

A SUNSHINE BOOK CLUB ROMANCE

The Best Book Boyfriend



HOLLY JUNE SMITH

The Best Book Boyfriend

Holly June Smith

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Cover design by Liz Mosley

For everyone who has ever fallen for a fictional man.

We've all been there.

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A Note From Holly

The Best Book Boyfriend is the first book in the *Sunshine Book Club* Series.

Please be advised that this book is an open-door romance featuring on-page sexual content for mature readers only.

While this is a light-hearted rom-com it also includes themes of break-ups and bereavement (both off-page) on the way to Kara and Luke's happy ending.

I hope you enjoy it as much I enjoyed writing it.

Chapter 1

Kara

“GET IN HERE.”

My best friend Megan grabs our other best friend Hattie by her coat and yanks her inside my front door. “You’ll never believe what’s happened.”

“Someone’s dead?”

“Grim. No.”

“Well, I know for sure nobody here is pregnant. Hashtag dry spell. Do you know, I think I’ve conquered every single man in a thirty-mile radius? There are simply no men left.”

Hattie sets down two paper bags full of food and takes off her bobble hat, pale pink hair spilling out over her shoulders. She undoes her buttons while Megan, a Golden Retriever in human form, bounces up and down on the spot beside her.

“Hmmm. Judging by your reaction, I’m guessing... did a new Taylor album drop?”

Megan wiggles from head to toe and can’t contain herself any longer. “Even better. Kara got a guy’s phone number!”

Hattie flings her coat to the floor, kicking off her boots in different directions as she scrambles through to the living room where I am curled up in the armchair in my favourite pyjamas. I cover my face with my hands, a strange mix of excitement and embarrassment churning away in my stomach.

Hattie drops to her knees in front of me. “What? When? Where? How? *Who?*”

“Get the food and I’ll tell you.”

She rushes back to the hallway, and I head through to the kitchen to pull warm plates from the oven.

Every Friday night for the past year, these two sweet angels have come over to hang out with me. Hattie brings takeout, Megan brings wine, I stock up on ice-cream and popcorn. We eat, drink, pull out the sofa bed, and make a nest to watch rom-coms in until we fall asleep. It started out as something Megan called my ‘Healing Plan’, but now it’s just our routine, and the highlight of my week.

It all started the night my boyfriend - *well, ex-boyfriend* - walked out. Adam left me after twelve (yes, twelve!) years.

We’d been together since we were sixteen and we had it all. Fantastic chemistry, good sex life, great jobs, beautiful house. Except while I naively thought we were heading for marriage, babies, dogs, the whole shebang, he was hiring an assistant who, let’s just say, helped him spread more than just his sheets.

I can still picture it like it was yesterday. He broke the news while I was plating up dinner from our local Nepalese restaurant, here in the kitchen of the house we bought and renovated seven years ago.

There I was, chatting away about our upcoming holiday like a total mug, and he just stood there holding a suitcase he'd already packed. He said he'd met someone else, and he was moving out. He didn't even say sorry. I heard he took her on the holiday instead. From his mum. Can you imagine how devastating that was? Not to mention humiliating.

The night Adam left, Hattie and Megan were here within the hour, and they both held me while I sobbed my heart out. I tried calling him over and over until Megan wrenched my phone from my sweaty, shaky hands. After crying so hard I'd thrown up in the kitchen sink, Hattie forced me to eat roti while I wailed that I'd never be able to order food again.

“He's not ruining takeout for you, babe,” she'd said. “No man can ruin takeout.”

After making it their personal mission to reclaim takeaway as a symbol of feminism and friendship, here we still are. Even though I'd never admit it to them, I do still get a bit of a lump in my throat if we're having Nepalese, memories of that night still just under the surface of my skin.

“So spill it!” Megan says, filling three glasses of Sauvignon Blanc nearly to the top. “She told me when I arrived, but has refused to give me more details.”

“There’s not much to tell,” I say, but they are impatient, crowding around me. I must admit I am rather enjoying having a story to share that isn’t just about work for once. “I was having coffee in that new place in the old haberdashers, and this guy came over and asked what I was reading. We spoke for a while, then he asked me for a recommendation and gave me a note with his number on it. That’s it.”

“Just some random guy?” Megan asks.

“He works there.” I carry our plates, cutlery and napkins through to the low coffee table. Megan plumps floor cushions for us to sit on while we eat.

“He works there? What is he, twenty-one?” Hattie says, clapping her hands together, throwing up a prayer. “Oh God, please say he is twenty-one.”

“I think he might actually be the owner. Maybe mid-thirties.”

“What does he look like?”

“Brown hair, bit of a beard, glasses,” I bite my lip to stop myself from grinning. “Checked shirt, nice strong arms.” I can’t deny it. He was hot.

“Oh, she’s checked out the arms,” Hattie laughs. “You’re done for.”

“I’m gonna die,” Megan mock faints onto my sofa. “And he just struck up a conversation about books? He’s a real life Book Boyfriend!”

“No, no. Don’t get ahead of yourself. He was a bit rude, actually.”

“Ugh, *men*,” they both groan as we tuck in, opening containers and spreading them across the table.

After Adam left, my calls went straight to voicemail. He blocked me on social media. Deleted me from his life. No wonder I’ve sworn off human men. Instead, I spend my evenings with an array of exceptionally hot literary ones.

“*Every week a new Book Boyfriend.*” The girls tease me about my obsession with romance novels, but I’ve found a lot of comfort between the pages of these sweet and spicy tales of unlucky yet feisty heroines and the charming, attentive men who are feral for them.

If there’s one thing the past year has taught me, it’s that my bed, a good book, and a small but powerful collection of sex toys is all a girl really needs. And I get through a lot more than one book a week.

I take a big gulp of wine and Hattie spoons egg fried rice and crispy chilli chicken onto all of our plates. Megan opens the prawn crackers and takes dainty little bites, while I prefer more of a shovelling-it-all-in at once in approach. “So then what happened?” Hattie asks.

“Then I left.”

“Without the note?” she gasps.

“No, not without the note.”

“Where is the note?” Megan asks. “We need to see the note.”

“In my book in the front pocket of my bag,” I whisper, tilting my head towards the door. The two of them lock eyes across the table, then leap from the floor, racing each other down the hallway. Megan lets Hattie take her down in a fit of laughter. Her big heart always wants everyone to win. Hattie reappears in the doorway moments later, note in hand, eyes frantically scanning what I know is his very nice handwriting.

“Oh, Jesus,” she groans. “Why didn’t you start with his name?”

“What’s his name?” Megan turns to ask me but I can’t answer her. I pull my jumper up over my face to hide my blushes. “Oh no. It’s not Adam, is it?” Hattie just stands there, mouth on the floor, fully agog as she reads it again.

“Kara! What is his name?” Megan is up on her knees now, both begging and towering over me. I just curl myself into a ball waiting for Hattie to say it, but she gives the honour to me.

“It’s Luke,” I whisper.

“*Shut the fuck up!*” We are all wide-eyed and shriek as if possessed. Megan does not swear, *ever*, though I can understand her excitement.

Luke Russo is the hero in *To Love and Protect*, an Italian bodyguard with a scorching body and a filthy mouth. Though the girls don’t read as much romance as me, they do enjoy an

occasional recommendation, and my love for Luke Russo had me shoving copies into their hands. We've spent many hours talking about him, his muscles, the way he takes control, all the things we'd let him do to us. To meet a real life Luke, well, I know where their heads are going right now.

"I want him! Read it to me!" Megan says, and Hattie clears her throat.

"He's written his phone number and, and I quote, '*I look forward to having the time of my life. Luke.*'"

In seconds Megan is up and reading it over her shoulder, both looking back and forth between the note and me with faces full of joy. Hattie takes a deep breath as she sits back at the table and picks up her fork. "Kara, you're going to need to start from the beginning and tell us *everything.*"

Chapter 2

Kara

I HAVE LONG BELIEVED that the only thing better than curling up in bed with a good book is finding a window table in a cute little cafe. You know, somewhere you can spend an hour with a gorgeous Book Boyfriend, a coffee, and a cinnamon bun. So today was off to a great start.

I'd had time to kill before meeting my client to discuss their upcoming home renovation, and they recommended I try Sunshine Coffee, a new place just around the corner from their townhouse. As if I ever needed an excuse to cram in some extra reading time.

When I turned off the high street into the open courtyard, a bittersweet feeling washed over me. The building used to be home to a brilliant haberdasher, and I visited often for fabrics and upholstery supplies. The owner, Marjory, taught me so much over the years, especially when I was getting started out. When she retired a couple of years ago, the place was left empty, until now.

The little table by the window soon won me over. We've only got a couple of greasy spoon type capps in town, so an

upmarket coffee shop was something we really needed. After ordering, I took a moment to enjoy the sun streaming through the window, warming my face while I embraced a much needed breather from my busy week. All my weeks are busy right now, but I'm not complaining.

Whoever has taken over the shop has paid a lovely homage to its history by covering the back wall with a display of vintage fabrics in frames and there are lots of lush green plants dotted around. They've brought the rest of the space to life with white walls and pale wooden furnishings. It's beautifully simple except for the bright yellow counter that draws you in as you walk through the door. It certainly lives up to the Sunshine Coffee name.

I'm obsessed with interiors. After turning my house from a grotty health hazard to the home of my dreams, I started my interior design business and I've made a good name for myself. Honestly, I'm a little miffed that I didn't get the call to do this place.

I was lost in my book, fully swept along by my latest Book Boyfriend, when I heard someone ask, "What are you reading?"

I looked up to see a man clearing cups from the next table. He wasn't the guy who served me and I didn't see him when I came in but he was wearing a dark red checked shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, which immediately made me think of Aiden, in *Got Wood?* one of my favourite books.

That's the one where a rugged lumberjack conceals his loneliness by being grumpy with everyone he meets. Then Hailey, a smart-ass city chick who's just inherited a run-down cabin, turns up to melt his icy heart. Five very hot stars from me.

"Um, it's called *Yours For The Night*." I held it up to show him the front and immediately wished I hadn't. It's a classic romance cover, a faceless woman in a flowing dress embraced in the arms of a topless man with huge pecs.

He stifled a laugh. "Any good?"

"Er, yeah, it is actually." At least it was until I was interrupted. I was just getting to a steamy bit, so I turned back to my page.

"What's it about?" he interrupted again. *Was this guy for real?*

I sighed. "It's about two best friends who decide to have a one-night stand to get them through a dry spell." I tried not to laugh at how awkward that was to explain to a stranger.

"Let me guess," he said, with more than a hint of sarcasm, "they end up together?"

"Well, I'm only halfway through, and they still haven't actually hooked up, but yes, that's the happy ever after guarantee."

"Ah, romance books," he scoffed, "where everyone is always beautiful, all their dreams come true, and nothing bad ever happens."

What the fuck was this guy's problem? I sat up taller, feeling defensive. “Well, that’s not true. They often have a lot to overcome on their way to the happy ending.”

“I guess I’m not really the romance book type,” he shrugged, eyes cast down to the floor.

“Do you grill all your customers about their literary choices?”

“Only the pretty ones,” he said, and when he looked up to catch my eye, I gasped so loudly he took a step back, his hands held out in front of him. “Sorry, that was very inappropriate. I’m so, so sorry, I’ll leave you be.”

Only the pretty ones. Me?

My cheeks burned. They must have surely gone bright red. I watched him walk away and turned back to my book, but when I reached the end of the page, I realised I’d not taken in a single word. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him, busy behind the counter, serving other customers. I watched him, subtly, I hope, and then snapped my gaze back to my book when he headed my way again.

I was making a mental note to never go back there again when he surprised me completely and placed a fresh latte down on my table. I looked down and noticed the foam poured into the shape of two hearts.

“This one’s on the house,” he said. “I’m sorry again. I really didn’t intend to offend you.” Well, that was unexpected, and rather good customer service, actually.

“Thank you,” I said, staring up at him. He looked like he meant it, and didn’t move to say anything else. When he reached across me to take my first, now empty, cup I noticed an intricate line-drawn tattoo on the inside of his forearm. His *toned* forearm, lightly tanned with a smattering of soft hair. “It’s OK. Romance is a very misjudged genre. You’re not the first guy to be completely wrong about it, and I’m sure you won’t be the last.” I pressed my mouth into a tight pout and cocked my head to one side.

“Tell me how I’m wrong.”

I frowned at him, taking in his features one by one. Tall, with broad shoulders, his light brown hair had soft waves styled away from his face, though I was particularly drawn to one bit flopping over his eyebrow that I wanted to reach out and push back. His glasses suited him so well, but behind them I could see gorgeous brown eyes that I felt like I’d already stared into before. He smiled a warm smile, the kind where you can see his tongue just peeking out from behind perfect teeth. I somehow knew in that moment that he could tell me a thousand stories and I’d want to hear a thousand more.

“Well, um, people... people like you,” I narrowed my eyes in a mock glare, despite how flustered I actually felt, “they often think romance novels are predictable, but nobody throws the same criticism at crime novels. A lot of fantasy and sci-fi books are predictable. They follow similar structures just set in different worlds.”

“Hmm,” he nodded. “Fair point.”

“People are snobby about it because most romance writers are women, so they think they’re easy reads, but it’s not easy to move people and make them fall in love with your characters. These books can take you all over the world, you can meet so many kinds of people, they’re pure escapism. They’re fun.” I folded my arms across my chest, confident I’d won this debate, which as far as I was concerned had no counter-argument. “You could be having the time of your life if you weren’t so judgy. You have no idea what you’re missing.”

“OK, so give me a recommendation.”

“Excuse me?”

“Recommend a book that will change my mind,” he said. *Shit.* Where to even begin. I just stared at him and he stared at me and I felt like neither of us would back down first.

“I’ll have to have a think,” I scowled.

“OK,” he said brightly, turning to walk away. “I’ll come back in a minute.”

Give me a recommendation. I should know the answer, but I’m usually preaching to the converted. It’s a big mission to convert a non-believer to the church of love and lust. I whipped my book journal out of my bag and flicked through to the list of books I’ve read this year. Where should an ignorant man begin with romance novels?

I couldn’t recommend anything too obvious and predictable. It had to surprise him. And nothing too sexy. You have to work

your way up the spice levels, though lord knows my tolerance for heat in books is off the charts these days. I also couldn't go too twee; no cupcake baking, small town, nanny-next-door vibes. I didn't even know this man. Maybe a hockey romance? Cowboys? Race Car drivers? Mafia, possibly. After the queue went down, he came back and took the seat opposite me with a coffee of his own.

“Can I sit here?”

The arrogance of this man. “Bit late to ask when you're already sitting.”

He sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping. “I'm not making a very good impression, am I?” *Why is he trying to make a good impression?* When I didn't answer, he filled the silence before it turned awkward. “So have you got something for me?”

“Not yet. I need to have a think about what would be the absolute best romance to change a terrible man's opinion.”

“Ooft,” he said, his breath whooshing out, “that stings. I'll accept your challenge that it may be a terrible opinion, but I'm not a terrible man.”

“I won't apologise for being defensive about my favourite thing.”

“You have nothing to apologise for. I can tell you love these books.”

“I do.”

“So tell me why.” He sat back and took a sip of his coffee and I knew at that moment I wasn’t going to get any more reading done. “I’m sorry, again, for underestimating the genre. I really am open to being convinced. Come on, sell it to me.”

“I suppose the thing about romance is that there are so many different kinds. There’s a trope for everyone, so no matter your mood, there’s a book to match.”

“What’s a trope?”

“Like a common theme. One of my favourites is Enemies to Lovers. Perhaps you’ve got two colleagues who hate each other, or they’re rival lawyers, or he’s a bastard, but only because he can’t be vulnerable enough to reveal his true feelings. Secretly, they both can’t stop thinking about each other. Fake Dating is a fun one because it’s so ridiculous.”

“How so?”

“It’s so unrealistic but it makes for a great plot. Maybe a successful career woman has to go home for her brother’s wedding and she needs a plus one, so she ropes in her best friend, or hires a male escort. Either way, they obviously end up sleeping together.”

“Obviously,” he said, smiling. My eyes fell downward, and I noticed he had immaculate but big hands. His coffee cup looked half the size of mine in them. And no wedding ring. *Why do I care?* I had thought this guy was grumpy and rude, but in just a few minutes, I was reconsidering my position. He was actually quite charming, and attentive, and there was

definitely some depth to the way he carried himself... and... and I'd lost track of how long it had been since he last spoke.

“Only One Bed trope!” I snapped out of my trance. “The love interests have to stay over somewhere, but there’s only one hotel room left and only one bed. He insists he’ll sleep on the floor, she says it’s fine, *but you’d better not try anything*. They fall asleep as far apart as possible on opposite sides of the bed, but you just know by morning they’ll wake up wrapped around each other, embarrassed but unable to deny the chemistry between them. What’s not to love about that?”

I was practically swooning as I remembered the spicy scenes in *I Do, I Don't*, a marriage of convenience novel I read last month. “Then you’ve got the classic rags to riches story, an average girl getting swept off her feet by a sexy billionaire.”

“Like *50 Shades of Grey*?”

“Yes!” my brow furrowed, and I paused to take a breath and a sip of my coffee. “You’ve read it?”

“No, but I’m familiar with the phenomenon. I used to volunteer in a charity shop and we got about thirty copies a week in.”

“Oh wow. I could never give my books away. That’s very kind of those that do.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. We had so many copies of that one we had to turn them away after a while.” He seemed to get stuck on a thought. “Wait... so is this book you’re

reading basically porn? Are you reading porn in my cafe?" He shakes his head, tutting. "This is supposed to be a classy place."

"No, it's not porn," I scolded, my tone defensive, my voice a shade too loud. I glanced around to make sure nobody was staring at me before leaning in and lowering my voice. "OK, it is a bit steamy, but in a very classy, accessible, diverse way."

"OK, sure," he smirked.

"Look, I know these books have a particular reputation. People think they're cheesy and full of stereotypes, but things have changed. A lot of what I read flips gender roles, the characters have relatable issues, there's plenty of Boy Meets Boy or Girl Meets Girl. And they're mostly written by women for the female gaze so they understand what women want."

"The female gays?" he asks. "Lesbians?"

"No, not gays, gaze. G.A.Z.E."

"What's that then?"

"Jesus," I feel my cheeks redden. "I didn't think I'd be performing this public education service today." He laughs loudly, and I'm surprised at how much I like it. It instantly puts me at ease.

"In stories written for the male gaze, the women are generally sexual objects, nothing more than tits and arse. It's all about how she looks, and how she can benefit the men. But when stories are written for the female gaze, our needs come first. They focus on emotional connection, intimacy, desire."

“Ah, I get you. So that’s what women want, is it?” *Is he flirting? Am I?* I didn’t think so, but I rarely talk to men who aren’t clients or my dad so I couldn’t actually tell what I was doing.

“Well, everyone is different, of course. Personally, I live for the sexual tension, chemistry, and great banter between characters. There’s not the instant gratification of porn. It would be boring if they start shagging right away. I like it when an author gets me invested with slow burn, pining, miscommunication between the main characters, inner conflicts to overcome.”

“So it’s not all maidens in peril and army majors rutting in the stables.” Well, that made me laugh. He’d given himself away there. Clearly, he has *some* knowledge of the genre.

“What on earth have you been reading? No. The best ones handle consent in a super hot way, and often the characters help each other overcome their personal traumas on the way to the bedroom. Those are my favourite.”

He paused for a second, then pulled his notepad and pen out of his shirt pocket. I watched as he chewed his lip and scribbled something down. “It sounds like I’ve got a lot to learn.” When he tore off the paper, he folded it in half, leaned in close, and tucked it between the pages of my book. “This is my number. Text me your recommendation.”

Jesus, why was that so hot? I could feel red heat creeping up the back of my neck. “I’m going to recommend three books,” I said, boldly.

“Great,” he said, standing. “I’m not afraid of hard work.” I had to pinch back a laugh, knowing full well that a lot of these books probably would make him hard. He tucked his chair back under the table. “I’d better get back to work. The boss can’t be slacking off for too long.”

“Oh, this is *your* place? It’s lovely, you’ve done a fantastic job with it. Great buns. Cinnamon buns!” *Fuck, I’m an embarrassment.*

“It was lovely to meet you, enjoy the rest of your day,” he said with a wink that felt like an arrow shot between my legs. And then he was gone, off somewhere in the back of the cafe.

He’d left me all hot and flustered, but I tried to keep my cool. When I glanced around the room, I spotted the clock above the counter. We’d been chatting for so long I was going to be late for my meeting. I’m never late. I shoved my book away, wrestled my cardigan back on, and tried not to trip over my own feet on the way out the door.



“Good lord, that is hot!” says Hattie. “I thought you were about to ride him on the table.”

“Hardly.” After replaying the afternoon, I’m feeling confused. I enjoyed our chat, but then I felt so awkward and weird and maybe I was even a bit rude?

I lie down on the floor, and Megan positions herself behind me, stroking my long hair. She's done this countless times when I've been in the throes of despair. "What are you going to do?" she says, softly.

"I don't know. I was all awkward and uncomfortable."

