make this move your own.

Xoxo

*The Lingerie Devotee*

Find me at You Look Pretty Today on Madison Avenue



# PEYTON

When I walk into Gin Joint on Friday night to see my girls, I check if I have toilet paper on my Jimmy Choos.

Nope.

Maybe a leaf fell into my hair? I brush a hand over my head as I make my way to the purple velvet couch Amy and Lola have commandeered in the center of the lounge.

With the way my two best friends stare at me, like I'm a giraffe walking backward, something has to be amiss.

I run my hands down my leopard-print skirt, then check my backside. "Do I have lint on my shirt? Dirt on my nose? A sign taped to my back that says I ate two whole chocolate bars for lunch? Because I swear, if Marley ratted me out about my midday Lulu's Chocolates scarf session, that girl is toast."

Amy blinks, holds up a stop-sign hand. "Wait. Your dessert compartment is that big? It holds two chocolate bars?"

I sit next to her, crossing my legs, answering primly, "It wasn't my dessert compartment. It was my lunch compartment."

Lola bows. "I had no idea it was possible to eat two chocolate bars for lunch. I humble myself before you, O Great Chocolate Queen."

I pat her curls. "You may rise now, my subject." Taking a moment, I stare at them like they're crazy. "Guys! No, I didn't eat two chocolate bars." I lower my voice, cupping my hand to



my mouth. “I had *one*. But seriously. Why are you staring at me with those you’re-so-naughty eyes?”

Amy gently shoves my leg. “Because you are naughty. Ahem.” She clears her throat, adopts a sultry tone. “*But do indulge in a piece of clothing that will make you feel adored when the one you want tugs everything else off you.*”

I shrug as a waitress swings by and asks for my order. I eye Amy’s drink.

“This one’s called Last Word. It’s delish,” Amy says. “Get it.”

“I’ll have the same, thanks,” I tell the woman, then return to my friends. “So, what’s the issue with my blog?”

Lola blinks rapidly. “What’s the issue? You just declared in a public forum that you want Tristan.”

“No. No, that’s not what I said.” I jerk my head back, shocked they’d leap to that conclusion. “I did not. I was writing about ...”

But I don’t entirely know how to fill in the blank. I was writing about whether romance novel scenes work. About walking up stairs. Was I writing about reenacting desire?

Or rekindling it?

Lola does know how to close the thought, it seems, since she jumps in. “You were writing about how you felt. With Tristan.”

Her statement—bold, possibly true—rings like a gong.

And with it, a host of nerves descends on me. Nerves I haven’t felt quite like this. Because this time, the nerves aren’t about what I’m doing. They’re about what I’m feeling.

Or, rather, what I can’t let myself feel.

I recalibrate. “It was an experiment, and I was writing about it sort of as if I’m an everywoman. I was saying, as an everywoman, you want to feel desired when the guy, or gal, stares at you like they want to ravish you.”

Amy points at me excitedly. “That’s how he looked at you! Like he wanted to ravish you. I knew it. Called it.”

She offers a high five to Lola, who smacks it.

“You’re placing bets on how Tristan looked at me?”

They nod in unison, twin torturesses.

“And you guys are my friends, right? Just want to make sure.”

“We are your people.” Amy pats my knee. “Now, how did it feel when he stared at you like he wanted to eat you up like those chocolate bars?”

*Decadent.*

I wave a hand, wishing I could erase this conversation because it’s treading on dangerous shores. “I wrote about it. It was an experiment. I wasn’t saying he’s the one I want.”

Lola arches a brow, her expression shifting. “But do you? Do you want him?”

“Because it seems like maybe you do from those posts,” Amy adds, a gentleness in her tone.

My throat hitches. My breath comes fast with the swell of rising emotions I do my best to deny. “I was just trying to capture a moment. To write broadly about how a woman might feel if she were in the shoes of a romance heroine.”

“Did you feel like one?” Amy asks, all teasing stripped from her tone.

Did I?

*Yes.*

In my bones. In my heart. In my mind.

But I can’t answer with words. If I speak, the reality might terrify me. I can only nod.

Lola inches closer. “Does that scare you?”

*Yes.*

But I don't want to give voice to the fear. I keep the question in my head a little longer, mulling it over, turning it this way and that. Maybe because I don't want to experience all this strange newness by myself, I manage to whisper, "So much," as the waitress brings me the drink.

"One Last Word for you," she declares.

Amy gestures to the waitress. "Add it to my tab."

The waitress leaves, and I pick up the glass.

"Why does it scare you?" Amy asks, returning to the question.

The question I need to figure out how to answer. "For so many reasons," I say, then I take a drink.

I don't want to list them all, because the list would occupy a sheet of paper so long it'd scroll out the door.

I knock back some of the beverage, savoring the clean, neat taste of the gin, then I turn the conversation in another direction. "The blog is working. Business has been picking up more than I could hope after only a few days," I say, rapping my knuckles on the metal table in front of me.

"That's great," Lola says with a smile.

I prattle on about the slight uptick in traffic to the store, and the comments on the blog itself, which is quickly picking up speed. "It's great to see the strategy working. Tristan said I should put more of myself into the blog, and that customers would connect with that."

Amy's eyebrows rise above her glasses. "I don't think your customers are the only ones connecting to the blog."

"I think *he* is too," Lola adds.

My brow creases. "Did he say something to you?"

Lola laughs, shaking her head. "He doesn't have to, Peyton. I've seen the way you two are together. How he makes you laugh, and how he pokes fun at you in the most deadpan way. And how you give it right back to him."

"Because we're friends. We always have been," I say.

“Right. That’s true. But you weren’t exactly hanging out with him all the time when you were with Gage.”

“And that’s why I’m glad that we *can* hang out again now. Like we did in college, and after college.”

Lola takes a deep breath, as if she’s steeling herself to say something hard. “I’m not trying to side with Captain Infidelity ...” My shoulders tighten. I can hear the edge in her voice, the slice of tough love she’s about to serve up. “But do you think maybe Gage was onto something when he didn’t want you to spend time with Tristan?”

My jaw ticks. “I was faithful to Gage. I’ve been faithful to everyone I’ve been with. I would never cheat.”

Lola squeezes my knee, but I shrink away.

She’s insistent though. “Peyton, I know that.”

“We know that,” Amy adds. “You’re a faithful person.”

“I am,” I insist. But why so strongly? It’s nothing but the truth. “I was faithful mentally, emotionally, and physically in every way to everyone I’ve ever been with.”

“Of course you were. But you’re also an honest person, and Gage knew you’d kissed Tristan. You told him about the kiss,” Amy says.

“Yes, because otherwise I would have been keeping it a secret, and there was no reason for it to be a secret. I was honest with him about everything. Telling Gage I kissed Tristan was the right thing to do.”

“Yes, it was. It absolutely was. And Gage is a total asshat,” Lola says. “But he’s also a human who was probably more jealous than he ever let on. So even if you weren’t thinking of Tristan as boyfriend material when you were with Gage, you were certainly thinking of him that way once upon a time, weren’t you? It wasn’t just a random kiss in college, was it?”

I drop my head in my hands, the past crawling over me, digging its heel into my back.

Memories of college, of the times Tristan and I spent together before the dance, flicker in my mind. After he

finished work, we'd meet for late-night study sessions for our history class, or we'd share notes for Spanish. On weekends, we'd go to the on-campus diner for milkshakes and fries, then salads the next day because we felt guilty about the fries. Sometimes we went out with our group of friends, and sometimes it was just us. He told me stories about teaching his brother how to make a pizza from scratch then showed me pictures of a young Barrett covered in tomato sauce and flour.

We played blackjack and made up new rules, and we read articles in *The Onion* out loud to each other in the snack bar, each doing our best to make the other laugh like a hyena.

We were friends.

Except for that one night.

I'd wanted more than that one night. I thought about him all through winter break, wondering, wanting.

Was he the one for me?

After his father passed away, we returned so seamlessly to friendship that it was as if the kiss had never happened. We never spoke of it. He gave no sign he wanted anything more.

But maybe Gage *was* right to be jealous of Tristan. Maybe it's normal to be jealous of any man your girlfriend has kissed.

I look up, seeing the patience in Amy's and Lola's eyes, pure friendship in their expressions.

"Yes, once upon a time, I wanted more," I admit.

A weight lifts from my shoulders.

But only for a moment. Then it crashes down heavier than before, a looming reminder of the risks.

Because that was in the past, and this is the present. "But there's too much at stake now," I continue. "And sometimes, chances slip by for a reason. I think we were meant to be friends. With friendship, I can't lose him. A quick romp, a one-night fling—those are too risky. Relationships can go up in flames. Look what happened to me."

I waggle my naked ring finger. “Three years with Gage and what do I have? Ten grand I poured into my store, and that’s all well and good. But I loved him, and he hurt me. I care so deeply for Tristan that the thought of losing him makes me physically ill.” I wrap my arms around my belly. “If I even tried to pursue something, acting on whatever this ...” I gesture wildly, searching for words. “This *vibe* is, then what if it goes belly-up? What if it turns into the next bare ring finger?”

“He’s not like Gage,” Amy points out.

“But that’s not even the issue,” I add.

“I know,” she says quietly. “You’re not worried he’d cheat. You’re worried you’d ruin the friendship if you let anything happen.”

“Yes, because relationships are risky, but friendships are solid. Look at us now. We wouldn’t be friends if we’d fallen into bed ten years ago. I need him in my life too much.”

Amy raises her glass and says, “Let’s drink to friendship.”

Lola chimes in. “Friendship makes the world go round.”

“Exactly. I don’t want to lose you ladies ever, and I feel the same about Tristan. If I’m not going to sleep with you, I’m not going to sleep with him.”

That decision felt right and solid when I said it to my girls. It’s harder to remember when Tristan knocks on my door the next night.



# TRISTAN

I spend the morning at the restaurant, managing inventory, paying bills, talking to suppliers.

My sous chef and I devise the specials, and I make small plates during lunch hour. When the rush dies down, I shift back to the office, finish some paperwork, and then pack up for the day, since my sous and the staff and crew can handle the night crowd.

Besides, I have a scene to attend.

And tonight's scene involves turning the tables on her.

I'm ripping off her panties, and she's going to wear red.

*Red.* Flipping red.

Which won't help my resistance.

Hence, the hour and a half I spend at the gym with the weights.

And on the treadmill.

And the elliptical too, for good measure.

As I leave, Linc walks in with Amy beside him. From the looks of it, she's showing him how her phone slides into the pocket of her bright-pink exercise pants.

She removes it with the showmanship of a magic trick. "See? We seriously need to plan a gift book about all the little things in life that bring joy, from pockets to hedgehogs to peeling a clementine in one strip," I hear her say.



Linc nods thoughtfully. “What about oranges though?”

“It’s impossible to peel an orange in one go.”

I cross their path, stopping to cut in on their conversation. “It’s not impossible. Ever tried a mandarin?”

Amy blinks. “I stand corrected.”

“Also, some grapefruits can be disrobed in one fell swoop,” I say, then I realize I just walked into innuendo quicksand.

I wait for Amy to take the bait, to toss out something like “But how many licks does it take to disrobe a redhead wearing the sexiest pair of panties you’ve ever seen?”

But she doesn’t say that. What’s stranger is that she says nothing. Amy rarely takes the fifth.

Linc simply raises a brow. “Have fun tonight.”

Amy smiles, shooting me a friendly grin. “May the force of romance novels be with you.”

They walk past the weight machines, and I scratch my jaw. It’s unlike the two of them to resist wordplay.

It’s almost as if they have some sort of secret.

Or something they don’t want to say.

But hell if I can figure out what it means.

Or if it means anything at all.

\* \* \*

I return home, and as I walk into my building, my phone pings with a text.

**Peyton:** Are your teeth nice and sharp?

**Tristan:** Yes. I gnawed on a tree earlier today. Hung out with a pack of beavers. Chowed down.

**Peyton:** Excellent. So they’re perfectly pointy.

I reach the stairwell and take the steps two by two as I answer her.

**Tristan:** Definitely. Let me guess—you want to test out a scene where the hero rips duct tape with his teeth before he hoists a couch on one shoulder?

**Peyton:** Yes. I want you to do lots of manly stuff like that.

**Tristan:** Manly stuff, check.

**Peyton:** Also, it turns out that not only does the hero in this book like to shred panties ... he likes to shred them with his teeth.

I trip.

My phone flies out of my hand and skids across the concrete landing as I fall on the staircase, tumbling over my own feet.

My knee smarts, screaming from the impact. Glancing behind me, I see no one there to witness my stumble, and I breathe a huge sigh of relief.

Hell, that was more than a stumble.

That belongs on epic fails on YouTube. That should be a PSA not to text while walking up stairs.

Or down stairs.

I push up and grab my phone. Dragging my hand through my hair, I shake off the momentary pain, but I can't shake off the thought of tonight's task.

Testing the rip-ability of panties with my hands would have been challenging enough. A true feat of strength, but not an insurmountable one, since she'd be wearing the "bathing-suit-style birthday suit," her words. She said she planned to wear a thong under the lace panties I was supposed to tear off her.

What was I supposed to say to that?

*Thanks, but no thanks?*

My brain was shouting *hell yeah* to any and all of those options. Aloud, I'd kept it to a simple "Sure."

Now, she doesn't want me to rip her panties off with my hands. She wants me to use my teeth.

Which means my face will be *this close* to heaven.

I don't know if this is a gift from the angels or a temptation by the devil, but my money is on the latter, especially after she sends me a few hundred words from the scene.

I'm so screwed.

I push open the door to my floor, stride down the hall, and unlock my apartment.

Music assaults my ears, but in a good way.

A hip-hop song blasts across the apartment, which is filled with the scent of something yummy. Is that cookie dough? Or baked pretzels? Or both?

Whichever, the smell and the music take my mind off of devils and angels.

After shutting the door, I head into the kitchen. Barrett is laughing, his back to me, stirring batter in a mixing bowl and shaking his hips while Rachel sings into a spatula microphone.

Head back, eyes closed, she belts out some Adele-like harmony, layering onto the tune.

Barrett joins in, stirring and singing and laughing.

"Hey there."

Barrett swivels around, waves a spoon at me. Rachel beams, shouting, "Hi, Mr. Alexander!" over the song.

Barrett reaches for his phone, lowering the volume. "Yo."

I meet our guest's eyes. "Rachel, you don't have to call me Mr. Alexander."

“I do though. You’re a mister! How are you, Mr. Alexander?” She flashes her bright smile at me, looking like a teenage Anna Kendrick, as Peyton once described her.

“Excellent. What are you two up to?”

“We’re baking cookie dough pretzels, and then we’re going to take them to some of the tech crew tonight,” Barrett offers, his grin matching hers. Damn, he lights up when she’s around—I’m talking Broadway-marquee wattage.

“Yeah, because the tech crew needs love too,” Rachel says, offering a palm to high-five.

He smacks it, snickering, and they have an insider humor going on. Maybe he has manned up? I smile privately, hoping he’ll have his heart’s desire—the girl he adores.

Rachel returns to the batter, tossing a question over her shoulder. “And what are you up to, Mr. Alexander?”

“I’m going to see Peyton in a few,” I say.

“Not dressed like that, I hope?” she asks.

I glance down at my basketball shorts and sweat-soaked T-shirt.

“Ladies don’t like basketball shorts, don’t you know that?” Barrett teases, flashing me an evil grin as he lobs my fashion advice back at me.

I pluck at the shirt. “I’m obviously not wearing this to see her.”

Rachel wipes a flour-covered hand dramatically across her forehead. “Good. Because I was going to have to go all fashion police on you.”

“And what exactly are you doing tonight with Miss Valencia?” Barrett asks oh so casually.

“Just hanging out.”

They burst into matching peals of laughter.

Rachel points at me. “You’re blushing, Mr. Alexander.”

Ah, hell. Am I as red as a tomato? No way. “I’m not.”

“Hey, handsome,” Barrett says in a torch-singer tone. “Why don’t you put on a corset and go see the one you want?”

I will never live this down.

I wave them off and head for my bathroom.

“Don’t forget to wear something pretty, Mr. Alexander.”

I shut the door. No wonder he likes her. She’s just like him.

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, I’m dressed and ready, wearing jeans and a Henley, my hair a little wet at the ends.

But am I truly ready?

Each session with Peyton is a new clue in an escape room, each mystery tougher than the last. Solve it and you can leave with your sanity intact. If you don’t, time runs out while you dissolve into a puddle of lust on the floor.

But it’s more than lust I feel for her.

So much more.

That’s the twist I can’t solve in this Peyton romance-novel-reenactment escape room.

How the hell am I going to handle being that close to her? What kind of superman human shield do I need to lock in place?

I pinch the bridge of my nose and remind myself that I’ve seen her in a bikini. I’ve seen pics of her in lingerie. Tonight I’m an actor, and I’m going to take home an Oscar.

On my way out, I find Barrett and Rachel huddled with his phone on the couch, taking selfies. Looks like they’re messing around with filters, something I will never understand the allure of.

“Yes. Send that one of us,” she says.

I clear my throat. “Hey. I’m going to head out. What are you two doing?”

“Just a group chat with the crew,” Rachel says. “Eli and Chloe, and Maggie and Jacob.”

“The ones you’re taking the cookie pretzels to?”

Barrett taps his nose. “You catch on fast, Einstein.”

I gesture to the door. “And on that note, I’m going to get out of here, which will sorely limit your targets for sarcasm, but I still wish you a good night.”

Barrett winks. “I wish you a good night with your homecoming date.” He nods at Rachel. “He’s taking Peyton to homecoming.”

I’m about to fire back with *Well, are you taking Rachel?* when I remember—I’m the parent. Or the closest thing he has to one.

Barrett points a finger at me, making a circle. “What is tonight’s test? Will she be testing how you smell? Because I can loan you my aftershave. It’s pretty sex-ay.”

Rachel grins. “Maybe you should do that thing in the movies where you run across a field of flowers and you catch her in your arms. Have you thought about that for a reenactment?”

I wave them off. “I’ll make sure to let her know the flower field was your idea.”

Barrett salutes me. “See you later. If you need cheesy pop music for that big moment, let us know.”

“We’ll make you a playlist. Maybe some Celine or Mariah,” Rachel calls out as I leave.

“I’m all good,” I say, then I get the hell out of the firing range of those two sarcasm monsters.

Their advice is good though. Not the field of flowers advice. But the *bring something* advice.

On the walk over, I pop into a bodega, grab a little gift, then use the cool fall air to clear my mind the rest of the way to her place.

This is an experiment.

Research.

That's all.

But when I reach her apartment and she opens the door, all those reminders run, hop, skip, and jump away.

And it's not because of how she looks, though she's so damn pretty in a light-blue dress.

It's what she says.

"Listen to this voicemail a customer left for me." In one smooth move, she grabs my arm, tugs me inside, and hits play on her phone as the door closes.

*Hi Peyton,*

*It's Sandra here! Just wanted to leave a little message! I stopped by your store the other day and picked up some new pj's. Ah, how I love my satin jammies—they're the perfect way to end the day. You were so helpful, aiding me in selecting just the right set. You remind me of Mimi. She always had time for every customer, talking to them, getting to know them. She'd be so proud of you, carrying on her legacy. And I know she'd be proud of your blog too. I can see where you get your spirit from!*

*P.S. You should stock knee pads for staircase use! It makes it so much more enjoyable! Helps with rug burn too!*

*See you soon!*

Peyton sighs happily, brings her hand to her chest, then smiles. "Is it weird that I'm happy that she thinks my Mimi would be proud of me for selling undies well?"

I smile, shaking my head, my heart warming at how radiant she is over a message like this. The simplest things make her shine. "No. You have a connection with your

grandmother. And you don't just do what you do to make a sale. You do it because it makes your customers feel better about themselves. You make them happy."

She points at me, doing a dance with her fingers. "See? You get my love of underwear."

*Does she have any idea how much?* "Yeah, I think I do."

"Also, you look ..." She stops, and her eyes travel up and down my frame. "You look great."

The way she says it, it's as if she's stripped bare for me, like her voice holds the raw truth of her heart.

Three simple words. *You look great.*

They burrow into me, reminding me this is so much more than an experiment.

That's the big problem.

I hold up the bag I picked up on the way, needing to get out of the line of lust-fire. "I stopped at a store. The first crop of clementines are in. Did you know you can sometimes peel one in a single go?" I ask, making small talk as I cross the few feet into her kitchen.

"Yes. I love it when that happens. It's sort of like the satisfaction you get when you perfectly flip an egg or a pancake."

"Exactly. Want to try?"

She's right behind me in the kitchen, so close I can smell her body lotion. It's cherry blossom, and I'm going to need another coat of armor. Maybe there's a spare under the sink? In the hall closet?

Or possibly I can find it in the clementine trick. Yes, I'm sure my kitchen skills will solve this escape-room clue. Worth trying, at least.

"Not this second, because I have something for you," she says, waylaying my plan, and I spin around, surprised.

She's holding a gift bag with a silver bow tied around the handles. Because of course she is. Because that's what she



does.

My heart dares to thump harder, and I have got to get it under control. I take the bag, untie the bow, and peer inside.

I smile when I see what she's gotten. "Forest green," I say, running my finger over the soft fabric.

"Take it out. Hold it up."

"Seriously?"

"Yes," she says, stomping her foot.

"Fine, fine." I tug the shirt from the bag, pretending to model it.

She nods approvingly. "Very you. Now you're all set for homecoming. And the clementines will go perfectly with my drink choice for tonight."

As I fold the shirt, I ask what's on tap.

She swivels around, grabs a bottle of tequila, and waggles it. "Shots."

Sounds like a good idea. Shots equal more armor.

She lines up two glasses, and I peel a clementine, all in one neat piece.

She whistles her appreciation as she pours the drinks, and we lift our glasses.

"What are we toasting to?" I ask, some ancient part of me hoping she'll say, *To us*.

She licks her lips, takes a breath, and seems to pause on the words. Then, with a rise of her chin, she declares, "To red lingerie and friendship."

That less-than-subtle hint is all I need to know.

Besides, it's precisely what I *should* drink to.

I down the tequila in two seconds, the fiery burn a stark and necessary reminder of reality.

I pour another shot and swallow it whole, then I grab a slice of clementine.

She finishes her drink, takes the fruit, and sets her phone in its stand. "I made a playlist. Mood music."

I hope it's not Chris Isaak again. I'm not sure my heart can handle that. "Metal music would be perfect," I say, dead serious.

With a roll of her eyes, she laughs and says she'll be right back.

As she leaves, Aerosmith's "I Don't Want to Miss A Thing" begins.

Well, that's not exactly Ozzy Osbourne.

Shoving my hand through my hair, I repeat her words while she's gone.

*Lingerie and friendship.*

That's what this is. That's what it should be. That's all she wants.

Now I know. Whatever I've been feeling these last few nights is one-sided. Like it's always been.

And it's time for this unrequited shit to end.

After her five scenes end in a few more days, I'm going to have to mix a drink that'll make me forget I ever had any feelings for her.

But I can't forget tonight.

Because when she returns a few minutes later, all the air rushes out of my lungs.

I can't think. I can't speak. I am on fire, burning alive.

Peyton, the woman I fell in love with ten years ago, wears a black satin robe that ends at her thighs.

Black heels raise her up a few inches.

And the lace of her bra strap peeks out on one side.

"I wore the red for you," she says, so softly, so faintly I'm not quite sure I heard her right.

I don't even know if it's a line from the novel. It doesn't feel familiar, but hell if I know anything anymore.

I laser in on the task, my slim-to-nil chance of beating the ticking clock.

"Do you want me to say the lines?" I ask as calmly as I can, but even so, the words come out like smoke.

"Yes." Hers sound like an invitation.

*Lingerie and friendship.*

I repeat it as I walk over to where she stands, poised against the wall.

"Did you wear this for me?" I fiddle with the satin ribbon at her waist, like the hero does.

"Just for you," she whispers.

Taking a deep breath, I untie the sash, the two sides of her robe falling open.

I shut my eyes briefly. I have to. She's so fucking beautiful.

When I open them, I half wish she'd changed into sweatpants. But she's the woman in red lace, with a bra that boosts her breasts, panties that should be worshipped, and a soft, supple body I want to have against mine.

I glance at the panties, noticing the lines for the tiny second-layer thong underneath. *Shame*. "These are pretty," I say, raising a brow, like the hero does. "Too bad they won't be on for long."

"Take them off," she murmurs, and her voice sounds different. Hotter, more sensual.

It's a trick. It's a tease. It's magic, that's all.

*Don't be fooled.*

I say what the hero says. "You know my favorite way to remove them."

A smile seems to tug at her lips. "That's what I want."

I kneel before her, and this—this is where I earn my Oscar for resistance. *I'd like to thank the Academy.*

Because, seriously? How the hell am I supposed to rip these off with my teeth without touching her? Would have been helpful for the hero to leave a step-by-step guide. Maybe a wiki or a how-to video.

Oh wait. He got to touch the heroine.

Lucky fucker.

I give it my best shot, dipping my face toward her, keenly aware of how ridiculous this is—I'm about to tear off her underwear for the sake of a blog.

Then walk away.

*Must make light of this.*

I glance up at Peyton and chomp my teeth, pretending I'm an animal about to devour its dinner.

But she doesn't laugh. The expression on her face is not one of amusement.

It's something else entirely.

Something I don't want to name.

With my arms at my sides, I bite at the top of her panties near her hip, and then briefly wonder what the hell to do with my hands.

"Put your hands on my ass," she says, like she can read my mind, or maybe my body language.

"It'll be easier that way," she adds.

"Right, easier," I murmur around the panties in my mouth, then slide my hands around her body, cupping her cheeks.

Holy fuck. She feels spectacular. Soft and smooth and so damn close.

Too close.

I'm losing my mind like this. I need to get out of this trap of desire, but it's a force of its own, shrouding me.

I try again, tugging at the lace, and she trembles the slightest bit. I hear a tiny hitch of her breath, testing my resolve.

I need to just get this over with and leave.

I draw a deep breath, ready to yank with everything I have, but I freeze when I feel her touch my hair.

That's not in the script.

The way she threads her hands through my hair like a lover—that's not in the scene at all.

I let myself give a name to the way she looked at me moments ago.

She looked at me with arousal.

Now she's touching me the same way too.



# PEYTON

There are reasons to resist crossing the line.

So many reasons.

And then there is *this*.

My best friend, on his knees, about to reenact an intimate scene.

Maybe I'll regret my actions in the morning.

Maybe I'll regret them in a few minutes.

But right now? With my playlist shifting to Janelle Monae and him looking at me with you're-so-beautiful in his eyes, I can't regret this feeling.

This wish.

This wild, powerful, almost painful desire.

I have to know what it's like to be touched by someone I trust. How it feels to be cherished.

And I know, without a doubt, he'll touch me that way.

I know, too, that I want Tristan desperately.

Maybe more than the woman in the book wants her man.

In this moment, I'm made entirely of emotion. Of desire. My skin tingles, and my body is awash with heat.

My heart stutters, longing for him.

I can't just playact this scene.

Or perhaps I simply don't want to.

I run my fingers through his hair, savoring the soft feel of his thick, dark strands.

"I wore the red for you," I say, repeating my words from earlier. *My words*. They're not in the scene. They're only mine, and they're wholly true. "I know you love red."

He stares up at me with so much intensity in his hazel eyes, so much desire. It's terrifying the way he looks at me. And wonderful too.

"I do. Love it so much," he says, his voice low and husky.

I shudder from the sheer magnitude of this moment. From the reality of what I'm about to do.

*Jump.*

"I know," I whisper, then I thread my fingers through his hair, curling them around his head, loving the feel of him. I guide him to my thigh, directing him.

He lets out a shuddery breath, then presses a ghost of a kiss on my bare leg.

I gasp.

The feel of his lips is extraordinary. The touch of his hands is utterly erotic. He shifts from cupping my ass cheeks to squeezing and kneading, bringing me closer.

And, like that, we cross the line of friendship.

We vault over it as he kisses my thigh, my hip, and moves up my belly. His lips travel across my skin, turning me liquid, transforming me into a molten woman.

He reaches my breasts, kissing the swell of one, then the other. When he arrives at my neck, his hands are on my waist, and his lips caress the hollow of my throat.

I shudder, murmuring, gasping all at once.

I'm in another realm, where passion rules the night and choices narrow to one—the choice is *touch*.



He kisses my neck, my jaw, the shell of my ear, his trim beard rasping deliciously across my skin. Then he stops, plants his palms on the wall behind me, and meets my eyes. I've never seen someone look at me the way he does. The intensity, the desire is almost too much.

“Kiss me,” I whisper, desperation coloring my tone.

“I want to kiss you all night long,” he says. Then his lips meet mine, and I am lost—completely lost in the sensation.

In the brush of his lips, the feel of his body, the power of his kiss.

He's not soft or gentle. He's all man, all hunger, and he kisses me like I'm the most succulent dish he's ever tasted. He seals his mouth to mine like he owns me, like he already knows the taste of me.

Like he wants me with a wild desperation.

Looping my hands into his hair again, I thread my fingers through the strands, playing with the ends.

He sighs against my mouth, his body trembling, and I smile inside, knowing he likes how I touch him.

I want him to. I want him to like everything I do. To feel everything I feel. Lowering his right hand, he cups my jaw, brushing his thumb over my chin as he kisses me.

Somehow this takes the kiss even higher, makes it even hotter. It's like he's talking with his hands, saying how much he needs me.

I need him just as much.

But I need more than kissing.

So much more.

I break the kiss, grinning as I reach for his hand. He's quiet, letting me lead. I swallow roughly, then guide his hand down my body. He shudders as I go, and we blaze a trail down my breasts and over my belly. When we reach the top of my panties, he takes over, sliding his hand between my legs.

“Oh hell,” he groans, his eyes squeezing shut as he feels my wetness through the lace, and the little thong too.

His fingers trace lines over me, then he seems to collect himself, issuing a command. “Turn around.”

“Against the wall?”

“Yes.”

I do as I’m told, thrilling at the confidence in his voice, the dirty need.

I turn, and as I go, I slide off the robe so I’m only in my red lace.

“God, yes. You’re so fucking incredible,” he says, then presses his big body against my back.

I gasp when I feel the outline of his erection, thick and insistent.

He slides my hands up the wall, above my head, holding them there with one hand. Then his other arm glides around my body, over my waist and down, his fingers dipping inside my panties, touching me while his lips press against my neck again.

Twin sensations—his fingers gliding between my legs, his lips traveling across my neck.

I moan and writhe, wriggling against his hands, arching into his lips.

He plays with me, rubbing and touching me where I need him most, winding me up, driving me wild.

“You feel spectacular,” he growls, and I do feel that way—because of him. Because of how he touches me. “You’re so fucking soft. So wet.”

I can’t even answer. I don’t know what to say. All I can say is “Yes” as he strokes and thrusts and sends me toward the edge.

His hungry mouth consumes me, kissing my neck fiercely, reverently, as he fucks me with his fingers.

All these sensations collide in a tightening in my belly, an exquisite tension in my legs. Then I break, gasping and crying.

“Oh God, oh God, yes. Oh my God.”

I fall apart with him, regretting nothing. Only wanting more.

When I come down from the high, I turn around, my legs like jelly, my brain high on dopamine. I clasp his cheek. “Will you please take me to bed now?”

His grin is wicked, and I don't ever want to forget the way he's looking at me right this second. “I will.”

It sounds like the answer to a prayer.



# PEYTON

I don't know if this is a vivid dream or heightened reality.

Reality has never felt as blissful, as unexpected, as it does when I stand in front of my king-size bed as Tristan lifts a hand to my chest, his fingers featherlight as he flicks open the front clasp on my bra.

I release a shuddering breath.

I'm getting naked for my friend.

He's stripping me down to nothing.

I want this so badly, and I'm terrified at the same time.

What does this mean? Where do we go from here?

But I *need* what's next.

Need it more than chocolate and lace.

When my bra falls open, my breasts revealed to him, a gust of breath rushes from his lips.

"You're so stunning," he whispers, his voice rough as gravel and yet dusted in honey at the same damn time. Like he can't believe he's looking at me like this.

But I feel the same about him.

I can't quite fathom that this strong, gorgeous man who I desperately wanted years ago is undressing me. For several surreal seconds, I'm sure I'm living a fantasy.

"I like the way you look at me," I say, needing to be sure this is real life, and holy hell, that felt good to say.

He shakes his head, like this is all a dream to him too. He cups my breasts, and we both groan at the same time.

He fondles them but doesn't linger long. On a fast track for total nudity, his hands skate down my stomach and slip into my panties. He slides them, and the thong, down my legs, his breath hitching as I'm revealed.

Shamelessly, he gazes up and down my body as he helps me step out of the lace.

When he rises, he glides a hand around to my ass, dips his mouth to my neck, and whispers, "Let's leave your shoes on."

A tremble radiates through me. "Better to wrap around your hips that way."

He jerks back, stares at me, then quirks his lips. "You dirty woman." He presses a kiss to my jaw. "You can leave your shoes on with me anytime, you dirty, beautiful, fucking sexy woman."

*Woman.*

He calls me "woman," not "girl."

And that turns me on even more.

But what would make me molten is seeing him.

I play with the waistband of his shirt. "My turn to strip you."

"Don't let me hold you back." His tone shifts to playful, his eyes twinkling with mischief. But the lightness fades once more as I lift his shirt, raising it over his head and dropping it to the floor.

The enormity of this choice echoes in my mind and sears in my brain. I'm doing this. *We're* doing this.

Damn the consequences.

My eager hands are ahead of my mind, my fingers trailing down the firm expanse of his chest, playing with the most delicious smattering of hair. Trembling, I continue my travels, an explorer traversing a new land.

He seems to sense I need this—this moment—to revel in the brand-new territory, to discover my best friend in this new way. He’s still as stone, letting me take this journey, like a cat in a new apartment, checking out every nook and corner.

The V of his abs. The grooves in his flat stomach. The happy trail that leads to where I want to be.

My fingers wander across the planes of his belly as I trace every carved inch of him, mesmerized by his body. Lifting my chin, I meet his gaze. Desire has darkened his eyes once more. His hazel irises shimmer with lust—a lust that heats me up.

“You’re kind of hard everywhere,” I whisper, then shake my head, correcting myself. I’m so lost in touching him that I can’t speak properly. “Not *kind of*. You *are*,” I emphasize, moving my hands to his arms, running them up his toned forearms to his biceps.

He’s no longer a statue. He reaches for my waist, jerking my body close to his, my skin against his half-dressed frame. “Yes, I’m hard everywhere, Peyton. *Everywhere*.”

As close as he holds me, my hip is the lucky recipient of the evidence, and I feel just how much he wants me. I shudder, my voice barely a whisper as I say, “I better finish getting you undressed.”

“Yes, you better.”

I nibble on the corner of my lip, both insanely aroused by and slightly nervous about what we’re doing. Somewhere in the back of my mind, or perhaps it’s in the front, I’m acutely aware I should say something before we do the deed. The requisite *are we okay with this* check-in.

*Hey, Tristan. Real quick. We won’t let sex ruin our friendship, right?*

*’Course not. Friends with benefits sounds cool.*

*Awesome. I thought so too. Let me just get these pesky clothes off you right now.*

But I don’t want to lose the intensity of this moment. It’s too perfect. Too wonderful in its own right.

Besides, of course we're okay with this. We can handle this.

And I want to keep experiencing all the wonder of undressing him.

I unbutton his jeans, unzip them, and push them over his hips.

He helps me along, kicking off his shoes and shedding his jeans, until he's down to only black boxer briefs that hide nothing. My mouth waters, and desire flickers through me like strobe lights in a disco.

I can't wait.

I need him.

Need *this*.

I strip off his boxers, and my lips part in admiration and desire when his cock springs free. He's beautiful. His cock is a work of art, a sculpture worthy of a museum exhibit.

I don't even know what to say as I stare at him in the flesh, drinking in his strong, powerful body, his thick, hard length.

Words feel foreign. The only language I know is sensation.

I wrap a hand around his hard shaft, hot and pulsing in my palm. As soon as I touch him, he exhales sharply, like he's been holding his breath forever.

Like I felt when he touched me.

The sound reassures me that he's in this too, every step of the way.

I ache exquisitely as I stroke him, making me want him more and more. I search for words, something to anchor me to this moment. "I kind of can't believe this is what you look like," I say, as speech comes to me at last.

He blinks, like he's trying to focus, trying to concentrate on answering me as I grip the steel of his erection. He rocks the slightest bit into my hand, need written on his face like a headline. "What do you mean?" he rasps out.



“All this time, all these years. And look at you,” I say, staring unabashedly.

He swallows, his eyes locking with mine. “And what do you see, Peyton?”

What do I see?

More than I bargained for.

More than I ever expected.

I see trust and sex and beauty and friendship. I feel fear and desire and unfettered excitement. And I see *him*. The way I wanted to ten years ago.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper, emotion tightening my throat. “Everywhere. And I want you now.”

In one swift move, I’m on my back, legs spread, knees open, heels digging into my peach comforter. Tristan crawls over me, pinning my wrists at my sides. “Say it again,” he commands, rough and gravelly.

“Which part?” I ask, arching my body, aching for him. A pulse beats insistently between my legs, and he’s going to need to put me out of my misery soon.

“The last part,” he says, lowering himself so his hard cock rubs against my belly.

“I want you,” I say, gasping, desperate now. “I want you so much.”

His jaw ticks, and he breathes out hard. “You have no idea.”

“No idea what?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he lets go of my wrists and rises to his knees, his eyes scanning the floor. “Need my wallet. Need a condom.”

But I have another idea. “Tristan,” I say, insistent, pushing up on my elbows. “I’ve been tested. Since my last relationship. I’m clean, and I’m on protection.”

“Oh, fuck.” He drags a hand through his hair like I’ve said both the best and the worst thing in the world.

“What’s wrong?” I don’t want to ruin the mood. I reach up to his face, cupping his cheek. “Did I say something wrong?”

He turns his face to my hand, kissing my palm, soft and tender. “No. You didn’t say a thing wrong. And I’m clean too. I’ve been tested. I just don’t know how the fuck I’m going to last inside you like that.”

A smile spreads slow and easy on my face, and all my anxieties sashay out of the room. With my hand on his face, I pull him back down to me. “I guess we should try, then, and see.”

He flashes me a wolfish grin. “I’ll give it my best shot.” He raises my arms again. “I love the way you look like this. Can you hold on to the headboard so I can fuck you like this?”

*Can I?* With fucking pleasure. I scoot up and reach for the headboard, gripping it.

He’s on top of me, cock bobbing, parking his knees on either side of my hips, his hands sliding up my waist, over my breasts, to my neck. “Do you have any idea how gorgeous you look? How beautiful you are? You’re so fucking stunning in every way, but especially like this.”

My skin is sizzling. All the nerve endings in my body are unraveling. Pleasure consumes my every cell and he’s not even inside me. He’s simply praising me, and I could luxuriate in this attention all night long.

He lowers his face to my breasts and brushes a kiss between them, then more down my belly. “Your body ... You need to be worshipped. I need to kiss every inch of you.”

I want that. Desperately. I want to feel him adore me with his mouth, his tongue, his lips.

But I need to be filled right now.

I need to be fucked.

My eyes float closed, and I lift my hips. “Worship me tomorrow. Fuck me tonight.”

The sound he makes is carnal and obscene. Like a wild animal.

And it thrills me, sending a wave of anticipation through my body. His hands slide between my legs, and he parts my thighs wider, settling between them. I open my eyes to see him running a hand down his hard shaft, then rubbing the head against my wetness.

My back bows.

His entire body shudders.

We are a feedback loop, and it's intoxicating.

He groans. I moan.

He shakes his head, like he can't believe this is happening. "I want you so fucking much."

Then he slides inside me, and I'm so wet, so ready, that he's all the way in me in seconds.

"Oh God," I murmur as I feel him fill me completely. Tingles spread everywhere, a rush of heat floods my body, and I don't want to hold on to the headboard anymore.

I want to touch him.

My hands fly to his chest, clutching him for dear life.

He doesn't move for a few seconds. Clenching his jaw, he closes his eyes. Then he opens them, meeting my gaze.

"I want this to be so good for you," he says, and there's pure honesty in his words, an admission in the middle of all this heat and need. He lowers his chest to mine.

I wrap my legs around him, hooking my high-heeled feet together over his firm butt. "It already is," I whisper as I lift my hands, thread them through his hair, and bring his face to mine, his stubble against my cheek.

He groans my name, some kind of plaintive wish to the universe as he starts to move in me with slow, unhurried thrusts.

The feel of him, the weight of him, the way he reaches for my thigh with one hand, angles me more open, is all so wickedly new and utterly wonderful.

I'm discovering a whole new side to my best friend tonight.

An erotic, seductive side.

A vulnerable, tender side.

With his palms planted by my face, he finds the most delicious rhythm, thrusting deep then stroking back, nearly pulling out before he drives back into me, right where I want him. *That* spot. Pleasure cascades through me, and I feel boneless as he fucks me, swiveling his hips, taking his sweet, fantastic time, and hitting the mark with every thrust.

He grins at me like he has a secret. "I'm going to make you come so fucking hard," he says, and I light up like a pinball machine.

Those words.

His intensity.

"Yes, please, yes," I say, dragging my nails down his back. "Make me come, Tristan."

"Like you did against the wall," he continues, his voice as ruthless as his desire. He rocks into me as tension grips my core.

"Yes, do it again," I urge.

"Love it when you come for me. I want to make you come so hard you lose your mind with pleasure," he says, and his filthy words flip the switch in me.

He has a dirty side too.

I never knew he was a dirty talker. How could I? The private knowledge thrills me, my body tightening, pleasure coiling in my belly. The ecstatic torture expands as I hover so damn close to the edge of release.

"Oh God, Tristan," I moan, lifting my hips closer, my head falling back on the pillow, my body taking over as I go wild

beneath him, bucking. “I’m coming. Coming again.”

One. Deep. *Thrust.*

And I am over the edge, tumbling into ecstasy as he praises me. “So fucking beautiful, so fucking perfect, love it when you come, love it so damn much.”

His words merge into his groans and his pumps, the thrusts of his cock deep inside me as he fucks me to his own oblivion.

Then he fills me, his cock twitching, his body collapsing on me, his pulse racing so fast, I can feel it under his skin as my hands roam his frame.

We’re both quiet for a minute. Our slowing breaths and the soft music from the other room are the only sounds.

Soon, our breathing slows. But I can’t stop touching him. I want to worship him too.

I want to have him again and again.

And I hope, dear God, I hope that he wants all the same things I do.

When he slips away to the bathroom, grabs a washcloth, and cleans me up, I nearly cry. It’s such a tender, sweet gesture. It’s one I’ve never experienced from a man.

He sets the towel on the floor, returns to bed, and wraps an arm around my waist. Nuzzling me, he kisses my neck, then whispers, “I need to go soon.”

That’s not what I wanted to hear.



# TRISTAN

The last thing I want on earth is to leave her.

But I have to.

Besides, leaving is easier.

If I stay, I'll curl up with her all night long, wrap her in my arms, and tell her she has my heart in her hands.

And what if she doesn't want me to spend the night?

I can't deal with any form of rejection this second.

Nor can I deal with a conversation about what this is or isn't. I'm not sure I want to have *any* conversation. Because I don't know what the hell tonight means for her. I've got no clue what we're doing or what she wants. But I can't handle hearing anything hard right now, anything that would slice my heart in half.

She has the power to destroy me, and I can't afford destruction. I have a business, a family, responsibilities. I don't want to put my heart through that wringer again when I have to deal with life head-on every damn day.

Besides, I don't know if she chose me tonight, or if circumstance did. Because in the past, I've never been the guy she chooses.

That's why I need to leave.

Plus, I actually do have to go, even though I want so much more of her. I want her over and over.

“You have to go?” She scoots up in bed, sitting, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

I grab my boxers, tug them on. “Barrett will be home by midnight. Well, he’d better be. Curfew and all.”

“Oh, right,” she says, blinking, nodding. “Of course. You need to be home when he returns.”

“I do.” I love that she doesn’t ask why, that she simply gets it. Sure, Barrett’s a senior in high school and he can take care of himself. But I don’t want him coming home to an empty house. That’s not how I’m raising him—to fend for himself and set his own rules. I need to set an example for him of how to be a man, and this man has a responsibility.

To be home when his kid brother returns.

She slides out of bed, searching for her clothes. She yanks open a drawer in her bureau and pulls on a long T-shirt. But when she turns, and I see the panicked look in her eyes, it cuts me to the core. It reminds me of how she looked when she came to my restaurant after she found Gage in bed with another woman.

*Devastated.*

My heart lurches, and I grab her arm, spinning her around. “Peyton,” I say, and it’s the most desperate her name has ever sounded on my tongue. “Tonight was ...”

*A revelation?*

*Ten years in the making?*

*The most intense night I’ve ever had, and I don’t want to let you go?*

She presses her lips together, like she’s holding in all her words too, all her feelings.

“Tonight was incredible,” I continue, admitting some truth. “You’re incredible.” I draw her close, plant a kiss on her forehead. But she’s tight and tense, and I fear I’ve done the wrong thing. Does she think this is a one-night stand for me? Is it for her?



But how can it be anything else?

Still, *one-night stand* doesn't feel like the right term for what just happened. Only, I don't have a clue what category to put this evening in.

I pull back, needing to reassure her of something that won't rip me to shreds. "You mean the world to me," I say, trying that on for size.

She nods, her shoulders shaking slightly. Her lip quivers. "But ...? It sounds like there's a *but* in that sentence."

"But nothing. But everything." I cup her chin, wanting her to know what she means to me, how I can't stand the thought of her vacating my life. "I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose our friendship."

"So we're still friends?" she asks, tentative.

"Of course. We better be."

"And we just do what? Put that behind us?" She flaps her hand toward the bed.

Oh, how I wish I could read her mind. That'd come in real handy right now. I cast about for something, anything, to save myself, to save us. "We don't have to put it behind us," I say, testing that option, as my brain tries to figure out what the hell we do next. Wind back the clock? Or spring forward into more sex? More experiments? I don't want to get hurt, but I'm dying for more of her. Once was not enough. Because, hell, this isn't a one-night stand for me.

"And if we don't put it behind us, we'd put it in front of us?" she asks, her eyes full of questions.

*Yes. All the way in front of us, forever and fucking ever.*

But that wayward thought stays locked up. "The way I see it is you have two more scenarios to play out," I say, because maybe *that's* the way to navigate through what this is—focus on the research. Yes, this new twist in the experiment is how I can have a little more of her for now, and still have her friendship when it ends. Because it *will* end. That's a fact of life.

She lifts a brow, intrigued, it seems. “What are you saying? That you want to try more scenes?” The words come out measured, but less awkward. We’re returning to common ground.

I try to keep the mood light, hoping that works. “I don’t think we’re quite done, are we? I bet the book doesn’t end with panty shredding.”

Her lips twitch, as if she’s holding in a grin. “Or panty shredding that led to sex.”

“To amazing sex,” I correct.

She shakes her head, tsking. “No, Tristan. It was earth-shattering sex.”

“I stand corrected. Happily corrected.” I square my shoulders, pride thrumming through me. “Maybe we should make sure some of the other scenes work too? And that they’re just as toe-curling?”

She licks her lips, lifts her chin, then waves a hand, erasing the awkwardness. “Exactly. This doesn’t have to change anything. I mean, c’mon,” she says, nudging me with her elbow. “We kissed before, and we’re still friends. We can totally screw and still be friends, right?”

And that’s a nick to my heart, a small cut with the friends-with-benefits knife. But I can stanch the bleeding. Been there, done that, have the T-shirt.

Besides, I *do* want to be friends.

*Always.*

“Peyton, we’re friends. Nothing is going to change that.”

“Not even a couple experiments, right? And maybe we just needed to get that out of our systems?” Her tone is lighter now. Gone is the trembling lip, the knot of emotions. Maybe I imagined them.

“Considering it was ten years in the making, we might need to get it out of our systems more than once.”

Her eyebrows wiggle. “Good point. Once for every three point three three years?”

I laugh to cover up the hole in my heart. “So, two more experiments and we’re all clear?”

She taps her chin, like she’s deep in thought. “Sounds about right.”

*Sounds like all I’ll get.*

And since I’m still starving, I’ll take what I can get for now. I’ll take one more kiss for the road too. I move in closer, cup her cheeks, and kiss her, trying to tell her with my lips all the things I can’t and won’t say.

*I want so much more of you.*

*Once will never be enough.*

*Don’t break my heart.*

As my lips sweep over hers, she melts against me, kissing me back like she’s saying all the same things.

But I’m probably just imagining it.

When I break the kiss, I make my best effort to zoom in on the task at hand. “So, doctor of romance novels, what tests are we running next?”

Maybe I’ve finally said the right thing, because she smiles at me, all flirty and coy again. “I have two things in mind.”

“Do tell.”

She stands on tiptoes, whispers in my ear, and I groan as the flash of images in my mind turns wildly pornographic.

“Same time tomorrow?” she asks.

“Yes.” I turn away from her, grab my jeans and shirt, and get dressed.

She taps on my shoulder, looking like a naughty vixen. “But we didn’t finish tonight’s test. I know you need to go, but this is all in the name of romance science.”

“Science is cool,” I say as she scurries to her bureau, grabs a pair of lacy panties, and pulls them on. She tugs up her shirt,

showing me a sexy pair of skimpy black panties. My dick jolts back to skyscraper levels.

“I love science,” I say as she leans against the wall.

I stalk over to her, get down on my knees, grab her ass, and bite into the waistband of her panties. I yank them off in one move, as she yelps from the tear of the fabric.

I stare at the lace tatters on the floor, and then at her face wearing an expression of utter delight.

She snaps a photo of the carnage for her blog.

But when I leave, I keep thinking the lace won't be the only thing ripped to pieces when this experiment runs its course.



# PEYTON

*The Lingerie Devotee: Definitely Do This at Home*

*Blog entry*

I can't believe I am writing this.

I feel like such a traitor.

An utter turncoat to all I hold dear in the world of lingerie. But I suppose I must do what all good bloggers do at some point.

*Come clean.*

It is my turn now to confess, and as much as I should hang my head in shame, I refuse to.

Because, ladies and gents, having your lover tear off your panties with his teeth is exquisitely erotic.

Even if it breaks my heart to see this little darling in shreds. These lacy numbers are delicate. Luckily I held up intact, without a tear or a scratch. But they didn't. See? Look what became of my sexy black lace panties.

How could I do this to them?

Yet there is something deliciously carnal in this scenario. It's animalistic in a way—tearing off someone's underthings with your bare teeth. And that's what works about the scene. Sure, it can be a bit camp if you let it. But if you set the mood,

play the right music, and wear something sensual, then you just might find yourself aroused in all new ways.

Now, to be clear, I'm *not* simply saying this so you'll come to my shop and buy more panties.

I'm saying this because I want you to feel as good as I felt last night.

Everyone should feel as good as I felt. Last night was the pinnacle of sensations.

And if you decide to reenact this particular scene, do follow this piece of advice: *commit*.

Have your lover get on his knees, grab your rear, and then treat your panties like a piece of steak.

Trust me on this.

Because chances are, your pleasure won't end there. It'll last all night long.

Xoxo

*The Lingerie Devotee*

Find me at You Look Pretty Today on Madison Avenue





# PEYTON

I toss the birdie into the air, raise my racket, and serve it over the net. It soars. My mom lunges for it, smacks it back. I dive for the prize, whacking it underhand and up over the net again.

Fast and furious as always, she reaches for it and lobs it to me.

Back and forth we go for another several minutes until she misses.

I thrust my arms in the air. “Badminton champion in da house!”

She rolls her green eyes. “Yes, as a former high school badminton winner, you should take pride that you can beat your fifty-five-year-old mother.”

I tut her. “Mom. You’re fifty-six.”

She swats me on the butt with her racket. “And there are ten more spankings where that came from if you say my age again.”

“Oh please, you don’t look a day over fifty-five.”

Her racket connects with my rear again as we leave the badminton court, wishing good luck to the next pair ready to tackle the sport.

“You are a most impudent child,” she says.

“I’m the worst.” I shrug happily. Because I am happy. Happily counting down the hours till I see Tristan again.

Six hours and fifteen minutes. Tonight can't arrive soon enough, but at the same time, I'm more wary than I was before. Because I don't know where we stand. I couldn't read him, couldn't tell what he wanted, if he was feeling the same new and wondrous connection I was.

Does he only want to be friends with benefits? Friends who needed to get a little lust out of their systems?

Part of me fervently wishes he felt more. But anything more is too risky, so I shouldn't even contemplate such possibilities.

"You okay? You drifted off there," Mom asks, breaking my reverie as we exit the badminton club.

"Of course," I say, quickly collecting my thoughts. "Just thinking about an order I placed this morning. For a second, I thought I forgot something in it," I say, fashioning a cover-up for my wandering mind.

"Is business going well with this new blog series? I know it's early days, but can you tell?"

"There is definitely an uptick in sales," I say with a smile as we head to our favorite cafe for Sunday lunch. "It definitely seems to be helping bring a little more attention to the shop. Even Jay and his wife are getting into it," I say, mentioning my brother.

"Your brother is wearing lingerie now? To each his own."

I laugh. "Who knows? But check out this text from him."

**Jay:** In case you're wondering, the guy who placed the order for three new bustiers this morning was me.

**Peyton:** You're going to look so pretty in that leopard print one especially.

**Jay:** Thanks. I was hoping it'd match my skin tone.

**Jay:** Also, they're for Holly.

**Peyton:** Yeah, I figured. What with them being a petite and all. Unless you planned to wear the bustier on your leg.

**Jay:** Make that your next blog post. Unusual uses for lingerie.

**Peyton:** Maybe *you* should write it for me.

**Jay:** I'll have it to you this evening. No photos though.

**Peyton:** Consider that a general rule of thumb for you, dear brother of mine.

**Jay:** Duly noted. Also, rush shipping please. As in overnight.

**Peyton:** They're already with Fedex. Good luck making babies!

**Jay:** Was it that obvious?

**Peyton:** Yes.

I close the text app. "Maybe you'll have grandkids soon, thanks to my blog."

She gazes heavenward and clasps her hands. "Please let my daughter's blog inspire my son to give me grandkids to spoil." Then she looks to me. "I'm glad the blog is working so well. It's hard to look away from it, after all. You're really putting it all out there."

I turn to meet her gaze as we reach the next block, curious what she means. "I am?"

"Yes, it's incredibly open and honest. Readers and customers are connecting with that, I imagine." She squeezes my shoulder. "I have to wonder if Tristan is too. He must be."

I tense. "How *should* he connect with it?"

She stops outside the cafe. "How do you want him to connect with it? That's the question." Her eyes lock with mine, overwritten with motherly wisdom.

I swallow roughly. "Mom ... is it obvious?"

She smiles softly, petting my hair. "That you have feelings for him?"

I wince, then admit the truth, since she's seen through me already. "Yes."

“Oh, sweetheart.” She wraps an arm around me and tugs me close. “It’s obvious to me because I know you so well. I know who you are, what you want, what you need.”

“And what is that?” I whisper.

“You want love. Great, beautiful, soul-searing love.”

“Mom, stop,” I say, as my heart catches in my throat. “That’s too much.”

She runs her fingers down my cheek. “You’ve always wanted that. And you’ve always trusted so easily. That’s why it hurt so much when Gage showed his true colors—because you did love him. You did trust him. And he broke everything that mattered to you.”

“He did.” But my voice doesn’t wobble this time because Gage is in the past. “But I’m over him. I’ve completely moved on.”

“I can tell completely,” she says with that sage look only a mom can give.

“How can you tell?”

“Because you’re falling for your best guy friend, and anyone who knows you the slightest bit can see it.”

I freeze as cymbals clang in my ears. As she bangs the gong. I could deny it. I could backpedal. But I am cellophane to her, and always have been.

“How?” I press. “How is it obvious?”

She looks to the blue sky, then recites my own words. “*I’m saying this because I want you to feel as good as I felt last night. Everyone should feel as good as I felt. Last night was the pinnacle ...*”

“You can’t just quote me back to me.”

“But I can, and I did.”

“That was about—” I cut myself off before I say “sex” because I can’t just admit to my mom that we had sex.

She laughs deeply. “Wait! Do you think I couldn’t read between the lines? Sweetheart, I know you slept with him.”

My jaw drops, and I am the definition of aghast. “Mom!”

She waves off my outrage. “I don’t know that everyone else could tell you have feelings for him. But it seemed obvious to me.”

“It did?” I ask, worry striking a chord in my heart. Could he tell? “Do you think he knows?”

“I’m not sure. Men don’t always see what women see. And certainly not what mothers see. But I know you, and I’ve seen you with him. Like I said, there’s a vibe.” She pauses, searches my face. “But what did you think would happen when you decided to experiment like this with a man who’s longed for you for a long while?”

I jerk my head, like she’s speaking in limericks. “*Longed for me?*”

She sighs. “Peyton. You two—you have this thing.”

I shake my head, denying, vehemently denying. “It’s just chemistry, that’s all. He doesn’t want more. He said as much last night,” I say, recalling the punch to the heart at his words. *You mean the world to me. I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to lose our friendship.*

That’s what matters most to him—keeping the status quo.

And it matters to me.

“And I don’t want to lose him,” I continue. “Mom, don’t you see? There’s too much at stake.”

She takes a deep breath, nodding. “What are you going to do, then? Stop these experiments?”

I glance away. “Yes, soon.”

She chuckles. “After you sleep with him again?”

I cover my ears. “Mom, stop talking about sex.”

She removes my hands from the sides of my head, laughing. “Sweetheart, be careful. Or be bold. But you can’t

have both.”

But she’s wrong. I can be bold *and* I can be cautious. I know how to protect my heart, and it’s by using my head. Last night, Tristan and I set the boundaries for our explorations. We picked an end date. We decided on the agenda.

We used our heads.

There.

Besides, we both want the same thing—to come out on the other side the way we started.

I repeat my mantra in my head: *Friendship and lingerie. Lingerie and friendship.*

After we finish lunch, I say goodbye, then head to WildCare where I volunteer, helping them with their mission to rehab injured birds and other wildlife. As I clean the facility, I compose a series of text messages in my head to Amy, smiling to myself as I devise ways to needle her and wind her up.

Texting Amy will be a fantastic way to pass the time this afternoon.

When I’m done, I walk through the park, tapping out a message to her.

**Peyton:** Hey, girl! You know that bathing suit I was going to wear to test out bathtub sex?

**Amy:** The royal-blue bikini with the white stripe? That’s ghost-pepper hot, so be careful. You might ignite flames in the tub. Best for me to bring you a black Speedo and a bathing cap. Wait. You’ll still look good in a Speedo, you mermaid. New plan—I’m going to bring you one of those full-body bathing suits they wore in those old-timey shots.

**Peyton:** I’m wearing something besides a bathing suit tonight.

**Amy:** \*waits with bated breath\* \*stares at phone\* \*googles waterproof clothing options\* \*decides a rain slicker that goes to your ankles is what you mean\*

**Peyton:** Nothing. I'm wearing nothing.

*Three, two ...*

And before I can count down to one, my phone rings.

“Explain yourself, and leave no dirty stone unturned. Must know everything,” she demands as I walk along the picturesque Terrace Bridge in the middle of the park, enjoying the early golds and bright reds of fall.

I smile, delighting in the memories of last night that are still wildly vivid. “We *might* have moved on to a new style of testing. Call it more hands-on research.”

She shrieks. “Where are you? I need to see you. I need to see your face as you share every gloriously filthy detail with me.”

“In the park.”

“What side?”

“Why? Are you going to triangulate me?”

“Yes. I bet you're heading home after WildCare. I'm on the east side. I'll meet you at that cake shop I like on Park Avenue. Be there in fifteen minutes, ready to divulge every salacious detail.”

“Cake shop you like? Ames, you're going to need to narrow it down. You like every cake shop.”

“I am very picky with cake, and you know it. Meet me at the newest Sunshine Bakery. I will gather Lola, and you will be prepared to narrate a scandalous new tell-all.”

\* \* \*

With a slice of chocolate cake and a cup of tea, I give my confession, but I don't ask for absolution.

I don't ask for anything, because right now, I'm still basking in the afterglow.

My friends, however, clearly want something.

“Well, what do you think?” I ask when I finish.

Lola fans a hand in front of her face. “I think I need to see who’s available tonight in my little black book. I might need to reenact your sex life.”

“Come to think of it, maybe I should hire you to write a hot new line of naughty books,” Amy says, but quickly she clears her throat. “But, Peyton ...”

Those two words hang heavily in the air, signaling *advice to come*. Warnings I don’t want to hear or heed.

“Guys, I’m fine,” I say, cutting off her words to the wise before they arrive.

“I didn’t even say anything yet,” Amy says, holding up her hands in surrender.

“Listen, my mother already warned me. Be careful and all that. I am careful, I swear. I promise,” I say, practically pleading with them to see this my way—the *have my cake and eat it too* way. “I just ... want this. I know we can manage this. We made a plan. We’ll finish out the tests and return to friendship. We did this before. Don’t you remember?”

Lola furrows her brow, flinching. “You’re not actually comparing a kiss at a college dance to sleeping with him?”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” I say, because I have to. I have to see this the same way. No, I *choose* to. “We returned to friendship. It was no problem at that time. We’ll do it again.”

“That was different,” Lola says firmly. “That was one kiss. This is sex. And it sounds like it’s not just sex for either one of you.”

But that’s where she’s wrong.

It’s. Just. Sex.

It has to be.

\* \* \*



That evening, I run a bath, drop in a bath bomb, and strip. I gave him a key last night, so right on time, he raps on the open bathroom door, walks into the steamy room, and finds me covered in bubbles, ready for the next test.



# TRISTAN

On Sunday morning, I swing by a farmer's market I like, pick up some goodies, and grab coffee with some of my friends in the business. When I'm done, I pop back home, make lunch for my brother, and proofread his English paper on themes in dystopian literature. He finishes, turns it in online, then tells me he's going to join me at the gym for an afternoon workout.

I flinch, surprised. Barrett's not a gym guy. But I don't ask. I'm just glad he wants to exercise. On the treadmill, he jogs and texts and makes Instagram videos. At least I think that's what he's doing. His thumb-speed belongs in record books.

On the way home, we chat about college apps. "Is NYU still your first choice?" I ask, since he changes his mind frequently.

"I think so. The science department is good, and so is the English department."

I smile. "You don't have to know what you want to major in."

"Good. Because every day it changes."

"And that's okay," I say as we turn onto Madison Avenue.

"I also like Williams College. And Rutgers," he says, although he doesn't sound too enthused about those options.

"But?"

He shrugs. "Dunno. Guess I just want to be in New York." He offers me a small smile, and in it I see what he's not saying

—he wants to be closer to home, closer to his friends.

I clap him on the back. “I’d love to have you in New York. But wherever you want to go is good with me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, of course. I want you to be happy.”

He shakes his head. “No, I mean, you’d want me in New York?”

I laugh, and it turns into a scoff. “Yeah, I would. Not only do I love you, but I like you too, you little punk.”

He doesn’t answer, just smiles, and that’s answer enough.

When we pass Peyton’s shop, which is closed on Sundays, my eyes drift briefly to the display. There’s an emerald-green teddy, and I picture her in it, chatting about Amy’s new project while she puts on her makeup before going out with the girls. Or in that dark-purple pair of pajama shorts, standing in my kitchen, drinking coffee and trying to convince me to install an archery range at the restaurant. And in that right there—the leopard-print bra—laid out on the bed, waiting for me, tonight, tomorrow night, every night.

I blink the visions away. They’re too powerful, too potent for me to linger on.

I look across the street, a block ahead of us, where I find a couple of guys on ladders removing the banner in front of Harriet’s store.

And that’s an image she’ll love.

The sale is over, and my first thought is I can’t wait to tell her when I see her in a few more hours.

\* \* \*

Barrett leaves first, taking off for play practice. A little later, I’m on my way to Peyton’s, walking uptown, when Barrett texts me.

**Barrett:** Just gotta ask. You can read, right?

**Tristan:** Yes. You can speak without using sarcasm, right?

**Barrett:** Wrong. Back to my point, you're reading these blogs, right?

**Tristan:** The food ones? You know I'm a food blog fanboy. Of course I read my favorites. Just a few minutes ago, I found an awe-inspiring recipe for a jalapeño-drenched burger in sriracha sauce. Want one later?

**Barrett:** Obviously I do. I want two. But I'm not talking about what you're drenching burgers in.

**Tristan:** Aren't you at play practice?

**Barrett:** Aren't you at love practice?

**Tristan:** It's a project to help a friend grow her business, and it's working. See? I'm a magnanimous soul, supporting her in all her endeavors.

**Barrett:** Wow. This is going to be harder than I thought. Do you really believe that?

**Tristan:** Hello? Play practice?

**Barrett:** It's called a break. I'm taking one, and I'm texting you.

**Tristan:** Then I'll take a break from the sarcasm as I walk to Peyton's. I always love hearing from you.

**Barrett:** Dude, now is not the time to go all bro love on me. What I'm trying to say is this—Henry James said, “To read between the lines was easier than to follow the text.” You need to read between the lines of her blog.

**Tristan:** You're quoting Henry James to me? Your education is worthwhile. God bless lit criticism classes in high school.

**Barrett:** Your sarcasm break was record-shatteringly short. Also, you are dodging the point.

**Tristan:** Listen, I get what you're trying to do, and I appreciate it. But you know what happens when you read between the lines? You make something bigger than it is.

**Barrett:** This isn't bigger than it is. This is exactly as big as it is. Time's up. Back to painting sets. By the way, in my paper, did you notice how dystopian futures are terrifying? And you don't have to read between the lines to know the hidden message is to live NOW.

I tuck the phone away as I reach Peyton's building. I'm sure he's right about dystopian futures, but that's not the world we're living in. This isn't *The Hunger Games*, and I don't need a bow and arrow to get out alive.

All I need are wits and a healthy sense of reality. I have both.

Reading between the lines would be as risky as volunteering as tribute. Besides, Peyton isn't sending me hidden messages in her blog. She's not writing me anonymous love letters.

The blog is a marketing vehicle for her store.

I should know, because it was my fucking idea for her to restart it. *To help her store.*

All that stuff she writes in it about wanting and craving and *feeling as good as she felt last night*—that exists in black and white to drive green.

Nothing wrong with that.

She loves that store madly. Cherishes her grandmother's legacy. Wants to protect it. *The Lingerie Devotee* is a means to a business end, that's all.

I would have to have an ego the size of Casanova's to think anything else of the tales she tells of late nights with lingerie and me.

Besides, the woman herself set the rules of engagement when she asked me to be her crash test dummy—*I need someone I can practice ripping a shirt off of who'll also rip off my panties.*

That was it. That was all.

She needed a willing participant, someone she trusts.

She's doing this because of that discount store anyway.

And with the discount over, the project will end soon too.  
Not to mention that she only needs five scenes for Amy.

Best to enjoy tonight for what it is.

When I reach her place, I laser in on what matters now.

*Figuring out how the hell all those couples in books are  
banging in the bath.*

\* \* \*

Candles flicker on the vanity. Soft music plays from her phone. Steam rises above the tub as she smiles softly from the water. The tiles are cool under my bare feet, but my body temperature is hot, hot, hot from her red hair, slicked back and wet, and the bubbles obscuring her breasts and belly. Her knees poke up.

“Hi,” she says, and the sound is sweet, inviting.

“Hey,” I say, drinking in the sight in front of me—this woman waiting for me in the tub.

Never in my dirty dreams did I imagine I'd walk in on this.

Maybe because tub sex was never on my fantasy list.

But it's on my reality agenda, and I'm so damn glad. Grabbing the bottom of my shirt, I tug it over my head.

“Look at you. Getting down to business,” she says.

“Did you want me to do a long, drawn-out striptease? Wait. Don't answer that.”

Her tongue lolls out, and she pants like a dog. “Striptease. Yes, please.”

I shake my head, amused, as I unbutton my jeans. “Hate to break it to you, Gingersnap, but even if you have *Chippendales reenactment* on your list, I won't be doing it.”

She pouts. “Really? Because I was going to add that. Are you sure?”

I’m not a dirty dancer. I definitely don’t have the moves or the interest in doing a lap dance.

But when she puts it like that—I’m not sure I’d say no. If she asked me, I’d probably say yes. Fact is, I’d say yes to just about anything for her, only I can’t let on how easy I am.

I shift the conversation. “Maybe I do need kneepads for this one,” I say, tipping my forehead to the tub.

She narrows her brow. “Um, do you think you’re going to be on top of me in the tub?”

As my jeans hit the tiles, my mind assembles the graphic novelization of this scene—in one panel, she’s in the throes of ecstasy. In another, her mouth forms an O in pleasure. In the next one, she’s coming.

Hmm. Seems that’s as far as I’ve drawn—the endgame, over and over. I didn’t consider the position we’d be in to get there.

“Because that won’t work,” she adds, gesturing to the tub. “Think about it. Are you just going to bang me while my body is underwater? My head would slam against the back of the tub. Ouch.”

I kick off the jeans, shed my boxer briefs, and take over the pregame report. “No, Peyton,” I say, walking over to her. “You’re going to ride me. And you’re going to ride me so fucking hard and so fucking good that neither one of us will care how much water we spill over the tub.” Gripping my cock, I run my fist down its length, savoring the wild look in her blue eyes. Her lips part, and she seems to take a shuddering breath as she stares at my dick, transfixed.

I’d like to say this turning of the tables helps me stay in control of my runaway heart. As if taking the upper hand in our sex play somehow restores my power.

But it only makes me want her more, since she’s staring at me like I’m all she wants too.



Then she rises like Aphrodite from the sea, red hair, naked body, beautiful and luminous.

And for tonight, she's all mine.

"Come on in. The water's nice."

\* \* \*

I settle into the water, and she scoots around, squeezing in next to me, her bare flesh squeaking loudly against the tub.

I laugh.

She chuckles too.

Somehow she wedges herself into my side, but half her body is above the water now.

She frowns. "This is cozy."

But it doesn't sound like *cozy* is good. "And that's a strike against tub sex."

"Call me crazy, but I feel like my tub was designed for one person," she says, crushing her body closer as she tries to slink under the water more.

I adjust, making as much room for her as I can, but at six feet and two hundred pounds, I can't exactly suction myself into a smaller size. "I think most tubs were meant for one, but we're doing this. We're not backing down," I say, playing the hard-assed personal trainer who won't take no on the final crunch.

She stares sharply at me. "Did I say I was backing down?"

"Seems like it, since you're trying to lie next to me. Get on me, woman," I say, reaching for her waist and pulling her on top.

Her eyes widen as I position her, helping her straddle me in the tiny space.

Her knees slip, and she falls forward, collapsing on my chest. She laughs, pushing up.

“Kind of a dork, aren’t you?” I tease.

“You try this. See if you can do it.”

“I *am* trying this. And I want this. But I need you to want this too. I need you so damn slippery and wet that you don’t care about anything else but fucking me hard.”

She gasps, her shoulders shaking.

*There.* I’ll keep her in the moment.

I reach for her face, clasp her cheeks, and pull her to me, sealing my lips to hers.

My plan, such as it is, is to kiss her soft, slow, and tender. Ease her into this position. Let her melt into a kiss so she can settle in this tiny space. But with her naked and wet on top of me, my best-laid plans fly the coop.

Curling a hand around her head, I haul her in for a fierce, possessive kiss. I kiss her deeply, my lips owning hers, my tongue exploring her sweetness.

She sinks into the kiss, all passion and surrender.

My brain goes hazy, and I’m sizzling everywhere in seconds. The kissing, the contact, the music, the water, the scents.

Dear God, the intoxicating candy-sweet scent of violet, or whatever the bubbles are. Everything goes to my head, and I can’t slow down. I can’t hold back.

That kiss in college had nothing on this kiss. This kiss blots out every other kiss in the history of the world as I consume her mouth, putting all my heart, all my body, into this moment.

She moves on me, sliding her pelvis down to mine, kissing me back the whole time.

Kissing me the way I want to be kissed.

*By her.*

Because hers are the only kisses I want. Fevered and passionate and full of so much ... *emotion?*

I end that train of thought, fight desperately to stop assigning meaning that isn't there.

This kiss *can't* be full of emotion.

It can't be anything but sex and heat and an agenda.

I give in to that and only that—to the exploration of bathtub sex as an experiment. My hands glide down her body to her soft, supple ass, raising her up, guiding her over me.

She breaks the kiss, her palms on my pecs. “Tristan?”

“Yes?” I ask, as hope balloons inappropriately in me.

“My knees hurt,” she says, whispering it like a confession.

“Do you want to get out?” I ask.

“No. I want to try. I really do want to try.”

“Let me make sure you're ready.” I slide my hand between her legs, groaning when I feel how slick she is there. “Gingersnap,” I murmur.

“Fred,” she purrs, somehow making that name sound sexy.

She lifts her hips, the water sloshing around as she gives me access to the paradise between her thighs. My fingers slide up and down, stroking her, touching her.

She shudders, letting her head fall back, looking more sensual than Aphrodite herself.

“I'm ready. I'm so ready,” she says on a breathless pant.

Lust barrels through my body as I grip her hips and line her up. Water splashes along my stomach, and it ripples across her thighs, slapping over the tub. Glancing at the floor, I laugh. “We're going to need lots of towels.”

But for now, I need to get her on me. Once more, I help her find a good position, and she rubs the head of my cock against her heat. My eyes squeeze shut as pleasure takes over momentarily, the incomprehensible sensation of this woman touching me.

Knowing me.

*Having me.*

I open my eyes as she widens her legs so she can sink down. But she winces.

“What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing. Let’s do this.”

But she flinches again as she makes a second try.

I splay a hand on her belly, stopping her. “What is it?”

“This position ...” she says with a sigh. “I’m sorry, but my toes are cramping, and my knees are killing me, and there’s so much water, and the bubbles are ...”

She lowers her face.

I tuck a finger under her chin, raising her face. “The bubbles are what?”

“Kind of stinging,” she whispers. “Now that I’m getting all turned on and my legs are spread—and oh my God, I can’t believe I’m saying this—there are soap bubbles in me, and it hurts.”

I fucking love that she’s saying it.

Her honesty is such a turn-on, and I don’t mean physically. Her confession makes my heart trip.

Carefully, I settle my hands on her waist, helping her stand. I join her, then help her step out of the tub. “So bathtub sex is a no-go,” I say, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around her.

“I like baths, but I think I like them solo.”

I rub the towel over her hair. “I bet you’d love lounging in a tub and being fed chocolate.”

Her eyes light up like sparklers. “Yes, let’s do that next time. I’ll take a long, luxurious bath, and you can join me. *Outside the tub*. Breaking off pieces of a chocolate bar.”

*Next time.*

Those words echo.

The images flip before my eyes.

I want that next time more than I want this time.

But this time is all I have. I can't let myself forget that.

"Let's shower," I say, and we head into the shower, rinsing off the evidence of our botched experiment.

But it doesn't entirely seem like we failed.

As we joke about the perils and pitfalls of bathtub sex, it seems like we've discovered something new.

That failing together in bed can be as fun as succeeding.

Or maybe more fun, because it gives us another chance.

When we dry off, she slips into a soft light-blue robe that ends at her thighs, then tells me she's ready to try one last item. "Amy didn't ask me to test this one. When we planned the experiment, we toyed with testing how long till staircase sex kills your back, or how soon till rug burn kicks in if you do it doggie-style on a carpeted floor."

Damn. I'd like to fail and succeed at all of those with her. "But we're not doing any of those, I take it?"

She shakes her head, her eyes sparkling. "No. I read ahead. There's something else in the book that I want to try out. It's something I've never experienced before."

My heart slams against my chest in anticipation. "Whatever it is, I'll do it."

When she tells me, her scenario sounds like the best and worst way to end this brief no-strings-attached research project.

After all, this is my last chance with her.

All that's left for me to do is make it clear I'm 100 percent good with us returning to just being friends.

Like she wanted.

Like we said we'd do last night.



# PEYTON

Is it a myth? An urban legend? Or the equivalent of a solar eclipse? Possible, but only once every few years.

Settling into the swath of purple and silver pillows on my bed, I straighten my spine, clear my throat, and adopt my best narrator's voice as I dive into the scene from Amy's book.

*“As he spread my legs over his face, I drew him in deeper, letting him fill my throat. He thrust up into me, and I nearly choked, but I was a determined chickadee—determined to finish him any ... freaking ... second. Because I was close, so close. And once I tipped over the edge, I'd lose my mind with pleasure. His dick would fall from my mouth as I screamed my orgasmic praise to the heavens.”*

I stop, the temperature in my core shooting to the stratosphere.

Tristan's lips curve into a satisfied grin. He's lounging next to me, propped on his side, his cock at full mast again.

I glance at the evidence that he's digging the story. “Guess this is getting you going?”

He shrugs impishly. “Maybe a little.” He drags his fingers down my bare thigh. “And you? Is this better than soap and bubbles?”

“Yes. I'm feeling a little, how shall we say, squirmy? And yes, I know *squirmy* is not a sexy word.”

His fingers roam to my knee. “On you it is.”

“Is that so?”

He nods, bending his neck, pressing a kiss to my leg. “Everything is sexy on you. Now keep reading.”

I return to the document on my phone.

“*Focus, I told myself. Focus on the suction—*”

But I can’t concentrate because Tristan’s lips flutter over my thighs, his scruff rubbing against my skin as he unties the ribbon on my robe. “Keep going,” he murmurs.

I gasp as I try to read more.

“*One long, deep suck. He groaned his appreciation for my efforts, but ...*”

He licks a line up my inner thigh, his soft tongue sending a spark of pleasure rushing through me. Screw the story. I toss the phone aside. He looks up from between my legs. “That’s all?”

“Pretty sure I picked up the gist of the scene,” I say, dragging my nails through his hair. I love the feel of his hair, his muscles, his skin. Love the contact, the connection.

So damn much.

“Think you can reenact it?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, already a little breathless from his touch and from anticipation. I want to taste him, feel him in my mouth, learn his flavors.

And I want to do it now, because if I stay in bed with him any longer, I will lose my heart to him. I already gave a little more of that organ to him in the tub just by telling him all the nitty-gritty details of why it wasn’t working.

I’ve never been *that* open with a man. I’ve never felt that free.

And it felt tremendous.

Like I’d crossed a border and entered a country full of brand-new possibilities.



But we've reached the final scene, and this is my last chance to try out a certain kind of sexual intimacy. Admittedly I'm wary. I've never been a big fan of sixty-nine. It requires too much concentration and coordination. Too much mental work.

But as Tristan tugs my center toward his face, my mind takes a vacation. My body reports for duty. He spreads my legs and licks me.

I arch into him instantly, electrified from the first touch.

"Oh God," I cry out.

He groans against me, pressing a hot kiss to my core.

A bolt of heat radiates through me, and I part my legs wider, craving more of him. He groans against me, wrapping his hands under my ass and kissing me, devouring me.

I never knew what I was missing. Never knew till he touched me like this, but now I'm certain—no one has ever gone down on me like this before, not with this type of hunger.

"But in the scene ..." I try to speak, because this isn't how they do it. And the test. We need to try the test ...

He nods against me. "Um-hum."

"They do it at the same ..." His tongue flicks against my clit, and my voice hits a new octave.

"Yep," he murmurs, lapping me up.

Threading my hands through his hair, I gaze shamelessly at the man between my legs. His gorgeous face. His passion. He's consuming me like I'm his last meal, and I want him to lick the plate clean and order seconds and thirds.