"Why?"

"I'm just not used to men talking to me. I was confused."

"Oh honey, that's not confused. That's horny," says Hattie, topping up the glass of wine she has drained while I've recounted the afternoon's events. "You have to go out with him."

"I'm not going out with him. I'm sworn off men."

"Kara, we love you babe, but it's been months since Adam left..."

"A year soon," I interrupt, though I'm not sure why I'm helping her prove her point.

"Wow, really?" Megan counts the months on her fingers. "Oh my gosh, Hattie, it is nearly a year."

"So?" A year is just a number, I don't need them treating it like some milestone or achievement. I sit up and finish my glass. Hattie fills it up again.

"OK, don't hate us. But back when you first swore off men, we had a private conversation and agreed we'd give you a year," she says.

"A year of what?"

“A year to wallow. A year to miss Adam, to grieve, whatever you needed.” Megan kisses the top of my head. “But you are far too amazing and kind and successful and badass and *far* too gorgeous to be tucked up in bed with a Book Boyfriend every night. We think you should start meeting people.”

“And fucking people,” Hattie interjects. It’s easy for her to say, she’s always got a string of men on the go, and no problem keeping feelings out of the bedroom. “You seriously need to get laid.”

“Ugh. I don’t want to meet people. I know it’s ridiculous, but Adam is the only man I’ve ever loved. He’s the only man I’ve ever slept with. I don’t know how to be with anyone else.” My eyes are welling up and I stave off tears with the heel of my hand. “I know how pathetic I sound. How pathetic I am.”

“Listen to me,” Megan squeezes me tight. “You are *not* pathetic.”

“Part of me still thinks he will come back to me.”

“If he comes back here, I will key his car.” My heart hurts because I know that she, a woman made of solid gold, would genuinely commit such a crime for me.

“I’ll kick him in the neck,” says Hattie. After years of kickboxing, she actually could.

“I’ll barricade myself across the door.”

“I’ll shit on his dick!”

I choke on my wine. “Woah! Too far.”

“How would that even work?” Megan taps her lips and ponders, “Would you capture him and tie him up and torture him? Or would you pretend to seduce him and get him naked and then do it?”

“Megan, stop, please,” I beg. “Nobody is shitting on anyone’s dick.”

“Yeah, because he’s not coming back.” Hattie spits, sending me back to the floor in a slump. “We’re sorry, Kara, but he’s not, and even if he did, you can’t take him back. We’d never allow it. What he did to you was awful. He doesn’t deserve you.” She crawls around the table and lies down beside me, her petite frame curling around me, the big spoon to my little one.

“But you deserve good things, darling. You really do. And right now, you deserve that last spring roll.”

Chapter 3

Luke

“SO I MET A girl today.”

“Oh, Jesus, now Luke, you’ll be giving me a heart attack with news like that.” My wee Granny Annie is pushing eighty, but you’d never know it. I’m pleased to say she’s fighting fit.

Every Friday night we have a video chat where she tells me what antics she and her friends have been up to and asks ‘*Are ye eating, sleeping, and greetin’?*’

Greeting is the Scots word for crying, and the norm where she grew up in Perthshire. Although she’s been living here in Hertfordshire since the 50s, she’s never lost her accent or bothered to adopt the more local or understandable words for things.

She’s always encouraged a big cry now and then, and I’ve done more than my fair share of it these past few years. Our calls are the highlight of my week. A therapy of sorts. They are the one place I get to offload how I’m really feeling about things, and I can’t pretend I haven’t been looking forward to telling her about today.

“Who’s this girl then?”

“Well, not a girl, a woman. She came into the cafe.”

“*A customer?* Ach, you’ll be getting a reputation if you’re away putting it about with customers now. What’s her name?” I smile at the suggestion that talking to a customer is a scandal, though in her circles it would be front page news.

“Um, I don’t actually know. I forgot to ask.”

“You forgot to ask? Oh, your grandfather would roll in his grave. We raised you better than that.”

Mum worked a lot when I was growing up. Though she was, and still is, a brilliant mother, my Granny Annie and Grandad Derek definitely did the lion’s share of raising me, and I’m a better man for it.

“I know, I’m sorry. I gave her my number, but I was a wee bit smitten.”

“I can tell by the look on your face, you big softie.” I rub my cheeks, which are sore from grinning now she mentions it. Our conversation took a few turns, but I can’t actually believe I gave her my number. And she didn’t rip it up, which I hope is a good sign.

I feel like a kid on Christmas Eve. I’ve been checking my phone all afternoon, but I don’t know what the rules are. Are you supposed to wait a minimum number of days before texting someone? Should I have asked for hers instead? Have I cocked this up? I’ve never given someone my phone number

before. I'm pretty sure Heather and I didn't even have mobile phones when we first got together.

Writing that note felt good, but the nerves kicked in after she'd left. Now I'm wondering if I came across too keen, or like a sleaze. God, I really wish I'd asked for her name.

“So what does this lassie look like?”

Someone else had served her, so when I came out from the back storeroom and clocked her sitting at the window table, my first thought was *‘Oh, there you are’*. It blindsided me. I couldn't take my eyes off her, and spent far too long hovering behind the counter, trying to pluck up the courage to say something. Talking to customers is an essential part of the job, but I felt stupidly nervous about approaching her, which is probably why I forgot to give her my name, or ask for hers.

“She's very pretty. She's got long reddish-brown hair, kind eyes, a gorgeous smile. She does that thing where she talks with her hands a lot.”

“What like a puppet?” Granny's aghast.

“No, not like a puppet, just gesturing a lot. You know, like this...” I move my hands around and do an absolutely shit impression of her.

“Oh right, thank goodness, I thought you meant like one of those creepy folk who speak through a doll or something.”

“No Granny, she's lovely. We had a great chat about books.”

“Books? Oooh la la, how romantic,” she teases. “Now, what does Rob say about it?”

“I haven’t told him yet. I only met her today. She might not even text me.”

“He will be thrilled, I am sure,” she laughs a hearty cackle.

She knows Rob, my oldest friend, has been keen for me to get myself back out there and meet someone. He’s a man-whore who says he needs a wingman, though he certainly never has any trouble on his own. We’ve known each other since we were kids and I want to tell him, but is there really much to say? All I did was have a chat and give someone my number. Still, it’s a gigantic leap for me.

“Now are ye eating, sleeping, and greetin’?” *There we go.*

“Yes, Granny.” I pat my stomach. “Plenty of eating, more sleeping now the shop is finally open, and a normal amount of greetin’ I think.”

“Good lad. Here, Janet is on her way round for a gin, so I’ll speak to you next week. Love you sweet pea.”

“Love you Granny. Talk to you soon.”

I’m an idiot. I can’t believe I didn’t ask her name. That’s my fault for blazing into a conversation without thinking about what I’d actually say. No wonder I put my foot in it and insulted her when she started talking about romance books. I’m hardly the picture of success in that department.

I think I pulled it back, though. She was so easy to talk to. I felt swept along listening to her speak, not realising that I’d veered into being a little flirty with her. *Was I flirting?* I don’t

know, maybe I sounded like a twat. All I know is it felt good to sit there with her. And that she's gorgeous.

I've always been a sociable person. I find it easy to get on with most people, although my circle of friends is pretty small these days. Opening Sunshine Coffee has forced me to come out of my shell a bit more. I want our customers to feel at home, see the place as somewhere they can relax, and be met with a friendly face.

The best bit of the job is getting to know all the customers. I've enjoyed finding out who's who around here, and wondering which ones will become regulars. Maybe there might even become someone I could call a friend, have a couple of beers with. It's the opposite of lonely, and I've been pretty bloody lonely for a while now.

Heather was it for me. I was the jammiest bastard in the world to convince her I was the man for her. And on my most miserable days, I have to remind myself that I'm lucky I got the time with her that I did.

I don't know if I'll ever be ready to meet someone else. My brain just doesn't think about that stuff. At least, it didn't until I saw her sitting by the window today.

The last time Rob came over, we talked about dating. I expected him to give me a kick up the arse and tell me to get back out there, but he was all *just take your time* which is exactly what I've been doing.

Luke: Gave someone my phone number today.

Rob: A woman?

Luke: Yup

Rob: What's her name?

Luke: Book Lady. For now. Forgot to ask.

Luke: Spoke to her while she was reading and gave her a note with my number

Rob: Nice one

Luke: She hasn't actually messaged me yet so we'll see

Rob: Baby steps. Proud of you mate x

I really hope it was OK to give her my number, and that I wasn't overstepping the mark. The more I think about it, the more worried I am. I don't know if it was friendly, or romantic, or pushy, or creepy. I don't even know if she's single. That probably should have been the first thing I asked. But then again, I can't exactly approach customers and say '*Hi, are you single?*' or there'll be no customers at all.

'I look forward to having the time of my life', I wrote. *What was I thinking? Who speaks like that?* I feel sick. Man, if this is what it feels like to even consider starting dating, then I'm tapping out. I check my phone again and still no message. I check all night until I fall asleep with my phone in my hand.

Chapter 4

Kara

“JUST COFFEE FOR ME, please.” Hattie wrangles the bird’s nest of her hair into a ponytail. “I’ve got a spin class at ten.”

“Rather you than me,” I yawn. I pour her a large cup and swipe her pain au chocolate for my own plate. I’m a teeny bit hungover, standard fare on Saturday mornings. The unwritten rule of girls’ night is that whoever gets up first bakes the frozen pastries I keep stocked, but in reality, it’s always me. I’ve not slept very well since Adam left.

Friday nights always end with the three of us having a tad too much wine, then falling asleep one after the other on the sofabed. I normally wake in the early hours and head for to the comfort of my own room. Three of us on the sofabed is manageable, but it seems daft not to sleep where I can stretch out without someone elbowing me or drooling in my hair.

“How did you sleep, poppet?” Megan asks, stumbling into the kitchen, her eyes half open.

“So, so.” When I turn to the counter to pour her coffee, she stands behind me, wrapping me into a big hug. I lean into it, grateful for the sun streaming through the window, the fresh

coffee, warm pastries, good friends. *I am OK. I am OK. I am OK.*

Hattie gathers up her things. “Sorry I have to dash. There’s a new instructor I’m desperate to wrap my legs around, so I want to make sure I’m early and get the best spot up front. Do you want me to come back later?”

“No, don’t be silly.” I wave her away. “I’ve got a load of social media stuff to do.” The girls used to stay all weekend when I couldn’t bear to be in the house alone, but things have gotten easier. Business has really taken off too. I need my weekends to catch up on admin and plan my content. I don’t mind though, it’s such a fun part of the job that it doesn’t feel like work.

“OK babe, text me when you’ve texted Luke though, yeah?”

Luke. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about him already this morning. When I woke up, I read a bit of a regency romance and wondered if he’d like it. Then I wondered where he was waking up, and what he looks like when he’s asleep. And then, of course, I couldn’t help but wonder what it might be like to wake up in his bed, warm in his arms, one of his big hands spreading out across my stomach and slowly...

“Ugh.” I lay my head on the kitchen counter. “Leave me alone.”

“Seriously babe. Text him, or we’ll go in there on Monday and scope him out.”

“Do not do that,” I scold. “That is a terrible idea.”

“Why? We’ll be subtle.”

“Ha! You two are incapable of being inconspicuous, and you won’t be able to resist saying something.”

“Guess you’d better text him them,” she sticks her tongue out, then drains her cup. “Right, I’m off. Love you both!” Hattie lets herself out, leaving me and Megan to eat our breakfast in peace. When it’s just the two of us, we often sit in comfortable silence, but she has a knack for always knowing what I’m thinking.

“Why are you so worried about texting him?”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t tell fibs,” she teases.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t even want to be meeting other men. But I also know you’re right. It has been nearly a year.” A horrible milestone. An entire year without my love, my sidekick, my builder buddy, my best friend. I hate that he’s still in my head so much. “I’m just not ready.” *Will I ever be?*

“He asked for book recommendations, right? So just send him some and see what happens next. You can do it. Be fearless Kara.”

When Megan leaves I get dressed, put on a bit of makeup and head through to my home office to set up my camera. Our, sorry, *my* house, has a spare room but when I started my interiors business, I transformed it into a studio space. It’s my

pride and joy. The spacious desk in the middle of the room is perfect for spreading out mood board ideas for clients, and I've painted a branded wall as a backdrop for all my social media content. There's not a trace of Adam in here, and I'm glad.

This weekend I plan to take advantage of the nice weather and good light to create a couple of DIY tutorials. I started my Instagram account when we bought this house. At first it was a diary of our renovation but I've built quite a good following by sharing DIY tips and tricks, and easy projects that most people can do in a day. People seem to really enjoy it because I include plenty of low budget and rental friendly options. I know not everyone my age is lucky enough to have their own place.

I start all my tutorials the same way, standing in front of my brand wall, introducing the project while holding some of the materials needed. I hit record, grab a large picture frame, and throw on my biggest smile.

"One way to add impact to your walls on a low budget is to hang large frames filled with wallpaper or wapping paper, sorry wrapping paler..." Ugh. Start again.

"Want to decorate your walls but aren't allowed?" No, that's shit. Start again.

"If you can't wallpaper your walls with wallpaper, try this quick, cheap hack using wallpaper samples instead." What is going on? I'm usually so good at explaining these things in an

off the cuff, casual way. I force myself to do some star jumps, stretch my neck out, take a deep breath and give it another go.

“If you want to add impact to your walls without spending a lot of money, then you’ve got to try this easy weekend DIY project. You can usually find large frames like this one in charity shops for under a fiver and today I’m going to show you how to turn them into glorious works of art. I’m going to clean them up, spray them in a new colour, then frame large pieces of wallpaper samples or fancy wrapping paper for a bold new look. Let’s go!”

Ha! Nailed it.

Next I head into the garden to film myself spray painting. These things were so much easier when I had Adam to stand there and hold the camera for me. Now it’s all tripods and lighting faff. Once I’ve set it all up, I venture into the shed and discover I’ve only got black and gold paint, leftovers from a garden furniture project Adam and I did together.

There aren’t so many reminders of him around the house anymore. I spent months surrounded by the stuff he didn’t care enough to take until one weekend I snapped. In under an hour, I boxed everything up and left it on his mum’s doorstep.

Still, sometimes things like this stop me in my tracks. I hate it. I hate how much I think of him, but most of all I hate that I don’t hate *him* even though I probably should.

I’m ashamed that I didn’t see it coming. I was so preoccupied with growing my business that I hadn’t realised I’d stopped making him happy. I’ve been left wondering when

he changed, when did we stop sharing the same dreams, how did we veer so far off track?

Maybe I was the one who had changed. Maybe it was all my fault. So many questions, and I've had no answers. Has he been with her in our house? How long was it going on? Where is he now? Is he OK? You can't love someone for twelve years and suddenly not wonder about them when they leave.

My parents were furious. My brother threatened to drive home from Manchester to beat the shit out of him. Adam's parents were as confused and upset as I was, and we kept ringing each other hoping for answers, but they couldn't explain it either.

I started making excuses for him, wondering if he was having a breakdown, some sort of mental health crisis that would make him act this way. What if he's got a brain tumour making him act all out of character. I saw that on Grey's Anatomy once, some guy touched a bear because of a massive glioma in his head.

Not long after him leaving, his mum told me he'd left his job at the insurance firm because employee relationships were forbidden. I should have been pleased, but he'd worked bloody hard at that job, climbing his way up from an apprenticeship. Surely only an idiot would sacrifice their career for a fling? Which can only mean it meant more than that.

It took me weeks to realise how much he had taken. Most of his clothes, his Xbox, his toiletries, the toastie maker. The bloody toastie maker. He must have been planning it for a

while because the suitcase he took with him that day could never have carried all that stuff.

No, he hadn't had a breakdown, he really had just left me, and what's worse is that he'd planned it.

So there's no way in hell I'm painting these frames in colours he chose.

Chapter 5

Kara

ON THE WAY TO our nearest DIY superstore, I listen to *RomComrades*, my favourite book podcast, in the car. It's hosted by two friends Jessie and Laney who share my deep love of romance novels and romantic comedies. Listening to them is a bit like having your mates talk your ear off, and they always have great recommendations.

Today they're discussing their favourite books for the Strangers to Lovers trope, and it reminds me of my meeting with Luke yesterday. *As if I could forget about it.*

"I'm obsessed with the insta-lust trope," Laney says. "I don't know if I necessarily believe in love at first sight, at least it's never happened to me, but that idea that you could walk into a room, lock eyes with a total hottie, and fall instantly in lust is one that hooks me every time."

"For me, strangers to lovers books have to have that," Jessie agrees. "That instant connection. That feeling that the characters' worlds will implode if they don't speak to each other right away. Otherwise it veers too quickly into friends to lovers. I need him to be marching over and demanding she

leaves with him. The more forward, the better. If he walks out of that bar with her over his shoulder, I'll be screaming."

They've got a point. In a book, I'd be absolutely frothing at a scene where a hot guy approached a woman and asked her what she was reading. Yet somehow, yesterday with Luke was like an emotional rollercoaster.

I went from annoyed that he'd interrupted me, to pissed that he'd made such massive and incorrect judgments about romance, then impressed that he brought me another coffee, and then, what... excited maybe? I definitely liked him challenging me to give him a recommendation. And then weirdly guilty, even though I know I did nothing wrong. Maybe that's why Adam is on my mind so much. Adam didn't like me talking to other men. So I never did.

Heartache always smacks me in the face when I walk into this place. We must have spent hundreds of hours roaming these aisles. We loved weekends, popping in here bright and early for supplies, then heading back to turn a run down hovel into our beautiful home.

I half expect to see him, but I have those moments less and less these days. At first I could barely leave the house for fear I'd see him and his new woman, but unbelievably, it's never happened. I don't even know if he's still living in the area.

We were just twenty-two when we bought our house. After school, I turned my Saturday job into a full-time one, and Adam got an apprenticeship with an insurance company. We were hoping to go travelling, but then he got made permanent,

and I got a bit of inheritance from my lovely grandad, so our travel fund became a house fund. We were on a mission, scrimping, and turning down plans with our friends. Adam even moved in with me at Mum and Dad's so we could save as much as possible.

It was the first house we saw and even though it was absolutely grim, it was love at first sight. The two bedroom semi-detached house had been empty for over a year. Every room had peeling wallpaper and nicotine stains. The carpets were so threadbare I couldn't make out the pattern, and the rest of the house had a mix of bare floorboards and torn linoleum. I kind of got the feeling someone had died there, but I didn't want to ask, and the estate agent wasn't forthcoming with those sorts of details.

Still, we knew it had potential. We'd spend our evenings in my childhood bedroom watching home renovation shows and DIY tutorials. We felt confident that we could turn this house into something amazing, so we put in an offer way under asking price, thinking that would start negotiations. When the estate agent called to tell us our offer had been accepted, we were in the freezer aisle in Tesco. We both pressed our ears to the phone to hear the news, then shrieked and jumped up and down right there by the potato waffles.

My very first Instagram post was me holding our keys by the front door, and then we got to work. We ripped out all the old flooring, stripped the walls, and did our bedroom up first, so we at least had a nice, relaxing place to sleep after busting our arses all day.

It still hurts to think of it now. Choosing new bedding, our mattress, tumbling onto it, unable to keep our hands off each other, finally free to be as naughty and loud as we wanted to be. I miss the way he used to touch me. I didn't realise the last time would be the last.

Hattie binned all that bedding a few weeks after he left. She just turned up one day, ran me a bath, and changed the sheets. I cried for hours, devastated to lose the smell from Adam's shampoo on his pillow, but she said it was important that I sleep in bedding he'd never touched. I could see the logic, and now whenever I put on the bedding she chose for me, I do feel very loved, so I suppose her magic worked.

There are too many memories here. There's the aisle where we chose our first drill, oh and there's the steamer we used to strip the walls. Those are the screws we built our kitchen cabinets with. *Fuck this*. I do what I always do when I'm having a wobble. I ring my mum.

"Hiya, love," she answers, sounding a little out of breath. I bet she's out for one of her walks. "You alright? I'm just climbing Colton Hill." *Bingo*.

"Hi Mum, yeah I'm OK. Just in B&Q getting spray paint."

"Oh love, it's OK." She gets it straight away. How hard this simple thing is for me. "Just get in and out and then home and put your feet up."

'Put your feet up' is my mum's cure for everything. In her eyes, there's no problem that can't be solved by sitting down

for a cup of tea and a biscuit. Then again, she's one of the most relaxed people I know, so it's clearly working for her.

I keep my head down and rush my way through the store, but stop short when I turn into the paint section. There he is.

Luke.

Standing right in front of the spray paint.

The very thing that I need. What are the fucking chances? I've never seen this man before in my life and now I've seen him twice in twenty-four hours.

Damn, he looks good. Hair all tousled in loose waves, shorter at the back and sides. I hadn't seen him from this angle yesterday. Sleeves pushed up to his elbows, the back of his neck exposed as he looks down to read the label on the can in his hand. I want to lick that neck. *What the fuck, Kara?*

"Kara? You there?" I hear Mum say. "Did you hear me?"

"Um..."

He hasn't seen me. Should I say something? Do something? I've stopped breathing, my face feels flushed, and I remember his note. The note which so far I've ignored. So, no, he absolutely mustn't see me. This is *not* how this would happen in a book. Why does he have to be so hot? Why do I feel like I might cry?

I spin around to make a swift exit and immediately crash into an old man's trolley that he's left blocking the aisle. I grab onto a shelf to regain my composure, sending a pile of brushes crashing to the floor. *Why? Why me?*

“Kara? Are you there?” Mum shouts down the phone while I shove everything back onto the shelf. “What’s going on?”

I stand back up, shove my hair out of my face, and I see him, leaning his hip against a shelf, arms folded across his chest. *Oh hello, arms.* His eyes slowly take in the entire mess that is me.

“Hi again,” he says.

“I’m on the phone to my mum,” I say back without thinking. He just nods and then he does that sexy wink thing again, and I do the only sensible thing left. I run.

Dodging my way back down the aisles, I head straight past the tills, out the front door and back to my car, where I finally take a proper breath. “I’ll have to call you back, Mum.” My DIY project will have to wait for another day.



On the way home, the vision of Luke winking at me plays on a loop in my head. That’s just a normal thing people do, isn’t it? Winking doesn’t automatically mean flirting, even if it made my fingertips tingle and turned me hot from the inside out.

I do not have good flirt-dar. I also don’t know how to flirt. You’d think I’d be great at it after reading so many books crammed with chemistry and sexual tension, but look at me. Here I am, running away from a man in B&Q.

Adam and I had been together for so long that our chemistry was built into the bones of each other. We were always joking back and forth, taunting one another, and I could always read his face to determine his mood.

I've been thinking about my conversation with Luke yesterday, studying it from all angles. I know romance novels are niche, but to his credit, after he graciously accepted my bollocking, he listened to what I had to say. And despite me acting like a bull in a china shop, he seemed pleased to see me again just now. It's hardly fair. That smile would send even the most unflappable women into a spin.

Was he really that serious about reading a book to change his mind? Am I now being extra rude if I don't text him? He knows I took the note, and it's no trouble to send him a few titles. I think I know what I'll suggest. *If* I text him...

When I get back, I find book post waiting on the doorstep and the timing is perfect now that my DIY plans have been abandoned. I make myself a plate of snacks, get comfy on the sofa and lose myself for a few hours in the new *Ice Kings* novel. It's one of my favourite series, following a Canadian Hockey team, their sexual exploits and romantic escapades.

Chet is the goalie who we've known throughout the entire series, but in this book he finally gets his chance to shine. He's always been awkward around women, too focused on his studies and hockey practice to worry about dating, but when a reporter from the college newspaper runs a profile on the team, he's smitten from their first meeting. He's adorable. The sex is

hot and sweet, lots of *'is this OK?'* and *'can I touch you here?'* which I find really attractive because I'm all for enthusiastic consent.

By the time I finish it, light from the patio doors fills the room, and I'm feeling relaxed and sleepy. This is why I love having a new Book Boyfriend. It's someone to sweep me away, get me out of my head, and fall deeper in love with every page. Chet is a babe, and he's definitely going on the Best Book Boyfriend List.

I pick up my phone to go through my DMs and reply to comments on my last post, then see a message pop up.

Hattie: Have you texted Luke yet?

Hattie: Just think, you could have amazing sex TONIGHT

Only on another planet where I had even an ounce of Hattie's confidence could I text a man and be having sex with him that same night. Sometimes I wish I could be like her, but I can't separate sex from my heart. I'm not brave enough to hook up with someone I don't know.

Me: You sound like an advert on a porn site

Hattie: You've got nothing to lose

Hattie: DO IT!!!

After Adam left, Hattie sent me a gift box of sex toys as a break up present. She said something about how I needed to get to know my mind and my body from scratch. So on that front I've been doing just fine, and haven't really seen the need to bring an actual man back into my life.

I always thought it was good with Adam, but a lot of what I read about in books blows it out of the water. It doesn't stop me thinking about it often, though. He's the only man I've ever been with, how am I meant to *not* think about him?

How he used to manoeuvre me into his favourite positions, how he used to kiss my neck, how tightly he held me when he came. I probably think about it too often. Sometimes I miss having sex with him, even though I think he'd become a bit selfish. It wasn't always a team effort anymore, and sometimes he finished before I'd really warmed up. It was definitely less frequent than those early days when we couldn't keep our hands off each other.

I think that's normal though? It's not really possible to keep up the chemistry you have when you're a brand new couple. Or more likely, he wasn't having sex with me because he was having it with someone else. I try not to think about that part too much.

That's another reason I love having a new Book Boyfriend. It's someone to fantasise about that isn't him. Someone who knows what they're doing and will never, ever hurt me.

By Sunday night, I've talked myself into texting Luke. I keep checking my phone, hoping for a message from him, but

I don't know why. He doesn't even have my number. The ball is entirely in my court, and I don't know how to play.

I try to remind myself that we had a friendly conversation about my favourite subject. If nothing else, I might get to do more of that. And maybe a cute guy with a coffee shop and an interest in books wouldn't be a bad person to practice flexing my flirting muscles on.

I am *not* flirting over text though. I don't know how and I won't even try in case I use the wrong emoji and somehow suggest I want to touch his... never mind. Keep it simple.

Kara: Hi Luke. Nice to meet you on Friday. Thanks for the coffee.

Do I mention the doing a runner in B&Q thing? No, probably best pretend that never happened.

Here are three books for the time of your life:

1. Snowed Inn - events manager Tiffany and hockey player Parker get stuck together in a snowstorm. (This will show you that romance books can be fun.)

2. The (Mis)Adventures of Becky Baxter - Becky's been single for a year, but when she meets a guy who is only in town for one long weekend, she decides it's time to

get back in the game. (This will show you that romance books can take you to unexpected places.)

3. Roomies - Guz and Sam are accidentally allocated to the same apartment during their final year of medical school. (This one is MM but worth reading for the tension alone)

If those don't convince you, then nothing will. You're a lost cause.

Good lord, I imagine never in history has anyone written such a long text. I'm not over thinking this. I hit send then realise I haven't even said who it's from.

This is Kara by the way!

An exclamation mark? *Go to bed, Kara, you idiot.*

Chapter 6

Luke

KARA. *Her name is Kara.*

Ever since I met her on Friday, I've been bollocking myself for not asking. She's not one of those women who looks like a particular name, and believe me, I've run hundreds through my mind trying to guess. Not a Sophie or a Hannah or an Ellie or a Rose.

No way would I ever have guessed Kara. It suits her. Kara and Luke. Luke and Kara. *Woah there bud. Don't get ahead of yourself.*

I'd been getting out of the bath when I heard my phone ping from my bedroom, and I nearly slipped, rushing to check my messages. I was hoping the text would be from her, and not one of the team telling me they can't work tomorrow.

This weekend has been really busy, which was great, but on Mondays we host a co-working group. I'll need help to make sure they're served quickly, and a bit of support so I can get ahead of admin and order more stock for the week.

Thankfully, nobody is calling in sick, and now here I am lying on my bed, towel wrapped around my waist, reading Kara's message over and over again. I'm surprised she's even messaged after legging it out of the shop yesterday. She seemed pretty flustered and embarrassed, but even then, she looked pretty cute and I was happy to see her.

This message is very direct. And polite. I'm searching for a hint of hidden meaning in her words. There's no sign that she wants to meet again, or even a suggestion of flirting, but I like her notes about each book.

I don't know what '*MM*' means, so I Google the book title to find out. *Ah, Male/Male*. It's probably not something I'd normally pick up, but if she rates it, I'll give it a go. After insulting her, it's the least I can do, and I'm keen to redeem myself if possible. Plus, I can tell just from our brief conversation that she has taken this really seriously.

I read it again. '*The tension is epic.*' So I guess that's something she likes. I wonder what else.

I get ready for bed and wonder for ages about what to write back to her, but everything I type sounds ridiculous. And now I'm self-conscious that she can see that I'm typing and then not typing, typing, then not typing.

I'm not cut out for texting and flirting in the modern age. I don't want to look rude, but I also don't want to make her feel more awkward. It's probably best to sleep on it and hope the right reply will come to me in the morning.

Luke and Kara. Kara and Luke. The last thing I remember thinking as I fall asleep.



We had a bit of a lull after the school mums left and the co-working group arrived, so I left my trusty assistant Jo in charge and hopped on my bike to the bookshop on the other side of town. In all honesty, I haven't been in here much because I haven't exactly been doing a lot of reading lately. I used to read to Heather sometimes, but after she was gone picking up a book wasn't something I had headspace for. My brain is calmer now, but my social life is hardly jumping, so reading feels like a good way to fill my evenings.

I pull out my phone and reply to Kara's text with a photo of me in the bookshop holding up a copy of *The (Mis)Adventures of Becky Baxter*.

I'm used to sending selfies now. In my worst times, Rob insisted I send him a photo of myself every day. He wanted to see me and make sure I was OK, and since I wouldn't let anyone come over, this was our compromise. I was far from OK, but I still sent them and I hope he deleted them because they must be awful. Me on the sofa for the third day in a row. My face red and puffy from crying and not sleeping. From missing her and wishing she'd come back. Me looking gaunt when I was only eating bagels that I couldn't even be bothered to toast.

I find the book quickly and have a read of the blurb. As excited as I am to text her, this book does not sound like my thing at all. Hot woman meets hot guy and falls in love, The End. It's a fantasy. Who honestly wants to read about this stuff? Still, I've made a promise, and I want to be a man of my word.

Luke: They only have this one, so I'll order the other two. Lovely to meet you too. Hopefully I'll see you again soon.

I thought about what I'd say all morning and I think this is the best approach. Keen, but casual. I've no sooner hopped back on my bike when I hear the *ding!* of her reply and quickly scoot up onto the pavement to stop and read it.

Kara: Wow. I'm impressed. You're an excellent pupil.

She replied! And she's flirting. Or is she? It definitely feels like she's flirting. I feel a bit sick. Is this a good feeling or a bad feeling? I can't tell. She's Kara, the queen of romance novels, and I, her ever willing student, have impressed her.

For God's sake, now I'm thinking about her as a hot teacher. I wonder if she's got any recommendations that fit with that fantasy? Actually, scratch that, I'm far too old to entertain the teacher/student thing without being a massive creep.

I didn't expect such a quick reply and now I'm stuck back in the loop of wondering what to say next. I want to impress her more, so I decide to head back to work and crack on with reading between customers. That way, when I text her, I can say something more profound.



OK, so this Becky Baxter book is hilarious. She's a motorbike courier with a real attitude and she seems to hate men, which is no surprise since she caught her bastard ex cheating, and every guy since then has been an utter knob. I can't deny it, I'm invested.

Then she meets Chase, an American tourist who I imagine looks like every generic leading man. He's in London for a few days after backpacking through Europe and nearly knocks her off her bike when he's trying to get the hang of an electric scooter. Twat.

He's offered to buy her a drink to apologise, and I've just gotten to the bit where she's grilling him about the girls he's slept with on his travels. Rather than getting put off, the exploits of a 22-year-old Californian hunk seem to turn her on and, *Jesus Christ*, OK, now they're shagging in the pub toilets in the middle of the afternoon.

Is this normal? Is this what single people do these days? I'm not cut out for this. All I can think of are grubby floors and does the loo roll need to be replaced? I glance around,

suddenly self-conscious that Jo might read over my shoulder, but nobody has noticed. I'm seventy pages into this book. I don't think I'll be able to keep going if it's all this dirty.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I snap a selfie, making a face that I hope looks a mix of shocked and bashful.

Luke: Um, this feels illegal to be reading in public.

Two ticks. She's online, and I can see she's replying already.

Kara: Oh yes, that is quite a spicy one. Should have warned you it might not be a good idea to read at work, sorry!

She's not wrong. I have to lean over the counter to hide the fact that my jeans are straining and hope nobody will come in and order anything that means I have to reach up high. For most of the afternoon, I'm thinking about getting home and reading more, and I let Jo go a little early so I can close up fast. Normally we end up chatting for ages, which I enjoy, but I'm desperate to know what's going to happen with Becky and Chase.

When I get in, I open a beer and lie on the sofa, pulling a blanket across me. I've seen people in support groups talk about reading as an act of rest and self-care, and this definitely feels like a good way to spend the rest of my evening. After

making it through a chapter that is pure filth, I pick up my phone to reply to Kara's last message, but decide a selfie might not be wise in case I look like a sweaty hornbag. I mean, I *am* a sweaty hornbag right now. There'd be no hiding it.

Luke: You weren't lying. I've just read the bit where they're at the back of the open-topped bus.

Kara: Such a good scene.

Luke: I will never be able to go on a bus again.

Kara: I'm the opposite. That book made me love getting the bus.

What the hell does that mean? I keep reading, turning the lamp beside the sofa on when I realise it's dark and I'm squinting. It's almost midnight when I finally finish the book, and I really want to talk to her about it, but she's probably sleeping already. I think it might be rude to text this late. Instead, I head to bed and as soon as I hit the pillow I realise I'm ending the day feeling more happy than sad. This definitely calls for a selfie to Rob.

Luke: Love you x

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'elle', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Sunshine Coffee has been packed all morning. There are a few faces I've not seen before and I force myself to take the time to introduce myself and make them feel welcome. On tough days I sometimes still have a little wobble chatting to new people, but if I want this place to be a success, I can't be a grumpy prick who hides behind the counter all day. My grief group were right though, it gets easier the more often you do it and I've been chatting so much that it's almost lunchtime by the time I get a minute to text Kara.

Luke: How should we do this then?

Kara: Do what?

Luke: My book thoughts. Do you want marks out of ten? A review?

Kara: You've finished it already?

Luke: I couldn't put it down! I had to know if she got on the plane with him.

Kara: I loved that bit. I really thought the author was going to pull a switch and make him stay for her, but she had no reason to stick around.

The other books are waiting for me when I get home and I dive straight into *Roomies*, the shorter of the two. It's so good that I have to force myself to take a break to eat dinner. Kara was right about the tension. I'm punching the air when Guz

and Sam share their first kiss and then, minutes later, getting all choked up when it looks like Sam will have to transfer specialties to a different teaching hospital. I'm rooting for them so much I have to remind myself that they're not real people.

Luke: You did not tell me Roomies would make me want to cry

Kara: I told you had romance all wrong.

Luke: I'm beginning to see the error of my ways

Kara: GOOD. I knew you weren't a lost cause.

We end up texting back and forth all week. As I read, I send her my thoughts, along with various photos. I wish she'd follow my lead and send me one of her. I keep opening her little profile image in WhatsApp, but it's a professional one that's quite different from the woman who sat down at my window table last week. When I picture her in my head, she's softer, but just as beautiful. Her hair is straight in her photo, and last week it was a bit more wild and wavy. In her photo, she's wearing the bright pink cardigan she had on, and I wonder what it would feel like to wrap my arms around her.

By Thursday I've nearly finished *Snowed Inn*, and I really want to see her again. Mostly so I can see her face while we chat and tell her how wrong I was. Neither of us have

mentioned meeting up again, but if our text chats are anything to go by, it's worth seeing how it goes in person. I've got nothing to lose, so I shoot my shot.

Luke: I don't know what your work schedule is like, but if you're free for coffee tomorrow I need more recommendations.

Chapter 7

Kara

COFFEE TOMORROW? MORE RECOMMENDATIONS.

Shit. That sounds like a date.

Except I'm assuming he means at his work, and no man in his right mind would suggest a date at his place of work, would they? Definitely no Book Boyfriend would do that.

Chill out Kara, it's just coffee. Coffee I can do. After texting so much this week, coffee with Luke is something I would actually quite *like* to do.

I can't pretend my heart doesn't do a little happy dance every time I get a new notification from him. Sometimes I wake up to a message and it makes me wonder if he thinks of me as soon as he wakes up, or if he's just on an early shift.

I open up my work calendar. I'm pretty sure tomorrow is quite a light afternoon, but double booking myself is my worst nightmare. My clients should feel like they are the most important people in my world. If I had to drop one to see another, I'd feel absolutely awful about it.

Kara: My last meeting is at 3. I could swing by after if you're still open?

Luke: Perfect, see you then.

What the girls said last week has really stuck with me. I'm not an idiot, I know it's nearly a year since Adam left. I've been trying to push it out of my mind in the misguided hope that somehow that day will simply not happen. Perhaps there is still time to pray to our Aztec ancestors or the Romans or whoever it was that invented the calendar and plead with them to make the day disappear entirely.

A year. Twelve entire months. And my birthday before then too. Part of me can't quite fathom how I'm existing. How do I manage to get up and live every day without him? I know I shouldn't feel that way. Hattie would be livid if I ever said it out loud.

I know I should reframe these thoughts and turn them into a positive. I should be proud I've survived nearly a year without him. It's an achievement, of sorts. I should probably set myself some goals for what relationships might look like in my thirties, but what if I fall in love with someone and then in another twelve years they piss off without an explanation too? I couldn't handle having my heart broken this badly again.

Those sneaky bitches said they'd made a pact to give me a year to wallow, and I know that's what I've been doing, but I don't know how they expect me to just wake up after a year and feel over it.

Romantic relationships aside, I think I've been doing well. Work is going great. I've landed a couple of brilliant projects this year, and my Instagram account has gone from strength to strength. Especially now that I've got full control of it and don't have to run my ideas by Adam.

It took me ages to work up the courage to tell our followers that we'd split up. I didn't know how to say it, but some of them had been on our home journey for years and were asking where he was. We, sorry, *I* lost a bunch of followers but I didn't care. I'd rather have Adam than followers, and anyway I've gained many more back now that I've got a bit of a niche as a single woman who does her own home makeovers and DIY content.

Texting with Luke has been a really fun distraction this week. I wasn't sure whether three recommendations was a bit much, but figured it was payback for being so wrong about romance, and to his credit, he's read them all.

My tummy did a little flip when he sent me a selfie holding up *The (Mis)Adventures of Becky Baxter* and he's been sending photos most days since. I would be lying if I told you I haven't studied them a lot.

After getting myself all flustered when I saw him last week, I felt like I couldn't really trust my memory of him, so it's been good to have a photo to refer to. His hair is a little lighter than I'd remembered, styled away from his face, and he wears tortoiseshell glasses.

In the first photo he sent, he's wearing a dark green crew neck jumper, with the collar of a green and blue checked shirt poking out. He has a wide smile, not fake or posed. Just a happy man, pleased to be standing in a bookshop. He has great teeth and a short beard that looks rugged but well maintained and full lips and...

Yes, I'm aware that I'm checking him out like a potential dating prospect even though I am absolutely sworn off men. I don't think I'll ever want to be in a relationship again, but there's no harm in looking at an attractive man.

One thing I know for sure is that I'm bringing an extra ounce of pep to my client meetings today. I've got that kind of Friday feeling I haven't felt in a long time, and it's definitely The Luke Effect.

There are only a couple of people in Sunshine Coffee when I arrive, tucked away at the back on their laptops, an array of cups and plates at their side. Luke is refilling coffee beans, the sleeves of his green jumper pushed up to his elbows. It's the same green one that he's wearing in the photo in the bookshop. I wonder if it's a favourite. Did he choose it knowing he'd see me today? I feel like it's fast becoming my favourite colour. A sure contender for Pantone Colour of the Year.

"Hi Kara." My name from his mouth has a sarcastic tone to it, but I like it and match it.

"Hi Luke," I reply, cocking my head.

"Do you drink coffee this late?"

I check my watch and realise it's approaching 4:30. "Good point. I probably shouldn't risk it if I want to sleep at all. Could I have a mint tea please?"

"Of course. Take a seat and I'll bring it over." I sit at our table from last week and look out of the window at the late spring light that fills the courtyard. He's already folded up the tables and chairs that normally sit outside, the hanging baskets slowly drip drip dripping from a recent watering. *Our table. Stop it, Kara.*

"Here you go." Luke places my tea down in front of me a few minutes later, and sets about tidying the nearby tables, adjusting the squint ones and putting chairs back into place. "How was your day?"

"Really good, thanks. I had a meeting to go over plans with one client this morning, then I've just come from a site visit with another to review the flooring before furniture goes in next week."

He looks confused. "I'm so sorry. I should have asked last week, but I have no idea what you do?"

"Oh," I smile. How would he know? "I'm an interior designer."

"Wow," he says, his eyebrows lifting. "What a cool job. How did you get into that?"

"I renovated my own house and then loved it so much that I launched my business after that. I started with projects for a few friends and now I work for a mix of private and

commercial clients. Speaking of which, whoever you hired for here did a great job.”

“Oh, this was all me.” *Wow*. That explains why I didn’t get a call.

“Well, I’m impressed. You’ve got a good balance between the bright walls and the bare wood. Enough decorative pieces to capture interest but not overwhelm the eye. That’s not an easy task.”