But that won't do. I can't linger in my own hedonism. I need to focus on the project and finish what I started.

For work, for the store, for my friend.

And most of all, for myself.

To put myself out there.

“Sixty-nine,” I pant. “We need to try it. The scene. Need to see. If. We can. Come at the same time.”

In a flash, he rolls to his back, pats his chest, and issues a command. “Drape those sexy legs over my face and take my cock deep in your mouth. Give it to me good, and I’ll do the same to you.”

I shiver at his filthy words, trembling with lust as I shed the robe and cover his body with my own. Wrapping my hand around the base of his hard cock, I kiss the head, flicking my tongue across him.

He jolts, cursing. “Holy fuck.”

I laugh. “Yes, this feels religious for me too. I could worship your dick.”

His groan is the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard. “I’m in heaven, Peyton,” he says, but it doesn’t sound dirty. It sounds reverent, and I’m sure heaven is where I am right now too, as he pulls me back to his mouth, licking me like I’m the best thing he’s ever tasted. I suck him the same way.

Because he is.

He tastes spectacular. Clean but manly at the same time. I swirl my tongue over the head, then draw him in, loving the way he jerks his body up almost involuntarily as I move my lips along his delicious shaft.

We’re not even listening to music this time, but I swear I can hear a symphony, picking up tempo, building to that rising crescendo toward the end when all the instruments come together at once, playing, soaring.

I lavish love on his cock, and he worships me with his mouth.

And the thought flashes clear and bright—we are acting out my command from last night. *Fuck me tonight, worship me tomorrow.*

Because this is worship.

This is a new kind of adoration, this intimacy.

I adore this man so much. I cherish him immensely. And I want to show him with my mouth and my tongue and my hands how very much he means to me. I want him to know that he's the man I trust.

But that's a little tough because he's going down on me like there's no tomorrow, and I'm losing my mind with pleasure. I can't concentrate. I can't focus. I can only feel.

I shudder as his tongue strokes faster, flicking my clit, driving me toward the edge.

And this is what I feel: *he's the one*.

He's the one who makes me feel so damn good, body and soul.

And heart.

Dear God, my heart beats loudly, insistently, because it's a part of tonight too.

Heart and hope and intimacy and hot, dirty dreams collide as my body tightens, pleasure coiling in me, my mind blurring.

I'm hot, so hot. Sensation grips me everywhere. Pleasure climbs up my legs in pulses.

I want to cry out. I want to moan, to groan, to say his name.

But I don't, because I want this moment more.

Not for the experiment.

I want it for me.

I want to know what it's like to feel *this* close to someone.

So close we crest the cliff at the same damn time.

Because I'm there, breaking and coming and tumbling into ecstasy.

I don't want to fall alone. I want his pleasure too. I'm desperately seeking it, and seconds later, it finds me as he fills my throat with his release.

He's salty and delicious, and I swallow him, savoring the taste.

Because it's him. Because I want him. Because I love him.

\* \* \*

I play with the words in the back of my mind. *I'm falling in love with you.*

And more, so much more.

*I want to go to your brother's homecoming as your date.*

*I want to walk into your bar and have everyone know I'm yours.*

*I want to see if staircase sex hurts my back, and if rug burn from doing it on the carpet is a real thing, and I want to have sex mishaps and sexual successes with you, only you.*

*And I want to kiss you goodbye in the morning someday. Someday soon. Maybe even tomorrow. Won't you stay with me?*

The words are fighting their way to the shore, against the tide. They're eager to make landfall.

Even though that's not our deal.

This *is* our deal. This postcoital tangling of limbs, as he pulls me close, wraps his arms around me, and kisses my cheek. "That's going out on a high note, I'd say. Do you agree?"

*Going out on a high note.*

That's where we're going. *Out.* We are unwinding. The hands on the clock are ticking back to friendship, minute by slipping-away minute.

But as each second passes, I desperately want to say something more. How do I get there though?

I slap on a smile for the time being. "Definitely. *Simultaneous orgasms are real, and you should definitely try it at home.* That's what I'll say in my blog." I haven't mentioned my blog to him in days. Is he still reading it? Has he picked up on what my mom claims she sees? Maybe this is how I can

find out where he's at. "Hey, have you read the blog the last few days?"

He looks away, then back at me. "Yes."

It comes out a little guilty, like he's been caught spying.

"What do you think?" My nerves clamp down, but I have to push through. Feeling him out on the blog is a safe way to see if the last few nights are a one-way street.

I doubt my feelings are as transparent to him as they are to my mother, or my friends. Tristan isn't the type of guy to read between the lines on his own, not like the women in my life do. That's why I need to guide him through, feel him out.

"What do I think about your posts?" he asks carefully, like he wants to make sure he's understood the question.

"Yes. The things I said. The things I wrote." I do my best to keep my cool, even as my heart pounds with worry.

He takes a breath, giving him time, it seems, to consider what to say. "I enjoy your blog, Peyton. I always have. I'm glad you started it again."

My shoulders sag a little. That's not exactly giving me confidence. But I need to soldier on. "And do you think I've been accurately reflecting the tests?"

He's quiet for several long seconds. I try to read his eyes. To find the unspoken meaning in how he holds my gaze. Finally, he answers in a voice that's honest and vulnerable. "Yes."

*Yes.*

The one word reverberates between us and all my hope comes rushing back like a fountain. He sees what I don't fully say. He *can* see the hidden truths.

I smile so wide it might hurt, but nothing could hurt if he feels the same way I do. "I'm so glad," I say, breathless.

He smiles too. "Me too. It's working, right?" His tone shifts to a more professional one. "It's helped with business? All the things you've been saying about the experiments, the

little details about how you want them to unfold. It's clearly doing the job because business is up, right?"

*What?*

Business? We're talking about business now? I thought we were talking about ...

My heart sinks as awareness smacks me.

It was all in my head.

It was all in my heart.

He doesn't see what I see.

"It is," I say in my best keep-it-together tone as I share some of my numbers from the week.

My reality tilts once more. We are talking about business. Not the other things I've said in the blog.

Not the words about wanting, about craving, about needing.

About being adored.

My muscles tighten. My throat clenches. For a few horrifying seconds, I fear I might break into tears in front of him, but I swallow them down.

This sharp ache in my chest is necessary. This knowledge is everything I need to move past our experiment.

He's been reading my blog, and he sees it *only* as an experiment. *Only* as marketing.

He's not connecting to the hidden confessions I hardly realized were there.

He's only responding to the bigger purpose—the competitive one.

And that means when the clock strikes midnight, we return to friendship land.

At least we can return intact.

I haven't blurted out the truth of my heart, so I'm safe, and we're safe, and we'll return to who we were.

“So, there you go. It’s a damn good thing I started it, and I’ll just have to keep writing more about lingerie,” I say in a cheery tone, trying to keep the mood featherlight to convince him the posts were only ever about the underwear.

Not about me.

Not about him.

“You should keep writing it, since you seem to enjoy it.” He props his head in his hand. “Hey. I have good news. Did you know the Harriet’s sale is over?”

“It is?” I ask, brightening.

“I saw it today. I couldn’t wait to tell you. But then I got distracted by this beauty in the tub,” he says, rough and raspy again, his eyes hooking into mine.

And the look in them is like a sign I should try one more time.

Because he looks at me like he feels the same way.

*Put yourself out there.*

“So you find me distracting?” I ask leadingly.

“You are highly distracting, Peyton.”

That’s promising, but then again, sex has been known to distract men. “What did you think of our tests? Did you learn anything?” I ask, trying to mask the hope in my voice.

He swallows and nods, his hazel eyes flickering with something darker, deeper.

*That.*

I want to know what *that* is.

*That* look is what I feel.

“What did you learn?” I ask, holding my breath, hoping he’s going to say he learned that I’m the one. Maybe he doesn’t need to read between the lines of my blog to take a chance with me. Maybe he’ll take it anyway.

His lips twitch in a wry grin. “That life doesn’t always play out like a romance novel,” he says, and my heart

plummets.

I want the romance of the romance novel.

I want the sex and the love and the happiness.

“But what if it could?” I ask, pushing past the ache in my chest.

He taps my shoulder, grinning. “You didn’t let me finish.”

“Okay. Finish,” I say, mentally crossing my fingers.

His fingers trace lingering lines on my hip as he says, “Life doesn’t always play out like a novel, or even often. But sometimes, every now and then, you’re so in sync with each other, you come together.” He stops abruptly, like he was about to say something more, and I wait, on the edge of possibility. But all he says is “Right?”

There it is.

We are just sex.

He’s not catching feelings for me.

I should kick him out. I should let him go. But I want one more time.

And he’s going to give it to me.

“Right,” I answer as I reach for him and bring him close, and he follows my lead.

Taking my wrists, he pins them over my head, groaning with appreciation at the sight of me stretched out for him.

He doesn’t say, *One last time*. He doesn’t have to. It’s clear.

What’s clear, too, as he enters me is that getting over him now will take infinitely longer than last time.

And honestly, I’m not sure I ever did.

I think a part of my heart has always belonged to him.

Maybe that makes me dishonest.

Or maybe I’m finally being fully honest with myself.



As Tristan moves in me, breathing with me, moaning with me, I'm certain now. I gave a part of myself to him ten years ago. And I never took it back.

Trouble is, if I don't retrieve it now, I'll be lost for good.

\* \* \*

When he leaves, he kisses me goodbye at the door, soft, sweet, and quick.

“Bye, Peyton.”

“Bye, Tristan.”

It feels like goodbye forever.

And I hate this feeling.

He holds the door open longer than he has to, then turns around and whispers my name. “Peyton?”

It sounds like the opening of a prayer.

“Yes?”

“What I meant to say is ...” His lips part, but no more words come. He just looks at me like he's trying to understand the secrets of the universe. “What I meant to say is thank you.”

It's like a hand grips my throat. “For what?” I choke out.

“For asking me to help you. For trusting me. I was so glad when you asked me. I didn't want it to be some other guy. I hate the thought of anyone hurting you ever again.”

*But you're hurting me right now. You're hurting me, and you don't even know it, you wonderful, beautiful, thoughtful man who doesn't love me the same way.*

“You would never hurt me,” I whisper.

He nods, swallowing roughly, his jaw tight. “I never would.”

He steps into the hall, turns around one more time, and gives me a look that would make movie audiences throw their popcorn at the hero.

A look that would make them shout, “Kiss her, tell her, love her!”

But life isn't like the movies. It's not like the books.

That's what I learned this last week.

After the door shuts, I let the tears rain down.



# TRISTAN

My hand doesn't move. It's stuck to her door like I can feel her through it. Like I can impart all the things I didn't say.

All the desperate, pathetic words that threatened to fall from my lips.

*Like I love you so much it hurts.*

*Like I don't want to read too deeply into your blog, but if you tell me you feel one-tenth of what I feel, I will be the happiest guy in the world.*

*And like this—By “come together,” I didn't mean sex. It's hard for me to say what I mean because I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose another person I love. But let me try to say it better. Let me rephrase. Life doesn't always play out like a novel, or even often. But sometimes, every now and then, you're so in sync, you come together like it was meant to be for the two of you. Right?*

And she'd say yes, and she'd throw her arms around me and smother me in kisses, because this is our time. It has to be our time. We won't get another chance.

I've already let two opportunities pass me by.

I'd be an idiot to let the third one go.

Barrett would tell me as much. I smile privately, thinking of my brother. Of how I've tried to goad him into asking out Rachel, and how he's tried to push me into speaking the truth to Peyton.

How can I raise him to be a man of action, a man of truth, if I can't do it myself?

I can't say one thing to him and do another. That's not what my parents taught me, and it's not what I want to impart to Barrett.

In baseball, you get three strikes. You don't fucking walk away from the plate after two shots. You either try to whack the ball over the fence or you go down swinging.

I step away from the door then pace the hall, practicing, trying to figure out what the hell to say.

I'm going to do this, and I'm going to do it right.

And there's one way to do just that.

I need to go big. I need flowers and chocolate. I need to give her everything she wants.

It's Sunday night, but this is New York, a city that never sleeps, and I'm going to get the biggest bouquet and the best chocolate, and I'm going to come back and knock on the door and tell her the real reason I'm glad she asked me to be her partner.

Because I want to be the only one for her.

*Always.*

That's it.

Fueled by this plan, I head for the elevator, willing it to whisk me downstairs faster so I can canvas all the nearby shops, find everything she likes, and return like the heroes in books do.

Because even though I don't read those stories, I know enough. You don't show up empty-handed to tell the love of your life that you adore her.

You go big or you go home.

I rush down the street past a pair of late-night joggers, then a delivery truck dropping off a package. I race past a doorman in a fancy building, turning the corner toward the nearest bodega that sells flowers.

My phone buzzes.

Maybe it's her.

I slow slightly, grabbing it, and there's a message from Barrett.

**Barrett:** Fine. If it's going to come down to this, I'll be the bigger man. I'll go first. I finally told Rachel how I feel.

My grin stretches for a city block. Look at us, the Alexander men getting their acts together. I stop outside the store and reply.

**Tristan:** And how did it go?

**Barrett:** I actually told her a few days ago.

**Tristan:** Oh, you did? And that's good?

**Barrett:** It's good, but it's not what you think. I'm home. Want to talk?

And that's when I know tonight's confession has to wait.



# PEYTON

*The Lingerie Devotee: Don't Even Attempt to Try This at Home*

*Blog entry*

Bathtub sex is a lie. Take a bath, have your lover feed you chocolate from beside the tub, then slip into a cute cotton robe and go to bed.

Or better yet, come into my store first. I'm having a sale on cute cotton robes, lace V teddies, and red bras and panties. Half off.

*The Lingerie Devotee*

Find me at You Look Pretty Today on Madison Avenue





# TRISTAN

Barrett waits for me in the kitchen, drinking a can of LaCroix and scrolling through his phone.

“Hey. How was rehearsal?”

“It was good,” he says, setting down his phone. He yanks open the fridge, grabs a can, and slides it to me.

“I’m not thirsty.”

“Take it. You’re going to need a drink. I’d give you a beer, but you don’t keep liquor in the house.”

I take the can, pointing it at him. “You’re right. I don’t keep liquor here, and I hope you don’t drink till you’re legal \_\_\_”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” He slides into a passable imitation of me. “*But if I do, call you, and you’ll help me or my friends. And call an Uber.* I know. But this isn’t about drinking. This is about something else.”

I frown, cracking open the can of raspberry-flavored water, the back of my neck prickling. I have no clue what he needs to talk about, but I’m imagining the worst—drugs, depression, a friend committed suicide. I’m not the praying type, but I offer a silent request anyway as I take a drink then set down the can. “So, evidently we need drinks to talk?”

“It’s metaphorical.” He chugs back some of his beverage, puts down the can, then exhales. “My liquid courage.”

I squeeze his shoulder, worry thrumming through me. “What’s going on?” I ask evenly, because I don’t want to let on that he’s freaking me out. “Tell me what happened.”

He drags a hand through his hair and breathes in loudly through his nostrils. “So ... I took your advice. I told Rachel how I feel ...”

“And?” Every muscle in my body tenses.

“And she agreed that I should go for it with Eli.” The words come out so quickly I’m not sure I heard him correctly.

“Come again?”

“Eli. He’s on the tech crew too. He’s into robotics and has shitty taste in music, since he likes pop, but I can forgive that because he has a wicked sense of humor. Also, he’s a Yankees fan.”

If I thought he shined when he talked about Rachel, that had nothing on the sweetness I hear in his voice now. And with that, the dots start to connect. “When you were saying you wanted to tell Rachel how you feel, and that you needed to do it in your own time, you meant she was the first person you told that you like Eli?”

“Yeah. She wasn’t surprised. And don’t worry—she’s not heartbroken. She didn’t think of me that way, and I’m glad. You, however, seem surprised.” His voice is strained, and there’s a touch of fear in his eyes.

And I don’t want him to be scared. Not for one second.

He’s brave.

He’s completely brave. My seventeen-year-old brother just came out.

“Yes, I’m surprised. But it doesn’t matter.” I laugh, relieved that he’s telling me he likes dudes rather than that someone broke his heart, or he’s addicted to opiates, or he’s unhappy every second of the day. “I was worried she’d hurt you, or that you were going to tell me you were depressed, or a million other things. But you’re not.” I let out a huge breath as

I smile like a proud dad. “You’re telling me what you like, and I think that’s awesome.”

He narrows his eyes, but the sliver of a smile appears. “It is?”

“Yes! God, yes. You know yourself. You understand yourself. That is fantastic. *This* is fantastic.”

He lets out a huge sigh, like he’s been taking on the weight of the world. “I was really worried.”

“Why? Why would you worry?”

“Because you’re *soooo* into girls.”

My smile takes over. “And that means I’d want you to be *soooo* into girls?”

His eyes widen. “Um. Yeah. You’ve been pushing me to ask out Rachel for, like, forever.”

“You’ve been acting like you liked her! You spend all this time with her, and you’re all happy and upbeat when she’s around, and you pretty much said you were going to ask her out. We made a bet. Why would I think anything else?”

“Fine. I led you on, but I just thought you wanted me to be like you. All manly and bearded and totally into curves.”

A laugh bursts from deep inside me. “News flash. Whether you’re gay or straight isn’t what makes you manly.”

He seems to consider this for longer than I would have expected, his hazel eyes darkening, turning serious. “What does, then?”

His question is completely earnest.

And it’s why I come home every night. It’s why I show up for him. So he has someone to ask these questions. Someone who can answer.

But even though I was dead wrong about who he likes, I know I’m dead right when I give him my answer. I clasp his shoulder. “What makes a man a man is when he owns up to his mistakes, when he acts with integrity, when he speaks with

honesty, and when he looks out for those he loves. And you ...”

I shake a finger at him, my voice breaking for the first time since my mom died. “I love you, Barrett. I love you like crazy, and I’m sorry if I made you think you had to like girls. You can like girls, or girls and boys, or just boys. Or everyone. Love is love, and I want you to love whoever you want. Okay?”

His eyes shine, and he nods several times, pursing his lips like he’s holding back emotion too. I draw him in for an embrace, a long big-brother bear hug that I don’t want to break.

But I do because I have to know something. I poke his chest. “Did you ask Eli to homecoming?”

Barrett smiles. “I did.”

“And?”

His answer comes in the form of a grin.

I grin too. “So, he said yes?”

“He did. You’ll like him. He’s cool.”

“And he’s smart, obviously, if he likes you.” Sunshine fills my chest. This is good. This is so damn good.

Barrett blows on his fingernails then brushes them across his chest. “I am a prize.”

“No doubt. You’re an Alexander man. And I’m glad you have a friend like Rachel. Glad you have someone you could talk to. Even if you told her before me.” I frown, giving him an over-the-top pout. “But you did trick me with your bet.”

He raises one brow. “Did I though?”

“Didn’t you? You said you’d ask her out.”

He raises a finger to make a point. “I believe my deal was—if you ask out Peyton, I’ll tell Rachel how I feel.”

My jaw comes unhinged. “You sneaky little punk,” I say in admiration. I flash back on all our recent Rachel

conversations. Come to think of it, he never did say he'd ask her out. He always said he'd tell her how *he felt*. And he did tell her.

He beat me to it, even though it wasn't a contest.

My little brother manned up before I did. And he did something even harder—seeing himself truly, and being honest with himself, his friends, and his family.

He taps his toe. “And did you tell Peyton the truth?”

For the first time in years, maybe even since our mom was alive, I speak aloud about Peyton with absolute honesty.

“That I'm in love with her? That I fell in love with her in college? That I wanted to have a real chance with her a few years ago before Gage came back in her life? That she's the one I want to spend my nights and mornings with?”

He rolls his eyes. “Dude. You sound like you're in one of those chick flicks.”

I laugh, loving that he ribs me still. “And what of it?”

“Save it for the woman. Tell her.” He stabs a finger on the kitchen counter. “Tell her now. As a wise man once told me: ‘I don't want you to wait too long and then regret it,’” he says, quoting me back to me. “Do you know what I mean?”

“I do. I absolutely do. And I was going to tell her tonight.”

“Tell. Her. Now.”

I nod dutifully, a good soldier.

I pick up my phone to call her, to see if I can swing by, but it goes straight to voicemail.

And that's where it stays when I call again that night—a few times—and when I wake in the morning.



# PEYTON

Marley opens the door cautiously, glancing around like she might get in trouble. When she spots me behind the counter, she offers a toothy grin. “Hi.”

Her voice is stretched thin, and I wonder if she did something wrong, or if I’m giving off don’t-disturb-the-bear vibes.

Probably the latter.

My vibes are dipped, battered, and fried in misery today, and no one wants to be near me.

She reaches into her purse, fishes around for something, and extracts a Lulu’s chocolate bar with coconut and caramel.

“I thought you might need this. You seem ... not yourself,” she says, taking tentative steps toward the counter and setting the bar down gently, like I might attack.

I smile faintly at the gesture. “I do need this. Thank you.” I grab the bar, rip open the wrapper, and bite into the corner, just as the bell tinkles.

Shit.

I can’t eat chocolate at the register. I can’t eat anything surrounded by all this silk and satin and lace.

I’m a piggy-pig-pig.

I shove the candy under the counter, checking my fingers to make sure I don’t have evidence of my chocolate therapy on them.



“Was it good?”

I raise my face, relieved to see Daniella. “It was delicious,” I admit.

“You okay?” she asks, striding over to the counter.

Marley steps in, smiling brightly. “She’s great. I was just raving about this chocolate, and I brought her some and made her eat it, and it’s all my fault.”

I laugh, but I can’t let her take the blame for my indiscretion, especially for something so innocuous and so clearly my responsibility—my sad, sour mood.

“Actually, I’m in a funk, and Marley is Wonder Woman, attempting to save the day by delivering my favorite thing.”

Daniella smiles at both Marley and me. “I had a feeling you were in a funk. I read your blog.”

I gulp. “Sorry. You must have caught it before I took it down earlier. I shouldn’t have posted that.”

She’s not the first one to notice the blog. Amy called me this morning, and Lola did too. “Was that a cry for help?” Lola had asked.

“Because it sure seemed like one,” Amy had seconded.

They’d proceeded to conduct an early morning therapy session that consisted of a lot of “chin ups” and “But are you sure that’s what he meant?”

Yes, I was sure.

I’d raised the issue of *more* with Tristan. I’d tried to talk to him. I’d made it as clear as the blue sky above.

And what did he do?

He *thanked* me.

He motherfucking thanked me last night.

If that isn’t a “he’s just not that into you,” I don’t know what is. The man clearly wanted to bang me—*you’re so pretty, I want you, blah blah blah blah blah*—but that was all he wanted.

Friendship and lingerie.

Nothing more.

That's why I didn't answer his missed calls this morning when I saw them wallpapering my phone. I didn't even listen to his voicemails. What's the point?

And you know what? It was all my fault. I can't even be mad at him because I asked him for this very thing—*be my tester, help me out, and oh, I'm hot for you, let's have a bang-a-thon.*

I set myself up to fail.

And now I have to suck down all these icky feelings and be the best damn bra saleswoman I can be. I wave a hand, dismissing my mood as if it's a dust mite, and I smile at Daniella, returning to her question. "I'm all good. It was a momentary funk."

Daniella narrows her eyes. "Was it?"

"Of course. Funk be gone. Enough about me, statistical goddess. Tell me how the math bra went," I say, zeroing in on her.

"It was great. I feel great. But I didn't come here to talk about lingerie. I came to talk about you."

I blink. "What about me?"

She sighs sympathetically. "I was worried about you. Because of your blog. It's not like you to post something like that. And I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

My heart squeezes at the gesture. The lovely gesture of a customer checking up on me. "I'm going to be fine."

"You really liked the guy, didn't you?"

A lump forms in my throat. "I did. Well, obviously I still do. The feelings didn't go away overnight. Wish they did."

"Why do you like him?"

I shake my head, not wanting to answer.

But she's persistent. "How *do you feel* with him?"

Marley pipes up. “She feels amazing.”

I snap my gaze to my assistant, who’s not normally so outspoken. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, you’re always a good-natured person, but in the last week, you’ve come into the store with this spring in your step, a saucy secret in your eyes, and a grin you can’t wipe off your face.”

Damn. My cheery, go-getting assistant is an observational guru too. A traitorous smile twitches across my lips, but I wipe it off.

“Like that,” Marley says, pointing. “You can’t stop smiling. This guy, this project—he makes you happy.”

Yes. Yes, he does. He makes me feel like the sun and the moon and the stars. He treats me like a goddess and looks at me like I’m a work of art.

“He does. He makes me incandescently happy.” I sigh, full of the weight of unrequitedness. “But he doesn’t want the same thing I want.”

Daniella tilts her head. “Are you sure though?”

I nod, dejected. “I’m positive. And you know what? I have a whole store full of lace and silk to help me get over him.” I rub my palms together. “Now, as for you, why don’t you let me help you find another sexy little number that’ll make you feel like a Botticelli?”

“If you insist.”

“I do.” I happily help her because I love what I do, and I welcome the distraction.

She chooses a stars and planets bra, and as I ring her up, I ask about her plans for the week.

“I am on the hunt for a fun new girls’ night out activity. I’m in charge of planning it this time, and I have nothing so far,” she says.

Fortunately, I have just the answer. “Try goat yoga. My girlfriends and I are going to do that. We took Cirque du Soleil

classes too, and they were horrible but also fun.”

“Those sound like a blast,” she says, then narrows her eyes at me, serious again. “And I’m going to pop in next week to buy more little darlings and to check on you.” She waves goodbye, then says in a hopeful tone, “But I have a feeling.”

When the door shuts, I see a familiar silhouette walk past my store.

My ex. He’s in a suit, hair slicked back, talking on the phone, heading uptown.

And I feel nothing.

I turn away from the window.

I don’t care where Gage goes or walks or what he does. He’s my past.

Even if he skirts near my present, I’m not bothered.

He’s just another guy on the streets of New York.

He’s not the one I want to see walking into my store, coming to my home.

My shoulders shudder as a wave of longing crashes over me.

“Hey.” Marley’s voice is soft but insistent, her hand gentle as she touches my arm. “Get some fresh air. You’re sad, but you shouldn’t be sad.” Her soft brown eyes are wise beyond her years.

“Why do you say that?”

She shrugs happily. “Like Daniella said, I have a feeling. Go for a walk. See if you get a feeling too.”

She shoos me out the door.

And as I walk along Madison Avenue, heading downtown, savoring the changing colors of fall, I reflect on their words. *I have a feeling.*

And my mom’s. *You have a vibe.*

Lola’s too. *I’ve seen the way you two are together.*

And then Tristan's, in bed, before the first time. *You have no idea.*

And all the other things, said and unsaid, that have passed between Tristan and me over the years.

Back in college. When we were friends. When we kissed. When we returned to being friends again.

And over the last nine months since I've been single. How he makes me the owner's special. And gives me chocolate. And listens to every word I say.

And the past few nights. The way he's touched me, looked at me, whispered my name.

I saw so much in his eyes. So much truth and honesty.

I was searching for confirmation in words. But maybe he already gave it to me in other ways. Or perhaps I wasn't seeing between the lines.

And maybe I need to find a way to give him more than a fishing expedition of effort. More than feel-him-out questions about my blog or the experiments or friends with bennies.

I need to tell him in no uncertain terms.

Because regrets are for haircuts and exes.

And I don't want Tristan to be an ex-anything.

I turn around.



# TRISTAN

I'll give her till eleven to call me back.

That should be enough time for her to wake up, get dressed, go to work, settle in for the day, and listen to messages.

That's civilized—give the woman a little time and space to deal with her business.

I go into work early, checking her blog on the way. But there's no new post, and my heart sinks a little lower.

No worries though. She's probably busy with Monday morning work stuff. At the restaurant, I handle the usual smattering of phone calls from suppliers and emails regarding inventory.

When eleven rolls around, my phone is still bereft of messages or texts from her.

I open the call log, about to call her again, when the door swings open. Likely a customer coming in for an early lunch.

I do a double take when I see who it is.

My jaw ticks as Gage walks over to the counter, grabs a stool, and flashes me a grin.

“Hey, Tris. What's up? Saw a write-up for this spot in a food blog, so I'm meeting a client here for an early lunch.” He extends a hand to shake, like we're buddies reconnecting after a long absence.

I don't take it. I slide him a menu. “Here you go.”

“Whoa. What’s with the cold shoulder?”

Is he for real? “Excuse me?”

Gage looks around. “Isn’t this a place of business?”

“Yes,” I say, clenching my fists. “And here’s the way to do business. You look at the menu. You place an order. That’s how it works.”

Gage gives me a *c’mon, man* sigh, then flashes me a smile. “Look, Tris. I know you wanted Peyton long ago. You didn’t get her. It happens. I don’t have her either. Let’s just move on.” His eyes drift down to the menu, perusing the fare. “Now, what do I want to drink while I wait?”

I seethe.

This guy.

This fucking guy.

I park my hands on the bar, about as aggressive as I can be without being aggressive.

“Let me make something clear.” He looks up from the menu, and I gesture from him to me. “You and I are not the same.”

He tilts his head and arches a well-groomed brow. “But we kind of are. We both wanted her.” He studies me, waiting for me to respond perhaps. I remain stone-faced and silent, and he laughs. He actually laughs. “Wait. Did you think I didn’t know you were hot for her? I knew the whole time. I knew in college, and I knew the last few years.” He scratches his jaw. “And I guess the whole world knows too, thanks to her ridiculous blog. Like I didn’t know you were her trick pony,” he scoffs.

Temper burns through me, raging like a forest fire. But I think of Barrett and what I told him last night. The measure of a man isn’t fists, or fights, or who thumps his chest the hardest.

It’s integrity. It’s truth. I speak mine as I lean forward. “Her blog isn’t ridiculous. And you know nothing about me, or her, or us. Also, we don’t serve your kind around here.”



Snatching the menu from him, I point to the door. “No shirt, no shoes, no assholes. Get the hell out of my restaurant. You lost the best woman you’ll ever have, and I would feel sorry if I could muster a single emotion for you, but I can’t. So goodbye.”

He holds up his hands in some sort of *excuse me* gesture. “You don’t have her either.”

“Once again, you’re missing the point entirely.” I take a beat and let go of my anger. “But then again, you always did.”

He scoffs, pushes away, and walks out.

As he leaves, I picture the time he walked back into her life a few years ago. When I’d bought flowers and planned to ask her out.

Now I’m not in the least bit worried about that chump. I don’t need to beat him to her doorstep. He’s not winning her back ever again.

But I’m also not wasting another minute waiting. I did that for ten years, and I’m done frittering away another nanosecond.

I tell my assistant manager I need to handle some errands, then I leave and head straight for her store.

When I reach it ten minutes later, she’s rounding the block, a look of intense focus on her face, her lips parted, like she’s practicing a speech.

I walk right up to her, stop in front of her, and clasp her cheeks.

She startles, then says, “*Oh.*”

I don’t wait. I say everything I should have said last night. “I love you. I love you. I love you. Please love me too.”



# PEYTON

This is the real dream.

This is the moment that's so surreal, it might be my deepest fantasy. Powerful and potent and the one I want now.

The one I've only realized I had in the last few days. But it's been growing inside me for years. I've been watering the seed of it, tending to it, readying it to bloom.

Shivers run down my arms, and they're not from the slight chill in the air. They're from my reality.

The man I love holds my face, gazes deep into my eyes, and asks me to love him.

I slide my hands up his chest, touching him, needing to connect with him. "You don't have to ask. I'm already there. I love you," I say, at last speaking the words I tried to say twelve hours ago. "I should have told you last night. I wanted to tell you, but I was scared. I'm not scared now, and I was coming to find you and tell you too."

His lips curve in a grin. "But I found you."

"I always want you to find me."

"I always will." He sighs, and the sound that comes with it is rich with joy. "Kiss me," he tells me. "Kiss me like you love me."

"I can't kiss you any other way." I brush my lips to his, gasping at the feel of him.

In a way, it's our first kiss.

It's the first time we've touched this honestly, this truthfully. It's our first kiss knowing the score. And that's how we kiss, like we've been waiting years to fall in love fully, completely, with the right person.

He holds my face the whole time, like he doesn't want to let go of me.

I don't want him to either. I want to be in his arms, with this man I trust and love and cherish.

His lips travel over mine, an eager exploration as we enter this new land together.

Love.

Real love.

With true intimacy.

When we break the kiss days later—okay, maybe it's only a few minutes—he's smiling at me and I'm grinning at him.

"I should have done that years ago," he says, shaking his head.

"Same here."

He runs his thumb along my cheek. "I wanted to a few years ago. Before ..." He trails off, not saying his name. He doesn't need to.

"You did?"

He nods solemnly. "I was all ready to give you flowers and go to your house and ask you to go out with me. That cologne you gave me had me convinced."

I laugh, remembering that gift. "You did smell awfully yummy when you wore it."

"I was stupidly convinced the cologne was a sign."

"Maybe it was, and I didn't realize it. Maybe I wasn't prepared for real love then. But I am now, and I'm not letting you slip away." I grab the neckline of his shirt for emphasis, clutching him tight. "I'm not."

He gathers me close, kisses my hair, and whispers, “I won’t let you. I promise. Besides, I have nowhere to go but to you, Peyton.”

My throat hitches, but this time I don’t try to swallow down the tears. They’re tears of happiness, and I let them fall.

And I’m even happier when he kisses them away, his lips soft and tender on my cheek. “What do you say we conduct a new experiment?”

I pull back to meet his eyes. “And what’s that?”

“How about we try love and sex and friendship? All of those wrapped up together?”

I tap my chin, like I’m deep in thought. “Hmm. Love, sex, and other shiny objects. I’m game.”

That night after work, he comes over, and I pounce on him the second he walks through the door.

We kiss like lovers in love, and like friends in love too.

He carries me to my bed and strips me down to nothing. I am bare before him, heart and soul. “Tristan, it was never just sex for me.”

He runs his fingers down my neck. “It was always love. Even when I fuck you, I’ll always be making love to you.”

I shudder, wild with anticipation as I take off all his clothes too.

When he’s inside me, I let go with him in a whole new way.

This is everything I’ve ever wanted.

Real intimacy.

Real closeness.

Real love.

\* \* \*

“Victory is mine! And the game goes to the fifty-five-year-old.” My mom thrusts her racket in the air, showboat that she is.

I shake my head, but I’m smiling as I congratulate her on her win on the badminton court. “You’re the champ, mom. But I do have a question for you. When you lie about your age, why do it by one year? Why not pretend you’re, say, twenty-nine?”

She tuts, like that’s the silliest notion. “Because then we’d be twins, sweetheart.”

“Ah, well. That explains everything.”

“Also,” she says, as we exit the court after my epic pummeling, “I’m ready for my *I told you so*.”

“Do you want me to serve it up with quinoa?”

“Excellent idea. Let’s get a quinoa bowl and you can tell me all about what the vibe turned into.”

We head to a café and I tell her the rest of the story. “And real love is awesome,” I add, when I finish the tale. “Also, you were right about Tristan and me having a thing. Does that make you happy?”

“No. What makes me happy is that you chose wisely. And I don’t simply mean the man. You chose boldness. That was brave. That was worth it, wasn’t it?”

I nod, agreeing with my whole heart. “When it comes to love, being bold is so much better than being careful,” I say, so glad I went for it with the man I adore.

“Keep being bold. Love is worth it.”

“And on that front, once again, you’re right.”

As we dine on quinoa, I consider myself lucky to have so many amazing women in my life—women who’ve helped me reach for and realize so many dreams.

From Mimi, to my mom, to my best friends, to the women I encounter in my job, they’ve all played a part in where I am today.

And I'm exactly where I want to be.





# TRISTAN

She doesn't stow away a small family under her dress.

That's good because her dress comes to just above her knees.

It's ruby red, and she looks like a jewel. The music shifts from some pop star to some other pop star, and I wrap an arm around her waist as we man the punch table.

"Are you wearing red lace under that?" I whisper, my voice already husky as I picture unzipping this dress later.

"Maybe," she says with a flirty, dirty look. "Or maybe I'm wearing green. To match the shirt I bought you." She tap-dances her fingers down the forest-green Henley. "Have I mentioned how good you look in this shirt?"

"Good enough to get me naked later so you can have your way with me?" I ask in a growl.

"That's exactly my plan."

"You should conduct an experiment to see how quickly you can take it off me. I'll do the same when it comes to stripping off your dress to see if you're wearing green." Around us, the seniors at Barrett's school dance, laugh, and snap pictures. "But I doubt it. You usually match your undies to your clothes."

She wiggles her eyebrows. "Very observant. Also, green is not my color when it comes to lingerie."

"Why not?"

“It makes me look like a leprechaun,” she says, flicking her red hair.

I run a hand through those strands, tugging her close. “On you, Peyton, the leprechaun look is sexy.”

She rolls her eyes as someone clears his throat.

We yank apart to find that *someone* is my brother.

“Don’t you know the chaperones aren’t supposed to make out?” he chides us.

He’s not alone. The guy next to him with olive skin and green eyes shakes his head in amusement. “Adults today. You can’t leave them alone, Bear.”

*Bear*: Eli already has a nickname for my brother.

“Seriously. What does it take to get some punch around here?” Barrett asks.

“All you have to do is ask nicely. And not slurp,” I say.

Peyton sticks a hand in the air and waves. “Hello? Introductions, gentlemen.”

As I ladle some punch, I second her. “Yes, Barrett. Make the intros.”

After I pour the beverages, we all shake hands and say hello, and then Barrett and Eli head back to their crew, joining Rachel and the rest of them.

I turn to Peyton. “I suppose I should apologize for constantly putting my hands on you, but I can’t seem to find it in me.”

“I would never accept such an apology. Because *on me* is my favorite place for your hands.” She smiles as the music shifts once again. The tune is instantly familiar.

She grins like she has a secret. *Our* secret. “I asked them to play this. I’ve always wanted to kiss you again to this song.”

Cyndi Lauper’s love song fills the gymnasium, and I take Peyton’s hand and bring her to the dance floor.

And I give her what she wants.

It's what I want too.

And this time is our time.

For all time.



# PEYTON

*A few months later*

The blog worked for my brother. He sent an ultrasound picture to the family chat the other day. A tiny little peanut that's growing in Holly.

**Jay:** Thought you might like this first shot of the newest Valencia.

**Mom:** The lingerie worked!

**Jay:** You told mom we bought lingerie from your shop?

**Peyton:** Obviously. Also, congratulations!!!! Was it the leopard print that did the trick?

**Jay:** Yes, do you want us to name the baby Leopard Print Valencia?

**Mom:** That is a perfect name. Also, I'm so happy for you!

**Peyton:** And I hope you have a girl so I can buy her her first bra someday.

**Jay:** Can we please not talk about bras yet?

**Peyton:** Sure. But mark my words, if you have a girl, I will definitely be taking her underthings shopping. Count on it.

The blog worked for business too.

It's still working.

Case in point—a determined woman in a trenchcoat who marches into my shop at the end of the day and declares in a posh tone, “I’m looking for a teddy that will make me want to rip off my lover’s shirt.”

“Are we talking all the buttons flying everywhere?”

She sweeps her arm out wide. “Ping, ping, ping. Literally everywhere.”

“Let me show you a few items that I bet you’ll love,” I say, and guide the woman to our new collection of teddies.

“Yes. Gorgeous,” she declares as she flicks through the display. “Oh yes. Delicious.” She pauses, eyes lighting up. “Oh, my yes. Must have that. I better go try this on right now.”

“Don’t forget to try the new pink one too. You’ll look pretty in pink,” Marley says, chiming in.

“Good idea. Plus, it’ll make me look innocent,” the woman says with a wink.

“God bless pink for that and other reasons. I’ll show you to the dressing rooms,” Marley says.

A few minutes later, the woman emerges, all the lacy teddies draped on her arm. “I’ll take them all. Including this pink one. I’ll have something to wear for the shirt ripping, the panty ripping, the staircase routine, and then for whatever else I decide to add to the naughty mix.”

I beam. “I like the way you think.”

“And I suspect you’ll love the way they make you feel every time you wear them,” Marley says as she rings up the woman.

When the customer leaves You Look Pretty Today, I lock the door behind her, then give Marley a thumbs up. “Well done.”

We close up, arranging displays and making sure the store looks fabulous to passersby in the night.

“That was a great day,” Marley says as she straightens some pink bras. “Business just gets better and better.”

“It sure does,” I say. “And you’ve played a big part in that.”

Marley is a kick-ass employee, so good at her job that I promoted her. She’s funny as hell too, and we take turns blogging now, sharing our respective adventures in lingerie.

Tristan’s original instinct was right—the blog and the social media that goes with it have played a huge part in keeping my shop competitive. We’ve been able to hold our own against Harriet’s, and we’re doing it in a way that would make Mimi proud—with personal service for all our customers, making sure they go home feeling beautiful in what they wear beneath the clothes they show the world.

Marley flashes a naughty little grin. “Well, I do happen to love lingerie as much as my boss does. So thank you for letting me write about it with you.” She’s a kindred spirit, and that’s exactly who I enjoy spending my days with here at the store.

“There’s no one I’d rather share a pen with,” I say.

“And on that note, how about slipping me some of that new La Perla shipment? I have a hot date tonight,” she says, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Ooh. I want details tomorrow. And yes, grab something lacy and lovely.”

“I will, and this guy, I have a good feeling about this one.”

“I can’t wait to hear more.”

And after work, I like spending my evenings with my girlfriends from time to time. They’re my people too, and always will be, so after we close, I head to Gin Joint to catch up with Lola and Amy.

Amy’s bouncing when I arrive, but she usually is. The woman has more energy than all the coffee beans in Columbia.

She’s holding something behind her back, and when she brandishes it, I squeal.

Lola does too, and Lola is not a squealer. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Lola says, going first.

I grab at the book, with its bright-yellow cover and red title. The illustrated couple on the front is perfectly cheeky and adorable.

“*Sex and Other Shiny Objects*,” Amy declares, handing me my advance copy of the book I contributed to. Immediately, I flip to the back, checking out the “Do and Don’t Try This at Home” guide that I penned for her.

I smile like a loon as I reread the blog posts—the posts that helped me realize I was in love with my best friend. “Ooh, I love this one especially.” I adjust my stance, adopting my librarian pose, and I dive into the revised post I wrote about bathtub sex.

*“Let’s talk about bathtub sex again. Yes, my pretties. It is a lie. Your knees hurt, your toes cramp, and your lady parts just might sting for hours. But what’s not a lie is this—bathtub love. Have a soak with your lover. Snuggle together in a tub. Get close. Or better yet—luxuriate in bubbles and have a chat with him or her about your day. After, when you’re all warm and relaxed, make your way to the bedroom. There, just go for the golden ticket. I’m talking the simultaneous prize. It’s rare, and it’s unlikely. But that’s why it’s all the more fun. Make it a quest. Try it several times. Every night. I tried it with the man I love, and let me tell you—it’s spectacular. But then, so is he.”*

A shiver runs through me as I remember that night. And, well, all the other nights we’ve chased after the elusive simultaneous finish of the sixty-nine. Some nights we catch it. Sometimes one of us flies first. But every time feels like the best time. Because I’m with him.

When I look up, they’re both staring at me like I’m a goofball.

“You’re so happy it’s ridiculous, and I love it,” Lola says.

“Yes. Yes, I am. Drinks are on me. Especially since business has been oh-so-good, thanks to this blog. Check this



out,” I say, as I click over to the comments section, showing them the exchange between Lovey Buns and Sweet ums.

*Sweet ums:* Thank you, Lingerie Devotee, for revealing the truth about bathtub sex. Like I tell my lovey buns, it’s just not happening.

*Lovey Buns:* But I’m willing to try again. Practice makes perfect, as they say.

*Sweet ums:* Bathtub sex is not yoga. It is not a practice.

*Lovey Buns:* But yoga makes it possible to get into all sorts of positions. Including in the tub, sweet ums.

*Sweet ums:* No. Not in the tub, lovey buns.

*Lovey Buns:* Out of the tub then? Maybe when you’re wearing that babydoll nightie?

*Sweet ums:* That is a pretty number. I do love how you indulge my lingerie habit.

*Lovey Buns:* And that habit, I will definitely keep practicing.

*Sweet ums:* And in that case, practice will make perfect.

I close the browser window as my friends nod approvingly at the couple’s exchange. I’m pleased too that everything worked out as it was meant to be for Sweet Ums and Lovey Buns—they are perfect together.

We order a round of Devil’s Teeth, and after we ooh and aah over the book cover again, Lola takes a deep breath, the signal that she’s about to make an announcement. “So...are you ready to hear the latest about you know who?”

“Chris Hemsworth?” I toss out a random name.

“Scott Eastwood?” Amy pitches in.

“Tom Ellis?”

“That hot guy on that new Netflix show you love?”

Lola laughs, shaking her head at each suggestion. Then she draws a deep breath and answers in a foreboding tone. “Lucas.”

“Um, yes,” I deadpan. “I’ve been dying to hear the latest since you had to spend those 24 hours with him.”

“A delicious 24 hours,” Lola adds.

“A wild and naughty 24 hours,” I chime in.

Amy stabs the table with her finger. “I demand a full report now, wild, naughty and delicious.”

Lola straightens her spine. “Here’s the latest with Lucas.”

I sit, enrapt, as she tells us what’s going on with the guy she had a thing for ten years ago, the guy who appeared in her life again a few days ago.

I’m all ears, because I can’t wait to hear what happens next with Lola and the one who got away.

# EPILOGUE

*Tristan*

*Several Months Later*

I blindfold her.

“Are you sure I can’t see it?”

“I’m positive,” I tell Peyton as I guide her to the back room of my bar. The cornhole board still claims center stage, but I’ve added shuffleboard too. And another item at her request.

Well, sort of.

I reach for the rubber hatchet I left on the ground.

I’m *not* letting her throw a metal one. I’m not letting *anyone* toss a metal one. But the woman has a thing for ax throwing, and I have a thing for making her dreams come true.

“Hold out your hands.”

She stretches them in front of her, and I set the rubber ax in her palms.

“Is this what I think it is?” she asks with delight.

“Sort of.” I move behind her and untie the blindfold, letting it fall to the floor.

Her smile fills the room when she sees the target I've installed. "It's ax throwing for my princess lumberjack."

She dances a little jig as she raises the toy ax made of hard, sharpened rubber over her shoulder and takes aim at the target. As she stares at it, narrowing her eyes, ready to fire, I flash back on our last year together—nights and days, hopes and dreams, love and dinners and breakfasts and coffees.

She moved in with me at the start of the summer, and the timing fit since Barrett was spending more and more time in the college dorms. He started early at NYU, and he's been living on campus, taking summer classes.

He comes home for dinner a few nights a week, and that's one of my favorite things in the world—seeing him so often, having dinner with him and Peyton as a family. Sometimes Eli joins us, and Rachel too. Eli's going to school in the city, so we'll see if they stay together. For now, Barrett's happy, and that's all I care about.

The edge of the ax wedges itself into the corkboard target, and Peyton thrusts her arms in the air. "Victory is mine."

And I hope she'll be mine forever as she turns around to find me on one knee.

She gasps, her eyes widening. "Oh my God."

I hold open a blue velvet box. "Peyton Marie Valencia, I've loved you for a long time, and I've been the luckiest guy in the world to have you love me back these last months. You're the only woman for me, and I want you to be mine always. I love you. I love you. I love you. Please marry me," I say, echoing the words I shared with her on the street last fall.

I say them without a shred of worry.

Only hope.

Only *love*.

She sinks to the floor, throws her arms around me, and says, "You don't have to ask. I'm already yours forever. I love you, and I'll marry you anytime, any day, anywhere."

A variation on her words that day too.

I slide the ring on her finger, and her eyes light up as she gazes at the diamond solitaire.

“It’s gorgeous. I do love shiny objects. But not as much as I love you.” She clasps my face and kisses her yes against my lips. Then softly, sweetly, she says, “Thank you for waiting for me.”

I kiss her back. “Thank you for asking me to be your research partner.”

“You’re my permanent research partner now,” she says.

“And we’ll have a lifetime to experiment.”

## ANOTHER EPILOGUE

*The Lingerie Devotee: Do Try This at a Hotel*

*Blog entry, My Wedding Night*

There's something special about white lace.

It's both innocent and sexual at the same time.

And when I wear it, I feel beautiful too.

That's how I wanted to feel on my wedding night.

No surprise I wore lace, then. White lace bikini panties, white lace garters, and a white lace demi-cup bra. Stockings too. Never forget the stockings.

The lingerie served me well during the ceremony and the reception.

But it served both of us later that night. After all, sometimes the mark of fantastic lingerie is how quickly it comes off.

I believe we set a record.

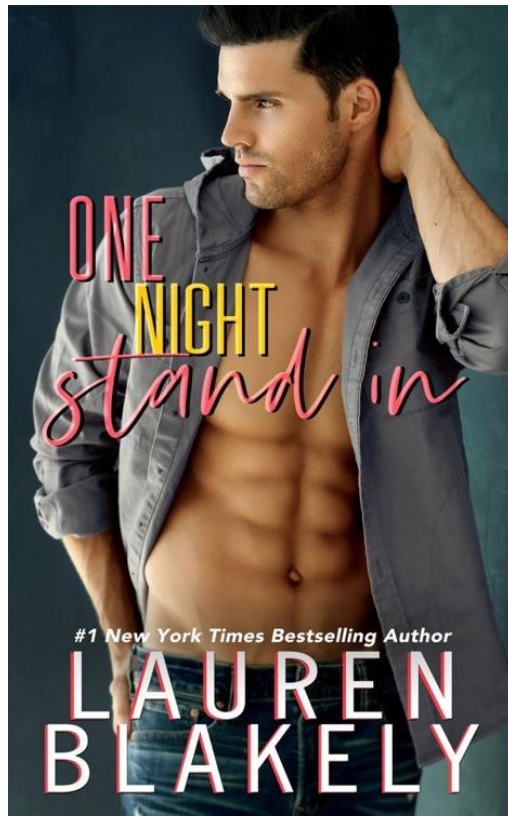
And we're going to keep setting them for the rest of our lives.

THE END

**Eager to know about Lola and the guy who got away?  
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# DEAR SEXY EX- BOYFRIEND

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**Let me just say — none of this was supposed to happen.**

I didn't expect the letter to go viral. I didn't think anyone would figure out who Dear Sexy Ex was. And I especially never thought he would find out about it.

Yeah, bit of a miscalculation there.

But see, I need the money to fund my brand new venture. And Dear Sexy Ex, well, it turns out he needs me to save his business.

By becoming his fake fiancée.

Yup, that's the pickle I find myself in — pretending to be madly in love with the charming, brilliant, and utterly infuriating man known as Dear Sexy Ex.

**Only, it's not an act. And he can never know.**



# PROLOGUE

## Summer

Dear Past Me,

In about twenty-four hours, you're going to have a spectacularly brilliant idea.

One that will make all the sense in the world at the time because it'll solve a big, hairy problem. And you love ideas that solve big, hairy problems. Like in sixth grade when you decided to sell origami door-to-door to raise money for the soccer team's travel. (Who knew there was such a big demand for folded frogs in suburban New York when you were in middle school? You did!)

Or in eighth grade when you ran for Chief Fun Officer on a platform of two junior proms, the second one including a carnival, because who doesn't love a carnival?

But *this* idea? This outstanding, fantastic idea that'll make your dreams come true?

Watch out, Summer.

You're going to end up with a soaking wet bridesmaid's dress, a swan boat incident you'll never live down, the disappointment of your entire family, plus the crushing heartbreak you've sought to avoid for decades, and also ... a pole.

Yes, *that* kind of pole. The kind of pole everybody whispers about when they see it in someone's basement. A "Do they really do that with that?" pole.

I wish I could tell you it'll all work out.

But, as I stand here now, clutching the wet remains of the dress while figuring out what to do with this pole, I don't have an earthly clue how any of this will resolve.

Because of all the harebrained schemes you've whipped up, this one doesn't just take the cake. It bakes it, frosts it, and serves it up in all its three-tiered, royal-icing glory.

You'll look back on other cringeworthy moments in your life—like that time you boldly updated your Twitter feed after four martinis, or your shame over the wrong placement of the apostrophe in *ladies' night*—and they will pale in comparison.

It's worse, even, than when Mom found you practicing volleyball indoors when you were fourteen.

In the living room.

And you had to give up all your allowance to pay for the chandelier.

And the vase.

And the picture frames too.

Of all the things that seemed like good ideas at the time, this letter, this contest, this *ruse* wins the prize.

So it's up to you, Past Me, to avoid this jam we're in now. Because I don't have a clue what to do from here.

Sincerely,

Future You



# SUMMER

## *Ten days ago*

I am about to be busted.

Embarrassingly so. And—I hang my head in shame—deservedly so.

But, for the record, I don't regularly check out guys' packages.

That's not my thing. I don't really think that's any woman's thing. I'm pretty sure gawking at the goods doesn't rank alongside knitting and candle-making in my female friends' hobbies. Or, at least, not that they'd admit in public.

Except ... I *am* doing it, and I can't stop.

It's just that ... seriously? Tiny little bathing suits?

They're impossible to look away from.

I literally have no idea how anyone is *not* supposed to notice a guy's, ahem, *outline* when he gets out of a pool wearing only a Speedo.

How do Olympic diving judges focus on their job, or women across the beaches of Europe focus on anything else? Clearly, that's why truly sophisticated European women always wear huge designer sunglasses.

Since you're supposed to avert your gaze.

That's what I've tried to do for the last minute.

I 100 percent averted my gaze as Oliver reached his sinewy arms for the metal ladder. As he rose out of the water. As he stepped away from the pool.

Because that's the proper social protocol.

But it's really hard to keep your gaze averted the entire time when you're having a conversation with a guy while he's wearing nothing but a Speedo.

And when he's dripping wet.

I mean, all those droplets of water are taking their sweet time sliding down his tanned skin. Along his pecs, over the grooves of his abs, and just a little farther.

This is resist-tasting-the-cookie-batter hard. This is don't-sing-along-to-"Bohemian Rhapsody" hard.

Just. Can't. Do. It.

Also, there are extenuating circumstances here in the form of Oliver Harris. His form is an extenuating circumstance.

Six foot one. Built like the statue of David. Face carved by a sculptor too.

Did anyone look away when Daniel Craig got out of the water in his first James Bond film?

I rest my gaze.

I mean, I rest my *case*.

I snap my gaze up, meeting Oliver's eyes. Those damn green eyes that are twinkling with mischief.

"So, does that work for you?" I ask, adopting the most casual tone I can. The kind of tone that says, *I was so not looking at you as I totally focus on scheduling a get-together to discuss my new business venture.*

His grin twitches.

Then, my longtime friend, in all his wet, toned, nearly naked glory, simply arches a brow, points to his irises, and dryly says, "You do know my eyes are up here?"

Dammit.

Caught red-handed.

I improvise, pointing to the pool behind him. “I was just looking in the shallow end. I was sure I saw Mrs. Wilson’s rose-gold bracelet at the bottom. She thought she lost it during the water aerobics class I just taught.”

So plausible. I could invent excuses for a living, surely.

He nods slowly, an *I call bullshit* nod. “Right. Did you want to go have a look? Pop into the water? Organize a search party?”

I tap my chin as if considering all three, then shake my head. “It was just wishful thinking. I looked pretty closely after class.” I sigh forlornly over the missing jewelry.

Magnanimously, he offers the goggles in his hand. “I insist. It’s Mrs. Wilson’s prized bracelet after all. Let’s have another go, shall we? I’ll help you. We’ll be like scuba divers searching for buried treasure.”

I’d give him points for holding his ground if he wasn’t holding it against me.

But I maintain the oh-so-innocent facade as I gesture to my jeans and sky-blue blouse. “No. I’m already dressed for work. Busy day at the residence. Thank you though. I’ll just let Lost and Found know to keep an eye out.”

He hooks his thumb toward the glistening water. A few solo swimmers power up and down the freestyle lanes. “Want me to jump in? Have a quick check?”

I wave him off. “No worries. I’ll find it later.”

“Are you sure? Might give you a better view of my arse. I’d appreciate an appraisal.”

And the sexy Brit wins the battle of wills.

I have no choice but to give him the all-the-way-to-Jupiter eye roll. “No need. I made my assessment that time you streaked naked across my backyard when we were sixteen. It’s a five, maybe a six on a good day.”

He peers over his shoulder at the backside in question, then parks his hands on his hips. “I beg your pardon. This is a top-notch arse here.”

I cross my arms and chuckle at the way he set up my victory shot. “Yes, indeed. I am definitely checking out a top-notch arse.”

Like a cartoon character muttering curses, he says under his breath, “Touché, woman. Touché.”

He steps toward me, shrugs a muscled shoulder, and gives me a smile from his cache of them—this one I’ve dubbed *the disarming one*. “Truth be told, I don’t mind if you gawk at the crown jewels. I wouldn’t tell you to look away from the works of art if you were at the Louvre.”

“Less like masterpieces and more like Velvet Elvises and paintings of dogs playing poker.”

The corner of his lips curves up. Why is it that infuriatingly good-looking men all have lopsided grins? Is it a standard feature when they’re assembled in the too-hot-for-words factory? Is it a custom order, or part of the Unfairly Handsome Package?

“Summer,” he chides gently. “You’ve been doing it since we were fourteen.”

Back then, I might have given in to the urge to swat him, but I don’t now. Instead, I grit my teeth, dig my heels in, and remind myself that even though he is the living, breathing embodiment of *cocky male in the city*, he is also the guy who has saved me many times.

And I’ve saved him more than once too.

But at the moment, I need to save face. I march to the nearby bench and grab one of the pieces of white cardboard they call gym towels here. Returning, I hand it to Oliver, raising my chin. “There. Now no one can admire the goods, such as they are.”

With an *I’m about to give it right back to you* chuckle, he takes the towel and pointedly refrains from wrapping it around his waist.

The cheeky fucker.

He drapes it over his shoulders then saunters to the side of the pool and leans against the wall, beckoning me. I follow, of course, because I need something from him.

Desperately.

“Tell me exactly what it is you need me to do this time,” he says. “Escort you to the wedding of a jackass you once dated? Train with you for a 10K to benefit Alzheimer’s? Or just look absolutely fantastic when I get out of the water?”

I huff. How can he be so endearing and such an ass at the same time? “Do you practice that, Oliver?”

He arches a brow. “You mean being the knight in shining armor? Or the way I always manage to get your goat?”

“Both,” I say with a laugh.

He scratches his jaw. “It’s a unique talent, I suppose. Being devilishly charming at all hours, no matter the circumstances.” Then he tugs me in close, roping an arm around me. A very wet arm, soaking my work shirt. “You know I’m just teasing you. You are literally the most delightful person to tease because I never know what you’ll do. Either you look like you want to clobber me, or you laugh and go along with it. Keeps me on my toes.”

I wriggle away from him, eyeing the wet splotches on my blouse. “Devil is indeed the appropriate word.”

“And you’re such an angel?” His green eyes flash me a pointed look.

“You know I’m not.” I shift gears and gesture toward the women’s locker room. “But I need to get to work. I have to complete some of the final paperwork for the new fitness center, and I’m hoping I might be able to borrow your brain tonight. Pretty please?”

He rolls with the topic change. That’s the thing about Oliver and me—we’ve worn so many hats with each other that we exchange them with ease. “My brain is always available for the borrowing. See you after work. Can we go to the Melt



My Heart place?” He puts his palms together in a plea, adopting a doe-eyed look that makes me laugh.

“Since when do you like specialty shop franchises you’d normally mock?”

He affects a serious expression. “I’m considering it for my last-meal list.”

“You’re back to that?”

“I was off it for a while, but it amuses me, so I’ve returned to it. Don’t you have things you do that amuse you?”

I tap his nose. “Yes. Talking to you. See you later.”

As I head to the women’s locker room, he says my name. “Summer?”

I turn around.

He raises an arm, leans to the side, and stretches, his muscles glistening as he moves, his abs looking lickable, his torso gleaming, toned and smooth. “Let me know when you find that missing bracelet. I’m sure Mrs. Wilson is terribly worked up over it.”

I rein in a revealing smirk, holding tight to my lie. “Of course.”

He heads to the men’s locker room, and I do not stare at his butt until he leaves my line of sight.

I do not stare at his butt.

I do not ... oh hell, the man just has a great ass.

Like, Louvre quality.

It’s only exceeded by his commitment to besting me, since he calls out, “Oh, hello there, Mrs. Wilson. Can I help you find your bracelet? What’s that? You left it in my locker? You naughty bird, you.”



# SUMMER

I'm about to leave work that evening when I hear the click of a pair of Mary Janes on the hardwood floors.

The clearing of the most aggrieved throat comes next.

Then the voice, brimming with consternation at all that she finds wrong in the world—in a nutshell, *everything*. Literally, everything.

Look, it's not like I disagree. The planet has a lot of knocks against it these days. But, glass half full—a lot is right in the world too.

“Excuse me, Miss Life Enrichment Director.” Roxanne says my title precisely the way such a title should be said—dripping with mockery.

Because seriously?

Couldn't I simply be the Activities Director? Or, if we need to be cutesy, perhaps Lifestyle Leader?

Nope.

Sunshine Living has gone over-the-top twenty-first-century workplace in dubbing me Life Enrichment Director. The title is almost as mockable as my friend Bethany's—she's the Chief Flavor Officer for a small-batch ice cream shop in the Village. I'm as ripe for ribbing as the guy in my building who is a Sales Ninja at an electronics store.

I turn around in the hallway of the assisted living home, flashing Roxanne an *I'm ready to listen* smile.

I swear the woman gets better with age. Every day she looks more glamorous. Her hair isn't gray. It's platinum.

Her face isn't wrinkled. It's wise.

And I swear her spine is straighter than her gold-tipped cane with the puma head top.

She stabs her cane against the floor, banging it petulantly. "Summer, I'm bored. Simply, utterly bored."

I gesture to the activity room fifty feet away, pasting on my cheeriest grin. "Bingo!" I declare, like I'm announcing a room full of puppies to cuddle. "It starts in ten minutes. It's going to be a rollicking good time," I say, even as I wish I could strangle the game of bingo.

Bingo is an affront to the very idea of fun and games. I wish I could make a bonfire of every bingo card in existence as an atonement for ever offering it as a pastime.

But bingo is what the boss wants in the Sunshine Living facilities throughout the tristate region, including here on the Upper West Side. "Everyone loves bingo, and no one gets hurt doing it, Summer. Get it going around the clock. Safety first!" he barked when he hired me a year ago.

It's hard to enrich the lifestyles of residents when you work for the Stickler in Chief, who refuses to implement anything close to fun. Not since a septuagenarian suffered a Siamese-inflicted injury during a field trip to a local cat shelter. In the cat's defense, everyone knows petting cats is just asking for a scratch.

Roxanne fires laser beams from her eyes. "Let me ask you a question, Summer. Are you trying to kill me? No, I'm serious. Do you actually want me to die today? Because bingo is murder."

I laugh. "No. Of course not." Then I glance around, and once I'm certain Travis is nowhere around, I step closer, dropping my voice to a whisper. "But you should know death by bingo sets in after twenty-four hours, so it's good to avoid it."

She chuckles the slightest bit, the sort of inviting laugh that says we're on the same page. *Sort of.* "My point exactly. Who in their right mind actually likes bingo? Nobody here wants to play bingo. We only do it because we're bored. In fact, I've already lined up cohorts to protest the never-ending bingo offerings in this place."

"The bingo revolt is upon us?"

She narrows her eyes. "Consider yourself warned."

I nod solemnly, then speak from the heart. "Roxanne, I'm trying. I swear, I'm trying." I don't add that there's so much red tape at Sunshine Living that I need a machete to cut my way through the overgrown jungle of bureaucracy here. You don't go around dumping your work woes on your customers. So I put on my best Happiness Hero hat, and say, "I submitted a number of proposals for new activities. I have some great ideas I want to implement, like Zumba classes, macaron tasting, and Riverside Park walks. I've put them in front of the board, and I'm really hoping they approve my plans."

My plans rock. They are compelling and well-written, and they spell out all the bennies. Only a total fun-slayer like Travis would shoot them down. But I'm hopeful that the other board members put more stock in common sense and, oh, say, data and research.

A sliver of a smile seems to tug at Roxanne's lips. "Zumba, you say?"

I execute a few zippy Zumba steps. I think my body must be programmed for motion, the way joy whips through me as I demonstrate. "Yes. Have you ever tried it? It's great for mental and physical health. I outlined some of the key health benefits for the over-fifty set in my proposal. There are so many studies about how good it is for your core."

One perfectly groomed silver eyebrow lifts, and mischief flares in Roxanne's eyes. "And for the libido, I hear."

I tuck a strand of blonde hair behind my ear, pausing to consider whether I'd be breaking the rules if I discussed

libidos with the residents. Since I don't know the answer, I respond in an offhand way. "That's possible too."

She raises a make-a-point finger. "Along those lines, you might consider a game of Would You Rather for the residents. Or a Would You Rather bar hop. This hood has some very hip drinking establishments, as you may know."

A cough bursts from my chest, and I gesture for her to lower the volume, whispering, "I would be fired if I organized a bar hop."

"Please, darling. I've been old enough to drink longer than you've been alive. Maybe double."

She's probably not wrong. But still. I'm not a drink alchemist or an alcohol tour guide for senior citizens, especially since Travis's response to a bar hop suggestion would be *But we don't know about any contraindications of the prescription meds our residents are on; ergo, there is no room on the schedule.*

"Would You Rather isn't a bad idea for a game night *in* though," I say diplomatically, doing my best to maintain the requisite chipper attitude.

I do have a chipper attitude.

Well, most of the time. When I can actually make a difference—the very thing I wanted to do in the first place when I took this job. My cover letter was bursting with enthusiasm and plans. Travis even said he'd never seen a job candidate with so many creative ideas.

And yet, here I am. Wizard of Bingo Scheduling.

Roxanne lifts her cane, curling her fingers around the puma head. "Or how about something more practical for an activity? I have a fabulous idea."

I hold my hands out wide, letting her know I'm all ears. "I love suggestions. What do you have in mind?"

Her cool eyes glint. "A session on how to make a great dating profile. An Ins and Outs of Tinder class."

Hmm. A class on Tinder isn't a discussion on libidos, so I can entertain this topic. "Go on," I say.

"Like, for instance, how do I know if I'm being hatfished?"

I smile helpfully. "You mean catfished?"

She shakes her head, her silver mane swishing. "No, *hatfished*. It's quite common with my generation. That's when a man wears hats all the time to hide his lack of hair."

I stifle a laugh. "Oh, well. Dating truly is full of hazards."

"Exactly. And don't even get me started on the submarining. I refuse to be a victim of that foul trend."

I pump a fist in solidarity. "The last guy I went out with did that to me—ghosted me then reappeared out of nowhere without so much as an explanation."

"I hope you torpedoed him," she says, and we're sisters-in-arms suddenly.

"Of course." I take a beat, studying the savvy woman in front of me. "Seems you already know the ins and outs of online dating, Roxanne."

She shrugs coyly. "Fine, maybe I do. I have profiles on Tinder, Bumble, and POF. But there is always something to learn. Like, if I swipe right on the gentleman down the hall, is he going to expect me to have a conversation *here* first? Because sometimes I want conversation, and sometimes I simply have no patience for small talk. But how do I set expectations on the latter occasions, when I primarily want to get to the good stuff?" Her expression is dead serious. "These are important topics for the modern woman."

"And they are things I have wondered myself," I admit with a sigh.

"See? We should work together to spruce up the social life here." She hooks her elbow through mine, coconspirators. "Dating, dancing, wine tasting, how-tos. Make that happen, Summer. I want a full life."

Since my shift is over and I have an hour before I meet up with Oliver, I gesture toward the front door. Knowing Roxanne loves to stay active, I say, “Want to go for a walk and you can tell me what you want most?”

As we amble around the block, she rattles off her dream activities, from cheese tasting, to bar hops, to tips on how to make the most of a hookup. “But the ones I want most after the dating classes?” She leans in close to whisper, “Kickboxing and spin classes.”

“You do?” I can barely contain my rush of excitement at this unexpected and unwitting validation of a business idea I’ve been saving toward since I was twenty-two.

Over the last nine years, I’ve squirreled away nearly enough money to open a specialty gym that caters to the over-fifty-five crowd. Just a little more capital so I can pay instructors for the classes I want to offer, and I can do it. Top-notch classes are vital for the success of a gym, and hearing Roxanne’s enthusiasm—and for just the sort of classes I want to offer—is a big dose of encouragement.

“Absolutely. How else would I stay in shape for Tinder?”

And we’re back where we started. But hey, in my book, exercise is good, no matter the reason. “If it keeps the heart rate up ...”

As we near the entrance to Sunshine Living, she says, “The best thing about being my age is I don’t have to worry about getting knocked up.” She eyes me up and down. “You, on the other hand ...”

I hold up a stop-sign palm. If she only knew how dating and I have fared. “I’m not involved with anyone. Or dating, even.”

Her sharp gaze says she doesn’t believe me for a second. “Are you sure you don’t have a date tonight? You look different. You’re wearing black. You never wear black. And a little more mascara. Do you have a swipe-right lined up?”

I laugh, shaking my head. Dating is the opposite of what I do with Oliver. “Nope. I’m just meeting a friend after work.”



Skeptically, she regards my skinny jeans, my black boots, and my sweater that ... Fine, this one is my favorite, and since my blue shirt was unwearable, I had to go home and change after that troublemaker put his arms around me.

“I don’t buy that he’s just a friend,” Roxanne says.

I picture Oliver’s square jaw. His flop of hair. His daring grin. The way he drives me absolutely crazy.

With complete honesty, I answer, “I’ve known him since I was wearing braces. Since I was all elbows and knees, and understanding boys was like learning how to survive on Mars.”

“And now you’re all legs and sass and energy,” she says in a flirty tone.

I shake my head, adamant. “And he’s always dating someone else. Besides, he’s helping me with the paperwork I need for my new venture.”

Her face says she still doubts me. “Is he a dragon?”

That’s a dating term I haven’t heard. “Does that mean he has bad breath?”

She shimmies her hips. “It means he brings the fire in the bedroom.”

A blush creeps across my cheeks and my skin heats as the briefest image of what Oliver might be like in the bedroom flashes before my eyes.

But I give her the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. “I will never know, because he’s just a friend. And he’s my brother’s best friend at that. Ergo, nothing will happen.”

For so many reasons.

“If you say so ...” Roxanne lets those words trail off into the evening as I say goodbye, heading across town to meet the off-limits dragon.



# OLIVER

My job boils down to three things: Reassuring. Fighting. Finagling.

I happen to be tops at all three.

Perhaps that sounds cocky.

But as my cousin Jason says, “You can’t be cocky if what you say is true.”

Fine, fine. There are about a million flaws in his logic, as I point out every time, but it’s become our joke.

Today, I’m completely confident as I reassure my newest client. “I’ve got this, Geneva. I’m going to take care of you. This is going to be the partnership you’ve always wanted.”

Seated across from me in my Park Avenue office thirty floors up, the nervous client breathes an audible sigh of relief. “Thank you so much,” she says, her shoulders relaxing. “I had a feeling you would be the right one to call on this deal. And I’m not just saying that because we’re from the same side of the street.”

“Can’t beat Crystal Palace, even the dodgy end,” I say. I grew up in that London neighborhood, where I lived until I was thirteen, and my new client comes from there too.

I tap the top paper in the stack on my desk—a term sheet I’m working on for her. Her ad agency is partnering up with a smaller one for a number of media clients, and my firm is handling the legal issues of the new pairing. Untangling prior contracts, I’ve found a few particularly thorny ones with

unfortunate terms. Her last attorney was a selfish prick, adding in layers of unnecessary loopholes that likely just padded his billables. He was also her ex. More proof that exes are douches. “We’ll get this all sorted out,” I tell her, keeping my opinion of her ex to myself.

“Thank you, Oliver.” She smooths a hand over her tight black bun. “It’s been a terrible year, and I want something to go well. I had a very public split recently.” She waves a hand to dismiss her words. “But you don’t need to hear about that.”

“I’m sorry you’ve had a rough go of it,” I say lightly. I did hear of her divorce. Or rather, my Aunt Jane did, and she told me before the appointment. Since I hired her a few months ago, Jane’s job has been not only to staff the reception desk and manage the office, but also to stay abreast of every iota of gossip.

“It’s better now. Or it will be soon,” Geneva says, stiff-upper-lipping it.

“It will be,” I reassure her. I don’t know all of her situation, but I do hope it improves.

“And on that cheery note, I’d better be off,” she says.

I rise, escorting her to the reception area, where Jane beams from her post at the desk. “You already look happier,” Jane tells Geneva. “Like I told you when you arrived, Ollie has a way of setting everyone at ease.”

“Oliver,” I say low, in a friendly warning.

Jane gives us an *oops* grin. “He’ll always be Ollie to me.”

“Ollie,” Geneva says, laughing. “It’s a very sweet name.”

*Sweet.*

An adjective no corporate attorney wants assigned to him.

“Would you like Jane to call you a Lyft?” I steer the conversation away from nicknames. “An UberX to whisk you home? Horse-drawn carriage, maybe? On the house.”

Geneva’s lips quirk at the over-the-top suggestion.

“I wasn’t sure ‘on the house’ was in an attorney’s vocabulary.”

“Shh. Don’t tell the bar he said them,” Jane whispers.

“I’ll keep it quiet.” She seems to be enjoying the banter—a good sign for business. “But I must know—does the carriage come with a footman?” she asks with a smile.

That smile is like a signature on the client roster. It tells me she has all the faith in the world in my firm, which is how I want her to feel.

That’s how I want all our clients to feel. Absolutely reassured.

“But of course,” I say, not sure where I’d find a footman but still playing along.

Geneva, though, gestures to the lift. “I like to walk in the spring. But thank you so much. I appreciate it.”

When she leaves, Jane gives me an approving nod. “Try to be a little less charming next time, dear.”

“That would be impossible.”

“I know,” she says with a wink.

“Also, you should try to call me Oliver.”

“I will, Ollie,” she says with a wave.

I return to my office, make a few initial calls to the other attorneys involved in Geneva’s business, then shoot her a quick email letting her know I’ve begun the work. I lean back in my office chair made of old tires. I had my doubts when Jane ordered it—finding recycled replacements is another passion of hers—but the chair is not only kinder to cows than leather, it turns out it’s also pleasant on the arse.

As I gaze out the window, I picture the deal coming together, imagining what it could do for this firm. How it could shoot us to another level, raise our profile, allow us to attract bigger clients and pay our staffers even more. It’s an enticing image, being able to provide for those in my employ while sticking it to her ex.

Well, not directly to her ex.

I simply have zero tolerance for bad legal advice.

And zero tolerance for lateness.

I grab my phone, lock up my office, and head out, chatting on the way with Jane about her weekend plans. No surprises—they involve snuggling cats, gardening, and reading the gossip blogs, much like they always do.

“Thank you again for the job, love.” She plants a kiss on my cheek. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d still be working for that wretched temp agency.”

“What? You didn’t like shuffling papers for bond traders who spent the day shouting into phones when not cursing and punching things?”

“Shockingly, I did not,” she says with a smile.

We say goodbye on the street, and I turn to walk uptown. As I reach the crosswalk, a text pops up.

**Logan:** Tomorrow night. Paintball. Be ready. I need you operating at 110%.

**Oliver:** Everything I do is at 110%.

**Logan:** That’s not what she said.

He rings. I pick up, faking an over-the-top laugh. “Haha. Never heard that from you before.”

“Listen, if you give me low-hanging fruit, I’m going to pluck it. But about paintball—” Logan wastes no time and minces no words. “I’ve got some new strategies to go over. We have to beat those fuckers at Lehman.”

His two speeds: intense and hyperintense. It’s my job to remind him of life’s niceties. “You do know the paintball league events are to raise money for charity, right? Not for obliterating other teams.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s awesome. That’s totally why I do it. But I also have to crush Lehman, and you know why.”

“Fair enough.” I do know he has his reasons. Perfectly valid ones. “But don’t worry. I’m brilliant at paintball, as you know.”

“Humble too.”

“Because humility is the trait you lead with as well?”

He scoffs. “Never. Anyway, I’ll email you and Fitz and the rest of the team the strategy guidelines later. I’m going to the boxing gym now. I’ve got to blow off some steam. Want to join me?”

As I walk up the avenue, I shake my head, though of course he can’t see me. “I know *you* can risk things like having an eye that looks like a meat pie or a nose that’s out of whack, being an ugly git already, but I can’t take those chances. What with this face and all.” I scrub a hand across my jaw as I stop at Sixtieth Street.

“*Right*,” he says, the word having about ten syllables. “You don’t want to risk your next appearance on BuzzFeed’s New York’s Most Eligible Bachelors.”

“Of course not. I’m hoping to make it five years in a row.”

“I cannot wait till the day you fall off that list,” he says, and I can hear that he’s practically salivating.

“They say all good things come to an end, but this one seems like it’ll last forever.”

“You’re telling me.”

“In any case, I’m almost at Melt My Heart to meet your sister.”

“Say hi to my twin for me. Also, why don’t you two just —”

A bus rumbles to a stop, the sound drowning out Logan’s words. “Didn’t catch those last few words.”

“Marry her. It’ll be easier.”

“What would be easier? I don’t follow.” My brow furrows. What he said doesn’t compute. There are a million reasons why Summer and I shouldn’t get married. First and foremost, we’re great friends. Second, despite her being quite lovely to look at, I can’t think of her that way. Third, I like having her in my life, not out of it, and since relationships always go belly-up and exes always go rogue, it’s best to keep this one on the level.

“Kidding! I’m kidding,” Logan says. “Just like I was that time I told you to propose when you took her to that asshole’s wedding.” His other line beeps, and he groans.

There’s another reason too. “Let me remind you, your sister is well-known for having the worst taste in men. Just bloody awful, and well, I’m delightful.”

“I beg to differ on your levels of delight. But the devil is calling, so I have to go. It’s my night with Amelia after boxing.”

“Tell Amelia her favorite person will swing by this weekend. We have to catch up on *Game of Thrones*.”

“You are not showing *Game of Thrones* to my six-year-old.”

“*Sex Education*, then? It’s brilliant.”

“Goodbye. The devil waits for no one.” He hangs up to talk to his ex, who is evidence that exes GO wrong.

Tucking the phone away, I head into Melt My Heart to wait for Summer, a woman who fits into a highly specific category among the people in my life. And that is the most important reason we can never be a thing.

Because Summer is a dependable person.

She’s reliable in a world where far too many people aren’t.

And frankly, those are the people you don’t risk losing by messing with a proven formula.





# SUMMER

Things I love about New York City.

1. The people. New York thrives on a Las Vegas-style buffet of humankind. There's no type of person you won't find on the menu here, and it's awesome. I love talking to strangers, talking to friends, talking to anyone.
2. Central Park, and everything else. You can literally never be bored in New York. If you are bored, you're boring. There's always something new, exciting, innovative, or even traditional to participate in. I'm all about participation, so this suits me. Museums, parks, sports—there is a league for everything, a class for anything, and a desire to move, move, move. Plus, there's that huge oasis in the middle of the city, and I could spend all my days there.
3. Specialty shops. This city is the Land of the Niche, with shops for pickles, for mayonnaise, for pencils, for grilled cheese, and for cookies—like my friend Stella's cookie shop.