After wiping down the tables, Luke washes his hands behind the counter, then takes the seat opposite me with a mint tea of his own. I wonder if that’s his normal afternoon brew, or if he’s taken my lead. I’m captivated by the way he holds his cup, fingers interlaced around it, elbows on the table, the fresh fragrant steam of the tea rising to his face. His pose reminds me of a Pinterest photo of a woman on a health kick. Then there are those sexy forearms again, taut and lean and... *Stop. It. Kara.*

“So,” I cough, composing myself. “Books. What did you think of *Snowed Inn*?”

“Well, I really hated Parker at first,” he says with a half-hearted chuckle.

“Oh gosh, me too! Tell me your reasons.”

“He was just such an asshole. I would be so mad if someone I knew dated a guy like that.” *My thoughts exactly.*

“Some books have this thing called the Grumpy Sunshine trope. Where he, well, usually he, is really moody, and she is

the happiest person on the planet who will eventually break down his walls. But Parker really took it to another level.”

“He behaved like such a little shit when they first got stuck, and then even worse when he found out they had to share a room. He was so rude to Tiffany.”

“I know. It’s quite unusual in these books for a man to make a woman cry. Sometimes it happens in dark romance, but not so much in the books I like.”

“I did really feel for him when I found out the truth, though. Falling through the ice on his grandparents’ lake as a boy would have been awful. No wonder he felt claustrophobic and trapped at the Inn.”

“Well, Tiffany certainly found his attitude easier to handle once she found that out,” I say with a smirk.

“And that’s not the only thing she handled.” *He went there.* I wasn’t sure he would take the bait, but we’re both stifling laughs. Feeling more relaxed, I’m relieved that this conversation has the same playfulness as our texts. “I liked that he had turned his awful experience into a positive by facing his fear of ice and becoming a hockey player.”

“Ahhh, you’re getting it! The hero’s journey, the redemption arc, the growth. See, I told you these books are about so much more than just shagging.”

“The shagging bits were good, though.” Do I spy a little blush creeping up his neckline? Get used to it pal, there’s

simply no way to talk about romantic fiction without addressing the saucy bits.

“Meh.” I shrug my shoulders and screw up my face a little. “The shagging was three stars at best. You’ve so much more to look forward to.”

“Wow,” he says, leaning in close and lowering his voice. “What gets five stars?”

A woozy feeling fizzles up inside me. I can’t believe he’s asked me what counts as five star shagging as casually as if he was asking for a restaurant recommendation.

“Um, I’m not sure I know you well enough to get into it,” I laugh.

“OK,” he shrugs. “We’ll put a pin in that for later. Don’t think I’ll forget.” He’s smiling. I’m smiling. We’re two people sitting across from each other talking about shagging in books like it’s the weather and we Can’t. Stop. Smiling.

“So, is it safe to say you’re a convert to Romance Land?”

“Well, nobody likes to lose a challenge, but I have to say I’ve really enjoyed spending my evenings reading, being in someone else’s world for a bit. It’s been a welcome break from the daily grind. And *Roomies*? Is it weird that I was desperate to finish it and never wanted it to end?”

“No,” I laugh, “I feel that all the time. That one’s been picked up for a movie.”

“I’m not surprised. I could really picture it in my head. So what else have you got for me?”

I take out a notecard from the back of my book journal and jot down a few more titles for him. “I’m impressed by how quickly you read. These should keep you going a while longer.”

Luke takes the note and pushes it into his back pocket. The sun bathes the courtyard and time passes easily while we chat about books we’ve both read, what we loved to read as kids, and both agree how lovely and special our local bookshop is. Conversation is easy, and I’m swept along by the energy of it.

“How did you get into reading romance?” Luke asks.

“I used to read much more widely, and still like to, but...” Oh crap, am I really going to tell him what a shitty year I’ve had? Maybe some other time. “Um. This past year I just wanted to read books that were fun. You know you’re going to get a happy ever after. You know that no matter what shit the characters have been through, no matter how many miscommunications, or how many faults a Book Boyfriend has, he’ll always end up being the perfect guy for the leading lady. I guess I enjoy knowing things will be OK.”

“Now don’t take this the wrong way,” he drums his lips with his fingers, leaning all the way back in his chair. It tips a little and I remember how Adam used to do that in school and get told off by the teachers. *Fucking Adam. Stop being in my brain.* “Does it get boring always knowing how the book will end?”

“Not at all. There are a million ways to have a happy ending. Every couple is different. I’m not really in a place in

my life where I want drama and horror. Are you?"

He laughs weakly. "No, I suppose not." I wonder what's behind that.

"It's just a shame books aren't real life," I sigh.

"You haven't met someone perfect for you?" Luke asks, crossing his arms over his chest. *Oh, here we go.* It's much easier to talk about fictional love lives than my actual one. In romance novels, it's customary for the main characters to keep something back. A secret. A truth. A fact about themselves revealed at the most opportune moment for maximum impact.

My identity has been so wrapped up in Adam for so long, and I've been so adrift without him. I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell Luke the truth.

"I thought I had, but we split up last year. Or rather, he left me. For his assistant. I'm a massive cliché."

"Wow, I'm so sorry. It really sucks when you don't want it to end."

"Yeah. I had no warning," I say, probably over sharing. "He took all of his stuff, and I've not heard from him since. He wouldn't answer my calls. Left me paying for everything."

"Jesus, what a dick."

You're telling me. Adjusting to paying all of our bills was a huge shock. Megan went into super organisation mode and made me transfer as much as I could into my name and my bank account. She was worried he'd try to take money from me, but I knew he'd never do anything like that. Then again, I

also never thought he'd cheat on me and leave for someone else, so what do I know?

“Yeah, I guess. The mortgage is still in both of our names. I don't know how long I should leave it until I try to, I don't know, sue him or something? He still gets post at the house. I don't know where he is though, so I have to send it to his mum. He doesn't take my calls. My head's been a mess about it, to be honest. I have to not think about it or I get really sad and angry.”

“I'm so sorry, Kara.”

“I've spent a long time hoping he'll come back. I'm a mug, really.” It hurts to talk about it, so I change the subject. “Are you... seeing anyone?”

His whole body tenses when I ask. I begin to wish I hadn't, but he asked me, so it only seems fair to ask back.

“Um, not for a couple of years, no.” He closes off and I pick another topic, my brain quickly searching for anything to avoid an awkward silence.

“Tell me about your tattoo,” I say, noticing it peeking out from under his jumper.

“Oh, it's er...” He pulls his sleeve up a little further and twists his forearm to show me. “It's an oak tree.”

“It's beautiful. Does it have a special meaning?” His slow exhale seems painful and now I really wish I hadn't asked this either. I've totally derailed our perfectly nice conversation.

“It’s a tree in my Granny’s meadow where I played a lot as a kid. It’s the tree I got married underneath.”

My breath catches in my throat. “You’re married?” *How could I have read this so wrong? Why am I meeting up with a married man? Why is he flirting with me?* No wait, he just said he’s not with anyone, and he’s not wearing a ring, but this is not the 1950s. He could be one of those guys that just doesn’t wear a ring. Is he lying to me? Does he have a secret wife and... *oh no...* have I stopped breathing? Am I about to pass out?

“I *was* married. It’s also the tree I scattered my wife’s ashes under.”

Chapter 8

Kara

OH, GOD. “Oh, Luke. I had no idea. I’m so sorry.” I don’t know what to say to that and before I can stop myself, I’m totally screwing up and blurting out, “What happened?”

“Cancer,” he says, his voice almost a whisper.

“I’m so sorry.” I instinctively reach my hand across the table to touch his arm. When I feel him flex slightly under my touch, I realise it’s wholly inappropriate and I yank my arm away. “Sorry.”

Why can’t I think of anything to say except sorry? Luke stares out of the window, so I stare into my now empty cup, swilling the liquid around and wishing it would wash this moment away.

“I haven’t had to say that to anyone for a long time,” he says, his lips pressed tightly together.

“I’d love to hear some stories about her if you’d like to share them.”

“Yeah,” he says, rubbing the tattoo. “Maybe sometime.” His tree tattoo. The one they got married under. Where he

scattered her ashes.

I really have got this all mixed up. Luke isn't flirting, he's grieving, he's lonely. He probably asked me for recommendations because he's bored, or just being friendly to his customers.

"That must have been so hard for you. I just can't imagine losing someone like that." *Kara, you idiot, please stop talking.*

"It was about as awful as you'd expect, really."

I'm lost for words, so I just sit on my hands and bite my tongue and let us be silent.

"Heather," he says after a while. "Her name was Heather. After she died, I kind of lost it. Didn't leave the house for months. Slept all the time but also didn't really sleep at all. Couldn't eat. Wouldn't let people come and see me." His face looks tight as he relives what must surely be agony for him.

"Over time, I got better, but I was just coasting. There wasn't really a reason to stay there, but I didn't want to move because I was afraid I'd leave all my memories behind, you know? I was so scared I'd forget her, but I was living in a ghost town. I'd go to the cinema and only think about all the times we'd been in the past. I'd walk out and not be able to remember a thing about the film I'd just sat through. I'd go running down the same country paths we'd run hundreds of times and replay our conversations over and over." He falls silent, off some place in his head and then with a shake he's back in the room.

“Sorry. I don’t know where that came from. I didn’t mean to treat you like a therapist.”

“It’s OK.”

He keeps going. “The longer it went on, the more I realised I needed a fresh start, somewhere to make some new memories. I know I’ll still have all of my old memories, too.”

“So that’s when you moved here?”

“Sort of. Once I’d made the decision, it took a long time to accept that it was a rational one, not an overreaction. I actually signed the lease on this place six months ago, so I’m glad we’re finally open and it can start making some money.”

“How has business been?” He perks up a little, and I think we both welcome the change in topic, although now I’m worried he’ll think I was dismissive and didn’t want to hear about his life.

“It’s been great so far. The town has really welcomed a new coffee shop, I think, but I’m mindful that new businesses always have a surge of customers when they first open. A lot of those people might not come back. I don’t mind the odd quiet spells, though, gives me more time to read.” He smiles a little, his mouth kicking up at the corner, although his eyes are still somewhere else.

“Well, let me help you with that.” I take my phone out of my pocket and open my camera to snap a photo of the back wall, the one with all the fabric swatches, then upload it to Instagram with a couple of editing tweaks.

“What’s the cafe’s Instagram account?”

“I don’t have one.”

“You’re not on Instagram? Oh Luke, you have so much to learn.”

“No, I’ve been meaning to do it, but I don’t really know where to start.”

“OK, give me your phone.” I reach my hand across the table and open and close my hand until he unlocks his phone and places it in my palm. Within minutes, I’ve downloaded the app, set up an account, and created a profile and business listing for the coffee shop. I get up and take a quick shot of the logo that he’s spray painted across the front of the bright yellow counter. It’s gorgeous in this light and I crop it and post it to his new account.

When I sit back down, he’s leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed, his head tilted a little to one side and a content smile. *God, he has a gorgeous smile.* I hand his phone back, then take out my own.

“There you go. I’m your first follower.” I smile smugly across the table and give a little shimmy. Back on my phone, I post my own photo, then tag Sunshine and add a few relevant hashtags, as well as all the ones I know our local business owners follow. “I love the name Sunshine Coffee. What’s the story behind it?”

“Um... I just liked it, that’s all.”

“Well, you should come up with one. People love a story. That’s a good thing to share with customers.”

“You’re kind of bossy, aren’t you?” he laughs.

“What can I say,” I shrug, “I know my stuff when it comes to social media.”

“How is that?” he asks, looking through what I’ve set up for him, and he’s clearly gone to check out my account when he says “Holy shit...”

I’m suddenly nervous. Why am I nervous? Thousands of people follow me online. It makes no sense that I wouldn’t want Luke to find my account, but I feel like I’ve pulled back the curtain on my whole life in one fell swoop. When I take a swig of my tea, I want to disappear into the cup.

“This is you?” I cringe while he scrolls through my profile. “You’re like a celebrity.”

That makes me snort and my tea goes down the wrong way, sending me into a choking fit. He’s up out of his chair like a shot to put his hand on my back and make sure I’m OK. Oh my, that’s a warm hand. How does his one hand seem to span most of my ribcage? These thoughts are not helping with the coughing.

“I’m OK.” I manage to clear my throat and take another small sip to soothe it, so he sits again. “I’m not a celebrity.”

“You’ve got 40,000 fans on here.”

“Please, they’re followers, not fans,” I sound like such a twat. “But they’re fans of my house more than me. I started

the account when we moved in and it just grew really quickly.”

“Is this part of your job?”

“Sort of. Growing the account while learning loads of DIY was the motivation for doing an interior design course,” I explain. “This just helps me connect with new clients and I sometimes do brand partnerships. Those I treat like a job, helping businesses to promote their products, reviews, that sort of thing. It’s a nice bit of extra cash.”

“Wow.” He seems a little lost for words. “I’ve been wondering about you. For some reason, I thought you must work in publishing what with all the books.”

He’s been wondering about me. What has he been wondering?

“Bye!”

“See you!” New voices snap me out of my distracting thoughts.

“Thanks guys, come and see us again soon,” Luke says, waving off his final customers. He gets up and turns the sign on the door to closed, clicking the latch into place. “Let me just clear up the stuff at the back and we can head off.”

While he takes dishes through to the kitchen, I need to take a much needed deep breath and recap on everything we’ve just covered in the past half hour. Books, hockey, tattoo, his wife died, Instagram, my house. It’s a lot.

“Do you ever stay open in the evenings?” I ask when we head outside. I pull my jacket on while he turns out the lights and sets the alarm.

“I’m hoping to. I want to make sure the team gets settled in and then maybe we’ll run some events.”

“You should do a book club,” I suggest.

“That’s a great idea,” he says, and I’m already picturing it in my mind. “But if anyone should run a book club here, it’s you. You’re clearly the expert.”

“Are you serious? I have actually thought about setting one up a few times, but it’s always been a low priority.”

“You’d be doing me a favour. I’m happy to hold it here but wouldn’t know where to start with hosting one or choosing books. The three you’ve recommended are the most I’ve read in years.”

“The thing is, I’d want it to be a romance book club.”

“Do romance readers drink coffee?”

“Oh, we live on it,” I say, slapping my hand against his arm. “Caffeine and smut are our primary food groups.”

Luke stares down at my arm until I realise how awkward I’m being and I let it fall to my side.

“So, um, OK, this is exciting. Shall I send you some ideas or something? What’s your email address?” I pull out my phone to note it down.

“How about...” he scuffs his shoe back and forth along the ground. “Um, how about I make you dinner. Next Saturday? We can talk about it more then.” Oh my God. Dinner? *Dinner* dinner? My heart pounds behind my ribcage.

“Dinner?” I repeat, thinking that maybe yes, this might be a thing I can do.

“Would that be OK? I’d like to see you sometime when I’m not working.” *OK, this is definitely flirting.* Is it? No, he’s grieving, right? I can’t think straight for all these mixed signals, but do you know what? Fuck it. It has been nearly a year. If nothing else, I’ll have a lovely meal and it will get Hattie and Megan off my back with their nagging.

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“Do you want a lift home?” he passes his keys back and forward between his hands. “My car is just out on the street.”

“I like to walk, actually.”

“OK. Will you text me when you get home safe?”

“Sure.”

I can’t stop smiling. We head off in opposite directions and I practically sail home.

Chapter 9

Kara

“SHIT, I COMPLETELY FORGOT to ask,” Hattie mumbles through a mouthful of noodles that she’s trying to swallow as fast as she can. “Did you ever text that Luke bloke?”

Here we go. “I did.”

“*Ahhh!*” they both shriek at the same time. I love and hate the shrieking. It’s extremely uncomfortable to hear, but super cute that they both do it without warning at exactly the same time, at exactly the same pitch. They’re sitting across from me around my coffee table and I now feel like I’m being interviewed.

“And did he text you back?” Megan probes.

“He did.” I pretend to scratch my cheek and cover my mouth to hide my smile.

“Stop being so cagey!” Hattie leans across the table and pokes me in the arm with a chopstick. I know I’m being cagey. Talking to him has been the highlight of my week, and I feel a bit like if I talk about it out loud I’ll burst the bubble.

“There’s not much to tell. I texted him, he replied. Then I replied, and he replied and I replied and so on and so forth. You know how texting works.”

“Yes but what did he say?” Megan pleads.

“Honestly, not that much. I sent him some book recommendations, and he’s been sending me his thoughts as he reads them.”

“Thoughts? Sexy thoughts? Oh my God. Did he send you a dick pic?” Hattie is wide-eyed. “Please show me the dick pics!”

“Please tell me he did not send you photos of his penis. That is extremely not good Book Boyfriend behaviour.” Megan always has my back. “Unless you consensually requested them during a mutual exchange, of course.”

“Calm yourselves. He did not send me dick pics and nor did I request them.”

A silence falls between the three of us and I look up from my plate to see the two of them making weird eyes at each other. They look like they’re either failing miserably at a staring contest or trying to seduce each other, but something tells me it’s neither.

I swallow a forkful of sticky rice and look back and forth between their faces. “What are you two doing?”

“Um...” says Hattie, turning to face me. “We have a confession to make.” These two are terrible at keeping secrets, so whatever they’ve been trying their darndest to communicate

telepathically, it won't be good. I tip my head backwards and let out a long, slow sigh.

“What have you done?”

“You can't be mad at us,” she says and I narrow my glare, willing her to spill the beans, but she's a shrewd opponent and looks around the room, anywhere but at me. Megan is no match, though. She'd make a terrible hostage. I genuinely don't think her brain contains the parts that make you capable of lying.

“We went to see him,” she blurts out, clamping her hands over her mouth with a squeak.

Oh, for God's sake. These beautiful, precious, infuriating meddlers. “What do you mean, you went to see him?”

“We went to Sunshine today so we could check him out,” Megan answers like she's been called to the headteacher's office for a bollocking.

“When?”

“This morning,” she says in her most apologetic voice. “We just wanted to see what he looked like and make sure he wasn't a psychopath serial killer.”

“Of course he's not a psychopath serial killer.”

“Babes, he is hot,” Hattie chimes in, refilling my wine. “You downplayed the scenario. He is *Fuck. Ing. Hot*. At least, we assume it was him. He was the only guy working there. You should shag him.”

“Hattie, if you think he’s so hot, you shag him,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“I could never shag him. He seems like a nice man. I would ruin his life.” She raises her glass in a toast to herself and I burst out laughing. Hattie has never dated seriously and shown no desire to. In our early twenties, Adam tried to set her up with a couple of his mates and it always ended with them crying and moaning to him about how much they wanted to be with her, but she’d never commit. We started calling her The Life Ruiner, and the reputation stuck.

“Do you want to shag him, Kara?” Even the word shag sounds so improper from Megan’s pure mouth, and from across the table I can see her face flush.

“I don’t even really know him,” I shrug. “How can I possibly answer that question?”

“Well, do you at least want to see him again?” says Hattie.

“I saw him today, actually.” They both perk up like meerkats. *Shit. Why did I let that one spill?*

“What, in the street?” Megan asks.

“No, I saw him at the coffee shop. I popped in after work and we had a chat.”

“Like a date?”

“No, not like a date. Like two people having a cuppa and a chat. I’m surprised I didn’t catch you both there peering through the window like a pair of sneaky pervs.”

“Are you going to ask him out?” Hattie presses.

I can feel myself blushing now. “No, absolutely not.”

“Kara, *please* ask him on a date. You need this.” Megan is in a begging position too now.

“*We* need this. You know we need our romance fix through you. I only shag emotionally unavailable men and Megan, well...” Hattie screws up her face. “What is your situation at the moment right now, Megs?”

“Dormant,” she says, and Hattie and I snort laughing. “Don’t be mean. I’m just taking some time to figure things out.”

After getting semi-serious with someone for a couple of years after uni, Megan had a string of short-term boyfriends before dating an older man called Max. It ended when Max moved back to Australia and it’s left her unsure of what to do next. He keeps hinting he’ll be back in the UK, but I’ll believe it when I see it.

“We love you.” I lean over the coffee table and press a kiss to her hand. “We’re here for your dormantness. Dormancy? Dormanting?”

“Anyway, stop changing the subject.” She gives me a gentle slap on the cheek. “Please, can you ask Luke out and just go on one teeny tiny date with him.”

“No. Stop it. I will not ask him out.” They both do the exact same groan out loud and flop backwards onto the sofa. I swear

if you only knew these two by the noises they make, you'd think they were the same person.

I let them languish a moment before covering my ears and dropping my truth bomb as fast as I can. "But I am seeing him again next week."

As expected, they jump up and down like they've won the lottery and I feel guilty for talking about Luke this way. I'm having those funny little flutters in my tummy that I have every time he texts me, but there's also been a heavy feeling since he told me about his wife.

"I have to tell you something, though."

"You kissed him?" they both squeal.

"No. Please calm down. This is a serious thing. Two things actually."

"OK sorry, best behaviour," Hattie throws me her butter-wouldn't-melt face.

"One, he's asked me to run a book club at the coffee shop."

"Oooh," they say in unison, and I'm reminded of those little green aliens in Toy Story.

"I love that for you," Megan claps her hands together. "We'll come!"

"Great, good to know, still working out the details. The second thing..." I feel bad even talking about it. It's not my story to tell, but it feels pretty important to mention. "He also

told me he was married, and that his wife died a couple of years ago, of cancer.”

“*Shit,*” Hattie says.

“Oh no, how awful.” Hands on her heart, Megan looks genuinely upset. “That poor man.”

“Yeah, I mean, really awful. I didn’t know what to say.” We are all quiet for a moment. “So, while I have been enjoying talking to him, and I have arranged to meet up with him next week, can we please put an end to all this shagging chat because one, he’s grieving, and two, if I’m going to run a book club at his place I’m going to need to keep it friendly and professional. OK?”

“OK,” says Hattie, “Boring, but OK.”

“Please, Hattie, please don’t harass me about dating. I don’t want to do it, and if I do, I’ll do it in my own time. I promise you’ll both be the first to know.”

We settle into the sofa and hit play on *It’s Complicated*, but we’ve all had a busy week and the girls drift off before the end of the movie. I take myself off to my own bed feeling restless. I try reading but I can’t seem to concentrate, so I grab my notebook and start writing out book club ideas.

I know Luke probably wasn’t flirting today, but I do hope we can be friends. The sad truth is, beyond Megan and Hattie, I don’t have that many close people in my life. Adam was well and truly my other half and, even though I’ve always found that expression weird, it definitely applied to us. We were

together every single day for over a decade. I can count on one hand the number of nights we spent apart. I used to say that with pride, but now I think maybe it wasn't such a good thing that my whole life was wrapped up with his.

Our friends were all mutual ones from our school days, but over time, lots of them moved away, and we never went out and met anyone new. After he left, some of those people got in touch, but not many. I came to realise they were more 'say hello in the street' people than 'we'll help you pick up the pieces of your smashed and ruined life' people.

I thank my lucky stars that Hattie and Megan both ended up living back here after they finished uni, or I'd have nobody. Megan teaches English at a local school, and Hattie works for a marketing agency. She used to commute into London but now she works half the week from home, which is great for me because it means I've got a lunch buddy on days when I'm not run off my feet. They share a flat on the other side of town close to Megan's work, but they feel like my housemates too with the amount of time they spend here.

It would be nice to have a new friend. Someone else to hang out with and chat to about stuff that isn't just me whinging on about my broken heart. Luke seems like he could use a friend too, I think.

At some point, I fall asleep with my phone in my hand. I don't realise it at the time, but it's the first night in months I go to sleep without looking at photos of Adam.

Chapter 10

Luke

WHEN I GOT HOME last night I had my call with Granny Annie, then went straight to bed so I could be fresh for Saturday, always our busiest day in the coffee shop. I don't plan to work every weekend, but while we're still getting up and running, I want to be around and on top of things. Right now I'm there most days, but it's good to keep busy. I don't have much else to do, except read Kara's book recommendations, which this week have been exactly the escape from reality she promised they'd be.

The cafe was so much busier than I expected today with customers sitting in, and queuing out the door for takeaway. I heard a few people mention they'd seen Sunshine Coffee on Kara's Instagram, which made me feel weirdly proud to know her. When I have a minute, I take a photo of a freshly poured cappuccino and upload it to the account she set up for me even though I have no idea what I'm doing. She'll probably tell me I've done it wrong, but I love that she's so no-nonsense and just tells it like it is. I'm just about to put my phone away when I see a notification that she's commented on my post.

Kara Wilson Interiors: my favourite! Can't wait for my next visit to Sunshine Coffee.

I don't stop smiling for the rest of my shift. It's not until I get home and stretch out on the sofa with a beer and start thinking about dinner next week that I freak out. I don't know what I'm doing, but I do know a guy who I hope can help me, or at least calm me down, so I pull up our chat.

Luke: Kara's coming over

Rob: Book babe?

Luke: Her name is Kara

Rob: You need a chat?

Luke: YES

He video calls me in seconds. I answer from my spot on the sofa and fill him in.

"I met her in the coffee shop, she gave me some book recommendations, we've been texting, I've asked her to run a book club, she's coming over for dinner to talk about how it will all work. That's it."

"Nice one mate, book club is a great way to pick up women." Rob is a perpetual bachelor with a knack for meeting women wherever he goes. You name it, he's done it. He's on every app going, and I don't think he ever sees the same woman twice. Last month, he hooked up with a woman he met in A&E after he rolled his ankle at 5-a-side football.

Apparently, she was more than happy to nurse him back to health. He's propped his phone up in his bathroom while he preens in the mirror.

"Please help me. I don't know what I'm doing and I'm starting to feel like it's a terrible idea."

"Take a breath, mate. What time is she coming over?" he asks.

"Next Saturday. We haven't set a time yet."

"Oh, you've got ages. I thought you meant she was coming tonight." I watch as he drops globs of some sort of lotion onto his forehead and cheeks before rubbing them in. "What are you going to cook?"

"I haven't thought about it."

"Just pick something simple that you can prepare in advance and then put in the oven, so you don't spend all the time she's there busy with cooking. Lasagne, risotto, your Granny's stew would all be good. Get a couple of bottles of wine in, and some of those fancy soft drinks too, in case she doesn't drink."

I grab a pen and paper from the little drawer compartment in my coffee table and start writing all of this down.

"But nothing too stodgy," he jumps in. "Nobody likes to fuck on a full stomach."

My face scrunches up and I pinch the bridge of my nose. I'd hoped he wouldn't go there, but since this is the first woman I've even mentioned since Heather, I shouldn't be surprised.

“What conversation topics have you got up your sleeve?”
His moisturiser goes on next.

“Um, book club. That’s it.”

“What do you know about this woman?”

“Not much. She’s an interior designer, she loves reading, her ex left her a year ago.”

“OK, so ask her about herself, what she likes, what she dislikes, what she wants out of life and all that. Do not ask about the ex. And don’t talk about Heather,” he says. “No offence mate, but that shit won’t get you laid.”

When he sprays on aftershave I can practically smell it through the phone.

“I haven’t invited her over to have sex. And she knows about Heather already.”

“In all seriousness though, Luke...” Uh-oh, he’s got his dad voice on now. “Please make sure you buy condoms.”

“Condoms? What the fuck? She’s just coming over for dinner. I’m not buying condoms.” I can’t even remember the last time I bought condoms. Heather was on the pill when we needed it. I probably only ever used the free condoms they handed out in the one sex education class we had. I know I’m a grown man, but the thought of going into a shop and buying condoms and basically declaring “I’m having sex tonight!” brings me out in a cold sweat.

“Trust me,” he laughs. “Worst-case scenario, they sit in your drawer until they expire. But don’t let them expire. I’ll use

them.” He must surely have shares in Durex by this point. “Get some just in case, then if you want them, you’ve got them.”

I begrudgingly write ‘C’ on the list.



Do I want to have sex with Kara? My gut reaction was no, but now I’m wondering why I was so quick to say that. It’s been such a long time since I’ve touched someone, or been touched in that way.

Memories of sex with Heather are more painful than hot, unfortunately. She was always beautiful to me, but her cancer took so much from her, including her energy, her sex drive, and her confidence. There were nights we spent hours trying to find a way to make her comfortable, her mind battling with her body, wanting to have that connection despite being in pain. We talked about it a lot. There was never any pressure from me, but I know she felt like a failure sometimes. As a woman, as a wife. Her body betrayed her. I still hate that I couldn’t give her what she wanted.

Mostly we’d just lay naked, stroking wherever felt right under warm blankets. It was everything. Not sexual, but out of this world in its own way. Our bodies pressed together, breathing together, living together while we still could. Her heart fighting to keep her here, mine fighting to keep from smashing into pieces.

In her last days, Heather made me promise her three things. She wanted me to follow my dreams, but I had no idea what I wanted except some magic way to turn back time and live my life with her all over again. We'd always dreamed of a life of adventure together, and then so many of those dreams got put on hold. Rounds and rounds of treatment meant it was impossible to make plans. We never knew how she would be feeling, and I hated to see her disappointed. We tried all that bucket list crap, but the list got smaller and smaller until none of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was that I stayed by her side.

After months stuck at home grieving, I realised the best I could dream up was a small and simple life, but one where I wasn't lonely. I'd cut myself off from everyone, but I needed to be around people. I sold our house, downsized to this place a couple of towns over, and took out a lease on the old haberdashers. Then I spent a few months making loose plans for Sunshine Coffee and trying not to shit myself. Was going from not leaving the house to renovating a building and starting a new business with zero expertise a good idea? Well, today I'll say yes, but there were definitely a lot of stressful moments along the way.

Heather also made me promise I'd laugh every day, and that one's really bloody hard. She used to say my laugh was her favourite thing about me, but for a long time I didn't think I'd be able to laugh at anything ever again. Other people laughing felt like an insult. How could people laugh when my wife is dead?

The third promise feels more like a curse the longer it goes unfulfilled. It's been two and a bit years since she died. I've heard stories of people who remarry six months later, and stories of folks who live out the rest of their days alone. There doesn't seem to be a normal amount of time for 'moving on'. Whatever that means.

When she told me about the promises, I walked outside in tears and threw up in a bush in the hospice garden. I could see she was trying to be sweet and gentle about it, but then she didn't hold back. She said I shouldn't feel guilty about having sex, should have lots of it to make up for all I've missed out on, should make an entire brood of babies. As if I could think about any of that when I was only thinking about the time we had left together. Every day, every hour, every minute, was a gift we didn't think we'd ever get.

Even the idea of being with someone else is terrifying. Heather is the only person I've ever slept with, so I don't exactly have a bank of experiences to conjure up if the mood to get off strikes. And it doesn't strike often. Depression and grief will do that to you. Infrequent forays into online porn have alternated between bleak and terrifying. I don't really feel attracted to anyone, haven't really allowed myself to think about women in that way.

Does that mean I'll never have sex again? I guess I assumed I would eventually, and maybe that point is nearer than I thought. The idea of having sex with someone new is terrifying, but somehow the idea of being celibate forever is even worse.

Halfway through Kara's next book recommendation, I decide that maybe I do want to have sex. It's just sex, isn't it? It doesn't have to be a big deal. If the characters in a book can be so laid back and casual about it, maybe I can too. Though obviously it will only happen if she's keen, and I've no idea where her head is at.

Jesus, the stuff they get up to in these books. It's probably not even that wild, and I'm just being naive about what people get up to behind closed doors, but I've been thinking about sex more in the past two weeks than I have in a long time.

When Kara texts to tell me she's looking forward to dinner and to ask if she can bring anything, I feel like a teenage boy anticipating how our evening might go. Something about her has woken all of those emotions up again, even though it's hard to feel these things without immediately feeling a rush of guilt and sadness.

I'm still way too embarrassed to buy condoms, though. I tried to in the supermarket, but then I saw a customer I recognised from Sunshine turn down the aisle so I put them back. In the end, I buy them online and shove them in the back of my bedside drawer. I feel guilty for even thinking about it.

Chapter 11

Kara

I HAVE NEVER BEEN this nervous in my life. My hand trembles when I open Luke's garden gate. Steeling myself like I'm arriving for a job interview, I'm mortified when he opens the door before I've even knocked. Either he was watching for me out of the window, or he could hear me doing a terrible job of closing the gate which, unbearably, I still seem to be struggling with.

"Just leave it," he calls from the doorway where he's leaning against the frame with a tea towel flung over his shoulder, looking every bit the modern domesticated romance hero. "The latch is really tricky."

"Oh great, cool." *What the fuck is cool about not being able to close a gate, Kara, you moron?*

My face goes red and he must notice when he greets me with a peck on the cheek as I step inside. "You look lovely. Here, let me take your coat."

He hangs it for me while I tug my boots off and set them neatly underneath the coat rack in his hallway. I'm suddenly struck by a feeling that it's bizarre to have a dinner date at

someone's house in just your socks and no shoes. It almost feels too personal. Perhaps I should have brought my slippers like when I go home to my mum and dad's house.

No, as strange as it is to be walking through his home in socks, it probably would be weirder to have turned up with my own slippers. What kind of message does that send? Hi, I'm moving in!

I need to stop overthinking this. I don't even know if this is actually a date, but I've been a bundle of anxious energy today. Hattie left before breakfast to go for a run, and Megan left straight after she'd finished eating. I'd hoped to spend the day reading and relaxing before tonight, but I couldn't concentrate at all. After reading the same page three times, I decided to sort out my bookcases which meant pulling everything off the shelves, cleaning and reorganising.

Halfway through I felt exhausted and took a little nap but made the error of getting under my covers which turned a short nap into a proper sleep. I woke up around 4pm and wanted to punch myself when reality hit. I still needed to finish re-shelving all the books I'd painstakingly removed earlier.

By the time I reorganised it, there wasn't long to get ready to see Luke. To be honest, that was probably a good thing, or I'd have overdone it with the pampering and preening and turned up looking ridiculous. Instead, I had a quick shower and blow dried, then straightened my hair. I put a touch more make-up on than usual and tried on two dresses before

changing into dark jeans, pairing them with a loose fitting white t-shirt that I've tucked in at one side. I'm glad I opted for casual because he's done the same; dark jeans, a white t-shirt, and a checked shirt unbuttoned at the front. *We look so good together.*

Luke and I haven't texted as much this week, but when we have, it's been fun and playful. I'm like a perky little puppy every time I see a notification from him, but I still don't know what tonight means to him.

Even though I downplayed this dinner to Hattie and Megan, I am thinking of it as a date. I haven't had sex in almost a year, which I've been fine with, but I'm no nun. It is a bit of an injustice. Not that there'll be sex on the agenda tonight. I'm here to make a good impression and talk about the book club and that's it. Or is it? *Gah! I don't know!* My stomach is churning. It's exciting, I just wish I knew what he is thinking about tonight. About me. About us.

"I brought you a present," I say, handing him my gift, which he unwraps immediately.

"Thank you so much. You didn't have to do that."

"It's the first *Ice Kings* book. If you like it, you can borrow the rest from me."

"Hmmm, *Ice Kings*," he says, his mouth pressed into a tight pout. "Viking romance?"

"Ice Hockey," I laugh, though to be fair, the semi naked man with the beard and flowing locks on the cover doesn't

give it away.

I follow Luke along his hallway and through to the kitchen, where I try not to look too obvious about checking out his place. This room is gorgeous. Generously extended into the garden with a huge skylight, I already know it must be stunning in full daylight. The kitchen cooker, sink, and cabinets line one wall, a big central island houses more cupboards and drawers, and I can see he's been prepping ahead of our meal. Over to my left is his large dining table, then further through the space there is a huge open living area, with a grey corner sofa positioned perfectly to watch the setting sun.

“Would you like something to drink? I've got wine, beer, soft drinks, tea, coffee... water?”

A drink would really take the edge off my nerves, but I don't want to look like a lush. “What are you drinking?”

“I was thinking red wine with dinner.”

“Red would be lovely, thank you.” I hover while he fetches two glasses from the open shelving and uncorks a bottle.

“Take a seat and I'll bring it over.” I notice he's set two places at one end of the table, and he's lit candles. *Candles say date, right?*

The solid dining table reminds me of a scene in the banquet hall in *Taken by Night*, and I immediately think about having sex on it.

I cross my legs and regain my composure, taking the seat facing the kitchen so I can check out more of his place. The wall behind me is exposed brick, though I think it must be brickslips rather than original, as this part of the room would have been in the original house and they're neater than decades of wear and tear would leave them. On the wall, he's hung three large framed black and white photographs; a sunset, a valley, and a tree. I wonder if it's the same tree as his tattoo.

"Your place is beautiful, Luke. How long have you been here?" I ask when he hands me my wine and takes the other seat.

"Well, welcome, it's lovely to have you here. Cheers!" he raises his glass, and we lock eyes as we clink them together and take a first sip. It's seriously excellent wine, bold and spicy and I know I'm going to enjoy every drop. "I moved in at the start of the year."

"Did you do the renovations yourself?"

"Oh no, the people before me did all of this. After I sold my old house, I just wanted a smaller place where I could move straight in and not do anything. Are you judging it?" The accusation makes me laugh.

"Occupational hazard, I'm afraid. I'm always checking out people's houses. I love seeing how differently they approach renovations and decor. They've done a lovely job here. This space is impressive, I bet it's great for entertaining."

“Ha, everybody says that.” His smile drops. “Can’t say I’ve been doing too much of it, though.”

“No?”

“My friend Rob is the only person I really know here, but we grew up half an hour away, so I go back a lot to visit my Granny. How long have you lived here?”

“My whole life. My folks live up near the garden centre.”

“You didn’t go away for uni or anything?”

“No, that wasn’t really for me. I used to work weekends with Dad in a timber merchants, and then after school I got a full-time job but still lived at home while we saved up for a deposit. After I renovated my house, I did an evening course and then started doing interiors stuff.” I’m talking way too much, and he’s just nodding along. “What about you?”

“Well, my mum and I lived with my Granny and Grandad when I was a kid. Mum’s a doctor. She got pregnant just after her medical training and my dad was never on the scene. Mum moved back home so they could help look after me while she worked. They owned the village pub, so I worked my way up in the kitchen there.”

“Wow, I bet you’ve got some great stories from there.”

“Yeah, I really loved it. Definitely thought I had a career ahead of me, but then my Grandad died around the same time that Heather got sick. Granny sold the pub and gave us the money so we could concentrate on getting Heather better,

which, you know... she didn't. And that's my whole miserable life story."

"I'm so sorry Luke. That's such a shit ride."

"It's OK. It's good to get through that bit fast," he says, taking a slow drink from his glass. "I'm grateful for what I had."

I don't want him to feel sad so after a long pause I change the subject to the real reason I'm here tonight. "So have you had many thoughts about the book club?"

"I've actually had such a busy week, thanks to your Instagram recommendation, I've not had much of a chance to be honest. Though the only thing I was thinking is that maybe Wednesday is a good night for it?"

"Wednesday is what I was thinking too!" He looks relieved that I agree. "It's the perfect night. Not much else going on, but far enough into the week that people might want to do something rather than stay in and watch telly. And I was thinking 7:30pm might be a good time to start? And maybe do it on the first Wednesday of each month, so it's easy to keep track?"

"OK, first Wednesday it is. I mentioned it to Jo and Katy who work at Sunshine. I think you've met them? They were both keen to join, so we'll all be there."

"Oh, lovely." I can't remember who I've met, but I'll attempt to introduce myself properly next time I visit. "One

thing I was wondering is how many people do you think you can fit in?”

“Capacity is probably fifty. I was thinking we could move all tables and chairs so they’re all facing up the back end and you could host from there?”

“That sounds good. So if it’s OK with you, I think we should just promote it with posters in the cafe and through your social media. I would share it on my account, but then there is a risk that more than 50 people turn up and I want it to be a Sunshine Coffee thing rather than a Kara Wilson thing.”

“It’s still so weird to me that you’re internet famous. Does it freak you out?”

“Not too much. I have such a supportive audience, and I’ve been able to grow my business because of them. I try not to share too much really personal stuff any more, or sometimes a handful of people get a bit too invested.”

“Like stalkers?” He looks concerned.

“No, nothing that bad. More just that sometimes people think they know you more than they actually do, if that makes sense? They have a lot of opinions about how you should live your life.”

We talk about the highs and lows of social media a little more while he takes food out of the oven and plates up a starter for us both. I try to keep my face straight even though inside I’m absolutely fawning at how gorgeous he looks, so at ease in his kitchen. I’ve only ever spent time with him in the

coffee shop, so I'm enjoying seeing him in a different light. Sat across from him at his dining table, I can see he has these tiny little flecks in one of his irises, a touch darker than the rest. I'm captivated, could spend hours mapping them.

Our first course is a little roasted pepper, aubergine and goat cheese tart and it is so good.

"Did you make this?" I ask once I've finished my first mouthful. I'm such a sloppy eater, so I make an effort to remember my manners.

"I did."

"It's delicious."

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it."

"You're an excellent cook."

"I lost my way with it for a while. Once I was on my own, I realised it would be a miserable life if I only ate toast for the rest of my days, so I challenged myself to make one new dish a week and it rekindled my love of food and cooking. The pub restaurant was all classic British food, so it's been good to get out of my comfort zone. I'm just glad I've got someone to share it with tonight." We smile across our wine glasses when we both lift them at the same time.

"I'll be round every night if you always cook like this." He laughs and shakes his head as he eats a little more. I really like making him laugh.

"Do you cook much?" he asks.

“I used to more than I do now. I’ve found it really hard to adapt to cooking for one, you know?”

“I know what you mean. I hate waste, and not everything works well as leftovers. A lot of times I’ve ended up eating two dinners by myself.”

“What’s the best thing you’ve made?”

“Well, I’m hoping it’s our next course.”

I’ve only eaten two things he’s made so far, and I can safely say our main course *is* one of the best things I’ve ever eaten. Hearty lasagna, rich, perfectly seasoned, and neither of us speaks much because it’s so delicious we can’t stop eating.

“So do you have a suggestion for a first book?” he asks as he finishes his plate.