As I head across town to meet Oliver, I make a detour at Stella's Cookie Shack, since she messaged me earlier asking me to pop in.

With her hair in a messy bun, her purple glasses sliding down her nose, and an apron tied around her neck with an illustration of two cookies high-fiving each other on the front, Stella is a model of charm and efficiency. She slides a box of a

dozen cookies to a curly-haired woman, then tells her it'll be thirty-six dollars.

The customer doesn't bat an eye. Stella bakes the best cookies on the eastern seaboard, and there's no reason she shouldn't charge two arms and two legs for them.

When the woman leaves, Stella shoots me a grin, her brown eyes twinkling from behind her glasses. "Can't stay away, can you?"

"No one can," I say, proud of my friend and her business.

Her store opened three months ago to rave reviews. This momentary lull in customers is just lucky for me. In a few minutes, throngs of Manhattanites will pour in here, grabbing cookies for dessert, for a snack, for a meal.

Hell, cookies for anything is my mantra.

"It was a busy day," she says, then crosses her fingers. "May there be many more." She gestures to the display case and its mouthwatering array of designer treats. "In the mood for the chef's choice?"

Setting my reusable drink mug on the counter, I give a crisp nod. "I'll live my life on the edge. Bring on the mystery cookie."

She bends down, dips a gloved hand into the shelf, and brandishes a treat. "Try the habanero chocolate chip cookie. I've just perfected the recipe, and it has all the zing and all the sweetness."

I let my tongue hang out, my show of adoration for her talent. "Sounds perfect. But I'll eat it later. I don't want to have cookie crumbs all over my face when I see Oliver in a little bit."

She sets her palms on the counter and stares harshly at me. "One, there are napkins for that. Two, that's a given. You *have* to look perfect for Mr. Perfect."

I wave breezily, making light of her comment. I do like looking good for Oliver, but it's a "when in Rome" thing. The man always looks good, sounds good, smells good, making a

woman want to do the same. “That’s *not* why I don’t want to eat it now,” I say, defending myself. “I just don’t want to look like a piggy when I see him in”—I stop, check my watch—“about ten minutes.”

Her eyes twinkle with a *gotcha*. “And counting.” I’ll be hearing someday about how I know in exactly how many minutes I’ll see him. Stella darts out a hand, reaching for my to-go cup. “The usual?”

“Yes, please, Goddess of Cookies and London Fog Lattes,” I answer, grateful for the latte and for moving away from the subject of Oliver.

She fills the cup, sets it down, and adds an extra cookie into the bag. “One for you, one for Ollie. Then you can be piggies together with all your crumbs.”

Amused, I shake my head, dip a hand into my purse, and offer her a ten.

She sneers. “Your money is no good here. Save it for the gym.”

“And that’s exactly what I need it for. I’m meeting with the bank on Monday. Here’s hoping for approval on a loan.” I have my savings for the lease on the space and for equipment, but I need a loan for the finishing touches and some great classes I want to offer. “Roxanne has me thinking that kickboxing would be a terrific addition to the class list.” I can picture it now. A class full of senior citizens learning to punch, kick, and defend themselves. The image fires me up. “What do you think? Kickboxing for seniors? Is that a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down?”

“Big thumbs-up. I’d send my grandpa to that class,” she says. “And that’s why I have all the faith in the world that your loan will come through.”

I segue to a text she sent me earlier. “You said you had something to show me?”

A giddy smile takes over her freckled face. She ducks behind the counter, grabs something from a shelf, then slides a glossy sheet of paper to me.

I arch a brow. “What’s that?”

“It’s from a magazine.”

“Oh, those things that used to be paper, but now are digital?”

“Yes, Miss Sassy Pants. I saw it at the dentist’s office. It’s basically an ad for the magazine’s online sister pub—*The Dating Pool*. It’s having a really cool contest that you should look into.”

“A dating contest? I don’t think so.” I shake my head so fast my hair whips. “Dating and me—we’re not really simpatico these days. Do I need to remind you of the last guy who ghosted me?”

Stella stares down the bridge of her nose at me. “That’s because you like bad boys.”

“Yes, because they also don’t get in the way of little things like, ya know, goals,” I counter. Bad boys have their place on a modern gal’s dating résumé. She just has to remember the heart can hurt just the same when they show their douche colors. “So, considering I’m waist-deep in opening-a-gym goals, I think I’ll avoid dating contests.”

“It’s not a dating contest. It’s an essay contest—with prize money. And you’ve always been good at putting your crazy thoughts and wild ideas into writing. Remember the time you convinced the physical therapy company you worked for to institute Happy Heart Friday? You had that whole pitch for a midday walking break laid out beautifully, and they said yes. Boom—happy hearting at Home Health Solutions was born.”

I sigh contentedly at the memory. Too bad Home Health had to cut back last year, a decision that sent me to Sunshine Living. I don’t think Travis would approve stopping work for a walk, let alone see the benefits of disco bingo.

But that’s yet another reason why I’m trying to open the gym.

Hmm ... That’s not a bad idea. I wiggle a brow at Stella. “What do you think about disco bingo?”

“For your essay?”

I shake my head. “No, for Sunshine Living.”

“Summer, focus. Just read.” Stella stabs the glossy sheet, and I scan it quickly. The theme is “Lessons Learned.” That does sound right up my alley. “Okay, that’s more interesting. I’m intrigued.”

The bell dings above the door, and a squadron of schoolkids rushes in.

“It’s the cookie lady,” the kids shout.

She warbles a songbird hello to the chattering throng, then in a low voice says to me, “You should definitely enter it.”

“Thank you, cookie lady.” I blow her a kiss, tucking the bag of cookies into my purse.

As I open the door, she waves goodbye, calling out, “Feel free to test Law Number Three of Stella’s Theory.”

I shoot her a sharp stare. She simply smiles and returns her focus to the kids, bug-eyed and gaping at the displays of yummy goodness.

I leave, hearing Stella’s voice in my head as I go.

Stella has a theory about men, and it’s based on her three so-called Immutable Laws.

*Law Number One: funny men make great lovers.*

*Law Number Two: funny and smart men make even better lovers.*

*Law Number Three: good-looking guys make terrible lovers.*

The way Stella explains it, being good in bed is work. It requires skills. It demands talent. It calls for an education in the ways of women.

“That’s why beautiful men are boring in the sack,” she explains when called upon. “I know because I conducted a comprehensive study before I married Henry. And my conclusion? The best-looking men waltz through life on their

looks. They never have to work to get a woman in bed, so they don't care about her pleasure. Therefore, you should never go above a five on the looks scale. And that's Stella's theory on how to have a happy vagina."

As I drink my latte along the way to the grilled cheese shop, I wonder if Oliver's ever had to work for it.

With those eyes, that face, and that accent, what are the chances? Women flock to him, especially since he's on all those most-bangable-in-the-city lists. Several years ago, he went to a few galas and premieres with a TV actress, shooting him straight onto the seen-on-the-arm-of pages of the gossip rags. Since then, he's been spotted with plenty of well-known women, and, come to think of it, he's not even on the apps.

Hmm. Maybe he *doesn't* have to work for it. I bet they line up at his door. Send him perfumed panties in the mail. Leave keys for their hotels at his reception desk.

My shoulders sag. I bet Oliver's terrible in the sack.

Dreadful.

I bet he kisses like a bore, bangs like a jackhammer, and licks like he's painting a house.

Then I berate myself for thinking about Oliver's prowess or lack thereof. Who cares if Chantal the heiress, or Dardania the TV lawyer, or Angelique the model ring him up for dates? Who cares if he takes women to O-town or not? That has no bearing on our friendship.

And that's what we are. I've known the man since we were fourteen, when my mom drove him, Logan, and me to school nearly every day.

I've known him since his sister and I helped the boys plan their prom-posals.

I've known him since that night a few years ago, when Logan, Stella, Henry, and Oliver took me out for a night on the town to celebrate my recent and nasty breakup. When Douche Ex himself waltzed into the bar and sauntered over to me, and Oliver pretended to be my new boyfriend.

Draping an arm around me.

Dropping a kiss onto my cheek.

Playing with my hair.

Making me momentarily believe he was.

But that's just what friends do—help each other out in a pinch.

I push those thoughts out of my mind as I reach Melt My Heart. When I open the door, Oliver stands and flashes me that familiar grin—one that sends an inappropriate tingle across my chest.

I've got my own theories, laws, and rules too, and mine start and end with—*ignore that inappropriate tingle.*

I've done it most of my life.





# SUMMER

Somehow, Oliver doesn't look piggy when he eats a grilled cheese sandwich.

Maybe it's the charcoal suit—the complete opposite of what I saw him wearing this morning. Nearly every inch of his skin is covered up now, except for his neck and a bit of his throat where he's slightly loosened his teal-blue tie.

And a hint of his forearms, since his sleeves are rolled up.

Also, his face. Since he's not wearing a sack over it. But if he did, he'd probably wear it well.

Just like the silk suit.

And the swimsuit.

Damn him.

But wait. What's that I see?

A string of cheddar decorates his lower lip as he chews.

If there is any justice in the universe, that cheese will stick to his lip all afternoon, unbeknownst to him.

A girl can hope.

“So, what do you think, Summer? Does this make it onto our list?” he asks as he sets the sandwich down on a mint-green ceramic plate. For some reason, the Fiestaware style makes me want to collect plates, even though I'm not generally a collector of anything.

“*Your* list,” I point out, as I root for the cheese to hang on. *Go cheese. You can do it.* “Your morbid list.”

“It’s not morbid. It’s important,” he says, licking his lips but still missing that bit of cheese.

Maybe I should tell him about it. But it’s too fun to watch the polished Mr. Harris, attorney at law, eligible bachelor, and connoisseur of women, outfitted in his tailor-made suit and wearing a sliver of Vermont cheddar on the corner of his lips.

I nod solemnly. “Then yes, I might consider this sinfully delicious grilled cheese sandwich as a last meal.”

He nods appreciatively. “I had a feeling this would make it. What do you say we put it in the top three?”

“Does it meet the key requirement though?”

As Oliver considers whether the grilled cheese says something about how he’s lived his life, I flash back to when we first played this game a few years ago, dining on buttered scallops. He’d groaned like a cooking show host after the first bite.

“About to go full Sally in the diner there, are you?” I’d asked.

“Yes. Because this is last-meal worthy,” he’d declared.

“Something you’re trying to tell me?” I asked, concerned that he was about to deliver Very Bad News.

Something he knew far too much about.

“No. It’s just that last meals say something about you. So it’s important to know what your last meal would be.”

“Brandon was obsessed with that. Well, with death row inmates’ last meal requests,” I offered.

“Is that Douche Ex Number Two? Since that guy at the bar is Douche Ex Number One.”

“Yes, and he also liked to read about serial killers. He had a stack of books about them on his nightstand.”

Oliver speared another butter-drenched scallop. “That’s why you broke up with him, right?”

Sheepishly, I answered, “He broke up with me, but that’s beside the point.”

Pointing his fork at me, Oliver had gotten emphatic. “No, that *is* the point. The man would have to be barking mad. It’s a damn good thing you’re not with him, and someday you’ll realize you have literally the worst taste in men.”

I arched a pot-calling-the-kettle-black brow. “And you have *all* the taste.” He had a solid three-and-out approach to dating.

But tonight I don’t want to linger on thoughts of Oliver and his appetite for the ladies, so I shift away from the memory, returning to the present. “Your renewed interest in last meals—is it because we’re nearing ...?”

He shakes his head, a familiar flash of sadness in his eyes. He hides it well, and it disappears so quickly I can almost believe it was never there at all except that I’ve glimpsed it since we were eighteen.

“I just think it says something about you—your life, your passions, and such—if you know what you’d eat if it were your last day. Sort of like last words. Did you know Humphrey Bogart’s last words were ‘I should never have switched from scotch to martinis’?”

“Fitting,” I say. “But let’s make sure yours aren’t ‘Do I have cheese on my face?’”

An eyebrow lifts, and he swipes a hand across his cheek.

I laugh, shaking my head. “Try again.”

“Damn. I missed it.” He goes for the forehead.

“Still off.”

“Help a mate out, Summer,” he says, jutting his face forward.

His gorgeous face.

I'm tempted to lift a finger. To touch his lip. To feel my flesh on his.

So I do, leaning closer, raising my hand, about to touch.

And maybe for a fraction of a second, the look in his eyes says he wouldn't mind if I did that. Wouldn't mind my hand on him. Wouldn't mind knowing how my fingers on his lips would feel.

But I shake those lunatic thoughts away, reach for a napkin, and wipe the cheese off his lip like the *mate* that I am.

And still, a tingle rushes through me.

Sometimes I wish I didn't feel these bouts of inappropriate desire for my good friend. They're like a side effect of the drug of friendship with a hot guy. Buddy-ira. Friend-ium. Mate-Zan.

*Side effects can include temporary hallucinations, including, but not limited to, occasional inconvenient fantasies, inability to control dirty thoughts, and heightened desire to touch your friend's lips.*

Because it is inappropriate for a thousand reasons—and also just one.

I *need* him.

Even though he's as infuriating as an alarm clock that won't stop beeping, he's also as wonderful as a sunrise. And sunrise is my favorite part of the day. Which I suppose means Oliver is one of my favorite parts of life.

“Thank you for looking out for the artwork,” he says with a teasing wink. “The Louvre appreciates your service.”

I roll my eyes, and we are back to normal. As normal as we ever are anyway.

He sets down the remains of his sandwich, taps the plate, and declares the grilled cheese “on the short list for last meals because it says he lived his life unafraid to indulge now and then.”

“It was indeed a tasty indulgence,” I second.

He dusts one hand against the other. “Let’s dive into the paperwork.”

We spend the next hour reviewing the final details of the gym and its lease, as well as my insurance obligations. I’ve been saving for this for years and planning for just as many, and I’m nearly ready to pull the trigger.

“Everything looks good. And I’m proud of you, Summer. You’ve wanted to do this for some time. And look at you, doing it,” he says, smiling. It’s his earnest smile, his honest one. The one, too, that says he admires me. It’s one of my favorite smiles of his.

“*Almost* doing it,” I correct. “But I’ll get there. I have a meeting with the bank on Monday.”

“Need any help?”

“Nah, I’m good.” I want to do this on my own. Nab the loan, secure the financing, fund my dream. “I can’t wait to tell Maggie later that it’s looking good.”

“Your grams will be so happy for you that she’ll go run a marathon.”

“Or get on Tinder,” I say with a laugh. “Lord knows she has better luck than I do.”

“Are you still on Tinder? Thought you declared yourself done.” He says it crisply, as if *done* is exactly where he wants me to be with dating.

“I might as well be done with it.”

“Are you though?” he presses, and it sounds vital that he know. Perhaps it’s just the lawyer in him, asking questions in that most lawyerly tone.

“Not entirely,” I admit. “But I haven’t used it in a while.”

He groans, dropping his head in his hand. “Woman, what am I going to do with you? Screen all your dates so you stop dating douches?”

“I’m fine with my relationship status. Why does it bother you?”

“Why?” His eyes widen as he repeats the question. “Why does it bother me?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because you’re *you*,” he says, and he seems flustered.

Totally discomposed.

It’s an odd look on him.

“And?” I prompt.

“Don’t make me say it.”

“Say what?”

“Something nice,” he grumbles.

I laugh. “Ah, so that’s it. You’re being protective of your *nice* friend.”

“It’s hardly protective, and you’re not really nice. More like saucy and vexing, and you wear sarcasm like a coat.”

I preen like a cat, taking the compliment. “Thank you for backpedaling on such a terrible *adjective*. ‘Saucy’ is way better than ‘nice.’”

“I just don’t want my mean, cruel, terrible friend dating douches, and you seem to be drawn to them.”

I shoot him a withering glare. Who is he to talk? “And you’re drawn to sweethearts? Angels? Mother Teresas?”

He stares at the ceiling as if in thought. “Hmm. I’m not sure about sweethearts, but I’m positive I’ve never dated Mother Teresa.”

I lean across the table to swat his shoulder. “You have definitely dated douches too. Oh, wait. You haven’t dated anyone long enough for them to measure on the douche-meter.”

He arches a brow. “I beg your pardon. I have absolutely hit the crazy-ex floor in the department store of love.”

I laugh as we clear our plates and head for the door. “Have you now?”

“Do I need to remind you of Hazel?”

No. He doesn't.

I can picture perfectly the day I saved his ass.





# OLIVER

*Two years ago*

This was getting to be a problem—the morning ambush.

Warily, I walked to the window, pulled back the blinds, and peered down to the street. Cars, cabs, and buses rushed along the avenue, and I held onto the fervent hope that I might be able to leave my own building unscathed.

Then I caught a glimpse of red.

Fucking hell.

Hazel was there, lying in wait.

With tea.

I didn't even like tea.

Who decided that all Englishmen liked tea and scones, lived in castles, and followed football?

Well, scones *were* delicious.

I pulled back from the window, grabbed my phone, and called in a favor.

“She’s here again,” I whispered, even though whispering was unnecessary. But it felt necessary. “Are you nearby? You’re probably on a run, right?”

On the other end of the call, Summer breathed out hard. “Just finished five miles. I’m on the east side of the park. I can

be there in ten. Want me to pretend I'm your girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"I'm on it," she said, knowing the situation well and knowing the solution too.

"You're a superhero."

"I am. It's true."

I grabbed a tie and slipped it around my neck, knotted it, and pulled on my suit jacket. I had to get to work without my ex pouncing on me and asking me to get back together with her. Never mind that she was hardly an ex. She was a woman I'd dated for a mere two weeks. After I ended it on account of a massive lack of sparks—and not at all because she wanted to attend a cheese-making class, even though I hate trendy thing-making classes—she decided to try to woo me back by waiting outside my building with tea from my favorite coffee shop.

She'd done this four days in a row. Today was the fifth.

Returning to the window, I watched the street below. On the dot, Summer walked into view, holding a paper cup. She spotted Hazel and, with a smile, headed over to the redhead, exchanged a few words, then continued into the lobby.

Hazel cast a glance upward, but she'd never been inside my building, so she didn't know which floor was mine.

Her shoulders sagged, and she walked away.

I punched the air as my doorbell rang.

Summer looked quite pleased with herself, and quite pleasant in her running shorts and purple sneakers, her blonde hair high in a ponytail. Her cheeks were red, her skin flushed from running. Would other activities bring that same pink glow to her face?

To the exposed flesh above her sports bra?

To ...

Quickly, I dismissed the freight train of dirty thoughts, because I had to.

Also, because ... coffee.

She thrust a cup into my hand. "Coffee. Just the way you like it." She took a beat, pausing before delivering our oft-said punchline, "Without tea."

"Superhero indeed," I said, taking the drink then motioning with my free hand for her to tell me what went down.

Squaring her shoulders, she flicked an unseen piece of lint off her Lycra top. "Call me Super Friend. Able to deflect clingy exes in a single bound. As soon as I saw her, I walked over, said a cheery good morning, then eyed her two cups of tea with friendly concern."

"And?"

"And then I said, 'By the way, if that's for Oliver, he doesn't care for tea. Go figure. But that's my boyfriend for you.'"

I beamed as she continued. "Then I trotted inside, said hi to the doorman, and left her to tuck her tail between her legs. She did tuck her tail, right?"

"Totally tucked. Saw it when I peeked out the window."

Summer blew on her fingernails. "Yay, me."

"Thank you for your excellent service," I said.

"It was easy. No doubt you'll need me again for the next crazy ex-girlfriend."

We left my building a minute later, finding Hazel across the street waiting for the bus.

When she spotted me walking next to Summer, I immediately grabbed Summer's hand, threaded our fingers tightly together, and dropped a quick kiss onto her cheek.

Her breath hitched, and she whispered a surprised *oh*. A sexy-sounding *oh*. One that had the freight train starting to chug out of the station again.

But there were exes to deflect.

“She’s across the street,” I said in her ear.

“Oh.” Summer straightened her shoulders and cleared her throat. “Well, in that case.” She tugged me closer, looping her arm possessively around my waist, let out a throaty laugh, then returned the kiss.

She dusted her lips across my jaw, sending an arrow of heat straight up my spine. Then she whispered in my ear, “Peas and carrots, peas and carrots, peas and carrots.”

Good thing she’d mentioned the veggies, because I’d been borderline aroused.

But I hated peas, so that took care of that.



# SUMMER

## *Present day*

For a second, I remember that whisper of a kiss.

Tender, gentle. The slide of his lips against my cheek.

The soft whoosh in my belly.

So fleeting, and then it was gone, and Hazel boarded the bus.

“Never to be heard from again,” I say, finishing the story.

“Thanks to Super Friend,” Oliver says as we reach the crosswalk, slowing to a stop at the light.

I tap my chest, imagining my Super Friend insignia is stitched on top of my shirt. “I’m awesome at saving your ass.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “You are. Especially from exes who want to take macchiato-making classes.”

“I thought it was cheese-making that turned you off?”

“Oh, no doubt the macchiato was coming next.”

I nod sagely. “Good thing you cut it off. So, can you just admit you have douchey exes too?”

He shakes his head. “Get it right, woman. Men have crazy exes. Women have douchey exes.”

“But your rule of thumb is that all exes are awful?”

“That’s why they’re exes, right?”

“I’m not sure I agree. Yes, we joke about my number of douchey exes. But were they truly all jackwads? What if they’re only exes because they weren’t right at the time?”

He shakes his head, adamant, as the light changes and we cross the street walking down Madison. “That presupposes there is only one right person for everyone, and there is nothing sadder in the world than assuming there’s only one person for you.”

“Right,” I say with an exaggerated nod. “That’s the saddest thing in the whole world.”

He levels a chiding gaze at me. “Obviously, it’s not the saddest. I’m simply saying it’s damn sad when it comes to relationships.”

“And I’m simply saying that no matter how fun it is to refer to a parade of exes as Douchey Ex Number One, Two, and Three, perhaps none of them were the right person. And there’s nothing wrong with that. You have to kiss a lot of frogs. I think we can learn from every ex.” I snap my fingers. “I should write about that for that contest.”

“What contest?”

Grabbing the sheet of paper from my purse, I unfold it and show it to him as we walk. “*The Dating Pool* is hosting an essay contest. Lessons learned from the past. I could write about lessons learned from my exes.”

He smiles wryly, quickly scanning the page. “That’s so very you. You can find the positive in every negative experience.”

“Is that such a bad thing? To find the silver lining?” I tuck the paper back into my purse.

“No, it’s not a bad thing. It’s a *Summer* thing. And that does sound like a good idea for you to write about,” he concedes. “You’d probably make it hilarious.” He mimes typing a letter. “*Dear Dating Pool, I learned how to cook an omelet from Timmy the Dickhead Cook, how to sing an aria*



*from Rupert the Awful Opera Singer, and how to pilot a private jet from Kip the Cocky Playboy Captain I dated.”*

Aghast, I swat him. “I never dated those men.”

“I know, but that’s the sort of thing you’d say. You can make a sweater out of any tangled skein of yarn. You’re an inherently positive person. That’s why you’re in the field you’re in.”

“And you? You’re a negative person?”

“I’m a realist,” he says. “And the realist in me says that if we were meant to get on so well with our exes, they wouldn’t become exes, and so if they are exes, they are crazy douches.” He raises his arm in the air, like an orator declaring victory. “Or frogs, and neither is terribly appealing. Both men and women can be douches or frogs.”

“That’s the difference between you and me. I played with frogs when I was a kid, and no, that’s not a euphemism.”

“You played with frogs?”

“Yes. And I put one in Logan’s bed too.”

His mouth twitches in a *that’s too good* grin. “Well done. How did he take it?”

“Screamed like a boy,” I say, proud of my frog fearlessness. “Also, it was a tiny frog. Like, maybe an inch big.”

“Things no one says about me,” Oliver whispers.

I shoot him the side-eye he deserves. “It’s a wonder any woman has lasted with you for any period of time.”

He wriggles his brows. “Oh, sweetheart, they last because I can last. All night long.”

“I take it back. You are a pig,” I say.

“Guilty as charged.”

As we stop at the next crosswalk, I reach into my purse and grab the bag of cookies. “All right, frog prince, this is my small way of saying thank you.”

He takes one. “Aww. This is a thanks for me letting you check out my package earlier?”

“You ass.”

“Ah, it’s for the time I let you check out my arse. I see,” he says, biting into the cookie.

“Double ass,” I say, but I’m laughing.

He chews and somehow looks sexy while eating, crumbs and all. “Admit it—I’m the sexiest of your ex-boyfriends.”

“You’re not a real ex,” I point out as we turn the corner then head into Central Park.

“I know. That’s what makes me the sexiest.”

“Cockiest maybe.”

“Like I said, the sexiest.” We wander along the mall, almost by instinct. He knows this promenade, with its towering elms and green canopy, is one of my favorite parts of the park, which is my favorite place in the city.

“More like most infuriating,” I say, as we slide back into our rhythm.

The rhythm that reminds me to squash any inappropriate tingles.

This rhythm is worth so much more than testing a theory would be.

We continue debating exes along the Literary Walk.

He hooks his thumb at a statue of Shakespeare. “He thinks exes are rubbish.”

“He killed most of his heroes and heroines,” I point out. “Hello, tragedy?”

“Like I said, rubbish.”

As we pass stone replicas of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, the great debate rages on, until he walks me all the way home, where he gives me a hug outside my building and says goodbye.

Later that night, as I read in detail the magazine page Stella gave me, our debate gives me a brilliant idea.

A brilliant idea that might solve a big, hairy problem.



# SUMMER

I wave the magazine page at Maggie. “I should do this, right?”

“Darn straight you should do it.” My grandmother, also my roommate, affirms my decision as she slices off the top of another strawberry with precision, and slides the red fruit to the edge of the cutting board.

“I mean, this is tailor-made for me.”

Another slice, another cut. She drops a handful of berries into the blender. “It’s as if it was written for you.” She holds up the knife to make her point. “Just for you.”

I back away. “Mags, put the knife down.”

“I have excellent vision and dexterity, you know.”

“This isn’t about your vision or dexterity, you crazy old bat,” I say playfully. “It’s about you wielding a sharp knife.”

“Impudent whippersnapper,” she mutters under her breath, but I smile at her teasing. She sets down the knife, drops the rest of the strawberries into the blender, then hits the crush button.

As the machine pulverizes the fruit, she chatters above the noise. “In any case, you’ve always loved contests, and you’ve always excelled at them, so you should do it.”

She hits end with the panache of a former professional cheerleader.

Because that’s what she is. This seventy-five-year-old babe shook her pom-poms and backflipped her way from the Dallas

Cowboys Cheerleaders to a forty-year career as a cheer coach and a trophy case full of well-deserved bling.

“But you could also let me fund your gym,” she adds like she’s trying to entice me into her car with candy.

“No way.” I shake my head and gesture to her rent-controlled two-bedroom Upper West Side palace. “You barely charge me rent. You’ve already made it possible for me to save a ton of money and live in one of the world’s most expensive cities on an activity manager’s salary. No way am I taking the cash from you.”

“But the offer stands.”

“And I appreciate it, but my answer is still no. I want to do this on my own.”

“Always digging your heels in.” She rubs my back gently. “I know you don’t like to accept help. And I know it’s because you think your mom should have kept working instead of quitting her job to help your dad.”

“Well,” I say, straightening my spine, “she gave up her own career managing a bookstore when his company took off. And she always reminds him.”

I love my parents madly. They have a great marriage, and they raised me with love. But every now and then when I was growing up, my mom made little comments about how proud she was of the success his consulting company was having, in part because she quit her job to support him.

I don’t ever want to be the person who quits.

The one who has to remind the other that she did.

Or the one who maybe wishes she hadn’t quit. Because I suspect that’s what’s behind her little asides.

Maggie tilts her head with a skeptical look. “*Always* reminds him?”

“It feels often to me,” I say, then I wave a hand breezily.

She pours her concoction into two glasses and slides one to me, then whispers, “I have an extra thousand under the

mattress. C'mon. Take it."

"Please tell me you don't keep money under the mattress."

"Mattress. Bank. Same thing."

I shake my head. "Nope. You didn't fund Logan's business. You're not funding mine. Besides, I'll either win this contest or nab a loan."

She takes a long swig of her smoothie, and I do the same. Then I nearly spit it out as my tongue rebels against the taste. "This is the worst one ever. What did you put in it?"

"Wheatgrass."

"You do know grass is what dogs eat when they need to barf?"

She laughs. "Wheatgrass is very popular in healthy beverages."

"No. Just no. Wheatgrass is wrong. It's grass, Mags. Grass."

She gives me a look like I deserve to be sent to my room for impudence. "It's good for you. Keeps you healthy. And I need to replenish after my workout. By the way, I killed it at my bike-training session today. Mildred and Octavia had nothing on me. I left them in the dust in Central Park," she says, then heads to the living room, where she grabs her phone and, judging from the beeping sounds, returns to her *Words with Friends* game.

From the stool at the kitchen counter, I review *The Dating Pool* contest rules one more time.

The theme is spot-on: letters to exes, with the proviso that you must have learned something from the past relationship. No slams, no digs, no skewering. *Show us how you're moving on.*

*Dating Pool*, I've got this. I've so got this.

This is my jam. Learning. Takeaways. Putting a positive spin on nearly everything.

I can bang out this letter, easy peasy.

I have the perfect person to write about.

Grabbing my tablet, I flip it open.

Two hours later, my entry is polished and ready to go.





# OLIVER

## *One year ago*

There are things a man just needs to know how to do by the time he goes out on his own.

How to tie a necktie, ideally without looking in the mirror. How to parallel park in one try. How to build a campfire—with and without matches. (*Hint: magnifying glasses.* Learn how to use them and you, too, can become Prometheus.)

And how to answer a Mayday call from your female best friend.

As it happened, Jason and I were hanging in his apartment one evening, working our way through the top ten skills any man must know.

I strummed a chord on his acoustic guitar, working my way through “Love Me Do,” the song we’d dubbed easiest to learn to play on a guitar. (On the list of things a modern man should know: how to play at least one song on the guitar.)

“Stop. Stop. It’s like a parrot mating with a trombone,” Jason said, clapping his hands over his ears.

Naturally, I played louder. “You’re just jealous that I’m ahead of you. I’ve tackled six items, and it’s your bloody list.”

An eye roll was his answer. “I would never be envious of someone who is total rubbish at item number four.”

“Building a campfire?” I scoffed. We’d worked on that skill last weekend while camping an hour outside of the city. “Please. I excelled. Yours was more like a bonfire, Smokey Bear. You do know the point isn’t to set the whole forest alight?”

“I made an elegant fire and cooked a burger on it. A burger you enjoyed,” he pointed out as he reached for the composition notebook with his list.

“Fine, I concede. The burger was tasty. But when you do your podcast on the top ten requisite skills, I want credit for excelling in outdoorsmanship, which is all the more impressive given my day job. Not only can I argue a case in court, but I can also survive a bear attack.” I eyed his notebook. “Check out item number seven. It’ll get any bloke past a grizzly or a black bear.”

He smacked the notebook on his thigh, looking skeptical. “I’m not questioning that you can *research* how to survive a bear attack, since you did it to put the item on here. Frankly, neither one of us ought to be putting that one to the test. Spoiler alert—the bear usually wins. But let’s go back to your other *supposed* skill.” His eyebrow rose to the ceiling. “‘Argue a case’? You’re a corporate attorney, inking contracts from your swank Park Avenue office. You’re hardly a prosecutor orating in court, *Atticus*.”

I stopped strumming, shooting him an *oh no, you didn’t* stare. “First, you enlist me as your comrade in tackling this Be a Man list for your podcast. Then you malign my ability to execute the tasks. Now you question my talent in the courtroom? I’m not sure you understand the meaning of the words *help a fella out*.”

“Fine, fine. You can fend off the next black bear we run into if-slash-when we answer the call of the wild,” he said, just as my phone bleated.

Jason peered at it on the coffee table, then arched a brow. “Ohhhhh. Summer’s calling. Your totally charming, utterly adorable *bestie* who you deny having a thing for,” he said in a high-pitched tone, sliding the phone across the coffee table

like he'd caught me in the act of—what? Having a friend with breasts? “Go on. Answer it.”

“Men and women can be friends, as you well know.” I clicked answer on the call and said, “Oliver Harris, at your service.”

“Hi,” Summer said, biting out the word. Sensing the rage in that one little syllable, I sat up straighter. Then, like she was breathing fire, she scorched the next word from her mouth. “Drew.”

As she hissed, the light bulb went on in my brain, illuminating an image of someone she used to date. “Ah, Douchey Ex Number Three?”

“Yes. He took my work ideas and claimed they were his.”

“That is grounds for top prize in jackassery.”

“And obviously why I broke up with him, though he never saw it that way. He thought my ideas were just ‘part of the conversational fabric and, therefore, fair game, and why don’t we try to work this out, sweetie-pie lovey-bear?’”

“And the double pet names didn’t win you back? Such a shock.”

“I know, right?”

“Also, who the hell says ‘conversational fabric’ unless it’s an op-ed piece for a snooty newspaper?”

“Drew, that’s who. And guess what he did now?”

“Don’t keep me waiting. I’m on the edge of my seat.”

“He invited me to his wedding,” she said, irritation thick in her voice. Suddenly, I had one goal—erase that irritation as soon as possible.

“Say no,” I said, since that was the easiest method to wipe it away.

“I would, except ... remember? We work together, and the whole department is going. There’s this office-vibe thing, and I look like the petulant jackass if I don’t attend. Like I’m holding a grudge.”

“‘Conversational fabric’ is reason enough to hold a grudge. It’s in the guidebook.”

“Along with claiming any idea of yours is ‘fair game.’ Also, inviting an ex to your wedding should be in the guidebook.”

“That’s in the How to Be a Total Arse handbook.”

“Ah, but of course. Why did I take a job at this company?”

“You’re a glutton for punishment, clearly.”

“I know, and now I have to go to this wedding, says the rule book for being the bigger person compared to my douchey ex. What am I supposed to do?”

The answer was so simple I barely thought about it. There was one way to survive a black bear attack—make yourself look gigantic. I could help her in that department.

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

“You will?” Her voice lightened immediately. Gone was the anger. In its place was something else ... amusement perhaps.

“I’ll be your pretend boyfriend,” I offered. It seemed like the ideal solution.

My normally confident, outgoing friend was quiet for a beat. “Like we’ve done before?”

“Exactly. Unless you don’t want me to, in which case I will spend the time showing my hapless cousin how to fix a flat tire, because I’ll wager he can’t do that without my help.” I looked over to tell Jason, “You do know law school teaches students how to fix flat tires?”

“Exactly what law school did you go to?” he asked, rolling his eyes.

Summer laughed—a warm, happy sound that made me certain playing her beau for the night was the right choice. “So it’s between helping me and fixing a flat tire with Jason?”

“Yes, but you’re far more interesting than working on a car, I assure you.” I returned to the music, absently strumming

The Beatles again.

“What is that sound? Is there a cockatoo strangling a trumpet near you?” she asked.

My shoulders sagged. “I’m playing the guitar. And I swear, you and my cousin are in cahoots. Did you go to the same school of insult metaphors? Now, would you like me to go with you, and we can show this asshat at the office that, one, it’s rude to invite an ex to a wedding, and, two, if you are such a twit that you do invite an ex, you are going to be shown up by a much sexier, much more handsome new beau?” I paused for dramatic effect. “Me.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you have a ginormous—”

“Yes, of course. All the time.”

“*Ego*, Oliver. *Ego*.”

“If you mean ‘ego’ as a euphemism for the crown jewels, then also yes.”

“You’re incorrigible,” she said, but she was laughing again, happy again. And that was what I wanted from Summer. After all, she’d been one half of the reason I didn’t spiral into depression during high school. She’d done everything she could to keep my spirits up during the darkest days of my life. This was the least I could do for her.

“That’s better than being corrigible, isn’t it? Tell me when to pick you up.”

She gave me the details, and when I hung up, Jason stared at me, lips twitching, eyebrows arching. “So, it’s the old pretend-boyfriend ruse, is it?”

“Why, yes, it is.”

“You know what they say about that.”

I strummed another chord. “No, I don’t. Enlighten me.”

But he simply laughed rather than answering, and I didn’t give his comments a second thought.

After all, being Summer’s pretend boyfriend had always been easy.

\* \* \*

On a Sunday evening two weeks later, I knocked on the door to Summer's apartment. As it opened, I said, "All right, sexy fake girlfriend, get on my arm and let's show you off like the \_\_\_"

My jaw dropped.

Possibly literally.

Definitely figuratively.

Because *holy fuck*.

Summer was a fox.

She wore some kind of dress. Some kind of fabric. Who the hell knew what any of it was except light blue and delectable.

She looked nothing like the girl I'd known most of my life, yet everything like her too.

She was sex appeal and sweetness all wrapped up in one delicious package.

"Like the what?" she asked, curious. "Show me off like the what?"

My throat was dry, but I managed to speak through the desert. "Let's show you off like you're the thing he most regrets."

Because jackass or not, how could Drew *not* regret his fuckup? Losing this woman had to be cause for going to the hospital to check for alarmingly high levels of relationship remorse.

She smiled, and it did something funny to my chest.

Something funny that I shoved into a dark corner of my mind, determined not to examine.

I hooked her arm through mine, then we left her building and slid into a waiting Uber.

In the car, I reminded myself of our roles, and that quick reset was all I needed to ignore that dark corner of my mind.

At the wedding, it was easy, so damn easy to pretend she was mine, but that wasn't because she was all dolled up.

It was because we knew each other. We had an ease between us. A rhythm.

During the reception, her ex strode over and introduced himself. "Pleasure to meet you. Drew McAllister the third."

*Are you fucking kidding me?*

I held out my hand. "Oliver Harris the twelfth," I said, since two could play that game. "Congrats on the wedding."

"Yes. I particularly love the favors. I'd been hoping for a pen with your photo on it," Summer put in.

"Thanks. They're great for signing things," Drew said, completely missing the point.

"As pens are," I added, affixing a most serious look to my face. "Do they also work for taking notes?"

"Yeah," he said, giving me a confused look. Drew scrubbed a hand over his jaw and glanced from Summer to me and back. "Have you two been together long?"

I looped my arm around her waist. "No, but when something is right, it's just right, isn't it?"

And since I had no more interest in him than I did in his bride-and-groom photo pens, I took Summer to the dance floor and twirled her around.

"Did you know you can also use a pen as a whistle?"

"Did you know you can use a pen to poke your brother or your cousin?" she tossed back.

"Some pens double as back scratchers," I said.

"And don't forget—nearly all can be used to hit that hard-to-reach reset button on modems."

I spun her around, and when she made a full circle, I added, "And this concludes our discussion of other uses for



pens. By the way, Drew the third, dullest man in existence, is not only a douche but a total douche.”

Her blonde hair spilled behind her, and she smiled. “Was it the *third* or the personalized pens that sealed the deal?”

I shook my head, tugging her up. “No, it’s that he’s holding a wedding on a Sunday. Who does that?”

“What’s wrong with Sunday? Don’t tell me you hate Sundays.”

“It’s too close to Monday.”

“Aww, poor Oliver hates Monday,” she said, patting my chest as we danced. “Ollie and Garfield.”

“Don’t call me Ollie,” I growled.

“But comparing you to a cartoon cat is okay?”

“It’s better than being called Ollie.”

“You know why I call you Ollie,” she said, a hint of seriousness in her tone.

“I know,” I replied, partially serious too.

“And I think you like it, even though you pretend not to.”

“Try me, woman.”

Her lips curved into a fantastic grin as she taunted, “Ollie, Ollie, Ollie.”

Maybe, just maybe, I didn’t entirely mind it from her. *Still*, I wasn’t a man for diminutives, so I clasped her tighter.

“Now I must punish you.” I dipped her precariously far. But Summer was the girl who liked to cliff jump into the ocean. She was the daredevil who’d skateboarded down the hilly street we lived on as teens. She had a lion-tamer’s ferocity and a fearless heart.

“That’s your punishment for *Ollie*?” she fired back.

“Watch it, or spankings come next.”

“Ooh, is that included on the fake boyfriend menu?”

I brought her back up again, flush against my chest, and for a flash of a moment, I had an image of where dancing might lead.

A dangerous image that would require use of the dark corners of my mind, so I stepped away from talk of spanking.

Lest it lead to something just like that.

Instead, I cleared my throat and answered her earlier question. “Holding a wedding on a Sunday is throwing in the towel. It says you’re going to bed early. It says you’re waking up and heading to the gym the next morning. It says you aren’t committed to lasting all night long.”

“What’s wrong with going to the gym in the morning?”

“Nothing, as long as it’s not the morning after your wedding night.”

“How do you know they aren’t staying up all night long?”

“Because it’s Sunday.”

“So are you telling me that you’ve never stayed up all night long on a Sunday?”

“I have, but I doubt Drew the third has my stamina,” I said, as I made sure our bodies didn’t sway too closely. I didn’t need another brazen image of her lodging itself where it didn’t belong.

“You are so cocky.”

“But it’s not cocky if it’s true.”

She tapped my shoulder. “Just because you and your cousin have this saying doesn’t make it right.”

“But you know what *is* true and right?” I asked, spinning her and enjoying the way it made her laugh.

“What?”

“Me stepping in as the future Douche Ex Number Four. Because now you’re not thinking about your Douche Ex Number Three breaking the rules of common decency by inviting you to his wedding, are you?”

Her smile lit up the entire dance floor. It was all the twinkling lights in the reception hall. It was the stars in the night sky. “Not at all.” She took a beat, as if stripping away the sass and teasing that were the hallmarks of our friendship. “Thank you, Oliver.”

“It was my pleasure, Summer.” And it was. The night had been fantastic. “Just like it was with the guy from the bar. Remember that night at the Lucky Spot?”

“I do. You pulled me onto your lap and played with my hair, really selling it to the jury.”

“It worked. He sulked off,” I said, but I wasn’t thinking of the ex. I was thinking of her hair, grateful she wore it up tonight, so I wouldn’t be tempted.

Summer glanced around, as if surveying the success of the wedding ruse. “And on that note, has anyone told you you’re the best fake boyfriend around?”

“Why, yes. It’s going on my business card.”

“Oh, good. Now I feel special.”

“You should always feel special,” I said, conveying that in my tone. I wanted her to know that. Wanted her to feel it. Because her role in my life and the immeasurable levels of special she brought to it were the reasons I didn’t want to get any closer to her.

“I should?” Her question came out a little tentative, a little surprised.

I met her gaze, making sure she saw that I was being honest. “You are special, Summer.”

She’d been one of my closest friends since I was old enough to need someone to turn to.

She’d been there for me the entire time my sister was sick when I was in high school, and when Phoebe died, she’d been there for me too.

Always.

And I always wanted her in my life, and to be in hers, not on a list of mistakes.

That was why I laughed it off when Jason or Logan hinted about us becoming more than friends.

We were an *us* because we didn't ever let *us* become anything else.



# SUMMER

## *Present day*

Stella answers on the first ring. “Let me guess. You’re in jail, and you need me to bail you out.”

“As if I’d call you first,” I say indignantly.

“Who would you call?”

I consider this from bed, staring at the ceiling. “Logan probably. He can talk his way out of anything.”

“Sweetie, it’s money you need for bail. Not talk.”

“But maybe he could talk his way out of the bail,” I suggest.

Stella yawns so savagely you could drive a semitruck through it. “Anyway, why are you calling at ten at night if you’re not in jail?”

“How old are you? Ten is not late.”

“Two years older than you, which means I need my sleep.”

“Sorry,” I mutter. “Sort of. Anyway, I’m calling because I wrote the letter, and I’m about to hit submit. But want to hear it first?”

“Oooh! I am wide awake and ready.”

I clear my throat and read the letter out loud.

Dear Sexy Ex-Boyfriend,

I've said this before, and I'll say it again.

Exes are exes for a reason.

But not always for a bad reason.

Usually, they're in the past because you didn't see eye to eye.

Or because you didn't love each other enough.

Or maybe circumstances pulled you apart.

That happens, and it's just part of life, part of learning.

Sometimes, though, an ex is history because one of you, or both of you, are absolute douches.

After all, exes can be jerks. They can wander into bars, saunter over to you when you're with your friends, and act like nothing happened.

Or invite you to their wedding when you have zero interest in their nuptials and even less in their swaggy wedding favors. (Seriously. Commemorative pens? Pens with your face on them?)

But I've never believed that *all* the ex-boyfriends are the worst.

I don't believe that about *you*.

You stepped in when I needed you the most, with your charm, and your wit, and your "I've got this" spirit.

You lifted me up when I needed you to. And you saved me when I needed saving. I saved you too.

And I know you—from the way you look when you get out of the pool to the way you like your English breakfast tea (not at all, thank you very much).

But in spite of this knowledge, you told me that someday I'd call you a douchey ex too.

And you'd deserve it, you said.

You'd deserve it because we don't always see eye to eye.  
Because we don't agree on everything. Because we see the  
world differently.

But you know what? I've learned something about who I am  
from you.

Just like our choice of a last meal is insight into the life we led,  
right? Exes say something about a person. When I look back  
on mine, they tell the story of my heart and my goals and my  
dreams. They say I'm not ready yet to give my all to a  
relationship. I'm not ready to move into that phase of my life.

There is a world out there and so much to see in it. I couldn't  
travel the way I wanted to if my exes had been the kind to  
stick around.

The kind I wanted to stick around.

And especially if *you'd* been the kind of guy who wanted  
more.

That was never in the cards for us.

So I say, if you want to be Douchey Ex Number Four, I  
welcome that. I've got labels printed out. You can wear a  
sandwich board stating that you're Douchey Ex Number Four  
—and proud of it.

We'd grab a pint someday and probably even laugh about it,  
except we both prefer martinis.

Because you and me? We know what we are to each other. We  
know that the world needs more sexy ex-boyfriends so we can  
achieve our dreams.

May we learn lessons from all kinds of exes—from the jerks,  
from the timid, from the crazy, from the ones we just didn't  
love enough, and from the ones who didn't love us enough.

They teach us about ourselves.

And I'm still trying to achieve all my dreams.

So I say thank you, Douchey Ex Number Four, for being the  
sexiest ex-boyfriend of all.



My best,  
Summer

I finish, feeling naked, exposed, but hopeful that it says everything I want to say, and that Stella will like it.

Hopeful that *The Dating Pool* will love it, because winning this could tip me over the edge with my new venture.

“It’s ...” Stella begins, but doesn’t finish.

“It’s terrible? That’s what you were going to say? Or it’s a brilliant scheme and a terrific chance to nab some extra money if I win. And if I win, I would use it to add a self-defense class to the roster, and that’s precisely what my gym needs.” My words are like froyo spilling out too fast and overflowing from the sample cup.

She laughs sweetly. “I was going to say I think it’s a brilliant scheme and a lovely letter. And I actually think I get it now.”

My brow knits. “Get what?”

“You and Oliver. Your connection. I think I understand it in a whole new way.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I do. I kind of get why you’re not interested in testing my theory. I understand now why you always say nothing will happen.”

“Thank you,” I say, warmth and happiness bubbling up in me. “It’s so easy to think because we’re good friends that a romance is inevitable. But that’s not in the cards.”

“Yeah, I see that now,” she says, sounding introspective. “I guess it’s human nature to want to ship two pretty people who spend so much time together.”

“And now you understand why there is no Sumiver Ship or Oliner Ship.”

“More proof you’re right. Your names are horribly unshippable.”

“There you go.” I smile, thanking her, then hit submit.

Even though, I suppose, a small part of me still wonders about the accuracy of her theories.

But just a small part, I swear.



# SUMMER

On Monday, I watch as Loan Officer Electra nods thoughtfully, takes a beat, then smiles. “You present a very compelling argument. And honestly, I’m counting the days till your gym opens.”

*Must not crawl across the desk and tackle-hug the world’s coolest loan officer.*

Instead, I sit ramrod straight on the edge of the leather seat, beaming. “I’m so glad you feel that way. I’ve lined up my final teachers too, to make the classes amazing. Seniors have different needs than other age groups and want a gym where they feel comfortable and welcome. Providing that can increase health in the golden years. I found a Zumba teacher who specializes in catering to seniors. I have a spin-class instructor who’s the best in the biz. I even found someone to teach kickboxing to older adults.”

I’m giddy, but professionally giddy. That’s a thing. “This is going to be so good for health and fitness and longevity. In time, we can reduce medical costs and reduce insurance needs. It’s going to be great,” I say, unable to stop giving my pitch to her on why fitness for life matters.

But the curly-haired woman with the hawklike nose seems to need little convincing. “I know! I can’t wait to sign up my dad. He is going to love it. He’s jonesing to do kickboxing.”

Just like Stella’s grandpa. Yes! This gym is filling an unserved need. And I am going to call my instructors the second the ink dries. They are going to flip.

“Thank you, Electra. I’m glad you feel that way. I can’t wait to let my instructors know it’s a go,” I say, nerves winging through my body as I adjust the pencil skirt that feels like a costume, since I don’t usually wear navy skirts and silk blouses.

Except when begging for money.

But that ends today.

Humming, Electra drums her fingers on her oak desk, flashing a cheery smile in my direction. “They are going to be ecstatic. And we simply can’t wait to hear how it goes.”

I blink. What? She can’t wait to hear how it goes? “What do you mean?”

“I mean, do keep in touch. And best of luck, Summer.”

*Ohhhhhhhhhh.*

My shoulders slide toward the floor in the slumpiest slump of all time. “You’re not granting the loan?” I ask in a dead tone.

She shakes her head, still grinning, which seems kind of cruel. “No, but you’re one of our most regular and valuable customers, and we so appreciate you saving all that money with us.”

“But I need more.” My voice cracks, and I swallow that awful splintering sound. Maybe I misunderstood. Maybe she’s just messing around. “I’ve been a good customer for ten years, and now I need a loan to make this gym the best it can be. To be competitive.”

Electra pumps a fist. “And we are fired up to see how it goes with all that you have saved here. You go get ’em, girl.”

*Girl.*

She just *you go, girled* me.

She hasn’t even uttered any of the warning words that come before crushing your hopes and dreams. Words like *however, but, with that said, or unfortunately.*

She’s turned me down with pep and vigor.

“Is there anything else I can do?”

“The risk is just too great.”

With a deep sigh, I gather my purse, say a wooden thanks, and leave.

A deep sadness cloaks me as I walk across the stone floor of the bank toward the ominous exit.

Maybe I didn't present a compelling enough pitch. Maybe I asked for too much. Maybe I asked for too little. But I need that extra money. Need it to get me over the hump. Need it to show I can do this on my own.

All I've ever wanted is to do this on my own.

And now I don't have enough to open the doors.

Now I'll have to table my dreams for months while I save up the rest.

As I trudge to the street, my phone rings—my mom is calling. I answer it half-heartedly, wishing I could muster my normal pep.

“Hi, Mom,” I say, trying to sound cheery, trying to focus on her. “How's everything going with you? Is it Book Club Monday? Do you have everyone hooked on the newest Nora Roberts?”

“Of course I do. I'm a master at picking books. I should be running book clubs all over town. But that's not why I'm calling. How did it go?” She sounds like she's been holding her breath with anticipation.

“Oh, you know. It went ...” But I can't even spin a tale. “They turned me down.” My throat catches.

“Sweetie, let us help you.”

I shake my head. “Nope. I'll make this work.”

“Summer, I want to help. We want to help,” she says, her tone upbeat. “I'm very good at helping, as you know. I've done it for years.”

And that, right there, is why I don't entirely want it.

What if I take it and feel indebted? Annoyed? Resentful? She says she likes helping, but why does she always bring it up? Because she wishes she were still running her bookstore, I suspect.

“I know, Mom. But this is just a little speed bump. I’ll figure it out.” I check my watch. I need to go to Sunshine Living in two hours, so I’ve got one-hundred-and-twenty minutes to process my disappointment. I refuse to bring it to work with me. “I have to go to work in a little bit. I’m going to go for a walk. But I’ll text you later.”

“Do that. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hang up, walking toward the park, trying to work through these obstacles before I clock in with Travis.

The moment I hit Fifth Avenue, my phone trills again—my brother this time. I’m tempted, so damn tempted to ask him for a loan. The words are on the tip of my tongue. He has the money.

He also has a six-year-old and the scars from a painful and expensive divorce.

And if I won’t take it from anyone else, I won’t take it from him.

I sigh so heavily it’ll send the Dow Jones plummeting. I’ll just wait a little longer, save a little more. It’s all I can do.

“Hey, Logan, what’s going on?”

My brother is cackling. “Sexy. Ex. Boyfriend. Dude, that is the funniest thing you’ve ever written.”

My brow pinches. “What are you talking about?”

But when I click on Twitter, I see I’ve made so much more than a grammatical error.





# SUMMER

I. Am. Trending.

Or rather, “America’s Worst Boyfriend” is.

It’s all over Twitter. The letter I wrote. The dissection of it. The whodunit. And there is little social media loves more than a good outing. How was it even published? But I don’t have time to figure that out because right now, I need to rubberneck at my own ten-car pileup.

I scroll through a river of comments hashtagged #AmericasWorstBoyfriend as I walk, head bent, face buried in a mess of my own making.

*@NYer14: I bet he’s a celebrity.*

*@GossipLoverLandOnly: A reality show star.*

*@SportsFan: An athlete.*

*@Anglophile2200: Hello? You twits. He sounds British. English breakfast tea and all.*

*@GossipLoverLandOnly: No, she said he hated tea.*

*@Anglophile2200: No, she said it would be cliché if he loved it. Learn to read, dimwit.*

*@RoyalWatcher: Could it be one of the royals?*

*@BTSlover: I bet he’s in a boy band.*

*@HatesBoyBands: Yes, that has to be it. Guys in boy bands are royal douches.*

*@TheThird: Wait. I know this guy.*

*@SexyLady: No, I know him.*

*@SexierLady: No, I dated him.*

I stomp like Rumpelstiltskin.

No!

My hair is on fire, my blood heats to a thousand degrees of fury. I can't believe I did this. I can't believe this happened. I can't believe ... oh shit.

I can't believe the next comment.

*@TheThird: I'm pretty sure it's Oliver Harris the twelfth. He came with Summer to my wedding. I gave out very nice pens. I'm not surprised they split though. He seemed like a bit of a playboy, truth be told. Also, my pens were cool.*

Screw one thousand degrees. I am an inferno, and I want to throw balls of fire at my very douchey ex Drew.

Because his comment is all it takes.

What started as the funniest thing I ever wrote speeds straight into an epic dumpster fire.

*@ManCandyFan: Oliver! Oh, he's hawt.*

*@LovesListsofMen: That British lawyer? The one who looks like Tom Ellis and Chris Hemsworth had a love child and Harry Styles donated his hair to their baby?*

*@GossipLover1andOnly: Yes, the one on New York's Most Eligible Bachelors list.*

*@ManCandyFan: The one who dated that heiress? Chantal. And some TV actress. That dude gets around.*

*@CheetahNoah: I hope he gets around! I'm doing a corporate scavenger hunt, and one of the things we have to find is a picture of an internet celebrity in the wild! If I can find HIM, I'm golden.*

*@MenAreJerks: I bet you'll find him being a douche.*

*@PeopleAreJerks: He does look like a douche too. And I mean that in the best way possible.*

*@ILoveJerks: Right? Jerks are sooo hot. Why are jerks so hot? I don't even know. They just are.*

*@ILoveCockyJackholes: OMG, yes. So much yes. There is just something about a jackass that I love.*

*@DownwithDouches: And look at this picture of him. He's posing like a freaking model, with his top button undone, his hand in his hair, like he thinks he's the hottest thing ever.*

*@ILoveJerks: Well, he is. I mean, my God. That jawline. That's, like, the kind of jawline you use to measure hottest jawlines ever.*

*@MenAreJerks: That's not a thing—hottest jawline ever is so not a thing.*

*@ILoveCockyJackholes: Well, it should be.*

*@FanofNietzsche: Jerks always get the good genes. It's the universe's way of reminding us that nihilism is alive and well.*

*@QuestionEverything22: So now this is a philosophical movement?*

*@DownwithDouches: Let's start a movement to stop assholes.*

*@HZRedhead: Yes, I concur. I dated him once. I went to his apartment to bring him tea. Wasn't that sweet of me? And he didn't even have the courtesy to come downstairs and break my heart in person. I was in love with him. IN LOVE. MAD, CRAZY, BEAUTIFUL LOVE. Instead, he sent his new girlfriend to tell me. This man is the patron saint of asshole exes, and he must be stopped.*

My eyes bug out when I discover Hazel's comment. She and Oliver dated for maybe two weeks. He ended it with her in person. And she stalked him. With tea.

"You got it all wrong, crazy pants," I mutter at the screen.

Maybe I'm the crazy one, though, since I'm talking to my phone as I march uptown. Oh, wait. That just makes me a New Yorker. But the craziest thing of all is when I see the next email.

From an editor at *The Dating Pool*. And it answers a big question.

*Congratulations, Summer! We loved your letter so much we published it this morning, as we planned to do with the top three finalists. If yours is selected as the winner, you'll receive \$5000 in prize money. Best of luck!*



# OLIVER

This is not how my day was supposed to go. This is not how any day is supposed to go, ever.

Dragging my hand through my hair—which looks nothing like Harry Styles’s, thank you very much—I pace in my office. With my work phone pressed to my ear, I do my very best to practice one of the three skills I pride myself on.

*Reassuring.*

“That’s not me. I swear that’s not who I am,” I tell Geneva, who’s beside herself thanks to Twitter doing what Twitter does best.

*Misinterpreting literally everything.*

“But all the posts say it’s you,” Geneva insists, a brand-new worry in her voice. “All the comments, all the blogs. Hashtag ‘America’s Worst Boyfriend.’ And frankly, I don’t know if I’m comfortable doing business with someone like that.”

A knot of anxiety tightens in my chest, hard and unpleasant.

I hate unhappy clients. It means I didn’t try hard enough, fight well enough. That’s not okay. I didn’t go into this field to lose. I went to law school to help those who need a lion in their corner, who want the king of the jungle fighting their battles.

For all the lawyer jokes in the world, the reality is, when you need someone to go to battle for you—and everyone

needs someone to go to battle for them at some point—that usually means you need an attorney who will be fierce for you.

My sister needed it when she was young. Geneva needs it now. And I want to be that person for her. “I think there’s simply been a misunderstanding. Allow me to explain,” I say calmly, preparing to improvise the hell out of this shitshow.

A shitshow that Summer started. Unwittingly, I’m sure. But one she started, nonetheless, with a funny, sweet, heartfelt insider’s joke of a letter that’s been twisted by the thing known as the internet. I bet in ten years, computers will come with a warning label. *Caution: internet use may be hazardous to your sanity*. Social media, in particular, has been known to cause stupidity and bad decisions, resulting in dumpster fires and absolute fuckery.

“You see ...” I begin.

“No, allow me to explain,” Geneva says, sharper now, her voice like a knife. “I just went through a terrible divorce. Public and horrible. My ex was a Casanova who made an utter mockery of our marriage, and frankly ... this reminds me of it.”

What she described, what Twitter is saying, couldn’t be further from the truth. I just need to convey that to her.

“Twitter has twisted this all around. The woman who wrote that—I’ve known her my whole life. It was all ...” I say, and then I’m about to tell her the true reason for the letter—that the woman who wrote it is, like, my best mate, that we have a long-running joke about terrible exes, that it’s a thing we do for each other, playing pretend, and that it all started way back in high school when my sister was sick. But as those words take shape in my mind, they sound ridiculous.

They sound like a bald-faced lie.

Geneva picks up where I trailed off. “If you were America’s best boyfriend, it would be one thing. But this? These things they are saying about you ...”

My cell buzzes on my desk with a text from Summer. I lunge for it as Geneva goes on about all the brilliant comments

on Twitter, including how I am the biggest twat of the internet.

**Summer:** I am so sorry. You are not America's worst boyfriend. You are America's best ex-boyfriend. That was supposed to be fun, a tongue-in-cheek way to celebrate us, and I never thought anyone would figure out it was you. I didn't even know my essay was going to be posted online—at least not right away, not to mention go viral—and I feel like such an utter idiot. The absolute worst friend ever. You probably hate me, and if you do, I deserve it, but I will do anything to make this right for you. What can I do?

Immediately, I know the answer.

I won't lose this client for my firm. I won't lose this deal. And I will fight this battle for her. It'll take me three weeks to ink the new partnership for her agency, and in the meantime, there's only one choice.

I flash back to a few years ago when my cousin Christian faced a somewhat similar predicament. To save his company in Paris, he had to marry straightaway.

A man's got to do what a man's got to do.

Sliding in when Geneva pauses, I go for it. Leave it all on the field. Well, not exactly marriage. But the same idea. "Here's the thing. Summer didn't mean the letter that way. The truth is, I am America's best boyfriend. Because ..." I draw on my best store of humility, such as it is. "Summer and I ... well, we're engaged. It happened quite recently. So, you see, what she meant with the letter is that she's saying goodbye to me as her ex-boyfriend because now I'm going to be her forever one."

And the response from my client is all I could ever want.

It's one word.

*Oh.*



Her tone is surprise mixed with delight, and then it finishes on a happy squeal.

“That’s so lovely, Ollie.” She laughs, sounding almost embarrassed, and I don’t even care that she called me Ollie. “I got it all wrong. I am so sorry I got it so completely inside out.”

“Everyone did, obviously.” I push out a chuckle. “We weren’t going to announce it yet, but Summer? Well, she’s Summer. She likes to present things in unconventional ways, which is one of the things I love about her. You’ll see when you meet her. We should all have dinner this Saturday.”

“Perhaps Jane can come along too. I wanted to invite her to my wine tasting tomorrow night. Why don’t we all go to that, and then we can have dinner with some of the other partners in the firm this weekend? It’s important to me to fully know and trust the people I work with.”

“I’m sure she’d love that—the wine and the dinner.” I breathe a lifetime’s worth of sighs of relief, even though Summer hates wine.

But I bet she can fake it for me.

Geneva seems relieved too. “I can’t wait to meet her, and of course, I won’t back out of our deal. I’m so glad that it was a misunderstanding. Thank you for setting things straight.”

I wave a hand airily. “Everything gets out of hand on the internet, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does. I should have known better,” she says with so much contrition that I almost feel bad for my fib.

*Almost.*

When I hang up, I call Summer and tell her to meet me straightaway. Then I leave, telling Jane I’ll be back soon.

“Don’t forget you have a one o’clock with Hanover Media,” she tells me. “Prospective new client. Helen Williams Designs referred them, since she loved your work so much on the last deal.”

“And I love word of mouth.” Word of mouth is exactly why I need to stop this shitshow from snowballing.

Loosening my tie as I go, I head to Fifth Avenue, walk up a few blocks, texting my cousin in Paris as I go.

**Oliver:** Remember that time you engineered a marriage of convenience to save your company?

**Christian:** Hmm. Sounds a bit familiar. Care to elaborate?

**Oliver:** It worked brilliantly, right?

**Christian:** What sort of hot water have you gotten yourself into, cuz?

I stare at the text thread. Yeah, this might not be helpful right now.

**Oliver:** I’ll update you later.

**Christian:** Spare no details. I need a good laugh.

Yes, a laugh. This is funny. This is something we’ll all look back on and laugh. Putting my phone away, I find Summer outside the entrance to the park, waiting at a bench and wringing her hands.

She looks devastated, her big brown eyes brimming with worry. “I am so sorry. I am the worst friend ever. I never thought that would happen. Those people are dickheads.”

“Yes, and Twitter is the biggest dickhead of all.” I’m not in the business of holding grudges or staying pissed. There’s no point. Besides, I’m about to call in a big favor now. “But I knew what you meant. I know what you were trying to say.”

“You do?” she asks, and her voice is small, fearful. “You’re not pissed at me?”

I hold up my thumb and forefinger, showing a sliver of space. “Maybe a little at first. But not for long.”

“Oh, Oliver. I feel terrible,” she says, her brow knit with worry. “I thought it was a nice little way of saying thank you, but in a way where *only* you would know it was you.” She presses her palms together as if in prayer. “Tell me how I can help. I meant it when I said I’d do anything.”

I shoot her a wry grin, take a beat, then call in a your-turn-to-scratch-my-back. “Here’s what I need for the next three weeks.”

“Anything. Please. I’m dying to make this right.” The look in those puppy-dog eyes is a desperate plea. I sort of hate that she feels that way, but sort of not.

Because it’s going to make my outlandish request much easier.

“Good,” I say, with what I’m sure is a slightly evil grin. “Because I’m cashing in on the prom promise. Your sexy ex-boyfriend is about to become your fake fiancé.”



# SUMMER

## *Thirteen years ago*

We huddled in the teen cave, the sprawling basement of Oliver's home, music blasting, hands dipping into the popcorn bowl as the four of us plotted—Logan, Oliver, Phoebe, and me.

The mission? Prom-posals for my twin brother and the guy next door.

We'd already mapped out a plan for Logan to ask the foreign exchange student in his history class.

Now it was time to assist Oliver in asking Emily.

As for me? I planned to go with my friends, a big group of girls in pretty dresses and sparkly shoes, dancing with each other.

"How about I ask Emily when she goes for her run in the morning?" Oliver suggested, grabbing a handful of popcorn and munching.

Logan pointed his finger approvingly as he grabbed some kernels then headed to the Ping-Pong table. "Dude. Yes. You just get some Sharpies, write it on a sign, and boom. In like Flynn."

I scoff-laughed. "I don't think it's that easy."

From her spot in the corner of the couch, Phoebe shot her younger brother a look that said he was a dolt. It was a look

she'd perfected with him. "Promise me you're not going to do that, Ollie. Just promise me."

Oliver turned to his sister, now nineteen. It was one of her good days. They were fewer and farther between, but she tried to embrace them when they came.

We all did. She'd been fighting cancer since the family moved from England a few years ago so she could undergo an experimental treatment at a nearby hospital. It had worked ...

For a while.

"Why not? Emily likes to run. She's captain of the cross-country team. It seems perfect for a prom-posal," Oliver said, being all boy-logical as he rose to join Logan at the table.

But boy logic didn't always sway teenage girls.

Phoebe turned to me. The look in her crystal blue eyes said, *Boys. You can't train them to do anything.* "What are we supposed to do with him, Summer? He's hopeless. Utterly hopeless."

"It's a condition of being male," I agreed dryly.

Oliver lifted his chin, standing his ground. "I think it's brilliant."

"You would," Phoebe said, reaching for some popcorn and tossing it at her brother. The kernels landed a few feet from Oliver. Her strength was waning.

He bent to pick them up, but their corgi mix, Gloria, raised her snout from the floor and gamely trotted over to Hoover up the spill as Logan served the white ball across the table.

Oliver darted up in time to smack it back, and the rhythmic sound of the plastic ball hitting the table punctuated our romantic war room machinations.

"Anyway," Phoebe added in her best arch *I'm your older sister and I know better* voice, "I would strongly suggest something a bit more creative. Right, Summer?"

"Perhaps balloons spelling out PROM," I offered. "Or get a T-shirt for Gloria to wear with *Will you go to prom with my*

*person?* written on it.”

“Excellent idea. Dogs are perfect wingmen. Or wingwomen, in Gloria’s case. Another option is to rent the marquee at the local cinema and put a sign up there asking her.”

Logan slammed a ball across the table. “No way. That’s megabucks. We don’t even know if Emily likes him.”

Phoebe stroked her chin, brow furrowed. “Fair point. It’s hard to imagine anyone would, truly.”

I held up a hand to high-five her.

“You’re a little stinker,” Oliver said to her as he backhanded a ball. “But I’ve no doubt she’s into me. She has excellent taste.”

“Then I bet she’ll go for that bloke who looks like Jude Law,” Phoebe offered.

My gaze snapped in her direction. “You mean Colton Davis? The guy who plays guitar? Senior? He’s yummy.”

“So yummy,” Phoebe said dreamily. It was the first thing that had come out of her mouth that afternoon that wasn’t laced with sarcasm or sass.

Logan missed the shot, Oliver lowered his paddle, and I simply stared at her. Phoebe rarely talked about boys. With a determined look, Oliver walked over to his sister, sat next to her, and took her hand. “Do you want to go with him? We could ask him to go with you.”

The sound that emanated from Phoebe was the most derisive snort to emanate from any person ever.

“No!”

Instinctively, I turned to the door, looking for Oliver’s parents to come running to see if she’d fallen, to see if she was okay. But she was more than fine, and they were out, their dad at work, their mom running to the pharmacy to pick up meds for Phoebe.

She jerked her hand away from Oliver and pointed a stern finger at him. “Do not ever do that. Do not do something because you feel sorry for me. I mean it. I don’t want to get dressed up. I don’t want to wear stupid makeup, and I definitely don’t want to wear a hideous fucking wig. No, thank you. I’d rather stay home with Gloria than have everyone stare at me because I finally got to go to prom.” For a second, her voice trembled, but she swallowed and raised her chin. “Besides,” she said, collecting herself, a twinkle in her eyes, “I’d rather help Summer get ready, do her hair, and snap the photos when she has to take you as a pity date after Emily turns you down.”

Her smile was slow to spread, mischievous and thoroughly Machiavellian.

Logan mimed shooting a slam dunk. “Ohhh! You’ve just been burned.”

We all laughed. Phoebe was still Phoebe—always finding ways to poke fun at her little brother.

I joined in the laughter, knowing full well Phoebe’s prediction would never come true.

Emily would say yes, Oliver would take her to prom, and I’d go with ... well, a group of friends.

Which would be fine.

I liked my girlfriends.

I didn’t have a crush on the handsome British boy next door.

I didn’t long for my brother’s best friend.

For *my* good friend.

Not at all.

At least, not very much most of the time.

\* \* \*



But enough, apparently, that butterflies flickered through my chest two days later when Oliver pulled me aside after fifth-period calculus, scratched his jaw, and said, “Listen. Turns out Emily’s involved. Dating some wanker in community college who’s taking her to prom.”

“He’s definitely a wanker if he’s dating a high school student,” I said, quickly concurring. “What kind of college student dates a high schooler?”

“The wanker kind.” His grin faded, his expression turning serious. “But I was thinking about what Phoebe said.”

“Which part?” I asked, ever so casually, as if the details of the prom planning weren’t seared into my brain.

“The part where she mentioned you getting ready. I think she really wants to help you get ready. Do the whole girly thing. And look, I know it’s not your thing. I know you’re more into sports and Phoebe was always more of the frilly one, but would you want to?”

My heart sped up, beating a wildly fast rhythm. That was weird. Why would my heart trip over itself? I didn’t like Oliver like that. I truly didn’t. Fine, now and then I’d entertain little crush-like thoughts, but that was it, that was all.

But I wanted to be sure I understood. “Would I want to go to prom?”

“Would you be my *pity date*?” His lips curved into a grin as he repeated Phoebe’s words.

“You make it sound so appealing,” I teased, but we both knew what the date was about.

It wasn’t about us. It wasn’t about this skip in my heart.

It was about Oliver giving something to his sister that she’d never ask him to give. Something small that he could do if I said yes.

Of course I said yes. I didn’t say it for me, though, in spite of those butterflies.

I said it for him and, most of all, for her.

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, Phoebe did her best to help me with my hair, flat ironing it until she was too tired to hold the iron.

She applied my blush, then regarded me with the intense stare of a reality show judge. “You look smashing,” she declared, appraising my simple blue dress. No frills, no satin, no lace.

“She does,” Oliver seconded, shooting me a smile that warmed me all over.

Was the smile for her? Or was the smile for me?

I didn’t know, and it didn’t matter. Phoebe mattered.

Oliver gave his sister a hug at the door, and Phoebe said, “That Emily doesn’t know what she’s missing, Ollie.”

He simply laughed, soft and light. “I told you not to call me that.”

“Oh, you love it,” she said, waving a hand dismissively.

“No. I don’t at all,” he said, but his grin gave him away.

“Then grumble every time someone calls you that, just like you do with me. It’ll be your way of remembering me when I’m gone.”

His smile disappeared. His eyes narrowed. “Oh, shut up now.”

“Just do it,” she said, and she wasn’t mad. She was simply ... *Phoebe*.

Especially when she turned to me and said, “Summer, call him Ollie now and then to get a rise out of him. Do that for me, okay?”

Laughing, I gave her my oath. “I solemnly swear to call him Ollie every now and then.”

“You’re a gem,” she told me.

“And you’re a little stinker,” Oliver told her.

She preened. “I know.”

“So stop talking about when you’ll be gone,” he said, a hitch in his voice.

“It’s the truth. I’m used to it. I’m fine with it.”

“I’m not,” he said fiercely, then dropped a kiss onto her forehead and wished her a good night.

As we left, he seemed to collect himself, to shift away from that tug I was sure he felt in his heart, that wish that things were different.

“I love Phoebe,” I blurted when we slid into the limo, just the two of us.

He offered a sad smile. “Join the club.”

“It is not fair,” I said, my lip quivering, but I swallowed the threatening tears. It was his hurt, his pending loss. I didn’t want to co-opt it.

“I know. Some days that’s all I think about.”

“I wish everything were different,” I said, my voice catching once more.

“You have no idea how much I want that. How much I hope for ...”

“For a miracle.”

Glancing out the window, he nodded, swallowing tightly and swiping a finger across his face before looking back at me with a helpless shrug. “I’ll miss her so much,” he whispered.

I set my hand on his, squeezing. “I’ll be here for you.”

He pressed his shoulder against mine. “I know.”

“Always. I promise.”

“I know that too, Summer.”

He squeezed my hand in return, and that contact was like a seal on our friendship. A promise that we’d look out for each other. That we’d have each other’s backs.

We had a blast at prom, dancing, drinking punch, laughing, and hanging out with friends.

Later, we lounged in our chairs at our table, watching the disco ball swirl its squares of light on the floor as others swayed and we talked.

He lifted a brow in a question. “So, tell me, Summer. How was your first pity date?”

“You’re assuming it’s my first,” I teased.

“Oh, is this a service you offer other sorry boys?”

“Only the sorriest.”

“How lucky am I?”

“Very lucky,” I said.

“In that case, let me know if I can return the favor. Down the road, when you’re twenty-five or thirty, if you ever need a pity date, you call on me, okay?”

I patted his knee. “You’ll be the first one I call. I promise. And same goes for you if you need my services again.”

“It’ll be our prom promise,” he said.

“A solemn vow,” I said, wiggling my brow and pursing my lips before I added with a smirk, “*Ollie.*”

He narrowed his eyes, growling at me. “You’re evil. But even so, I doubt you’ll need to cash it in. You’ll have no problem getting dates ...” He trailed off like he was waiting for me to say something more.

Was I supposed to say something? Something clever or romantic?

I didn’t know, wasn’t sure what he was getting at. Teasing him was easy. Understanding him was hard in moments like these.

And deciphering my own tangled knot of emotions—friendship, a dash of attraction, a close family connection, and that terrible kernel of pending grief, cresting like a wave not far from the shore—was impossible. Best to not even try.

So I simply laughed and said, “You’ll have no problem either, Emilys of the world aside.”

The odd thing was that Emily didn’t go to the dance. She wasn’t there with her wanker boyfriend.

The next week, I overheard her in the cafeteria line talking to a friend as she scooped salad onto her tray. “It’s strange,” she said. “I was so sure Oliver Harris was going to ask me to prom. He never did.”

I blinked, my face flushing as she unwittingly revealed his secret to me.

He’d never asked her.

I never let on that I knew he hadn’t.

It didn’t really matter anyway.

I was his pity date, and Phoebe was the happiest we’d seen her in a long time.



# SUMMER

## *Present day*

All day long, all the time, all across the world people say, “I’ll do anything.”

But it’s just a saying, like “I’m dying to see your dress” or “This song is the worst.”

So when Oliver takes me up on my offer to do anything, my jaw comes unhinged. My brain buzzes with static, a radio stuck between stations.

Did he just say “become your fake fiancé”?

*That’s the anything?*

Cashing in on our prom promise? Isn’t that what we’ve always done? First with Emily, and later with Drew the third and his pens, with Hazel and her tea, and with all the other douche exes we’ve both had.

But not for three weeks.

More like for a few minutes, an hour, a night.

And now we’re making believe for twenty-one long days. I should be dreading it, like a twenty-one-day paprika-infused juice cleanse.

When someone cashes in a voucher for a debt you owe, it’s not supposed to be enjoyable.

But being Oliver’s pretend fiancée doesn’t sound that bad.

It sounds weirdly sort of fun, when he explains why he needs one.

Like being immersed in a great romance novel.

Hell, maybe, just maybe, a touch of pretend will eradicate those occasionally pesky tingles from my body. Satisfy a craving or my curiosity perhaps.

I confirm I heard him right. “So, let me get this straight. I wrote a letter for a contest extolling your virtues as an ex, the internet misinterpreted it, your client freaked out, and your solution is for us to pretend we’re engaged?”

He quirks up an *I’m so clever* brow. “Brilliant, right?”

I laugh. “That’s one word for it.” I shake my head, but I’m already in, and we know it. “A deal is a deal, and no promise shall be reneged on. So we better lay out the rules.”

His eyes twinkle with delight, and maybe relief too. “We should. Rules are good, right?”

“Rules are vital for any game people play.”

As if we’d planned it, we both gesture to the park as if to say, *Let’s walk and talk*. There’s no need to say it. It’s one of the things we do, and the park is my favorite place in the city.

We used to hop the train in from Connecticut and do teen things, and we usually ended up in the park eventually.

Heading into the park, we roll up our fake fiancée planning sleeves. “So, how did this happen? Well, besides the obvious. My letter. I’m sorry for it,” I say, and I feel like I’ll be apologizing for this for the rest of my life.

“Don’t. It was quite sweet.” His tone is neutral, though, and I can’t tell what he means. “Even if it was nearly deadly to my business.”

I cringe. “So what happened?”

“I didn’t see it at first, so I was a tad surprised when Jane alerted me to the things people were saying.”

“Ah, Jane. Looks innocent on the outside, loves gossip on the inside,” I say.



“That describes her to a T. Though it’s a useful trait in an aunt who runs the reception desk. In any case, she tipped me off, showed me the comments, then Geneva rang.” As we wander through the park, he goes into how his key new client reacted.

“And that’s when I realized, I had to cash in on the prom promise,” he continues. “But we should probably get our story straight. Like, how this happened, and so on.”

I tap my chest. “I’ve got this. You’ve come to the Queen of Brilliant Schemes. I’m thinking we keep it easy—we say we’ve known each other for ages, and—”

He snaps his fingers. “You fell for me when you saw me get out of the pool. Couldn’t keep your hands off me, and we’ve been shagging like bunnies every night since.”

I blink. “Whoa.”

My mind is a carousel now. The merry-go-round of my brain whirls past an arousing array of images of Oliver unable to keep his hands off me.

Because, hey, this is my inconvenient fantasy, and in it, he can’t get enough of me.

But there is one little issue nagging at me, back where I can hear Stella’s voice in my head. “So, that’s how it happened? Your fake fiancée backstory starts with shagging?”

He scratches his head. “Yeah. I mean, how else would it start?” The corner of his lips curves up into the cheekiest of grins as we near the carousel.

Carnival music floats out from the ride, a nostalgic sound that reminds me of our times traipsing through the park on weekend escapes into the city. I told Oliver once that I planned to have my first real kiss in front of the carousel. And now we’re talking about banging.

“Right. Naturally, it started with sex,” I say, deadpan, and I’m thinking Stella is right. Good-looking men have no clue.

Women fall at their feet.

“Precisely. A very stellar shag,” he adds.