“I have a few ideas actually, let me get my journal.” I dab my mouth with my napkin and get up from the table. My bag is out in the hallway with my coat, and I use this opportunity to take a deep breath and double check myself in the large mirror hung along one wall. Hair looks OK, makeup is still in place, nothing in my teeth. *I’m doing fine. I’m not messing this up.*

When I get back to the table, Luke pulls my chair around so I’m sitting at the end rather than opposite him, and I open up my journal to flick through the pages.

“This is really cool,” he says, admiring the pages I’ve filled so far. “Talk me through it.”

“It’s just a place I like to keep a record of what I’ve been reading, ratings for each book, a little review, favourite quotes and stuff like that. Then every month I pick a favourite and I use this page...” I turn a few until I find it, “to keep a log of my favourites and all my five-star reads.”

I suddenly feel really embarrassed. My book journal goes everywhere with me and while he knows I’m a reader, he doesn’t know I’m this nerdy about it. And some things I’ve written in here are a tad spicy to be sharing on a first date that may not even be a date at all. I rifle through the pages a little more quickly to get us back on track. “And then this is where I’ve captured all of my book club ideas.”

“Wait, go back,” he tugs the journal towards him and flicks back a page or two. “What’s this?”

I want to disappear underneath the table. The page he’s pointing to is, as it’s clearly labelled at the top, my Best Book Boyfriends page. The page where I list my top tier romance heroes, why I love them, and - *and this is the worst part* - quotes of the hottest things they say in my books. I know much of it from memory, there is a lot of filth and right now I really don’t want Luke to be reading any of that. Partly because it makes me look like a love-struck teenager, partly in case I give him the impression that’s what I am looking for in a man. Not that I’m looking for a man, but I still don’t want him to know.

“OK, this is amazing. Explain.”

“Ugh.” I bury my face in my hands. “It says what it says.” I tug it back from him and go back to the book club page. “I feel like you’re reading my teenage diary.”

“Best Book Boyfriends, huh.” He leans away, his forearms resting on the table in front of him. “I’m curious to know how they make the cut?”

I take a deep breath and swallow my shame. “Various reasons. Sometimes it’s to do with their personality, sometimes it’s the things they do, or the things they say.”

“What kind of things?” He’s sitting back in his chair, head tilted just ever so slightly, and I have the urge to climb into his lap.

“It’s hard to explain. There are just some books where the guy really does it for me more than others. They have a good vibe, they’re caring, open and honest, enthusiastic when it comes to... you know.”

“No, I don’t know.” He shakes his head slowly and bites the side of his lip, trying not to smile.

“Sex.” I cough awkwardly to clear my throat. “Generally, I find that nice, kind men who turn feral are my weakness. In books. They’re the ones who make the cut. Bonus points if they have a way with words.”

I know Luke is nice, and I know he is kind, but now all I can do is wonder if he has a feral side.

“Duly noted.” *Is he flirting with me? What does that mean?*
“Is Anders on this list?”

Anders Pinewood is the hero from *Up In The Air*, a book I recommended when I saw him last week. He's a pilot who flies private jets all over the world, sleeping with his famous and wealthy clients but always pining for the best friend he never gets home to see. I didn't know Luke had started it yet.

"Oh Anders Pinewood is *definitely* on this list."

"I just finished it this afternoon. What a life that man lived," he chuckles knowingly, and I wonder which scene he's thinking about. "Hey, you lied to me."

"What?" My face burns. "What have I lied about?"

"You said you weren't reading porn in my cafe and everything you've sent me so far has been extremely dirty, Kara."

"Oh wow," I laugh, somehow relieved and mortified all at once. "OK, I didn't realise you were a prude. I'll tone it down with my next recommendations."

"Oh no, please don't. I'm rather enjoying them." What does he mean he's enjoying them? Is he *enjoying* them the way I *enjoy* romance novels? Late at night with my hand for company? My thighs instinctively press together and I stop breathing for a moment. "So, tell me a bit more about what you do when you're not working or reading?"

I'm grateful for a reprieve from what I am now certain is flirting. If this isn't flirting, God help me if someone ever does flirt with me. I will just combust on the spot. "Not a lot, to be honest. Mine is one of those jobs where I'm always coming up

with ideas for my clients or looking for inspiration. I don't exactly clock off at five and stop thinking about it. Maybe you're the same with Sunshine?"

"Yes, definitely. Even if I'm not there, it's on my mind, but that's a good thing because it keeps me from getting in my head too much."

"That's what reading does for me. It's my favourite way to distract myself and unwind. And then, I've got two best friends who I see a lot."

"Local?"

"Yep. Hattie and Megan. We've known each other since secondary school and they share a flat in that building above the supermarket."

"I know the place. That's lovely that you've been friends for so long."

"Yeah, and they're brilliant. I don't know what I'd do without them. They come and stay over on Friday nights, and then we take a lot of day trips to places depending on where the mood takes us."

"Well, I look forward to meeting them sometime."

"I think you already have, actually." I don't catch myself in time.

"I have?"

"Well, I mean," *oh no, what are you saying Kara.* "They've been to Sunshine. I told them about it and they've been in for

coffee. I think.”

“Oh, so you’ve talked to your friends about me?” He raises his eyebrows and I lose the ability to speak entirely. *No. Yes. You’re so hot. I don’t know.* What even are words? Did my stomach just fall out of my bum?

“I, er, might have mentioned you once, maybe.”

“I’m just teasing.” *I love it. Please tease me every day for the rest of my life.* “Are you ready for dessert?”

“Yes, please.”

“And a top up?” I nod my approval, and he busies himself in the kitchen. I’ve left my phone in my bag, but I wish I had it here so I could send a thousand screaming emojis to the girls. Instead, I take a few deep breaths and try not to look like my brain is on fire.

Luke returns carrying two little dishes, each with a chocolate brownie and a spoonful of vanilla ice-cream. We dig right in. This is the nicest dinner I’ve had in ages. Nicest evening I’ve had in ages, and I’m so glad it’s with him.

“What is this on top?” I ask, unable to finish my first mouthful before speaking.

“Extra virgin olive oil and sea salt.”

“Why is this so good? It doesn’t feel like it should work, but it’s incredible.”

“I don’t know. We served them this way at the pub and I’ve never made them any other way.” The flavour combination is

so intense that the next noise that comes out of my mouth is basically pornographic and we're both doing that looking at each other, smiling, looking away and looking back thing. I am giddy and I don't think I can entirely blame it on the wine.

The rest of dinner passes with comfortable ease as we talk about work, our friends, our families a little more. I try not to fawn too hard, but he really is so lovely.

"So I'm curious to know..." he takes a sip of wine, turning into the king of dramatic pauses. I tense up, wondering what he's about to ask. "Have you dated at all since your ex left?"

I guess it was going to come up at some point. And I would like to know where his head is at too. "No. I'm really nervous about it. And besides, I don't think I want to. I'm basically sworn off men for the foreseeable." *Except you. I think I would un-swear off men for you, Luke.* But that's not me talking. That's Main Character talk. I don't have the confidence in myself to say those things out loud.

"I'm nervous too."

"I think I'm *more* nervous. It's really embarrassing to be my age and admit that I've only ever had one relationship. Only ever been with one person. I think I'd be eaten alive on the dating scene. Not in a dark romance way either." *Jesus, maybe I have had too much wine. He must wish he'd never invited me over.*

"You've not had any rebound flings?" A ridiculous giggle escapes me. The idea is entirely laughable.

“Absolutely not. I’ve not tried to meet anyone, and I’m not a one-night stand kind of girl. The last time I had sex was over a year ago. I’m so worried that if someone tried it on with me, I’d be really rubbish and then they wouldn’t want to see me again.” *TMI Kara.*

“I’ve only ever been with one person, too. And the last time I had sex was long before she died. Trust me, I feel just as out of practice. I think I’ve accepted the fact that the first time will probably be terrible, and I just have to hope it will improve from there.”

“Do you miss sex?” I ask, a little too bluntly. Luke shifts awkwardly in his chair. “Sorry, that’s probably too personal. Romance books have given me zero filter.” *Good save Kara. Blame the books.*

“It’s OK,” he says, taking a big gulp. “I guess I do miss it, but I don’t think about it too much. I never wanted to be with anyone except Heather, so when she died, it’s a bit like my sex drive did too.”

I’m relieved to hear it, because I feel a similar way. Reading spicy books turns me on, but the desire to involve anyone else in that process? Adam took it with him when he left.

“I can relate. I had a weird sense of pride that Adam and I were each other’s first and only sexual partner. Well, at least he was mine.” My words fall from my lips and my eyes must glaze over as I pick at the edge of my thumbnail. “I feel like I’ve literally forgotten what to do with a penis.”

Luke almost spits out his drink. “OK. We’re definitely not having sex tonight.”

My face flushes beetroot red.

“That was a joke.” He sits bolt upright, pushing his glasses up onto his head as he covers his face with hands. “I’m so sorry. That was a stupid joke. Can we pretend I didn’t say that? I’m mortified. I didn’t invite you here for sex.” *Oh. OK then.*

I watch him readjust his glasses, get himself back together. He’s very cute when he’s bashful.

“Although...” he says, tentatively, “I’d have thought you’d know better than most, given how much romance you read.”

“That’s the thing. These books are written by women, for women, so although there is a lot in there that seems really hot, I wouldn’t know the first thing about what men want in bed.”

“I feel the same way. About women.”

I take another drink and hold his gaze as I raise one eyebrow. “No late stage bisexual awakening?”

“Don’t think so. If it’s happening, it hasn’t hit me yet. *Roomies* was pretty great though. I don’t think I’d have read a book with two male leads if you hadn’t recommended it.”

“What can I say? Love is love. It doesn’t matter to me who’s doing the loving. In books.”

“In books.” He nods slowly, rubbing the pads of his fingers back and forth along the base of his wine glass.

“So I’ve told you about my Best Book Boyfriends, tell me what you look for in a woman?” I chance it, taking what I hope is a seductive sip of my wine.

“You seem to be under the impression I’ve been looking.” Ah. So I *am* entirely deluded. He takes a deep breath. “In all seriousness, Heather and I met as kids. I only had eyes for her, it’s been a bit of an adjustment getting used to being a single man. I can’t imagine myself getting into another relationship.”

“I feel a similar way. I still can’t really wrap my head around the fact that I’m not in a relationship anymore.”

“Do you want to be single forever, then?”

I’ve never really thought about it that way, so I just sit for what feels like a very long minute. “The last year has been rough. I think when you’ve been with someone for so long, it’s hard to imagine yourself with anyone else. I’ve always done everything with a plan, then the plan just ended without warning.”

“You don’t really strike me as the reckless type.”

“God no, I’ve never been reckless. Are you?”

“Definitely not. Opening Sunshine is probably one of the most reckless things I’ve ever done, but even that had months of planning so hardly the dictionary definition of the word.”

“I don’t even know what recklessness would feel like. My heart is thumping at the thought.”

“OK, so imagine you’re in a book,” he says, sitting up and leaning closer towards me. “What would you do if you were

reckless, even just for one day?”

“If I was in a book?”

“Yeah. What kind of main character would you be?” *Oh boy.*

“Luke, this is *such* a good question. OK, let me think.” Memories of my recent reads flash through my mind like a virtual library. I try to recall a book where the main character had a wild streak, but I struggle to pinpoint one that feels quite right. Probably because I’m the opposite of wild.

“I guess I’d be a character who went for whatever she wanted, and didn’t worry about the consequences.”

“Maybe you should try being reckless sometime,” he says, his voice almost taunting. “You’ll be on the first guy that looks your way in a heartbeat.”

Is that what he thinks of me? My face must give me away. “Sorry Kara, I didn’t mean that. Please ignore me, my flirting is atrocious. I apologise.”

So he is flirting with me? Fuck, this is all so confusing. I can only bite my lip as I gather my thoughts and try to keep my brain in the room. There is something so sexy about the way he says, *I apologise*. It makes me want to give him a lot more to be sorry for.

“In books, these women have the confidence to go after what they want, or at least seize opportunities that come their way, and I don’t know what I want, or what I like, or anything

really.” If this *is* a date, I’m doing the worst ever job of selling myself.

“I have an idea,” Luke says. “More wine?”

“Sure.”

He tops up my glass and stands, carrying both over to the sofa. “Come here.”

He pats the cushion in the corner spot, and I feel like an obedient dog when I follow him and sit down. I get comfortable and tuck my feet up, then he pulls a blanket from the back of the sofa and drapes it over me. He grabs another from the back of the armchair before sitting down at the opposite end of the sofa, facing me. We look like we live in a retirement home and I press my lips together, stifling a laugh at the visual.

“You comfy?”

“Yes?” I say, cautiously. “And weirdly nervous. What are we doing?”

“We’re going to play a game.”

“What kind of game?”

“Like a...” he waves his hand back and forth between us, “a getting to know each other game. I’ll ask you a question, and then you answer it, and then you ask me a question.”

“Sexy questions?” *Kara!*

He chokes back a mouthful of his wine. “If those are the sort of questions you want to ask, then go for it. I think maybe

we can help each other figure out what we want.”

“Luke...” I whisper.

“Yes Kara?”

“This is exactly like something a Book Boyfriend would do.”

“I know.”

Chapter 12

Luke

I THINK I WAS on the verge of losing her for a minute there. Her book recommendations have had me thinking about Kara a fair bit this week. Of things I'd like to do with her, to her. It's like the libido switch inside me has been flipped back on. It's not just the books though, there's something about her I'm so drawn to. No, not something, *everything*.

Everything about her is exciting, but the absolute last thing I want to do is rush things or scare her off. And she's been really clear that she's sworn off men, which I completely understand given what happened with her ex. I suppose I just want to get to know her better, even if she feels like she doesn't know herself right now.

"Who's going first?" she asks, pulling her blanket a little higher up. I can tell she's feeling cautious and I should probably start, set the tone.

"I'll go. Do you..." Maybe this was a bad idea. Now I'm struggling to think of interesting questions that won't make me sound like a sleazeball. "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

“Hm,” she glazes over a little and I let her find her words. “I like to think it’s possible. In reality, I was with my ex for such a long time that I’ve never been in a *looking for love* headspace, if that makes sense? Like, I already had love.”

She shifts, tucking her legs further underneath her and smooths the blanket over her lap. “It feels like maybe it’s something that just happens in books? What about you? I don’t think you strike me as a ‘believes in fairytales’ guy.”

I hate what this bastard has done to her. I imagine men eye her up wherever she goes, and he’s made her so miserable she can’t even see it. “Heather and I were friends since we were kids, so it’s hard to say when we fell for each other, we were always just a part of each other’s lives. I guess for me there was never anybody else to have eyes for.”

“That’s really sweet.” She pauses for a moment to consider her next question. “Do you care more about looks or personality?”

“I don’t think I could be attracted to a beautiful person with a shit personality for very long.”

“Good answer. Your turn.”

“Tell me about your favourite Book Boyfriend.”

“Easy,” she laughs. “Matthew Braverman in *Love To Loathe You*.”

“What do you like about him?”

“I mean, he’s super sexy, ambitious, extremely good in bed.” She pauses to bite her lower lip, clearly lost in some

memory from the book. I know what my next book will be. “But I think what I really like about him is that he cares about the heroine, Briony, so much that even though she thinks he’s her enemy, he does all these things behind the scenes to protect her.”

“He sounds like a good guy. What does he do that makes him so good in bed?” She lets out a long slow sigh that gives me goosebumps on the back of my neck.

“Um. There’s this scene where they’re accidentally locked in his office together at a Christmas party. They get drunk on whisky from his desk drawer and... hey! You totally skipped my turn to ask.”

Damn, I wanted to see where that was going. “Oh, you’re gonna leave me hanging?”

“No spoilers! You should just read it.”

“I will. OK, your turn.”

“What’s your ideal first date?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had a first date. You?”

“I don’t know either. Books have probably given me an unrealistic expectation of what a first date would be like. I just think somewhere you can get to know each other a bit better. It doesn’t have to be fancy or extravagant. Do you think you’re a sex on the first date kind of guy?” *Jesus.*

“Again, I have absolutely no idea. I’d need to have a date first to find out.”

She seems deep in thought, swirling her wine around her glass and I can't take my eyes off of her, waiting for her next question even though I know it's my turn. "Is this a date?"
There we go.

"Do you want it to be a date?" I bite back my smile.

"I've never had a first date either."

"You're avoiding the question."

"You avoided it first!" she points accusingly, and I want to grab that finger and pull her into my arms, but I won't step over her boundaries.

"Are you having fun?"

"I am actually, thank you. Right back to the game. Do you hold hands in public?"

"Yes, but only with my Granny Annie." My answer makes the most beautiful smile spread out across her face. I'm glad she's feeling a little more relaxed and enjoying this game as much as I am. I extend my arm across the back of the sofa cushions, half wondering if she'll hold my hand, but she's too far away and I curse myself for not having a smaller sofa.
"Ask me another."

"Do you like kissing?"

"I love kissing. Extremely underrated activity, if you ask me." Right now, all I can think about is pressing my lips to hers, as if that wasn't the first thing on my mind from the moment she walked in the door.

“Adam only really ever kissed me if it was going to lead to sex.” I feel a little gut punch when she says his name. I can’t stand the thought of her with him. “It wasn’t until I started reading romance novels that I realised you can kiss any time you want. Sometimes just kissing can be the end goal.”

“Kara, can you do me a favour?” I’m such an asshole. I can’t believe I’m about to ask her this. “I know Adam is the only guy you’ve been with, so this isn’t really a logical request, but based on what you’ve told me, I don’t want to picture him anywhere near you. Can we leave his name out of this conversation? And I’ll do the same.”

“Of course,” she says with a smile. *Phew.* “Um, tell me what you like about kissing.”

I take a minute to really think about her question. “Well, for one I like that you can do it anywhere. So even if you’re out or in public, you can still be affectionate with each other. The older I get, the more romantic that feels.”

“Oh, so you’re a PDA guy?”

“What’s PDA?”

That earns me the cutest little squeak from Kara. “Public displays of affection.”

I laugh loudly at the suggestion. “I’m not going to dry hump someone in the supermarket, if that’s what you mean, but yeah, I think I’m a pretty affectionate guy. For me kissing, even if it’s just for a couple of seconds, it’s like a secret. I like it when it’s winter and you’re both wrapped up but out

somewhere and you can sneak your hands underneath layers to find skin and know that you both want each other. Nobody else gets to do that, just the person you're with. Do you know what I mean?"

"Uh huh." Her eyes have glazed over a little. "Jesus, you must have been written by a woman." I don't know what that means, but I wonder if she's thinking about touching me in the way I'm thinking about touching her.

Her next question tells me I might be right. "Do you like massages?"

"I like giving them. I'm a little sensitive when it comes to receiving. I end up giggling like a child."

"Where are you sensitive?"

Don't say your dick, Luke. "My neck. This spot here." I stroke the skin in the hollow of my neck. "I'm like putty if you play around there for a bit." She didn't flinch when I said 'you'.

"That's one of my favourite bits. And also I just weirdly like the word *clavicle*. Where else?" We've completely abandoned taking turns with these questions, but I love seeing her ask whatever comes to mind. So emboldened.

I'm feeling bold too, so I lift my t-shirt to show her, and I can't deny that the soft gasp that escapes her mouth is an ego boost. "Ignore the fact that my gym bod is a distant memory, but these bits at the sides are really sensitive."

“Oh shut up, you look great.” She’s gnawing on her knuckle and I’m about to lower my shirt when she says “Can I...?” but cuts herself short.

Watching her hold back is a unique torture, and I’m desperate to know what she wants to say. “Can you what?”

“Can I touch you there?” *Fuck*. All my breath rushes out of me.

“Sure.”

She crawls towards me on the sofa and I relax my back into the armrest, holding my t-shirt up to my chest. Kara reaches her arm out towards me, and I swear I’m going to burst when she softly strokes her fingers over my stomach. My eyes fall shut when she traces down my happy trail and keeps going, but just as I think, hope, pray, that she’s going to hook her fingers inside the waistband of my jeans, she pulls away and puts distance back between us.

“Sorry, I kind of have a thing for stomachs after reading the *Ice Kings* books. You’ll find out soon.” She nods back at the book I’ve left on the dining table.

“No need to apologise.” I swallow thickly and lower my t-shirt again, grateful for the blanket over my lap. I need to calm down, tell my dick to stop embarrassing me, but I don’t want this game to end. I need to know what turns her on, what turns her off, what she wants, all of her deepest fantasies. And I’m having fun, which feels fucking great after years of misery.

“How about a quickfire round?”

“Sure.” She sits up a little straighter and coughs, getting herself back in the zone.

“How do you feel about being tied up?” I ask.

Kara’s eyes widen, and her mouth hangs open in shock. “Wow, OK, we’re going there. Um, yes, maybe, for a bit, not sure about the whole being suspended from the ceiling thing.”

“Blindfolds?”

“Yes, that’s very hot. You?”

“Never done it, but I think it sounds fun. Spanking?”

“Hmmm, a little, if the mood is right. Choking?”

“God no. You like that?” I hate the idea of it. It makes my spine tingle in a not good way.

“No, it’s not for me, but my friend Hattie says a lot of guys are into it these days. I don’t mind a firm, possessive grip elsewhere,” she strokes the skin where her neck slopes into her shoulder, “or holding my face is OK. I do like having my hair pulled a bit, just in a desperate way, not in a mean way. It’s hard to explain.” She absent mindedly wraps her hair around her fingers and it makes my dick twitch.

“Noted. Biting?”

“Hmm,” she pouts and shakes her head. “I don’t think so.”

It’s so hot that we’re talking about this stuff so casually. Kara looks absolutely gorgeous wrapped up under her blanket at the end of my sofa, one arm propping up her head. She is the picture of Tuesday nights planning what to eat for dinner

and Sunday afternoons doing a crossword puzzle. And yet somehow she's also the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

“Although there is this one scene in *Dealbreaker* where they're on his boat and right before Jason goes down on Aria he bites her thighs and then kisses them better and I definitely thought that was hot. Oh, and there's this one bit here...” she turns to face away from me, scoots her t-shirt down at the back and reaches her hand over her shoulder.

“Right between my shoulder blades. You know how they say everything in the body is connected, well that bit is definitely connected to my... good stuff.” She laughs. This conversation is outrageous. “If you nibbled me there, I'd...” she trails off.

God, I want to touch her there so much. Stroke my fingertips down her back, plant soft kisses along her spine, see what happens when I nip her with my teeth. She rights herself and shimmies back into her corner of the sofa, and takes a sip of her wine. “OK, so I guess I do like biting. What about you?”

“I do now you've told me that.” I can't take my eyes off of her. “What about whips and stuff?”

“Better in books. Not for me personally. Anal?” she asks like it's the most normal question to be asking someone you've only met three times.

“I've never done it, bit intimidated by it if I'm honest. You?”

“Same. What about using toys together?” Fucking hell, every one of these questions is making me throb.

“Never done that either, but after reading that scene in *Snowed Inn* I’m definitely intrigued. What about food and sex?”

“Bleurgh, absolutely not. Yeast infection waiting to happen. Better to eat, then have sex. Or actually sex first is better because I’d never eat a big meal and then go trampolining, if you know what I mean?”

I burst out laughing. She knows exactly how to lighten the mood. “I do know what you mean. And sex always makes me really hungry. I agree, way better to do it first.”

“Nipples.”

“What about them?” Her directness is hot, in an intimidating sort of way.

“Do you enjoy having them touched?” she elaborates.

“Yeah, doesn’t everyone?”

“Ad—” she grimaces and stops herself. “Some people don’t.”

“Do you?”

“Yes definitely,” she nods, wide eyed and enthusiastic. “And they’re not too sensitive. You can be a little rough with them.”
‘You’, she said.

“Are they hard right now?” She gasps harshly. Shit, this has escalated quickly. I have a horrible feeling that was far too real

a question in this game of hypotheticals.

She answers yes on a soft exhale and I feel the whole room slow around us. “Are you hard?” *Fucking hell, this woman is going to ruin me.* What a question. If this blanket wasn’t here, she wouldn’t even need to ask.

“Yes.” I admit, my voice low. The air is thick between us. I feel a twisting in my stomach, like I’m standing on the edge of a diving board, willing myself to make the next move. “Do you like being told what to do?”

“Very much so.” Her eyes are aflame now. I can see the pulse flutter in her neck as her heart rate rises. Mine is already racing. I can’t think about anything except how much I want to see her naked.

“Take off your top.” Without hesitation she crosses her arms and lifts it over her head, revealing a sheer white bra. I can see for myself she wasn’t lying, her perfect rosy nipples pressed tight against the thin material. I push my fists into my eye sockets until I see stars.

“Your turn,” she says, biting her lip between her teeth.

“Do you...” I start to ask another question, but she interrupts.

“No,” nodding towards my chest then cocking her head. “Your turn to take your top off. It’s only fair.” I do as she says, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world to be semi-naked in front of her.

“Do you like to be rough, Kara?”

“Sometimes yes. Other times I like to be more soft and slow depending on my mood. But rough in a caring way, where we’re both giving and getting what we want and need. I don’t want to be genuinely hurt.”

“I think I understand,” I whisper.

“It really turns me on to think that someone would want me so much that they can’t hold themselves back. I love it in books when sex is greedy and desperate. I have a very busy brain, so I like the idea that it’s so intense that I can’t think about anything else.”

“How do you feel about touching yourself in front of someone?” *Fuck’s sake, what the hell am I doing?*

“Are you asking or telling?” she raises one eyebrow and bites into her bottom lip.

I don’t want to push it too far, but I can’t hide my smile, nor can I tell who is pushing who any more. “Maybe more like requesting?”

“Tell me what to do, Luke.” My name sounds so filthy in her mouth. This is the best game I have ever played.

“Take off your trousers,” I say, and she pushes the blanket from her lap to the floor and stands. So close to me, yet so far. I can’t tear my eyes away when she undoes the button and zipper, easing them down over her hips and then off entirely. She sits back against her side of the sofa, with her knees tucked up and pressed together, denying me the full view of what I really want to see.

“What now?”

“Open your legs.” Everything in the room disappears into a blur. The only point of clarity is Kara spread out before me, beautiful and on fire. I have to remember to breathe.

“What’s the dirtiest thing you’ve read about in your books?”

“I can’t even begin to tell you that. So much filth. Dark romances are all kinds of fucked up, and don’t get me started on the alien, monsters, vampires crossovers, which I enjoy in a book, but not in real life, obviously. Ask a different question.”

“Have you thought about me?” This is bloody bold, but I’m dying to know if I’ve been on her mind the way she’s been on mine. I want to get to know her but right now I’m my own worst enemy. My dick is solid in my jeans and I’m half scared I’m going to come in my pants from whatever she says next. Her eyes bore into mine and I’m about to tell her it’s OK, she doesn’t have to answer, when she rolls her lips inward, wetting them a little and then opening them to speak.

“Your dining table.” *My dining table?* I don’t follow.

“What about it?”

“When we sat there earlier, it reminded me of a scene in a mafia romance I read last year.”

“What happens?”

“I think you can guess.”

“I want to hear you say it,” I whisper. “Tell me what you were thinking.”

She just stares at me, deep in thought, and I don't miss her soft moan when she breaks her silence. "I was thinking about you bending me over it."

My heart is beating out of my chest and there's a good chance I'm going to rip the stitching in my zipper if I don't adjust myself soon. I've read a handful of these books now and I know they can be filthy, but I've never heard this kind of talk straight from her mouth. A mouth I can't stop imaging on mine. And everywhere else.

"What would I do?"

"You'd tease me."

"How?"

"Slow and gentle at first, whispering in my ear what a good girl I am, but when you feel how wet I am, you'd tear my underwear down and thrust your fingers into me."

"Jesus, Kara," I'll never be able to sit at that table innocently again. "I want to see you do that to yourself." It's out before I can even think about what I'm saying, and as if she's been waiting her whole life for permission, she pushes her hand into her underwear. I'm in hell when she arches her back and lets out a low moan. I curse myself for dimming the lights before we sat down, but there's also something incredible about watching her, her face and chest lit by the glow of my lamp, but in shadow from the waist down.

"Tell me what happens next," I say, not daring to move, unable to do anything except look at her.

Her eyes flutter closed as her hand moves in slow strokes. “You flip me over and make me come with your fingers, licking my neck and sucking my nipples.”

I’m desperate to touch my dick, but I don’t want to assume that’s what she wants, and to be honest, I think I would come the second I did it.

“Show me how you stroke yourself,” she moans, opening her eyes wide. *Goddammit, she’s a fucking mind reader.* I don’t waste any time unbuttoning my jeans and letting my dick spring free. I’ve never seen anything hotter than her licking her lips when she lowers her gaze to check me out. I wrap my hand tight around my shaft and stroke myself slowly.

“Keep talking, Kara.” I can make out the shape of her fingers working in tight circles. She moans more and her body tightens.

“You’re relentless and I’m completely helpless. While I’m coming in your hand, you get your dick out then push it all the way in, fucking me straight through my orgasm until I have another one.”

“Fuck, I want that.” I keep stroking in firm, fast pumps. I couldn’t ease off my grip even if I wanted to.

“You’re so big inside me, and I’m so tight and wet and when you can’t hold back anymore, you pull out and come all over me.”

Kara can’t talk, she can only moan as she lifts her hips from the sofa, grinding up against her fingers. I don’t know whether

to look at her hand or her face or her incredible tits as her ragged breath makes them heave. When we lock eyes she cries out, her body seizing as she crashes over the edge and I follow her straight over, groaning loudly as my orgasm paints my stomach.

Then Kara does the last thing I expect her to do.

Chapter 13

Kara

OH GOD, I'M COMING.

And oh God, I'm crying.

My legs are trembling, my heart is racing, and my breath is ragged from the best orgasm I've had in a long time. Maybe my whole life. My face, however, has lost complete control of itself and tears are pouring out of me.

Before I can stop them, I am sobbing out loud, gasping for air as I scramble to grab his blanket from the floor and cover myself up. I suddenly feel exposed and vulnerable and I might be sick. How the fuck did I end up sitting here on Luke's sofa in my underwear watching each other come?

"Oh shit," he says, jumping up from the sofa and then turning in a circle as he looks around the room. "Um, I'll be right back."

My hands are shaking, and I press my face to my knees, curling myself into a ball. I hear him call through from the downstairs bathroom. "Kara, I'm right here, I'm just cleaning up. Take a deep breath for me, OK?"

I try, but it's impossible to do anything other than gulp at the air while I search amongst the pile on the floor for my clothes.

Luke reappears, pulling a hoodie over his shoulders and I can't tear my eyes away as his chest and stomach disappear beneath it even though I'm still crying, tugging my jeans up over my hips. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll go."

"Kara wait, no. *I'm* so sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. Let me get you some water."

He fills a glass for me and by the time he returns, I'm fully clothed, sitting on his sofa with my head in my hands. Every part of my body burns with shame. What the fuck just happened? What am I playing at? Why am I acting like a character in one of my books who drips with confidence when in reality I'm a pathetic sex idiot. I am not someone who does these things. I don't speak like that. I can't believe I've gotten so carried away. This is not a book, this is my real life. I don't flirt and I certainly don't wank on the sofas of men I've only recently met.

Even in all our years together, Adam and I never did that. Except whatever just happened, it was so bloody hot and my legs are still twitching a little and, oh god, I think I'm going to cry again. Well, he definitely won't want to date me now. What a mess.

"Can I sit next to you?" Luke asks and I nod, looking up at him through blurry eyes. He takes a seat and hands me a glass, which I down in one.

“I am so sorry. I don’t know where that came from. I’m mortified.” Explaining myself is impossible, I don’t even understand it.

“It’s OK, you don’t need to apologise. Things got pretty intense there for a minute. I’m the one who should say sorry. I should never have suggested such a stupid game, I didn’t mean for it to go that far.”

“I’ll go,” I try to get to my feet, but I feel a little woozy and sit back down.

“I don’t think you should go. Unless you really want to, of course, I can call you a taxi? I’d drive you, but I’ve had a drink.”

Yes, the wine, blame the wine. “I’m sorry, I think I had too much to drink too. I would never have done that otherwise.”

Luke hangs his head and pushes his fingers up behind his glasses. “I’m so sorry, Kara. I really never intended to take advantage of you.”

“Oh God, no. Trust me, if anyone was taking advantage of anyone, it was me. You did nothing inappropriate. That was —” *Incredible? Terrifying? The dirtiest thing I’ve ever done?* “I don’t really know how to explain what that was,” I say, gesturing at both ends of the sofa. “But it was 100% consensual. Don’t worry about that.”

I laugh awkwardly, and we find ourselves just staring at each other.

“Do you want me to walk you back? Or you can sleep in my spare room? It’s all set up for guests.”

I nod again. Why am I doing so much bloody nodding? “OK,” I croak out.

“You’ll stay?” More idiot nodding. I’m not sure I’ve ever actually been speechless before. “OK, let me show you where everything is.”

He stands and helps me to my feet, then leads me through the hallway and up the stairs with a gentle grasp of my elbow. At the top of the stairs we turn the corner and he tells me which room is his, which is the bathroom, and then points to the guest room at the end of the hall. I follow his directions. *What is happening? Just go home you dickhead.*

“Kara, are you OK?” I stand awkwardly next to the spare bed, Luke leans against the doorframe like a Sex God, and I still can’t speak. I just nod some more while he turns on the bedside light and pulls some spare clothes from the cupboard. “I have to ask, how the hell did you manage to sit through dinner with me while you were thinking of all that?”

Kill me now. Vapourise me. Float me off this planet.

“I’ve read a lot of smut in public.” I roll my eyes and bite the inside of my cheek, thinking I might start crying again. “So I’m pretty well practised at hiding my horniness.”

“OK. Good to know you’re stealthy,” he smirks. *So fucking smirking is horny now, is it?* “We should probably get some

sleep. I'll leave you to it but give me a shout if you need anything. Goodnight Kara."

He closes the door gently behind him, and I silently scream into a pillow. Why have I said yes to staying over? Why am I getting changed? I need to get my shameful self out of here. I'll never be able to sleep, though these covers are awfully inviting, and when I climb under them and sink into the mattress, I quickly prove myself wrong.



When I wake up, I find myself curled into a ball in the middle of Luke's spare bed, wearing a t-shirt he'd offered me. This room is sparse, but the mattress is comfy and his bedding is soft and airy. When I check the time I can't believe it's already 8am. I've not slept this late in months, and somehow I've also slept right through, avoiding the usual 3-4am existential *am-I-completely-unlovable* crisis.

Two thoughts keep running through my head:

1. I read Luke entirely wrongly. I thought this was a date, but then he told me he can't imagine himself in a relationship with anyone else, so clearly that wasn't the case.

2. Despite that, I fingered myself on his sofa and then cried about it. And he got off too. Which means this is a sex thing, and I don't want to be anyone's *just a sex thing*.

I hope my next breath is my last because I don't want to be in a world where I have to face him and acknowledge that *that* happened. Why did I even stay over? I could definitely have taken a taxi home where I'd have cried a bit more, had another orgasm thinking about his stomach, and fallen asleep reading a book. Hopefully, he's still asleep and I can sneak out of here without an awkward goodbye. I can always text him later and tell him I had a meeting or something.

After getting dressed, I tiptoe down the hall and peek over the bannister, but I can't hear any movement. I pause when I notice the framed photo at the top of the stairs. His wedding day.

Though he's never really described her to me, Heather is just as beautiful as I imagined. A short blonde bob beneath her flowing veil, she has a gorgeous smile, and Luke looks so handsome in his suit. There is so much love and sadness in this one photo.

Downstairs, I sneak into the kitchen to retrieve my book journal, and that's when I see him. Stretched out on the sofa, phone in hand, in the exact spot where I defiled our friendship last night. No way I'm getting out of here unnoticed.

"Good morning," I whisper, not wanting to scare him.

"Shhh, I'm just getting to a good bit." I watch his face and notice how his eyes are scanning back and forth. He's not scrolling, he's side swiping. Reading.

"What are you reading?"

“Love To Loathe You.”

What. The. Fuck. “Are you serious?”

“You told me I had to read it, so I’m reading it. I downloaded it as soon as you went to bed.”

“Have you been awake all night?”

“No, but it took me a while to nod off and then I woke up early. Did you sleep OK?”

“Yes, really well, actually.” He’s still looking at his phone, but I can see him smiling in the reflection on the window.

“That’s good. There’s coffee in the cafetiere there if you want one.” He nods towards the counter where he’s left a mug out for me, along with milk and a little sugar bowl. I pour a cup and ghost my fingers along the countertop. This feels... normal? Nice? Not as awkward as I thought it would be.

His garden is waking up with the morning sun. I take a seat at the end of the sofa nearest the window and watch the birds while he finishes reading. The first coffee of the day always feels a bit special to me, and I cradle the cup the same way I’ve seen him do when he seems nervous. After a little while, he nudges the outside of my leg with his foot and puts his phone down on the table.

“What do you think?” I say.

“Of?”

“The book.”

“Oh,” he laughs gently, “well these two are awful, but it’s early days.”

“I know, they’re so mean to each other, but you’ll soon see chinks in their armour. Have you got to the fake date yet?” I ask, my thumb sweeping back and forth against the lip of my coffee.

“Not yet.”

“That’s my favourite bit. You have lots to look forward to.”

He lets out a long slow sigh and sits up taller. “So last night was—”

“I have a real vulnerability hangover—” We both speak at once and then break into smiles and then laughter, only setting each other off more when we make eye contact. Thank fuck for laughing, because my chest feels heavy and I appreciate a moment of lightness.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks.

“Not particularly. I’m feeling quite embarrassed about the whole thing. I mean, you’re grieving and I’m sworn off men, and not really over getting dumped. I owe you an apology for getting carried away.”

His brow furrows. “I don’t feel that way, but I’m also sorry if I rushed you into something.”

“You didn’t. It’s just—” I don’t even know how to explain myself. “I had a really nice time last night, and I ruined it by getting hysterical. I’m obviously not ready for this sort of

thing. I'm hoping we can just forget about it and still be friends?"

I wish I wasn't saying this. What I actually want is to crawl over there and climb him like a tree. "I hope this won't make things weird between us. I still want to do the book club if that's OK?"

"Of course it is. Nothing has to change. Look, it was probably good for us both to have a..." he waves his hands around in the air as he tries to find the right words. "An... interaction with someone else. Rip off the plaster, if you will. Kickstart the engine. Unblock the sink."

That is quite a revolting image, and my face must give me away. He laughs and holds his head in his hands. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I say these awful things. I'm not good at this."

"It's OK, I'm no good either. Hattie and Megan have been pestering me about dating for ages and I've been terrified at the thought of having an *interaction* with anyone. So thank you, I guess, for being that person. You're a good friend."

"It was my pleasure." Then we're laughing at the innuendo again and the wobbly feeling in my stomach feels more like a good one than a bad one.

elle

I am not handling last night well at all. On one hand, my thighs are still twitching every time I think about Luke sitting across from me with his dick in his hand. I need to *stop* thinking about it because I've got work to get on with today, and all I want to do is crawl into my bed and relive it over and over.

On the other hand, I feel sad, and I can't explain why. I know I've done nothing wrong, but my entire being aches. I'm embarrassed that he saw me touching myself, embarrassed that he saw me crying, embarrassed that he had to look after me. And why, oh why, do I feel like I've cheated on Adam?

On the third hand... Wait, that's too many hands. For thirdly? *Whatever*. I feel awful for Luke. He's such a kind and genuine man, and I've defiled him and his beautiful fresh start home with my filthmongering. The poor guy is a widower, for goodness' sake.

He said himself how he can't imagine being with anyone else, and yet there I was practically throwing myself at him with those questions. Why did I have to tell him about the dining table? I hadn't even had that much to drink, though I guess it was enough to loosen up.

I said I still want to be friends, and he says he wants that too, but honestly, how on earth will I be able to be friends with him now that I've seen his penis? *And what a penis*. Friends do not talk like that, or do those things, and I one million percent want to do it again, and more. It was the hottest thing that's happened to me in ages. Maybe ever.

Though I love a Book Boyfriend with a filthy way with words, Adam was never into dirty talk, and some of the stuff that came out of my mouth last night surprised me. I've been holding these thoughts and fantasies in my head when I'm reading, but it felt good to confess. I felt like someone else entirely. Not the sappy little girlfriend I was when I was a teenager.

Falling for Adam had been so easy. He was the most gorgeous boy in school, and after having a huge crush on him all through year eleven, we shared a messy snog at the Christmas disco. We'd spent the whole of the school holidays texting each other, much to the annoyance of our mums, who found that no amount of chocolate or roast potatoes could drag us from our bedrooms.

When we got back to school in January, it was like a scene from a film; me walking into the playground with Hattie and Megan, Adam standing there with his mates, then walking over and kissing me in front of everyone while the morning bell rang. I still remember how amazing it felt, both the kiss and the boldness of kissing *in school*. We were inseparable from then on.

My whole life I've only ever loved one man. Sure, hundreds of fictional ones on regular rotation, but only ever one real man. My Adam. I never imagined myself with anyone else because I never *wanted* to be with anyone but him. It's like my brain has been closed off to other men since seventeen, and while I can appreciate them from afar, the idea of being with another man still feels crazy.

Before I waste another second thinking about Adam, I throw myself into Book Club planning and spend Sunday evening designing posters and social media posts while catching up with my favourite podcast.

“Welcome to RomComrades, where today we’ve learned that the latest figures that show sales of romance novels increased 47% last year, so Laney and I are asking, why is that?”

“Because we’re all dirty bitches?” Laney chimes in and I laugh in agreement. “But on a serious note, my biggest guess is that we’re seeing more readers turn to the genre seeking to disassociate from the chaos and conflict of their current lives.” I comically gasp out loud. This feels like a personal attack.

“Say more,” Jessie says.

“We’ve said before that the common critique is that these books are anti-feminist and portray outdated stereotypes, but when you look at everything women are facing at the moment; pandemic fatigue, burnout, harassment in the workplace and the streets, social media addiction, hustle culture, comparison, transphobia, ageism, invisible labour, emotional labour, diet culture, and all the rest. Tell me Jessie, who amongst us wouldn’t want to spend an evening disassociating with a 300-500 page novel in which the romantic hero would save the world, take a bullet, spend their entire life for the love of us?”