Naturally, Oliver would assume I caught one look at his banana hammock at the pool and had to get his man meat between my thighs.

God damn it.

Why does Stella have to be a soothsayer?

Oliver is surely awful in bed.

I raise a palm as we near the pretty ponies. “Or, hear me out, we could keep the bedroom part private and maybe just say something generic, like *After years of friendship, we realized the one we wanted was right in front of us.*”

He snorts. “Boring.”

“Seriously? That’s boring? It’s kind of sweet.”

“Nope. It’s dull. After years of friendship, we can’t just have a light bulb moment. We need fireworks.” He mimes an explosion with both arms. “A parade. A twenty-one-gun salute in honor of our hormones finally getting on the same page,” he says.

“Fine, yes. That could work. Or *maybe*,” I say, as if offering an outlandish idea, “how would you feel if it wasn’t about hormones? If maybe it was about—*gasp*— feelings?”

He sighs dramatically. “Only if we can still have fireworks. Don’t you get me, Summer?” He grabs my shoulders, gripping me. “We need the story of our fireworks.”

*Fireworks.* The thing we will never have because the Law of Good-Looking equals bad in bed is as inescapable as E equals MC squared.

This entire conversation is pretty much confirmation.

“Fine.” I wave a hand airily, searching for a tale that’ll satisfy him. “Let’s say one night while you were helping me plan the gym, I went over to review paperwork, we got stuck in the elevator, and all our pent-up truths came out.”

“Elevator, you say? Can we have shagged in it?”

I slug him. “Yes, you sex-obsessed pervert. You are America’s Worst Boyfriend.” I laugh, and he grabs me, putting

me in a chokehold.

“Say you don’t mean it. Say I’m the best. Say no one is better than me.”

It’s like being tickled, and I’m laughing and snorting at the same damn time when a throat clears.

And a voice I don’t recognize cuts in—fast, excited. “Excuse me. This may be crazy, but it’s probably not, because I’m pretty sure I’m right. Aren’t you America’s Worst Boyfriend?”

Oliver groans.

We both turn to face some random person, a guy a few years younger than us with dark hair and a trim frame. He’s wagging his phone at us, showing his Twitter feed. A satisfied grin lights his face. “Yes! I thought it was you. I was so sure, and now I know it is. I’m Noah. I’m doing this crazy scavenger hunt for my company, and we have to get ten items. One is a pic of a real-life internet celebrity. We hashtag the pic, and everyone shares it. Can I take your pic? It would probably get my team into first, and if we win, our company will donate to the charity we chose, and I picked pediatric cancer research.”

While the guy catches his breath, a flash of sadness crosses Oliver’s eyes, and that’s when an idea sticks in my mind.

The next brilliant scheme.

This will solve the hairiest, thorniest issue of all. And it’ll even do some good, it seems.

I drape an arm around my best friend, then meet Noah’s gaze. “You can take his picture, but his nickname isn’t America’s Worst Boyfriend. It’s America’s Best Boyfriend.” I squeeze Oliver’s shoulder like a girlfriend would do, then shoot him a *hearts are aflutter in my eyes* look. “And I know that because I wrote the essay and this man is my fiancé.”

“Sweet! Even better. It’s like I can break the story. I always wanted to be a journalist. Well, after being an Olympic superstar. That was my first goal. But this—this’ll work.”

“Excellent. Glad to hear it,” I say. Oliver turns his face to me, mouthing, *You’re brilliant.*

“Smile for the camera,” Noah says, and holds up his phone. “New hashtag. ‘America’s Best Boyfriend.’”

And America’s Best Boyfriend deserves a kiss. I lean in and press my lips chastely to his cheek when Oliver says, “Let’s give them something to hashtag about.”



# SUMMER

I've thought about kissing Oliver before. My mind has gone there every now and then.

It's not like I've mooned over him.

Please. I'm a grown woman. I don't moon.

It's been more of a ... consideration. A visit to another town, just to peek around, see the shops, check out the scenery.

That's all it is, because I've had enough experience with this inconvenient crush that it's no longer inconvenient. I can turn it off anytime. Hell, I turn it off most of the time. I guess that makes it a convenient crush.

But when I *have* let my mind skip over the border to Kissingville, there's a buildup. I picture us at a bar, on the beach, along the boardwalk.

There is always a moment. A movie moment that I see coming.

But now I'm completely blindsided, and I have no time to brace for the most unexpected kiss of my life.

I close my eyes the second his lips touch mine.

No, the world doesn't stop.

No, I don't melt.

And no, I don't stop breathing when Oliver brushes his mouth against mine.

What happens is far more wondrous.

I feel good *everywhere*.

There's not a corner forgotten or untouched.

I've taken a happiness drug, and it's flooding my veins with a dreamy, dizzying sensation, and every molecule is tingling.

It's sunshine and music, this feeling of his lips dusting mine with a soft, tender ghost of a kiss.

A gentle slide.

A delicious sigh.

His lips trace mine for the very first time and the kiss sweeps through me, lights flickering on like fireflies in June.

I'm illuminated by a kiss that feels like floating.

His lips are soft, full, and confident.

They brush against me, making me tremble, making my skin shimmer.

It's possible I'm glowing.

Because holy hell.

Oliver Harris is proving Stella's theory wrong.

This man can kiss.

Oh my, he can kiss so damn well.

My knees wobble, my stomach flips, and shivers rush down my arms, skating across my skin.

One touch of his lips, one flick of his tongue, and I am tumbling out of this-is-so-easy zone and into what-the-hell-was-I-thinking land.

Pretending to be his fiancée is no longer the simplest thing, not when I know now exactly what I'm missing.

I'm missing *him*.

I'm missing a kiss that makes me want to sing.

I'm missing this possibility beyond my reach.

Then, that possibility turns hotter, burns brighter. Oliver's hand cups my cheek, grazing my skin, making me shudder. His fingertips trail down my face.

And he lingers, his thumb sliding along my jaw. It's almost like he doesn't want this to end either. His lips luxuriate on mine for one last second, and right when I swear he's about to pull away, his tongue flicks out across my bottom lip.

I gasp.

He breaks the kiss.

I'm not a fainter. But I'm about to tumble to the ground in a puddle of turned-on woman. He clasps my elbow, and I steady myself.

Oliver's gaze stays on me, his green eyes growing darker, glittering with something new, something that looks distinctly like the start of a fire.

Like desire.

Like want.

And that—that look—sends a whole new rush of sensations through me.

Hot, wild, electric ones that threaten to consume my common sense, tenuous as it is right now.

The man behind the phone camera emits a low wolf whistle. "Hot damn. I think I'm going to enter that on a Tumblr feed of hottest kisses spotted in the wild. Or really, I bet my friend Ginny will. She's into that sort of thing. She'll dig it."

"Glad to be of help," Oliver says, his voice smoky.

I've never heard it like that before.

But I want to hear it like that again.

And that's a problem.

The man leaves, and I turn to Oliver, trying to wrestle some semblance of control over my thoughts, when I remember—I'm due at work.



“I need to go.” I point in the general direction of Sunshine Living as explanation.

He drags a hand through his hair, taking a deep breath, like he’s centering himself.

“I’ll ...” he stops, like he isn’t sure what to say, “see you later,” he says distractedly, and when he leaves too, I try not to glance back.

I swear I do.

But when I sneak one last peek, I see Oliver doing the same at me.

And when I reach the other side of the park, I’m still replaying that kiss.



# OLIVER

Evidently, one kiss does the trick.

Geneva sends me an email that night.

*I'm so sorry again about earlier and my mistaken assumptions. I just stumbled across the photo of you and your fiancée in the park. How utterly delightful! You're the toast of the town. See you tomorrow at wine o'clock!*

I fire off a quick reply, thanking her, then segue to business, updating her on the deal and confirming we'll be at the tasting.

Jane is next, sending me a text.

**Jane:** How dare you not tell me you're betrothed? You naughty boy. Also, I expect all the salacious details tomorrow. :)

**Jane:** Wait. Not the salacious ones. Just the juicy little nuggets of how you found yourself in this pickle.

**Jane:** P.S. How long must we keep this ruse up? It is a ruse, no?

**Oliver:** Yes. Ruse. But you didn't hear that from me.

**Jane:** I'll be in early tomorrow for a full and proper download.

I sink down on my couch with my Chinese takeaway for dinner, put on my online hazmat suit—aka my *I don't give a fuck* armor—and dive into the deep end.

I click on the hashtag “America’s Best Boyfriend” as I eat.

Well, well, well, look at that. That turnaround didn’t take long.

Apparently, I’m not such a knob after all. The internet loves me again.

*@LovesListsofMen: SAD!!! All the good ones are taken! Do you think she runs her hands through his Harry Styles hair?*

*@ManCandyFan: If she doesn't, I volunteer as tribute. But she totally does.*

*@GossipLoverLandOnly: Among other places where she runs her hands.*

*@ManCandyFan: Arms. I bet he has good arms. Sigh. I love good arm candy.*

I check out the guns. Not too shabby. Why, yes, ManCandyFan, feel free to enjoy the arms.

*@RoyalWatcher: Did we ever figure out if he's royal? He looks like a duke. Or an earl. That lady is lucky to snag an earl.*

*@Anglophile2200: I'd take a viscount.*

*@BritsDoItBest: I'd take the valet of a viscount if he could speak British to me.*

*@Anglophile2200: British is not a language, you twit.*

*@BritsDoItBest: Gee, thanks for horning in on my fantasy life.*

*@Anglophile2200: Maybe keep it off Twitter?*

*@BritsDoItBest: Maybe you should keep off Twitter. Maybe you're America's Worst Boyfriend.*

*@RomanceFanForLife: Can we please focus on the most important thing? How cute they are? That letter was like a love letter to him. It was her way of telling him how much she loves him.*

I scoff at that last one. Oh, you are so very wrong, RomanceFanForLife. But who cares, because I righted this ship, and that's all that matters.

That kiss barely matters.

That was simply a smooch for the camera.

I'm not thinking about how it turned me on wildly. Definitely not contemplating how I touched her face, dragged her close, and brought her in for a hot, searing moment of passion.

If not for the guy on the scavenger hunt, I would have pushed her up against a carousel horse and continued for hours rather than seconds, kissing the breath out of her to the calliope music soundtrack until we were panting, groaning, putting on a show.

And see? That didn't happen.

So it's all good.

The plan is working, and Geneva doesn't think I'm a callous arse.

I take another bite of the pepper steak, then fire off a text to Summer, sending her a link to the new hashtag.

**Oliver:** It worked. We are tops at faking it.

**Summer:** Well, I've been pretending to tolerate you for seventeen years, so this is easy enough.

**Oliver:** Absolutely. It's been the same for me. It's not easy, since you're a terrible bore.

**Summer:** And you're a humorless nitwit. :)

**Oliver:** And we have zero to say to each other.

**Summer:** Nothing but dead air when we're together.

**Oliver:** Amazing that we've pulled off this friendship for so long when we can't stand each other.

**Summer:** And no one can tell. They actually think we like each other. As if.

I laugh as I take another bite of my dinner. This is an excellent way to handle a kiss that didn't feel like we hated each other whatsoever. That felt a little pent-up. Fine, a lot pent-up.

But whatever.

It was just a kiss for the hashtag.

The sighs, the gasps, the little murmurs were just by-products. If there was more to the kiss than damage control, we wouldn't be joking so well, getting on like we've always done.

**Summer:** Little do they know we are experts at this ruse. Heck, we could enter a contest for most believable fake fiancée kissing. Oh, speaking of contests, I have news!

**Oliver:** I'm all ears. Digital ears. But ears nonetheless.

I reread my last note. I might sound like I'm trying too hard at friendship. But hell, we are friends. It's not trying. It just ... *is*.

I truly want to know her news.

**Summer:** The magazine just informed me I won the prize for the essay!

I pump a fist, thrilled for her.

**Oliver:** That's brilliant!!! You deserve it! Everything is coming up aces.

**Summer:** Crazy, right? It's \$5000!

**Oliver:** Is it enough for the final funding for your gym, with the classes and whatnot?

**Summer:** Not quite, but it sure does make the shortfall a little easier to manage.

As I'm typing out a reply, a new post from Twitter pops up under the hashtag thread, with a series of replies too.

*@MenAreJerks: I bet he's still a douche.*

*@PeopleAreJerks: He looks like he's a good kisser. Therefore, a douche.*

*@ILoveJerks: Jerks are the best kissers.*

I take a screenshot and send it to Summer.

**Oliver:** Ah, Twitter still thinks I'm a jackass. C'est la vie.

She seems to take her time answering. The dots pop up, indicating she's typing, but they stop every few seconds, making me curious.

*What are you trying to say, Summer?*

Hell, I'm dying to know.

And then, finally, she sends something, but not to me.

There's a new post on the social media feed, in a reply to ILoveJerks.

*@SummerTime: I don't know if jerks are the best kissers. I do know that Oliver is.*

And there goes my fucking resolve not to think about kissing her.

My brain can go fuck itself.





# OLIVER

“This tastes like blackberries and a fireplace on a cold winter’s night.”

The declaration comes from Geneva the next night at the wine tasting in Soho.

She holds the glass of merlot up high, sniffs it again, then takes another sip. “With a hint of ... leather.”

“The finest leather,” Jane seconds from her post next to Geneva.

My client turns to Summer, who’s by my side looking elegant in a black dress that, if it were up to me, would plunge lower. But the V-thing it’s got going on works its powers of distraction nevertheless.

Geneva reaches for a fresh glass from a nearby table and thrusts it at my date. “What do you think, Summer? I’d love your opinion.”

Summer shakes her head. “I’m honestly not a wine person.”

Geneva frowns. “Oh? I thought Oliver said you liked wine?”

Summer jerks her gaze to me. “You did?”

And shit, fuck, bugger. I forgot to debrief Summer properly on the way over, forgot to tell her I told Geneva that she enjoyed wine. Because of that damn dress. It’s like Lex

Luthor designed a dress with my personal kryptonite. Or maybe that kiss fried too many brain cells going into tonight.

Jane widens her Mayday eyes, trying to signal that I need to get my act together.

“My apologies, Geneva. Summer’s never been a wine fan,” I say, dropping an arm across my date’s shoulder. “But I wanted to come, and I knew she’d be a good sport about it, because she is a great sport.”

Summer gives an *aren’t we cute* grin. “That’s me. Sometimes he even calls me *sport*.”

*What?*

I would really like to roll my eyes now. I’d never call her “sport.” Maybe “strawberry.” Or “petal.” Or “cupcake.” She does look a bit like one right now ... as in, good enough to eat.

I push out a laugh as I shift my gaze to the woman by my side. “But most of the time, I call you *cupcake*.”

“Yes, it is so dear when he calls her ‘cupcake,’” Jane chimes in.

I press a kiss to Summer’s cheek. And the kiss seems to do the trick.

“For a moment there, you had me thinking you don’t really know your fiancée. With the wine and whatnot.” Geneva wags a finger at me. She’s grinning, but her grin says, *You damn well better know your fiancée*.

I toss my head back and laugh at that ridiculous suggestion. “I know her incredibly well. Have for years.”

“They were practically inseparable in high school, from what I heard,” Jane adds.

“We were. And we never drank wine together then either,” Summer says.

“Such well-behaved teens,” Jane says.

“And I can at least sniff it now,” Summer chimes in, grabbing the glass and lifting it to her nose. “Yes, it does indeed smell like bacon.”

Geneva frowns.

“I meant leather.” Summer quickly corrects herself. “I meant it smells like fine leather. The finest.”

Jane grins.

I squeeze Summer’s arm tighter, then drop a kiss onto her cheek. “Leather. Bacon. Sometimes it’s one and the same.”

“I love bacon,” Summer blurts out. “That was a compliment. Bacon is awesome. They should make bacon wine.”

Geneva tilts her head, considering us for a beat. The woman is more skeptical than I’d like her to be, and it’s much harder to play pretend than I anticipated.

Time to prove it’s real. I draw Summer close and plant a quick kiss on her lips that’s not so quick after all. Because she’s delicious and the taste of her lips goes to my head, making me want more of them. So I linger just a little bit longer. “Your lips taste like cupcakes,” I murmur.

And Summer breathes out hard.

That makes Geneva smile bigger.

“Such an affectionate couple. I swear, some days you can’t pry them apart. Now, let’s go try that Syrah,” Jane says, steering Geneva away while shooting me a *get it together* look.

I turn to Summer. “‘Sport’? I would never call you ‘sport.’”

She swats my arm and chides in a whisper, “And I never would have said I didn’t like wine if I’d known I’m supposed to love it. Maybe if you had told me that instead of spending all that time on the fictional first time we shagged.”

“Fair point. But also, bacon wine?”

“Someone should make it.”

“No. No one should make it.”

“If someone made bacon wine, I might like wine.”

“Stop. Just stop. Bacon wine sounds horrid.”

“Bacon wine, bacon wine, bacon wine,” she whispers, taunting me, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Woman, you need to get a grip.”

She bonks my shoulder. “And you need to brief me properly.”

“Fine. On the way home, we’ll work on our cover story for next time. But for now, I have a solution.”

“What’s that?”

I waggle my hands. “Did you know I’m incredibly affectionate?”

“Is that so?”

She raises her eyebrows flirtatiously, and I tempt fate. I run my fingers over her leg.

Her breath catches the tiniest bit, and if she wasn’t my fake girlfriend, my fake fiancée, I’d think it was sexy.

But this is all pretend.

It’s a lucky thing I’ve always been so good at make-believe. For instance, I know that if your pretend love affair comes into doubt, you should touch your fake fiancée as much as possible.

At least, that’s my rule and I’m sticking to it.



# OLIVER

This is weird.

It *shouldn't* be, and yet it is.

I take a drink of my IPA, set the glass down, and try to focus on whatever Logan is going on about—something vitally important, judging by the sound of his voice.

“So it lets you take down the enemy faster,” he says, staring intently at us. “Make sense?”

“Right,” I say, but I’ve missed how we’re taking down the enemy or even why we want to. I don’t even remember who that is exactly.

At this moment, my libido is my most obvious foe, taking over a larger portion of my brain than it normally controls, say, 99 percent instead of the usual 95 percent.

Thank fuck our mates are here with us at Gin Joint on Wednesday night, because I need the buffer with Logan.

Which is another thing that’s unusual—I’ve never needed a buffer with Logan when it comes to his sister because we’re all friends.

But this is the first time I’ve seen him since I kissed Summer. Since I had my hands all over her. Buffers are absolutely necessary because I’m thinking about his sister naked.

“So, that’s the plan, guys. Can you do it?” Logan asks, looking at me, then at Jason, then at Fitz, who rolls his eyes as

he downs the rest of his drink.

“Dude. I knocked out Blake MacAvoy from Ottawa the other night. Yes, I think I can take out this fucker from Lehman.”

Yes! Paintball. Sneak attack strategies. That’s what we’re talking about. I can focus on that, not on how insanely strange it is to be sitting across from Logan after thinking about the huge boner his sister gave me last night.

But there is no brain space for boners now.

None.

Zero.

Not even if I think about her lips.

Her smell.

The way she curved her body against mine.

Nope.

I’m not getting aroused again.

Especially while I’m sitting here with my mates. Three great big, hairy male mates. There are no better boner killers than that.

Maybe I should just stare at them to erase the image of Logan’s sister melting in my arms by the carousel, sighing against my lips as that guy snapped our pic, and emitting that sexy little gasp when I kissed her for the hashtag.

When I touched her face, her cheek, her jaw.

And when I kissed her a second time last night.

I definitely need to focus on something the opposite of enticing, and these fellas will do.

Logan with his dark hair, who looks nothing like his twin sister.

Jason and his familial relationship to me.

Fitz and his beard and his ink, the familiar face of one of the NHL’s top D-men. Who’s our paintball ace.



Done. Summer is no longer in my head. Ejected.

“Perfect. You’re our secret weapon,” Logan says.

“It’s good to have a ringer on our team, isn’t it?” Jason gestures to Fitz, who winks.

“I got your backs, boys.”

“If we didn’t have Fitz,” Logan says, always planning for contingencies, “I’d invite my sister because she is the most competitive bastard I know—”

Dammit to fucking hell. Why did he mention Summer? Why not show me a picture of her in that dress again and just kneecap me now? Though, admittedly, I wouldn’t look away.

“Wait. More than me?” Fitz asks, mortally offended. His million-dollar-a-year job depends on him being ruthlessly competitive.

Logan arches a brow, considering Fitz’s question. “Maybe not *more* than you. But close. Only, she won’t play paintball with us. She says it’s”—he stops to sketch air quotes—“Neanderthal.”

“Smart woman,” Jason remarks, then gestures to the bar where his wife is mixing drinks. “And speaking of smart women, I’m going to see my bride and nab a refill.”

I raise my empty glass. “Same here. On the refill, that is.”

We head to the bar, where a couple of hipster guys are checking out Fitz. The taller of the pair says, “This is my chance. I should go talk to him. I’ve had a crush on him forever. But do you think he’s involved with one of those guys?”

“Probably, because who wouldn’t want him? It could be your shot though. You have to take it, Gavin. Do it,” the other one urges.

Jason shoots me a smirk and quietly says, “Should I tell them the good news that he’s not with one of us? Or do you want to pretend you’re engaged to Fitz as well as Summer?”

I lean back, catching the eye of the taller of the guys at the bar. “Sorry, mate. Fitz is with this guy,” I say, clapping my cousin on the back.

Jason mutters under his breath, “Fucking hell. You beat me to it. Also, what if Fitz was into him?”

“Fitz is a big boy. He can make his own moves.”

“You’re a terrible wingman.”

“That may be true.”

After we refill our drinks, Jason says he’s going to spend time with his bride, so I return to the boner-killers, settling into my chair and turning to Fitz. “By the way, those guys at the bar are devising a strategy to come talk to you.”

This gets his attention. He raises a curious brow. “Are they hot?”

I give him a *Seriously?* look. “How am I supposed to answer that?”

“Do you have eyes?”

“I do.”

“Can you not tell if a dude is good-looking?”

“Are we talking about George Clooney?” Logan asks. “Because I can tell, empirically, that George Clooney is good-looking. Beyond that, no one.”

Fitz huffs. “So you’re saying you can tell if someone is good-looking only if they’re the gender you want to sleep with? Unless it’s George Clooney? That’s the line you draw?”

“It’s called the Clooney Line,” I supply. “He’s the only guy a straight guy can tell is empirically good-looking.”

Fitz smiles, wagging an *I’ve caught you* finger at Logan. “You want to sleep with Clooney—admit it.”

Logan laughs, nearly spitting out his beer. “No. I don’t.”

Then to me, Fitz says, “But if you had to sleep with a dude, it’d be Clooney.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to sleep with Clooney.”

“If not Clooney, who would it be?”

I shoot him a look like he’s nuts. “Are you barking mad? I’m not going to answer that. Can you say which movie starlet you’d shag?”

He shudders. “Fair point. But I’d do Clooney for sure. I don’t mind the gray hair.”

“How open-minded of you,” I say.

Fitz’s grin spreads, and he leans his elbows on the table, counting off on his fingers. “But if you really want the movie star list, it goes something like this—Idris Elba, Adam Driver, Kit Harington, Henry Cavill, Michael B. Jordan.” He stops, furrowing his brow. “And Michael Fassbender. For obvious reasons.”

Logan blinks. “Why is that obvious? What’s the reason?”

Fitz’s jaw drops. “You don’t know?”

Logan stares at him blankly. “No. That’s why I asked.”

Fitz gestures wildly to Logan’s phone on the table. “Just google his name. You’ll see what comes up as one of the search terms.”

Logan picks up his phone as Fitz says, “Also, I forgot to add Liam and Chris to the list.”

“The Hemsworths?” Logan asks, momentarily distracted from the search mission.

Fitz shrugs, giving a wolfish grin. “Yep. Both. Same time.”

“And you know they are brothers?” Logan asks, ignoring his phone now.

“Well, they don’t have to bang each other,” Fitz deadpans.

I clear my throat, continuing down this path of absurdity because it is indeed a fantastic murderer of the libido. “How are you shagging them both at the same time?”

Logan cuts in, narrowing his eyes at me. “Did you really just ask him that, Oliver? It’s patently obvious. Same way you’d do the Olsen twins.”

And that does it for me.

Not the prospect of Fitz taking on the Hemsworth brothers, because, whatever, who cares who he bangs.

But it's the image of me doing the Olsen twins.

I used to watch *Full House* reruns, for fuck's sake, and that's the most massive boner killer of all time.

"But for the record, I can tell if a woman is pretty, unlike you dickheads." Fitz gestures to Logan. "His twin sister. Very pretty."

And here we go again. Back to Summer. Back to picturing her blonde hair, her brown eyes, her glossy pink lips.

I. Can't. Win.

"Thanks. She takes after me," Logan says, then swings his gaze to me. "Speaking of my sister, dude, what the hell? Why are you two engaged?"

I shake my head. "We're not a real thing. Also, use your library voices, arseholes. It's a bloody fake engagement. I don't need the whole bar knowing."

"Whatever. It's funny," Logan says, swiping his screen, then swiveling it around to show us Twitter, of all things. "So, now you're America's Best Boyfriend. You turned that shit around in two days. Well done, my man. Well done."

I take a small bow. "Thank you."

Fitz taps on the picture of Summer and me. "So, tell us more about this kiss, Ollie."

My skin goes hot. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and every detail of kissing Summer flashes before me, image after delicious image. The moment should be no different than any other moment in my life, but it keeps flipping before my eyes.

Taunting me.

Teasing me.

I drag a hand through my hair. I should not be this affected by one little fucking kiss.

One kiss.

Hell, there wasn't even any tongue. There were no fingers in hair, no bodies aligned together, grinding and pressing ...

Well, maybe there was a little tongue.

And maybe that little bit of tongue is what's unleashed this dragon of lust in me.

A dragon that did not return to its lair last night.

Nope, the wine-tasting handsy action only intensified the fire.

"Excuse me," I say, pushing back in the chair and walking away from the table, heading straight for the men's room.

Men's rooms are reliable erection banishers too, especially if they are shitholes.

This one is mostly tidy. I'd give it a seven on a scale of one to not-a-shithole, so that's a small miracle, but it still helps with deflation.

Because it's still a toilet.

I set my hands on the counter, stare in the mirror, and do something I haven't done in ages. I listen for my sister's advice. I try so damn hard to conjure what Phoebe would say. Ever the older sister, she loved to tell me what to do. Sometimes it'd be a scathing wardrobe indictment, like *That blue shirt looks wretched with those jeans. Please go change before all the girls never date you again*, and other times it'd be a backhanded compliment, like *Just ask the debate teacher if you can level up, since clearly you've never met an issue you won't argue*.

If she were here, I'd ask her how to put a kiss or two with Summer behind me.

But when I try to guess at what she'd say, I come up empty, so I'm left to answer myself. "One kiss with your best mate. Get over it, you twat."

A toilet flushes, and I groan. Grand, just grand. Someone's in here. I turn on the tap to wash my hands and don't look at the guy who comes out of the stall and heads to the sink next to mine.

After a moment he asks, "But was it a good kiss?"

It's the guy who was crushing on Fitz. I grumble my answer into the water. "Yes."

"Then maybe you don't want to get over it," he says, turns off the water, dries his hands, and walks out.

I flip him the bird as the door closes. "Thanks for that profound unsolicited advice."

Then I stare at my reflection.

This time I don't say a word out loud. But in my head, I repeat my new mantra.

*Don't touch her again.*

*Don't touch her again.*

*Don't touch her again.*

I'm sure Phoebe would agree that's the right approach.

When I return to the table, I slap my palm on it. "Let's review paintball strategy. We need to crush the opposition."

That reroutes the conversation with the two most competitive friends I have, and for the next thirty minutes, I am laser-focused on paintball strategy and only paintball strategy.

Logan is determined to win the league, even more so because his ex-wife's lover works at Lehman, an investment bank his firm worked with.

"So that's the plan of attack for this weekend," Logan says, then turns to Fitz. "We will see you after you destroy Montreal Friday night."

"Annihilation is indeed the game plan," Fitz says. "I have extra tix. Want 'em?"

Logan shakes his head. "I'm with Amelia that night."

“Dude, she loves hockey.”

“Afternoon games. I can’t take her to a night one,” he says. “Past her bedtime.”

Fitz tips his chin at me. “Why don’t you take Summer? It’ll help with your public image, lover boy.”

“Good plan,” Logan seconds. “Sell it to the jury, man.”

And the funny thing is, in some other bar, some other guy is cursing himself for crushing on his best friend’s little sister because his friend would hate it.

But that’s not the case here.

Logan isn’t the issue. Hell, he’s given the idea of *us* his approval already.

The issue is I know exactly how it feels to lose the people you care for, the people who make your world go round.

I know, too, how it feels when your life falls to pieces.

I became a lawyer in the first place because of the battles my parents fought with insurance companies over my sister’s treatments. Because of the marathon phone calls they endured trying to get coverage, to get treatment, to get meds.

I saw what it did to them. How it nearly broke them. How they nearly withered. How we all nearly fell apart.

And how much I needed Logan and his sister at that time. They both became my family. Hell, their parents did too. It’s why I’ve never crossed a line before with Summer.

Because what if it all went to hell?

That could happen.

I don’t want to lose someone I love.

And I’m pretty sure I love Logan and Summer—as friends—and I want them in my life always.

Best way to keep Summer in it? Lock her in the friend zone.

I send her a quick text to see if she wants to go to the game, and she replies immediately with a yes. Perfect. The

hockey game will be the ideal opportunity to refocus on our friendship.

“Sure, Summer and I will take the tickets,” I say.

Fitz gives me the details, and as I’m saving them in my phone, Logan shouts victoriously. “Michael Fassbender’s penis! How did I miss that reference?”

“Now you see why it’s obvious he’s on the list,” Fitz says, like a supremely satisfied cat.

I blink, bewildered, as Logan high-fives Fitz with one hand and holds his phone in the other. Logan waves the mobile around, showing the results of his image search.

Michael Fassbender’s penis.

Yes!

That’s perfect. And, frankly, *obvious*.

\* \* \*

I leave later with the perfect trick to rid my mind of dirty thoughts of my good friend.

That night, every time my brain drifts off and imagines the sounds Summer might make if I touched her, I think about Michael Fassbender’s penis.

It works.

It works all the next day at the office, and at the gym, and in the shower.

I may never be aroused again.

This is like a three-week celibacy pill.

Who knew that Michael Fassbender’s penis would cure me of all my desire for Summer Clarke?

That is, until Friday morning when I see her march into the pool area at the gym as I’m finishing my swim.

Out of the corner of my goggles, I notice her sundress, how it’s swishing around her legs, showing them off,



accentuating her curves and muscles.

And now I won't be able to get out of the pool.

Thanks a fucking lot, Fassbender.

Your dick failed me when it mattered.

Time to turn up the friendship charm.



# SUMMER

I crouch at the edge of the pool, waiting for Oliver to finish his lap.

When his head pops up, he gives me a grin. “Good morning, fake fiancée,” he whispers, wiggling his brows.

“Shh. We don’t want anyone to know,” I say, pressing a finger to my lips.

But the pool is quiet. It’s only us.

He parks his elbows on the edge of the deck, water droplets sliding down his face, one hitting his lip.

My finger itches to touch it, to swipe it off.

I ignore that desire, zeroing in on everyday us. “Just wondering if you wanted to grab a quick breakfast when you get finished. I would love to go over my plans for how to use the money from the essay. That is, if you have time.”

“I have a meeting at nine, but I always have time for the future Mrs. Harris.” He’s laying on the charm, flashing a slightly strange smile, but he doesn’t move to get out of the pool.

“Breakfast is on me,” I add.

“Sounds great,” he says, still not budging.

“Do you have more laps to do?” I glance at the wall clock. He’s usually done at seven on the dot, and it’s ticking past the hour.

His eyes light up. “Yes, I nearly forgot. I have ten more to do. Can’t fall behind.”

“Cool. I’ll wait for you on the bench.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind. I can answer some emails.”

His eyes stray longingly to the clock. “Maybe twenty more laps. You’d better wait in the lobby. You know, for your health. Nasal health.” He taps me on the nose, an overly cute gesture. Made all the overly cuter when he crinkles his own nose.

“For my nasal health?”

“Well, all the chlorine in the air,” he says apologetically, like it’s somehow his fault. “It isn’t great to breathe.”

“I already taught a water aerobics class, so I’ve been inhaling it all morning.” The whole exchange makes me wonder what *he’s* been inhaling, but I just point out, “I’m not affected.”

He simply shrugs. “If you say so.”

I rock forward and rap my knuckles on his forehead. “You’re being odd.”

He’s silent, and I see the cogs in his head turning, picking up speed. Then things seem to click, and he heaves a dramatic sigh. “Fine. Fine. I’ll skip the rest of the laps. I was trying to do you a favor. I just thought, with you being my fake fiancée and all, it’d be even harder for you to look away when I got out of the pool. I didn’t want to tempt you.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll do my best to resist you.”

Though, admittedly, resisting him is much harder now that I’ve kissed him. Twice.

Even though they weren’t real kisses.

He glances at the pile of towels on the bench. “Any chance you can grab one for me?”

My brow knits. He’s suddenly strangely shy. More proof the kiss was a one-way street.

With tongue.

And moans.

He definitely moaned the other morning.

I can still hear the sound of it rumbling in my ears.

Whatever. I'm not letting myself go there, and I'm not thinking of his hands all over me at the wine tasting. How they felt when he slid his palms down my bare arms.

I turn around, head to the bench, grab a towel, and return to him. He's at the ladder now, and he climbs out, quickly wrapping the towel around his waist like he's preventing me from seeing his Speedo.

"Weirdo," I mutter.

"Takes one to know one," he says with a wink.

Ah, that's the Oliver I know. Fine, I get it. He's firmly planting his flagpole in Friendship Land.

*Well, duh. Where else would he plant it?*

"I'll be ready in five minutes," he says.

"That's all it takes to blow dry your Harry Styles hair?"

He drags a hand through his wet locks. "Harry's got nothing on me, baby."

There's the sound of shoes clicking on the tile, then a voice calls out—older, feminine. "Summer, dear. Have you seen my silver tennis bracelet? I think it fell in the water this morning."

Hello, déjà vu.

It's Mrs. Wilson, one of my regulars in water aerobics, and evidently a regular when it comes to losing her shiny objects.

I turn around, and Oliver does too, scanning the pool area. A hint of silver gleams on the deck by the ladder. "I think that's it," I say, and Oliver and I cross over, bending and reaching for it at the same time.

We're close to each other, our noses inches apart, and I'm keenly aware of his body, his scent, and how even with the chlorine he still smells kissable.

Damn him. *He* is good for my nasal health.

“Found it,” he says.

“Oh, thank God. Good thing it wasn’t my cubic zirconia ring that everyone thinks is a diamond. I’d hate to lose that. I’d have to go to John Steven in Midtown to get another one,” Mrs. Wilson says with a laugh.

Oliver meets my gaze, his green eyes saying what I’m thinking. *Holy shit, we need a ring before dinner with your client this weekend and probably before the hockey game tonight.*

Geneva must not have noticed the absence of one the other night, but I suspect she’ll be more hawkish at a dinner party.

We rise, and Oliver hands the bracelet to Mrs. Wilson. She blows him a kiss, but then her brow knits. “Wait. Aren’t you America’s Best Boyfriend? My granddaughter showed me the picture of you two kissing the other day. Apparently, it wound up on BuzzFeed’s Ten Best Kisses Ever list,” she says, then waggles her fingers and says goodbye.

As she walks away, I grab my phone, tap “BuzzFeed” into the search bar, then stare at the two of us at the top of the list.

I’ve seen the image a million times now.

But still, seeing it codified this way, seeing it labeled, is like seeing it anew.

Or maybe the difference is that I’m seeing it with him next to me, mere inches away.

My pulse spikes, and I shudder.

Oliver clears his throat, like there’s something smoky, husky stuck in it. “Yeah, that’s ...”

My lips part to say *hot*, but Mrs. Wilson wheels around before I do. “Dear, can you remind me again how to do that move? It was like a trick. The leg-lift bicep-curl combo.”

“Of course,” I say, and the moment crumbles away as Oliver heads for the locker room and I show Mrs. Wilson how to do the move.

\* \* \*

Over eggs and potatoes at a nearby diner, we arrange to snag a cubic zirconia ring in Midtown tonight at John Steven Jeweler's before the hockey game, then we review my plans for the money.

We don't discuss that moment at the pool. No need to after all. We're past it.

"So, the extra money helps, but I'll still have to push back the opening. Not the worst thing," I say, taking a drink of my coffee and giving an easy shrug.

He munches on his potatoes then sets down his fork. "You always manage to see the positive. And I have no doubt you'll be swinging open the doors in no time. I'd offer to loan you the rest, but—"

I narrow my eyes. "But you know I'd claw your eyes out with my daggers for nails." I brandish my short, unpolished nails as claws.

He shudders, shirking away. "Yes, exactly. I learned from a very early age never to cross you when it comes to you doing things your way. Like when you were insistent that we all go as the Breakfast Club for Halloween in tenth grade. Even if it meant taking the train to the city and scouring all the secondhand shops to find your frayed denim John Bender jacket."

I wiggle my brows. "Worth it. We won best group costume. And this'll be worth it too."

He nods, then reaches for his coffee. "But it's not just your iron will and damn-the-torpedoes approach, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

He takes a drink, then sets down his mug. "You're so determined to raze the city solo."

"I am not."

He laughs at me. "Funny, how you believe that."

I narrow my eyes, grumbling. “Fine. I’m stubborn. I just want to—”

“Do everything on your own?”

“Yes. But you know why. I mean, are we that different? You like to be prepared. I like to be independent.”

“Well, nothing could have prepared me for the Twitter hate,” he jokes.

I wince. “Are you mad at me for that?”

He takes another bite of his breakfast, then says, “It’s hard to be mad at you. And believe me, I tried.”

I’m about to reply when the woman in the booth behind us says to her companion, “I have no problem admitting I would watch the neighbors have sex. Are you telling me you have an issue with that?”

My eyes pop.

I nearly drop my fork.

Oliver mouths, *This is getting interesting.*

As I lift a forkful of eggs, the woman says, “And you’re telling me you wouldn’t watch?”

The man she’s with scoffs. “No. I wouldn’t. You would? You truly would? If you looked outside and saw someone in an apartment across the street having sex, you’d watch?”

I keep my gaze on Oliver’s, smirking as I take a bite.

Oliver mimes bringing a pair of binoculars to his eyes, pretending to peer at someone in the distance. I hold in a laugh as the man and woman grab their things and leave, the debate raging on as they go.

“It’s not perversion,” she says, her voice lingering as they head to the door. “It’s curiosity.”

“It’s a little perverted. Actually, a lot,” the man says as they fade out of earshot.

Oliver’s lips quirk in a grin. “That raises an interesting question, doesn’t it? A little or a lot perverted?”



I laugh. “I thought you were going to ask if I’d watch.”

“Excellent question too. Would you watch?”

“Would you?”

“You go first,” he says.

“Fine. The answer is yes. Yes, I would.” I square my shoulders, owning it.

“So, set the scene for me,” he says. “You’re at home with Mags, you walk past the window, you see the neighbors shagging. Mr. Winchester with his bald spot and beer belly has bent Mrs. Winchester over the couch by the window. And you’re the Peeping Tom in that scenario?”

“Are you saying I should only watch hot young things bang in front of the window?”

We are back to Oliver and Summer, pals at large.

He laughs, shaking his head. “Not saying that at all. I just want to understand this particular perversion of yours.”

I pretend to toss my napkin at him. “Humans are inquisitive. If someone is going to publicly screw, I will watch. Not for titillation but curiosity.”

He arches a brow. “You’d watch for curiosity?”

I nod, then take another bite of my eggs, chewing, swallowing. “Yes. Because it’s interesting. *Sex* is interesting. And if someone is going to do it in front of an open window, I’m going to check them out. And obviously, you are not.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I am most definitely watching. Wait. Correction. I am flipping through the channel, stopping, deciding if it looks good.”

“And if it’s Mr. and Mrs. Winchester, you’re moving on to ESPN?”

He pretends to work a remote. “Clicking the next channel at lightning speed,” he says, a gleam in his eyes.

“Well, I guess you’re more discerning than I am with your perversions,” I say, glad whatever weirdness he felt at the pool

has vanished. “Or more discerning than the rest of the world too, since everyone seems to want to watch us kiss, what with that pic and all.”

One eyebrow climbs. “Really? I dunno, Summer. Seems like watching your neighbors go at it like bunnies is just a little different than checking out a snapshot of a somewhat chaste kiss.”

*Somewhat.*

That’s the key. It was somewhat chaste, but what does he make of the “somewhat” portion? I wish I knew.

“The concept is the same,” I say, sticking to the cerebral side of this conversation.

“The concept is one hundred percent not the same,” he insists, stabbing his finger against the table. “Case in point. We can look at that picture right now, in public, and that’s not perverted.” Grabbing his phone, he taps on the search bar, and seconds later, slides the device to the middle of the table so we can both see it again.

An image I checked out less than an hour ago.

And I can’t look away from this picture of a man and a woman swept up in each other.

Lost in a kiss.

They look ... enrapt.

The memory of the kiss sweeps over me, cocooning me in a kind of residual bliss.

A *somewhat chaste* bliss, but I feel all the tingles you get from a memory. They float over me, reignite, send flutters all through my body.

Flutters that turn to sizzles as the memory intensifies.

They turn more carnal.

They’re hardly chaste at all now.

Heat races through me, and my neck is hot. My cheeks go red. And my wishes must be written in my eyes. I have to

wonder if Oliver can read them there.

*Kiss me.*

His gaze locks with mine, and I swear on all that is good and holy—on Stella’s cookies and comfortable yoga pants and nights out with friends—that his eyes are darker than I’ve ever seen them before.

Desire flashes across them too.

But we’re in a diner.

We’re just checking out a photo.

Testing a concept.

Except I’m thinking about where this image could lead to.

To touching, to closeness, to sex.

To nothing chaste whatsoever.

“You know,” he begins, as if he has an idea. I hope it’s to pour cold water on my head or dip me in an ice bath, because I need something, anything, to deal with the heatwave inside of me. “We should take one. Post it on your feed, since you defended my kissing the other night on Twitter.”

It’s not Summer the friend who answers his suggestion.

It’s Summer the tiger.

It’s Summer who wants Oliver, the man who’s spectacular at kissing, to kiss her again.

“Yes. We should.”

He rises from his side, moves with grace and confidence around the table, and sits next to me.

I shiver at his nearness.

He raises the phone camera, then laughs, shaking his head. “This may come as a bit of a shock, but I’ve never taken a picture of myself kissing before.”

I laugh. “First time for me too.”

He holds out one arm, slides the other all the way around my shoulders, claspng me tightly, and I am dying.

His touch is electrifying.

I feel almost ashamed, because he's not even kissing me, and it's not even real, but I'm already awash in anticipation.

Waiting.

Needing.

Hoping.

He peers into the screen, checking the image.

"Wait. Hold on," he says, then adjusts his hands, moving his fingers away from my shoulder, fluttering them across my neck, playing with my hair, and then he's leaning in.

And everything happens in slow motion.

I watch him inching closer.

His eyes zeroing in on my lips.

His lips parting.

Then, when he's dizzyingly near to me, he glides his lips over mine, and all the hope I've been holding escapes in one long, delicious sigh that turns into a moan.

Because here we are again, kissing for the camera.

*Click.*

I hear him snap a picture.

And I hear something else too.

His sexy sighs.

His murmurs.

He kisses me with another click, another moment, another image.

It's simply for the camera.

But he flicks his tongue against my lips.

And I ask myself if this is proving Stella wrong once again, and whether I want to fully explore her laws.

When I part my lips for him, inviting more, I know the answer.

*I do.*

And this kiss becomes more than a kiss for the camera.

The device slips from his hands and hits the table with a thud.

In no time at all, his hands are on my face, and he's hauling me in for a hot, hard kiss.

This kiss wastes no time. This kiss leaves no mixed signals. This isn't a kiss for a hashtag. He's taking it for himself.

His hands curl around my face possessively. He holds me like he doesn't want to let go.

He kisses me fiercely. His lips are hungry, fevered, as he skates his tongue across my lips again, and then our mouths explore each other.

Not just our mouths—my hands are curious cats, slinking up his suit jacket, sliding up his pressed shirt, grabbing his tie. I yank him closer, tugging on the silk.

And he responds with a rougher kiss.

It's no longer an exploration.

It's a declaration.

It says, *I want you, I want your lips, I want your taste, and I want to feel you, touch you, have you.*

In a diner, on a Friday morning before work, we kiss like the world is going up in flames.

I'm positive that if I were to see someone going at it like we are, I'd watch.

Oh, hell would I watch.

Because kisses like this don't come around often.

I've never had one like it in my life, and I don't have a clue what it means, or where we go after.

Someone coughs, and we break the kiss as the waitress passes us.

I blink, breathing out hard like I've run a race.

He looks at me the same damn way.

He swallows, trying to collect himself, his voice hoarse. "So, yeah. Looks like we got that one. You want to post it?"

I don't know how he's speaking. I don't know how anyone can speak after being kissed senseless by her best friend.

But he's doing it, so I follow his lead. "Yes. Sure. Of course. Do you want me to say anything special?"

He waves a hand. "Oh, you're great with that stuff." He looks at his watch. "I have a meeting. I should go."

He's leaving? Just leaving? Though he did say he had a meeting. Still ...

I furrow my brow. "Oliver?"

He scoots away, grabbing his phone and tossing bills on the table. "Yes?"

But the look in his eyes is nothing I've seen before. It's distant and masked.

Actually, I have seen that look before. It's how he looked for months after his sister died.

My chest hurts. It aches terribly.

He regrets kissing me, while I regret stopping the kiss.

I try to draw a big, fueling breath, like it can reroute the pang in my chest. I purse my lips. Then, against the tightness in my throat, I manage to say, "I'll meet you at the jeweler. Before the hockey game?"

"That'd be perfect."

He turns and leaves me and my bruised lips and heart at the table.



# OLIVER

Blinders come in handy.

I put mine on all day, zeroing in on the contract work ahead of me for Geneva's firm, then on the deal memo for my new client, Helen Williams Designs.

I focus on that rather than on how utterly fucking complicated this fake fiancée gambit has become after this morning's kiss.

I have half a mind to call it off. Because how the hell am I supposed to spend time with her and pretend I don't want to kiss her again?

It's all I want to do.

Wait. That's not true. I want to do much more.

Which is the real problem.

So I bury myself in work, since the law is reliable.

With every line of legalese I write, I remind myself of why I am faking it—I have to protect this firm and its rep.

I meet with some of the junior partners handling various deals for the firm, and we review the terms. When we're done, one of the newest attorneys here mentions that his one-year-old just took his first steps, and then shows us the video.

"What a cutie-pie," one of the women says.

That's another reminder.



These people depend on me. I sign their checks so they can pay their student loans and take care of their one-year-olds.

I can't call anything off.

Even if I want to.

Even if it's getting harder to pretend.

\* \* \*

At the end of the day, I change into running shorts to hit the park, chatting with Jane on the way out.

"I see you're the toast of Twitter now," she says as the elevator doors close.

"Am I now?"

With a sneaky look on her face, she grabs her phone from her handbag, slides it open, and shows me the latest comments.

*@LovesListsofMen: The kissing pics!!! Dying. Just dying.*

*@ManCandyFan: Dying twice. Dying dead again. Dying from the hotness of the kissing.*

*@GossipLoverLandOnly: I am dead. I am literally dead.*

*@ManCandyFan: \*collects your body\* \*gives it a proper funeral befitting a death from hotness\**

I laugh at the exuberance. I guess it's better than the first rush of tags. "That's good. Wait—" I narrow my eyes and point to the next one in the thread. "Is that the pen twat again?"

*@TheThird: I dunno. Something about the two of them is almost too good to be true.*

*@LovesListsofMen: Jelly much?*

*@TheThird: Not one bit. I'm just saying, who's like that?*

*@HZRedhead: He wasn't like that with me.*

*@ManCandyFan: Uh, hello. He's not with you. He's with her.*

Jane closes the app. "Your public is amused."

"Seems to be."

She pats my arm. "You know, I'm happy to keep this up as long as you need me to, but do think about what happens down the road," she says as we exit the lift.

*Down the road.* I let those words echo, as I slide a thumb across my mobile, checking out the latest text from Christian.

**Christian:** Tell me every entertaining detail. Also, have we discussed the importance of an exit strategy?

But I've got no time for down the road, or exit strategies, when I have to deal with now and with this morning and what will happen tonight.

I head to meet Jason in the park.

\* \* \*

"It happens to the best of us."

That's Jason's sage advice that evening after I updated him on my morning bolt-from-the-scene routine during our four-mile run through Central Park.

"And what exactly is the 'it'?" I ask as we walk along the Reservoir to cool down.

"Being an asshole," he says.

"You're saying I was an asshole this morning?"

He blinks. "Are you saying you were anything but?"

“I had a meeting. I had to go.”

He rolls his eyes. “‘Had a meeting’ is a load of shite for an excuse. You kissed her in a diner full of people and then left like your trousers were on fire. Face it—you just punched your ticket at the ‘I’m an asshole’ counter.”

I shoot him a betrayed look. I knew it was a dick move, but I wasn’t prepared for this sort of character assassination, not even from the renowned hitman of men’s characters. “And I suppose you’ve never done anything so stupid?”

He lets out a deep belly laugh, hands on his stomach. “How the hell do you think I know about the ticket counter for assholes?” He pats his chest. “You’re looking at a once-upon-a-time card-carrying member. I did some very stupid shit when I was figuring out things with my wife, before she was my wife.” He gives me a wry smile, one that I know means he’s about to give me shit. “However, I never ran from a kiss like I might catch something. Now that I think about it, you’re the bigger knob. I’m getting you a plaque.”

“Thanks. This is grand. Simply grand.”

He claps my shoulder. “Just apologize. Say you were overcome by the taste of her lips or something.”

I recoil. “That does not sound like anything I’d say.”

“I know. With you, it’s more like *grunt, tits, arse, sex.*”

I roll my eyes. “Pot. Kettle.”

“I’m calling it as I see it,” he says as we head around the bend toward the park exit. “Anyway, say you were stressed about the meeting, you know it was rude, and you’d very much like to kiss her again.”

I flinch. I can’t say that. We can’t kiss like that again. “That won’t work.”

He stops at the edge of the park, trees overhanging us, other New Yorkers running, walking, blading by, and shoots a serious stare at me. “Why exactly *did* you leave?”

I stop, rubbing my hand across the back of my neck. I left because I didn’t know if I could stop kissing her. I left because

I wanted to say, *Screw the meeting, come spend the day in bed with me.* I left because I want to know what the hell is going on with this brand-new mess of desire I feel for my best friend.

Somehow I wrap that all up into one simple answer. “Because it was easier.”

He drops a hand to my shoulder. “I hear you. But now you have to do something harder—find a way to say you’re sorry for being an arse. Probably won’t be the last time you have to say it, so consider it good practice.”

I blow out a long stream of air, nodding. “I hate that you actually know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t worry. It came from years of being a dickhead too.”

“I feel loads better.”



# SUMMER

I see the puma first. The gold figure waggles out of a doorway in front of me as I walk down the hallway of Sunshine Living's fifth floor.

"Summer," Roxanne says, poking her head out, scanning the hallway. She sets the cane on the floor, puma-head down. She blinks, flustered, then switches the puma to its upright position.

"Hey, Roxanne." Curious, I slow at her door. She doesn't seem her savvy self at all. "What's going on?"

"Help," she whispers.

The hairs on my neck prick. "Are you okay?"

She shakes her head and beckons me. "Come inside for a second. I think I've made a grave mistake."

"Okay," I say, following her into her apartment.

The door stays open as she ushers me to her living room and motions to a high-backed cranberry-red upholstered couch. "Sit."

I park myself, and she brandishes her phone. "I don't know what to do," she says, almost distraught. "It's this damn Tinder. I'm in a bit of a pickle."

"What happened?"

Shaking her head, she lowers her voice. "I'm now chatting with a man I'm not interested in. Actually, I'm chatting with a bunch of men I'm not interested in."

I frown. “Can you just stop talking to them?”

“I could ...” She trails off.

“But?”

“But there are things I like about them. Hence, my dilemma.”

“I’m a little confused. How did you wind up chatting with them in the first place if you’re not interested?”

She gives me an innocent grin. “They have cute dogs. I swiped right on their dogs.”

A laugh bursts out before I can stop it. “You swiped right on their dogs? How does that happen?”

She squares her shoulders. “Sometimes the dog picture shows first, and some dogs are so adorable I can’t help myself. Especially if they look like my collie, Sally.” She wrings her hands. “Can I just go out with them to see their dogs? I miss my Sally so much.”

I take a breath and consider my answer. “That’s an idea. But I think you should probably tell them that you’re only interested in their dogs.”

She sighs heavily, but after a moment, nods and pats my knee. “You’re right. Honesty is usually best,” she says. “And speaking of honesty, can I tell you my idea for classes?”

“Sure. Of course.”

She sweeps her arm out wide. “Exotic dancing. I want to learn exotic dancing.”

I keep my expression neutral somehow as she tells me about the dance moves she wants to learn.

“Can you please work on getting an exotic dancing class here? Or else I’ll have to set it up myself.”

“Sure. I can look into it,” I tell her.

Throughout the rest of the day, her words echo in my head. Not about exotic dancing, though if she wants that, I will try to help.

But what she said about being honest.

I should be honest with Oliver.

Let him know we simply can't fake-kiss again. It's hurting my heart too much. It's throwing me off.

Nothing against the man, but I'd rather date someone who was more into my dog than me than go through that again.

As I leave, I vow to find a way to add an Ins and Outs of Tinder class to the activity list, no matter what my boss says.





# OLIVER

After a post-run shower, I head to Midtown and pace outside the jewelry store, practicing what to say to Summer.

The words roll off my tongue easily.

*I'm sorry I was a dick earlier.*

*I'm sorry I took off like the jackhole the internet sometimes thinks I am.*

Boom.

That shouldn't be too hard.

I can handle all of that, no problem.

Except something nags at me as I wait on the street, while early evening crowds march past, heads bent, checking their phones on the way to their destinations.

Because I can picture myself asking Phoebe what to say to Summer.

And for the first time in a while, I can hear her crisp voice in my head, chiding me. *That's only half an apology, Ollie. Apologize all the way.*

An image of my older sister giving me a sharp stare, telling me to apologize properly, takes shape before my eyes.

It's the strangest thing to see and hear her so clearly, especially when I was listening for her the other night and heard nothing.

My God, how can the sharpness of her voice still be so clear after all this time?

*Maybe because she's right, you daft idiot.*

I laugh out loud, because I hear that in her voice, crystal clear. And it makes me happier than I ever thought I would be to still recall her voice in these moments.

“What’s so funny?”

I jerk around. Summer’s here, head tilted, eyes curious, lips so damn pretty.

My heart pounds a little faster.

“I was just thinking of something funny Phoebe would say.” Then I’m smiling because I can share that with Summer. I don’t think I’ve ever been with a woman to whom I could admit how much I long sometimes to hear my sister’s voice.

After thirteen years, I shouldn’t still be so affected by her passing. And yet, every now and then, I am.

I don’t need to explain to Summer why I sometimes drift off, why I obsess over last meals, why I don’t mind one bit if she calls me Ollie.

Why I even like it when she does.

Because it’s a promise we made to Phoebe long ago.

Summer’s smile starts small then spreads as she steps closer. “Tell me what she would say. And then I have something to tell you.”

“Ladies first.”

She stands firm. “No. You.”

“Fine.”

I know what to say. I have to do this the right way. Because this friendship matters too much to give her half an apology.

I draw a fueling breath then begin. “I’m sorry I left so quickly this morning at the diner.” That’s easy to get out—what comes next is harder.

But then maybe not as hard as I anticipated, because the huge knot of anxiety comes undone when I continue with the cold, stark truth. “I left because I didn’t think I could stop kissing you if I stayed, and I care about you too deeply to jeopardize our friendship. Even though kissing you was absolutely fantastic and definitely not at all chaste. So I hope you’ll forgive me for being a dick.”

I try to read her reaction, try to find the secret to Summer in her brown eyes, but all I see is surprise.

Or more like shock.

Because her irises go wider than the moon, and she blinks several times, like she’s trying to make sense of my words.

For a second or two, her lips seem to twitch like she has a secret. But if she does, she’s keeping it in, because she schools her expression before she parts her lips to speak.

A ringing bell from the store interrupts us. A large man with a thick beard and a helpful grin pops out of the shop. “We’re closing in ten minutes. Just wanted to see if you needed something before we shut for the evening.”

“Yes. We do,” I say, and then we head inside, quickly finding a cubic zirconia that looks mostly real, and once we leave, she returns to the conversation.

“There’s nothing to forgive. We’re all good. And I appreciate you saying that. It means a lot to me.”

“It does?”

“It does. I care so much about our friendship too. I truly do. And I don’t want to jeopardize it either.”

I sigh in relief. “Well, that’s good. That’s great. Being on the same page and all.” But I’m still eager to know what was on her mind earlier. “What were you going to tell me before we went in there?”

She smiles as she looks at her fake ring. “Just what I said, for the most part. That I love being friends with you.” She lifts a hand like she’s going to set it on my arm, but she doesn’t. She lowers it and keeps her arms at her sides. “But also that

it's probably for the best if we don't pretend to kiss again ... because I liked it too. A lot."

*Oh.*

Well.

That's an interesting twist. "You did?"

She gives me a *what can you do* shrug. "I did." She smiles a little impishly then taps my skull. "But don't let that go to your head too much. I don't want your ego to grow any larger."

"No, I wouldn't want it to outpace other large parts of my body." Joking is easier than addressing what she's just told me.

But I stew on it anyway as we walk to Madison Square Garden to catch Fitz's game. Along the way, I'm extremely grateful for the noise of Manhattan, for the sardine-packed streets stuffed with tourists and locals, and for the smells of garbage, the scent of buses fuming, the din of phone calls, of cabs honking, of cars stopping.

It keeps my focus on the immediate rather than this brand-new information that's complicating matters even more.

She liked it too.

*A lot.*

When we go inside the Garden, it feels like I'm entering a safe zone.

There is no way I will be tempted to kiss her here.

Not a chance.

Especially when we grab nachos and beer. The nachos here are covered in jalapeños, and who would want a jalapeño kiss?

Not this guy.

Not at all.

Not even with Summer.

Then I take a bite of the nachos, and they are spicier than I remembered.

Who am I kidding? I bet she'd taste fiery.  
That's the trouble.



# OLIVER

But a deal is a deal.

That's what we have. A deal to appear engaged. A deal to look the part.

So we do our best at the game, shouting and cheering and, also, talking.

Like we've done for the last seventeen years.

Every year. Every day.

And I can forget the jalapeño desire. I can forget how good she tasted, how fantastic she smells. I can do what I've always done—be her friend.

“Have you given any more thought to your gym time frame while you save the rest of the money?”

“No. But my mom texted me again. She offered me the money a second time, but ...”

“But you're not going to take it, I trust?”

“It just doesn't feel right to me.”

“I suppose.” I take another drink of my beer as the good guys chase the puck on the ice and Summer shouts her encouragement.

At the next lull, she picks up the discussion as if we'd only hit pause.

“You get why I turn her down though, right?” she asks earnestly. “I want to do this myself. I already pretty much get



off scot-free in the rent department, living with my grandma. I don't want to be beholden to anyone else."

"But your mom would *give* you the money. So would you truly be beholden?"

She reaches for the nachos, scoops one up, and chews. "No, but what if I was? She always talked about how she gave up her job to help support my dad's business. So what if it became this thing that would hang over us?"

I nod, taking a tortilla chip and eating it as New York attacks the net. But New York misses the shot, and the collective shoulders in the rink slump.

"Your mom's happy though, don't you think? At least, she always seemed that way when we were younger."

"Did she?"

"Happier than my parents. But that's not hard."

She sighs, sets a hand on my shoulder, and squeezes. "True. Understandable, but true."

"It was so much better to be at your house, you know?"

She nods. "I do know, and I also know it's not simply because I made amazing popcorn."

I arch a skeptical brow. "'Made'? More like bought."

"Hey! I made it. Most of the time," she says sheepishly.

"And all of the time it was better to be there than with my parents fighting constantly over insurance and treatments, and on and on." Ironic that they moved to America for jobs with supposedly better health benefits but wound up arguing with insurance for hours every day, it seemed.

Summer winces. "I sound like I'm complaining about my mom wanting to support me. I'm a dick, huh?"

I laugh, loop an arm around her shoulders, and draw her near. "Only a little."

"I'm a little dick. Even better."

I laugh, knowing I'd miss these moments if I lost her to a stupid decision like giving in to lust. "All I'm saying is you're remembering it a certain way. You remember her being resentful, but I remember her being happy."

"And I remember your parents trying really hard every second to keep it together, and you remember them fighting," she says softly.

I mull that over as I drink my beer. She has a point, but also maybe not. "But isn't it our recollections, more than the reality, that informs our outlook?"

"Possibly. But what if our recollections are wrong?"

"Speaking of wrong, sometimes I worry that Logan is too caught up in what went wrong with his marriage. On wanting to beat that guy who cheated with his wife," I say.

"I think that too. But I've said it to him, and he doesn't seem ready to hear it."

"Maybe we only hear things when we're ready." My attention swings back to the ice, where Fitz slams the puck, sending it to the forward, who lobs it straight into the net. Setting my beer down, I thrust my arms in the air, cheering.

Summer's up in no time, punching the sky, hooting and hollering.

The Jumbotron pans the crowd, capturing a raucous audience cheering. When it swings to us, the words "Best Kiss Ever?" blast across the screen.

And in seconds, the whole section is pointing at us.

Summer blinks, her face flushing pink.

She looks at me. I look at her. We look at the screen.

And the words "America's Best Boyfriend" flash across it.

I don't know if one of us goes first, or if we both just realize we have to.

I cup her cheek. She slides a hand around my waist. And we kiss not only for the camera, but for the entire arena.

Twenty thousand fans cheer us on as I seal my lips to hers, kissing Summer for the fourth time.

And for the fourth time, tearing myself away from her seems impossible because I don't want to stop kissing her.

Only this time, it's because I know she likes it.

Judging from the way she slides closer, from how she skims her hands up my shirt, from the way she murmurs, we both like it more than we should.

In fact, when we finally break the kiss, our section is seated, play has resumed, and the Jumbotron screen is showing the game again.

I have no idea how long we were kissing.

Only that I didn't want it to end.

And I know, too, that we're going to have to sort out what the hell is going on—sooner rather than later.

When the game ends, her phone trills loudly, and after she answers it and listens, she shrieks in excitement.



# SUMMER

Things I never expected to happen in Madison Square Garden.

Getting a phone call from a dating site.

Getting a phone call from a dating site asking me to be part of a feature.

Getting a phone call from a dating site asking me to be part of a feature that the magazine is willing to pay me for.

It would cover the rest of the financing I need for the gym, I mentally figure when the woman on the other end of the line tells me how much I'll receive if I can deliver a bang-up piece.

“So, would you want to do it?” she asks.

Oliver is watching me with expectant big eyes, gesturing for me to hurry up and tell him what it is.

I cover the phone. “*The Dating Pool* asked me to do a profile on Top Five Best Dates in New York. They want us to go on them,” I whisper. “Do you say yes?”

“Yes.”

\* \* \*

At Gin Joint with Fitz, we toast.

“To another win,” I offer.

Fitz clinks his glass to mine. “To the best fake engagement ever.”

Oliver taps his glass too. “To the money for Summer to fund her dream.”

Then we drink and chat, and this moment almost seems too good to be true.

Like this is a fragile bubble of happy news, great friends, and possibilities. Stella even texts that she’s nearby after a baking class and comes to join in.

She flops down next to us, giving Fitz a kiss on the cheek, then Oliver, then a hug for me. She’s a toucher, and always has been.

“Henry’s at a conference, so I’m all by my lonesome,” she announces, then orders a gin cocktail. “I debated going home and bingeing *Schitt’s Creek*, but I decided I like you guys better.”

“How lucky for us,” Oliver deadpans. “We’re better than TV.”

“Dude, have you seen *Schitt’s Creek*?” Fitz asks. “That’s one helluva compliment.”

I nod savagely. “That’s a compliment of the highest order.” I point to my friends, sweeping a circle around them. “Trust me, if it’s between you guys and that show, I’m picking the show.”

“You’re not wrong,” Fitz says.

“You’re definitely not wrong,” Stella adds, then returns to the topic of *The Dating Pool* phone call. “So, what’s the first step in being this poster child of adorable couples?”

“They want us to do very New York photo-shoot things. Eat cupcakes, stroll through the park, all that jazz,” I tell her, and the four of us discuss date options as we work our way through a round of drinks.

“Just make sure to look pretty for the cameras when you snap all the shots,” Stella says.

“Don’t I always?” Oliver asks, adopting an Instagram-ready duck face.

“Yes, you’re so lovely,” Fitz says. He drifts off in thought for a moment, staring at the ceiling, then returns to Oliver and me. “I was just thinking though—what happens when this ends?”

Oliver nearly spits out his drink. “What do you mean?”

Fitz laughs, then his mirth subsides. He peers at us like we’re a science experiment as he strokes his beard. “You’ve thought about that, right? You have to have a game plan?”

Oliver gulps. “Sure ...”

But the word goes on forever, and Stella shakes her head and laughs. “You guys need a plan.”

“An exit strategy,” Fitz adds.

“My cousin Christian said the same thing,” Oliver adds.

They’re totally right, and I cycle through the options. “I guess I figured interest would die down after a while, and we’d quietly say we were better off as friends.” It’s not a far-fetched idea, though a plan based on what other people do is risky. “Sort of like those dating reality shows. They never stay together, and no one really cares after their season is over, right?”

“True,” Oliver says. “They just move on to the next thing. We can do that, no problem. Just move on, and no one will think twice about it.”

“Or—” Stella holds up a finger. “Just tell everyone Oliver is terrible in bed.”

“Ouch,” Fitz declares. “Way to wound a man.”

“Yes, exactly,” Oliver says, recoiling. “Spreading such spurious lies.”

Stella shrugs, and I cringe a little, knowing where this is going. “I’m just saying there’s no way you can be great in bed. It goes against the Third Law. You’re too cute.”

I stare hot coals at her. I don’t want Oliver to know that Stella and I have discussed this, or that I’ve even thought about how this law might apply to him.

Fitz arches a brow in a *check out my smolder* way. “Hate to break it to you, ladies, but I’m even hotter than Oliver, and I’m pretty much a god in bed. And that’s *my* law—be awesome in the sheets all the time.”

Stella pats his leg. “Sweetie, I have no doubt you’re a prize in the sheets. But Stella’s Law focuses on a different type of plumbing.”

“Oh, well. See if Oliver can handle the pipes, then,” Fitz says as a fit guy walks by, giving the hockey star a lingering gaze with his piercing green eyes. “Speaking of, I have to go practice some laws.”

He leaves, and Oliver looks at Stella and me expectantly. “So, ladies, tell me all about this law of plumbing.”

I scowl at Stella. She offers an *it was inevitable* smile.

Oliver cocks his head and prompts again, “So, you have a law about how I’m bad in bed?”

I slam a hand on Stella’s thigh, squeezing it to make her stop. “No one said you were bad in bed, right, Stella?”

Oliver points at the accuser. “She did. Did you not just hear her with that vicious character assassination? And I thought my cousin was bad. But, Stella,” he says, clutching his heart, “you are cruel and hurtful.”

Stella simply shrugs. “That may be true, but the evidence suggests you’d be terrible in the sheets.”

“How?”

Her brow knits. “Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Oliver grabs his phone and turns it to selfie mode. He smiles at the screen. “Yes. And I have nothing stuck between my teeth, so what is it?”

“You’re too pretty,” she says matter-of-factly, then lifts her glass and takes a drink.

“Too pretty for what?”

“To be good in bed. Look, it’s a law like gravity. It’s not your fault. You were blessed with extraordinary genes, and



now you have to live with the consequences.”

I wave a *nothing to see here* hand, my chest tight as we edge closer to a place I don't want to travel. “She doesn't know what she's talking about.”

Oliver swings his gaze my way. “Nor do you. You haven't taken this car out for a proper drive. We've only kissed. And you said I was a great kisser.” His eyes narrow. “Or were you just taking the piss out of me?”

My eyes go wide, and I shake my head. “No. That was true. You kiss extremely well.”

Oliver raises his chin at Stella and clears his throat. “See? She vouched for me.”

“She's never slept with you though. Good-looking men can still be great kissers, because that's an entry point. But beyond that, women fall at their feet, and the hotties never have to work for it.” She stretches an arm across the table and ruffles his hair. “Look, Oliver, I hate to break it to you. But there's no way you can be anything but bad in bed.”

“And you will never know that I'm an Olympic-caliber fucker.”

I try to suppress a laugh, but the chuckle bursts from me. I can't help it. “Oliver, are you a gold-medal fucker?”

He crosses his arms in something pretty close to a sulk. “Maybe you should find out and then vouch for me.”

Stella glances from Oliver to me and back. “Well, if you do, let me know. But my money is on bad in bed.” With a wink, she rises, tosses some bills on the table, and gestures to the door as she yawns. She waves goodbye and takes off.

Oliver points at her, stabbing the air. “She's wrong. She's completely wrong.”

“Of course she's wrong. I'm sure you're great in bed. Fireworks, the whole nine yards.” I try not to blush, not to let on how much I've thought about what he'd be like between the sheets.

How often I've wondered if her theory is true.

How I'm wondering it right now. Because he's looking at me with serious bedroom eyes.

*Sex* is written across his green irises. It's all he's thinking about. He's gazing at me like he wants to prove things to me.

And his stare is making me hot.

This is dangerous. Too dangerous.

We agreed not to go there. Not to tango on the physical side.

And there's no need to now. Not for a stupid theory that's just for fun. Not for a friend who's giving him a hard time.

But Oliver won't leave the topic alone. He leans closer to me across the table. "Do you think I'd be bad in bed?"

"Oliver, what does it matter? I already said you're a good kisser. I can't possibly know how you are in bed."

"But what do you think?"

My chest heats. My cheeks are hot too. "Who cares what I think?"

He grabs my arm, his fingers circling my wrist, sending a ribbon of fire through my body. "I care."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not lazy. I work hard. I want to please the woman I'm with. I want her to feel good. I want her to feel fucking fantastic."

Dear God, I already do. His words send sparks sweeping across my skin, leaving a pulse beating between my legs.

*Defuse the situation*, I tell myself. "I need to go."

He pays the bill, and we make our way outside, where there's an awkward moment again. We stand on the street, phones in hand. This is where we call separate Lyfts.

He lives on the East Side.

I'm on the West.

There is no reason for us to share a car. There is no reason for us to spend any more time together.

Except he's not moving to go.

Neither am I.

"I'm not that tired," he says, his eyes still searching mine for something. Permission? An answer? An invitation?

"Nor am I," I say, a little breathy as I wait for something too. Maybe I'm the one wanting an invitation.

"We could work on that list of dates for the article. Do some research."

A smile pulls at my lips. "We could."

"Go to a diner. Or a coffee shop. Or back in the bar."

"Or you could come over," I suggest. "We could go to my \_\_\_"

"Yes."

In seconds we're in a Lyft, heading uptown to the home I share with my grandmother.

This will be safe.

Nothing dangerous will happen.

I'm not going to jump him with Maggie in the house.

We're simply going to sit in the living room, have some popcorn, and plan some dates.

Maggie might even help.

But when we reach my place, a note from her on the kitchen table says she's gone to Connecticut to visit a friend and won't be home tonight.

The air feels heavy.

My skin tingles with possibility.

With Oliver a few inches behind me, I set down the slip of paper, and say, "She's not here tonight."

His fingers graze the back of my neck. “About that law  
...”



# OLIVER

There are things you should do and things you shouldn't do.  
And then there are things you quite simply *have* to do.

This is the latter.

Touching Summer is no longer optional.

Because those ladies are wrong, and I'm going to prove it.

I can't let her think I'm some sort of conceited jackass in bed. That I don't care about a woman's pleasure. Hell, a woman's pleasure is literally all I care about.

Pretty much most of the time.

Ninety-five percent of my brain is allocated to libido. To making a woman arch her back, curl her toes, grab the sheets.

And that allocation is earmarked all for Summer now.

As I stand behind her and run my fingers across her neck, my focus zeroes in on one thing only—showing her how good I can make her feel.

Because I can't stomach her thinking I'd do anything other than bring her uncommon bliss.

"That law should be stricken from the books," I say, as I gently move her blonde locks over her shoulder, revealing her neck, prime real estate for kisses that'll drive her wild.

"Is it unconstitutional?" Her voice is breathy, needy.

"Yes. And I intend to show you why." My fingers trail along her neck. Her gorgeous, enticing neck.

“Tonight?” That one question seems to charge the ions between us, crackling with electricity.

It reverberates in the silence, waiting for an answer.

I am a man on a mission.

I bend to her, brushing my lips across her skin, answering with a “Yes.”

She shivers, emitting a sexy “*Ohhh*.”

Grinding against her, I continue my travels, mapping her neck with my mouth. Kissing her shoulder. Dusting my lips across her exposed collarbone, a location on a woman’s body that doesn’t get the attention it deserves. “I think I’ll worship your collarbone for a little bit as I make my case,” I whisper, kissing her there, inhaling her scent—something sweet, maybe vanilla, maybe honey. I don’t know, but it goes to my head, making my mind hazy with desire.

“You’re presenting some compelling evidence, counselor,” she whispers.

“I’m only getting started. But here’s Exhibit A.” I run my fingers through her hair as I kiss her neck, running my other hand down her arm, sliding past the short sleeves of her blouse, traversing her skin as the little hairs on her arm stand on end. I inch closer, my chest to her back, as my hand glides down to hers, palm touching palm. There’s a hitch in her breath, and it sounds like an invitation. And it’s one I desperately want to accept. My body heat rises as I move in closer and thread our fingers together, clasping her hand. She clasps back, squeezing tightly.

And that, right there, is another line.

Or maybe everything is a line, and I’m hell-bent on vaulting each damn one.

I kiss her neck harder, driven, determined to make her feel incredible.

She’s trembling in my arms, and that’s what I want. I nip my teeth against the flesh of her neck, setting off a chain

reaction. She groans, a rumbly, sexy sound that fills the silence, that hooks into my body and drives me on.

I spin her around, grab her face, and drag her to me, pressing my hard-on against her body. “I know I said I shouldn’t kiss you again, but that was temporary insanity. I can’t *not* kiss you.”

Her lips part, and her eyes spark with lust. “You’re right. But I’m not going to take your word for it.” She grabs at my shirt. “I want more hard evidence.”

Oh hell, she is dirty, and I love it. “Then here’s Exhibit B.” I push against her, letting her feel the outline of my length.

She moans, and her fingers tighten around the fabric of my T-shirt, twisting it as she rubs against me. “I need to know if that law should be overturned, overruled, whatever you lawyers call it. Show me.”

“I’ve got quite a case to present,” I murmur as my hands loop through her hair, the lush, blonde strands sifting between my fingers. “Also, for the record, there was not a single chaste thing about kissing you. It was never pretending. It was always a turn-on.”

“A rush, a total rush,” she whispers, barely a breath.

Then I cross all the lines, crushing my mouth to hers and devouring her lips.

Kissing her hard, possessively, like she belongs to me. My lips claim hers, my tongue flicking across her delicious mouth, the taste of her lip gloss so damn arousing. It’s understated and sexy, like everything about her. The sporty tomboy has turned out to be wildly feminine underneath, and the scent of her, the feel of her, sends a new wave of lust crashing over me.

Because this kiss is different.

It’s not our first. But it’s a whole new kind.

We kissed in the park.

We pecked at the wine tasting.

We went at it in the diner.



We made out for the Jumbotron.

Every other time, there has been an audience. Every other time, we've pretended it was pretend.

Now that it's only us, I'm learning it was never pretend for me. That I was only fooling myself. Because every time, I felt *something*.

Something unexpected.

Something that surprised me.

Maybe that something has always been there, and I had no clue until I touched her.

I can't say for certain. All I know is I'm kissing her for real now, kissing her like nothing else matters beyond these four walls. My hands tighten in her hair, and my tongue explores her mouth, and my body craves more and more contact with her. More closeness, more connection.

Maybe their comments earlier about me being bad in bed flipped a switch. Maybe they drove me to break the promise I made to Summer outside the jewelry store. Or maybe they gave me the excuse I'd been looking for to get closer to her again.

But they're not the reason I'm kissing her.

They aren't why I'm scooping her up in my arms.

And none of that spurs me into carrying her to her bedroom, kicking the door closed, and setting her on the edge of her bed.

As my breath comes hard, I gaze at the woman I've known more than half my life.

The woman I took to prom.

The woman who's been my rock.

The person I've depended on.

And holy shit, I really want to get naked with her all night long, damn the consequences.

I don't want to do it to prove a point. I want to do it because I want her.

I want Summer Clarke so damn badly.

I cup her cheek, meeting her gaze, ready to tell her that this thing between us—and I don't want to define it—is so much more than a stupid point to prove.

That it's turning into a strange new sensation in my heart.

But she speaks first while she's tugging at my shirt, pulling it up, trailing her fingers against my abs.

"Oliver, show me," she whispers in the voice of a seductress. "Show me how good you are in bed, as good as I've imagined."

My brain short-circuits.

All the wiring fries, and I can't form coherent thoughts.

Because she's pictured this.

Knowing that throws accelerant on a roaring fire.

I ignite, and the flames lick through my body as I pull off my shirt the rest of the way, letting the corner of my lips curve up in a grin. "You've pictured me?"

She nods, dancing her fingers down my stomach, over my abs. "I have. I shouldn't, but I have, and every time, you've made me come."

Holy fuck.

She is a goddess of dirty dreams.

She's a kitten and a vixen and a daring, bold woman all in one.

She runs her fingers back up to my chest, making my brain pop. My skin sizzles.

I don't need to form intelligent thoughts after all. Telling her this isn't about ego, that I'm not making a case—those protestations don't fit in the heat of this moment.

Not when she wants this purely physical connection.

So I home in on that.

I undo her blouse, slipping one button through its hole, then the next, then the next. Her shirt falls open, revealing soft, creamy skin and a pale-pink bra holding in those beauties. She shrugs off the shirt, letting it fall to the floor. We toe off shoes, and then I climb onto the bed with her, lying down, sliding under her so I can kiss her like that.

It should be weird, kissing my best friend with her lying on top of me.

Kissing in her bed, half-undressed, knowing everything's coming off so very soon.

But it's not weird.

It feels inevitable.

It feels like it's about damn time.

And it's utterly fantastic to finally give in.

I'm not sure how long I've wanted her, whether these feelings are new or they've been there all along, just waiting.

But I know, right now, my desire for her runs far and deep.

I bring her close for another devouring kiss. She tastes sweet and sexy as our lips collide in a hungry, wild crush.

My hands slide to the back of her bra, unhooking it. She sits up on me, lets the lingerie fall to the bed, and I stop everything because I have to look. I have to feel.

My God, she's spectacular.

I cup her breasts, moaning my appreciation. "You are fucking beautiful."

She smiles, kind of shyly, as she arches her back. "So are you."

"But that's the problem, isn't it? You think I can't make you feel good." I tease her nipples, lifting my head up from the pillow to draw one delicious teardrop breast into my mouth, sucking on that diamond point.

She gasps, and it turns into a long, lingering groan. “Oh God. That feels so good. You do make me feel good.”

“Good. That’s what I want.”

Except, for her, this might merely be an exploration. An exercise. A test.

But as I flick my tongue across her nipple, I decide I can’t fucking care about the *why* right now. All I care about is that *this* doesn’t stop.

I bite gently then switch to her other breast, lavishing attention on it too.

She wriggles as I touch her, bowing her back, seeking out my mouth.

I answer her movements, licking and sucking and kissing as the girl next door writhes on top of me. As I play with her breasts, she moves up my body, straddling me now, rocking her hips against the outline of my cock.

“Oliver,” she whispers, a needy plea. “More, please, give me more.”

I thrust up against her as I kiss her breasts, licking as she gasps, as she seems to chase her pleasure.

And soon, her hips are rolling, her pelvis rocking, her tits bouncing in my face.

Her breath comes in short, sharp bursts.

“Don’t stop.”

“I have no intention of stopping,” I murmur against her chest as my hands guide her, gripping her, working her over as she seeks her release.

Because that’s what she’s doing.

And this is a fucking revelation.

Summer loves it when I kiss her breasts.

Summer gets wildly aroused from me biting her nipples.

Summer is so turned on, she’s panting, moaning, and riding me clothed, looking perilously close to climax.

And then she does.

Her mouth falls into an O.

Her moan rises higher.

Her body rocks, thrusts, then shudders.

Beautifully.

“Oh God, oh God,” she pants, then cries out, collapsing onto me. The sight of her coming is honestly the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

So hot that I flip her to her back, strip off her jeans, then meet her gaze, my fingers stopping at her pale-pink knickers. “Summer,” I say.

“Yes?” Her tone is feathery. She’s still floating on her orgasm, it seems.

“I need these off. I need to be inside you. Tell me you need it too. Please fucking tell me you need it too. I’m desperate for you.”

She nods, blinking, then sits up, grabbing at my jeans. “Take these off. Now.”

Maybe we ought to be having a conversation about what this means, or what happens next, or how we navigate friendship and fucking.

But I don’t want to ruin the moment.

She yanks at the button on my jeans, and I fumble at the zipper, working it open. Before I push my pants down, I grab my wallet, fish out a condom, and set it on the bedside table. Then I shed my jeans as she helps us along by slipping off her pink lace.

She’s naked, and she’s gorgeous.

And I’m so damn hard. My cock throbs as I push down my boxer briefs, freeing my erection.

She licks her lips, her eyes never straying from my dick.

And hey, I don’t mind the eye-fucking.

I don’t mind the ogling at all.

I grip my cock, sliding a fist over it, showing her what she's doing to me. "You are so fucking sexy."

"So are you," she says, her eyes hooded, her tone so sensual. She moves her body like a cat stretching out, then she glides her hand down her pelvis. "I don't think you're bad in bed so far, but I think you should prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt."

And there it is—I was right about what she's after. Why she's doing this.

*Proof.*

But I'm not trying to prove anything. What drives me is pure and simple want.

It's too strong to fight. It's overwhelming. It's fierce and dangerous, like a wild animal finally set free.

Part of me thinks it's for the best that she's not on the same page. That it's safer.

And this may be simply an experiment for her, but she seems to be enjoying every second of our lab test. She arches her hips, such a desperate thing.

And it's so arousing that my dick throbs insistently.

"I will make sure beyond any reasonable doubt that you come hard for a second time, maybe even a third. Sound about right?"

She moans. "Sounds perfect."

Getting on the bed, I wrap my hands around her ankles, opening her legs.

But she shakes her head. "Let me be on top."

"What the lady wants." I flop onto the mattress as she shifts, straddling me. I reach for the condom, open the packet, then roll it down my length.

With avid eyes, she watches me, a wild sort of hunger in her gaze. It's something I've never seen there before. Something I never expected from her.

But it's incredibly erotic to experience her like this.

To see my friend come alive in a whole new way in the bedroom.

As she settles her knees on either side of me, I don't need any proof to know I want so much more than one time with her.

Because I've been wanting her for a long, long time.

How did I not realize it sooner? I've been craving this, denying this. Moments over the last few years flash before me. Snapshots of the flush on her chest, my gaze on her lips, our bodies nearly touching.

The way I felt.

How I reacted.

I shoved all those wants away each time, ignoring, denying.

Pretending.

That was where I was truly faking it.

Now, here I am with her for real, and I'm pretty sure my want is so much more than physical.

It's hitting me in a much deeper way.

And evidently, like a stupid idiot, it took me getting naked with her to learn I really, really like her.

On a whole lot of levels.

Even if she's only feeling it on one level.

I'll have to take what I can get.





# SUMMER

I hardly feel like me.

Gone is the outgoing, upbeat, peppy, positive Summer.

I'm suddenly this wildly different woman.

I'm lust-drenched and dipped in desire, rolled in it from head to toe like a sugar coating.

As Oliver sheathes himself, I'm vibrating with desire.

I'm enrobed in lust.

I can't entirely believe I'm doing this.

I'm about to fuck my best friend, and a part of me wonders why we waited so long to cross this line.

Here in my room, everything about us together feels ... undeniable, like maybe all our touches, all our teasing, and all our kissing was always pointing right to *this*.

He grips my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh as I position myself over him. I take his cock in my hand, and I breathe out, hard. It's a relief and a thrill all at once to touch him at last. To touch the man I've been crushing on for years.

And the only way—literally the only way—I can get through the sheer intensity of this moment is to act like it's just a game, an experiment.

But it's so much more.

It's a deep and potent longing to know him like this when I've craved it for so long.

As I curl a fist around his length, I'm lit up, because this is heady, this is real, this is me touching my best friend and knowing he wants me the same way I want him.

And I want us to feel everything together. I rub the head against my wetness, my eyes squeezing shut at the first enticing feel of his cock against me.

Then I rise up, and I slide down onto Oliver Harris, the boy who took me to prom, the man who I'm taking to bed, the person I enjoy the most in this world.

"Oh God. Oh my God," I groan as I sink down, settling onto his shaft.

He growls, a long, carnal hum of approval. "Summer. You feel fucking incredible."

"God, so do you." It's all I can say, all I can feel as I adjust to his delicious length, to the feel of him pulsing inside me.

If I say anything more, I'll say too much.

I'll tell him I've wanted this for reasons that go beyond his beautiful face, his carved body. For reasons that live inside me. Because he's the person I've laughed with, depended on, turned to.

And he's this beautiful man beneath me in bed.

A friend and now, for the most unexpected of reasons, a lover.

Those roles are supposed to be separate. Opposite sides of the ring. But they're crashing into each other and doing crazy, dangerous things to my heart.

It's hammering. It's expanding. It's reaching for him.

*Focus on the physical.*

Yes, that's what I need to do.

I start to move, to seek a rhythm, find a pace.

Moving my hips, I roll back and forth, up and down, taking him in, out.

I plant my palms on his chest, and he guides me with his strong hands.

“That’s right, cupcake. Use my cock. Use it to make yourself feel so fucking good.”

Sparks race across my skin. He’s a dirty talker, and I love it. Love discovering this side of him.

“More. Give me more dirty words,” I pant. His voice sends shivers across my skin, hot, decadent tingles that feel so damn good.

“Fuck me hard, cupcake. Like you know you want to,” he urges, moving me up and down on his thick, hard cock.

Sparks of pleasure ignite in my core, fireworks exploding into the night sky as I rock my hips against him. “I do. I do want it hard. I do want it good.”

I’ve never spoken like this during sex.

I’ve never wanted to. Never tried.

But it’s heady and thrilling to say out loud all the filthy things I feel.

“Then that’s how you’ll get it. You are going to get it so hard and deep you’ll be feeling me tomorrow. Now let me see those beautiful tits bounce up and down,” he says, rocking under me, fucking me from below. He pistons his hips, driving into me and consuming me with pleasure. I can’t stop moaning, because the threat of bliss is close, so deliciously close.

Oliver slides a hand across my waist, down my belly, heading straight for my clit. The second he touches me there, I cry out. I toss my head back, yelling his name.

“Oliver, God, Oliver! Yes, yes, yes.” His name is hard to say during sex. All those syllables. But I want to feel it on my tongue. I want the reminder that *he’s* doing this to me. My friend, my rock, my confidante. That even if this is a game, a slipup, a moment in our pretend love affair, I want it to feel as real as I’ve imagined it.

So many times.

Countless times.

And now, as I'm chasing the edge, I start to understand why.

As he pumps into me, my belly tightens, a swirl of pleasure coiling inward, gathering strength, and then, out of nowhere or out of everywhere, the pleasure in me shatters into a thousand diamonds as I detonate.

I shake as ecstasy rattles through me, expanding, crashing over me, into me, under me as I call out his name again.

The second I come down from the high, he pulls out, flips me to my back, and hikes up my legs on his shoulders.

Oh my God. I can't move. I don't want to move. I want to be owned.

He's fucking me so good.

Such a hard, wild fucking.

And I love it. I love watching him take me. Feeling him ride me to the edge, my legs hooked over his shoulders as he pumps hard, fast, deep.

"You're so fucking wet. So fucking sexy. Love the way you grip my cock. Love the way you feel. It's so fucking good."

"It is. It's so good."

"So sexy. So goddamn sexy. Come again for me. Want you to come again."

As he drives into me more furiously, his moves send me soaring over another cliff, and I come hard for the third time. I cry out, then I beg, "I want you to come."

But I don't really have to ask. His body stiffens, and then he grunts, "Coming," and collapses onto me.

He's panting, moaning, and saying my name over and over. Whispering it. Then my new nickname, spoken quietly in my ear. "Cupcake."

It's a slow, soft murmur.

Like he's delighting in it.

And I am too, as aftershocks reverberate in me while Oliver kisses my neck. "That was so much more than being good in bed," he whispers.

*I know, I know.*

My throat tightens, and I press my lips together because I don't dare let a true word escape. That this was so much more than a test, a theory. That it was so much more than sex.

But if I admit any of that, I might lose my heart to him, and if I lose my heart, I could lose *him*.

The person I depend on, turn to, need.

So I say something else that's true. "It was. You broke all the laws, Oliver."



# SUMMER

This isn't the first time we've spent the night. There was that Saturday a few years ago when we were all up late—Stella, Henry, Oliver, and me—playing *Would You Rather* and showing off our drink-mixing and drink-downing prowess. My grandma was out of town, and we all crashed in the living room in an epic late-night fiesta of drinks, food, and fun that made us feel like we were in college again.

Another time, I was at his apartment, binge-watching *Friends from College* on Netflix—or cringe-watching, really, since that show is like a train wreck you can't turn away from—and I conked out five minutes into the final episode.

I woke the next morning covered in a navy-blue blanket, one arm hanging over the side of his couch. We finished the episode over coffee and bagels, lamenting the show's cancellation.

But this is not that.

This is not either of those.

This is something else entirely.

I'm not even sure how he or we made the decision for him to stay over last night, only that there was yawning and stretching, and a great many *I'm so tireds* involved.

Now, it's Saturday morning, and he's sound asleep on his stomach, the sheets riding low on his waist.

His back is exposed, and as I push up on my elbows, I'm tempted to trace long, lazy lines down his spine to where the

curves of his perfect, round butt cheeks peek above the sheets.

Dear sexy ex-boyfriend indeed.

He's the sexiest.

And the riskiest. Because my heart clutches as I gaze at him, swelling with new emotions.

Or maybe not so new ones.

Maybe ones that have been present for years and became even stronger last night, activated by touch.

Or maybe activated by new moments too.

I flash back on last night outside the jewelry store, the way he apologized, then later at the game as we talked about our families.

Those moments brought me closer to him.

Made me feel more connected to my best friend.

I lift my hand, running it through the air as if I'm touching him. The desire storming inside me is so much more than physical.

It's not only coming from my body—it's coming from my heart, my mind.

And that's why I have to get out of bed, have to get away from him.

If I stay here, I'll pepper him with kisses. I'll run my fingers across his warm skin. I'll try to cuddle him.

My God, if I cuddle him, I'll give away all this aching in my heart.

And I can't.

Just can't.

Last night has to be just sex.

Because I remember how he looked at me in the diner yesterday after we broke the kiss.

Like he'd already lost something.



I remember what he said later when he apologized.

*I left because I didn't think I could stop kissing you if I stayed, and I care about you too deeply to jeopardize our friendship.*

The memory sings me, and I bolt out of bed, grabbing jeans, panties, a bra, and a shirt. Like my hair is on fire, I rush to the bathroom, take a quick shower, brush my teeth, and get dressed. I can't risk our friendship. I can't hurt it.

Ten minutes later, I'm out of there, heading into the kitchen to start some coffee.

I'm not a yoga person, and I don't meditate. But I know the value of breathing, so I practice my breaths, telling myself that nothing can jeopardize the years of depending on each other.

Because I won't let it.

As the life-giving beverage brews, I hear sheets rustling and feet padding on the floor. Then the toilet flushes, a sink runs, and a door opens.

Clad in only jeans, Oliver walks into the kitchen with gorgeous bed head and a happy grin.

My heart trips on itself, wanting to run to him and fling itself at his feet.

Must. Calm. Down.

"Good morning," I say, all cheery and full of zest.

I'm not Summer the Sex Vixen anymore. I'm the cheery, sarcastic friend. I draw a circle in the air to encompass him, especially the hair. "I'm entering you in The Best Bed Head Ever competition. Because that all-the-strands-sticking-up look is adorable."

I fix on a smile.

There. I sound like a sassy friend, not a lovestruck lover.

With a *what can you do* shrug, he drags a hand through his tousled hair, strides over to me, and drops a kiss onto my cheek. The minty scent of his breath drifts past my nostrils. He

must have found my extra toothbrush and brushed his teeth when he woke up. Another point in his favor.

He lifts his face. “Morning.”

Gah.

Even the way he says *Morning* is making my heart do handsprings. What is wrong with me?

I straighten my spine and gesture to the coffee. “Want a cup?”

“There is only one correct answer to that question.”

I smile and pour him a mug, looking away and focusing on the role I’m playing. That role means steering the ship of *us* back into Buddy Harbor.

“So,” I begin, drawing a deep breath. “The verdict is in.” I spin around and hand him his coffee.

He arches a brow in question. “It is?”

I nod fiercely, making a big deal of this moment. Because friendships cannot be jeopardized with things like epic, earth-shattering, soul-searing sex.

“Good-looking men are not selfish lovers. Law abolished.” I make a big sweeping gesture with my free hand, like I’m striking down a statute.

He blinks, his brow furrowing. He takes a drink of his coffee, the crease in his forehead still present. “Oh, right,” he says. Then his expression shifts, like he’s clearing something up in his head. When he looks at me, he flashes that fabulous, famous smile—the one that melts hearts and panties, and might very well be doing a number on both those things of mine right now.

Damn him for being so damn pretty.

And kind.

And funny.

And caring.

Because that was what I saw last night. For all his cocksure charm, all his jokes about sizes, he's the same guy in bed that he is out of it.

A good man.

He blows out a long stream of air, like he's relieved too. "Glad to hear that. That law. Super important to strike it down."

"Right?" I force out a laugh. "I couldn't have Stella bad-mouthing your abilities. I had to know for sure, though, since she wouldn't take my word for it."

"Right, right," he says, nodding as he drinks again. "Wouldn't want that." His voice tightens, goes a little crisper. "Maybe it's time to let Twitter know too. I'm sure they'd be delighted to learn that I'm not only a spectacular kisser, but that I'm great in bed as well."

My brow knits. Is he mad?

He sets the cup on the table and turns to head for the bedroom. In my alarm and confusion, I grab his arm. "I didn't mean anything bad by it."

He laughs, but it sounds bitter. "Nor did I. Hell, it's great news. Let's host a parade. Let's tell everyone that the guy you all thought would be rubbish in the sack is a stellar shag."

"Oliver," I say, turning desperate. "That's not what I'm saying. I'm not posting anything on Twitter. I was just ..."

*I was just covering up how I feel for you.*

He waves a hand. "Whatever. It's fine. I love being judged for completely unimportant shit."

He doesn't add *like how I look*, because that would be cocky.

And right now, he's not cocky.

But he has been judged—unfairly—and that's partly my fault.

I don't let go of his arm, squeezing tightly. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean to judge you. I think you're

amazing. As a person, as a friend, as a ...” I flap my hand in the direction of the bedroom.

A small smile plays on his lips. “Thanks.”

“And I would never say something online about ...” I don’t finish that sentence either—*how good you are in bed*. That seems trivial, and this moment feels bigger, more important.

So I do the thing I ought to do—apologize again. “I’m sorry for judging you on your looks. You’re gorgeous, and I maybe assumed something that was stupid to assume.”

He laughs, and it sounds self-deprecating. “I sound like a total arse now. It’s all good. We’re good, I swear. I didn’t mean to get cranky.” He takes a beat. “But would you tell Stella your grade for me?”

The question comes out almost sheepish, like he’s embarrassed to ask.

I want to tell him the truth. That I would tell Stella as my friend. That I would tell her because she’s the only person to see through this facade of mine. Because she knows how I feel for Oliver.

Oh, how I want to find her, flop onto a couch, clutch my heart, and say it was amazing because it was him.

But I can’t, and I won’t.

“No,” I say. “It’s private.”

He shakes his head, like he’s clearing it. “Shit. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I said any of that about judgments and whatnot. I didn’t mean anything bad by it.”

I let go of his arm. “I didn’t mean to make it seem like it was only about that, Oliver. I didn’t sleep with you to test her theory.”

“You didn’t?” For a second, it sounds like he’s holding something precious in his hands, like a hummingbird, like hope.

I square my shoulders. “No. It wasn’t about a law.”

“No. It wasn’t about that for me either,” he says, his voice stretched thin.

In it I can hear fear—fear of loss—like I heard the other day. I go with an answer that’s true but won’t hurt my heart—or his.

I meet his eyes, willing myself to stay strong. “I think we just got caught up.”

“Yes!” His eyes blaze. Well, then. “All caught up.”

“It was a moment. And we just gave in.”

“Yes, precisely. Just a moment,” he says, practically punching the air in agreement.

Admittedly, my silly heart wishes he weren’t agreeing so easily. But my head knows this is for the best.

“We’re not going to do it again, obviously,” I add.

“Of course not. We know better.”

I swallow past the stone in my throat. “We do.”

“Yeah, we sure do.” Then he picks up the cup, takes another deep drink, and peers at the clock. “I should get out of here. I have lots to do.” He scratches his head and repeats, “Yeah, lots to do.”

I don’t answer. I just savor the view one last time.

I’ll see him like this again, surely. At the pool, he’ll be wearing less.

But it’s not so much what he’s wearing or not wearing.

It’s *why*. He’s still in a half-dressed state from last night, from us, together. It’s not just bed head—it’s bed head from sleeping next to me. It’s shirtlessness from me undressing him last night.

It’s a sleepy, sex-rumpled, morning-after look, and I put it there.

I want to put it there again.

But I can’t.

So it's better if I just let him leave.

"Yeah, I have so much to do too. The gym and planning. Maybe I'll even add a pole-dancing class and all sorts of fun stuff." The words tumble out to fill the awkward silence. "Plus, we have dinner tonight with your client, and maybe we should take pics for one of those *The Dating Pool* dates before we go? I'll pick one and text you where to meet."

"Sounds brilliant." He heads to my room, grabs his clothes and shoes, then walks to the door.

I follow him, and as I open it, my grandmother walks back in.

"Oh, I didn't know you had company," she says. "Hi, Oliver."

"Good to see you, Mags. I'm just taking off. Summer, I'll see you tonight."

When he leaves, it feels like he takes a piece of my heart with him. My grandmother tilts her head, shooting me a curious look.

"There's something you need to tell me. I see it in your eyes."

A lump rises in my throat. She knows me so well.

My shoulders sag as she shuts the door, and then I sit at the table and tell her everything.

Well, I leave out the three orgasms, but I tell her that I think I'm falling for him.

"What do I do?"

She pats my hand. "Sweetheart, I honestly don't know."



# SUMMER

Time to focus on the gym.

On the goal that I've been working toward for years.

I am *this close* to nabbing the financing I need to make this happen, and all I have to do is nail this feature piece for *The Dating Pool*.

I power walk around the park with Mags, where we discuss the follow-up email from *The Dating Pool*, with its short list of possible dates. We debate the merits of each, and settle on a few fab ones. Ones that will make the piece sing, and hopefully guarantee the magazine pays me the full amount for the article I'll write.

Then we catch up on her triathlon training and her friend Octavia's Tinder woes—she did *not* swipe right on a dog, but she is suffering from a severe lack of interest in men her age.

“She finds them dull. She likes a captivating young mind,” Mags says.

“And what about you? Anyone new on the horizon?”

“Me? I like 'em thirty-five or younger,” she says with a wink, and I'm pretty sure she's taking this walk with me to keep my mind off Oliver. News flash—it's not entirely working. I'm faking it, pretending I'm not thinking about him.

But I do always love chatting with my grandmother.

“Cradle robber,” I say with an exaggerated cringe.

“But I do prefer to meet men the old-fashioned way. IRL.”



“You can just say ‘in real life,’” I tell her as we power walk along the Bethesda Terrace.

“If I don’t use the lingo, you’ll never learn it,” she says sweetly.

“Hey! I know the lingo.”

“Sure you do,” she says with a wink, then she squeezes my shoulders when we reach Fifth Avenue. “Good luck with your meeting.”

She spins around and breaks into a jog. I smile as I watch her go, loving her spirit, her get-up-and-go-no-matter-what-ness. I’m glad she’s so fit at her age—seeing her energy reminds me why I do what I do.

Or what I’m trying to do, at least.

I head to a café and meet with some of my instructors for the classes I want to add at the gym, crossing my fingers that this dating piece will do the trick and make my dream come true.

When I’m done, I say goodbye, grab a coffee, and google my favorite options from the short list *The Dating Pool* sent over. Checking the time, I pick the best one for tonight, then open my text app and tap out a message to Oliver.

**Summer:** I know you hate classes, but ...

**Oliver:** Please tell me we’re not going to learn to knit hats or make booties. Or candles. I draw the line at candle making.

**Summer:** Candles? That’s the line in the sand?

**Oliver:** A man has to have some lines.

**Summer:** Then you’ll love where I’ve drawn this one.

**Oliver:** Can’t wait.

**Summer:** You do know I can hear the sarcasm even through text messages?

**Oliver:** I wasn’t trying to hide it.

**Summer:** See you at five on Perry and Hudson, then we'll go to your client's dinner, and we'll have a hostess gift that'll be perfectly unique.

**Oliver:** Lawyers are generally known for giving great hostess gifts. We're often praised as a collective group for our excellence in that area.

As I drink my coffee and reread the thread, a pang pulls on my heart.

This should be a good thing—that we can return so seamlessly to the way we've always been. We are a rubber band, snapping back into friendship shape.

But in a way, it feels off, like this isn't who we are anymore.

Or maybe it's not who we could be.

I had a taste of that last night, and I want another drink.

But I sigh and close the app.



# OLIVER

In the grand scheme of things, I have nothing against pink. I mean, it's not *my* color. I don't wear it. I don't decorate with it. Not that I decorate anything, for that matter.

Point being, pink is fine, except when it's not fine. Except when I'm surrounded by it.

"I feel like I'm swimming in a Pepto Bismol bottle," I whisper to Summer as the pink-haired instructor with the world's cheeriest smile hands us aprons at the Cookie Academy.

"It does have a rather strong *Candy Land*-slash-*My Little Pony* vibe," Summer whispers, tying an apron around her neck.

I fasten mine at the waist, then gesture to myself, reaching for humor and normalcy. "Domestic god is a good look on me, right?" I lift a brow and give her my best smolder. "You've always wanted to see me in an apron—admit it."

Wait—

I frown, second-guessing myself.

Was that flirty?

Yeah, that *was* flirty.

I shouldn't be flirty with Summer if we're going back to the friend zone. And we are, since we've agreed that last night was not the norm.

But this is a cookie-making class. Cookie dough won't be tempting. It's not like we're making sensual massage oil. Now that would be a class I could get behind.

"You look absolutely dashing." Summer pats me on the shoulder as we set out ingredients on the pink counter. If she's feeling awkward after this morning's let's-never-go-there-again decision, it's not showing.

At the front of the kitchen classroom, the instructor cups her mouth to make a megaphone. "Who's ready to make the best cookie batter ever?"

"We are," shouts the couple behind us.

"Woot, woot," shouts another.

I groan inside. Classes should not include a cheering section.

The instructor sings out her instructions, and we set to work mixing and measuring, Summer taking pics as we go.

"I think *The Dating Pool* included this date idea on its short list because it's highly Instagrammable." She snaps a shot of me measuring sugar.

"Isn't that the main criterion for a date these days? Because who will believe you had a date if you don't post pics on social media?"

When Summer laughs, I take it as a sign that this is where we're supposed to be. No, not this pic-friendly, cotton-candy-pink cookie school. I mean the friendship we've managed to pull out of the sex nosedive. We're flying at cruising altitude into the friend zone so damn easily it's like we live there.

This proves last night was a blip. Just a bump of turbulence.

"We're adorbs," she says. Now she's snapping a shot of us working our KitchenAid blender—pink, of course. Then she pauses. "Wait. How about a kiss? What's a photo op without a kiss?"

"Things I ask myself every day." I drop a chaste one on her cheek.

This is our frequency, this saccharine cute and absolutely fucking awful class where we stir up a concoction we could make at home. But in this day and age, we need a course in everything so it can be chronicled for social media, thus proving we're having the *best time ever*.

All I want to do is rip off this apron, bring her close, and kiss her senseless.

Toss her over my shoulder.

Carry her out of here.

I want to strip her, touch her, have her.

Tell her how I feel all night long, and then in the morning tell her that I want to do it again and again.

Instead, I'm shaking rainbow sprinkles into cookie dough batter while pretending I don't want to do any of that with the woman next to me.

I sneak a glance at her—the girl next door who's become the woman I want.

Become so much more than a friend.

The strawberry shortcake instructor swings by, checking out our mix and clapping approvingly.

"I'll take a picture of you guys, since you're so cute," she chirps.

We pose, flashing toothy, too-big smiles, cheerily stirring our batter, peppering each other's cheeks with kisses.

My life has become a series of social media moments, chronicled for *The Dating Pool* piece, one fake moment after another with my fake fiancée.

\* \* \*

When we leave to make our way to Geneva's dinner party, Summer's brow is furrowed, and she seems lost in thought. I look at her hand by her side, wanting to take it, knowing I shouldn't.

Why did I think it would be a good idea to sleep with her to prove a point?

That was a stupid idea.

“You okay, Summer?” I ask as we walk along Perry Street, wanting to keep things light between us. “Are you thinking deep, cookie-inspired thoughts about the state of the world?”

She shoots me a dubious sideways look. “Did cookies make *you* think deep thoughts about the state of the world?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Do tell,” she prompts.

I choose the safest of my insights. “When did everything turn into a class? There are pickle-making classes, yarn-twining classes, how-to-tie-your-shoelace-into-an-origami-frog classes. Everything is a class.”

“I wouldn’t mind learning how to tie my shoelaces into a frog,” she counters, but her tone is more curious than challenging. “Why do you dislike all these trendy classes so much?”

“They’re pointless. People take them, but they never actually go home and make pickles, or candles, or piña coladas. They take them *knowing* they’ll never make pickles or piña coladas.”

She shrugs and smiles. “Who cares, as long as the class itself is fun.”

“You liked that?” I hook my thumb back toward the Cookie Academy.

“Yes. I had a good time.”

“But you could do that at home,” I argue as we reach the next block, heading toward my client’s West Village home.

“True, but I don’t very often, and sometimes it’s fun just to get out of the house. To do something other than dinner and a movie, or dinner and drinks. You wouldn’t want to do that if we were dating?”

That stops me in my tracks—the *if*. The question of dating her. The possibility I haven't let myself ponder.

“No, I wouldn't.”

“What would you want to do, then?”

I answer easily. “I would probably take you to, say, a hockey game. Or maybe to your favorite diner. I would take you to Central Park, since I know you love it. We'd wander through it and try to find a corner of the park you haven't explored. But if we couldn't, we'd just go to all your favorite places because they're mine too.”

The scenarios roll off my tongue. I know them well. I know *her* well. “I would go for a run with you, something else we both enjoy. I would ask you what new music is on your current playlist, and you'd tell me you just downloaded the playlist from *Sex Education*, and I'd say, ‘That's a brilliant show,’ and you'd say, ‘I know, I love it, it's amazing.’ And then we'd debate which one's better, *Sex Education* or *Schitt's Creek*, but we'd literally never decide.”

I stop for a breath, trying to read her brown eyes. But they're not flashing *kiss me now* at me in neon. Instead, they're gentler, and that softness in them, a vulnerability, even, hooks into my heart and tugs.

I don't know what to do with that look or these feelings except to stand on this corner with her. Talk to her. Be with her. Go into that party tonight as if it's a real date, not a date for show.

Mostly, I just want to know where she's at.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“Those things all sound like great dates too,” she says slowly, absorbing what I've just said, and almost as slowly, she lets a grin spread across her pretty face. “But I also had a great time with you just now at the cookie class. I pretty much always have a great time with you, Oliver.”

I fight the impulse to draw her near, to bring her into my arms. “Yeah, same here. I hate stupid classes, but I always have fun with you. I guess part of me is just tired of the



charade,” I say, but the desire to touch her is stronger than the will to stop, and I finally yank her in close for a hug. She snuggles against me, her face in the crook of my neck.

And that feels too good.

Too right.

And a little too tempting. As a couple walks past us, I close my eyes and inhale the scent of her hair, sweet vanilla reminding me of last night, taunting me with a tonight that won’t happen.

I breathe her in on the streets of New York, doing my damndest to stay very still. To not cross a line again. To make sure we’re on the level.

Even though it’s hard.

Maybe too hard to keep to myself.

“You smell really, really good,” I whisper, and a bit of weight shifts off of me.

“So do you,” she says softly into my neck. “Maybe beautiful guys just smell better.”

I laugh. “Yes, it’s our secret cologne.”

She takes a beat. “Actually, it’s just you. You just smell really good, Ollie.”

Then she draws a shaky breath and pulls back. “But if we keep doing that, we’ll get all caught up again, and we said we wouldn’t.”

“Right. Right. We did say that.” Part of me loves that she feels the same slippery slope I do.

Another part wants to send us both tumbling down that hill.

We start walking again along the block and spot a couple staring at us. One of the pair, a woman with dark hair and gray eyes, offers me a tentative smile and seems embarrassed. “America’s Best Boyfriend?”

Summer chimes in, “This is him.”

“Can we take a pic?”

“Sure,” she says, snuggling up against me.

The woman snaps a picture, then her eyes drift down to Summer’s left hand. “Gorgeous ring.”

“Thanks so much,” Summer says, and the couple turns to leave, saying they’ll hashtag us.

I look forward to the day I’m not a hashtag.

\* \* \*

A little later, we reach Geneva’s block.

“I feel a little guilty going in there,” Summer says softly.

“Because it’s a charade?”

She smiles softly. “Yes, to be honest.”

“Same here. I guess I’m not as Machiavellian as I thought.”

“Did you think you were?”

“I’m a lawyer. I have to be a little Machiavellian. The ends justify the means and all.” I puff up my chest and put on my best dickhead voice. “I’m an asshole. I can do this.”

She laughs, then her laughter fades. “But in this case, I do think the end justifies the means. Maybe I’m Machiavellian.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I think it’s stupid that you were judged for what I said. I think it’s stupid, too, that I judged you for being”—she waves her hand at me—“for being pretty.”

I flutter my hand across my chest. “I’ve always wanted to be pretty.”

“You know what I mean. It’s ridiculous. Society judges women based on looks, and, frankly, on a million other things too. And then we turn around and judge other people. The internet judged you. Your client judged you for a letter I wrote about how awesome you are.” She’s winding herself up,

building a head of steam. “It’s insane. I mean, so what if you had truly broken my heart. Does that mean you’re a bad lawyer?”

“Probably means I’m a good lawyer.”

“But see, that’s the thing—the letter was supposed to be a thank you,” she says, turning to me, touching my arm. “It was supposed to be between us.”

I take a breath, thinking carefully before I say the next thing. “Then why didn’t you just tell me?”

She’s quiet, the cogs in her brain whirring. “Because I don’t think I realized what it was at the time. I wrote it from the heart, and it felt like a secret, something only we would know.”

Her confession feels like the true secret. She’s telling me something private, something meaningful.

I stroke her hair, tucking some strands behind her ear. “Then next time, just tell me.”

She raises her hand to clutch my wrist, but not like she’s stopping me—more like she’s clinging to me. “I’ll do that. I promise. And I’m glad you’re not mad at me.”

I lean in closer, press my forehead to hers. “Do you want me to pretend I am? To fake being mad?”

She laughs. “Don’t fake that. I’m sorry you have to play this game because of me.”

But maybe I don’t mind the game after all. I slide my hand down her hair, savoring the softness, and consider saying *fuck the world* and kissing her.

Instead, I let go.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m having a blast with you. Let’s go inside and fake it—and give her this infernal cookie-batter hostess gift.”

Once inside, we give Geneva the batter, which delights her.

“I’ve never had someone bring me cookie batter,” she says, her eyes shifting from Summer to me. “I suspect this is

your fiancée's doing.”

“It absolutely is.”

We mingle with her guests, as well as Jane, and I feel nothing but honest as I take Summer's hand, thread my fingers through hers, and introduce her as my fiancée.

She looks like she belongs to me.

She feels like she belongs to me.

And when I hold her hand during the cocktail hour, I don't think anyone can tell otherwise.

Geneva introduces me to some of the other partners at her media firm. “This is my attorney, Oliver Harris. He's tops at contracts and business, and he looks out for me like a tiger,” she says. “And this is his fiancée, Summer.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Summer says to a tall woman with horn-rimmed glasses.

“And you as well,” the woman answers. “How long have you two been engaged?”

“Two weeks.” Summer gives the story that we practiced after the bacon-wine almost-fiasco.

“Congrats. And when is the wedding?” the inquisitor continues.

“In ten months,” she says, squeezing my hand. “We're getting married in Central Park. We've always loved it there.”

“Right.” I pitch to sell our story. “We had our first kiss there.”

“Oh, how romantic,” Geneva puts in. “Where in Central Park?”

Summer meets my gaze, her brown eyes twinkling. “By the carousel.” She touches my arm. “Do you remember what I said in high school about kissing at that spot?”

My mind is a blank—a white slate of nothing. Then, like the sun rising, the memory returns. “Right. On one of our

visits there. You said you wanted your first real kiss to be there. And I just laughed.”

“Why did you laugh?” Geneva asks curiously.

I don’t look at Geneva. I look at Summer and speak the truth. “Because I knew then, on some level, I wanted her first kiss to be with me.”

“Ohh! That’s so lovely.” Geneva clasps her hands to her chest. The other woman coos.

And Summer just smiles at me, only me. “I wanted it to be you too.”

I have no choice. I step closer, sweep my lips across hers, and kiss her the way I want to now.

Well, not entirely. I’d like to kiss her with no one else around. But here in the middle of a dinner party, I’ll take this.

Nothing about it feels fake. Not the gust of breath that escapes her lips. Not the slightest murmur she gives. And not how she responds.

But because we’re not alone, I end the kiss after a few seconds, reorienting on the present moment. “And we did kiss there for real, several months ago, when we started dating.” I pick up the thread of our fake story. “Because I realized after all these years that it’d always been her.”

All the hands flutter over all their hearts.

Summer’s eyes widen, shining with what might be the threat of tears, but she, too, gets back to the story. “So, earlier this week, we recreated our kiss for fun. To celebrate, you know?”

“Yes, of course,” Geneva says.

The other woman adds, “And did you know then that you were in love with her?”

“It took me a while to figure it out,” I say, and Summer visibly trembles at the comment. It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, the way it moves through her body. The way her breath ghosts across her lips.

“But you figured it out,” Geneva says.

As I meet Summer’s gaze, I speak the full truth when I say, “Yes, I did.”

\* \* \*

We’re quiet later as we leave, heading down the stairs to the street, where Summer waits for her Lyft.

We don’t say a word. It’s strange for us. But she breaks the silence eventually, gesturing to my client’s home. “Are you going to feel as bad as I will when you tell her we broke up?”

“Yes.” But not for the reasons she thinks. Not because I feel guilty. I don’t fucking care about appearances anymore.

I say yes because I feel like it’s already happening—the breaking up—and it does feel bad.

The feeling is magnified when the Honda pulls up to the curb and I open the door and say good night.

She waves faintly from the car, the look in her eyes a little sad.

It probably mirrors mine.

Last night really was just one night.

Once she leaves, I don’t call a cab or a Lyft.

I start down the block, but I’m not alone for long. A familiar voice calls out, “Care to walk a woman home, love?”

I turn around and wait for Jane, coming from the party. “If I must.”

We turn uptown. “Seems like your little ruse is going well.”

“Is it though?”

“You had everyone eating out of the palm of your hand,” she remarks. “Maybe you missed your calling as an actor.”

“Maybe I did.”

She pats my arm. “Or maybe you should just let Summer know you actually have feelings for her, like ManCandyFan thinks you do.” She takes a breath, showing me her phone.

*@ManCandyFan: He’s so in love with her.*

*@TheThird: Is he though?*

*@GossipLoverLandOnly: Yes. It’s beyond obvious.*

For a second, I close my eyes, letting the comments sink in. By and large, the internet is pretty stupid. But Jane isn’t. So, I open my eyes and meet her gaze, asking her opinion, since she knows me well.

“You think I have feelings for her?”

“Yes. And that perhaps you have for a long time now.” Then she hails a cab. “Time for me to go.”

“Thanks for leaving on that note.”

“What better note to leave on than giving you something to think about? Especially when I need to get home to feed Daisy. She’s quite demanding when she’s hungry. Cats. What can you do?”

“Feed them, I suppose.”

When she’s gone, I walk up the street, trying to remind myself why I never pursued anything with Summer in the first place. Why I never let myself examine all those things I felt for her but couldn’t name.

It’s because she’s practically family.

Because she’s part of my life.

Because I know what it’s like to lose someone you love.

Only, none of those reasons hold as much weight as they did a week ago.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I meet up with Logan and Fitz to play paintball in Central Park.

“I had an epiphany last night,” Logan announces.

“You’re joining a monastery?” Fitz asks.

“You’re dying your hair all the colors of the rainbow?” I put in.

“You’re going to Vegas and betting everything on red?” Fitz says.

Logan rolls his eyes. “No, dickheads. It’s about the strategy. I had it all wrong. It’s not about crushing the other team. It’s about how fucking awesome we are.”

I shoot him a skeptical look. “Is this an empowerment moment?”

“Yeah, because I don’t know if I’m ready to sing ‘Let the River Run’ with you cats,” Fitz says.

Logan gives him the side-eye. “Did you just reference *Working Girl*?”

“Yes, does this surprise you?” Fitz asks. “One, Harrison Ford is in it. Two, I grew up with three sisters and a single mom. We watched it together.”

I snap my gaze to Logan. “More to the point, did you just recognize a *Working Girl* reference?”

Logan ignores me and proceeds with “As I was saying—Amelia and I were talking last night, and she said I was going at it all wrong.” Amelia is his daughter, and I appreciate the image of her telling him he was all wrong. “She said the point of the game is not to crush the enemy but to have fun. And I realized I’ve been focused on the wrong thing—on some stupid revenge on the guy at Lehman. But you know what? He can have my ex. I am done being angry, and I am letting it go. I just want to have a blast and move the hell on.”



Is he serious? I pull back to study him, and yes, he absolutely means what he's saying. This is a huge step for my friend, and I smile, happy for and proud of him.

“That is big of you.”

Logan simply shrugs. “Time to move on. Also, my daughter is brilliant, so I should listen to her.”

“Sometimes kids have the best advice,” I agree. I wonder what Amelia would tell me to do about all these feelings I have for her Aunt Summer.

The advice she gave Logan is kind of all-purpose, and maybe I should apply it broadly. So I decide to follow the kid's wisdom for the moment.

*Just have fun.*

Right now, though, we play, and Logan doesn't obsess on crushing the competition to settle a pointless score. He seems happy, and like that—playing as a team, playing as friends—we win.

Afterward, as he packs up his gear, I tell Fitz, “Bet he meets someone new and is arse-over-elbow in love before we know it.”

Fitz claps me on the back. “My bet is *you're* next.”

I scoff, dismissing that with a wave, then tell them I'll take them out for breakfast. But over eggs and toast, I'm still thinking about Summer and the story of how we fell in love in Central Park.

Then I shove it out of my head because it's time to play pretend with her again.



# SUMMER

“Thrifting?” Oliver arches a brow as we walk to A Taste of Champagne, a consignment shop on the Upper West Side, then he shakes his head like a dog shaking off water. “You’re really taking me thrifting?”

“It’s apparently a very popular thing to do on a date.”

“For who? Teenage girls?”

“Well, the cookie-dough class seemed tailor-made for teenage girls, and women who were once teenage girls do most of the date planning these days, so I suppose, yes, dating trends are driven by teenagers.”

“Can we go to the mall next?”

I swat him and tell him no as we head into the vintage shop. As I comb through racks, he snaps pictures of me while I hunt for a cute jacket.

*Focus on the date, I remind myself.*

*Focus on the article.*

Don’t focus on memories of last night and the swoony words that fell from his mouth as he spun the story of how he fell in love with me.

Swoony words were part of faking it.

Who knew Oliver was such a good actor?

But he is. He’s a great actor.

I find a rack of short sequined dresses, labeled *The Bridesmaid Dresses You Really Want*. I sort through them, paying undue attention to the sparkles to keep my mind off all the things I can't have.

Like him.

Because relationships suck. I don't have time for them, and they just distract you from your goals anyway.

*So there*, I tell my brain.

Really, I should tell my heart, which beats too fast for him.

"Thrifting is fun," I say as I sort through clothes, ever the cheerleader.

"Why does it need a name like thrifting? It's just shopping," he says.

I shoot him a look over a rack of red dresses. "See? You're being all negative again."

"No, I'm being honest. It's not like this is a new thing. Is it supposed to be a fresh fad because we gave it a new name? It's literally bargain-hunting."

"Why do you have to be the fun police?"

"I am not the fun police. I am the fun ringmaster. And I'll prove it to you with our next activity. Did you see the link I sent you earlier? Today is a very special day at Central Park. Once a year. Swan boats."

"Yes. I did. I love that the park just started that," I answer, then return my attention to the dresses, where I spot a sapphire sequined mini dress with spaghetti straps. "This is perfect. I'll try it on, and can you take a pic?"

"Yes, of course, and then we'll Snapchat it to all our friends, like Madison and Hannah and Taylor," he says, imitating a teenager.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're having a good time even though you don't realize it."

He laughs, waving a hand toward the dressing room. "Let's see the dress, Cassidy, and then we can show Grayson."

“Fine, but don’t forget to tag Braxton, Jayden, and also Carson.” I snatch the dress and saunter into the changing room.

“I’ll get it on Instaface straightaway. And then ChatterSnap.”

“You do that.” I shrug out of my cotton sundress and pull the snug little number over my head, yanking it down to my thighs, where it ends. Glancing at my shoes, I laugh out loud. “My yellow flip-flops look so cute with this sexy number, Jarret.”

“All right. Show me, Isabella, and then we can post it for the squad.”

I swing open the door, announcing myself with a “*Ta-da.*”

Oliver’s jaw drops. He blinks then rubs a hand over his chin. “I love thrifting.”

“You do?”

He nods, looking mesmerized. “I’m getting it for you. Wear it all day.”

And I say yes.

\* \* \*

A bearded man chewing on a straw unties a swan boat, pats the railing on the dock, then tells us to get in.

We step into a plastic swan paddleboat on the lake in Central Park. Normally, the park only has gondolas or rowboats, but once a year it’s Swan Boat Day.

“No rocking. No swan boat bumper cars, and no making out,” he barks at us.

“Aye-aye, captain,” Oliver says, backing the boat out of the dock, the churning of the paddles beneath the boat like a roller coaster chugging uphill.

I push hard with my yellow flip-flops as we pedal around the lake at top speed—maybe three miles an hour. We cruise

past other boaters, enjoying the sun and the water.

“Is this too teenager-y for you, Mr. I’m So Sophisticated?” I ask. “Are you sure it’s not your fun police duty to arrest us?”

“It’s more fun than shopping,” he says as we pedal through a sunny patch of water, past another group of boaters.

I wave to them before turning my narrow-eyed gaze on Oliver. “But you seemed to be having fun shopping. You made me get the dress.”

He eyes me from top to bottom, his green eyes shimmering with a hint of desire. He’s not trying to hide it, and that heats me up, especially when he says, “Well, it looks good on you. I had no choice.”

“No choice? Really?”

“When a woman looks this good, she can’t not wear the thing that makes her look this hot,” he says, his eyes locked on mine.

His words and his gaze make my stomach flip as tingles spread down my chest.

“See? You have your laws, and so do I.” The way he says it, all low and sexy, makes my pulse speed up.

I shouldn’t like this, but I do. God, I do.

I like knowing he’s still affected, still attracted to me, even though we laid down the rules.

We made our choices.

But it feels like the choices are making us.

And try as we might to reroute back to friendship, we keep tipping into the danger zone.

Soon we reach a quiet corner of the lake where it feels like it’s just us. He stops pedaling, and we soak in the sun.

Maybe it’s best to remember those choices. To remind ourselves of why we’re here. So I try. “We made it through last night. We survived.”

“Yes, the cookie batter. Don’t remind me.”

I set a hand on his arm. He tenses, then, after a moment, relaxes. “No, I meant we survived moving past the sex.”

“We did,” he says, pushing out a laugh. “Because I used my patented mind eraser.”

“What’s that?”

He mimes sweeping. “I just get out my broom and sweep the memory into a corner and pretend it never happened.”

“Really?”

“Men are simple, right?”

“I don’t know. I think you’re complicated.”

“Trust me. I’m not. I’m pretty straightforward.”

“So, if I flash my boobs, are boobs all you’re going to think about?” I ask, challenging him.

“I’m sorry. What did you say? I stopped thinking.” He lets his gaze drift playfully down to my chest. “Nice dress.”

“But see, I don’t believe that. You pretend you are shallow, but deep down you think about things like friendship,” I say, as he looks me in the eyes again. “You think about life and death and your parents, and you think about your clients and fighting for them and doing the best you can.”

He looks at me, quiet and studying. “True. Yet sometimes I’m still playing the same loop. Food. Sex. Money.” He takes a beat. “Sex.”

And I might be playing that last one on a loop too. But I’m still trying to make a point, one related to sex, and to all the other things I like about him. “I don’t think that’s all you care about. You care about security. Reliability. Dependability. If you didn’t, we’d be sleeping together again.”

He stares hard at me, his jaw ticking. “Is that why we’re not sleeping together?”

I stare back, feeling the mood shift. My skin is hot, my breath comes fast, and the sun beats down. “Isn’t it?”

“At the moment, I’m honestly not sure.”

Heat roars in my body. “I’m not either. Going back to how we were sounds good in theory ...”

“But theories can be wrong,” he says, his eyes dark, glimmering with lust.

But I don’t think it’s only lust I see. I think there’s so much more.

No, I *know* it.

My tingling chest is the proof.

My aching heart is the verification.

And my wild need is the driver.

Of me.

Because here on this sunny day, in this quiet nook of my favorite place on earth, I do maybe the craziest, most daring thing of all.

I shift out of my seat, climb onto his lap, and straddle him. Then I kiss the breath out of my best friend in a paddleboat.





# OLIVER

I'm a pretty open-minded guy.

I'll try nearly any position. I'll break out toys, props, and loads of dirty talk.

I'll give the woman what she wants.

And if the woman wants public sex, sure, that can be arranged, short of an arrestable offense.

I just never put a paddleboat on the list of places I'd want to try.

But then, I never expected Summer to initiate paddleboat sex.

Here she is with her knees spread and her dress riding up, grinding against me.

*When in Rome ...*

I cup her face, drag her close, and kiss her.

Without any cameras, without any agenda, without anything to prove.

There's no reason but desire, and we kiss hard and hungrily in the lake at Central Park, and it feels like where we're supposed to be.

I trace her lips, parting them with my tongue then stroking inside her mouth. I tug her closer, kiss her harder, our lips marauders. We plunder and suck, tongues tangling, bodies pressing.

She grinds against me, pressing on my cock, like iron in my jeans. And she's relentless, a woman after her own pleasure, like she was the other night.

And the source of it is me.

It's a thrilling and addictive feeling, knowing I'm the one she's chasing like this.

That's how we kiss.

Like we can't get enough of each other. Can't get enough lips, tongue, skin. My fingers curl around her skull, gripping her tight, slamming her against me.

Her hands skate into my hair, her fingers roping through the strands as she brings me closer. She's panting, moaning, and nothing on earth is sexier than this woman revealing her desires to me.

For me.

And with me. I slide my hands down her back, along the crazy sequined dress and down to her ass, cupping her cheeks.

A groan rips from my throat as I squeeze her tight, firm ass. Yes, she was naked on me the other night, and yes, she was naked in bed, but it still feels like the first time.

Like I'm just discovering all her curves, all the softness of her body.

My hands slide lower, reaching the edge of her short dress. She feels too good. I break the kiss, panting. "So glad you got this dress."

"Me too." She breathes out hard, then lifts up and grinds back down on me, sliding against my cock, humping me.

Lust sizzles down my spine, radiating out through my whole body as she stares wickedly at me, a wanton, gorgeous woman eager for pleasure.

"I want you again," she whispers, her voice all smoky and sexy.

It's the hottest sound I've ever heard, and I can still barely believe it's coming from her.

From my friend, who's shown me so many sides of herself over the years—except this one.

“I want you again too. Right now, Summer.” I bring my mouth to her neck, kissing a decadent path to her ear. “But we really need to get to my place where I can strip you to nothing, worship your body, and make you come over and over.”

“Yes. That. Let's do that now.”

She slides off me a few inches, setting her feet down, hunting for her flip-flops. As she roots around for her shoes while tugging down her dress, she stumbles.

Tips.

Pitches.

Right off my lap.

Everything happens in a heartbeat.

One second, she's grinding on me. The next, she's toppling off the side of the boat and into the lake.



# SUMMER

How to instantly become a social media sensation? Fall into the lake while humping your fake fiancé.

Once I pop up from the murky depths of the lake, he's fighting like hell not to laugh at me.

I'm soaked, head to toe, and covered in algae or Central Park Loch Ness guts. Take your pick. Both are fetid.

"I'm a sea monster!" I say, skimming my hand over my soaking wet and utterly disgusting hair.

Oliver kneels on the edge of the swan boat, offering his hand as he cackles.

"You're evil! You're laughing at me. You're a terrible fake fiancé."

He rolls his eyes as he tugs me up by my hand. "I'm an amazing fake fiancé. Get back here, you sea monster of mine." His tone is playful as he pulls me up out of the brackish water. I sling one foot over the edge of the white plastic boat then haul myself up the rest of the way, his hand an anchor.

I am an ungraceful, sopping, smelly mess.

I shove the strands of wet, tangled hair from my face.

"I told you not to do that!"

I jerk my gaze to the bearded man who rented us the boat.

He's on the shore, pointing at us, flapping his arms. "I told you the rules!"

“Gee, thanks. I wanted to fall in the water. It was on my bucket list. Go to Central Park, ride a paddleboat, and fall in the cesspool known as this lake,” I shout back.

“I meant no making out, lady. Serves you right,” he yells.

Oh, well. He might have a point there.

He’s not the only one watching us.

He’s flanked by spectators with their cameras trained on our boat. *Natch*. After all, what’s funnier than a girl falling into a big pond in the city?

I do the only thing I can. Smile and wave. Just smile and wave.

I park my butt in the plastic seat next to my fake fiancé, and we pedal to the shore, where the bearded man glowers at us, telling us to never come back again.

“That won’t be a problem,” I assure him.

As we get off the boat and walk away from the dock, Oliver peels off his T-shirt and hands it to me.

My brow knits. “You’re giving me your shirt?”

“Well, your clothes are a little bit wet.”

I run my eyes up and down his carved chest. “Guess I get a nice view *and* a shirt. It is my lucky day.”

“Play your cards right, and you can get a shower at my place too.”

And let me tell you, I practically run out of the park for that chance.

\* \* \*

I peel off his gray T-shirt then my wet sequined dress, dropping them onto the tiled bathroom floor.

I wiggle my eyebrows as I unhook my soaking wet bra. “I’m sexy wearing Central Park lake water, don’t you think?”

Oliver smiles as he stretches past me to turn on the shower. The water runs, and he unbuttons his jeans then unzips them. “Let me tell you something, Summer. Your sea monster perfume isn’t going to deter me from fucking you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I shiver from his words, from seeing this side of Oliver Harris, from hearing him say *fuck* as it applies to me. It’s surreal, but heady too, to experience him like this—wanting me, staring at me, heat and abandon in his eyes.

Even in my swamp creature state, all matted hair and stinking of pond scum, he still gazes at me like I’m not just the object of his desire, but like I’m precious too.

Like fucking isn’t just fucking.

Like it’s so much more.

That’s how I feel too. And I want to tell him and tell him soon.

But first, I need to de-skunk myself.

I let my bra fall to the floor as steam curls from the shower. I peel off my damp panties, hold them up on my fingertip, twirl the cotton fabric, then toss them to the floor as well.

I step into the shower but keep my eyes trained on my best friend. I’m tempted to make a joke, maybe about swamp monsters or sea creatures, but the look in his eyes stops my breath.

Intensity flashes across his irises, a deep and powerful longing in his green gaze.

My heart stutters, then it pounds relentlessly as he pushes his jeans to the floor.

His boxer briefs go whoosh.

His cock springs free, happy to see me in my Central Park state of decay.

“Nice to see you too,” I say as I lean my head back under the water, letting it stream over me.



He steps in, closing the shower door behind us.

I shudder at his nearness, at the way he can't take his eyes off me.

And at my own spiking pulse.

But I also want to get clean.

Seems Oliver wants that too, because he reaches behind me for the shampoo, pours some into his hands, then washes my hair. He's tender and gentle, running the shampoo all through my strands then rinsing it out.

I squirt some into my hands and return the favor, loving the feel of his hair between my fingers.

We're quiet, besides saying the occasional *hi*, and *that feels good*, and lots and lots of *mmms*.

I don't trust myself to say anything else. To not blurt out some great, immutable truth. Some pronouncement born from years of admiring him from afar, from endless days of maybe, possibly crushing on my best friend.

Fine, maybe it was more than a crush.

Maybe it's becoming real, so damn real, but I don't trust that this new reality will last beyond the here and now.

So I let myself wordlessly enjoy the moment.

He reaches for his shower gel, pours some in his hands, and then lathers up. He rubs along my arms, and I inhale deeply, loving the attention, the care.

He moves up my arms to my shoulders, soaping me, then down my breasts to my belly.

After he squirts more soap, he bends, kneeling on the tiles as the water pounds over us. He soaps up my legs, from my ankles to my knees to my thighs, cleaning all the dirty water off me.

Then he runs his hands up the back of my legs and looks up at me. "I swear this is all I've thought about since the other night," he whispers, and presses his face to my thigh, brushing a kiss against my skin, water droplets sliding down his nose.

“Same here,” I confess, my voice feathery, my need palpable.

“Maybe I am simple, Summer. I just want to touch you again. I want to kiss you and have you and fuck you,” he says, then a rumble emanates from his throat as he turns his face from my leg to my center, pressing his lips against me where I ache for him.

Flicking his tongue against my wetness.

“Oh God,” I gasp the second he makes contact.

And because I’m helpful like that, I widen my stance, spreading my legs a little more.

He groans against me, licking and kissing.

Desire floods my body. It lights up my veins. It spreads across my skin as he cups my ass and licks me in his shower. I lean back against the wall, and I’m glad I do when my knees wobble as his tongue sweeps across all my wetness, all my desire for him. Kissing, licking, sucking.

The sounds he makes are a dirty song, a carnal tune of lust and passion, the notes insanely sensual.

“If this is simple, I’ll take it,” I whisper, my fingers tangling in his hair.

He hitches my right leg onto his shoulder, and yes, standing is harder now, but he’s got me, and so has the wall.

And this is on.

It’s happening.

And I’m awash in pleasure.

He’s relentless, kissing and worshipping, and soon pleasure crests in my body, a wave rising up, rushing to the shore. I let go of his hair, grab at the wall, and shudder. A long gust of breath escapes my lips.

I rock against him, losing myself to the moment, losing my mind to this connection.

And nothing feels like we're getting swept up in a moment or a mistake.

Everything feels like we've been building to this.

It's the last wall between us coming down, coming down gloriously.

As the desire tightens in my belly then bursts, I gasp and cry out, coming hard.

I wobble, and he reaches for my hips, steadying me as he rises. He wraps his arms around me and tugs me close, our wet, naked bodies pressed together.

"Hi, Oliver," I whisper.

"Hi, Summer."

"You're quite good at that," I say.

He presses a soft kiss to my lips. "Because it's you."

"Or maybe because it's you." I slide a hand down his chest, reaching for his cock. He groans, all growly sexy as I wrap a fist around him. I stroke him, gripping and pumping and wanting.

So much wanting.

But so much more than wanting.

As he thrusts into my fist, his breath hot and staggered, I take another step, a bolder step.

Maybe the riskiest one of all.

I don't know where we're going. I don't know how to make us work. I don't know what happens tomorrow. But I want him to know this is more than just sex for me.

I let go of him, run my hands up his chest, and meet his gaze. "Would you make love to me?"

His lips curve up. "I thought you'd never ask."



# OLIVER

You think you know someone.

And maybe you do.

Maybe you know how they like their coffee, or that they snort when they laugh too hard, or that they're a little bit stubborn—or maybe a lot—but still the most positive, upbeat person you've ever known.

And maybe you need that part of them, needed that part of them for ages, because you haven't been inherently upbeat since life changed you.

And you know that about yourself.

But then, you get this person naked and you learn about her other side.

I'm learning that Summer luxuriates in her body.

That when she's toweled off and dry, she settles into my bed languidly, stretching her hands over her head, her body on beautiful display.

Sure, I've thought about having her here, but always in a truncated way where my brain doesn't let me finish the thought. Where I force myself to swipe the images away.

Now the images are real as she parts her legs for me, slides a hand between them, and glides her fingers through her wetness.

*Fuckkk.*

I don't know that I can withstand the hotness, but I'm willing to try. I am goddamn willing to try as I climb onto the bed with her, grab her ankles, and spread her legs wide.

"Let me taste you."

"But you already did," she says with a smile.

"I am ravenous, it seems."

She lifts her hand, runs her fingers across my lips, and I draw them into my mouth, sucking hard, savoring once again the delicious taste of her.

"You dirty, sexy woman. Enticing me with the way you taste so fucking good."

"I think you like being enticed," she whispers as a shudder moves through her, gliding along her skin.

I shake my head. "No. I love it."

I reach for a condom in the nightstand, open it, roll it on, and then push her knees up higher and higher still.

Then I notch the head of my cock against her and push inside.

"Oh God," she gasps, her back bowing, her eyes fluttering shut.

And that's another thing I now know.

How the girl next door looks when I fill her. When she takes me in all the way. She looks spectacular, all sex-drunk and needy, her lips parted, her knees hiked up.

Open to me.

I move in her, swiveling my hips, pushing deeper, pulling back, then plunging in again.

Her hands slide up my chest. "This feels so good," she whispers.

"Feels amazing," I murmur as pleasure crackles along my spine. "Feels fucking incredible."

Her arms loop around my neck, her fingers playing with my hair. Even that touch ignites sparks across my skin.

“Because it’s you,” I tell her as I pick up the pace, moving faster, listening to her body.

She arches her back, moving with me as we find our pace.

When we do, I bend closer to her, my lips dusting across hers. My shoulders are tight. Tension, exquisite tension, radiates through my muscles as I fight off my own release, focusing on her, only her.

And on the words I just said.

*Because it’s you.*

Only, that’s not entirely true. This is spectacular, the sex, the connection, the unholy pleasure.

But not because it’s just her or me.

“No, Summer. Do you know why it’s so good?”

“Why?” she asks as she gasps, her voice cresting to a needy cry.

As I move in her, I pull back to look at her face. Her brown eyes are glittering with lust and something else.

Something deeper.

Something far more powerful.

Something that lasts.

I bury my face in her neck, whispering against her ear, “Because it’s us. That’s why it’s so good. Because we’re so good together.”

“Ohhhh,” she calls out, rising up, her hips bucking, her voice catching, her sounds reaching the ceiling. Then she’s losing control, and it’s beautiful—absolutely beautiful and erotic to watch her fall apart beneath me.

And I follow her there, chasing my pleasure to the other side of bliss too.

Soon, I’m lying next to her, panting, sated, drawing lines with my fingertips down her warm skin when my phone rings.

I have half a mind to ignore it, until I realize it’s Jane’s ringtone.

I grab the phone from the floor and answer. “Hi, Jane. What’s going on?”

She clears her throat, and a pit forms in my stomach. “Well, love, it seems that America’s Best Boyfriend is now America’s Fakest Boyfriend.”





# OLIVER

That pit? It becomes a cavernous maw as I read. It's like rubbernecking, and I can't stop.

This time, it's worse. Far worse. Because there's a GIF someone made of Summer splashing water at me, saying, "You're evil! You're laughing at me. You're a terrible fake fiancé."

And that's all it takes.

*@ManCandyFan: NO!!!! It was all fake???? They were fake dating? They were faking us? No, no, no.*

*@LovesListsofMen: Do you mean YES???? It means he's single.*

*@GossipLoverLandOnly: Single and going right back on my Single and Hot in the City list.*

*@ManCandyFan: Put him at the top. But also, NOOO!!!! They were such a cute couple.*

*@CheetahNoah: They seemed real to me. So real. I don't know about this new intel. Are we sure? Like, really sure? Super sure?*

*@MenAreJerks: He's a douche. This proves his douchiness.*

*@PeopleAreJerks: Um, hello? She's a douche too. She's just as bad. They both lied to us. They totally lied. And I'm sad, sad, sad, but not surprised.*

*@ILoveJerks: I love liars. They are so hawt.*

*@IloveCockyJackholes: OMG, yes. Liars are like the hottest guys ever. They lie, and they look good lying. And he sure looks delish lying.*

*@DownwithDouches: Look at this picture of them eating cookie batter. I hate them.*

*@ILoveJerks: Would eat cookie batter off his chest. Even with raw eggs in it.*

*@MenAreJerks: I would eat it off her chest.*

*@DownwithDouches: Also, her ring looks fake. I bet it's cubic zirconia.*

*@FanofNietzsche: What did I tell you about jerks? Jerks are always the hotties. And jerks always win. And he won. The hot jerk got the hot girl, and they hoodwinked us all. Once again, it's the universe's way of reminding us that nihilism is alive and well.*

*@QuestionEverything22: Or maybe that they are pranksters?*

*@DownwithDouches: They pranked us! Let's start a movement to stop pranksters. Also, I zoomed in on her ring from the hockey game. TOTAL FAKE, like they are.*

*@HZRedhead: Ahem. We stopped the pranksters. You're welcome.*

*@TheThird: Yes. You see, we had a feeling, Hazel and I. We sensed they were faking it. So we followed them. And then we caught them on camera. They tried to trick us all. But guess who's getting the last laugh?*

*@HZRedhead: We are. We're cackling as we sit in a coffee shop writing this and smooching and enjoying the satisfaction of exposing two douchey jerk canoes who tried to trick us all!*

*@ManCandyFan: Umm, aren't you married, @TheThird?*

*@TheThird: Happily divorced and enjoying my new girl. We fell in love as we took down the fake fiancées. NO ONE should lie about love.*

*@HZRedhead: Love is beautiful and true. Like you.*

@TheThird: No, like you. <3

I yank on boxer briefs one-handed while scrolling, slack-jawed, through my phone.

“The internet must end,” I say.

“Like my dreams are ending. This is terrible,” she says, hunting around for clothes in a hurry, finding her purse where she stashed her sundress from the thrift shop. She tugs it over her head, then borrows some boxer briefs from me and retrieves her wet dress and underthings from the bathroom. The briefs on under her dress are kind of an odd look, but, hey, desperate times.

And they’re definitely desperate when I see there’s a message from my newest client on my phone. It’s three words long.

*Is this true?*

And another from Helen Williams Designs asking me to call her.

Then Summer wags her phone. “Look at this.” Her breath catches, and her face twists in a wince as she shoves the screen at me.

It’s a message from *The Dating Pool*.

The note is terse, to the point.

*This email is to inform you that both the Best Dates piece and your winnings from the essay contest have been canceled, your entries disqualified.*

And one from her mother too. She thrusts that at me next.

*Honey, are you all right? My book club is forwarding me a lot of strange tweets. I told them that I would know if you were*

*engaged or if you were faking it. So let me know which it is.  
Love you, Mom.*

“I need to go.” Her voice cracks, and she covers her mouth with her hand.

“Yeah, I need to deal with this too.” I scramble to get dressed, cursing as I tug on jeans then a shirt. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. Not a single bit of it.”

She freezes. “What?”

“The whole thing. It’s a fucking shitshow.”

She swallows roughly then nods. “I didn’t mean for any of it to happen either. None of it.” She grabs her purse and says, “I’ll talk to you later.”

Then she marches out, stopping at the door to turn and offer a helpless shrug. “I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

“It’s my fault,” I argue, but the door’s falling shut behind her.

Out in the hall, her phone rings, and I hear her ask, “What’s going on, Roxanne?”



# SUMMER

“You’re stuck on a stripper pole?”

I rub my ear in case I’m hearing things. Because that just can’t be. How can Roxanne be stuck on a stripper pole? How can anyone be stuck on a stripper pole?

“I’m not stuck,” she says diplomatically.

“Who is, then?” I ask, swiping at the tears pricking my eyes, zeroing in on the Mayday call instead.

“It’s more like the pole is stuck.”

“In your apartment?”

“In the activity room,” she confesses in a hushed voice.

“How is there a stripper pole in the activity room?”

“I had it installed. As part of the bingo revolt.”

“Oh my God,” I groan, rushing to the stairwell and racing downstairs so I can get across town. “I’ll be there in five.”

Once outside, I call a Lyft, which speeds me through the park to Sunshine Living.

I run to the second-floor activity room, blinking when I find Roxanne, a seventyish man named Michael, and a woman Roxanne’s age, tugging at a silver pole.

“Ah, Summer!” Roxanne rises, a little wobbly, setting her puma head cane down. “Be a dear. You’re so strong and young. Can you help us move this?”

I shake my head in disbelief. This is my life? I'm carrying a plastic bag with a sopping wet bridesmaid's dress inside, and now I have to uninstall a stripper pole, plus the internet hates me, my dreams have been crushed, and the man I love thinks we are a mistake. He didn't mean for any of it to happen. He didn't mean for *us* to happen.

But first things first. Dropping the bag, I rush to the crew who are pulling—to no avail—at a stripper pole installed in a silver base. After a quick assessment, I figure out they were unscrewing it the wrong way. Grabbing the screwdriver, I slide the tool into the base and detach the pole from it, holding tightly so it doesn't fall. Once it's detached, the pole comes apart in two pieces.

Roxanne guards the entrance to the activity room, then mouths, *Coast is clear. Let's take it to my place.*

I hand her and her friends the pole pieces. "Maybe that's where it should have been installed in the first place."

"Live and learn," she says, then stomps off with her friends.

I sink down on the couch, grab my phone, and stare at my messages, trying to decide what to tackle next.

But really, there's nothing to tackle.

I can't undo *The Dating Pool's* decision.

I can't convince them to requalify me.

And I can't prove we didn't lie. We did lie. We were fake, and we won't ever be real.

But I can at least return my mother's call.

"Sweetheart. I'm at Mags's place. Where are you?"

"I'm on my way," I say, crying for real, and there is nothing fake about these tears.





# OLIVER

“So this is true.”

The words are clipped, crisp.

I pinch my nose, nodding as I slump down on my couch.  
“Yes.”

I tell Geneva the truth. There’s no point in lying now. “It’s all true that it was all fake.”

She sighs. “I’m soooo—”

I take the liberty of filling in the blank. “Disappointed. Yeah, I’m disappointed in myself too.”

“Yes. I thought I could trust you as my attorney.”

“Of course you did. That’s why you hired me.” A weight sinks onto my shoulders, dragging me down. There is no point backpedaling now. No purpose in covering it up. The proof’s there on social media, where all truths and lies are exposed.

The ring, the comments, the offhand joke between Summer and me post-paddleboat hump. Those people who took a picture of us on the street last night were probably sent by our crazy exes. More proof that exes are crazy.

But even so, I deserve this.

I tricked a client.

“And I suppose that’s what is most surprising. I would expect you, of all people, to know the value of trust,” she says.

I hang my head, dragging my hand through my hair. “You’re not wrong. It was a mistake. It seemed like a way to save face at the time, but I should have told you the truth when you first called me. I wanted to help you with your deal. I want to take care of my employees and my aunt and everyone else. So I said we were engaged because it seemed easier.”

She sighs heavily. “I suppose what’s so strange about it is that ...” She takes a beat to think, or maybe to mull over what to say. “It seemed so real. Last night, the things you said to Summer, the way you looked at her. I suppose it made me believe in love again. Like it was possible to get hurt and then get back up and try again. When you said—”

“I realized after all these years that it’d always been her.” I repeat my words from last night. Words that make my chest feel lighter. Words that fall from my lips so easily.

“Yes.” There’s a smile in her voice. I can hear it. “When you said that, Oliver, I was so sure you meant it.”

I sit up straighter, recalling last night, remembering how my heart thundered when I looked at Summer at the party. How it ached when I put her in the car. How it sped up when we were in the paddleboat, then the shower, then the bed, only an hour ago.

“I did mean it.” I’m speaking the whole truth now.

“What?”

“I did. It was all fake, and it was all true too.”

She’s quiet, humming softly then asking carefully, “What do you mean?”

“It started as a ruse. It started because you didn’t trust me. So I thought it’d be safer if I was involved with the woman who wrote the letter, so it wouldn’t be a character indictment. And Summer’s my best friend. I’ve known her for seventeen years. She’s been by my side through everything. I know how to make her laugh, I know how to comfort her when she cries, I know what makes her happy—the park and exercise and her grandmother and trying new things—and I know her dreams. And I want to help her achieve them.”

There goes my heart again, pounding mercilessly against my rib cage, trying to find her, to see her. “And I suppose I didn’t truly realize all of this until we faked it. But I also think maybe a part of me knew I had feelings for her and just didn’t see what was in front of me. After all, I never wanted to invite Emily to prom. I only wanted to go with Summer.”

Geneva sighs happily. “Oh my God, that’s so sweet.”

Then I freeze, remembering something else I said, not last night, but just an hour ago.

*I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.*

Those words could easily have been misinterpreted.

Shit.

I picture Summer’s face, the hurt in her pretty brown eyes, and I’m sure they were.

There’s a voice in my head, loud and clear, and it’s not my sister’s voice, though I suspect she’d tell me exactly what I need to do *right now*.

And I know she’d be right, because my own voice is telling me the same thing.

“Excuse me, Geneva. You’re not the one I should be saying this to. Summer is.”

I hang up, grab my keys, and leave.



# SUMMER

I am a stubborn girl.

I know this about myself.

But when I walk into my apartment and find not just my roommate but my mother, my niece, and my twin brother, I let all the tears rain down.

I head for the couch, nosedive into it, and cry in my mother's lap. Amelia crawls up next to me, crouching by my side. "Don't cry, Aunt Summer. Everything's going to be fine. I swear."

And that makes me cry a little harder—her sweet six-year-old faith in the world.

"Tell me why you're so sad, honey," Mags says.

"Yes, tell us. What can we do?"

Amelia snuggles on my lap. "I'm all ears. That's what my daddy says to me when I want to talk to him. He says, *What can I do?*"

Logan ruffles his daughter's hair, then plops down on the couch next to all of us—four women and a guy.

"I'm in love with Oliver Harris." I choke out the words past the prickly, complicated emotions that clog my throat.

Logan snorts.

I shoot him a sharp stare. "What was that for?"

“Tell me something I don’t know. I came here to see if you were okay, and this is what you confess? Something we’ve all known for years?”

“Thanks a lot,” I mutter.

My grandmother smiles, petting my hair. “Ignore him, honey.”

“Yes. We all do,” my mother says.

“I like Oliver,” Amelia chirps.

“Me too. But it’s a mess, and he said the whole thing was a mistake, and it *is* a massive mistake. Just look at what happened. I lost the prize money. I lost the chance to write the feature piece. I lost Oliver.”

My mother tuts. “Did you lose Oliver though?”

I make a show of looking around. “He’s not here, and he said it was all a mistake.”

“It’s hard to believe it’s a mistake when you seem like such a great couple,” she says diplomatically.

“But we’re not. This isn’t some cheesy romance where everything works out perfectly. It’s real life.” I swipe my hand across my face, swallowing these dumb tears. I draw a deep, fueling breath, one that I hope masks all this pain in my heart, this wild ache for Oliver. An ache that won’t be soothed. “It’s fine. I don’t want a relationship. I’m not interested in one. It doesn’t remotely make sense in my life.” I hold my chin up high even as my lower lip quivers.

“Relationships never entirely make sense, dear,” my mom says softly. “Did you think it made sense to me when I met your father?”

I furrow my brow. “I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it.”

She tucks a finger under my chin, tilting my head so she can look me in the eyes. “I just loved him. It wasn’t always convenient.”

I straighten my shoulders. “Well, I don’t have time for a relationship. I’m trying to grow my business, and it’s going to be even harder now. I’ll have to start over.”

“You can do both.”

I stare at her and point out a truth of my whole life. “But you didn’t do both.”

Her brow knits. “What do you mean?”

“When you quit working to help with Dad’s business. You always made comments about how you left your job at the bookstore. You didn’t really want to leave it, did you?”

“Sweetheart. I did want to. I chose to,” she says, rubbing my shoulder.

“Why did you always say that, then? To me? To us?” I gesture to my brother and then to me.

Logan simply smiles, his grin telling me he knows why she did it.

“Because I was proud of my decision,” my mother says. “I brought it up because it was what I’d wanted to do. I was glad I made that choice. I stood by it then; I stand by it now. And whatever you decide, I hope you have no regrets. There are too many other things to regret in life, and I don’t want your career to be one of them.” She squeezes my arm then lets go to tap my chest. “But I don’t think the way you feel now, this hurt in your heart, has anything to do with your career.”

Mags squeezes my other arm. “It doesn’t at all.”

And Amelia shoots me a sad smile. “Just be happy and tell Ollie you love him. Sheesh.”

Logan scoops up his daughter. “You are full of brilliant advice.” He meets my gaze. “And as Oliver’s good friend, let me tell you something, Summer. You might need to spell it out for him—how you feel—because he doesn’t always believe when good things happen.”

My heart crawls up my throat. “You think he wants this?”



Before I can say anything more, my phone buzzes. It's Oliver. I answer it the second it rings, but he speaks first.

"It's Ollie, and I've come to fix something stupid I said earlier."

"Yes."

Logan walks down the hall and holds the door open for me.

Rather than wait, I rush out, down the steps, and into Oliver's arms, where he waits on the stairwell.



# OLIVER

She's flying down the stairs, her blonde hair a sheet behind her, a huge grin on her gorgeous face. I stop on the landing, my smile taking over my entire being as I drink in the sight of the woman I love madly.

"It wasn't a mistake. Nothing was a mistake," she blurts out.

"I know. I meant it all. I wanted it all to happen." Words tumble out in a rush, and I reach to catch her and tug her into my arms.

She's wrapped around me in an instant, arms, legs, and then lips on mine.

"I meant it all, Oliver," she says between kisses. "I wanted it all to happen. When I said I didn't mean for any of it to happen, I meant everything going wrong. But not everything that went right. And we're right."

I run my arms up her back, holding her tight, thrilling at the feeling of her, at the truth of her words. "We are so right together," I agree, happiness taking over my chest, sunshine flooding my veins. "I love you. I am in love with you. And I never wanted to ask Emily to prom. I always wanted to ask you."

The smile that takes over her face is radiant. Beautiful. Magical. And all for me.

"I was hoping you'd say that. I wanted that. I think I started falling in love with you that night all those years ago,"

she says, all soft and sweet and so sure.

“I definitely did. But I’m a simple man. It took faking it for me to realize how real it all is. How real everything is with you. I don’t want this to stop. I want it to keep going, on and on, always.” I press a kiss to her lips, savoring the chance to imprint her with the full truth of my heart. “Because I’m in love with you, Summer. Madly.”

She slides off me, planting her feet on the ground, cupping my cheeks. “I am so in love with my best friend. Will you be mine?”

I laugh, shaking my head in amusement. “I’m not letting you go. So yes, I’ll be yours, and you’ll be mine. And let’s not fake a thing ever again.”

She slides her hand down my cheek, stroking my jawline. “I was never faking a thing with you.”

I close my eyes, brush my lips to hers, then claim her mouth in a possessive, greedy kiss that’ll turn filthy if we let it.

So I stop, running a hand through her hair. “After all these years, it’s always been you.”

She rises on tiptoe, kissing me tenderly. “And it’s you for me.”

Then she takes my hand, leads me up the stairs, and kicks everyone out, including her grandmother.

It’s fine by me.

I have plans for her. For her body. Her heart. Her mind.

But I’ll start with her body. Even though I had her mere hours ago, I want her again, and she wants the same thing. We go to her room, strip down to nothing, and I bring her close to me then slide inside her, making love to my best friend.



# SUMMER

*A few weeks later*

“Hmm. What would taste good with an order of humble pie?” I ask as I peruse the display at Stella’s Cookie Shack.

“Personally, I highly recommend the cherry chocolate chip cookie as a chaser when you have to eat crow,” Stella says with a wink.

“Make it a double, then,” my mom says.

Stella plucks two cookies from the case, slides them onto a plate, and hands it to us. We head to a white table in the back of her shop, settling in with the sweets.

My mom picks up a cookie. “A toast.”

I pick up the other one. “Yes, let’s toast to the end of my stubborn streak.”

She scoffs but says nothing.

“What?”

“You’ll be stubborn again. But I’m glad you’re not being stubborn now.”

I give her a soft and very genuine smile. “Me too. Also, thank you, Mom. I truly appreciate you doing this for me.”

Setting down her cookie, she stretches her hand across the table and squeezes mine. “I love that you’re pursuing your dream. I love that you saved so much of the money. And I love

your commitment to doing this. It's a beautiful thing to bring health and fitness to the older generation. I'm proud of you." Emotions swell in my chest as she clasps my hand more tightly. "But I'm especially proud that you're allowing me to help. Thank you for letting me."

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Thank you for making this happen."

We finalize the details of her gift to me.

I wanted it to be a loan, but she said she wanted to give it to me, no strings attached.

And I decided to take it.

With grace, at last.

It seemed more important to move forward than to dig in my heels.

And that means my gym opens in less than two months, and I have a ton to do.

I couldn't be happier.





# OLIVER

## *Later that day*

She's staring at me shamelessly.

She doesn't even pretend not to.

As I reach the ladder at the edge of the pool, my gaze locks on Summer, on the naughty glint in her brown eyes.

She watches unabashedly as I climb up the ladder and out of the pool.

And I watch her too.

My girlfriend looks gorgeous in her workout clothes.

But then, she looked stunning in a sopping wet sequined dress.

"Feel free to check out the crown jewels."

She wiggles her brow. "I am. But I'll give them a more thorough inspection tonight."

"Excellent. You be sure to give a proper review, okay?"

"Count on it." She offers me a towel then snatches it back.

"No towel for me?"

"Nah. I'm going to check you out a little bit longer."

"Feel free."

With a smile, she hands me the towel, and I dry off. “How was your workout?”

“Amazing. Roxanne came with me. We did a Zumba class here. And she’ll do the water aerobics I’m teaching tomorrow.”

“And then pole dancing? Have you signed her up for that?”

“Not yet. But I will,” she says, then she glances at the clock. “Do you have a few minutes? I was hoping I could borrow your brain to review my gym plans.”

“Always. I always have time for you.”



# OLIVER

*Several months later*

I pace in my office, finishing a call. “Yes, we can absolutely add that clause into the contract.”

“Oh, good. That’ll make a huge difference with the next acquisition,” Geneva says.

“Almost as big a difference as in the last partnership.” As we talk, I check out the crowds below, New Yorkers scurrying by on Park Avenue.

“Yes. That deal was top-notch,” she adds. “I’m glad I stayed with you.”

“As am I.”

We wrap up and say goodbye, and I hang up the phone.

When I turn around, Jane’s standing in the doorway. “Still have her eating out of the palm of your hand?”

I shrug like it’s no big deal, when, in fact, it’s a huge deal that she stayed.

I didn’t chase her. I didn’t beg. She decided to stick around on her own, telling me that the work was good, that she appreciated me owning up to the ruse, and that if I lied to her again, she’d have my head.

That seemed fair and reasonable on all counts, so we finished the first deal and started working on a second one.

“Besides,” Geneva had said. “It’s your personal life, and honestly, you’re free to do what you want with it. I shouldn’t have cared so much or taken it so personally.”

“Don’t think twice about it,” I’d told her, all too happy to move on.

I meet Jane’s green-eyed gaze. “Aren’t they all eating out of my hand, Jane? Aren’t they all?”

“Ah, there’s that cocky nephew of mine.”

“And you wouldn’t have me any other way.” I glance at my watch. “And on that note, I need to meet the fellas.”

“Don’t stay out too late.”

“I promise to be good.”

I leave, catching a Lyft to Chelsea, texting my cousin in Paris on the way, who can’t stop reminding me that falling in love with Summer was exactly what he meant by an *exit* strategy.

**Christian:** When are you going to admit I was right about everything?

**Oliver:** You were right. There, are you happy?

**Christian:** Yes. And I suspect you are too. Happy, that is.

He’s right on that count. He’s completely right.

The car pulls over to the curb, and I thank the driver, then get out to meet Logan and Fitz for drinks. Summer’s teaching a kickboxing class at her gym now, but I’ll see her tonight when she comes home.

Since she lives with me now.

I open the door to Gin Joint, finding my mates quickly. They’re toasting to all sorts of good news.

I order a beer, then join them.

“So, we have loads to celebrate tonight,” I say.

“Yes, how good of you to grace us with your presence. Maybe *you’ll* have something to celebrate soon,” Logan deadpans.

“Maybe I will, but let’s start with you.”

Fitz raises a glass and stretches his free hand across the table to knock Logan on the shoulder. “To this cat finally getting on the apps. The ladies of New York had better watch out. They don’t even know what’s coming their way.”

Logan takes a drink. “Speaking of, remember that woman I told you guys about at lunch the other day?”

My ears prick. I know who he’s talking about. I also know what went down and it’s way more complicated than he ever expected. “The Snoopy lunchbox woman?” I ask just to make sure who we’re discussing.

“She’s the one,” Logan says, heavily. “Her name is Bryn, and she is the sexiest, most captivating, most off-limits woman I’ve ever met.”

“Did anything else happen since you and I last talked?” I ask.

“Yeah, stop holding out on me, bro,” Fitz says. “I want all the deets too.”

“It’s quite complicated,” I say, like a warning.

Logan scratches his jaw. “Crazy complicated,” he says, then catches Fitz up to speed on the details.

“Whoa. I do not envy you there, Logan. Good luck with that. It actually sounds mega complicated,” Fitz says.

“And you?” I ask Fitz. “What’s your news?”

“My little sister was just accepted into the art program of her dreams—in London. So I’ll be taking her over there in a few months, helping her get set up.”

“Say hello to the homeland for me. And don’t forget to check out The Magpie. Some of my mates over there were raving about it. It’s their favorite local bar.”

Fitz taps his temple. “I’ll file that away.”

“Supposedly, the bartenders are good-looking.”

He arches a brow. “Tell me more.”

I laugh. “You’ll have to figure out that part on your own.”

“Maybe you’ll meet someone with an accent just like Oliver’s who’ll sweep you off your feet,” Logan chimes in.

Fitz laughs. “Not gonna lie—I do love a hot British accent. But getting swept off my feet? I don’t think so.”

I shrug. “It can happen to the best of us, mate. After all, tomorrow I’m going shopping.”





# OLIVER

*A few weeks later*

Another satisfying last meal is on the books.

We leave Melt My Heart on a Sunday afternoon and wander through Central Park, the afternoon sun warming our skin, the birds chirping.

“I’ve decided,” I announce as we walk along the path.

“And what did you decide?”

“The grilled cheese at Melt My Heart wins.”

She shoots me an *oh really* look. “What about that sandwich makes the cut?”

I drape an arm around her, loving that I can, that I have the freedom to touch her as we walk and talk. “It meets the most critical requirement. It says something about how I lived my life.”

“It says you loved carbs and cheese? Get in line. Me too.”

“Carbs and cheese are the hallmarks of a well-lived life.”

She laughs as we near the carousel. “Words to live by.”

The carnival music grows louder as the merry-go-round comes into view. “But in this case,” I say, returning to the reason we’re here, “I believe what it says is this.”

I stop, take her hand, and meet her gaze. “I hope it says that the grilled cheese sandwiches we just devoured are the last meal we’ll have before ...”

I drop down to one knee, take her hand, and finish the thought. “Before you become my fiancée for real.”

She gasps, her hand covering her mouth. “Ollie.”

“Summer, I’ve been falling in love with you since I was seventeen, and I plan to keep falling in love with you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me? Because I would love for my best friend to become my wife.”

Her smile is worthy of a million social media posts. Of a thousand Instagram likes. Of all the BuzzFeed lists ever made.

But it’s just for me.

No cameras.

No pictures.

No Twitter.

And that’s how I want it to be, as the woman I love falls to her knees, throws her arms around me, and smothers me in kisses.

Well, I could get used to this.

When she breaks the kiss, she says, “Yes. In case that wasn’t clear—yes.”

I take out a box from my pocket, slide a diamond solitaire on her finger, and kiss the hell out of my very real fiancée.

# EPILOGUE

*Summer*

*A few months later*

Dear Sexy Ex-Fiancé,

I've said this before, and I'll say it again.

Exes are exes for a reason.

But not always for bad reasons.

You're an ex now for the best of reasons.

Because you're graduating. You're moving on up and kicking all of those old titles to the wayside.

You're no longer the guy I crushed on. You're no longer my pretend ex-boyfriend. You're definitely not my fake fiancé. And you're about to leave your position as my real fiancé.

Today, you become my husband.

And as I write this on the morning of our wedding day, I can't wait to walk down the aisle and say, "I do."

But fair warning.

I might jump into your arms.

Who am I kidding? I will definitely jump into your arms.

It's what I've been wanting to do for so many years.

And you know what I've learned from falling in love with you when we were younger?

That every day gets better. Every day, I love you more. And every day, I love knowing you.

Once upon a time, I wasn't ready to give my all to a relationship.

That changed with you.

And I want it all with you.

There is a world out there and so much to see. I want to see it with you. Always with you.

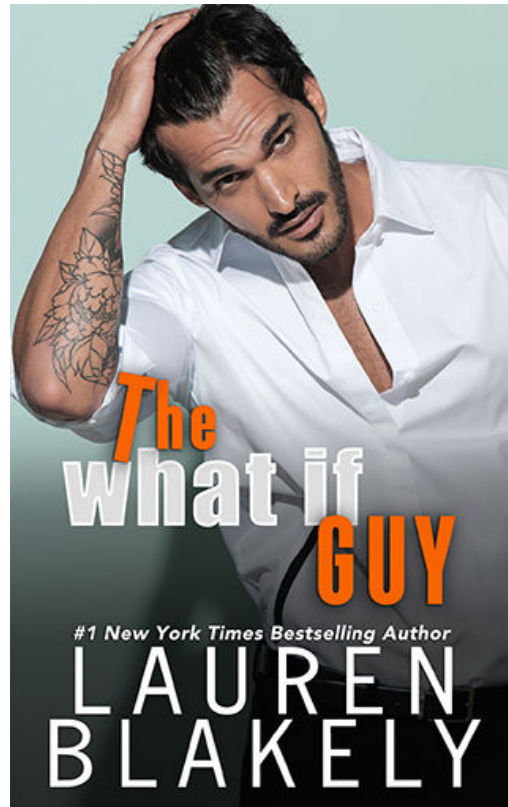
So, thank you for being the sexiest ex-fiancé of all. Now, it's time for you to move into your new role, so let me say this ...

Dear Sexy-As-Sin Husband—I'm going to love you for the rest of my life.

THE END

EAGER FOR LOGAN'S STORY? It's complicated indeed and comes in [THE WHAT IF GUY, a sexy, swoony romantic comedy!](#) Also, Fitz's romance is told in my MM romance, a sexy, irresistible, epic romance – [A GUY WALKS INTO MY BAR.](#) Sign up for my newsletter to make sure you don't a single sexy [new book!](#)

**THE WHAT IF GUY**



**It should be an easy rule to follow – don’t bang your boss...**

**But I didn’t know who he was when I met him.**

And the first time I saw him, our connection sounded like the stuff of romantic legends — that whole “their eyes locked across a crowded room” moment that turned into more.

I didn’t believe it... until it happened to me.

Fine, the charming, clever, sexy-as-sin guy in the tailored suit was only trying to buy the same Snoopy lunchbox (as a gift!), but still, our eyes totally locked, and my lady parts definitely tingled as we vied for the prize.

Naturally, I did what any badass business woman would do. Negotiated for the lunchbox, then found my what-if guy online and made plans to see him the next night.

One night only — that was the deal we made.

But one fantastic night had us both changing our minds in the morning. And making plans for another.

Until I walked into the office to learn he just bought my company.

And here's the biggest rule of romantic legends — no matter what, don't bang your boss.

Especially if you're already falling for him.

THE WHAT IF GUY is a sexy standalone you can escape into!

**And don't forget to grab Fitz's romance as he heads to England and meets a sexy bartender who rocks his world...**

Every bartender should follow one simple rule—don't go home with the customers.

That's been easy for me to stick to, until the night a cocky, confident, and sinfully charming hockey star walks into my bar. This sexy athlete is too hard to resist, especially when he makes it clear how much he wants the “sarcastic, witty, hot AF” guy behind the bar—also known as me.

Still, I'm not keen on breaking my own rules since I know where that can lead—no place good.

But when that man makes his case with one bone-searing kiss on the streets of London, I throw resistance out the window.

What could go wrong with a hot, dirty, no-strings-attached fling before he leaves town in five days?

Trouble is, soon our nights together lead to days, to long conversations, to getting to know each other, and to something I never expected—falling ridiculously hard for a man who's getting on a plane to America when I live a world away.

My life is here. His is there. And no amount of falling or feeling will change that one big problem.

*Warning: contains hot hotel sex, loads of dirty talk, PDA all over London, and two sexy, witty, charming alpha heroes...*

**Grab sexy, irresistible, epic romance – A GUY WALKS  
INTO MY BAR!**

# HARD WOOD

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**Women often say a good man is hard to find. And a hard man is even better.**

That's why I'm quite a catch— good, hard, loaded, and wait for it...I'm ready to settle down too. But the woman I want to pitch my tent with lives clear across the country. Neither of us wants to get lost in those woods. All I have to do is resist her for the week she's in town.

**I try. I swear I try. But yeah, that doesn't work out.**

And after one fantastic night with my good friend Mia, I'm ready to give her years of nights under the stars. What's a few thousand miles when love's involved? But there's a hitch in my plans — she just hired my adventure tour company. If there's one thing I'm committed to, it's running a squeaky clean business. Number one on my list of iron-clad rules?

**Don't screw your customers.**



But what's a guy to do when she's so hard to resist? How hard can it be to keep our hands off each other for a quick group tour down the hills and over the trails? I'm about to find out, and I have a feeling I'm going to need a new badge of honor because things are about to get **very hard in the woods.**

## PROLOGUE

By now, most women have met the half dozen or so basic types of men in the world.

Just to be sure, though, let's review the lineup.

First, there's the too-cool-for-school playboy who solemnly swears he'll never settle down. Next to him in the modern-day parade of dudes is the Grouchy McGrouch Pants. This surly, bearded guy is a softie beneath the dickhead exterior he shows to the world, along with his beanie cap. By his side is the guarded businessman in his three-piece suit, housing deep, dark secrets that only one woman can unlock. We have other roles in Guy Central Casting: the lumbersexual, the groomed father, the citified pretty boy, the hot nerd, and the bad boy with a heart of gold.

Trust me when I say the ladies of the world have heard every one of their stories.

I know that because I've fucking heard them. I've heard them from the guys, and I've heard them from the gals. When you take people out of their comfort zone and into the woods, they tend to tell you everything—every sordid detail. I'm honestly kind of amazed that men and women, women and women, and men and men get together at all. There's so much baggage going around, it's like a goddamn virus.

As for me?

I'm simple. I travel light. I don't bring luggage to the table. I hoist my backpack and I'm ready to go.

I'm a man of many skills. Give me a battery and I'll start a campfire. Show me an old phone and I'll make a compass. I'm the guy who knows how to get out of jams. I can fix a tire, repair a sink, gut a fish, pick a lock, and survive a bear attack—I've been there, done that, and have the merit badges to prove it.

Not gonna lie. Women do tend to like a guy who can get shit done without bitching about it. That's why I've had a nice run of luck with the ladies. But I'm not looking just to get lucky anymore.

I'm ready for a whole lot more.

I'd like to think that makes me the good guy with all the skills when we're talking about types. I'm the unicorn, and I'm not just talking about the length of my horn, if you catch my drift.

I'm the guy who's fit, successful, baggage-fucking-free, and—wait for it—ready to settle down.

Just call me a four-leaf clover.

The trouble is the woman I want is off-limits. She's my buddy's sister. But don't worry. That's not the issue. Max is a cool cat, and he has no problem with the fact that I have it bad for his little sis.

The problem is something else entirely, and I have one week to fix it. This is where all my life-hacking skills will have to come into play.

Let's do this.

Human beings tend to overthink all sorts of stuff, but a lot of our quandaries are pretty basic. You're either going out to dinner at the new Italian joint, or you're staying home to make a turkey sandwich. You're doing the laundry so you have a fresh shirt to wear, or you're sniffing the hamper, hunting for an old-but-good-enough-*ie*. You either carve out the time to run five miles, or you watch another ten episodes of *Breaking Bad*.

For the record, the answers are Italian, wash on hot, and lace up.

I take the same straightforward approach to the current black-and-white question posed to me by Camilla Montes, the local WRBC Channel 10 morning news anchor.

"Patrick, how will our viewers know if Fluffy wants to go for a hike?" she asks in that perfectly modulated TV reporter voice that matches her coiffed black hair.

"If you're wondering if Tiger, Tom, or Tabby is ready to become an adventure cat, there's a simple litmus test any pet owner can conduct." I sit on the couch across from her and run a hand down Zeus's back. He arches into my palm and rumbles, his purr so loud he could land a career in the cat sound-effects business. *Show-off*. But in his defense, if I possessed an Al Green-style purr, I'd make sure the ladies heard it all the time, too. "I like to call it the drag or no-drag cat."

“Interesting. Tell us more,” she says, her voice dripping with curiosity.

“Your cat either willingly lets you put a leash around his furry neck, or he turns into putty when you harness him, and you wind up dragging his feline butt across the floor.” I mime tugging a gone-limp cat on a leash.

“That does make it crystal clear.” Camilla flashes her practiced grin, then points a polished fingernail at me. “But how did you know to try with Zeus? Did you simply want a famous hiking partner, or did he insist on it?”

“I listened to the cat.” I lean forward, parking one hand on my knee where my cargo shorts end, since the station likes me to dress like an REI model for my segments on *Tips and Tricks for Enjoying the Great Outdoors*. “His behavior told me he might be willing. For instance, one time, I headed down the hallway to drop the trash in the chute, and Zeus followed me out the door of the apartment, staying by my side the whole time.” I lower my voice, cup the side of my mouth, and speak in a stage whisper. “And I don’t think it was *only* because there was leftover salmon in the trash.”

Camilla laughs.

“Salmon aside, he exhibited this inquisitive behavior often, and that’s when I decided to give a leash and harness a whirl.”

“And now he’s become The Hiking Tomcat.” She gestures grandly to my long-haired cat, who’s lounging next to me, his white-gloved paws folded in front of his chest and a look of satisfaction on his furry face. I swear this dude is such a ham. He was born for the cameras. “Can you show our viewers how a cat who likes to go for hikes will handle being harnessed?”

“Why, I thought you’d never ask,” I say as I stand, grab the leash and harness from the couch, and pat my leg.

Zeus stretches, slinks down the side of the couch, and gazes up at me.

“Want to go for a hike?”

His tail swishes back and forth.

Look, I'm not claiming he understands English. He's a cat, after all, not some kind of Cesar Milan-trained dog. But Zeus knows the drill, and the leash is dangling in my hand. He stretches his neck out, almost as if he's inviting me to put the red hiking harness over his head. I slide it on and clip his leash to the end. Zeus struts a few feet.

Camilla's smile beams as brightly as the TV lights blasting from above. "There you go."

"Would you like to walk him, Camilla?"

Her glossy red lips part in a wide grin. "I would love to walk this Internet superstar."

I place a finger to my lips. "Shh. We don't want his fame to go to his head."

"If he only knew how purr-fectly popular he is." Camilla takes the leash and walks Zeus around the set. "We brought in something to simulate the conditions on the trails."

Camilla escorts my boy to some fake rocks set up for this demo while the on-air screen shows an Internet video I've shot of Zeus clambering up a hill on a nearby trail. When they reach the rocks, the shot returns to Camilla, walking alongside in heels as Zeus scurries up the rocks and then down the other side. Note to self—score this cat some commercial work and see if we can retire on Friskies royalties.

But then, I've no interest in slowing down. My life is the textbook definition of *so fucking good*. My business is thriving, my family is healthy and happy, and my friends are settling down. There's only one thing I long for more of. Well, not a thing. More like a lovely, captivating, I-just-click-with-her *someone*.

But now's not the time to dwell on a certain woman.

Camilla returns to her blue chair, and I park myself on the couch again, alongside my loyal companion. I spend the next forty-five seconds reviewing trail safety for those who walk with their cats. After all, hiking with a feline is not for the faint of heart. People with dogs have no idea how easy they have it. Hiking with a feline is a whole other kettle of fish, but well

worth it for the photos alone. We're talking unexpected goldmine. When my sister, Evie, plunked this cat on my doorstep and begged me to give him a home, I had no idea he'd turn out to be, one, totally cool, and two, the best marketing ever for my adventure tour company.

When the segment ends, Camilla thanks me and cuts to a commercial. "See you again next week, Patrick. I've been thinking we could do a piece on first aid in the woods."

"Absolutely."

"And you know what I've been dying to have you do a segment on?"

"Whatever you want, I can do it," I say, keeping up the easygoing vibe, since that's what works best for business partners.

"What if we did a piece on how to glamp?"

I chuckle lightly, rubbing a palm across my short, neat beard. "I can do that, and I can also give you a simple trick for camping with style right now if you'd like."

Her chocolate-brown eyes twinkle with excitement. "Please do."

"Do you have your phone with you?"

"Of course. It's on silent, but I'm never without my closest companion," she says, taking it from her skirt pocket, unlocking the screen, and handing it to me.

I tap a few words into the search bar, and the result I need returns quickly. I hand the phone to Camilla. "This is who you call."

Her reaction is priceless—a slow smile spreads as the name and number for the Ritz Carlton appears on her screen.

"So true. What can I say? I'm not an outdoorsy girl at all. But I love your segments. So does my new intern, Taylor," she says, lowering her voice and looking toward a bubbly blonde who's waiting to escort me from the set. Funny, since my job requires me to find my way out of pretty much anywhere on God's great, green earth. Not to mention, I've been the guest

commentator for the station's Friday morning outdoors segment for a few months now and I know the way to the door.

Then, because I like the furry dude and don't want to torture him—and taking a cat for a walk on the sidewalks of Manhattan is a unique and terrible form of torture—I drop Zeus into my backpack, slide the straps on, and leave the studio with the perky cheerleader girl by my side and the cat's silvery head poking out the top of the pack.

“I made s'mores the other day,” Taylor offers with a big smile, her bright blue eyes meeting mine. “They were so good.”

Her *so* has eight syllables and all of them drip with innuendo.

“That's great,” I say, since I'm not interested in entertaining any syllables or innuendo with someone barely past puberty.

“Do you like s'mores, Patrick?”

“Who doesn't like s'mores?”

“I was wondering, though, if you might have any tips for me on how to make them. Like, how do I get the chocolate and marshmallow to *come* together perfectly?” She stops at the door, leans her hip against it suggestively, and twirls a strand of her hair.

And I do believe s'mores porn is officially a thing.

Even though I pride myself on making the world's greatest version of the campfire treat, I keep my answer simple, but clear. “It's all in how long you let the ingredients *age*,” I say, since Taylor is twenty, twenty-one at best. “See you next week.”

I say goodbye and leave, catching a train downtown then walking through the streets of lower Manhattan.

Do I get stares because of the cat on my back?

Hell, yeah.



Do I enjoy it?

Absolutely.

I smile and nod, giving a few salutes and a couple of *how are yous* and even a *meow* as a little kid walks by with her mom and whispers while pointing at my shoulder. As if I don't know there's a badass pussycat purring in my ear.

As I turn onto the block with my building, he's not the only one purring.

Because right there in front of the lobby, wearing reflective sunglasses and jeans that hug her curves deliciously, is a certain woman I'm very happy to see.

Mia Summers. Tiny but mighty. A powerful sprite with wavy hair, hazel eyes, a soft heart, and a quick wit I just dig.

I met her several months ago when she was visiting her brother, Max, and it's safe to say she's claimed center stage in my mind ever since.

When I see Mia, when I talk to Mia, when I spend time with Mia, it confirms my belief that some things are simple.

Like whether a cat drags his whole body on the floor or he gamely trots alongside you.

It's a yes or no.

A black or white.

You're either attracted to your good friend's sister or you're not.

For the record, the answer is I am, so fucking much.

I haven't seen Mia in almost a month, since the last time she was in town staying with Max. I didn't realize she'd be back a full week before her other brother Chase's wedding, and am I ever glad to see her again.

She makes all parts of me quite happy indeed.

By happy, I mean hard as a rock.

Okay, fine. It's not like I'm operating at full power this second. I'm thirty-three, not fifteen. I have plenty of self-control in the "when and where to pitch a tent" arena. All I'm saying is this woman gets me going, and I feel that zip down my body when I see her.

She's on the phone, her eyebrows pinched, her expression harried. She drags her hand through her caramel-blond hair. As I walk closer, I hear her say, "I understand. Yes, I understand. Things happen."

And that's the sound of someone being disappointed.

Which is a terrible thing for this sexy-as-a-fiery-sunset woman to experience.

When she stops and ends her call, she spots me. She tilts her head, her eyes piercing, her brow furrowed, and her dimples killing me with cuteness. Her eyes roam from me to Zeus, and then she points at my boy. "I don't know if anyone has told you this ..."

I raise my eyebrows. "Tell me. What could it possibly be?"

Her eyes drift to the ground then back up. In a deadpan tone, she says, “But your shoelaces don’t match.”

I glance down at the red lace in my right hiking boot and the orange one in the left. “True that. The other red one got tangled on a tree trunk on the Hudson River Trail, and I had to sacrifice it to the shoelace gods.”

“I’m sure they were delighted to receive such a fine offering,” Mia says, and I love that even though I haven’t seen her in a while, she rolls right into an easy conversation. No need for greetings, embraces, or *how the hell are yous*. Not that I’d object to her wrapping her arms around me and giving me a friendly hug. Or a long, lingering hug for that matter.

She’s looking at me expectantly, and I snap back to our playful footwear banter. “They were indeed grateful that the shoelace came home to rest.”

“Also,” she says, stepping closer. “Did you know there’s a cat in your hat? Well, on your back, actually.”

“There is?” I crane my neck to peer over my shoulder. “You’re right. How did he get there?”

She parks her hands on her hips. “You’re in big trouble.”

“I’ve been bad, have I?”

She pushes my shoulder then wags her finger at me. “How did you keep this from me?”

I quirk an eyebrow. “The fact that there’s an awesome new Italian place down the street? It opened last month, and I planned to tell you.”

She huffs, rolling her eyes. “I’ve known you for months and you didn’t tell me you had a cat. Friends don’t hide pets from friends.”

She’s not in town that often. She hasn’t ever been to my apartment. And I don’t take Zeus upstairs to Max’s. But I’m not going to state the obvious. I’m going to have a little fun with her. Flirt with her. Because ... that’s what we do.

“There’s a reason for that.”

Her eyes go wide, and she taps her toe, waiting. I drag a hand through my hair. Evie says my light brown hair is floppy, and she tells me this is a good thing. *The ladies love floppy hair*, she says. She's been right so far. My hair's been a big hit with the ladies, and other parts have, too.

"It's a good reason," I add.

"I'm waiting, Patrick. This really isn't the type of intel you should hold back."

I heave a sigh as if I'm going to make a huge admission, then I park a hand on her shoulder. Because, well, I'm a sneaky bastard and I'll look for any opening to touch her. "Look, I'm going to be blunt. If I told you I had a hiking cat who rides shotgun in a backpack and can purr like he's a jazz superstar, you'd have had no choice but to fall in love with me." I flash her a grin.

When Mia laughs, she tips her head back and her wavy hair flutters in the breeze. She has a simple beauty about her. She's fresh-faced, and her hair isn't overly styled—it looks tousled and towel-dried, and I can't deny how much that wash-and-wear, low-maintenance vibe turns me on. Plus, she has the most fantastic dimples, which make her look innocent even though I suspect she has a wickedly naughty side. And then there are those eyes—hazel, with flecks of green. Sometimes they read as a soft, warm brown, sometimes like a green sea under the sun.

Don't even get me started on her body—toned and athletic, exactly what I like. But it's her dry sense of humor that nails me every time.

"How do you know I wouldn't have fallen in love with the cat instead?" She reaches up, standing on tiptoe since I'm nearly a foot taller than she is, and runs her hand down Zeus's head. Lady-killer that he is, Zeus lifts his chin and purrs suggestively as Mia scratches him.

And now we're at steel level.

Because with her this close, I can't help but enjoy the eyeful of soft, sweet curves at the line of her tank top. God, I

love summer and the clothes women wear when the days turn warmer.

“Nah, we’re a package deal,” I say. “And look, don’t be ashamed. You can just admit you’re crazy for me now.”

Mia steps back, rolls her eyes, and pushes her pink messenger bag higher on her shoulder.

I gesture to the lobby so we can head inside. Her beauty products company is based in San Francisco, but she’s been spending more and more time in New York. When she’s in town, she usually crashes at Max’s apartment, five floors up from mine. I first met Max when I moved into this building a year and a half ago, and we became fast friends. But I didn’t meet Mia until she started travelling to New York regularly for business several months ago.

She holds up her hands in surrender. “Fine, fine. He’s pretty much sealed the deal for me.” Her eyelids flutter, and she places her hand on her heart, making a loud thumping sound. “I’m over the moon.”

“Exactly. That’s why I didn’t just whip out my cat and show him to you the first night we met. Or the second. Zeus is a complete and absolute chick-magnet, and since I respect you, I couldn’t willy-nilly throw down this kind of secret weapon and leave you no choice.”

“Zeus is kind of a big, bold name. Is that overcompensation for something?” Her eyes drift down. Thank fuck I’m not sporting wood anymore.

I scoff. “Overcompensation for his sheer and utter awesomeness.”

“And what makes him so awesome? Besides the fact that he rides sidecar with you, it seems.”

We reach the elevator banks, and I stab the up button. “You can play it cool, but I’m sure you’ve heard of Zeus The Hiking Tomcat. He has more than a million followers on Instagram.”

She blinks, and the sarcasm games cease. “Seriously?”

As we wait, I snag my phone and open The Hiking Tomcat's feed, showing her some recent pictures: a shot of the furry fellow wandering along a curved mountain trail, a picture of him chilling in the stern of a canoe as I paddle across a lake, an image of him scurrying on a felled tree trunk over a mountain stream.

Then, my favorite—Zeus in the meadow, his eyes closed, his face raised to the sun, enjoying some rays at the top of a four-mile hike up a mountain when there was nothing but blue skies forever.

“Wow. I can't believe he actually hikes,” she says.

“I can take you along, if you want to see the proof with your own eyes.”

She laughs and shakes her head, patting her bag. “I just arrived last night. I have meetings all afternoon, terms with suppliers to review, and marketing campaigns to peruse. Plus, dinner tomorrow night with Josie and Chase, and Max and Henley. I have way too much work to take a break for a hike.”

The elevator arrives. We step inside and the doors whoosh shut.

“That's insane. There's always time for a hike.”

She sighs heavily, so hard it's like air leaks out of her. “I feel like I don't even have time to breathe, let alone go to the gym, let alone go on a trip. The last time I was in town, I barely made it to the Friday afternoon laser tag game with my friend Dylan. And I just found out one of our biggest suppliers has pulled out of a deal for this new face wash we've been working on,” she says, meeting my gaze. “And I need to figure out a replacement.”

Mia started her own company a few years ago, making organic and cruelty-free beauty products and makeup. It's a true passion of hers, and she works doggedly at building up Pure Beauty. But even when you love what you do, it can exact a toll. I see a flash of weariness in her eyes, tiredness, and I sense how much this woman needs a break.

“That’s what I was doing before I saw you. Talking to the supplier,” she explains.

Ah, so I was right. Disappointed. “Sorry, Mia. That sucks.”

“I know. I’m trying so hard, and I just feel like I’m being pulled in all these directions.”

“Maybe you do need to get away.”

“I can’t.”

“You’ll think better after a few hours unplugged. Be in a better mood for the wedding next week.” Look, I’m not simply trying to snag some extra time with the woman. I can tell from the tightness in her shoulders, the heaviness of her sigh, and, oh yeah, her motherfucking words that Mia needs a break, even a short one.

“Is that so?”

“Mia, you need to recharge. Look, I’m sure you can fill all twenty-five hours in your day with work, but people need to step back from the screens, too.”

“Except there are only twenty-four hours in a day, right?”

The elevator slows at my floor. When the door opens, I stand in it to keep talking to her. “Not for people like you, who have somehow annexed an extra hour to squeeze in even more productivity. So take a break for a couple of hours and let yourself unwind. Your mind will be fresher.”

She nibbles on the corner of her lips. “You’re trying to get me to play hooky.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday. If not working all day long on a Saturday counts as playing hooky, we have some serious issues.”

“What are you suggesting we do?”

“I’m saying we find some sunshine and snacks, and unplug till you clear your head and let go of this stress.”

The gold flecks in her eyes twinkle, making them look green. “I do like snacks.”

“Marcona almonds,” I say in a low, dirty whisper.

She hums.

“Green olives.” My voice turns huskier.

She fans herself.

“Sunflower seeds.”

She lets out a gasp, and yeah, sunflower seed erotica is way better than s’mores smut. “Now you’re just teasing me.”

“I swear. All those can be yours.”

“But I have to review these marketing campaigns ...”

The elevator rumbles, itching to travel to the next floor. I make my last pitch. “I wonder if there are any tall, handsome, blue-eyed, brilliant fellow business owners who’d look at them with you, say, over lunch today, so that tomorrow you could take a day off to relax.”

I see her switch from maybe to yes. I suspect it was the word *lunch*.

She bounces on her toes. “Can we order Italian from that new place down the street?”

And lunch is now my wingman.

“Deal,” I say, and she follows me off the elevator and into my spacious apartment. I set down my pack, letting Zeus go free. He hops out, and once his white paws hit the floor, he promptly proceeds to bestow all the affection in the world on Mia’s leg.

We spend the next two hours eating pasta primavera, reviewing her marketing campaigns, and debating favorite foods to bring along on a four-hour hike.

We settle on the aforementioned olives and almonds, and then she places an order of *surprise me since I love surprises*.

When she leaves, I batten down the hatches and take care of my own business, coordinating with my new West Coast manager who oversees our Northern California trips, as well as my associates out here who handle day-to-day work on the



hiking, rafting, camping, and corporate retreats we manage on this coast. In the afternoon, my HR manager calls, and we spend an hour reviewing the updated employee handbook line by line. I had some trouble earlier this year with a guide who slept with a married client on a three-day hiking trip in Vermont. The whole situation turned into a mess—the guide slapped some angry posts on Facebook about being fired, and the client’s husband called and threatened us. Tempers flared red-hot and dangerous, even though nothing came of it at the end of the day. But we tightened our guidelines for employees, since that’s all we can control anyway.

\* \* \*

The next morning I’m up bright and early for a five-mile run, and when I return, I slide the red harness onto Zeus. I snap a shot of him sitting next to a daypack and some food for the hike, then post it to his feed.

*Ready for today’s adventure!*

I shake my head because I can’t believe this is who I’ve become. A guy who posts cell phone pics of his cat.

But, then again, how could I turn him down when Evie brought him to me, his green eyes batting up at me like Puss in Boots? My sister is a matchmaker, and one of her clients is a fireman. He rescued Zeus from a warehouse fire in Queens. The little fellow had no home, so Evie insisted he be mine, since she’s mildly allergic.

Ergo, I have a cat.

A few minutes later, I take the elevator to Max’s floor and knock on his door.

He answers and bestows the biggest scowl on earth on me. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice you were taking my sister out for the day?”

I roll my eyes at Max’s effort to play the role of scary big brother. Even though we’ve known each other for less than two years, he’s become my closest friend in New York, in part

because he's blunt, loyal, dependable, and has a kickass pool table. *His* opinion always matters to me.

"I figured showing up at your door would tip you off."

But he doesn't ease up. Instead, he snarls.

That only makes me laugh. "Dude, the whole routine is a little ridiculous."

"I saw the way you looked at her at Henley's dinner party a few weeks ago."

Max and his girlfriend, Henley, built a car together for a network TV show that just finished a successful first season, and they celebrated with a party at their place. Not gonna lie—I spent a little extra time with Mia at the party, but I hadn't seen her in a while, and the two of us always seem to gravitate toward each other when she's in town. We've been like that from the night we met—we click.

And that's a big reason why it sucks that she lives three thousand miles away.

But since Max started it, I can't resist giving him a hard time. "And at this party, how exactly did I look at her? Like I wanted to help serve the salad she made? That kind of look?" I adopt a low and dirty voice just to emphasize the ridiculousness of his point. "Hey there, sweet cheeks. Let me help you with the tongs."

"Don't ever let me hear you say the words 'sweet cheeks' again."

"Same goes for you."

He cracks a smile, laughs loudly, and smacks me on the back. "Just yanking your chain. I know you'd never do anything behind my back."

*Well, that's not entirely true. I did some seriously dirty things to her in my imagination this morning.*

"Right?" he asks, pressing.

I raise my hand, as if I'm taking an oath. "Nothing behind your back, I promise. Besides, when I convince your sister to

marry me, I'll be upfront about it. Man to man." I smack his chest.

He blinks. Rubs his ear. "You're messing with me."

I smirk, my lips twitching in an evil grin. "Absolutely," I say, since there's nothing to tell. I meant what I said—I *would* be upfront about it. I *would* tell him. But there's nothing to tell, because she lives so far away. All I can do is grab the few seconds and minutes of time with her that I can. Maybe if I spend enough hours with Mia, the feeling will burn off and fade away. "Besides," I add, "I'm just taking her to explore Mother Nature. I have the sense she needs it."

"Man, she does," Max says, peering behind him. "She's been stressed about the business, where it's going, what to do next. Henley and I tried to convince her to get a massage, but then she mentioned she was spending the day with you. I was glad to hear it."

"Good. I guess that means you'll let me borrow your Triumph to take her to the trailhead."

Max sets a hand on his stomach and laughs. "That's a good one. As if I'd let anyone but my woman touch Blue Betty. You can take your Hyundai."

A few minutes later, Mia appears, twisting her damp hair into a bun on top of her head and flashing me a smile. "I'm ready. I have to be back by five thirty for a conference call with a potential supplier. She had some time today so we're going to chat."

I roll my eyes and whisper to Max, "Someone needs to cancel that Saturday conference call."

Mia parks her hands on her hips. "I heard you. This apartment is big, but not that big."

"Don't forget dinner tonight with your favorite brother," Max says drily, tapping his chest.

"You mean Chase?" Mia asks, batting her eyes innocently.

He scowls. "Fine, I'll let him come along." His tone turns serious. "Henley said to remind you we have reservations for

seven thirty, and Chase and Josie are excited to see you.”

“I’ll be back. I swear. You act like I’m going to get stuck in the woods.”

Max scoffs. “No. I’m not worried about that at all. I’m worried you’re going to get stuck on your conference call.”

A few minutes later, Mia slides into my most-decidedly-not-a-Hyundai Jeep, and as we make our way out of Manhattan, she pets Zeus, who’s decided to spend the drive on her lap.

Can’t say I blame him.

I wouldn’t mind spending some time there, too.

I have a rule of thumb if I like a woman.

Call me crazy. Call me old-fashioned.

But here's what I do.

I ask her on a date.

I know, I know. I'm old-school, especially since I use the phone to do it.

I don't send coy texts. I don't Snapchat her a *Wassup?* And I don't try to weasel a hookup. I call her and invite her out. I try to choose an activity that suits her. For the athletic ones, I might suggest a bike ride. For the casual gals, maybe an afternoon at a craft beer festival. For the Louboutin-styled lady, I find sushi or the latest hip eatery that fits the bill. There's no need to half-ass anything in life, especially a first date. I go all out and make sure we can truly get to know each other. Find out if we're compatible.

I haven't asked Mia out, though, and it's not because of Max. Not really. The guy is a total softie inside. Plus, he's not, ya know, a dickhead who'd pull that whole *don't date my sister because she's my sister* bullshit.

The bigger reason is she's not around that much. I suppose I'm not, either. But she's *really* not around. She doesn't even live here. She lives in San Francisco, and though she makes it to New York enough for me to have developed a wicked attraction to her that shows no signs of abating, she's not here

enough for me to realistically pursue dating her. Or mating her. Or more.

We pull up at a trail near the town of Cold Spring in the Hudson Valley, and I try to shove all thoughts of attraction out of my head. That involves some seriously intense mental gymnastics, since Mia is completely fetching in her khaki shorts, white sneakers, and a sky-blue scoop-neck shirt. When she unzips the light hoodie that she's been wearing, I read her T-shirt. It says "I'm sorry for what I said when I was hungry."

After I harness up Zeus, I nod at her shirt and say, "Good thing I packed two servings of surprise food for you. I take it this means you're one of those people for whom *hangry* is a real word?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "You know how some people are before coffee?"

I nod.

"That's me unfed."

I laugh as we head for the trailhead, enjoying the sun shining brightly above. "We need a food mood ring for you. It would detect your probable mood based on what fuel you've consumed, and it would warn me when stores are dangerously low."

"I had oatmeal and blueberries this morning, so the arrow should still point in the *pleasant* range, but in a few hours, it'll drop precipitously into *disagreeable*."

"Good thing I'm prepared."

Mia makes eye contact with my backpack. "Looks like you're prepared for everything."

I know too well the risks of getting lost in the woods, so I've packed some of the basics. Better to be safe than sorry. "I am."

I gesture to the soft dirt path that unfurls ahead of us at the base of the hill before it winds into a more wooded section. "After you."

She holds up her hand as a stop sign, then points at me, accusatorially. “Wait. Aren’t you supposed to be the nature guide?”

I run a hand through my hair. “Yes, but the way I see it is if I send you ahead, you’ll be my canary so I’m aware of any jagged rocks, quicksand, snakes, mountain lions, or even the occasional man-eating twig.”

She shoots me a steely stare. “If the twigs are man-eaters, then they’ll be aiming for you.” She spins around and takes off in a sprint, initiating a full-on, all-out, shotgun-has-fired race. “Catch me if you can!”

Holy shit.

She’s a blur.

She glances over her shoulder, waving to egg me on.

I’m fast, too. I could catch up in seconds. The trouble is, Zeus is allergic to running. Sure, he can tear off in hot pursuit of a small, and likely, tasty bird. But that’s about the extent of his speed footwork. He’s not playing Mia’s game. Instead, he puts one white paw in front of the other and walks.

And walks.

And walks.

“Dude, you’re cock-blocking me,” I mutter to the cat.

He lifts his face and utters an *au contraire* meow.

“Can you try to at least jog?”

If cats could laugh, Zeus would be doubled over as he strolls after the woman.

“How about a trot? Maybe a power walk?”

A minute later, I’ve caught up to Mia, who’s laughing, her hands on her hips. “I’ll take my medal now, please.”

“And what event is that in?”

“In leaving you in the dust,” she says, shaking her hips back and forth, like a badass trash-talker. I see taking Mia out of the city has made her even feistier.

“I had a handicap. My cat.”

“Aww. Poor Zeus.” She bends to scratch his ears. He stretches up into her palm. “I’m sorry Patrick is blaming you for him being slow.”

I roll my eyes, shaking my head in amusement. “One, I’m not slow. But two, you’re a jackrabbit.”

She rises. “Not a cheetah?”

“Anyone can call you a cheetah. Not everyone knows jackrabbits are the seventh fastest land animal. However,” I say, gesturing to the gray boy by my side, “the humble house cat is not on the list at all. Hence, we stroll today.”

She shrugs and smiles, a grin full of mischief, as we begin our trek. “I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees.”

She’s quoting Thoreau. She’s not helping things at all. I was a lit major in college, and his work inspired me. His writings on nature were my drug. Nope, there’s very little Mia can do, it seems, to make me not want her.

“That’s a good one. But my favorite of his is, ‘If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.’”

“I love that. I even love the simplified version you see in those inspirational quotes.”

“Live the life you’ve imagined,” I begin, and she jumps in to finish with me. “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.”

I smile, impressed.

Her smile spreads, too, shifting from playfulness to warmth. “There’s a shop at SFO Airport that has magnets with all sorts of popular business and life quotes. You know—dream big, work hard, innovate, pivot. I always stop to read them, since they give me a warm glow. But I love that one best. Because I want that life.” She glances at the cat.



“Speaking of dreams, it’s one of mine to say I walked a cat. May I?”

I hand her the leash, and she beams. Just fucking beams. And that smile hooks into me, lighting me up, so I step closer, lower my voice, and say, “The reason I said ‘after you’ at the start of the trail is that I’m a gentleman, and I still believe that ladies come first.” I stop, reining in a smirk. “Go first, I mean. Ladies go first.”

Her pupils dilate, and she blinks. Then, her shoulders rise and fall, more dramatically than before. Good. If she’s going to beguile me with quotes from my favorite philosopher–poet, then perhaps I’ll tease her with a little wordplay, too. Of the dirtier variety. The kind that’ll make her imagine. Make her feel. Make her wonder.

“That’s considerate of you. And I do like gentlemen,” she says, a slight catch in her breath when she says *like*.

Maybe if she weren’t flying home in mere days, I’d follow that with a flirty reply. I’d test the waters, ask what she meant, and if all signs pointed to go, I’d act on it. After all, this is a perfect setting for a kiss. The sun is rising overhead. The sky is a paint can of blue. A canopy of trees frames Mia.

Sunshine, lip gloss, and her. That’s what I’d taste if I pressed my mouth to hers the way I want.

But she’s given no indication she wants a kiss.

I step around her on the path, pointing to a gnarly twig for her to avoid.

“Man-eating variety?” she asks as we walk.

“That one likes speedy women, so be careful.”

“Thanks for the warning. And since you were right about twigs, does that mean you were accurate about snakes on this trail?”

Her voice is calm and even, unlike the way most people talk about snakes. Usually the word comes out in a chilled whisper.

“There are some, sure. We’re outdoors. But you don’t see them too often, and I know how to handle them, so you don’t have to worry.” I study her face, looking for signs of fear. I don’t see any. “You’re not afraid of snakes, are you?”

“Let’s put it this way—I’m not about to curl up on the couch and share popcorn with one, but I can deal with them.”

Something furry, not reptilian, rustles in a bush ahead, and Zeus goes bananas. He lunges, jerking Mia with him, yanking her as he charges after his favorite thing in the world. The one thing he’ll run after forever—a squirrel.

“His greatest dream is to have squirrel for a meal,” I say as Mia gently tugs him away.

“Let me guess. He hasn’t yet achieved that?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. But hope springs eternal.” I cycle back to the conversation. “So, snakes don’t scare you off. What are you afraid of?”

Her answer is immediate. “Balconies,” she says, shuddering.

I arch a brow. “Balconies, as in decks?”

She nods vigorously.

“I’d never have guessed. Max’s apartment is on the twenty-fifth floor.”

She raises a finger as she sidesteps a low branch. “Aha. Therein lies the issue. I’m not afraid of being up high. I’m afraid of standing on a balcony.”

Awareness dawns on me. “You either have the fear of the balcony crumbling under you, or the one where you’ll fling yourself off.”

“The second one. It’s so weird, isn’t it?” she says, her voice full of seeming surprise that she feels this way. As if she doesn’t entirely know what to make of this fear of hers. “I know logically I won’t. I love life, and I don’t have suicidal tendencies. But when I’m on a balcony, I’m supremely aware that I could hoist my leg over and jump off. It’s such a strange fear, Patrick.”

Her tone is intense, but what strikes me the most is the way she says my name. As if there's a special intimacy to this confession.

"I've never admitted that to anyone," she says, under her breath, almost astonished she gave this fear voice.

I'm pleased—proud, if I'm honest—she chose me for this confidence, but curious as to her reasoning. "Why haven't you told anyone?"

"Most people wouldn't understand it," she says, as a monarch butterfly flutters past my head, flapping its sun-yellow wings. I point to it as she talks, and she smiles, watching it fly away before she goes on. "Most people would worry it means I'm going to launch myself overboard, but that's not it. It's just that my brain can see all the horrible things unfolding. Even though I know rationally that I won't do them, the mind still lets the images unfurl. And that's how I feel when I stand on a balcony and look down. I *feel* all the things that could happen, and some ancient human curiosity pokes and prods at me, saying *test it out*, even though of course I don't want to."

"So why'd you tell me if you think sharing this will make people think you're crazy?"

Her eyes are a darker green than I've ever seen before as she answers. "You're different. You're not like everyone else."

And that's one of those things people say that can rock your world or upend it.

Different.

It's one of those adjectives that can go either way.

*He's a little, how shall we say, different.*

I've never thought of myself as different. I'm a regular guy. I'm not someone who has odd habits, like swabbing my ears with Q-tips in public, or discussing Q-tip swabbing in mixed company, for that matter, or even standing so close to strangers that they can smell my breath. Though, to be clear, it's minty fresh since I brush as if it's a religion.

But aside from walking a cat, I'm as regular as they come.

"Lay it on me, Mia. Tell me why you think I'm *different*. You don't like the beard?" I run my hand over my chin.

She laughs. "The beard is great."

"Clearly, you have something against dudes who like cats, then."

"Oh my God. I love animals. You know that. I volunteer at WildCare, helping injured wildlife. I do what I do because I love animals more than people most of the time."

"Then obviously, you found my high school yearbook photo."

She arches a brow, her eyes twinkling with curiosity. "No, but now I want to."

“Don’t. Just don’t,” I say, my voice deeper, warning her. Because that right there is a line no one should cross.

“Fine, fine. I’ll stop rifling through your underwear drawer for your yearbook.”

*Mia and my boxer briefs.* I’m just going to linger on that thought for another second. Okay, back to the matter at hand.

“So I’m *different*?” I draw air quotes. “What’s the story?”

She smiles broadly at me. “It’s a compliment. You’re different because you’re normal.”

A laugh starts deep in my belly, rumbles up my chest, and bursts from me. A hearty, happy laugh. “Normal. I’ll take that.”

“Trust me. It’s a *huge* compliment. Most people aren’t as easygoing as you. As laid-back. As *comfortable* with who they are. I think that’s why I told you about the war I’ve been waging with balconies.”

“I’m glad you shared your balcony battles.”

She sighs deeply, as if she’s inhaling the fresh, invigorating air. She stretches her neck from side to side and shimmies her shoulders, almost as if a weight has lifted. “You were right. Getting away from work and phones and pressure does help.”

I flash her a smile, giving myself a mental fist bump. It makes me happy to know I’ve helped her.

She points to the trail. “Keep on going. It’s your turn now. Tell your friend Mia—what are you afraid of, Patrick?”

“Vegas,” I say, shuddering. “Can’t stand that city.”

“Oh, stop it. You’re not afraid of Vegas.”

“Fine. I just dislike it.”

She laughs. “I like Vegas. It’s fun. A little crazy and over-the-top, but I take it all in stride. Why do you hate it? You live in one of the biggest cities in the world.”

“I don’t really hate Vegas. But there’s no balance to it like there is in New York City. See, Manhattan operates at a

million miles an hour, but then it surprises you with Central Park and Hudson River Greenway, and then a cobblestoned street in the Village. And water—everywhere there's water.”

She sighs happily. “I do love Manhattan, too. But you still haven't told me. Fears. Fess up. Be truthful.”

So we're playing the getting-to-know-you game. I can do this. I like this. I want this. Plus, the answer is easy. My big fear? I've conquered it. I adjust my pack slightly, dropping my shades to my eyes since the sun is rising higher and hitting harder. “Bridges.”

“Huh. That surprises me.”

“Yeah?”

“I can't see that at all. Do you mean like those crazy bridges you see on Facebook? *Would you cross this bridge?* And then it's a glass bridge with a view from one thousand feet above roaring waters? Or do you mean the rickety bridges in a jungle?”

“Rickety bridges I can handle. Even glass bridges. My issue was with the ones I have to drive over.” It's my turn to shudder. “Those were mildly horrifying.”

“Ohhhhh,” she says, dragging out the word. “You're afraid of crashing, tumbling over the side of the bridge, and being stuck in a car.”

I mime hammering. “Nailed it. But I got over it.”

“How did you get over it? Did you buy a car with manual windows so you could always escape and swim free?”

“That, and I drive wearing flippers and goggles so I'm ready.”

“Ha ha,” she says, shoving my shoulder. “Seriously. What did you do? Because you were completely fine when we drove across that bridge over the Hudson.”

“I kept doing it,” I say, matter-of-factly. “I kept facing the fear. Stared it down, so to speak. Honestly, it was the hardest thing for me when I moved to Manhattan. So many bridges, right?”

“Like they’ve mated and produced baby bridges everywhere.”

“Exactly. I had to deal with all the bridges. I played music to keep me in an upbeat zone, and actually talked back to myself as I drove over them. I said things like *I’m fine, I’m in control, I’m safe.*”

She smiles. “That’s kind of cool. You took charge of your fear. You didn’t let it control you. Is it gone entirely? Did you even think about it when we drove here?”

“Sure, it occurred to me. But I can handle it now.” I take a beat, casting my gaze behind me to meet her eyes. I wink. “Though, next time it would be so much easier if you’d hold my hand.”

“Want me to pet your hair and sing lullabies, too?”

“Yeah, maybe not.”

“Okay, next order of business,” she says as we wind along the trail, heading higher into the hills. “Tell me something you’re still afraid of. Tell me a fear you haven’t conquered, because otherwise I’ll think you’re not normal.”

I scratch my chin, considering her question, as Zeus sniffs a purple wildflower tucked beside a small boulder. In the distance, I can make out the faint gurgling of a stream. The sound of water rippling over smooth stones is music to me. It means I’m outdoors. I’m moving. My legs are working. My heart is pumping blood. This is what I love. Energy. Action. *Living*. The way I feel under the big sky, with no pavement between the earth and my feet, is why I have one big fear.

“Here’s one I don’t think I’ll ever get over,” I say, raising my shades and leveling my gaze at her. No joking. No teasing. No sarcasm. “Being sick.”

Her expression softens. Her lips part. She swallows. “I can see that about you.”

“I want to be healthy. I want to be well. I want to make my own choices every day. Health is such a gift, and what I’m afraid of most is losing it for God knows what reasons.”

“Like something catastrophic?”

“No, but yes. But it’s also just anything—flu, cold, whatever. I hate being sick. I don’t ever want to be the unwell guy.”

She brings her hand to her chest. “You’re making me want to give you a hug.”

Well, that is an unexpected bonus.

“I won’t turn you down,” I say playfully.

She steps closer, stands on tiptoe, and wraps her arms around me. She tucks her head against my pecs, her cheek on my shoulder. Oh hell. She fits me like the perfect pair of hiking boots. The kind that feel so good you want to spend your day in them. She’s soft and curvy in the right places, strong and lean in others, and her hair smells like pineapple. There’s also a hint of coconut, and I know it’s one of the products she makes—tropical body wash. I’d like to lick her neck, suck on her jaw, flick my tongue against her ear. I bet she’d shiver if I pressed my mouth to her. I bet she’d tremble if I nipped on that soft earlobe, then she’d arch into me, asking for more.

*Begging* for more.

But my dirty thoughts are washed clean instantly when she whispers into my shoulder. “I’m afraid of hurting my family.”

“Yeah?” I ask, and all my instincts tell me to raise a hand and pet her hair. So I listen to my gut. I run a hand down her blond locks. Jesus. She’s like a kitten. Her hair is so soft.

“I love my stupid brothers, and I want to do right by them. They always looked out for me when I was younger. I was the smallest kid in school.”

“You were?”

She nods against my chest. “Shockingly, I didn’t have the massive growth spurt all the way to five-foot-one until I turned fourteen. When I was in grade school, other kids teased me, saying I looked like I was still in nursery school. Even in second grade, the running joke was that I was a kindergartner.



I hated it because I just wanted to fit in. And my brothers, they taught me it didn't matter. They taught me to be tough. They never made fun of me for my size. They did the opposite, in fact. Max was the one who said my size would come in handy for gymnastics. That it would be my secret weapon," she says, pulling back and meeting my eyes with an intense stare.

"He was? Our big, boorish Max?" I laugh, because that's kind of cool. Correction—that's incredibly cool.

The corner of her lips curve up. "Yep. Our big, boorish Max. He told me it was the one sport where being tiny would be a true advantage."

"He was right."

"My parents were totally supportive, too, but it was Max who was always there for me. He would get so excited when I'd win a competition. He'd cheer the loudest, lift me up on his shoulders when I won a gold. He was five years older, and when I was ten, he was already more than a foot taller than me. His enthusiasm was like an explosion of happiness in my chest," she says, tapping her breastbone. "And he was right. My focus on gymnastics made me stop caring that kids mocked me for being small."

"I like your size." Because really, what else is there to say? She's little, and it's perfect for her.

Her voice goes soft, kind of sexy. "I like yours."

And right now, I want to make s'mores porn with her. I want to tug her back into my arms and show her how well our sizes fit.

But right when we're veering into the flirty, let's-compliment-each-other phase of getting-to-know-you, the sound of crunching footsteps ahead interrupts us.

A pair of hikers appears, heading in our direction as they go down the hill. That's my cue to move on from whatever moment we're having. We soldier on in silence, nearing a heavyset guy in safari shorts and a straw hat. The woman right behind him wears a small backpack and uses a walking stick.

I tip my forehead to them. "How are you doing?"

“Can’t complain. It’s a perfect day,” the guy says.

“It sure is.”

“And that’s one helluva cat you have with you.”

“Why, thank you,” Mia chimes in as we step out of the way, letting them pass. “He’s an adventure cat.”

“Fred, why don’t we train our Siamese to wear a harness?” the woman asks.

“Sweetheart, we have a no-drag cat. That’s what I heard on TV yesterday.”

Mia chuckles to herself. As she does, I flash back to their words. Not the ones about the cat. The ones before. *It’s a perfect day*. That’s a bold statement. I’m not so sure my day is perfect, but I’d have to say it’s pretty damn good.

And, moment or no moment, that has to be enough. This is all I’ll have with Mia – little moments every now and again.

\* \* \*

A little later, we reach the water. The stream races downhill, rushing over rocks, cutting over stones. A huge tree trunk rests over the creek, providing passage to another trail.

Mia hands me the leash. “Watch me.”

Easiest command ever.

She steps onto the log, crosses it as if it’s a balance beam, dipping her foot along the side with each step, sticking out her chest, and flinging her arms up triumphantly. My heart skitters faster, and I can’t help but worry about her, no matter how many gymnastics meets she won as a young girl. When she reaches the middle, she bends forward, sets her hands flat on the log, and kicks her legs straight up.

She’s ruler straight, and beautiful upside down. Her hair spills to the wood, and she beams the wildest grin at me. “Like my handstand?”

“Love it, but please don’t do a back handspring or whatever they’re called,” I warn, because I’m feeling like what she described feeling on a balcony—only I’m imagining Mia tumbling off the log.

“I didn’t win the all-around fifth-grade gold for nothing.” She flips over, nailing the landing. She leans forward now, her arms straight out to the side, one leg kicked high behind her. “Hey, Mr. Hooky! What do you think? Am I enjoying my day off?”

“Too much.” I shake my head, laughing as I scoop up Zeus, drop him in the pack, and carry him across the log on my back. I keep him there as we climb a series of steep switchbacks to the top of a hill, where a meadow awaits.

“Wow,” Mia says, her eyes roaming across the grass and flowers, admiring the view.

I’m admiring the view, too. Mia, standing in one of my favorite places on Earth. Maybe this *is* a perfect day.

I tap my watch. “Did we make it in time? Is the food mood ring pointing to *disagreeable*?”

Mia rubs her belly. “We’re *this* close.”

As I spread out a blanket, I’m struck by the thought that if this were someone else’s story, the girl would have tumbled on the log, I’d have caught her, played the hero, and we’d have shared a moment. But our moment came before she flipped upside down on a felled tree. Our moment transpired on the trail when she hugged me out of the blue, and for several fantastic seconds I had a taste of how well we’d fit.

As I unpack the food, I wonder if we’ll experience any more moments, or if today is all I have before I have to get serious about letting go of this crazy crush once and for all.

Mia groans. "I'm stuffed."

"How is that possible?" I lean back on the red-checked blanket spread out on the grass. "You barely ate anything."

"Not true. For the record, I devoured the surprise strawberries, the almonds, the Gouda cheese, the yummy crackers, and the olives. Everything but the turkey jerky."

"You do realize you just rattled off snacks. That's all you ate. Snacks. Not a meal."

"Now you have something against snack food. Are you a snack-ist?"

"Quite the opposite. I happen to think snacks are among the greatest joys in life."

She rests on her elbows, her legs stretched in front of her, crossed at the ankles, and turns her gaze to me. "And what are the others?"

I meet her eyes straight on. "Sex."

Her expression is blank at first, then a laugh bursts from her lips. "Well, yeah. But what else?"

My eyes bug out. "That's not enough for you?"

"You said 'joys,' as in plural. I was waiting to hear the others."

"Ah, simple misunderstanding," I say, nodding. "See, the answer was plural because with me, the sex is so good it's

multiplied.” Then I wiggle my eyebrows.

Once more her face is a tabula rasa, and then her entire body shudders. We’re talking head-to-toe laughter. “You sound like the dirty kangaroo meme now. You know him?”

“Oddly enough, I’m not familiar with the filthy marsupial.”

“He’s a douchey marsupial,” she corrects. “Anyway, he’s this weirdly muscular kangaroo, lying down, looking like a ’70s porn star, all suave and cocky as he says things like, ‘Hey girl, ever been down under?’”

I scratch my chin. “So what you’re saying is I’m a douchey kangaroo, and you don’t like sex multiplied. Fair enough.”

She fixes me with a *you’ve got to be kidding* stare as she sits up to swat my elbow. “That was for saying something ridiculous. Obviously, I like multiplication. It’s my favorite form of arithmetic,” she says, giving me a very naughty wink that sets off a new round of lust in me, as I picture how she’d look after two times two orgasms.

The answer? That’s what a perfect day looks like.

Flopping back down, she takes a deep breath and raises her face to the sky as if she’s soaking in the sun’s rays. She sticks out her flat belly and adds to the look by ballooning her cheeks. “But maybe no plurals or multiplication for me when I have a snack baby growing.”

I raise an eyebrow. Her belly is a board. A sensual, alluring board I want to kiss all over. Yeah, that’s what Mia does to me. Gets me aroused thinking of kissing her board belly. “You can’t even make your belly look full.”

“Yes, I can,” she says, huffing and puffing and trying hard to make her midsection round. “Just feel it. You can feel the snacks growing inside me.”

I stretch an arm across to pat her tight, trim belly, wishing for a second I was feeling it under different circumstances. But even I’m not enough of a pervert to be turned on by her

pretend belly. Her goofball side? That's another matter entirely. It's endearing and, admittedly, enticing.

I wish it weren't.

"Do you have a turkey jerky baby in you?" she asks, her tone intensely serious.

I pat my abs. "Definitely."

"Do you think Zeus has a tuna baby in his furry belly?"

"Absolutely," I say, glancing at Zeus, lolling in a tuna coma. I pick up the empty can of fish from his side and place it in the trash bag.

"Anyway," Mia begins, her tone shifting, "can I be serious for a moment?"

I point my thumb over my shoulder as if gesturing to the past. "You weren't serious just then?"

"Ha ha. But what I wanted to say is thank you. I was a stress case about work, and even though I didn't work today, the time I spent here cleared my mind. I feel like I can go back and tackle the problems. And while we were hiking, I came up with several possibilities for new suppliers based in the area."

That piece of intel pricks my ears. "Think you'll be spending more time in New York, then?"

An *I wish* laugh falls from her lips. "Most of my work on the deals can be done remotely. Give me a screen, and I'm good to go. But I'm grateful you encouraged me to play hooky today. I needed it, and I can only imagine how beneficial this is for when you lead corporate groups. They must get so much out of it."

"I'd like to think they do. After the trust falls, of course."

She presses her hands together in prayer. "Please tell me you don't do trust falls."

"Any guide who works for my company signs two agreements—don't sleep with the customers, and never ever do a trust fall."

"You do need to have standards."

“And thank you, Mia,” I say, stripping the teasing from my voice as the sun shines high above us now, warming my skin, bathing us in its afternoon glow. I’m fortunate that my corporate retreat business has grown in the last few years. A lot of companies use us for day trips for their employees, for rafting expeditions, and for weekend canoeing retreats. It’s kind of cool to watch employees come together. “The reports back from that side of the business have been great. They say the trips foster bonding, improve morale, and help the employees adjust better to changes in their companies. I don’t mean to sound like a broken record, but I think sometimes we forget that our bodies were designed to be active. We think best when we walk, or run, or stretch, or bend.”

Mia flashes me a big smile that shows off her dimples, those adorable dimples that nail me in the heart every single time I see them. “I love that you’ve turned your passion into this huge success.”

“Well, Zeus helped,” I say, giving credit where it’s due.

Mia sits up, stretching to pet him as he basks in the sun. “I feel like he has the right idea. Can we take a catnap?” As if to emphasize her point, her mouth opens into the hugest yawn I’ve ever seen.

“Catnaps are always a good idea. I only have one rule. We need to nap in a tent.”

“You have a tent?”

I blink. “Sorry, what did you say? Do I have a tent? Do takeout containers unfold into plates? Does the word *bed* look like a *bed*?”

She squints. “Holy cow. Bed does look like a bed.” She furrows her brow. “But when did takeout containers start unfolding?”

“Evidently, they always have. But they work better folded as far as I’m concerned.”

“They work really well folded. So well that I don’t know why anyone would unfold the container. But about your tent ...”

I smirk because I can't resist the innuendo. My eyes stray to my crotch, and she blushes for a second.

"*Your tent.* The one you brought with you. You really have a tent in your pack?"

"Mia, I was a Boy Scout and then an Eagle Scout. You never know when you might need a tent, and I don't advise snoozing out in the open on public trails. Even if we're mostly alone." I gesture to the wildflower-filled meadow we've claimed as our own.

I reach into my pack, grab a pop-up beach tent, and unfold it, setting it up in less than three minutes. With avid interest, Mia watches the whole time, and even though I'm not doing something strapping like building a house or fixing a tire, I still like that she seems to dig that I'm handy. That I'm prepared. And that I have everything she's asked for. I tug on the end of the blanket, and she stands and hands it to me. I spread it on the floor of the tent.

"Ladies first." I gesture for her to go in.

"Such a gentleman."

As she lies down, all I can think is that she doesn't know the half of how gentlemanly I am being right now.

Because what I really want is to do ungentlemanly things to her as she curls up next to me in a tiny nap tent.



## Conversations with the Cat

### *Zeus*

With a belly full of fish and a sun-warmed spot on the blanket, the cat was ready for yet another nap. He hadn't quite hit his full allotment of sleep for the day. He needed to catch up so he could be fully rested to sleep more tomorrow. The man was sound asleep, and the cat considered draping himself over his master's head. Surely, the man would sleep better with a cat wrapped around him. But then the woman flipped to her side, staring at him with big eyes. Was she going to stare him down? A cat?

*Just try it.*

But instead, she scratched between his ears.

*Oh, baby. Do that again.*

She obliged, stroking him more. He kicked up the noise box, purring at her.

“You're loud,” she whispered under her breath.

Raising her hand, she scratched his chin. “You're mighty handsome.”

*Yep, keep it up.*

“You're a perfect pair,” she said, her eyes drifting from the feline to his master.

He rumbled louder, waiting for the woman to say more.

“A pair of lady-killers.” She sighed as she stroked his back. “What’s a girl to do?”

As she whispered, his feline thoughts drifted to a certain calico lady on the ninth story who might want to share a can of tuna with him at some point. He’d need to convince his master to take a trip on the elevator to her floor. He liked her whiskers. He liked her tail, too.

The woman’s eyes drifted to the man, his chest rising and falling, the look on his face serene.

“If things were different ...”

She sighed.

“Maybe then ...”

She rubbed his furry belly.

“But I don’t know how to make it all work.”

*So good.* The rubbing was so good. He tuned out the woman’s chatter, and eventually she stopped talking.

The man rustled, stretching his arms over his head, but still slept. The woman’s eyes widened as the man’s shirt rode up. Her breath seemed to catch as she stared at his stomach. Stared, and stared, and stared, as if it were a bird she wanted to devour.

Well, that made sense.

Birds were mighty tasty.

A few minutes later, the woman fell asleep, tangled up with the bird she wanted to eat.

Warm flesh presses to mine. Soft breath flutters in my ear. The body I most want to get my hands all over brushes against my side.

Torture. Exquisite torture.

My eyes snap open just like that—asleep to awake. Here I am, in the tent with Mia. One lovely, feminine leg is flung over mine, and a smooth, toned arm is draped over my stomach. Her eyelids flutter, and her lips twitch. She’s on the edge of a dream, I suspect.

I don’t move for several seconds. Instead, I let my imagination picture this moment unfolding again and again. Waking up next to Mia. Having permission to touch her. Being able to pull her close and take her in my arms.

Like she’s done to me.

But that’s something Dream Mia did. Not Awake Mia. No matter how enticing this scenario is, I force myself to focus on how it isn’t reality.

The leg on mine? It means nothing.

The arm on me? It tells me zilch.

Turning my head, I scan for Zeus. He’s staring at me, like he knows all my secrets.

Well, the dude does. Pets know everything. If cats and dogs could talk, man, the things they could spill.

I catch a flash of silver, and my eyes home in on the metallic glint. Oh hell. Mia's shirt is twisted, rising to her belly button, revealing a piercing—a simple silver barbell with a purple ball at the end. I'd like to say it's the sexiest thing on her body, but then I spot something hotter.

And cuter at the same damn time.

On her hip bone is a silhouette of a fox. The outline of the animal tattoo is unmistakable, from the pointy ears to the fluffy tail. It's about the size of a dime, one of the smallest pieces of ink I've ever seen.

This woman will be the death of all my restraint. I want to run my thumb over that tattoo so badly. To watch her body arch into that slight touch, and feel her tremble as I trace the lines of the tail.

I raise a hand, hovering it above her, tempted, so damn tempted.

Then she sighs, and a dart of *I don't want to get caught with my hand in the cookie jar* jolts me. I snatch my hand away, casually threading it through my hair and yawning.

"Just woke up," I say in my best groggy voice.

"Me, too." Her voice is gravelly, so sleepy-sexy.

Her eyes drift down, and she seems to realize she's tangled around me. "Oh, sorry."

"I didn't mind."

She slips her leg off me and then moves her arm. She stops at my stomach, patting it. "I like your snack baby."

I chuckle lightly.

"It's very ... firm."

*Jesus.* That's not the only part of me that's firm. "Feel free to conduct a full test of firmness."

"As if your belly were a mattress?"

"Well, you do seem to be sleeping on me," I say, trailing off.

“Is it weird that I find you so comfortable?” she asks, her voice low and soft.

“I’m *normal* and *comfortable*. Would you also like to tell me I’m reliable?”

She twists her neck to look up at me, wiggling her eyebrows. “And punctual, too.”

I roll my eyes. “Great. Just great.”

Maybe it is great, though. Because her hand is still on my stomach. Her hand isn’t moving. And I’m not moving, either. I lie perfectly still, watching her fingers splayed on my abs, picturing all the directions that hand could go. Up would be fine. No objections there. She should feel free to explore my pecs all she wants. But down? That’d be even better. I’d really like to see how her hand looks slipping under my shorts. Heading south. Wrapping around my—

Wait. That’s not what I want.

Don’t get me wrong—I do want to feel those soft hands all over my dick. But more than anything, I want to feel *her*. I want to touch that fox, then lick my way up her belly to her breasts, the hollow of her throat, her alluring neck. I want to roll over, slide on top of her, pin her wrists above her head, then tell her how badly I’ve wanted to have her beneath me since the night I met her at her brother’s apartment.

And if she wants the same damn thing as I do, I know myself. I won’t be satisfied with snacks of Mia. I’ll need the full meal. Hell, I want the whole menu of Mia.

But the miles between us ...

They loom so damn large. I’ve been around the block. I’ve dated. I’ve had serious girlfriends. And I’ve learned this—proximity matters. It’s quite possibly the foundational element of a relationship. You need to be able to see each other. I don’t want to rely on texts and phone calls. I want nights and mornings, and weekends, too. Maybe that makes me greedy, but I’m thirty-three, and I’m not interested in a fling anymore. I don’t want a part-time woman. I’m ready to go all in.

How can we be all in with each other when we're on separate coasts? Sure, I spend time in California now and then for work, and a few months ago I was there even more. But I hired a West Coast tour manager, so I don't have too many reasons to jet out there every weekend.

Against all my desires, I sit up ramrod straight, and her hand slides off me. She brushes one against the other. I stare ahead at the opening of the pop-up tent. "We should go."

"Is it that late?"

I shake my head, checking out the sun patterns cast across the top of the tent. "I'm guessing it's a little after one. But we need to hike down, and you have your conference call."

She groans. "I should have canceled that call."

I laugh lightly, but I don't say *I told you so*. If she needs to do the call today, my job is to take her home. She straightens her shirt and gathers our supplies, minimal though they are.

We retrace our route, but this time we're faster, less chatty. We make no pit stops for hugs or deep conversations. We're all business, and I'm not sure if it's because I pushed her hand off me, or if we've simply talked ourselves out. Perhaps there's nothing left to say. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't it be absolutely wonderful to discover I have no more conversational bits and pieces to share with this woman? That's my new dream—that with this day I'll have exhausted my interest in her.

Then she won't have such a claim on my thoughts.

Inside the Jeep, Zeus curls up on the back seat and falls into slumber as I pull away from the trail, heading to the highway that'll take us back to the city.

"Patrick," she says after a few painfully silent miles.

I grip the wheel tighter. "Yeah?"

"Normal isn't a bad thing."

"That so?"

"Nor is comfortable."

“Really?”

“And reliable isn’t, either.”

“Yeah, I get that,” I say with a heavy sigh. I still wish she’d chosen other adjectives.

She taps her bare fingernails against the dash. “I dated this guy a year ago who always said he’d show up. But Zach was late. All the time. Sometimes when we’d made plans, he didn’t show up at all.”

I hate this Zach. “And?”

“I broke up with him.”

“So you’re looking for a punctual guy?” I ask, a flicker of hope inside me. I’m excellent at arriving on time.

She shakes her head. “That’s not what I’m saying. And I’m not looking. I’m not out trolling for someone who’ll show up at seven p.m. on the dot. I’m just saying ...” She slows down, taking a beat, her voice the slightest bit wobbly. “I’m saying I like that you mean what you say. You do what you say. You show up.”

“That seems a base level of acceptability, Mia,” I say gently, but firmly, to get my point across. “Why should you, or my sister, or any woman, for that matter, feel like she should be happy if a guy merely keeps his word? Shouldn’t we all do that?”

“Yes, of course,” she says, her pitch rising. “But that’s not what I’m trying to say.”

“What are you trying to say?”

She blows out a long stream of air. “I’m saying normal is awesome. Normal is what we all want,” she says, dragging her hand through her caramel-blond waves. “But it’s hard to find. My God, you should see the guys out there.”

For a flash, I picture her on a date with another guy, a nameless, faceless schmo, and my words come out harsher than I’d like. “Please, tell me more about the men you date.”

She flinches, then snaps her gaze to me. “Wait. Are you jealous?”

Yes, I am. I’m jealous of Zach. I’m jealous of anyone who came before and anyone who’ll come after Zach. I’m jealous of any guy who’s taken her out for so much as a cup of motherfucking coffee.

After today—the things we shared, the jokes we told, the fears we laid bare—what is the point of keeping this treacherous ball of jealousy rolling around in my chest a secret? I should say yes. I should admit it.

I glance away from the road momentarily, meeting her gaze. And in her soft hazel eyes I see her kind spirit, her good heart, her wicked sense of humor. I relax my viselike grip on the wheel, the tension spilling out of me. I don’t need to ruin our friendship with a misplaced admission.

“It’s all good, Mia. Keep talking. About the normal thing,” I say, keeping it calm, keeping it chill.

She clears her throat. “What I’m trying to say is I’ve met plenty of guys who are weird in all the wrong ways. Weird about commitment, weird about boundaries, weird about truth. I don’t mean weird as in they have cute idiosyncrasies like constantly reciting the temperature inside a house.”

I straighten my shoulders. “That’s not weird. That’s normal.”

“It’s something men do that I will never understand.”

“I will never understand why women can’t turn lights off when they go from room to room. You flick a switch,” I say, miming turning off a light. “There. Simple. And as for the temperature, we like to know precisely how hot or cold it is, so you’ll have to try again on the ‘not normal’ thing.”

She smirks. “You’re missing the point. I’m trying to say that I like normal. A lot. The thing I want most is a normal guy.”

I wait for her to continue. To reveal more. But she’s quiet. She doesn’t say she wants me—that I’m the normal guy she wants.



Maybe this is the moment of truth. This is what I need to get this dumb lust out of my system. In fact, today has been precisely what I needed. A cold dose of reality.

I flick on the right-turn signal, heading onto the bridge that'll take us back to Manhattan. I fiddle with the radio and tune in to a station that plays indie music. An upbeat song starts as the car rolls past the tolls and over the water.

For a flash, that primal fear of crashing into the sea lashes before my eyes, but the music shoves it out. I turn the dial a bit louder, and then Mia places her hand over mine.

I flinch briefly.

She turns my palm over and threads our fingers together.

My breath stops.

For several seconds, I don't even try to exhale. Nor do I tear my eyes from the road. Her fingers clasp mine, and finally, I relax into it.

There is no earthly reason why holding hands should feel this good.

But it does.

It feels better than good.

It's astonishing.

It stokes flames inside me, especially when she strokes my palm with her thumb. Every reason I recited in the tent—proximity, three thousand miles, different coasts—threatens to march back into my brain, but I tell them to scram. Right now, I want to feel her touching me.

I squeeze her hand as we cross the bridge. When we're on the other side, I steal a glance at her. She smiles at me, kind of sweet, kind of nervous, kind of like she likes this, too.

“Hey, Jackrabbit,” I say.

She winks. “Hey, Kangaroo.”

Right now, I'll take that nickname, thank you very much, even if it started from a douchey marsupial meme. I'll take it

because she's holding my hand.

She doesn't let go. Not the rest of the way. Not till we reach the parking garage.

We separate, and I'm hit with how much I want to touch her again.

When we're inside the elevator, I press the button for the twentieth floor, then the twenty-fifth.

Once the doors close, she leans back against the opposite wall to me, her hands gripping the railing. "I liked holding your hand."

Zeus meows from his post on the floor, and I step closer to her. "It felt so *normal*," I say, using her favorite word.

Her eyes shine with desire. "It felt so good."

Like I said, proximity usually wins.

In this case, it's not only trumping the miles that often separate us, it's stomping all over any restraint I might once have had.

There are no miles now. This is a battle of inches. And I'm losing.

Gladly fucking losing, because my pulse races rocket-fast, and my skin is hot, just from being near her. "So, what do you think? You and me. Bad idea?"

She shakes her head. "Definitely not bad." She swallows. "Good idea?"

"Maybe the best idea?"

"Would it be?" she whispers.

"What do you think?"

She's breathing hard, and I love that. She licks her lips, her cheeks flushed. "Want to know what I think?"

"You know I do."

She lifts one hand and places it gently on my chest, pressing her fingers against my pecs. Even through my shirt, her touch triggers an instant response—a rush of desire to every molecule in my body.

"Sometimes I wish you still visited San Francisco," she says. "I liked it the few times I saw you out there."

We played pool one night when I flew into her hometown en route to a tour in Tahoe. Another time, I took her out to her favorite sandwich shop for a tomato and mozzarella panini for lunch, before I met the guy I've since hired as my West Coast manager. That's when I learned of her impressive appetite. Or, of how much bigger her eyes are than her stomach—that stomach I want to touch, and I have permission to at last. I run the tips of my fingers down the fabric covering her belly, and she gasps—a quiet but sensual little sound that leaves no room for argument. She's into this.

“I definitely wish you were in New York City more,” I tell her, traveling to her arm, brushing my fingers down her bare skin. Goose bumps appear on her flesh, and she feels so good to touch. Her eyes flutter closed for a second, maybe more. When she opens them, those hazel irises are fiery with lust.

“I wish you weren't friends with my brother,” she says, her tone unexpectedly dark. It gives me pause. I don't see why Max would be an issue. Not for us. Max isn't the type of guy to be a territorial asshat, and I'm not the type of guy he has to worry about with his sister.

“Why?” I raise an eyebrow in question.

Mia shakes her head. There's something she's not telling me. “It just makes it harder ... and other reasons.” She doesn't elaborate. I'm not sure I want her to right now. Not when we're both finally saying the things I've wanted to speak out loud and hear.

Besides, we know the score.

And yet, we're still here, barely any space between us, the elevator rising higher, dinging softly as it passes each floor.

“There are always reasons.” I lift my hand to her hair, brushing it away from her face. She moves with me, her cheek following my palm, and the most desperate look crosses her eyes. Like she can't bear not to be touched right now. “But are those reasons more powerful than the fact that I'd really like to kiss you right now?”

My muscles relax, and heat shoots through me. It's a spectacular relief to give voice to how I feel, and a huge turn-on, too. Now she knows. We aren't playing poker anymore, holding our cards too close to the vest. I still don't know how much either one of us is willing to bet and willing to lose, but we're in the same card game.

She trembles, and her voice is feather soft and so inviting when she says, "Kiss me."

*Hell to the yes.*

I cup her cheek, rubbing my thumb across her skin, and it's as if she dissolves, as if she floats, and I can feel how incredibly mutual this attraction is.

However, she's also incredibly short.

I don't line up that easily with her. When I line my body to hers, my hard-on meets her navel. That's not the big issue—though it is *big*. The pressing issue is I'm more than a head taller. I dust a quick kiss to the top of her hair, laughing, to emphasize my point.

She laughs, too. "You're a foot taller."

"More than a foot." I lower my hands to her hips and lift her up, setting her ass on the bar in the elevator. She lets out a little squeal. Out of the corner of my eye, I see floor fifteen light up on the pad as we pass it.

This is going to be one fast kiss.

But I'll take it. I'm inches away from her soft, sensual lips. She parts them, and I close my eyes, dipping my mouth to hers, then the elevator slows.

On the seventeenth floor.

I groan and huff in frustration.

She winces, as if *not* kissing is as painful for her as it is for me.

The doors whisk open.

She slides off the bar, her feet hitting the floor as a fortyish-year-old woman strolls into the elevator, carrying

several empty canvas grocery bags. She wears electric-blue glasses, and her black hair is twisted high in a bun. Earbuds blast some kind of loud music in her ears, and she clutches her phone, bopping along with it, and gives us a quick nod. When the doors close, she stabs the down button, then mutters under her breath, probably because she's realizing she entered an elevator going up.

I sigh heavily, because she's not even headed in the same direction as us. She doesn't even need this ride.

I look at Mia, right next to me. She brushes her hand over her hair, smoothing it out though I didn't get to mess it up like I wanted.

She shrugs and gives a *what can you do* smile as the elevator slows again, approaching my floor. Then she rises on tiptoe and dusts her lips along my jaw. Now it's my turn to shiver because ... holy fuck. *Those lips*. I want to feel them all over me. I stare hard at her for the last two seconds of the ride, my eyes trying to say everything.

*I want you so much.*

The twentieth floor comes far too quickly, and I grab my backpack with my cat in it and give her a tip of the cap. "Time for your conference call, Jackrabbit. I don't want you to be late for it."

She smiles. "*Considerate*. You're considerate, too."

This time I take it as a compliment, because from Mia, I know it is.

I'd like to say that later we pick up where we left off, but that doesn't happen. Instead, I take off for a bike ride to burn all this excess energy, my version of taking a cold shower.

As I power along Hudson River Greenway on a titanium-grade custom bike that my buddy Carlos shipped to me, I weigh what to do next.

Well, the very next thing I'm required to do by the Competitive Guy Act is to pass the cyclist in front of me, which I accomplish with a quick burst of adrenaline, leaving the dude in the banana-yellow jersey ample opportunity to enjoy the view of my back tire.

With a clear path in front of me, I try to approach the Mia quandary like a trail I'm guiding some newbies along. Do I keep marching down this path? Or is it time to fork left and veer away from my preconceived notions of how a relationship should unfold?

The wild card, though, is her—her presence.

And that changes the game.

She's in town for the next eight days, and she's only five floors up from me. Theoretically, I could see her every day. We could start a crash course in whether we are a good idea or a bad idea. I could take her out every night, plan things I know she'd enjoy. Go all in for eight days. That has to be enough time for us to figure out what the hell to do with all this tension between us.

But as I shoot past another cyclist—I'll have to let Carlos know his custom ride, paired with some good old-fashioned energy, is a winning combo—I ask myself what actually changed this afternoon in the elevator.

Not that much, to be honest.

Logically, the only thing that has changed is information. I have evidence that she has the hots for me, too. Whoop-de-do. That doesn't fix the big hurdle between us—the motherfucking continent.

Or does it?

Do the miles truly matter?

I'd like to call my sister and ask her advice. Maybe find out if she's ever successfully set up a man and woman who live so far away from each other. Several weeks ago, Evie asked if there had ever been anything between Mia and me, saying she had seen the way I looked at her at the dinner party.

But my sister is away for the weekend with her new guy, and now that she's finally found a match of her own, I don't want to interrupt. I need to make this choice on my own. Is it worth pursuing something while Mia is here for the rest of the week?

As I burn off the rest of this lust, I feel I'm close to an answer.

But when I return home, the decision is snatched from me, courtesy of an SOS message from my East Coast manager.

*Harvey has food poisoning! And the whitewater trip with Greenstone–Harrington Capital starts tomorrow afternoon.*

My shoulders sag, and I drag a hand through my hair. Harvey is my most experienced guide. That means I just booked myself a trip out of town, and that also means there's no chance with Mia this week.

I write back to my manager and tell him I'll cover for Harvey. That's my job. I didn't start this company to sit at a desk and tell other people where to go, like an air-traffic



controller. I started this company to be a pilot, flying the damn plane.

To be outside.

But ideally, not during the one damn week when the woman I'm crazy for is in town. But so it goes.

I flop onto my couch with my pussycat in my lap and dial my buddy Carlos in California. "Your bike kicks ass," I tell him after he picks up. "I lapped twenty people, including Lance Armstrong look-alikes."

He chuckles. "Only the finest for you. And how are the other models working out for your business?" he asks, since I've stocked his more economically priced models for the bike tours we recently launched.

"The customers love them. A few have even said they want to buy one, so maybe you'll let me use that cabin of yours in Blue Canyon next time I'm in California. It can be my commission."

"Ha. I loan it to no one. That's my baby."

I snap my fingers. "Shucks. I wish there were something I could do to convince you. Like, say, buying another dozen of your bikes for the East Coast, too."

He's silent for a few seconds. Then he clears his throat. "What did I say? I believe I said you can use it on your next Tahoe trip."

I grin, and stretch my arms across the back of the couch. "Excellent."

When I end the call, I spot a text from Mia, and my heart bounces around in my chest like a tennis ball. Jesus Christ, I have it bad for this girl.

**Mia:** At dinner. Still thinking about good ideas and bad ideas. How about you?

**Patrick:** Ideas are all I can think about. Have you landed one way or the other?

**Mia:** I've landed on, I hope that woman's groceries were absolutely delicious for making us miss a chance in the elevator.

**Patrick:** Yeah, me, too. Feel free to stop by later.

My finger hovers above the last message for a few more seconds. Finally, I hit send, even if it might be a little too pushy, a little too suggestive.

Maybe it is, since her reply is straight down the middle of the *I can't read it* road.

**Mia:** I wish I could. The dinner is running late. But we're having fun!

I rub my hand over the back of my neck and heave a sigh. I want to tell her I'll wait up. But that sounds really fucking lame. And that's not where we are—we're not hovering in *I'll wait up for you* territory.

In fact, we're not anywhere at all on the relationship road map.

We're back to where we were yesterday. Friends who've never kissed.

Zeus meows his displeasure as I head for the door.

His green eyes narrow as he unleashes a needy, distrustful meow that loosely translates into *what on earth could possibly be more enticing out there than spending time with me in here?*

I kneel and scratch his chin. “Dude, I’m sorry. I have to go.”

Another wounded mewl makes it clear how abhorrent he finds the idea of my departure.

But that chin rub is so good he emits a little rumble, even though it’s clearly against his will.

“You’ll be fine. Daisy will visit you twice a day to give you food,” I say, reminding him that his favorite cat-sitter will pop by for regular visits. “You love her.”

His tail twitches like it does when he’s annoyed I haven’t fed him yet, when a bird is on the other side of the glass, and when I leave for a trip.

“I’ll be back in a few days.” I scratch between his ears. He arches his back and cranks up the volume. I’m forgiven. For a second.

In the elevator, I check my phone and find a missed message from last night.

From Mia.

It’s a picture of the douche kangaroo she mentioned, only she’s edited the meme. The kangaroo has boobs now and is

wearing a white bikini and red lipstick. The caption reads in blocky white letters: “Hey, guy, wanna see my pouch?”

I laugh hard, right from the gut.

Jesus.

It’s raunchy and goofy at the same damn time.

I peer closer at the time. She sent it after midnight. And I have half a mind to analyze what that means.

But I don’t.

Sometimes a meme is just a meme.

And sometimes a kiss never happens, and not even a kangaroo in drag can change the score.

Besides, she’s busy. Hell, I’m busy, too. It’s all for the best that the grocery lady came between us. Now, Mia and I can remain as we’ve always been. *Friends*. And we’ll always stay friends. This most excellent photo of a drag queen kangaroo is proof that we’re better off as buddies.

There are other fish in the sea. Hell, my own sister is a matchmaker. She might very well know someone. But when I reach the lobby and stride to the glass doors that open to the sidewalk, *the* woman I want to be with is running toward me.

She wears neon-green running shorts and a form-fitting white tank top. That is all.

Well, running shoes, of course. But I’m not lingering too long on the shoes. I’m looking at her trim body, those toned arms, her shapely legs, and then, my favorite part—her face. Her gorgeous, beautiful face, all rosy-cheeked from a morning run.

She beams when she sees me and practically rips her earbuds from her ears.

“Good morning,” she says with a cheery, infectious smile.

The corners of my lips curve up. “It is a good morning, indeed. What are you listening to?”

“A podcast.” She flashes the screen at me, and it’s a business-centric show.

I nod. “Ah, back in all-business mode?”

She narrows her eyes and wags her finger at me. “Yes, but it’s good because ...” She lifts her arms and chants “ahhh,” as if she’s an angel sent from on high to issue a heavenly pronouncement. “I had an epiphany.”

“Oh yeah?”

She drops her arms and pokes my chest. “You were right. Stepping away from work cleared my head. All these ideas for where to go next with Pure Beauty came rushing in.” She adds a *whoosh* sound effect like a stream.

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “Really?”

“Yes, really! I swear, Patrick. Everything came together for me yesterday in a mad rush. Then it crystallized last night.”

“Like new product lines and stuff?”

“Maybe,” she says, a little coyness to her tone.

“Ah, I know. It’s beauty products for cats, right?”

“Absolutely,” she says, in mock seriousness. She strokes her cheek. “It’ll make their fur even softer.” She notices the gear in my hand and on my back and stops to stare at my bags, then at me. “Do you have a tour?”

I nod. “That I do.”

Her smile disappears. Her lips turn into a sad line. “For how long?”

“Most of the week.”

“You’re not around the next few days?”

I shake my head. “I’ll be back in time for the wedding.”

“Wow,” she says under her breath, as if she’s been thrown for a loop. Her reaction intrigues me, makes me wonder if she wanted me around. But before I can noodle on that, she seems to find her bearings. “What about Zeus? Do you need me to feed him?”

I smile. “He has a regular cat-sitter.” I cross my index and middle fingers. “He and Daisy are like that.”

Her mouth drops into a full-on frown. An absolutely magnificent pout. “*Please*. I want to spend time with him. He’s so cute. Let me do it. I’ll be here all week.” She makes the sign of the cross on her chest. “And I swear I won’t look through your medicine cabinet.”

I laugh. “You are more than welcome to check out my toothpaste and deodorant. It’s Crest and the Trader Joe’s brand.”

“You spoiled the surprise,” she says, stomping her foot. She screws up one corner of her lips as if she’s plotting something nefarious. “Well, there’s always your fridge.”

“Condiments, Jackrabbit. Condiments as far as the eye can see. All the mustard varieties in the world are at your disposal. But feel free to paw around in my boxer briefs drawer.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “Is your high school yearbook there?”

I sigh. “Mia, I didn’t keep a copy of it, and you just made sure that Daisy will remain my sitter.”

She parks her hands on her hips. “I promise I’ll be good. I really want to help you, since you helped me immensely yesterday. And I like the ... *pussycat*,” she says, tiptoeing and leaning close to my ear. Just like that, with her body near me, her dirty words on my neck, I give in.

“Fine. You can feed him. I’ll text Daisy and let her know I have it covered, and I’ll get you a key.”

She claps her hands. “Excellent.” Then her smile burns off. “About last night ...”

I wave a hand dismissively. I need to get in the zone before this rafting trip. No need to bring any baggage over what didn’t happen. “Don’t worry about it.”

“The picture?”

“No,” I say slowly, pointing behind me to the building. “The elevator, right?”

“Sure. The elevator.”

“It’s fine. No big deal,” I say, keeping it light and easy. Casual even. “We’re friends, right? It’s all good.”

She blinks as if she’s startled. “Right. Friends.” Each word comes out at the speed of molasses. She sounds sad about that prospect, but isn’t that what we are? We almost kissed, and then she didn’t come over later. No big deal. It happens. The elevator was a blip, a moment in time. Now, we need to be friends again. Friends who’ve never kissed.

“You’re taking care of my cat. We’re clearly friends.”

She smiles, but it’s a kind I’ve never seen on her before. A smile I can’t read. “We’re totally buds.” She smacks my shoulder like a dude would do.

I head back inside, grab my spare key from the concierge desk, and hand it to her, along with instructions on feeding the cat. Then, I remember one last detail.

“My suit is coming back from the cleaners on Wednesday. They’ll deliver it, but any chance you can grab it from the concierge? I don’t like to leave things there too long. Those guys are pretty busy and deliveries pile up.”

“I’ll grab it, no problem. You spent your day off with me yesterday. The least I can do is get your suit and feed your cat.” She smiles again, that same unrecognizable variety, before she adds, “It’s what a friend would do.”

Ah, got it. It’s the *friend* smile. It’s clear that’s what we’re going to be. That must be what she’s preferred all along.

Good thing I have the next four days on the raging waters to reset our relationship to the friend zone.

## Conversations with the Cat

### *Zeus*

It was days later.

Or, really, it might have been hours. His belly was convinced it was longer. He'd tried in vain to find a mouse, even a mole. He honestly wouldn't mind a moth for a small snack, either. But the place he lived remained as fastidious and mouse-free as it had ever been.

Fortunately, as the sun dipped in the sky, the door creaked open.

At last.

Someone had remembered the cat existed. Surely, it would be the red-haired woman with the jingly bracelets on her arms. That woman was a favorite person of his. She seemed to have one purpose in the world.

*Serve him.*

He liked it when humans had that purpose.

But that woman didn't wander in. It was the bird woman. The woman who wanted to nibble on the man he lived with.

*Well, hello, lady.*

The cat rubbed against her leg both in greeting and a clear command—*FEED ME NOW*.



“So good to see you, too.” She bent down to stroke his head. “I’ve missed you so much. I’ll be taking care of you for the next few days. But I promised Patrick I would be a very good girl. So if you see me rifling through his things, you have permission to scratch and claw me.”

She was taking too long. He needed food, and he needed it stat. He’d have to try her other leg. Perhaps rubbing that one would activate the can opener.

“Oh, you’re too sweet. Do you want me to pick you up?”

The woman scooped him in her arms, and he pushed his head against the bare skin of her chest. Ah, that was nice. No wonder his master seemed fascinated with that area of the woman.

“I’ll give you your tuna, and I’ll tell you all about the exciting things I’m working on.”

She set him down, and he paced across the tile, waiting, waiting, waiting, as she entered the feeding zone. The sound of metal opening metal rang out like a joyous song. Food was coming at last.

He turned in ceremonious circles, round and round, unable to contain his sheer excitement.

She set the dish on the floor, and he nearly wept with feline ecstasy—tuna and kibble. He purred as he ate. Meanwhile, the woman perched on the counter, kicking her feet, chattering on and on, perhaps to him.

“So that’s what I want to do with Pure Beauty. Because beauty products for cats is such a brilliant idea, right, Zeus? We can call it Purr Beauty then.” She stopped and winked at him, then hummed. “But then, there’s the other issue. What about Eric?” she asked, and her tone shifted. It was the sound of frustration, like how he felt when there was no longer a warm body on the bed in the morning. “I have to tell him about what happened with Eric. But I don’t want to go there, because this doesn’t seem remotely the same. The way I feel for Patrick is completely different. It’s like night and day.” She sighed and went quiet for a spell. “But I know it’ll have to

come up. I need to be upfront about what's held me back. Don't you think?"

After he finished his feast, the woman stayed with him a little longer. He rewarded her excellent can-opening skills by deigning to sit in her lap as she tapped away on her little silver machine, chatting on the phone with someone she called Felicia and someone else she referred to as Lisa.

When she arrived another time, she carried a bag with her. "Look, Zeus. It's a suit. Isn't it to die for?" The woman ran a hand down the covering, almost as if she were worshipping the item. He rubbed against the bag, too. He was unable to resist clothing in bags. Or bags in general for that matter. "Seeing Patrick in this suit might possibly make me ovulate. I swear, I can't be held responsible for my actions. Wait. Wait. Of course I'm responsible. I have to be good. Must be good. Even though that body in that suit might very well be the ever-loving death of my restraint."

She walked into the other room, and he trotted after her instantly, since she seemed to have forgotten his needs.

A meow here and there and he'd successfully lured her back to the kitchen where she opened a can and fed him, then rattled on and on.

"I wonder what tie he'll wear. If he'll need help straightening it. If he'll need help taking it off."

He had his own issues to noodle on as he devoured the feast—was trout tastier than salmon? Was mackerel better than yellowtail? Those were interesting questions he contemplated as he dined.

She hopped off the counter, stared at the shiny fridge, and shook a finger at herself. "Stop it. Just stop it. You know the risks. Too high. Besides, he just wants to be friends. It doesn't matter if you want to straighten his tie or undo it."

Her stomach rumbled, and the cat really thought she ought to spend more time focusing on hunting her prey. The woman opened the box that held human food, grabbed a small bottle, and kissed his furry head before she left.

Sometime after, the man returned, and the cat circled his ankles in excitement.

“Hey, buddy, did Mia take good care of you? Did she treat you well? Did she tell you all her secrets?”

His answer was a deep and satisfied purr.

He was the cat. That meant he knew all their secrets, but he would never tell.

After a hot shower to wash off the day, I run a towel over my hair, dry off, and pull on a pair of black boxer briefs. I stroll into the kitchen and yank open the fridge, just in case something miraculously appeared inside it while I was gone.

Nope.

Still full of condiments and beer. Though they are the two basic food groups, some protein would be nice. I pick up my phone to place an order for a burger, and a message from Mia lands on my screen.

Four days in the woods, four days away from the woman I want. That was absolutely enough time to recalibrate my feelings back to *just friends*.

I exhale deeply before I open her text. Remind myself of who she has to be to me.

*Mia, my friend. Mia, who I put in the friend zone. Mia, who I've never kissed, and never will kiss.*

I read her text. It's a reply to my earlier text message letting her know I'd returned and she was relieved of cat detail.

**Mia:** Welcome back! I loved every second of cat detail. Also, if you're wondering where the sriracha is, I might have borrowed it. But I'm on my way to return it right now.

**Patrick:** Good. I was hungry. Now I'll be satisfied with some sriracha.

**Mia:** It is quite filling.

I set the phone down, pleased that we both executed that *just friends* exchange so easily. It's going to be seamless slipping back into friendship with her.

Two minutes later, she raps on my door. "Damn, you're fast," I say as I unlock and open it.

And it's safe to say her jaw drops.

Her eyes approximate the size of pizza pies as she swallows hard, as if there's something stuck in her throat.

"I think you forgot to put on clothes ..." She points at me with the sriracha in her hand.

Oh, yeah. I'm wearing only my boxer briefs. I wiggle my eyebrows. "Good thing I didn't slip into a yellow thong tonight."

She furrows her brow. "Please tell me you don't own a thong."

"You tell me. Zeus said you went through my drawers."

"Oh my God. I did not. I swear."

I hold up my hands in surrender. "Just teasing." I open the door all the way. "Come in. I was about to order a burger. Are you hungry?"

I pat myself—*virtually*—on the back for staying in the zone.

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

"Does that mean you want one?"

She flubs her lips. "Do high heels hurt? Are meetings the bane of my existence? Does cereal taste better with milk?"

I laugh. "Gee. I don't really know if high heels hurt."

“They do. They’re the devil, and yes, I want a burger. Veggie, please, with cheddar.”

“Coming your way.”

I open my Seamless app, place the order from my favorite diner, drop my phone on the coffee table, and then offer her a beer. She takes it and tips the neck to mine in a toast. “To your return.” Then her eyes wander, traveling over my frame as I lean against the kitchen counter. “Are you going to put on any clothes?”

I decide to have fun with her. That’s what friends do. Plus, I’m not lacking in the confidence department. I wasn’t always in great shape. Fitness is an effort, so I’m not going to pretend I don’t like looking this way. “Do you want me to get dressed, Mia? Does it make you uncomfortable to see all this masculinity on display?”

She closes her eyes for a second. “It’s fine. You can wear those things.”

“Things?”

“Those form-fitting boxers that show off your fantastic ass,” she blurts out. “There. Are you happy I said it?”

I peer behind me as if checking out my own butt. “Damn, that is one fine ass. Did you want to conduct any firmness tests on it?”

She drops her face into her hands, laughing. When she looks up, she slides the sriracha to me along the counter. “Here you go.” Next comes the key. “And I picked up your suit.”

*Good. Come sit on my face now.*

Shit. Where did that come from? I shake away the filthy thought that flashed before my eyes. “You’re pretty much a perfect cat-sitter.”

She smiles. “So how was the trip?”

I tell her about the group from the financial firm, and how they were an interesting mix of daring and cautious, but that kind of reflected the point of the trip. “These two firms just

merged, and the company wanted to bring the new team members together. Have them work in tandem on the rapids.”

She arches a brow. “That’s kind of cool. Did it help them bond, or what have you?”

I nod. “I think so. At the beginning, you could sense some tentativeness. Maybe even wariness. But after the first day on the water, they were getting along better. By the time we navigated the toughest sections, it was as if they’d been working together for years.”

“That’s amazing. You’re like glue.”

“I’m very sticky, Mia,” I say straight-faced.

She laughs. “That’s kind of gross and sexy at the same time.”

“That’s generally what I aim for.” We make our way to my couch where we sink onto the soft maroon cushions.

She takes a sip of beer and sets her bottle on the coffee table. “So I guess this is how it goes. You’re comfortable enough around me to drink beer in your underwear.”

I laugh, leaning back into the couch and stretching an arm over the top of it. My reboot completely worked. Even she can tell we’re awesome at being buddies. “I guess I am.”

As I take a drink, she looks at me. Studies me. Stares.

“What is it?”

She licks her lips. “I’m sorry, but you have a perfect body.”

It’s like an injection of pride right in my chest. “You really don’t have to apologize for saying that. Also, so do you.”

Crap. I didn’t mean that in a friendly way at all.

A reddish tint spreads in her cheeks. “You really do.” She flaps her hands around at me, gesturing. “Your abs. Your arms. Your biceps. I think your biceps are bigger than my thighs.”

“Possibly.” Setting down my beer, I take her hands, and bring them both around my left bicep. She can’t touch her

fingertips, and naturally, this pleases me to an incomprehensible degree.

“Holy guns,” she says, kind of breathless.

Then I move her hands and circle them around her thigh. She’s wearing jeans. I keep my hands on hers as her fingertips touch.

“Do I get to touch your thighs now and compare them to my tiny arm?” she asks, a hint of mischief in her hazel eyes.

In an instant, my bearings are gone. I don’t know where we are anymore. I don’t know how we slipped so quickly into this touchy, flirty game, but I know I like it. I know I want it.

“Go for it,” I tell her.

She wraps her right hand around her opposite arm, coming a few inches shy of her fingers touching her thumb. Then, she places that same hand on my thigh, barely covering the top of it.

I laugh at how small her hand is on my body. Then I stop laughing because it’s *her* hand on my thigh, and now I know exactly where we are. We’re no longer in the friend zone. Friends don’t touch each other’s thighs like this. This is elevator land.

While I was in the woods, I tried to put her in the friend zone. I tried hard, and I thought I’d succeeded. Maybe I was just fooling myself.

But there’s no fooling myself now.

Sometimes you don’t know where a trail goes, but you turn onto it anyway. Like she did to me in the car, I set my hand on top of hers. I’m not lying when I say it’s an instant turn-on. This woman—she has my number. She has to know it, too, as I curl my fingers through hers.

The barest hitch in her breath tells me she’s turned on, too. Neither one of us is wandering in the friend zone right now.

Thank God.



When I raise my face and meet her eyes, she asks, “Were you always in such perfect shape?”

I laugh. “I was born with muscles. I sprang out of the womb lifting weights.”

“Seriously. Have you always been so ... fit?”

My smile fades away. “No.”

“Why do you say it like it’s sad?”

“It’s not sad. It’s just true. In my freshman year of high school I was—”

“Chubby?” she supplies with a lift of her eyebrow, like she can’t quite believe that.

I shake my head.

“Skinny?”

I make a rolling gesture. “And?”

Her eyes bug out. “And awkward?”

I flash a huge grin at her, baring my teeth.

“With braces?”

“Forever,” I say. “That was the kind I had. The forever kind of braces. I swear they were on for my entire high school years and only came off a month before graduation.”

She stares at me in disbelief. “I can’t picture you skinny and awkward.”

I hold up a finger to correct her. “Tall, skinny, and awkward.”

She pats my shoulder with her free hand. “I’m going to need to see the photos.”

“Why?”

“I can’t see you as anything but what you are now.”

“So, what’s wrong with that? Why do you want to?”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “I don’t know. Maybe there’s a part of me that likes knowing you weren’t

always this ...”

“Handsome? Strapping? Studly?” I ask, puffing out my chest as I exaggerate preening for her.

“Yes,” she says, squeezing my fingers more tightly, sending heat all over my skin. “Can I see?”

“I don’t have my yearbook,” I remind her. “But I have a picture that Evie sent me recently.” Without letting go of her hand, I reach for my phone then open the text thread from my sister, searching for a digital shot she snapped of a framed photo of us she came across at our parents’ house.

She titled it *Before We Were Cool* and sent another text that read, “Just kidding. We were never cool.”

“There am I, in all my TSA glory. That’s tall, skinny, awkward to you, Jackrabbit,” I say as I show her the pic. My sister wears big round glasses and is sticking her tongue out, and I tower above her, a muscle-free metal-mouth.

Mia doesn’t laugh. She smiles, then sighs, then nibbles on the corner of her lips. “I love it,” she whispers.

And I crack up. “You’re such a goofball. Why on earth would you like this?” I toss the phone to the table.

“Because it means you’re—”

I hold up my hand. “Don’t say normal again.”

“Tell me what changed, why you’re no longer TSA.”

“My parents sent me to summer camp my freshman year. I’d already been a Boy Scout and an Eagle Scout, but this was every day. Outdoors. I fell in love with the swimming, the hiking, the canoeing, the rafting, and the obstacle courses. I couldn’t get enough of it. I came home fifteen pounds heavier, and it was the good kind of heavy.”

She runs her other hand down my bicep. “This kind of heavy?”

“Yeah,” I say, and the word comes out dry, husky.

She’s turned the temperature in me to red-hot. She draws her hand down my pecs, to my abs. “You’re so ...”

“So what?”

“Every part of you is hard.”

I laugh, and my eyes drift to my crotch. “Yes.”

She takes notice of the tent in my briefs and licks her lips.

“And that’s because of you,” I say, my voice lower but my words clear. She’s been complimenting me, but I need her to know how I feel. Turns out four days away from her didn’t reset anything at all. I don’t know where we’re headed tonight. I don’t know where we’re going. All I know is I can’t turn back. “Because of what you do to me. Because of your body, your face ... *you*.”

She takes a breath, her lips parting. “This is crazy,” she whispers.

“It’s not crazy.”

My gaze strays to her wandering fingers, traveling down my arm, over my elbow to my wrist. My little Mia is such the explorer, and it’s me she wants to discover. She looks at me like she wants to touch me everywhere. Lick my skin. Run her fingers all over me.

She looks at me the way I look at her.

Screw friends.

Screw distance.

Screw the hurdles.

I’m going all in.

I let go of her hand and thread my fingers through her hair.  
“Get on me.”

Then I grab her hips and move her so she’s straddling my lap. She gasps, a sexy noise that turns into a moan as she sinks down on my hard-on.

I hiss because it feels so fucking good.

“I wanted to come over the other night. After dinner. After the elevator,” she blurts out.

“Yeah?”

She nods. “Dinner ran late, but I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

“What were you thinking?”

“That we didn’t get to kiss, and I wanted to so badly.”

“I can fix that problem right now.”

I take her face in my hands and bring her to me. Then the world spirals away as I kiss Mia Summers for the very first time.

It’s extraordinary. Her lips brush against mine, and she wastes no time. She slides closer, rubbing on my dick as she presses her chest to me. It’s as if she’s climbing me, and God, how I want this. How I want her like this.

I thread my fingers through her hair, pulling her closer, kissing her deeper. Tasting her. Her mouth is soft and sweet,

and she makes these little sounds—whimpers, sighs, gasps—that make me nearly lose my mind.

I'm kissing Mia. I've been crazy for her for so damn long, and she's on my lap, rubbing against my erection, kissing me as if her every last breath depends on it. Her tongue tangles with mine, and in a hot second, the kiss become furious. Greedy. Like two people who are mad about each other. I curl my hands around her head, wanting to get as close as I can, but she bats them away.

I break contact for a moment and raise a questioning eyebrow.

“My turn.” She lifts her hands, cups my cheeks, and then she strokes my jaw. Reverently. Hungrily. And I know what she's doing. She's feeling my beard. She's touching my stubbled jaw with eager fingers, as if she's wanted to get her hands on me for as long as I've wanted to touch her.

I don't stop her. I drop my hands to her hips, and I guide her along, moving her so she grinds against my cock, and she's gasping and murmuring as she kisses me.

We consume each other. We are ravenous. My brain turns to static, firing pleasure signal after pleasure signal to every nerve in my body. I want to live in this moment for the rest of the night. I don't ever want to forget how good it feels not only to kiss her, but to be kissed by her.

She rocks harder, goes faster, murmurs louder, then she separates and looks at me with desperate eyes. “You have no idea.”

I shake my head. “I do. I have every idea.”

And when I pull her back to me, ready to kiss the breath out of her once more, my phone rings.

I groan.

“Ignore it,” she whispers.

“It's the diner, probably. Burgers.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “Well, in that case ...”

She rolls off me as I answer the phone.

“Good evening, Mr. Milligan. We have a delivery from Wendy’s Diner.”

“Send him up, please, Trevor.”

“No problem. Also, sir, you have a few packages that arrived this week. Do you want me to bring them up, too?”

That must be some new gear I ordered—goodies I wanted to test before we add them to the lineup. “Sure. The more the merrier.”

“And finally,” he says. “I have a plant delivery for a Mister Zeus.”

I furrow my brow. “Plant delivery?” Then I shrug. “Bring it all up. We’ll make it a party.”

When I end the call, I notice my erection has had the courtesy to subside. Shame, since it was a particularly good one.

I stand. “I should get dressed.”

“Undressed worked for me,” Mia says with a little twitch in her lips, but she’s not looking at me. She’s tapping away on her phone. “Hold on. I need to deal with something from Lisa.”

“Who’s Lisa?” I ask as I head to my bedroom, since I don’t want to be the douche who answers the door nearly free-range for anyone but Mia.

“My VP of products.”

When I return a minute later, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, her head is crooked to the side, and she’s talking on the phone.

“Right. But what if we move up that date, too?” she asks then holds up her finger to let me know she’ll be done soon.

I nod, scoop up the two empty beer bottles, and put them in the recycling bin in my kitchen.

“So it looks like that would work then? Can Felicia do it, too?” Mia asks, as someone knocks on the door.

I open it and take the food from the diner delivery guy, thanking him and giving him a tip from the app. After I put the food on the counter, Trevor's at the door, laden with boxes from REI and a small potted plant with a silvery bow around the terra-cotta.

I give it the side-eye, but there's a card on it.

"Here you go," Trevor says, and I tip him, place the boxes on the floor, and hold up the plant quizzically.

When Mia sees it, her eyes widen, and she mouths *that's from me*.

Then into the phone, she says, "Hey, can I call you back in two minutes?"

And that tells me all I need to know. The evening activity is over.

She hangs up and gestures to the plant. "I ordered a little gift for Zeus. To thank him for being such a good companion. Want to let him sniff it?"

And I can't be annoyed. "You got him catnip?"

She crinkles her nose, her dimples in full force. "I did. Is that okay? He's not allergic to catnip, is he?"

I laugh. "He's not allergic to anything. He's very manly," I say, glancing to the sleeping king, who's chosen the TV stand as his evening nap spot.

She presses her hands together. "I feel terrible, but I really have to deal with this call. It's only five on the West Coast."

"Go," I say with a smile, picking up the box with her veggie burger and handing it to her. "Cat beauty calls."

She smiles. "It does." She takes a deep breath. "I'll see ..."

"I'll see you at the wedding," I say, finishing for her. I've just spent the last four days putting Mia back in the friend zone, and now I've gladly jumped back to elevator land with her in mere minutes.

But I need to figure out what the hell to do with the big problem. The problem I can't fix. The miles. I need the time to

process what the hell all this means.

Other than the obvious.

She's trying to get my cat high.



The Rolling Stones' "Beast of Burden" bounces from the old sound system at Joe's Sticks as the groom misses an easy shot.

"Damn," Chase says, shaking his head as he regards the pool table disdainfully, then his hands. "Where did my hand-eye coordination go? I can't believe anyone lets me operate on them with these hands."

"Time to turn your license in," his best bud, Wyatt, says from across the green felt.

"Or maybe"—I lean against my pool cue—"Chase could be throwing the game on purpose because he really wishes we took him to Scores for his bachelor party."

Chase laughs, dragging a hand through his light brown hair. "Yeah, you guys are cramping my style by bringing me here instead of to the land of G-strings and fake boobs."

I point the stick at him, narrowing my eyes. "Admit it. You have a stack of one-dollar bills burning a hole in your pocket."

"Tell the truth, Dr. Summers," Wyatt says, his blue eyes narrowing, his tone toughening as if he's trying to shake him down.

Chase holds up his hands in surrender, then drops his head forlornly. "The truth wins out. All I ever wanted was to throw money at women I'll never have and don't want."

"Isn't that the truth?" Max adds with a nod as he makes his way around the table, lining up a shot.

Joe's is our regular haunt, and for the record, a strip club was never in the cards for tonight. But good friends, good beer, and a few competitive rounds of pool are an ideal trio before we send Chase down the aisle tomorrow. I came here directly from work, and it has been a crazy day, cramming in not only my segment on first aid in the woods for WRBC Channel 10, but also a meeting with Dana, our reservations manager, to review some upcoming trips, including some potential ongoing clients. Those are some of my favorite kinds, and as we assigned leaders for the tours, I told her which ones I wanted to handle myself. I signed off on the employee handbook, too, and boy, am I glad that our rules have tightened now. That's a huge weight off my shoulders.

Oh, but that's not all. Mia and I texted on and off throughout the day. She told me the bridesmaids are taking Josie to see *Hamilton* tonight as a surprise, since Josie's been dying to see it, and Mia planned to throw her bra at the stage during the curtain call, since it was a bachelorette party, after all.

*I've no doubt that's precisely what the theater likes its patrons to do,* I'd replied.

Good thing it's showtime at the musical, otherwise I'd be tempted to check for a message from her. Doing that with Max nearby feels all kinds of wrong. Though, truth be told, feeling the way I do and *not* telling him feels all kinds of wrong, too.

Spencer takes a swallow from his beer then sets the bottle down. "C'mon, what could be better than the six of us at a strip club? Half of us are married, with one more to go tomorrow, and Max on deck in another few months, while Wyatt already has a kid at home."

At the end of the table, Nick pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Not to mention, one third of us have pregnant wives."

"Hear, hear. To my soon-to-be-born son," Spencer says, raising his beer, then tipping it in Nick's direction. "And my soon-to-be-born nephew, even though it's still a weird concept that *you're* going to be related to *my* nephew."

“Yeah, I’ll just be, ya know, his father,” Nick deadpans. Spencer’s wife, Charlotte, is due in a month, and Harper, Nick’s wife and Spencer’s little sister, isn’t far behind.

Spencer shakes his head, as if this is all too much to digest. “Still strange that you’re married to my sister.”

“Speaking of sisters, how’s Mia doing?” Wyatt asks, directing his question at Chase and Max. “Natalie and I didn’t see her much this week.”

“She’s been running around for work,” Chase answers.

“Building her business has been pretty all-consuming,” Max adds, looking at Chase.

Something seems to pass between them. Absently, I scratch my jaw, wondering what it is.

Then, my conscience nags at me. I need to let Max know what’s going on, and I’m not talking about that hot-as-sin kiss on the couch last night. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, and I’ve come to a decision. I need to tell him what’s in my heart for her, and that needs to happen ASAP. Maybe even tonight. I’ll have to search for the right moment.

A little later, Max clears his throat and raises his beer bottle in a toast. “To my brother, Chase. The happiest guy around. Josie is perfect for you, and we’ve always known it. I’m thrilled that you’re marrying her, and may you always be not just the happiest guy around—but even happier.”

Chase looks almost embarrassed, but also ridiculously delighted. The dude is, quite simply, madly in love with his bride.

Wyatt claps slowly. “To the golden boy. May your life with my sister always be golden.”

Nick lifts his beer. “I’ll second that, since Josie’s my sister, too.”

Spencer nods from Chase to Nick. “You two should form a club. The Society for Dudes Who Fell for Their Friend’s Sisters.”

Max laughs. “Don’t even think of looking at me. Henley is related to none of you fuckers.”

“Nor is Charlotte.” Spencer’s eyes land on me. “And what about you, Captain Outdoors? Are you the next one?”

I force out a laugh then take a hearty gulp of my beer to hide the fact that he’s nailed it, whether he knows it or not.

Max shakes his head, chuckling. “Guys. It’s Chase’s night. Let’s keep it that way.”

And that ends my search for an opening. Tonight is not the time to tell Max that I absolutely want to be the next one in the club.

I stroll across one of the bridges in Central Park, on my way to the wedding at the boathouse. When I reach the steps heading to the ceremony, I spot a familiar silhouette in the crowd of guests milling about in front of the doors. A blond woman, wearing a sky-blue dress, is chatting with a couple. When she finishes her conversation, I call Evie's name.

She whirls around and waves when she sees me.

"Fancy meeting you here," I say as I reach her. Her date and some of our mutual friends are chatting a few feet away.

"And you. What a surprise," she teases as she throws her arms around me. I bend lower and give her a bear hug.

"How many weddings a year is it for you now?"

"This would be my tenth in the last twelve months," she says with a note of pride.

"And of those, how many are because of you?"

"Five," she says, beaming.

We high-five each other. "You are the Queen of Love. And when will yours be?" I ask, my gaze drifting pointedly to her date, a brainiac Internet genius who makes her so damn happy it's crazy. Dylan's talking with his sister.

Evie blushes and lowers her voice cautiously. "I'm not sure, but I have a feeling he's been ring shopping."

"Dylan's no idiot. He knows a damn good thing when he sees it."

Evie steps closer and adjusts my purple tie, knotting it tighter. “I swear, it’s like men never know how to tie these. You spend so much time in shorts. And what about you?”

“What about me? Do I know how to tie a tie? I believe I do,” I say with a smirk.

She gently swats me. “I mean, what about you and Mia?”

I let a smile cross my lips. Evie’s bright blue eyes—the same shade as mine—twinkle with excitement. The last time she asked me about Mia, nothing had happened between us. And while I’m not one to kiss and tell, I do want my sister’s advice.

I cup her elbow and gently guide her away from the other guests. “Listen, I need to ask something, Ev. Have you ever known a couple in a long-distance relationship where it worked?”

She beams. “Yes. Silly. Is that why you’ve held back with Mia?”

I shrug. “Kind of.”

“And now?” Her voice is laced with excitement.

“Well, I know she’s into me. I’m not sure if it’s to the same degree, but I guess I’m tired of pretending I’m not completely —”

“Besotted with her?”

I point a finger at her in acknowledgement. “Guilty as charged.”

She claps her hands and bounces on her toes. “I knew it. I knew it all along. And no, I don’t think it’s crazy to pursue something with someone who lives far away. Yes, I think it’s absolutely harder. I won’t kid you about that. But it happens. It’s real. Sometimes you fall in love with someone who lives halfway around the world.” My sister’s eyes turn dreamy.

“Mia isn’t halfway around the globe,” I point out.

Evie arches an eyebrow. “But the other part?”

“What part? The falling part?”

“Falling in—” She stops, her voice going softer. “The most important question is this—how would you feel if you never took the chance to let her know you wanted a relationship, damn the miles between you?”

“How would I feel ...” I repeat, musing on the words.

An usher dings a bell, and that ends the conversation. It’s time to head inside the boathouse and take our seats. A sign reads, “This is an unplugged ceremony. Please turn off your cell phones and be present with us.” I do as instructed, then grab a white wooden chair in the second row next to Dylan and Evie. A wall of glass windows provides a stunning view of the water. The groomsmen enter from the side, followed by the best man—that’s Max—and Chase, the man of the hour. They stand by the glass at the front.

A professional photographer is poised at the entryway, ready to do his job. A string quartet picks up their bows and plays something that sounds like Beethoven. All eyes turn to the doors. A bridesmaid I don’t know comes in first. She might be Lily. The name sounds familiar.

When the first bridesmaid is ten feet down the aisle, Mia enters.

My sister’s words ring in my ears.

*How would you feel if you never took the chance?*

They repeat in my head as I stare. I can’t take my eyes off her.

She wears a yellow dress and clutches a bouquet of daisies. Her hair is twisted up, but several caramel-blond strands fall softly around her face. As she walks down the aisle, my heart battles to break out of my chest and run to her.

Those dimples I adore.

Those eyes I want to look into.

Those lips I want to kiss.

As she nears the front, her gaze locks firmly with mine, and I swear I can see her mouth form the barest word. A *hi* just for me.

A few more bridesmaids enter and join the wedding party at the front, but I lose track of who's who and who's here because I can't stop looking at Mia, even when the bride enters to "Ode to Joy."

I try to focus on the ceremony, on the words the officiant says to Chase and an absolutely radiant Josie, who's as beautiful as any bride. He pledges to love her for the rest of his life, and she vows to do the same, and soon platinum bands encircle their fingers, and the groom kisses the bride as claps and cheers erupt throughout the boathouse.

*How would I feel?*

Like I'd missed the greatest chance of my life.

Mia's the one, no matter how far or how close she is, and I'll tell her as soon as I get her in my arms.



In the rom-com movies my sister made me watch growing up—and by *made me*, I mean she baked the most delicious brownies and I was only allowed to eat them if I watched her chick flicks—the hero runs to the heroine and tells her right away when he realizes precisely how he feels.

In real life, there's a lot of waiting around.

A lot of small talk.

A lot of “how do you know the groom and bride” and “what do you do” conversations with people I'll never talk to again. That's okay. I don't mind. I'm good at small talk, and frankly, it's part of my job. But it occupies an inordinate amount of my evening and makes it damn hard to find a spare moment with the sister of the groom.

Since she's in the wedding party, the photographer whisks the crew away shortly after the ceremony to snap sunset photos of the group. I down a glass of champagne, eat some kind of mushroom appetizer, and chat with friends, family, and random doctors from Chase's hospital. When they learn what I do, they seem particularly interested in sharing stories about some of the most absurd outdoor injuries they've treated, from gnarly broken bones to dangerous wild animal bites. It's like we're on two sides of the equation. I've seen or heard of the mishaps as they occurred, and they've treated them.

“What about you? Ever been injured in the woods?” a doctor with glasses and a crooked nose asks.

“Sure. I’ve had my share of wounds, from a broken arm to a sprained ankle. But hey, I’ve never been skunked or bitten by a raccoon, so there’s that.” I tap a wooden beam for luck. “And I’ve managed to avoid tripping on twigs.”

The guy laughs. “You don’t want to end up with a twig in the wrong place.”

And I don’t want to think about what that place would be, either, so I politely excuse myself.

These random conversations continue throughout the evening, into the reception, and during the dinner itself. At one point, Mia swishes past me, stopping briefly to whisper, “Nice tie.”

“Nice everything,” I say.

She purses her lips and blows me the barest of kisses.

Then she’s gone, chatting with her mother, chatting with her father, talking to Max. I keep myself busy, catching up on the latest from Dylan and his identical twin, Flynn. Honestly, if Dylan weren’t holding my sister’s hand, I’d be hard-pressed to tell the brothers apart.

The evening unfurls into toasts, laughter, delicious food, buzz-worthy champagne, and more happiness than I’ve ever seen in one place. Chase and Josie move onto the deck for their first dance as husband and wife, and when “Overjoyed” by Matchbox Twenty ends, they dance through another song, then another, as more guests join in.

One of the groomsmen rises, and for a second, I think he’s going to ask Mia to dance. I’m not okay with that. Not in the least.

I stand, cut a path across to her, and hold out my hand. “Dance with me.”

Her smile lights up her face. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

Out on the dance floor, we join dozens of couples. Mia’s parents, Josie’s parents, Spencer’s parents, and Charlotte’s parents, too. Max and Henley laugh as they shimmy, and I faintly remember him mentioning once that Henley loves to

salsa and had taken him to dancing lessons. I knew then she was the one for him, hook, line, and sinker. I'd never thought anyone could lure Max to a dance floor. But now he twirls his fiancée in a circle. He doesn't even balk when he sees me take Mia in my arms.

She places her arms on my shoulders, and mine circle her hips, as chastely as I can manage. The lights on the deck twinkle, and the stars wink in the night sky. Tall buildings in Manhattan tower around us, sprinkling their own light in an iridescent nighttime painting.

Mia fiddles with my tie, running her fingers over the knot. "So where's your plus-one?" she asks, staring at the knot.

"I'm hoping she's right here. And you?"

She smiles, the kind of smile she can't seem to contain. "The same might be true for me." Instinctively, I wrap my hands tighter around her hips.

"We fit," she says softly, just for me. The way she looks at me triggers a rush of heat across my skin.

"I'd say we fit incredibly well."

"Do we?"

"We do, Mia." I want to bring her closer, kiss her till she's drunk on me.

"I know." She swallows, waiting for more, it seems.

Good. I want to go first. "I can't stop thinking about you."

"You mean the other night?" she asks, her voice like a feather. "You can't stop thinking about the other night?"

I shake my head. "No. Just you. Everything about you."

A smile tugs at her lips. "Everything?"

"Every single thing," I say, taking my time with each word. "Kissing you. Touching you. Knowing you."

"But there are reasons ..."

I shake my head and lift her chin. "I don't care about the reasons not to be with you," I say, my voice low but firm,

because once you realize you might miss out on the greatest chance ever, the reasons shrink to nothing. “I don’t care about the miles. I don’t care that we live on different coasts. All I care about is how I feel, not only when I’m near you, but when I think of you. Don’t you see how you make me feel?”

“How do I make you feel?”

My gaze drifts down, taking in the view of her in my arms. Her strong, toned body, the lines of her neck, the softness of her skin. I dip my face near her neck, ever so subtly inhaling her. She intoxicates me. “Like my body is humming. Like I’m vibrating. Everything crackles when I’m with you.”

I meet her eyes once more. Those eyes—I could get lost in them. Hell, maybe I’ve already gone missing. Maybe I’ll never be found because this is where I want to be.

She draws a deep breath. “There’s a lot I want to tell you, Patrick.” I tense, my shoulders tightening, my body going rigid. This can’t be good. “But when we’re like this, I can’t really think.”

Her breath flutters across my jaw, and it stokes the flames inside me.

“And why’s that?”

“Because of how you make me feel,” she whispers.

I relax. That’s better. Maybe whatever she wants to tell me is something we can deal with. “How do I make you feel?”

“Like I want to be in my body and out of my body,” she whispers. Her palm slides up the back of my neck, and I nearly growl. Her back is to the crowd, and we’re at the edge of the deck. No one can see that her fingers have traveled into my hair. She plays with the ends, and her touch drives me out of my mind. It’s a straight shot of lust to my chest, and heat pools in my groin.

“Mia,” I whisper, almost a warning.

Her fingers thread through my hair. She inches closer. Her lips are so damn near to me. “But most of all, I feel like I want you in my body.”

I groan. I can't even speak. Can't form words. My brain is a haze. It's a hot, fuzzy, static haze, and my fingertips burn with desire as I dig them into her hips. She's reduced me to nothing but lust, nothing but fire, nothing but heat.

She's rendered me speechless, aroused, and completely, absolutely over the moon.

"Jesus Christ, Mia," I manage to say, a desperate groan under my breath, and I don't care if Max is watching, or Chase, or anyone. But a quick scan tells me they're all in their own worlds, so with my hands on her hips, I yank her closer, letting her feel what she's done to me.

She smiles, a wild, wicked grin.

But this is more than sex. The way I feel for her is so much more. "Listen," I say, before she kills all my brain cells with her words.

"Talk," she gently commands.

"I don't care that you live in California and I live here. I want to be with you. Even if we're long distance, even if it's hard to see each other, I'm absolutely crazy for you, Mia," I say, and my heart feels a thousand times lighter.

And then a thousand times fuller when she says, "I'm so crazy for you." Her body melts against mine as if it's as much of a welcome relief for her to speak her truth as it is for me to speak mine. "I thought I would go out of my mind if I didn't say something."

"I wish I could kiss you right now." My eyes survey the crowd, our friends and family dancing on the deck with us. As much as I want to crush my lips to hers, now's not the time for that kind of public display of affection.

"Kiss me tonight, then. Can I come over later? When the wedding ends?"

"If you don't, I think I might die," I say, laughing.

She levels me with her gaze once more. "Don't die until you make love to me."

I'm fried. I'm toasted. I've never wanted anything as much as I want Mia under me, over me, with me all night. "That's all I'll be doing once you knock on the door."

She curls her hand around my shoulder. "There's something else I want to tell you." Her voice is wobbly, and my chest hollows with her words.

But I steel myself to take a hit tonight. Let's do this. Let's finish it. I need to know once and for all what I'm up against.

A shriek of excitement cuts across the deck. "It's finally time for cake!"

We both startle and turn toward Nick's pregnant wife, who's pointing excitedly at the towering white cake as she calls the wedding party over.

Once more, my arms are empty.

I flick on the light, unknot my tie, and say hello to Zeus.

He rubs against my leg and meows. I understand immediately. I scoop a handful of his favorite kibble into a bowl, and set it on the floor.

I turn on another light in the living room and contemplate pouring a Scotch. Feels like a night for the amber liquid. The kind of evening where I'll pace around my pad, hoping she'll arrive soon. A night when I should flop on the couch, stare into the distance, and think dark thoughts.

But that's not who I am.

Even if Mia has things to tell me, I can handle them. That's what I do. I handle stuff.

Rather than pace, I grab a book, my dog-eared and well-worn paperback of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. I flip it open to a random page and read words I've read many times before.

The knock on my door comes quickly, and I open it. Mia strides in with purpose, her chin high, her eyes fierce. She places her hands on my chest, as if she's warding me off. "I told myself I wouldn't do this."

All the air spills out of me. "Why?"

"I dated a good friend of Max's right after college."

And that's the reason. That's all the reasons, it seems. "What happened?"

Her hazel eyes are intense. "It didn't end well."

I furrow my brow. “You mean Max didn’t handle it well?”

She shakes her head, the loose little strands of her hair moving with her. “It’s not about him. It’s about me. I’ve never wanted to get involved with one of his friends since then. That’s why I’ve had to resist you. That’s why I’ve held back before.”

I grit my teeth, then will myself to let go of my frustration. “What happened? Who is this guy?”

“His name is Eric.”

I search my files for a friend of Max’s by that name. But he’s never mentioned an Eric, not even in passing. “I’ve never heard of him.”

Mia lets out a long, sad breath. “That’s the issue. They aren’t friends anymore.”

My shoulders sag, and I get it. I understand at last what I’m up against. This cuts so much deeper than the question of when and where I tell Max I’m mad about his sister. This is about whether she’ll even let herself cross a huge hurdle.

But Mia surprises me by wrapping her arms around my neck. Pressing her breasts to my chest. Sliding her body against mine.

“Mia,” I say, and this time the warning is real. “You tell me you shouldn’t do this, and then you *do this*.”

“I told you because I want you to know where I’m coming from.” She draws a deep breath. “But I don’t want us to stop.”

I close my eyes, feeling my body sway as if I’ve had too much to drink, when all I’ve had is a glass or two earlier. It’s not alcohol, though, that makes me feel this way. It’s the uncertainty of opening my heart. But even so, I don’t want to resist her. I rope my arms around her waist, bringing her closer, walking backward with her toward the kitchen counter.

“I can’t think straight when I’m touching you,” I say, my voice rougher than it’s ever been.

“I can’t, either.” Her back hits the counter, and I lift her onto it so we’re face-to-face and eye-to-eye.



“So what are we doing?” I don’t break my gaze. I don’t mince words. I serve it straight up. “I don’t want half of you. I don’t want a fling with you.”

“I don’t want that, either. All I know is I don’t want to hurt Max.”

“And I don’t want to hurt you.”

“But I’m still here.” With a clear voice and fierce eyes, she says, “And I don’t know how to stop wanting you.”

This woman is breaking me down. I don’t even know if I can have her the way I want. But I don’t want to let her go, either. That means I need to show her. I need to convince her *we* will be different. That I’m not Eric, even though I know nothing about him.

I bend close and push the strap of her dress over her shoulder. “I won’t hurt you.” I kiss her neck, her collarbone. “This won’t end badly, Mia. I promise you.”

“Patrick ... you don’t know that.”

I kiss her shoulder, and she shudders. “I do know that. And I mean it. I’m not that guy.” I don’t know how to make it more obvious without spelling it out for her. But she’s not ready to hear the truth—I won’t let it end badly because if I have my way, we won’t end. Instead, I clasp her face in my hands and say, “You have to know I will do everything to make this good for you. Every single thing between us will be good.”

She trembles and circles her arms tighter around my neck. “It’s so good already.”

Our eyes lock, and the air between us is charged like a live wire. Electric. Ready to burn.

“Then what do you want, Mia? You know what I want. *You*. I want all of you, and I’ll tell Max tomorrow that I’m crazy for you. But if you think you shouldn’t be doing this, then you’re right. We shouldn’t do this. If you need to leave, I need to be the man who lets you walk away.”

She closes her eyes, and when she opens them, they shine with heat, with fire, with an insatiable need I recognize

instantly. It's how I feel.

“I'm not going anywhere.” Her lips curve up in a grin.  
“Except to your bed. Right this second.”

Our hands move with furious speed as we reach the bedroom.

She tugs at my loosened tie, tossing it onto the mattress. Her quick fingers make fast work of the buttons on my shirt.

“God, you looked so hot in a suit, it’s almost a sin to take it off you,” she says, as she makes her way down to the last button. “But I’m willing to commit this wrong.”

“I couldn’t take my eyes off you all night, from the second you walked into the boathouse,” I tell her as I spin her around, unhook the zipper on the dress, then slide it down to her waist. She wears a strapless bra and my God, her back is so fucking sensual, so smooth and soft. I unhook her bra and run my fingers along her spine.

She arches into my touch, and then I press my lips to her neck and kiss a slow, lingering path down her back. She shivers with every single kiss. When I stop, I spin her around again to face me, slide the straps down her arms, and let the dress fall to her waist.

My breath hitches.

“Mia,” I say, as I cup her breasts, running my thumbs over her nipples, feeling them tighten under my touch. “You’re so beautiful. I’m going to sound like a broken record. But, Jesus. Look at you. I can’t believe you’re here and I’m touching you.”

She runs her hands down my chest. “Don’t stop.”

We move quickly through the rest of our clothes. She tugs at the zipper on my suit pants as I push down the skirt of her dress, letting the pale-yellow fabric pool on the floor. Everything else comes off in seconds, and then I stare at the stunning woman before me. Her silver belly-button ring glints in the moonlight. I run my thumb over it.

My mouth is dry, and my heart slams against my chest. My pulse rockets. “*You.*” I can’t form any more words, so gently, I push her to the bed.

She sinks onto the mattress. I kneel before her and open her legs.

She gasps.

I spread them wider, savoring the sight of her wet pussy. “Need to taste you.”

“Please,” she moans, leaning back on her palms, her tits pushing up, her back arching, her legs wide for me.

I slide my hands under her thighs and bury my face between them.

And I lick.

And I lick.

And I lick.

She’s the most intoxicating thing I’ve ever tasted—sweet and salty and so fucking wet for me. Her silky sweetness coats my lips, gets on my chin, covers my beard.

I can’t get enough of her. My cock throbs, a heavy weight between my legs, aching as I devour her.

Something happens when you touch the person you’ve fantasized about for months. The person you’ve longed for. You not only want to fuck her, you want to adore her with every part of you.

Right now, my mouth is going to deliver that message, because that’s how I feel—I want to fuck her with my tongue and cherish her with my lips.

I want her to know how badly I want to fuck every part of her, and how much I'll adore her. That's how I taste her. That's how I eat her. The way I want her—every way. I flick my tongue against the delicious rise of her clit, and her hands clamp onto my head, her fingers threading tightly in my hair.

“Ohhhh,” she moans, tugging me even closer. I'm not sure I can bury my face any farther into the promised land, but if she needs more of me, I'll give it to her. I'll give her anything she wants.

As I suck hard on her clit, she curls her hands tighter around my skull, then she draws up her legs, so her feet are perched on the edge of the mattress. Like that, she lifts her hips, arching, thrusting, and fucking my face.

I go faster, sweeping my tongue up and down her center, lapping up every last drop of her wetness, then I do it again, since she only gets wetter, flooding my tongue with her desire.

Her scent fills my nostrils, and her pussy is the center of my world. As her noises grow louder, and her cries reach higher, I glide a finger across her. Her gasp is long and feral, and it's a cue to give her more. With two fingers I push inside, and she falls back, her head hitting the bed, her legs widening, and her hands never letting go of my head.

She moans and writhes. “So close.”

*Come all the fuck over me*, I want to tell her, but I won't let go of her pussy. I am a man consumed with the task at hand—making Mia come so hard she forgets any reason she's ever had to back down. Making it so good for her that she knows no one else will ever send her so high.

I move my face back and forth fast, licking and kissing her through her orgasm as she rocks against me like there's no tomorrow. She's moaning and groaning and crying out *so good, so good, so good*, as her body's rhythm slows.

She lets go of her grip, her hands falling to the mattress as she releases a satisfied breath.

I raise my face, wipe a hand over my mouth, and look at my gorgeous woman. She's spent and glowing, and she's still

murmuring. I crawl up her body, lower myself to her, letting her feel the weight of my cock against her belly.

Her eyes flutter open. Her smile spreads. Her hazel eyes are glossy. “Hi,” she says a little hoarsely, as her hand drifts down to my dick. Her fist curls around me, and I suck in a breath and then groan.

“Hey,” I manage to say as she strokes. A shudder racks me as her soft hand explores my shaft, her thumb tracing the head.

“I like this. I like you,” she says, all sensual and husky as she wraps her hand tighter.

Her smile fades, and she lets go. My dick misses her hand. A lot.

She pushes up to her elbows. I tense, brace myself for some kind of shift. But instead, she asks me the most wonderful question in the universe. “Can we have sex without a condom? I’m on birth control, and I’m clean. Are you?”

“Fuck yeah, I am,” I tell her, and I grip my cock in one hand, settle between her legs, and rub the head against her sweet, hot pussy.

She lifts her hips, seeking me out. Flames lick my skin, and I groan. It’s such a rush, such a high. There is nothing like this. Nothing like knowing that my Mia wants the same things as I do right now.

She’s ready. She’s so damn wet. But I want her begging. I want her needing me. I want her to know from the way I fuck her that I’m not like any other man in her past. I need her to know I’m the one she’ll always want.

Gripping my dick, I rub against her, touching her wetness with the head, letting her feel me all over her—up, down, around, then right there, on her most sensitive spot. I rub, and I play, and I work her into a frenzy again.

“You’re driving me crazy,” she cries out, lifting and rocking and trying desperately to draw me into her body—her body, where she said she wanted me tonight.

“You want me inside you, Mia?” I growl.

“Please, yes,” she groans, letting her knees fall wide for me.

I give her just the tip, and it electrifies me. I tremble because it’s so damn good. “You want me to bury my cock all the way in you?”

She rocks her hips. “I do. I want you in me.”

“You want to feel all of me, baby, or is this enough?” I give her a little bit more. My meaning should be perfectly clear. If Mia wants me, she’d better want everything I have to give.

“I want all of you. I want you to fuck me. I want you.”

Kneeling between her legs, I push in another inch. I shudder. “How’s this?”

“More,” she groans.

“You want it all?”

“Yes,” she says, practically bowing her back off the bed. “I want all of you.”

I give in, sinking into her, burying my cock inside her, and then lowering myself to her. “You need to know, with me, you can have everything.”

She wraps her legs around my lower back. “That’s what I want.”

I hold nothing back. I fuck her hard. I fuck her slow. I fuck her fast. I fuck her so she knows she’s the one. I give her everything I have as I move inside her. As I swivel my hips. As I pump into her.

She moans, and murmurs, and cries my name. Her hair is a wild tangle, strands pressed to her face as she moves with me, her hips lifting and thrusting and rising.

We move as if we’re meant to come together. I reach down to her thigh, pushing her right knee up to her chest.

“Gymnastics comes in handy,” I say, laughing lightly.

“The other one, too,” she says, and pleasure camps out in my whole damn body.

I push her left knee up so they’re both hiked to her chest. Then she drapes them over my shoulders. She wiggles her hands between us, sliding them to my face. Gripping my jaw, she lets me do all the work, as she gives herself over to how I fuck her.

“We fit,” she says, on a pant.

“So incredibly well,” I groan, driving into her. As I pull back, my shaft slides against her clit, and she moans so damn loudly.

“Like that, like that,” she pants, and I take her and make love to her until she’s so far gone, she’s digging her fingers into my jaw as she gasps *oh God, oh God, oh God*.

Then she keens. It’s beautiful and primal. The world disappears as Mia comes again, lost in her orgasm, her eyes squeezed shut, her breath ragged, her moans guttural and gorgeous.

There are no more words for me, either. Just grunts and growls.

I pump faster, harder, more furiously until my vision goes white and the room turns to a neon-hot blur. Pleasure crackles along my spine, surging inside me, barreling down my cock as I empty myself inside her, filling her up.

Then I collapse onto Mia, wrap my arms around her, and whisper in her ear. “I’m so crazy for you. I’m not letting you go.”

I can feel her smile against me. “It’s a good thing I’m not leaving then.”



I prop myself on my elbow. “I like the sound of you not leaving, but feel free to elaborate.”

Her eyes twinkle like she just scored a deal on airline tickets to Paris and can’t wait to share the news. “I’m moving to New York.”

And the City of Lights can’t hold a candle to that one.

I blink.

This can’t be happening.

I’ve fallen into the most vivid, lucid dream of my life.

“Are you screwing with me?”

She shakes her head. Her smile is as wide as the sky, her voice full of joy. “I’m not joking. I’m relocating Pure Beauty to New York. I’m so ridiculously excited about this, and everything was finalized today. Now I can tell you. That’s what I was going to tell you before Harper’s cake announcement.”

“It was?” I figured it was the Eric thing, since that’s what she led with when she arrived.

“Yes. But then when I came over here, I had other things I needed you to know, too, and honestly, after that, I wanted to focus on getting you naked.”

“Yeah, I’m totally into the whole naked thing, too,” I say, admiring her bare skin as she lies next to me. In my bed. If

questioned under oath, I'd still have to go with this being a dream. "You're really not messing with me about moving?"

"Apparently, you think I'm a mean trickster, because that would be a cruel joke." She pushes my chest then trails her fingers down my torso, dancing them across the planes of my abs, as if she's only now realized she has permission to touch me whenever she wants.

Does she ever.

But ...

Removing the distraction, I take her hand and curl my fingers around hers, squeezing. "Are. You. Serious?"

"Yes. The podcast? My epiphany? All the new things going on with my company? It's not a beauty product for cats, obviously. It's that I want to be here in New York."

Zeus jumps up on the bed, as if on cue. He lands on silent paws and pads up the covers, slinking between us. I stroke his back, and he arches into my hand.

Mia scratches his chin. "You're naturally beautiful. You don't need a single product," she says to him.

There goes my heart again. This girl talks to my cat. "What made you realize you wanted to be in New York? You've always lived on the West Coast."

"Everything." She strokes the beast as he perches imperiously on the pillow and launches into a fastidious face washing. "Being here made me realize what I miss every day – my brothers, and they're both here now, of course. Everyone has moved from the West Coast to New York. Plus, I have great friends in the city, like Dylan and Olivia, and some of my suppliers are here so it makes it easier to do business. My VP of products, Lisa, grew up in Connecticut, so it works for her, too. And when I had dinner with my brothers last weekend, everything crystallized. Josie's now my sister-in-law and I want to get to know her better. Same for Henley soon too. I don't want to be the lone wolf out on the other side of the country while everyone goes about their life. I want to be near my family. My brothers are the two people I'm closest to,

and I miss them more every day. They might even be having kids soon.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Does that mean Chase needed to get Josie down the aisle, stat?”

Mia laughs, shaking her head. “No. At least, I don’t think so. But Max will be married in a few months, and I have no doubt they’ll all be having kids in the near future. I want to see them regularly. I want to see any nieces and nephews I might have regularly, too. I feel so good about this decision.”

So do I.

Though, I’d feel a bit better if she happened to include in her list of reasons a certain guy she just banged. The one thing she hasn’t mentioned is me. I keep it light and playful when I say, “And Zeus was obviously a big factor, since you can’t keep your hands off him.”

“He’s irresistible.” Then she covers his ears and stage whispers, “He knew about it all along. I told him earlier in the week that it might happen.”

I stare at my cat as he licks a white paw, then rubs it against his cheek. “I seriously can’t believe you kept this from me, Zeus.”

“He’s a shrink. He keeps all my secrets. I think it’s like patient–pussycat privilege.”

“He is something of a vault.” Time to stop dicking around. *Just ask her directly if I even made it to the pros and cons list.* “Are you doing this at all because of us?”

She swallows, and her eyes widen. The look in them reminds me of a teen caught dipping her hand in her mom’s wallet. “Because of us?” she squeaks, her voice high.

“Is that crazy to even ask?” I run a hand down her bare arm, since I sure as hell enjoy having permission to touch her. “I recall a whole conversation earlier tonight about not being able to stop thinking about each other.”

She taps my nose with her finger. “Don’t worry, Kangaroo. It’s not as if I expect you to ask me to move in and marry

you.”

My lips open, but no sound comes. Her answer throws me. Because honestly, there’s a part of me that likes that idea—move in and marry. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but a lot sooner than later.

Except, she might not be in this to the same degree that I am.

Possibly because of Eric.

Maybe because of Max.

More likely because of her.

And you know what? Even if she isn’t all in yet, I’ll need to be okay with that. I’ve wanted Mia for a long time, and now I’ll have the chance every goddamn day to convince her how good we can be together. Judging from the length and intensity of the orgasms she’s already had, I’m winning her over easily in that department.

Time to play to my strengths.

I move her on top of me, her legs straddling my stomach. “Bring those sweet, gorgeous lips to mine. If you’re going to be living here, you need to start practicing your favorite form of arithmetic. I believe on the hike you said it was multiplication.”

“I do need to catch up on my math.” She leans forward, her tits brushing my chest as she kisses me. I groan at the feel of her lips. I curl a hand through her hair, kissing her deeper, savoring the exquisite taste of her mouth. Her tongue darts between my lips, and we both moan at the same time.

The kiss unfurls like a slow wave rolling toward the shore, one crest spreading into the next as I spend some time with those lips I love.

But soon enough, I stop the kiss. “Let me show you what two times two every single night feels like.”

Grasping her hips, I slide her down my body. My dick is doing an excellent full-on salute, and I make sure she gets a

proper greeting when I bring her to me. I draw a sharp breath as she lowers herself onto my erection.

“You feel so incredibly good,” she murmurs. Then she moves on me, slow and sensual, taking me in, and then nearly letting me go.

God, it’s so good with her. It’s mind-blowing. It’s astonishing. Sharp, hot pleasure sparks through my body. I watch her every move as her tight figure rises and lowers. She grinds on me, taking me deeper, then picking up speed, sliding her hot wetness up and down. Her tits bounce, her hair swings, her nails dig into my chest.

When she closes her eyes, she leans her head back, and her neck looks so long and inviting. I thrust my hips up, fucking her as she fucks me. Her sounds grow louder, her pants wilder and more erratic. She cries out that she’s coming, and it’s filthy and sensual at the same damn time as her mouth parts in a perfect *O*. She shudders as she climaxes, and then she crashes onto my chest, murmuring as she threads her hands in my hair, “I need one more to make it four.”

“Let’s do it,” I say. I pull out, flip her to her hands and knees, and bury myself in her again. What a gorgeous sight to see Mia bent over for me in the middle of my bed, offering her body and letting me take her. I band an arm around her waist, slide my hand between her legs, and work her clit until she comes once more on my cock.

And as she pants and moans, I don’t have to hold back anymore. It’s my turn, and I unleash several fast, hard pumps, as pleasure rockets through me. I join her on the other side, my own orgasm pulsing hard through me, coming as I groan her name.

After we clean up, I gather her in my arms. “I like that last position,” Mia murmurs as she nestles against my chest.

“I like all positions with you.”

She laughs. “Yes, I do so far, too. But I *really* like that one.”

“You mean *doggy style*, Mia?” I say, since she can’t seem to say it. “And I thought you were an animal lover.”

“Yes, Patrick. I like it doggy style.” She swats my hip. “And you’re a dog.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” I stare at the ceiling for a moment, thinking back on how fantastic this night has been, even if she’s not as full speed ahead as I am yet. “Hey, do you think when dogs do it, they call it doggy style?”

She shakes her head. “No. It’s just *style* then.”

“Then, we have a lot of styling to do once you move to New York.”

She wedges herself even closer to me, and I thank my lucky stars she’s a top-notch snuggler. “Like, maybe every night styling.”

I kiss her hair, both satisfied that she’s with me now and even more determined to prove to her that moving to this city will be the best thing she’s ever done.

## **Conversations with the Cat**

### *Zeus*

The sun shone brightly through the window as the woman engaged in one of Zeus's favorite activities—rubbing his belly. He demonstrated his appreciation by lounging on his back and stretching his legs as far as he could.

### *Supercat.*

The elegant, seductive pose showed off how long and lean his body was. This way she could admire his belly, too. It was quite a handsome stomach by any mammalian standard, sleek and covered in the softest fur.

“Did you hear the news? I'll be seeing you more often,” the woman said.

The man wasn't here. He'd left a few minutes ago, pulling on some clothes and grabbing his keys after patting the woman's rumbling tummy.

“I still have lots of details to work out, and I need to find a place to live. Or I could just move in with you,” she said then laughed. “Shh. Don't tell Patrick I said that. I'm sure he'd think it's too soon. And too crazy. I suspect he thought I was only moving for him, and it freaked him out last night.”

Zeus twitched his tail, yet another incredibly lovely feature that he possessed. Such a good-looking tail.

“I’m doing this because it makes sense for me. I’ll find my own place easily. I don’t want to scare him away, especially since I’m already crossing a line I swore I’d never cross after what happened with Eric. But it’s different with Patrick, you know what I mean? So different. I can’t see it playing out the same way this time since I feel so much more for him.” Sighing, she flipped onto her back. “And obviously I want to see him more. Of course, he’s part of why I’m moving. I’d love to see him as much as possible. But who knows if he’s even thinking along those lines...” her voice drifted off and turned into a long sigh. “Sometimes your mind goes to these places when you’re madly in love with someone and have been for months.” She turned to stare at him. “You know what I’m talking about? Of course you do, you sly fox. I’ve seen the way you look at that calico.”

He answered her with a deep, rumbling purr. He liked to think he understood humans as perfectly as any feline ever had.



The clock keeps ticking closer to Mia's flight back to the West Coast tonight. She won't return to New York for a month, she said, since she has business to attend to in San Francisco, prepping for her relocation. I won't be counting the days till she returns.

The thirty-four days, that is. Fine, the thirty-four days and six hours.

Max and Henley stayed at a hotel last night, so after I make sure my hungry Mia eats breakfast, she heads upstairs to his apartment to tackle work for the day. I leave for a run and a bike ride, then I upload some of Zeus's shots from a recent hike to his Instagram account and respond to a ton of replies the popular fur ball received in the last few days.

Later, Max texts to invite me to an impromptu dinner. Chase and Josie leave for their honeymoon tomorrow, and he's having them over before they go. Since it's no longer technically Chase's day, that makes tonight the night to tell Max.

I head upstairs with a bottle of wine and join my buddy, his fiancée, the newlyweds, Henley's best friend, Olivia, and the woman I screwed senseless last night to the tune of four orgasms, with two more this morning.

Yes, folks, I'm sending her to San Francisco with a half dozen orgasms in less than twenty-four hours to remember me by. I'd say that's a good showing. I'll need to pull off a victory

in the all-around, too, but I'm awarding myself a gold medal in Making Mia Meow.

At dinner, Henley serves her now-famous homemade mac and cheese as we recap the best and goofiest moments from the wedding. As Olivia recounts Harper's cake shout-out, I catch Mia's eye, and the second I do, she blushes. I can't help but smile because I love that all it takes to turn her cheeks rosy is one knowing look. I wiggle an eyebrow as I drink the wine. She nibbles on the corner of her lip then casts her eyes down.

"Just a heads-up. I do plan to scream when it's cake time at your wedding, too," Josie says to Max and Henley, prompting Henley to show off her ring.

"Speaking of our wedding, check out my ring for the thirtieth time."

"It's like looking at the sun," Olivia declares.

Henley glances from her ring to Josie's. "The Summers men do have most excellent taste."

Mia clears her throat. "Ahem. Where do you think they learned how to pick out rings?"

I laugh and raise a glass. "To the happy couple, and the secret weapon of a sister who helped choose the most beautiful diamonds for both her brothers."

When dinner is over, Max and Henley clean up, shooing us to the pool table. After a quick round, Chase and Josie take off, and Olivia leaves, too. The hosts join us at the table as Mia peers at the time on the wall. "I better make sure I have everything for my flight."

"I'll help you check," Henley says, and the women head to the guest room. A few seconds later, they're listening to the Go-Go's as Mia packs.

I take a deep, fueling breath. As Max grabs a stick and Belinda Carlisle gives us some privacy, I say what I've wanted to say for months.

"This seems as good a time as any to let you know something that's been on my mind."

Max stares as he lines up his shot. “You want me to fix your car for free?” He heaves an over-the-top sigh. “Fine, if I must. But I insist on you hooking me up with your dealer for that kick-ass ride of yours. I need one of Carlos’s custom-made bikes.”

I smile. “Consider it done.” Then I clear my throat. “What I wanted to say, though, is I’m falling in love with your sister.”

His spine straightens, and he blinks. “Excuse me?”

“I think you understood me.” I smile.

“You’re in love with my sister?”

There’s no question in my mind. That’s where I am on the map with Mia. I’m falling headfirst and fast. “It was pretty instant when I met her here several months ago. We’ve had a connection from day one.”

He draws a deep breath. “You two have always gotten along,” Max concedes. “Are you guys together now?”

“It only started last night for real. I wanted to let you know as soon as I had a chance, and today seemed the best time, now that the wedding is over.”

He nods slowly. Rubbing a hand across the back of his neck, he says, “I appreciate you telling me.”

“And listen, you know I’ll be good to her. I’ll treat her so damn well.”

“I have no doubt.”

“And since she’s moving to New York, we’re going to make a real go of it.”

“And she’s down with this?” He sounds skeptical. Way more skeptical than I thought he’d be.

“Yeah. She is.”

“Are you sure?”

I scoff. “I know the score, and I get it.”

“Okay, then.” He resumes his pace around the table, looking for the right shot. But something about the turn this

conversation has taken bugs me.

“I’m not going to be like that other guy. I’m not going to hurt her, so you don’t have to worry.”

Max scratches his jaw. “It’s not her I worry about, buddy.” He claps my shoulder and pins me with his dark gaze. “It’s you.”

Tension bolts through me. “What does that mean?”

Max tips his forehead to the kitchen. “When Henley and I were cleaning up, she said she thought you had it bad for Mia, and it seems you do. In my humble opinion, when a man feels that way about a woman, he opens himself up for a world of hurt if it goes south.”

It won’t go south, I want to say. It’s all looking up. I keep my mouth shut, though, as Max continues.

“I have no doubt you’ll be good to her. Hell, I’m sure you’ll be great to her. But Eric was good to her, too. Trouble was, she wasn’t in love with him, and he didn’t get over her when they broke up. That’s why we’re not friends.”

With brutal clarity, I understand what I’m up against. When Mia said she feared this not ending well, it was a warning. She might not feel the same way I do.

On the drive to the airport, I do my best to put the conversation with Max out of my mind. No need for baggage, right?

The past is the past.

The present is a gift.

I'm not the dude who dwells on what went wrong. I focus on the here and now. On Mia and me. On what I can offer her. *Normal, considerate, easygoing*. That's my stock-in-trade, and I aim to deliver.

I keep the conversation free and easy. We chat about the new product lines she's working on, as well as the volunteer work she hopes to do with animal rescues here in New York.

"WildCare is my jam," she says, drumming her fingers on the dashboard. "I need to hook up with something like that in Manhattan."

"I've no doubt we can find an organization like that for you," I say, turning into the airport parking lot.

Mia smiles. "*We*. You said we."

I raise an eyebrow as I search for a spot. "Any reason I shouldn't say we?"

She shakes her head. "No. I just like that you think of us as a we."

Okay, then. Score one for this guy on Project Make Mia Fall Madly in Love with Me.

“And I’ll be hoping the next thirty-four days pass quickly,” she adds.

I breathe another small sigh of relief. Yep, I’m going to stay the course. Build on this connection the two of us have. That’s how I’ll deal with the Eric issue. I’ll make sure Max and I stay friends, because our friendship matters to me, and because I don’t intend to lose his sister. My goal is to keep winning Mia’s heart every goddamn day.

And her body, too.

And her tummy, since I know that’s a key route to her ticker.

“You’ll be back in New York before we know it.” Then I remember a booking Dana told me about in our meeting—a trip she wanted me to handle in California. Maybe, just maybe, I can squeeze in a visit with Mia while I’m there. Nothing like a little proximity to make Mia remember why I’m the guy she can’t stop thinking about. “You know, I think I have a trip on the West Coast in the next few weeks. Something in Tahoe. I don’t have all the details yet.”

“How serendipitous,” she says, a playful glint in her eyes, as I pull into a parking spot. “Maybe we can have lunch.”

“Yeah, let’s do lunch, Mia,” I say drily, since we both know we want more than lunch.

I cut the engine, open her door, and take her bag. “Carry-on?”

She scoffs. “As if there’s any other way to fly.”

“Traveling light. I love it.”

As we head inside, she checks her phone. “Oh!” Her eyebrows rise in excitement.

“Let me guess. Your flight was canceled, and you’re excited about the extra half dozen orgasms I can give you tonight?”

As travelers scurry past us, and announcements boom in the terminal, Mia stops in her tracks and tap dances her fingers

down my shirt. “Or maybe the half dozen orgasms you can give me in a tent.”

My interest perks up, as well as my dick. I loop my arm around her waist and yank her against me.

“Well, hello there, hard wood,” Mia says in a purr.

I laugh. “Speaking of wood, and hard wood, and woods, I *would* very much like to get you under me in a tent.” I lower my voice. “And in your favorite position, too. On your hands and knees.”

She shivers against me. “Maybe on a little secluded trail somewhere?”

“I’m liking the sound of this in-the-woods seduction. You, me, a campfire, and a sleeping bag to share. Is that what you’re thinking? Because I would love to make you come under the stars.”

She hums her yes out loud, and then she kisses my jaw.

Proximity—it’s exactly what we need to make sure we work. We need to see each other. We need to touch each other. I need to remind her why she’s breaking her rule for me.

She pulls back and meets my eyes. “I’m thinking I’d like to melt marshmallows with you in, say, another week or two when you lead the corporate retreat we just hired you for.”

My world goes deafeningly silent amidst all the beeps and buzzes of the noisy terminal, the boarding-soon calls, and the baggage announcements.

They are a wasteland of sound to my ears.

“What?” I somehow manage to say, setting my hands on her shoulders.

“That California client you have? I was hoping you’d be the one handling the trip because that’s me! That’s Pure Beauty. We don’t have to wait thirty-four days to see each other,” she says, bouncing up and down, radiating pure glee. “Surprise!”

“The Tahoe client is you?” I ask, dumfounded.

“Yes! You convinced me.”

“I convinced you?” I ask, and now I’m doubly dumbfounded.

“You told me how great the rafting trip was for the company that merged. And I thought since I’m moving my employees, this could be a great bonding experience for those making the transition, and it’s something we can keep doing once we’re all in New York. To make us a better team. Help us navigate the change. Isn’t that what you specialize in with the corporate retreats?”

“Yeah,” I say, a stone lodged in my chest. I scrub a hand across my jaw.

“I’m sorry,” she says, bringing her hand to her mouth. “Is this too soon? Is this a bad surprise? I thought it would be great for all of us. And I just received the confirmation from Felicia, who set it up. She said she was talking to Dana at your company. That was what I was so excited about when I looked at my phone.”

Mia shows me an email from Dana confirming that *our CEO and founder will be perfect for your Tahoe trip and the ongoing monthly adventure tours when your move to New York is complete. Can’t wait for you to meet Patrick Milligan. He’s a total pro outdoors, with years of experience, and all our clients love him.*

Awareness hits me hard. Dana never gave me the names of the new clients when we last met. We don’t usually discuss them as we plot out which guides will handle which bookings. We assign trips based on skill level, as well as the type of retreat. When Dana gave me the basic details—a small company wanting to contract ongoing trips to foster an ideal transition to a new location—she said I’d be perfect for it.

And I’d agreed.

And that also means I’m going to California to see Mia in a couple weeks. Which is precisely against the corporate guidelines I signed off on.



“Mia, we can’t be involved if I’m working for you. I have a strict rule for all employees, including myself.”

Her jaw drops. “What?”

“I had some trouble earlier this year,” I say, explaining the issues that led me to tighten the rules. I give a half-hearted grin. “You could just fire us.”

Her sigh is heavy. “Felicia already transferred the funds for the deposit.”

For a moment—okay, a few long moments—this feels insurmountable.

But am I a man or am I a man? I guide people across the toughest trails, up mountains, and over rapids, for crying out loud.

If I can't find my own way across this swamp of a situation, then I should fire myself, and that's not what I'm going to do. When you're in the woods, you solve problems. Hell, if I can start a fire with a battery and clean a mess kit with dirt, then I can sure as hell tackle this problem head-on.

“Don't worry. I know what to do,” I say, then I tell Mia my plan.

She shrugs and shoots me a lopsided smile. “And that's why you're not a douchey marsupial.”

I grab her face, kiss her hard in front of the Sunday night crowds heading to distant lands, and watch as she makes her way quickly through the TSA PreCheck line. She waves from the other side of security, and then she's gone.

I head to my car, ready to tackle this new twist. Sure, it would be a hell of a lot easier to win her whole heart if I could use all the tools in the tool kit. I'd like to have my dick play its very capable part at making Mia happy.

Instead, I psych myself up for back-to-basics time with her.

\* \* \*

In a hotel's rooftop garden in Gramercy Park a few days later, Evie gives me a sharp-eyed stare. "Why don't you just assign her a new guide?"

"Obviously, that thought has occurred to me," I say, since that's the first thing I considered.

"Then why didn't you do it?" Evie asks as she wanders through the exclusive establishment, a ten-table garden restaurant that she considers perfect for a first date. I follow her as she tests each table, like Goldilocks, for one of her potential couples. The restaurant is empty since it's midday, but the manager is letting her check it out.

"Because I can handle it," I say. She pats the seat across from her, and I take it. "Besides, she requested me. And yes, I have guides, and I will still have a local guide along with me, but this is my specialty, leading this type of adventure tour-slash-retreat. This is why she hired *my* company." I tap my chest for emphasis. "For me."

Evie rises and gestures to the next table. "Fine. No one is as good as you. I understand."

"That's not what I mean. But it also is what I mean. If someone hires you as a matchmaker, they want you. They want Evie Milligan, the matchmaker who searches for the optimal table in a rooftop garden restaurant to make sure her potential match has the best first date possible."

She turns and stares at me. "But if I had junior matchmakers, I'd farm out some of the work."

"Would you, though?" I ask pointedly as she tries a table in the far-right corner with a stunning view of downtown Manhattan. "Or would you still test all the tables yourself?"

She narrows her eyes and wags a finger. "Fine, fine. I understand. It's not one you can hand off. Why not just change the rules, though?"

I slash a hand through the air. “No way. We revised the employee guidelines for a reason. I can’t just say, ‘Oh, I was kidding.’ And I definitely can’t say they don’t apply to me.”

“But isn’t she your girlfriend now? That doesn’t make her exempt?”

“Oddly enough, I didn’t make a girlfriend provision.” I smack my forehead. “What was I thinking?” Evie rises, and I follow her to one more table. “But seriously, if I use that loophole, then anyone can give retroactive relationship-status to whoever they hook up with. No screwing the customers has to mean no screwing the customers.”

She runs her hand along the crisp tablecloth. “Is there that much boinking in the woods that you need these hardcore rules?”

I laugh. “Have you ever been camping? I swear half the babies in the world have been made in tents. It’s one huge bang-fest sometimes.”

“I guess that’s why you went into this field,” she says playfully.

“Ha ha. But seriously, it’s all good. I have a plan.”

She sits in the chair, crossing her legs. “And what is this brilliant plan?”

I sit across from her and lay out my strategy. “I’ll do her trip, as requested, as planned. But I’ll also spend some time beforehand finding the best guide for her here on the East Coast, so I can reassign her company when she moves to New York. I have enough people out here who can handle the type of day trips she wants once she’s here, so I just need to work with Dana and find the right match. And as for the Tahoe trip, I’m the guy. I’m the one who needs to lead it,” I say, cracking my knuckles. “And that means I’ll be a good Boy Scout.”

Evie doubles over. “That’s a good one.”

“Why is that so funny?”

She points at me. “You think”—she’s laughing so hard she can barely breathe—“that you”—more laughter bursts from

her—“can put the genie back in the bottle?”

I square my shoulders. “Easy as pie.”

After all, what’s so hard about a week of celibacy with the woman I’m crazy for?

Day One is a piece of cake. After we ride around the Truckee River on mountain bikes in the morning, Mia and her twenty-five employees take a break to play the stuck-on-a-deserted-island game, a standard icebreaker for these sorts of retreats.

“Which three items would you want if you were stranded on a deserted island?” Mia asks from her perch on a large boulder at the edge of the water, rays of sunlight stretching across the blue surface behind her.

She looks to Lisa, her VP, who I’ve learned is the practical one, which she demonstrates when she picks a map, a knife, and a satellite phone.

“I like that. I’ll stick by your side,” Mia says.

Next is a guy named Otis who works in the IT department. He opts for swim trunks, sunscreen, and a Tardis, thrusting a fist in the air rocker-style as he shouts, “TV is educational. Thank you, *Doctor Who*.”

Mia nods her appreciation for his answer. “You’ve always been a master at finding work-arounds.”

We go through the rest of the crew, and when it’s Mia’s turn, she taps her finger against her lip. “I choose a plane, a pilot, and ... some fuel.”

I shoot her a smile that says *well played*.

“And you, Patrick?” Lisa asks, peering over her sunglasses, her black hair in a high ponytail. “It’s only fair that the guides play, too.” She gestures to me and Blair, a guide I

hired recently. Blair pretty much lives and breathes the outdoors. Twin braids run down her back, freckles line her cheeks, and she's always smiling. She'll be with us for the whole trip since the group is large enough to need two guides.

"You want to go first, Blair?"

She shakes her head, her braids swinging. "No way. I'm dying to know what the boss would take."

"Yes, tell us," Otis says, rubbing his palms together, goading me on.

I glance at Mia, who wears a playful *we're waiting* look.

I blow out a long stream of air, stare off into the bright, blue sky, and pretend I'm noodling on the question. "A toothbrush for sure. Since who wants stinky breath when you're stuck, right?"

Lisa narrows her eyes, as if I can't really have given *that* answer.

"A snack would be good," I add, furrowing my brow as if I'm deeply pondering the question. "Maybe an energy bar or a bag of nuts."

"That's what you'd take? A bag of nuts?" an incredulous Otis asks, his eyes bugging out like a cartoon character.

I hold up a finger. "I didn't get to my third item yet." I wiggle an eyebrow. "I'd also take Mia ... because she has a plane, pilot, and fuel with her."

Otis hoots. "I bow down to you. That's the best work-around ever."

Mia laughs. "And I see Patrick is excellent not only at backpacking, but piggybacking."

When the break ends, just before we hop on our bikes, Mia whispers to me in a flirty voice, "Piggybacking," as if it's some new naughty term. Then she stops herself. "Wait. I'm sure that's a terribly inappropriate term for something I don't even want to know about."

I laugh. "Hey now. You're supposed to behave."

We cruise around the lake for the rest of the day, until we return to the inn where everyone is staying for the first two nights of the four-night trip. After dinner and some relaxation time, I call it a night.

Alone.

In my room.

I'll admit it. A part of me hopes Mia will tiptoe over to visit me here on the other side of the inn.

Okay, two parts of me. My dick and my heart.

And fine, my brain wants it, too.

But we made a deal.

Or really, I insisted upon one, and I'm glad she's honoring my wishes, especially when curiosity wins, and I learn the *terribly inappropriate term* refers to when one person piggybacks off another's porn during a solo ride, watching over the shoulder. The way I see it, I don't want to be sneaking up on Mia when she's savoring her own delicious body. I want to be a major player in all the action when she's in my bed, in my home, living in my house.

It's a sharp moment of clarity brought to me by Urban Dictionary.

And I groan with the stark realization that I do want her to live with me. There isn't just a part of me that wants that, like I thought when we joked about it at my apartment. All of me wants that. I don't want to mess around with separate places. I want to pick her up at the airport when she lands in New York in twenty-four more days, and take her to her new home.

*Mine.*

\* \* \*

Kayak time is the next morning, and Blair leads this part of the trip, while I help her out. After a few hours, the group breaks for lunch. As everyone else heads to picnic tables, Mia hangs back, waiting for me.



“So ...” A curious tone threads through her voice.

“So to you, too.”

“Blair’s cute.”

I glance at Blair, several yards ahead, then to Mia by my side. “Is she?”

“You know she is.”

I arch a skeptical brow. “Do I?”

“You do know that.”

“I know nothing of the sort.” Except that I like Mia’s jealousy.

She narrows her eyes and whispers under her breath. “Do you think she’s cute?”

I sigh. “Mia, she works for me.”

“Do you?” she presses.

I flash her a grin. “Does it drive you crazy not knowing?”

Her eyes are fierce as she answers, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Say it, Mia.”

She crosses her arms and huffs.

I shrug as we walk toward the tables. “Okay, don’t say it.”

“I don’t want you to think anyone else is cute,” she blurts under her breath.

That’s another plus in the quest to win her whole heart—a jealous, possessive Mia. I like her jealous side a hell of a lot. Naturally, I have no choice but to tease her as we amble by the water. A chipmunk scurries along the ground, and I gesture to the little fella. “What about a chipmunk, though? Chipmunks are cute.”

“They are.”

“How about baby birds? The kind you rescue.”

“Stop it. You know I think baby birds are adorable, and you’re clearly allowed to think they’re cute, too.”

“And what about foxes? Like your foxy ink?”

“Foxes are the cutest things ever.”

I stop, cross my arms, and peer over my shades. In a voice for her ears only, I give her what she wants at last. “Jackrabbit, I only have eyes for you.”

Even though we’re side by side, gazing at the water, I can tell her grin is spreading far and wide.

The second night is tougher.

But my copy of *A River Runs Through It*—the book, not the Brad Pitt flick—keeps me occupied, as does a few hours of work, checking in with Dana on the other tours underway, and touching base with clients and suppliers. Before I’m ready to hit the hay, Daisy sends me a picture of Zeus rubbing his cheek against the pot of catnip, captioned: *It’s high time you gave him the herb!*

I laugh, then because I’m sure Mia would love to see this, I leave my room and find her curled up on a chair in the living room of the inn, reading a *National Geographic* piece on Arctic exploration. I grab the chair across from her and show her the screen. “He likes your gift.”

She sets down the magazine. “Please have him make a list of his likes and dislikes so I can continue to bestow only the finest presents upon him when I’m living in New York.”

*Mia in New York.* Those words sound foreign. The idea of her living in the same city as me feels strange and almost unreal. Maybe because we’re riding this in-between state right now, trying to balance all these other complications—her move, my friendship with her brother, and then the most inconvenient hurdle of all—the current can’t-touch-this situation.

I’d really like to touch her, just to reconnect. Her knee. Her shoulder. Her hair. I’m a starving man, and any morsel will do.

“Zeus looks forward to your generosity.” That feels even more surreal, as if I’m talking to her through my cat who’s not even here. *What I really want to say is I look forward to showering you with affection every single day. And then you’ll tell me how much you can’t wait for that, too.*

Why the fuck don’t I say that? Maybe because Max’s warning threw me off. And maybe I’m giving it too much power. But I don’t know Mia’s whole heart yet, either. She hasn’t shared it with me. The last thing I want is to scare her off. I want to nurture this burgeoning thing between us, give it every chance to become all I want it to be. That’s why I’ve kept my mouth shut. After all, one small bout of jealousy is hardly her asking me if she can move in. We’re not entirely on the same page here.

Mia cocks her head to the side. “Do you miss him when you travel? Zeus?”

I flip over my phone and check out the shot of the little dude once more. “I do miss him.” I hold her gaze. “What about you?”

She licks her lips, her eyes locked with mine, her voice low and soft. “I do miss him. I miss him a lot.”

We’re not entirely talking about the cat.

But I’m not entirely sure what we’re saying, either.

That’s the problem.

I want us both to say the same things, to feel the same emotions, and to want this great, big love I believe we can have. And someone is going to need to step it up and speak first.

But if I say all that now, it hardly seems like I’m following my own guidelines. And if we’re trying to put the genie back in the bottle, now’s not the time for nookie—or for declarations of *I need you with me always*.

\* \* \*

The next day the backpacking begins, and I lead the Pure Beauty crew over the hills and through the woods, stopping to snap photos and to breathe in the views—peaks, valleys, and toweringly tall green trees. In the afternoon, we arrive at the campsite, and I work with Blair to set up the tents for the first of two nights in the great outdoors.

A little later around the campfire, Mia runs through more of her team-building and bonding games, including an impromptu round of “What’s your special talent?” Mia shows off her party trick, a walking handstand that easily lasts twenty feet. I crack up since it looks like her hands and arms work as upside-down feet and legs. I get a chance to show off mine, too. Making the most kick-ass s’mores ever. Blair helps me with the marshmallows, and for a moment I wonder if Mia’s jealousy will return, but she seems focused on her job.

Which I admire.

Selfishly, though, I wish she’d turn her focus elsewhere.

But when it’s dark and quiet, and only the owls are hooting and the crickets are chirping, she does just that.

Her silhouette frames the flap of the tent as she unzips it, glances behind her, and whispers, “Coast is clear.”

I smile at the sight of her sneaking into my tent at midnight. This is a fantasy come to life.

But I silently curse my reality. I can’t get any closer to her. That’s too risky. Too tempting. I don’t stop her, though, from crawling into my tent. Surely I can be near her without kissing her senseless and sliding her under me.

Mia sits cross-legged, her dimples peeking at me briefly.

“Hi,” she whispers, taking me back instantly to her *hi* the night we were first together in my bed.

“Hey.” I shift in my sleeping bag, propping myself on my elbow.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she says softly, her lips curving in a guilty grin.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I echo.

She looks at the tent flap, zipped down. “I don’t want to go.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“Therein lies the dilemma,” she murmurs. She takes a deep breath. “Should I go?”

“You should ...” I inch my hand closer to her.

She glances down at my wandering fingers. “I don’t want to tempt ...”

Heat rushes over my skin. “Tempt you or me?”

She swallows. “Either one of us.”

I draw a deep breath. “Guess there’s nothing wrong with us just talking, right?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing at all.”

I reach her leg and run my fingers across her shin where her yoga pants stop. Her lips fall open in a gasp, and her hand flies to her mouth, covering her sound. A grin plays on my lips. I love that the slightest touch from me turns her on.

“How are you?” I ask.

“I’m turned on now, and it’s all your fault.”

My fingers travel higher to her knee.

She bites her lip and scoots closer. I brush my fingertips over her thigh, and she closes her eyes, her lips parting as a soft sigh of pleasure falls from them.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I whisper again.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she says, as if she’s in a trance.

My fingers roam up her legs, and I register every move she makes. The way her knees subtly open wider. How she stretches her neck. The way her hair falls against her skin. How her back arches, as a shudder runs through her whole body when my hand reaches hers and I take it in mine.

“Why are you here then?” I ask, craving her answer. It’s torture, absolute torture being this close to her. But I welcome it because even some of Mia is worth the torment.

Her breath is ragged. Her eyes flutter open. She leans closer, bringing her face nearer to mine. “You’re hard to resist,” she says, and her admission spreads warmth all through me.

“I like knowing it’s hard for you, too.” My fingers continue their journey, reaching her hip. “Why do you have a

fox tattoo? I never asked you before.”

She smiles. “A fox was the first animal I rescued in the wild.”

“Yeah?”

“When I was nine, I found a little kit in the woods near my home. My parents were working, so Max helped me bring it safely to the house, and he called WildCare while Chase tended to it.”

I laugh softly. “Dr. Chase’s beginnings as a foxy doctor, revealed on the ten p.m. news.”

“The truth comes out.”

“That’s why you volunteer at WildCare.”

“That’s why I do what I do at Pure Beauty,” she says with passion. “I love animals, and I’ve wanted to help them my whole life. I don’t want to hurt them; I don’t want to test on them. That’s why I started this company, because I love pretty scents and smells and lotions and potions, and I want to show that it’s possible to have everything coexist.”

I squeeze her thigh. “I love that you feel that way. It’s a gift to do what you love.”

“Didn’t your favorite writer say, *Do what you love. Know your own bone; gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it, and gnaw it still?*”

“Been studying up on Thoreau’s best quotes?”

“Maybe I have. I believe that, too, though. That’s why I want to do right by Pure Beauty.” She tips her head to indicate the others in their tents, and nervousness flicks across her eyes. “I want them to enjoy working with me. And I hope they’re having a good time, but also learning and growing.”

“They are,” I assure her.

“Thank you for doing such an amazing job, Patrick. These few days have been incredible so far.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. And that’s also why I won’t pull you into my sleeping bag right now. I love what I do, too.”

I want to do right by my people, as well.”

“You are doing right by them.” She lays her hand on my sleeping bag, finding and then pressing my hip. “And by me.”

I stifle a groan as she repays me by traveling across my hipbone to my leg, and then to the outline of my erection.

I grab her hand, stopping her. “I can’t.”

She swallows and nods. “I know. I’m sorry,”

“Don’t be sorry,” I whisper. “Just come back when it’s over.”

She leans near me, her hair framing her face, tickling my cheeks. “Good night, Patrick,” she whispers, then she backs out of the tent, zipping it closed.

She’s gone, and there’s a part of me that thinks she won’t come back. There’s a dark part of my heart that fears this surreal sliver of time is all I’ll ever have with her. That we won’t ever be on the same page. What if Max was right to worry about me meeting the same fate as that other guy?

The guy she didn’t love enough.

I should be happy with her unexpected midnight visit. Instead, I’m left not only with an annoying erection, but also with this persistent ache for her in my heart.

*Good night, Patrick.*

*I love you, Mia.*

That’s what I want to say.

That’s what I want to tell her.

I park my hands under my head and stare at the roof of my tent, wishing I could ask her if we’re on the same page, if she’ll come back when this is over. Instead, I’m searching for the answer in a night sky I can’t even see.

But there are no stars to guide me.

\* \* \*



In the morning, I rise before everyone else, as the early blue light of dawn begins painting the horizon. I survey the campsite, the orange and green and yellow tents dotting the ground.

I take a deep breath, turn, and walk away from the clearing, along a trail I know well. I have always found answers in the outdoors. Trees have never led me astray, and sunrises have constantly anchored me. The earth has always been honest. I flash back to the moments in my life when I felt the same weight in my chest, a heavy unknown ache.

Where to go to college.

What to study.

Whether to pursue a safe, comfortable career in an office or to take a chance at building a business doing what I love.

Now I need another answer. I need to know if it's time to go all in one more time. To bet everything.

The trouble is, ever since Max told me about Eric, I've been determined to prove I'm different from a guy I know nothing about.

That's what's driving me crazy.

My focus has been all wrong.

As I walk along the trail, the lightening sky keeping me company, I think of Mia, and all the times we've shared. I think of our nights, our days, our moments. I've been so caught up in whether they'll become more than that, that I'm not sure I've seen them completely for what they are.

*My perfect days.*

I remember the time I took Mia and Zeus for a hike near Cold Spring, and she quoted my favorite writer. "*I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees.*"

But that's not the Thoreau quote that drives me on. Instead, the one that's been my compass and my guide does. The one about walking toward your dream, and living the life you've imagined.

Mia is the life I've imagined. She's the dream I want to make real.

No more of this surreal stuff. I'm not interested in an in-between state. I can't dwell on moments, and I definitely can't dwell on the past.

The other guy? The one she never loved? I know now he doesn't matter. He has nothing to do with us. What unfolds between Mia and me is between us, and I have it in my power to do everything I can to make sure she's mine.

Starting with telling her how much I want her to be my future. All of it, all of her. Always.

I turn around and head in the direction of the campsite.

But finding the right moment to confess my feelings will have to wait until we're off this mountain. Besides, we're surrounded by twenty-five people most of the time.

Two days later, we pack up, ready to say goodbye to both the backpacking and the trip, which ends with a picnic at the inn this afternoon.

I'm itching to say goodbye to this trip. It's been a good one, but boy, do I want it over right the hell now. I need time with only Mia.

On the hike down the mountain, the day is nearly perfect, with beautiful blue skies lined with only a few clouds. The weather app on my phone predicts a few summer showers for later in the day, but honestly, I've never met a summer shower I didn't like. Bring it on.

We stop for photos, and a particularly scenic vista elicits *oohs* and *aahs* from the whole crew. The Sierra Nevada peaks rise majestically in the distance. I suggest a group shot at a large boulder. My phone has been on battery saver mode the whole time, except for morning weather checks, so it still has juice. I turn on the camera and snap a picture. Lisa holds up a finger telling me to wait and grabs a digital camera from her backpack. She's been shooting photos throughout the trip for the company blog. "Take one with mine, too. I'm old school. I like digital cameras better."

I shoot several, and the smiles on all their faces make it clear how much they've enjoyed this adventure tour. They're

more ready than before for their next journey together—one that will take them across the country. Maybe that sounds cheesy. Hell, maybe that *is* cheesy. But the way I see it, a little cheese never hurt anyone—a company or a person.

Or a sandwich for that matter.

Which reminds me that I need to introduce Mia to my grilled cheese sandwiches once she's in New York. I have a feeling my hungry jackrabbit will like them.

We wind around switchbacks, cross a small stream, and step over a few fallen branches. When we reach the parking lot, the crew disperses to their vehicles, tossing packs into cars and chatting about showers, picnics, and the move to New York. Lisa closes the trunk then stops in her tracks at the driver's door. A long *ugh* bursts from her mouth as she pats her pockets and unzips all the sections on her backpack.

"I think I forgot my camera," she says, a terribly guilty look on her face.

Mia shakes her head, reassuring her. "No worries. I'll go back and get it."

"I'm pretty sure I left it on the rock where we took the last photo after Patrick returned it to me. It's not a problem for me to go grab it. You don't have to," Lisa says, taking a step that way.

Mia shoos her to her car. "Go to the inn. Freshen up. I'll get it. That was only twenty minutes back up the trail."

*Thirty*, to be precise.

Lisa frowns. "You don't have to, Mia."

I pipe in, "I'll go with you, Mia. It's always better to have two on the trails."

"Good plan," she says, then turns to Lisa. "Just save some hot water for me."

Lisa gives her a thumbs-up. "Deal. And thank you."

Mia calls out to the group, "The rest of you go on ahead and get started. We'll be there as soon as we can."

Mia is a chatty bird on the way up, recounting the trip, her favorite moments, and the things her team have said about the tour. She's singing my company's praises, and I couldn't be happier about that, even though I'd rather be talking about us. But she seems to need this, so I do what I sense she most wants—I *listen*.

A half hour later, I spot a shiny black object gleaming in the dirt next to the boulder. Mia snatches it and clutches it to her chest. "Eureka!"

On the way downhill, Mia skips a few steps, turns around, and says, "Want to know what I'm most looking forward to?"

Since this is pretty much the only time we've been alone since she appeared in my tent, I wiggle an eyebrow, and say in a suggestive tone, "What are you most looking forward to?"

I expect her to say something dirty or flirty in return.

Instead, she peers down at her T-shirt, tugging at the neckline, then sniffing it. "A shower."

I laugh. "I'm sure you smell just fine."

She turns around and resumes the downhill trek. "I beg to differ. I haven't had a shower in two days, and I intend to crank up the spray the second we reach the inn. I'd invite you to join me, but then I'd have to fire you."

"Feel free. For a shower with you, I'd gladly get sacked."

"Speaking of showers, that's one thing I'm looking forward to about moving to New York."

"The showers?"

"The water pressure in my building in San Francisco is a trickle." She clears her throat, and her tone shifts, as if she's about to say something serious. "When I look for places in New York, I'm going to have to test the water in every single one."

*Finally.*

We're finally talking about what happens next.

Good, I need some info. I need to know how far along she is. Where her mind is at. I might be ready to go all in, but there's a difference between putting your heart on the line and putting your heart on the line only to swerve off a bridge and sink to a watery death.

Fine, that's dramatic, but I still need to test the waters about how much to share, and when. Even if I've pushed Eric from the forefront of my mind, I still don't want to meet his fate. "Have you started the hunt?"

"Yes." Frustration laces her tone, but it's chased by sadness. "It's a nightmare. Nothing feels right, like it could be my home."

"Where are you looking?"

Before she can answer, a clap of thunder echoes like Zeus himself is tossing bolts across the sky. The god, not my cat. We pick up the pace, walking faster around a bend in the trail. Those white clouds? They're a wee bit grayer now.

Mia turns to meet my gaze. There's a new vulnerability in her eyes, something I haven't seen before. "I've been looking in a lot of places. Chelsea. Upper West Side. The Village. Hell's Kitchen. Washington Heights." Her voice is odd, but I can't put my finger on why. It's almost as if she's saying these neighborhoods for the first time, as if she's testing them out as words. Still, there's no Battery Park City in her list.

Time to throw it out there in the mix. See if she bites. "I hear Battery Park City is nice," I say with a wink.

She laughs, but it sounds forced as she marches onward. "That is a great area."

And that response tells me bupkis.

She stuffs her hands in the pockets of her shorts, then takes them out, then jams them back in. "So ..." Her voice trails off, so I try once more to cast a gentle line and see if she nibbles.

"I like Battery Park City a lot. Do you?"

"Sure." Her tone is even, and I can't read it. "I like it a lot. Definitely."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s great,” she says, and my radar is picking up nothing. Zilch.

I reel in the line, and then toss it out once more in a new direction. “Where do you think you’d like to be?”

“Where do you think I should live?” The words tumble out in one fast breath, and I’m not sure where she’s coming from. She knows the city well, so I’ve no clue why she’s asking me where to live.

Maybe I can tease out the truth in the guise of humor. I inhale, exhale, and spit it out. “Well, besides the obvious answer that you should live with me, I’d say you’re an Upper East Side gal.”

She flinches and snaps her gaze at me. Her expression is deadly serious. Her voice is a whisper. “What did you say?”

I’ve never seen her eyes so intense, so quizzical, and all I can think is I’ve crossed a line. I’ve floated a trial balloon that she’s not ready for.

Time to reel it in before I drown. “Upper East Side,” I say, all casual and no-big-deal cool.

She furrows her brow. “That’s what you said?”

I work to sell the cover-up. “Yeah. Sure. That’s the obvious answer. That’s what I was saying. Upper East Side. Obvious answer.”

“Oh.” She shakes her head as if she’s ridding her ears of water. “I thought—”

“No. That’s what I said.” My answer is quick and clear.

“Okay, then.” She resumes her speedy pace.

Silence covers us for a minute, and once I’m sure I can open my mouth without saying something dumb that scares her the fuck away, I try again. “Anyway, you rattled off a ton of neighborhoods. What kind do you like best?”

She shrugs. “I guess it doesn’t matter. I’m even considering Hoboken.”

I scoff. “Hoboken? You can’t live in New Jersey.” Another clap of thunder echoes above us. Her shoulders tense. “We’re almost down.”

“I’m fine. I’m not scared of rain.”

“I know. But it’s still better to be out of the weather.”

“So, tell me about your disdain for Hoboken. Are you allergic to it?”

“It’s just too fucking far,” I say. Screw politeness.

“Too far?” She raises an eyebrow. “Does that mean you won’t come see me in Hoboken?”

I sigh heavily. “Mia, I was ready to fly clear across the country to see you. Obviously, I’d see you in Hoboken.”

“But it’s *too far*,” she says, imitating me, annoyance coloring her tone.

“It’s not too far. It’s fine. You should live where you want to live.”

“But ideally in a neighborhood more convenient for you?” she says, pointedly, as we round a switchback. I rub the back of my neck, trying to figure out why she’s suddenly so combative.

Frustration curls in my chest. The last thing I want is to argue with her over where she should live. “That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

She narrows her eyes, and in her won’t-back-down stance, I can tell in an instant why Mia runs her own company. She’s sweet and kind and savvy, but she also has a lion in her. Sometimes we all need to call on our inner lion. Looks like she’s dialing hers up right now. “Then what are you saying, Patrick? Because it’s not clear to me at all. It’s not *obvious* in the least.”

I take a calming breath, marching forward as we argue. I want to stay cool. Hell, I pride myself on being unflappable, but I also want to speak my mind, so I give it one more shot. “I’m saying that I would like you to be closer to me.”



“Oh. Is that where I should live? Closer to you? Is that the *obvious answer?*” she fires off at me, sketching air quotes as she spins around—

And stumbles on a rock. She wobbles, and I grab her arm, steadying her. Her breath rushes out in a worried stream. “Shit,” she mutters.

“Let’s just focus on getting down to the bottom of the trail before the rain starts,” I say in a cool tone.

We walk in silence along the trail. As the trees clear and we near the bottom, thunder booms again, and this time it’s followed by lightning.

Twenty seconds later, the skies unleash sheets of rain. We’re a hundred feet from the parking lot, and Mia takes off running. I run, too, and when we reach the rental SUV, I yank open her door. She looks like a drowned chipmunk. Her hair is matted to her face, and streaks of dirt run down her arms.

“Give me your pack,” I say, and when she hands it to me, I shut her door, toss the gear into the back as the water pelts me, and get in the car.

I’m soaked, too. All the way to the bone. I look at her. “I’m sorry, Mia.” I take her hand. Squeeze it. “I don’t want to fight with you. Ever.”

She gives a sigh, the relieved kind. “I’m sorry, too. I think I’m just on edge about the move. Which is crazy because I want to do it. Everything feels like it’s happening all at once. The company, the move, needing a new place.” She exhales and speaks softly. “And you. All these changes are coming at me at once.”

Foolishly, I hadn’t really thought about the fact that Mia is changing everything. Where her business is located. Where she lives. And who she’s with—switching from single to involved in the blink of an eye. I should give her the space she needs, rather than crowd her with all these feelings in my heart. “You have a lot on your plate.”

“I do, but I ordered this meal. I’m just trying to balance it all.”

“What can I do to make it easier for you?” Rain lashes the windshield, and I pull out of the lot at the trailhead.

She shoots me a small smile. “How about you take me to the nearest shower?”

“That I can do.”

The rain has other plans. The rain is biblical. The water hurls itself down from the sky. Heavy drops fling at the earth like they’re angry at the ground itself.

I focus on driving, slowly ambling along the winding road that takes us away from the trail, staring straight ahead as buckets of water pound the car, punctuated with the *slap-swish* of the wipers.

“This is bad,” Mia says. Understatement of the year.

“Yeah, a little more than a summer shower.”

I peer ahead. Water gushes over the road in torrents.

My phone buzzes. I glance quickly at the screen to find a flashing triangle.

*Warning: Flash flood. Roads closed in the area.*

“There’s no way to get back to the inn right now,” I say heavily. “There’s one road out from this trail, and we’re on it.”

“How long does a flash flood last?”

“Not long, but it usually closes roads for several hours.”

She groans, and shoves her hands in her wet hair. She exhales, trying to calm herself, it seems. “Fine. It’s not the worst thing in the world. We’ll just park and wait it out in your car, right?”

I nearly say yes.

But I don’t.

Because the woman wants a shower.

The woman doesn’t want to wait in a parked car on the side of the road.

And hell if I'm going to be the schmuck who twiddles his thumbs. I'm the guy who gets shit done. Who gets out of jams. Who fixes the flat tire.

This is one hell of a flat tire in our day.

But I'm going to repair it.

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel. "So, I know a guy who has a cabin ..."

After I make a call to Carlos, a twisty one-lane road leads up, up, and away from the submerged streets. Mia calls Lisa to let her know we're stuck. From Mia's half of the conversation, I gather that Lisa and the rest of the crew are already at the inn, and she'll check them out and send them back to San Francisco.

Soon, we pull into the driveway of Carlos's cabin on our side of the closed roads.

Heavy rain falls as we dart out of the car and jog to the front porch, where I track down the extra key he said was hidden beneath a bronze miniature Pegasus statue next to a potted fern. I unlock the door and push it open with a loud creak.

Inside, Mia breathes a deep sigh. "It's dry," she says with a wide smile.

"The one time I'm okay with you not being wet." I point to the car. "I'll go get your things. You get in your shower."

"You're my hero," she says, and when I head back out into the rain, those words make me stand a little taller, walk a little prouder.

Sometimes the hero has to serve up a shower for his woman.

Even if she doesn't want to live in the same place as him yet.

*Time.* There will be time for that. Time for us to navigate this new relationship road. As I open the back of the car, I remind myself that everything is new for us. We've only ever lived on opposite coasts, and figuring out how to be together will take some adjustments. If she needs to be across the river in Hoboken to make those adjustments, so be it.

I grab her bag, since she'll have another change of clothes in it, and mine, too, then return through the rain to Carlos's sweet digs. It's more like a mountain home away from home, with soft, cushy furniture, a fully stocked kitchen and stainless-steel fridge, a spacious living room with high ceilings, and a fireplace that alone would make the winter trips worthwhile.

The cabin also has a shower.

A shower that's running loud.

And hot.

Starring one very naked woman right now.

I remove my hiking boots and follow the sound of the running water, stripping off my wet, clingy shirt and shorts. The door is ajar, and already steam wafts out.

I knock, but it's purely perfunctory. I'm going in without an invite.

In one quick whoosh, my boxer briefs are off, and I step into the rainfall shower with Mia.

Hot, soapy water slides down her breasts, slipping over her belly and gliding across the silver ring in her navel. Her wet hair is lathered thick with shampoo. A trickle of muddy water runs down the drain.

“Told you I was dirty,” she says with a wry grin.

I cup her cheek, bending to reach her as she rises on tiptoes. “But I already knew that.”

I slam my lips to hers, and we both groan. Her hands shoot to my pecs, slide over my shoulders, and loop around my neck. As for mine, I can’t keep them off her tits. I palm those gorgeous beauties as I kiss her hard and fearlessly. I kiss her so she knows how much I want her, how much I need her, and how much I expect her to be the only woman in my arms ever.

Mia dissolves against me, sliding closer, rubbing her hot little body against mine. Water sluices between us, slips down my nose, and glides over my chest.

This kiss is rough and hungry, our teeth clicking together, our lips bruised. She kisses me as fiercely as I kiss her, and I know—no, I *believe*—that the way we kiss says all the things we’re not saying.

*I need you. I want you. You’re mine.*

If she’s ready to take the next step now, or in six months, or in a year, I’ll be fine with it. And because I’m in love with her, I’m going to give her the time she needs. I’m going to be patient with her as she figures us out.

At last, I pull away, my breath coming in jagged pants. “Missed that. I missed that so fucking much.”

She tips up her chin. “I missed you.”

I arch a questioning brow as my lips quirk up. “Did you?”

“So much,” she murmurs, sliding her hand between my legs and grasping my dick. Her eyes light up with mischief. “Sometimes I think you don’t realize how much I like you, Patrick.”

I can’t help but smile. And I can’t help but groan as I thrust into her hand as the water streams over us. “Why don’t you show me?”

She grips me harder, her hand twisting around my dick as she strokes. “It feels like it’s been forever since we’ve touched, but it’s only been thirteen days. And if we were doing the long-distance thing, this is what it would be like.”

Desire rattles through my bones. “Like we’re going to explode?”

She shakes her head. “No. Like we don’t get enough of each other.”

“You know that’s how I feel. You know that, right?”

“I do.”

I shudder on an upstroke, and my brain threatens to short circuit from her touch. “Sometimes I don’t think you know how much you affect me.”

She brushes her lips to mine in the sweetest, most sensual kiss as she tugs harder. When she pulls away, she says, “Then show me how much I affect you.”

She lets go of my cock, spins me around so my back is to the tiled wall, and drops to her knees. Gripping my shaft again, she brings me to her mouth, her eyes sparkling with wild desire as she licks the head.

And I die. Because holy hell. This is heaven. This is another world. This is Mia, on her knees, sucking me off.

Sparks shoot through my body and ripple across my wet skin. As she draws me in deep, she keeps her eyes on me as if she's saying *watch me*.

I grab her head, circling my hands around it. She hums on my dick, and the vibration spreads through my whole damn body. My legs shake, and I have a feeling this won't go down in the record books as the longest blow job. Pleasure slams into me as she flicks her tongue over the head. The sensations are so intense it's like an onslaught of euphoria. Shockwaves of desire rocket through me with her every touch.

"Mia," I groan, my eyes floating closed.

She stops, and I fall from her mouth as she demands, "Watch me."

I blink open my eyes and pull her closer. "Get back on me."

She pumps her fist down my shaft, working me over, licking the tip.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?"

She shakes her head, smiling wickedly. "No, but I want to blow your mind." She toys with me using tight, teasing strokes.

"Take me in," I tell her, my voice rough. "Please."

"Are you sure?"

"Mia," I say, as if in warning.

"Tell me what you want, Patrick."

"You," I groan, frustration and desire seeping into my voice in equal measure. "You, all the time. You, around the clock. You with me always. You. Fucking you. And right now, I want your lips on my dick."

With a wildly satisfied grin, she gives me the relief I seek, wrapping her lips nice and tight around me. She takes me so deep I hit the back of her throat. "Christ, Mia. You know why this is so good?" I ask, as sheer bliss threatens to obliterate my brain.



She shakes her head. I grip her tighter, my fingers digging through her hair as the water pounds us both.

“Because it’s you doing this to me,” I say, and her eyes blaze. “It’s you I’m looking at. It’s all you.”

One more suck. One more thrust into her throat. One more moment of holding her gaze. That’s all I can take. I don’t even try to fight it off. The orgasm rips through me as I come in her throat with a growl.

My climax erases the world, the cabin, the entire day. All I’m aware of is the intensity of the aftershocks as they spread to every molecule, until Mia stretches and rises, wedging her body against me.

I open my eyes and grasp her tight, hold her close. As I come down from the high, she takes the soap, rubs it on her hands, and washes my arms, my chest, my abs.

God, how I love her.

She runs a soapy fist down my dick, and it tickles.

I laugh.

I love her so fucking much.

I take the soap from her and turn her around, rinsing the remnants of shampoo from her hair, then spreading conditioner in, and washing her arms, legs, belly, and breasts. By the time I’m done washing off the conditioner, she has sparkly skin and probably the cleanest tits in the world.

I take her face in my hands and breathe out hard. She looks up at me, her eyes big and vulnerable. “Is that how I affect you?”

I swallow hard, shake my head.

A crease appears in her brow. “It’s not?”

I run my finger down the line in her forehead. “Sometimes, maybe most of the time, I don’t think you realize that I’m completely in love with you.”

She melts into my arms, her soft, naked body pressed to mine. Her lips part, but she says nothing, and I’m not sure

why. But then, she turns the shower off, and a lone tear streaks from her eye.

“Are you sad?”

She shakes her head, and her smile is radiant. “No. I’m happy. I’m so happy because I’m so in love with you.”

And this—this feeling, like I can do anything, like the world is shaded with bright, bold colors, like I’m living inside a hit song I can’t stop singing along to—is happiness. It’s joy. It’s love, and my heart feels like it doesn’t even fit inside my chest anymore.

“I’m crazy in love with you,” I say, and then, because it’s out there, I can’t stop. “I’m so wildly in love with you, Mia.”

She loops her arms tighter around me. “I’m so crazy in love with you, but I thought you didn’t feel the same.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

She nods. “I thought it was one-sided.”

“You thought I wasn’t into you?”

“Well, I knew you liked me. I didn’t think you were in as deep as I was.”

I grab her ass. “Mia Summers, if there’s one thing you can be certain of, it’s that I’m in so deep with you, it’s beyond over my head.”

I grab a towel and dry her off.

She shoots me a quizzical stare. “You’re not just saying that because you liked the blow job?”

I scoff as I grab another towel and run it over my body. “Let me prove to you that this has never been just sex. It’ll never be just sex. I’ve always made love to you, and I’m going to do that right now. So you know how you affect me. So you understand when I say it’s you I want, you every day, I mean every single day and every damn night.”

I hang up the towel, scoop her into my arms, and leave the steamy bathroom. I glance down the hall and make our way to one of the bedrooms. I kick open the door, and a king-size bed with a white cover awaits. I carry her, lower her onto it, and watch as she scoots up the bed to the pillows.

I join her, grabbing her waist and flopping down on my back. “Come sit on my face.”

She shudders. “Really?”

“You say that like you think I don’t want to eat you right now.”

“I thought you were going to make love to me.”

“I am. First with my mouth. Then with my whole body.” I grab her hips, but I don’t need to convince her anymore. She crawls up me, and lowers herself to my face, and I kiss her wetness. I close my eyes, groaning instantly. The very second I taste that silky heat, I’m roaring inside.

And she’s moaning.

And rocking.

And grinding.

My Mia gets into it. Oh hell, does she get into it. It doesn’t take her long to find her rhythm. Grabbing the headboard, she circles her hips. I hold her tight, moving her across my mouth, flicking my tongue over her swollen flesh, rubbing my stubble all over her.

She pants, and moans, and cries out.

Then, she turns wild. She’s a woman possessed, riding my face, fucking my mouth, grinding and rocking until she shudders, and everything goes silent for one gloriously suspended moment when she doesn’t move.

Then, her shoulders shake. Her belly tightens. Her thighs grip my head.

And she is nothing but *oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God*.

She comes on my lips, trembling against me. I keep my grip on her until her moans subside, then I gently move her off and slide her down the bed, flipping her onto her belly. She's a warm, soft creature now, all blissed-out and sex-drunk.

I yank up her hips, so she's on all fours, resting on her elbows.

"You're going to make love to me like this?"

I nod. "Let me show you how I can make your favorite position feel even better."

With her hips raised, I line up my cock at her entrance. Then I slide inside, and I groan. I shudder. It's just so fucking intense. Her back bows, and she moans, then looks back at me.

I thrust deep in her, her heat gripping me as her intense eyes stay on mine.

When I'm all the way in, I band an arm around her waist, and tug her up so she's kneeling with me. Her back is against my chest, her body so tight to mine.

I raise one hand to her face, turning her so her lips meet mine. And we kiss, and we groan, and we fuck. She lifts her arms, wrapping them behind her, around the back of my head. My hand slinks between her legs, and she shivers against me.

I show her how her favorite position can be even more intimate, how it can bring us even closer. I don't stop kissing her, not when she cries out, not when her breath turns ragged, and not when she trembles.

When she starts to fall away from me, I hold her even tighter, letting go of her lips at last so she can cry out her pleasure as she comes on me. And that's all I need to join her on the other side of the cliff.

She traces lazy lines down my chest.

I'm smiling.

I don't think I can stop.

This woman. She does this to me.

I dot a kiss to her forehead and tug her closer in the crook of my arm. "I want this every day. I meant what I said in the shower. I want you every day."

"Me, too."

I stroke a hand through her still-damp hair. "I'm so happy you're coming to New York, Mia. You have to know, it's my greatest dream come true. You and me together in the same zip code." I'm not worried anymore about saying too much. This cabin unlocked my heart, and my mouth right along with it. I need her to know she's everything to me. Patience is great and all, but sometimes you have to unleash the truth.

She turns and levels me with her gaze. "Remember at your place when you asked if you were part of my decision?"

I nod.

She nods, too. "You are."

And that organ in my chest is hula-hooping right now. I can't hold back any longer. My plan to take some time has gone up in smoke. *See you later, patience.* I run the backs of my fingers over her cheek. "I don't want you to move to Hoboken. Or Chelsea, or the Upper East Side."

She arches a brow. “Oh, you don’t? Why’s that?”

Nerves swoop down, but just as quickly, they fly away. “I would think the obvious answer is”—I let those words from earlier linger before I give them a whole new meaning—“that I want you to move in with me.”

She gasps, and her eyes widen. “You do?” She speaks in a hushed whisper.

“Yes. I want to go to bed with you, and I want to wake up with you. I want to make you grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch on a lazy Saturday afternoon and then curl up with you on the couch and not watch sports since we’ll be too busy getting naked. I want to say goodbye to you when you leave for work in the morning, and I want to text you during the day asking if I can bring you home anything. I want to share a closet with you and watch you rub that coconut lotion on your legs in the morning after you get out of the shower, and then pick up the towel you used and send it to the laundry with mine.”

Her eyes shine with tears, and her lips quiver with happiness. “I don’t really understand how you made damp towels sound romantic, but somehow, you did.”

I run my thumb over her top lip. “I know your fears. I know your hopes and dreams. I know your heart. I love you. Will you live with me? Will you make my home yours, too, and let me love you every single day?”

All the hope in the world hangs in the balance, suspended in this brief moment before she answers. But I don’t let myself worry, nor do I fear that I’m scaring her away. Because when you know you’re madly in love with someone, you don’t want to keep it to yourself any longer. I need her to know she means everything to me.

She nods, and a tear slides down her cheek. She inches closer, dusting my lips with the sweetest kiss any woman has given any man. “I’ve wanted you to ask me since the day I told you.”

I blink. “What?”

“When I told you I was moving to New York. And you asked if it was because of us.”

I shoot her a look. “You said, ‘It’s not as if I expect you to ask me to move in and marry you.’”

She smiles. “I know what I said. I also know what I meant.”

I laugh. “Woman, if you wanted to live with me, you should have said something. I’m not a mind reader.”

Her fingers travel up my belly. “I think I needed you to come to it on your own terms.” She winks. “I would think that’s obvious.”

“Feel free to hit me over the head with this obvious stuff, Mia. Want to know why?”

She smirks. “Why?”

I tap my chest. “Because I’m *normal*. Remember? And that means sometimes—hell, maybe a lot of the time—I’m going to need some help decoding the secret language of women.”

“Fair enough,” she concedes, then she nudges my shoulder. “But there was no way I was going to tell you that day that I wanted all of you. Hello? That’s a recipe for scaring a guy away.”

I bring her closer in my arms and kiss her forehead. “I was afraid I’d scare you away if I told you then that I wanted you with me.”

“You wanted the same thing then, too?”

I shrug happily. “I think so. Yeah, the idea was just starting to form, but this trip with you solidified it.”

She hums a note of approval. “So, my corporate retreat was good for you, too ...” She sounds quite pleased with herself.

“Yes, Mia. The guide learned something, too.”

She climbs on top of me, laying her naked body on mine, propping her chin in her hands, and looking at me. “So all the



wilderness made you realize you wanted me?”

“It did.”

“You’re so outdoorsy,” she says with a laugh.

I wiggle an eyebrow. “Turns out you are, too.”

“Hmm. Maybe I am.”

“You are,” I say firmly.

A smile crosses her lips. “Fine, you’re right. I’m into this whole nature thing with you. And I still want to do it in a tent.”

“Don’t even worry about that, Mia. That can happen anytime. Tonight, if you want.”

Naughtiness twinkles in her eyes, then she sighs happily and inches forward to kiss me. “I wanted to tell you in your tent the other night how I felt.”

“I wanted to hear it.”

“But I also didn’t want to say anything sooner because this is all kind of new for me.”

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve never really been in love before. Not like this, where I can feel it everywhere.”

I feel like Zeus on catnip. This woman makes me so high, makes me feel so good. “You’ve never felt like this?”

She shakes her head. “Have you?”

I shake mine, too. “No. I feel like you’re a part of me.”

She brings her lips to mine. “I am.” Then she kisses me, and it’s so tender, so gentle, I swear I’m floating.

When we separate, she speaks first. “It’s different between us, you know that, right?” The look in her eyes is intense and meaningful.

“How are we different?”

“I think you were worried the same thing would happen, but this isn’t the same. What I feel for you has never been the

same as anything else. The reason I held back for so long was I was worried you didn't feel the same way about me."

I scoff. "As if that's possible."

She taps her fingers on my chest. "And I was concerned that if it was just a short-term thing for you, that you and Max would have a falling out. I didn't want that to happen to him again."

And with brilliant clarity, I can see her warning to me was never a warning about her heart. It was because she loves that big lug of a brother like crazy.

I run my hand up her arm. "Max and I won't have a falling out, because I'm not letting you go," I say, finally telling her what I wanted to say many nights ago.

It's funny, in a way, that so much of falling madly in love comes down to when you find the guts to speak your whole truth. But men and women aren't always ready to bare their souls. Instead, we sidestep the hard stuff, we avoid tough conversations. That's human nature – we can't always solve every problem when it happens, even if we want to. Sometimes we don't yet have the tools, or the guts. We have to hike through the woods, march up the hills, climb over rocks, before we come out on the other side.

That's where I am now. That's where we are. Finally saying what we've both wanted to say for a long time. The best part is learning she's wanted the same things all along.

When she pulls back, a thoughtful look passes over her eyes. "I should tell Max I'm moving into the building. I should also tell him not to worry that he'll lose you as a friend, since I have you wrapped around my finger." Her eyes twinkle as she holds up her pinkie.

"Definitely tell him you're moving in with me. But I did let him know we were seeing each other. I actually told him the night you left New York."

She laughs. "Did he freak out?"

I shake my head. "Not entirely. But I think he'll be happier now, especially since he'll be able to see more of you this

way.”

“That makes me happy, too.”

“I suppose I’ll need to break the news to Zeus that he won’t have me to himself much longer,” I tease.

“Oh, sweetie. I think the cat already knows.”

“You do?”

“I bet that cat knows everything.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Her stomach rumbles, and I rub my hand on it. “Hey, hungry monkey, I mentioned grilled cheese sandwiches earlier, and I bet you like them.”

Her hazel eyes turn to saucers. “I love them.”

I smack her ass. “I had a feeling you would. Carlos told me he had groceries sent earlier this week since he’d been planning to come up, but he didn’t make it. I bet I can find all the fixings for a sandwich for you.”

Fifteen minutes later, I serve her a deliciously gooey Gouda cheese on sourdough, and she tells me it’s the best thing she’s ever had. I think she might be exaggerating, but I don’t care. I eat up her compliment as I grill a sandwich for myself.

As I cook, she clears her throat and adopts an overly professional tone. “By the way, even though the trip has ended and all, I suppose I should officially fire you.”

I look at her over my shoulder as I flip the sandwich. “And I’ve never been so happy to be sacked.”

When mine is done, I stand across from her at the counter and take a bite of my sandwich. “Damn, I sure can make a mean grilled cheese.”

“Sandwich master. I’ll add that to your list of attributes.” She puts her sandwich down. “Hey, what do I call you now? Are you my roomie? My boyfriend? My lover? My trail guide? A god in bed?”

I point in the air, as if I'm selecting that option. "Last one. Clearly."

She rolls her eyes. "Seriously."

"You want to know what to label us?"

"I do work in the beauty business. We label everything. So, what are you?"

I lean across the counter, brush a crumb from her lips, and press a soft kiss to her mouth. "Yours."

The next twenty-one days pass in a flurry and slog. The days are fast, filled with details and arrangements, but the nights are slow, marked by longing.

I count down the hours until I can spend them with her.

We talk and text and Skype, and the Skype sessions are both fantastic and completely unsatisfying, since I want to be the one giving her the orgasms, not her vibrator. But hey, at least it's something.

I learn even more about Mia during those three weeks before she moves. One night on the phone, she warns me that she has a thing for blankets, and loves to snuggle under many soft, fleecy ones at bedtime. I tell her I'm all for a top sheet and leaving the windows open. She shudders and says *brrrr*.

"I'll change my habits for you," I tell her.

"Or we'll compromise."

"That works, too."

"But I might have bought a new adorable fleece blanket for the couch that I couldn't resist. It should arrive in two days. I hope you don't mind."

I smile. "Mia, you can decorate your house however you want."

"Great. I have some posters of Chris Hemsworth as Thor arriving the day after."

"Except that way."

I learn, too, that she likes to sleep in on weekends, but she also wants to go for runs and bike rides with me. I'm an early riser, so I tell her I'll go solo on Saturdays and later in the day with her on Sundays.

"Or we can just have sex all morning on weekends," she offers.

"That works for me. In fact, you can consider me a yes anytime you want to fuck."

She laughs. "Good to know. Oh, and I think I feel the same way, too."

"Think? You think?"

"Well, you're kind of well-endowed, Patrick. A girl sometimes needs a break so she can walk straight."

And that goes down as my favorite compliment ever, even more than the grilled cheese.

Obviously.

We make plans, too. Dates we want to go on in Manhattan. I tell her I'm taking her to the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, and to Governors Island, and to any bath and beauty shop she wants.

"Stop being so perfect. You're making me look bad," she teases.

I laugh. "I'm not perfect. Just normal."

"As a thank you for being so normal, I'll take you on a date to REI."

"Don't get me excited."

"And we'll go back to the trail in Cold Spring."

"Now I'm even more excited."

"And I'll walk your cat with you any time you want."

"Mia," I chide. "He's our cat now."

The other plan we make is for me to help her move. She's hired a company to transport some boxes and a few items of

furniture, and I offer to join her in San Francisco to help handle that before we fly to New York together.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Mia, you’re moving your company and yourself across the country. I’ll take a few days off to help you move. It’s what any good *god in bed* would do.”

Soon, but not soon enough, I’ve crossed off twenty days on the calendar. On the twenty-first day, I wake up early, harness my cat, and take him to one of my favorite trails outside Manhattan. That’s when I realize how right Mia was about cats.

## Conversations with the Cat

### *Zeus*

Along the trail, the cat sniffed leaves, darted after birds, and stood lookout on the canoe as he and the man enjoyed an hour on the water. The sun shone brightly in the big blue sky, warming his lush fur with so much heat, he purred his appreciation for the great outdoors.

He was a simple cat. Give him some fish, a spot of sunshine, and his favorite person, and he was good to go.

Sometimes, though, he also liked bugs.

Tasty creatures. Crunchy and savory at the same time. Such a wonderful combination.

The hunter in him kept his eyes peeled for his favorite flavor—something the man had called moth. Back on the trail, a winged insect had the good fortune to zip too close to him. In one fast lunge, Zeus sprang forward, caught it, and crunched into the snack.

He considered playing with it. Batting a paw to it. Torturing it. Bringing it home to share with the calico lady he'd been getting to know.

*Quite well, in fact.*

But today, Zeus opted for instant gratification and devoured the moth.



The man laughed. “Sometimes you just have to go for it, right, buddy?”

The moth went down easily. So satisfying.

The man stopped in his tracks, tugging on Zeus’s leash. He looked up at him, wondering what had prompted him to pause. “Meow?”

“Don’t you think, Zeus? This is one of those times, isn’t it?”

Zeus asked again. “Meow?”

The man talked and talked as they clambered down the hill, and Zeus curled up on the front seat of the Jeep, pleased that he had once again proven why he was a most excellent companion.

Then, he slept. After all, he’d only slept ten hours so far that day. And he needed fifteen for his beauty routine.

With my duffel on my shoulder, I stop by to see Max.

His eyes register surprise as we talk, but then he claps me on the shoulder, and wishes me luck. My flight leaves in two hours, so I don't have much time. But that's where my life-hacking skills come into play.

Or my simple, go-with-what-you-have skills, really.

At Kennedy airport, I zoom past security thanks to TSA PreCheck, then I do something I rarely do at airports. I shop. I pop into a specialty shop then a gourmet store. As I buckle up on the plane, I call my sister, and she shrieks so loudly I have to pull my phone away from my ear. After an endless flight across the country, I finish my commerce at San Francisco Airport, settling for a photo since the store is closed. I catch a Lyft to Mia's apartment in the heart of the city and wait for her to buzz me up. My duffel is on my shoulder, and I carry a plastic bag with all the items I've bought on the way.

I'm hopped up on nerves and excitement, adrenaline and possibility. I'm not sure I'm fully prepared for what I'm going to do, but I also know that preparation isn't what matters.

This is a spur-of-the-moment decision, and sometimes the best things in life happen that way.

When Mia opens the door, I drop my bag, cup her cheeks, and look into those eyes I love. Eyes I've missed. Big, beautiful hazel eyes. "Let's make a stop on the way to New York."

She raises an eyebrow. “A stop where?”

“Vegas.”

She blinks. “You don’t even like Vegas.”

“I know. But I don’t want to play the slots or see a show. I want to marry you. I want you to walk into our apartment in New York as my wife.”

Her jaw comes unhinged. I watch her as she swallows then tries to speak again.

I don’t pressure her. I wait.

Finally, her voice nearly cracking, she asks, “Are you serious?”

“Do you really think I would joke?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Is that a no?” I ask, but I’m honestly not scared. I know deep inside, in the marrow of my bones, that this woman will be my wife. That doesn’t make me cocky. That doesn’t make me overconfident. It just means I believe in our love. I believe in it so heartily that I’m not afraid.

“It’s not a no. I’m just shocked. I didn’t expect this.”

“That’s okay. I didn’t, either. But then I went for a walk in the woods with Zeus this morning, and I knew it was time to go for it. I had an epiphany, you could say. Like what happened to you a month and a half ago in New York,” I say, reminding her of the day she decided to begin changing her life. A faint smile creeps across her face. “And everything was clear. Sometimes in life you just have to go for what you want.”

“Yeah, you do,” she says, her dimples appearing. That smile makes me press on.

I hold up a finger. “But just so you know that I’m not a schmuck who’d propose empty-handed, I did a little shopping.”

A laugh bursts from her lips. I’m not sure if it’s from surprise or shock. She hasn’t said yes yet, but that won’t stop

me from diving into my impromptu proposal.

I dip into the bag and take out a small royal-blue box. Her eyes are drawn to it, like lasers. “It’s not a ring. I want you to have the ring you want. But the jewelry store at JFK did have this adorable bunny necklace.”

Laughing, she clasps her hand to her mouth as I click open the box. A small silver pendant of a rabbit rests on the velvet. “I can’t ask you to marry me without some kind of jewelry. So for you, Jackrabbit, a bunny seemed perfect. And I can take you shopping tomorrow at Katherine’s in the city if you’d like.”

She starts to speak, but I press my finger to her lips. “Don’t answer yet.”

I hand her the box, and she takes it, clutching it tight. She doesn’t speak, but she smiles so wildly it’s like she can’t even contain it.

That grin is magic to me.

“And then there’s this,” I say, fishing around for the item I picked up at the gourmet shop. A bag of Marcona almonds. “Since I know you’ll get hungry, and I want you to know I’ll always be thinking of you.”

“I will, and I love that you’re thinking of my belly and me.”

My heart thumps hard. “One last thing. The day we went to Cold Spring, you mentioned a magnet store at the San Francisco Airport.”

“You remember that?” she asks, wonder in her tone.

“When the woman you love tells you things, you listen.” I tap the side of my head. “You store it up here. You never know when it might come in handy. Now, since it’s ten p.m., the store is closed, but you said you never shopped there anyway, just stopped to read the quotes. And tonight, this one reminded me of you.” The corner of my lips curves up, and I shrug hopefully. “And maybe, of you and me.”

“Show me,” she says as I reach for my phone. Her voice is a whisper now, but in it I hear hope. I have faith she wants the same things that I do.

Sliding my thumb over the screen, I find the magnet I snapped a picture of. “Bear in mind, this isn’t some great philosopher’s quote. This isn’t from one of the writers I studied in my lit classes. In fact, I’m not even sure anyone knows who said this. But it seemed the most fitting quote of all.”

I show her a magnet with four simple words on it:

*Why the hell not?*

And she cracks up. Her hands fly to her belly as she laughs. “Oh my God. Are you seriously proposing to me with a bunny necklace, some nuts, and a pic that says ‘*Why the hell not?*’”

I square my shoulders and give her my honest answer. “Yes. I am. This isn’t complicated. It’s simple. I don’t need to weigh this. There’s no need for a pros-and-cons list. Marrying you is all *pro*. I have no doubts. I have no questions. My only hope is that you’ll say yes.” I run my thumb along her jaw, and she leans into me. Then I whisper, “But if you’re not ready, I’ll wait for you. I’ll wait until you’re ready, whenever that is.”

She raises her chin, her eyes locked on mine. “You’d wait for me?”

“Yes.”

“Even if I’m not ready?”

My answer is truthful. “I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

She wiggles an eyebrow. “So, like, say, a day?”

I grin wildly. “Is that a yes?”

She sets all the goodies inside her apartment, then she loops her arms around my neck, rises up on her tiptoes, and kisses me softly. “It’s a *why the hell not?*”

Then she tugs me into her place, kicks the door closed, and kisses the hell out of me.

I lift her up, wrap her legs around me, and spin her against the wall.

She's laughing and smiling and kissing and beaming, and it's all so insanely awesome. "I've always liked surprises, but this is the best one ever."

And she kisses me more.

"I never pictured us getting married in Vegas," she says, when she takes a break from kissing me.

"Wait. Does that mean you pictured us getting married?"

She rolls her eyes. "Of course I've pictured us getting married."

I kiss her neck then meet her eyes. "And what did you picture?"

"I saw us getting married on a hillside at sunset."

"That's what you imagined?"

She nods. "The rest was a blur. The only part that mattered was that it was you and me."

Mia and me. That's what the rest of the night feels like—a blur of her and me.

She's right. All that does matter is the *who*. But color, cut, clarity, and carats are pretty important, too. Sometimes in life, you can streamline. You can simplify. You can lean on a life hack.

Choosing an engagement ring is not one of those times.

As promised, the next morning I arrange to take her to Katherine's in Union Square, but first we have details to tend to.

As Mia showers, a burly man with a beard knocks on the door, and he's flanked by a redheaded dude with tattoos down his arms. "Hey there. You're here for the couch and stuff?"

"Yep. Salvation Army."

I let them in and help them lift then carry the sofa down to their truck full of donations. The next item to go is her desk, along with a coffee table. I help them carry boxes of books, cookware, and other items that are on their way to a second life. She already donated her car to the ASPCA.

I thank the guys, give them a tip, and head upstairs to Mia's increasingly empty apartment. She stands in the middle of the tiny living room, eating the almonds and scanning the place where she's lived since she started Pure Beauty in her kitchen with an idea, a vision, and a business plan.

"Will you miss it?"

"Probably," she says, a tinge of sadness in her sweet voice.

“That makes sense. It would be strange not to.”

“I have a lot of fond memories of this city. This whole coast. But I also know I’m going where I want to be.”

“And you don’t mind ditching so much of your stuff?” I ask her for probably the twelfth time.

“I don’t need two couches. I don’t need two beds. All I need is to add a metric ton of pillows to yours and I’ll be good to go,” she says, not for the first time since we discussed this idea.

“Good. As long as you’re sure,” I say.

She meets my gaze across all the space in her home and taps her finger against her lip. “Let’s see. In exchange for stuff, I get new pillows, access to one brother in the city, another in the building, and the master sandwich maker in the same home. I’m okay saying goodbye to a little thing known as a couch.” Then she walks to me, sets the bag of almonds down on her purse, and presses her hands to my chest. “Also, now I have twenty-four-hour access to my own personal mover anytime I need something heavy lifted.”

“That is, indeed, one of the perks of living with me.” I shake my head, amused at my own faux pas. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Almost-Milligan. I meant to say that’s one of the perks of being married to me.”

And an hour later, I introduce her to another one of the perks.

Ring shopping.

Since Spencer’s family owns Katherine’s, which has locations around the world, he arranged for the store manager in San Francisco to personally assist us in picking a ring and sizing it today. Mia takes her time, trying on as many rings as she wants.

She shows them all to me. “I really don’t know what to look for.”

“You didn’t imagine what you might want when you helped Max and Chase pick rings?”



She shakes her head. “No. I swear. I wasn’t thinking of anything but what Henley and Josie would want.” She takes a beat. “Which is kind of funny, since I was definitely crazy for you when I was helping Max pick out the ring.”

“And you never fantasized about what you’d want?”

She leans in close and brings her mouth to mine. “All my fantasies about you were of the bedroom variety.”

I growl my appreciation under my breath. “Be sure to share all your fantasies with me, but right now, let’s keep looking.”

The helpful brunette manager brings her more rings. Mia tries many on, and when she slides an emerald-cut ring onto her finger, my phone buzzes with my sister’s text tone.

**Evie:** HOW IS IT GOING? ARE YOU RING SHOPPING? DID SHE PICK? DYING TO KNOW. SIMPLY DYING.

**Patrick:** She’s trying on the whole store. It’s adorable.

**Evie:** GAH. I WISH I WERE THERE.

I stuff my phone in my pocket as Mia shows me another solitaire.

“What do you think?” she asks.

“Mia, I think they’re all beautiful. Because they’re on you.”

She narrows her eyes, then glances at the manager. “He’s no help,” she says playfully.

The woman laughs and then holds up one finger as an assistant scurries over to her. “Just one moment.”

She steps away from us to chat with her employee, then rejoins us to tell us she has one more ring she thinks might be

perfect.

Mia shrugs happily. "I'd love to see this perfect ring."

"One moment," the manager says, then heads to another side of the display case, roots around amid all the gleaming diamonds, and returns a minute later. "I think you might like this one, Ms. Summers."

When Mia slides on the ring, she gasps. "I think this is the one," she whispers reverently. "Can I take a picture and show your sister?"

"I assure you there's nothing Evie would like more than to be a part of this."

"Wait. Did she know you were going to propose?"

I rub my knuckles against my ear. "I have the pierced eardrum to prove it," I say, then tell her about Evie's excited reaction when I called her while we were taxiing for takeoff yesterday.

I snap a photo and send it to my sister.

**Patrick:** Mia loves this ring. She wants to know if you approve.

I look at my bride-to-be. "Now, we wait."

But not for long. Ten seconds later, my phone beeps.

**Evie:** I BOW DOWN TO THAT STUNNING TWO-CARAT ART DECO-STYLE VINTAGE RING THAT I JUST PICKED OUT FOR YOUR BRIDE!!!!

I laugh and show Mia the message.

"Your sister picked this out?"

"Evidently."

Mia turns to the manager, question marks in her eyes.

The brunette's eyes twinkle. "My associate just received a phone call from an Evie Milligan, recommending we show you this ring."

Mia's smile is one I will remember for all time. "Sisters always know best."

Then, we choose two platinum bands and opt to have them engraved.

\* \* \*

The next morning, the movers arrive, and they pack up Mia's remaining items. The head mover tells us the boxes should be at the destination in Battery Park City in seven days.

I grab her suitcases and my duffel bag as she locks the door behind her. For a moment, she simply stares at the door, then she takes a breath and turns around.

"Are you good?"

"So good."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive."

She drops the key with the landlord, blows a kiss to her building, and then threads her fingers through mine. "I am so good with everything."

We pick up the bands and the resized engagement ring, and catch a flight to Vegas.

“You bought me a suit?”

She bounces on her toes. “Yes!”

“Why on earth would you buy me a suit?”

She parks her hands on her hips and stares daggers at me in our room at the Luxe, a hotel run by one of Evie’s good friends.

“Patrick, do you have any idea how handsome you look in a suit?”

I shake my head. “Oddly enough, I do not.”

“You’re stunning. I happen to be a big fan of you in a suit, and you’re going to marry me in a suit. That’s just the way it goes.”

“But will it fit?”

She rolls her eyes. “Kangaroo, where there’s a will, there’s a way. That same sister who picked my ring also went to your apartment and snagged your suit measurements for me. She helped me find a tailor here in Vegas, and he made sure it would fit you. I had it sent to the hotel, and the rest is going down in quickie wedding history.”

And so, I put on the charcoal suit my bride chose for me, while she slips into a simple, shimmery white dress that stops at her knees. The bunny necklace rests on the soft skin of her neck. Her diamond ring gleams on her hand.

On her feet are flats. “I don’t care if I’m a foot shorter than you. I’m not hiking up a hill in heels.”

And that’s another reason why I love this woman. She likes simple solutions.

With our marriage license in hand—that is one thing I do love about this city, you can get a marriage license with a snap of your fingers—we climb into the limo that picks us up at our hotel. It’s part of the wedding package I ordered. The car whisks us away to Red Rocks Canyon, on the horizon west of Vegas.

There, we walk along a trail, framed by rust-red cliffs and rocks, and meet the officiant. His name is Walker, he wears a black suit and a white shirt, and his glasses slide down the bridge of his nose.

The sun hangs low in the sky, its bright peach and fiery-orange rays signaling the coming sunset.

Walker clears his throat. “We are gathered here today to join Patrick and Mia in holy matrimony.”

Since this is a simple ceremony, he slides right into the vows. “Do you, Patrick, take Mia to be your wife?”

With my gaze locked to hers, I give the easiest answer ever. “I do.”

“Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and protect her, forsaking all others and holding only unto her?”

“I do.”

Walker looks to Mia. “Do you, Mia, take Patrick to be your husband?”

Her smile can’t be contained. “I do.”

“Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and protect him, forsaking all others and holding only unto him?”

“I do.”

And I soar. I am officially the happiest man in the world.

“It is now time for the exchanging of the rings.”

From my suit pocket, I take out the platinum bands from a small velvet bag and hold up hers. “I promise to love you, cherish you, hold your hand on balconies, take care of you whenever you need me, and hold you from this day forward, until death do us part,” I say, and Mia’s eyes well with tears as I slide the band on her finger.

She takes mine. “I promise to love you, cherish you, hold your hand over bridges, take care of you whenever you need me, and hold you from this day forward, until death do us part.”

She puts the ring on my finger.

“You may kiss the bride.”

And so I do, kissing her sweet lips, cherishing her taste, loving that as the sun sets over the cliffs, this woman is now my wife.

Later that night, I make love to her, and it just gets better and better every single time.

When she curls up against me for our first night together as husband and wife, I hold her hand, studying our rings.

“I love our rings,” she says, snuggling against me.

“The best part is what’s engraved.”

She laughs and dots a kiss on my nose. “That is the best part of these rings.”

After all, it says what’s always been true.

*The cat knew first.*

# EPILOGUE

*A few months later*

“And then you need to bring caviar for the cat.”

Camilla laughs at my final tip. “What would any glamping feline need but caviar?”

Zeus stretches a paw across my leg, and raises his chin at the WRBC Channel 10 anchor. He’s become a regular on the *Tips and Tricks for Enjoying the Great Outdoors* segment. Turns out when you’re a hiking cat, you’re in demand. The first segment with him was one of the station’s most popular, so they asked if I could bring him back for each and every one.

Gladly.

He’s one chill feline, and if he helps more people and pets enjoy the world around them, then I’m a happy camper.

And Camilla says she’ll be a happy glamper if she follows my tips.

“I know you’ll have a great time, Camilla.”

“I’ll report back on whether my curling iron works in the woods.” Then she turns to the camera. “And that’s all for today. Join us next week for another segment from our outdoors expert and his cat, Zeus.”

Camilla thanks me again, shakes my hand, and tells me she’ll see me next week.

I load Zeus into his pack and head home.

To see my wife.

Since it's Friday morning, she's just finished her shower and is rubbing coconut lotion into her shapely legs when I return to our place.

"Ah, just like I imagined," I say, then press a kiss to her cheek.

After she tugs on her skirt and zips it up, she tosses me her damp towel. "And now for my fantasy."

"Laundry," I say in a deliberately husky tone, as I drop it into the basket I'll be sending out later today.

"Mmm. You get me so excited when you talk about chores. Tell me more about the household tasks you'll engage in."

I loop my arms around her waist, and press a kiss to the back of her soft neck. "I'll order some groceries," I say seductively.

"Oh yeah," she hums.

"I'll pay the utility bill."

She cries out, as if in pleasure.

"I'll even pick up a gift for Max's wedding."

She laughs and slides around in my arms so she's facing me. "Silly kangaroo, I already did that."

"I have no doubt you did."

Then she slips away, puts on a blouse, and blow-dries her hair. When she's done, she tells me she's leaving for the office.

"Same here," I say. I give Zeus a goodbye scratch on the chin, and we take off together.

Mia heads for the Pure Beauty offices, and I head to meet Dana to review our upcoming trips. Dana handles Pure Beauty's regular excursions now, and that works out just fine. In fact, everything has worked out just fine.

Sure, Mia and I argue every now and then. Like last week, when she wanted to give me head before I went down on her.



Insistent little thing, she was sure she'd win.

She didn't.

I can be pretty convincing with my tongue.

There was another time we didn't see eye-to-eye, but she was right on that count. It turned out that fresh strawberries and champagne did make a better gift for my sister's engagement party than my idea to give them a backpack. In my defense, my sister didn't have one, and I still don't understand how anyone can function without one.

In any case, I let Mia pick a gift for her brother's wedding. Besides, I've been the recipient of the greatest gift of all. Not just Mia, obviously. But the gift of teasing Max relentlessly about the fact that I beat him in the marriage game. He's the last of our crew to tie the knot, even though he was engaged well before I started seeing his sister.

But hey, every man goes at his own pace.

Some just go a little faster than others when they fall in love.

That's evidently the kind of guy I am.

\* \* \*

The next night, Mia is a radiant bridesmaid as she stands across from me at the front of the ballroom in the Plaza Hotel while Henley and Max exchange their vows.

The venue was Henley's choice. She works on cars all day long, so she said her inner girlie side needed nothing less than a full Plaza wedding, and that's what she's having.

Chase and Josie are part of the wedding party, too, while Spencer, Nick, and Wyatt are parked in the front rows with their wives and kids. Spencer and Charlotte's son is adorable, perched in his mom's lap, with blond hair to match hers. Nick holds his infant son, who has blue eyes the same color as Harper's. Wyatt's toddler daughter holds his hand.

Briefly, I wonder when Chase and Josie will head down that path, but there is plenty of time for that.

When the officiant tells Max he can kiss the bride, Henley jumps in his arms then smothers him in kisses.

They have the right idea, so once they're walking the other way down the aisle, I give my wife a kiss.

She smiles and sighs happily. "Everyone's married off now. Does that mean the rest of us have to get knocked up soon, too?"

I tense for a moment. "Is that your way of telling me you're pregnant?"

She laughs and shakes her head. "No. But the abject terror in your eyes is all I need to keep taking my birth control."

I grab her hand tighter, tug her in closer. "I'm not scared. You just caught me off guard. Do you want to have kids soon?"

"Maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but someday. Someday is soon enough."

"That sounds good to me, too."

Then we join our friends and family, and when I dance with Mia later that night, I remember the last time I danced with her at a wedding, when I was ready to fly clear across the country to date her long distance. Now, several months later, she's here with me every night.

I run a finger across a strand of her hair. "Sometimes, I think this life we have is everything I imagined. But then I realize, it's even better than I could have dreamed."

"Me, too."

## ANOTHER EPILOGUE

### *A little after that*

By now, most women have met enough players, enough guys who don't ever want to settle down. I suppose that's fine. There's a time and a place for everyone.

As for me, I knew what I wanted from the first night I met Mia. I wanted her, and for more than one night.

But you don't always get what you want just because you're ready for it. Even though I like to think I'm easygoing, laid-back—hell, even *normal*—I discovered I had my own baggage.

I had to let go of what I thought I needed—proximity—before I could get it.

I needed to be willing to take what I could get. When I fell in love with Mia, the problem I had to solve was learning that she was worth the distance, worth the miles, worth the wait.

Now I have everything I could ever have imagined and then some. Sometimes, you just have to say *why the hell not?* and go after the life you want to lead.

That's what I have now. A great job, fantastic friends, a healthy family, a cat who isn't like any other cat, and a woman I've pitched my tent with.

Speaking of tents, I've made good on my promise to introduce Mia to the true joys of camping. We've spent many nights under the Milky Way, and I make sure she always sees stars.

If you catch my drift.

After all, we both like camping best ... with our particular *style*.

## AND ONE MORE EPILOGUE

*Sometime soon enough*

**Conversations with the Cat**

*Zeus*

He padded toward the bathroom on the quietest feet in the home. The woman had gone in there the second she woke, springing out of bed.

She never bolted up in the morning. Perhaps she needed to stroke his soft fur to feel better about whatever was making her nervous. He'd sensed her nerves. He was talented like that.

Now, as the man slept deeply, Zeus nudged his shoulder against the ajar door, pushing it open.

The woman was perched on the toilet bowl, holding a stick. He cocked his head to the side, watching her. She stretched her arm to push the door closed.

“Shh. I don't want him to know I'm even taking this.”

Zeus parked his rear on the tile and stared at her, while she stared at the stick.

*Tick tock.*

She set the stick on the sink and flushed. She watched the stick more as she washed her hands.

Zeus never looked away from her.

At last, she peered at the stick once more. She gasped.

She dropped down to him, scooped him up in her arms, and pressed her lips to his furry face. “You’re going to be a big brother.”

Then she set him down and burst out of the bathroom, waving the stick and waking up the man, who erupted into the kind of cheer that Zeus could only assume accompanied a fresh can of tuna.

Whatever was exciting the man and the woman, he found great satisfaction in the fact that he had known first.

THE END

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