Everything she says makes perfect sense to me, and I find myself nodding along.

“The protagonist often has a difficult or even traumatic past they’re coping, or not coping, with. Childhood trauma, absent parents, maybe they’re grieving, they had to give up on a dream, or their dream turns out to be a nightmare, they’re victims of late stage capitalism and no matter how hard they try to put a positive spin on it, things are just not OK.”

Jessie agrees. “I think you’re spot on! And then these romance heroes, oh my God. These are the folks who will come in and say look, I’m here, I want you, I’m not going anywhere. They will take all your worries away, they listen, they somehow know exactly what you need before you even knew it, and they always make you come first. I mean, sign me up for a good old disassociating. I’m first in line.”

Just listening to this makes me feel shaky. I push away from my desk, and rest my head between my knees while I take a few deep breaths. The words *traumatic past* ring in my ears as I think about how much changed for me when Adam left. I had a whole life planned out in my head and it was just taken from me overnight. I know I’ve thrown myself into romance novels to avoid dwelling on the breakup too much, but ‘*disassociating*’? Is that what I’ve been doing? I’ve definitely been avoiding my reality. I spent months deluding myself that he’d come back to me one day.

Then along came Luke. A potential real life romance hero. We’ve only hung out a few times, but all my sadness disappears when I’m around him. He listens, he encourages me, he makes me laugh. And based on our little sofa game last night, I get the impression that he’d be a very attentive lover.

It's just bloody typical to swear off men and the first chance I reconsider, I get the hots for a grieving man who can't imagine himself being in a relationship ever again. And what did I do with that information? Took off my clothes and wanked in front of him. And then the crying? I will never live it down. I can't even explain my reaction, I just hope he never mentions it again.

If I'm really honest about it, I'm terrified of dating. I don't think I could open my heart to someone and risk having it broken like that again. I told Luke I don't have the confidence to be like a main character, but it's not like I had bags of it before Adam took it all away. As much as I enjoyed last night, being friends with Luke is the safest option. If it became something more, I'd always worry about it ending. This way, nobody gets hurt.

Trying to refocus on my work for the new book club, I'm feeling stuck with the next step. When I realise why, it makes me groan. I pick up my phone to text Luke.

Kara: We still didn't choose a book

Luke: Hostess chooses. You have great taste

Kara: I'll have a think. And is it OK if we call it Sunshine Book Club?

Luke: Of course

Luke: By the way, I'm falling in love with Matthew Braverman too. What a babe x

Chapter 14

Luke

I CAN SEE WHY *Love To Loathe You* is Kara's favourite book. Matthew and Briony have fantastic chemistry even though they pretend to hate each other, but for anyone with eyes, their taunting and goading is clearly sexual tension.

When Briony gets stood up on a date, Matthew saves the day and they start a whole Enemies With Benefits thing that is as sexy as it is hilarious. I don't know why Briony screaming "*I hate you!*" and slapping Matthew while he makes her come for the third time is so hot, but I've barely put the book down or left the sofa since Kara went home this morning.

And of course I can't stop thinking about last night and what happened, or nearly happened, between us. Can't ignore the fact that I'm feeling pretty guilty too, but I think that was always going to be the case the first time something happened with someone new.

My whole life I've only ever been with one woman, and I don't really remember what it felt like to fall for her. Heather grew up a few doors down from my Granny Annie's house, so she'd just always been in my life. She was as much a part of it

as my own family, the house, the meadow, the trees. When we'd learned about the concept of fate, we'd both agreed that was what had happened to us.

I've never had that moment of being swept off your feet. The sudden realisation, tunnel vision, heart thumping out of your chest, *have I forgotten to breathe* kind of falling in love. The kind I read about in Kara's books. Where the girl walks into the office on her first day at a new company and the guy sees her across a meeting room and thinks "You're it for me."

At least, I hadn't felt those sorts of feelings until now.

When I first met Kara, I liked her straight away. Cute, charming, clearly dedicated to her work and passionate about her books. Then, from the moment she arrived for dinner, it was like she'd set off a grenade in my chest. She looked gorgeous, her hair straighter than usual, full lips painted a delicate pink. I wanted to kiss her so much it made my head spin.

And she was so comfortable here in my house, sharing a meal, curling up on the sofa. There were no awkward silences, I forgot my nerves entirely while we spoke. She does this thing where she looks down when she smiles, I can tell she's a little unsure of herself. Mostly, it was nice to get to know her a bit better than the quick chats or texts we've shared so far.

I can't even explain what happened on the sofa. Sure, we'd both had a couple of glasses of wine with dinner, but in a million years I couldn't have dreamed of how our evening played out.

I got totally caught up in the moment, in her. That all came crashing down when she started crying, but until that point, I felt something. Now I'm worried I took the whole *getting to know each other* game too far, but then when I remember the things she asked me, I think she must have felt as into it as I did.

This morning when she said she hoped we could still be friends, what else could I do but agree? How can it be that I've seen her come but haven't even kissed her? And now I'll probably never get the chance.

How does Rob cope with all these one-night stands? I'm a wreck with the stress of one evening, with one woman. But fuck, what a woman she is.

Kara seems really hung up on this ex of hers. She's only shared a bit about what happened, but I can tell how much it's messed her up. Imagine leaving your partner, the person you live with, without a word of explanation? I hope I never meet the prick. I've never been a hateful person, but I can safely say I hate him.

And I hope I was a good husband to Heather. I think I was. I hope I never made her feel bad while we were together, though I'm sure I wasn't perfect all the time. She was, as my Granny Annie would put it, *'isnae backwards in coming forwards'*. She always spoke her mind. If I was getting on her nerves, she told me so. If I wasn't pulling my weight, I knew about it. She never expected me to be a mind-reader either. If she needed something, she was upfront about it.

I learned everything about being in a relationship, about teamwork, and communication from her. And sex, obviously. The thing that dwells on my mind now is that the way I was with Heather is not the way I'll be with someone else. What happened last night was nothing like anything Heather or I did, and half of the things we mentioned I only really know about from Kara's books, anyway.

It was refreshing to hear her say she feels unsure of herself, of what she wants or how to be with someone else. That's exactly how I feel. Obviously, Heather and Kara aren't the same person. I don't know why I'm even comparing the two of them. Nobody will ever compare to Heather, and I think that's part of my problem. I hope someone else will be as amazing and special as her, and it's not exactly a fair expectation to set.

Meeting Kara has made me realise that anyone I date after Heather will be their own person. And if I'm getting deep about it, I know I'm not the same person I was with Heather either. I still don't know how do you live your whole life with someone and then carry on alone. I'm living half a life. I've got to figure out how to fill the empty bit, and it's not fair to expect Kara to do that for me. If we are nothing more than friends, that's still good with me because I enjoy spending time with her.

My phone on the coffee table pings me out of my spiralling thoughts.

Rob: How was dinner?

Where to even begin. I snap a quick photo of me doing a thumbs up.

Luke: It was great. Don't ask any more questions.

Rob: That means you got laid you sneaky fucker.

Luke: I did not. Goodnight x

— e e —

I haven't seen much of Kara in the past few weeks, but we've texted most days. She mentioned she's landed a big project designing some waiting areas and family rooms in a new wing at the hospital. When I've spoken to her about it she's seemed pretty stressed. Apparently, there is a lot of red tape and conflicting opinions, but I'm confident she'll win them over.

I've been busy too. Things at the cafe are going well and I've been working a lot after hours trying to get the council to process an alcohol licence so I can put on evening events. Our book club will be a great trial run, and we've had lots of customers asking about it. Unfortunately, it turns out the council are fans of red tape too and I keep getting passed

around departments with no answers. If I can get it sorted, it might be the first step to potentially opening a second location. That's the new dream; a bar with live music, comedy, a place for private events. There's nothing like it round here.

Kara came in a while ago with posters to put up and sent me a load of pictures to promote it on Instagram. I often get a 7am text message reminding me to post something that day. I wonder if she wakes up thinking about me the way I wake up and thinking about her. Probably not. She's doing way better at the *just friends* thing than I am.

Today's the big day, our first Sunshine Book Club meeting. All week I've been feeling a kind of tension, like I'm floating around in a balloon just waiting for it to pop. Unmissable in her bright green coat and yellow beanie hat, I spot her through the windows as soon as she rounds the corner into the courtyard. My chest hurts, in a good way.

Neither of us have spoken about our sofa night, but I wish I could ask if she's feeling OK. I know she just wants to pretend it never happened, and I'm the dick torturing myself by replaying images of her over and over in my head.

Some days she sends me a book recommendation and I cycle over to the bookshop or the library and see if they have it. In the evenings I send her a selfie of me reading on the sofa, and if I'm lucky, she gives me the gift of one back; Kara holding her own copy, Kara covered in paint flecks from a client's house, or a thumbs up from what I think is her bedroom. I wonder if I'll ever get to visit her place.

I lock the door behind our last customers and clean up while Kara rearranges the furniture. I sent Katy and Jo home early but told them to come back at six so I could order us all dinner. Around one table, the four of us smash through burritos and dirty fries, and try to avoid talking about the book too early. I catch myself in a true moment of presence and realise it feels really fucking nice. My business, good food, a great team, and this beautiful woman whose mouth I want to taste.

People trickle in from seven and get right to ordering more coffees than I expected for an evening event, along with fruit teas and soft drinks. The sausage rolls and pastries I ordered in from our bakery supplier sell out fast, and I keep half an eye on Kara, watching her weave through the crowd making sure everyone is personally welcomed. From a business perspective, she's totally held up her end of the deal, although I'd gladly let tonight go ahead even if it was just the two of us.

There are lots of friendly faces I recognise, and I finally get to meet the infamous Hattie and Megan, who seem like exactly the kind of friends I would hope Kara has in her life. Not that I doubted they'd be good people, and I've no business feeling so protective of her, but it's nice to meet them properly. Megan hugs me like she's known me my whole life, and Hattie gives me the attitude Kara had kindly warned me about.

“We've already been in here to perv on you twice,” she says. Poor Kara looks horrified, but shakes her head and laughs. I can't help but wonder what they know about me. Has she told them about what happened when she came over for dinner? Has she told them how often we talk?

“I think we can probably start now,” I say, once everyone is served and seated. It’s awesome to see so many people gathered here in this space, just like I’ve pictured. Lots have brought their books and a few have gone the extra mile with some notes. Clearly Kara’s found her people.

“I’m nervous, Luke,” she whispers at my side, nibbling the edge of her thumb. I lay a palm on her shoulder and turn her to face me.

“Kara. There is absolutely nobody more qualified to run a book club than you. You’re a reading machine, you chose a brilliant book, you know it inside out. You’re a fantastic speaker, your best friends are here, and I’m here. You’ve got this.” When she drops her gaze to the floor to hide her smile, I can’t help but kiss the top of her head. “Off you go.”

She finds her place at the back of the room and the chatter dies down in her presence.

“Good evening everyone, and welcome to the first meeting of Sunshine Book Club,” she beams, and then we’re off.

Our book tonight is *Miles From You*, a moving story about Nate and Steph, childhood sweethearts who split up when Steph moves to America in the middle of their final year of school. Though they try to keep things going long distance, they both get tempted by other relationships closer to home and ultimately break each other’s hearts.

The book then follows them over several years as they bounce back in and out of each other’s lives, either at the worst possible time, when they’re both in relationships, or

when they need each other most, like when Steph's dad dies and Nate gets the first flight to the States to be with her. I really loved it and it seems everyone else did too. Well, everyone except Hattie.

"I thought it was so romantic when Nate sent all those letters, while he was away from her." says Jo.

"It's not romantic," Hattie scoffs. "It's bloody insanity. Do you know how much stamps cost these days?"

"He's a banker, Hattie," Kara laughs, mediating perfectly. "He can afford stamps."

"I don't know how he finds the time if he's such a successful businessman."

I know Kara loves a slow burn novel, and it paid off because when these two get it on in the final chapters it's pretty explosive, and special too. I felt like I'd waited a lifetime for their happy ever after. Kara told me she didn't want to pick anything too smutty in case it put people off coming, but she has plans to slowly bring them into her world. The same tactic she used on me, the filthy genius.

The hours pass in a blur, the room filled with amiable chatter. There is plenty to discuss, and the people in the room bond over thoughts on second chances, long-distance relationships, and the importance of hope.

And Kara, the way she commands the room is just so impressive. Everyone is on tenterhooks when she speaks. Her face is bright and full and her arms roam as she expresses her

thoughts physically. I feel star-struck just to know her. She speaks eloquently about the book, remembering details I'd forgotten not long after I finished it. She encourages everyone, welcomes their views, and I can see new friendships forming from my spot where I hang back by the bar.

It's only when she realises she's spent the past minute talking about the key sex scene with a bunch of people she's never really met that she blushes. I curse my caveman brain when I wonder what else gets her looking flushed like that.

We wrap up with a unanimous vote on the next book, and shortly after 10pm, the inaugural book club members head off in a flurry of swapped numbers and recommendations.

"This was great babes, we're so proud of you!" Hattie says as she and Megan hug Kara goodbye. I know how they feel. Kara hangs back while I rearrange the furniture back in place for the coffee drinkers of tomorrow morning.

"Do you think it went OK?" she asks me when we're finally alone.

"Yes babes," I mimic Hattie, and she laughs. "Seriously though, it was brilliant. I could tell everyone had a great time. Lots of people said they're definitely coming back next month."

"Who knew our town had so many love story fans? You're happy for us to make it a monthly thing?"

"Definitely. I'll be offended if you don't." Even though I probably shouldn't, I pull her in for a hug before we say our

goodbyes.

Chapter 15

Kara

“CLAUDE?” I ANSWER MY phone on the first ring. “You OK?”

“It’s time to do the guesthouse, darling. Could you pop over this week?”

“I’m on my way.”

This is the best week of my life.

I’m still buzzing from Wednesday’s book club, and now a new contract with one of my favourite clients. I worked on Claude’s house a few years ago, and she always talked about renovating the old stables so she could have people come and visit. Not that she’s short of rooms in her actual house, mind you. Now the guesthouse is complete and ready for my interiors magic.

Claude gave me my first big design project. Five bedrooms, two bathrooms, and two living rooms. She’s since sent loads of work my way, but I’ve been secretly hoping I’d get to work with her again. As we walk around the building, she talks me through her vision for the space. She sees a stripped back

version of the main house but still keeping the traditional farmhouse style. My mouth hangs open as I admire the gorgeous kitchen and large lounge area that sit beneath exposed original beams. A master bedroom at the opposite end of the property is complete with a freestanding bathtub installed in front of floor to ceiling windows. Beyond them, only fields and sky.

Screw the guests. I want to live here myself. Spend my days soaking in that tub, windows open, book in hand. What more could a girl want? Maybe a man to soak with, to nip my neck with his teeth while I rest against his slick chest, to slip his hands beneath the bubbles and feel how much I want him. A man like Luke.

“Do you think we could get it done in six weeks?” Claude asks, pulling me from my fantasy. “My friends are all dying to come and stay.”

“Absolutely. I’ve already got lots of ideas.” Six weeks is tight, but not impossible. “Do you have a budget in mind?”

“Oh, you know I trust you darling, you spend whatever feels right.” I swear she is my dream client.

We say our goodbyes and back in the car, I ring Megan on the way home and tell her to bring fizz tonight so we can celebrate how great this week has been.

“Shall we invite Luke?” she suggests.

“But it’s girls’ night?”

“Yeah, but since we’re celebrating book club, he might like to join us?”

“What will Hattie say?” I ask.

“She’s here giving me two thumbs up,” she laughs, “and thrusting her hips like a sex fiend.”

“OK, I’ll take that as a yes.”

I text him when I get in the door.

Kara: You got plans tonight?

Luke: Book, beer, bed. You?

Kara: It’s girls night, but we’re celebrating things, including book club. Would you like to join us?

Luke: Sure, what can I bring?

Kara: Just you. Come at 7. We’re ordering Thai, so let me know what you like.

elle

“Wow, I never knew you liked books this much. Why didn’t you say?”

Luke stands with his hands in his pockets while he browses the bookcases that line one wall of my living room. He looks gorgeous in dark grey trousers and a green sweatshirt, his hair

a little more styled than usual. I couldn't bear to greet him in my usual Friday night uniform of pyjamas and no make-up, opting instead for a light blue shirt dress. Thankfully, the girls are wearing proper clothes too and nobody dares acknowledge the effort we've all made.

“So this is the famous Kara Wilson Interiors house.”

I love my home. I've made a genuine effort with every month that passes to make the place feel like my own rather than *mine and Adam's*. Once I realised he wasn't coming back, I moved some things around, painted over the pale grey living room walls with a deep green, and replaced all the artwork Adam had chosen with things more to my taste. I'm pleased Luke is seeing it like this. All me.

“It is,” I say, laying the dining table with plates, cutlery, and napkins. “Are you going to be weird about it? Are you going to take selfies while I'm not looking, or steal things and try to sell them online?”

“God no. I'm still getting to grips with all that social media stuff. In fact, I've been expecting a bollocking for not updating the cafe account often enough.”

“Well, let's not ruin this lovely evening with a fight. I'll bollock you tomorrow.” When I throw him a smug grin, his gorgeous smile spreads across his face. I wonder what else makes him smile like that. *Get your mind out of the gutter, Kara.*

“Why are we sitting at the dining table?” Hattie asks as we gather around it.

“We have a guest, so I thought it would be more comfortable.”

“Where do you normally sit?” Luke asks, taking a seat at one end.

“On the floor around the coffee table,” she says, as if that’s the most normal thing in the world.

“Like goblins,” I laugh.

“Ooh, someone is trying to make a good impression,” Hattie smirks, and I extend my leg to give her a not-so-subtle kick under the table.

Luke’s presence is a little awkward at first. Megan and I are more reserved than usual, and Hattie is a touch louder as she asserts her dominance. She can’t help herself. In her eyes, all men need to be put in their place and she wastes no time making sure they know she’s the boss.

Over dinner I tell them all about my new project, and I’m mortified when Megan makes a fawning speech and tells everyone to raise their glasses to me. After we all take a sip of bubbly, I bat the attention away with a toast to Luke and to Sunshine Book Club, pleased I have an opportunity to thank him properly for letting me run it.

In time we relax into being four instead of three, and we enjoy our food and more fizz, while Hattie fills us in on her latest conquests.

“Do you have any hot single friends, Luke?” she turns to ask him.

“Pfft,” scoffs Megan, “As if them being taken has ever stopped you!”

Hattie throws a prawn cracker across the table, hitting Megan square in the forehead. “Hey, that’s mean. You know fine well that very little is off limits, but cheating is a no go. It’s not my fault if they aren’t honest about their relationship status.”

Luke looks baffled, so I throw him some clarification. “It’s true. During our many book discussions, we have often agreed that a romance hero can be brooding and withholding, they can be domineering and controlling, they can even kill people to prove their love for a woman. But a cheater? No. Immediate ick. Unforgiveable.”

“Are you serious?” he asks.

“Morally grey sex gods are in,” Megan laughs. “We know it doesn’t make sense. Be glad it’s just fiction.”

“Seriously though, Luke,” Hattie turns to face him again, “Your single friends. Where are they?”

“You’d get on well with my friend Rob,” he says with a gentle laugh. “I think he has a similar attitude to you when it comes to dating.”

“What do you mean by that?” she puts her cutlery down and glares at him accusingly. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

“Oh, um, I just...” his face runs a gamut of expressions as he picks his fork through his meal, the right words escaping him. “He also enjoys dating, that’s all.”

Hattie bursts out laughing. “I’m winding you up, it’s no secret I’m a slut. If he’s a slut, then he sounds perfect. Invite him to the next book club.”

“I don’t think he’s the bookish type, I’m afraid, but I’ll suggest it.” Luke looks like he’s taken his first breath in weeks. When I catch him giving me a sideways glance he raises his eyebrows and I mouth, “You’re doing great.”

Luke helps Megan clear the table while Hattie and I make what we affectionately call Sad Girl Snacks; a giant bowl filled with sweet popcorn, salty pretzels, an entire bag of peanut M&Ms, and another of Maltesers. We started making it sometime last year, and it’s been a Friday staple ever since.

Luke takes a seat in the armchair while Hattie pulls out the sofa bed and covers. We three take our usually snuggly spots together and Hattie hits play. Nat King Cole croons L.O.V.E. as yachts and fireworks accompany the opening credits.

“Isn’t this a kid’s movie?” Luke asks, leaning across to grab a fistful of popcorn and chocolate. “I think I went to see it at the cinema with my Granny Annie.”

Megan is aghast. “Yes, The Parent Trap is ostensibly a kid’s movie, but more than that, it’s a love story.”

“A second chance love story!” I chime in.

“Exactly!” Megan says. “And we’re working our way through Nancy Meyer’s back catalogue, so if you’re going to be joining us for Friday nights, you’re going to have to rein in the snark buddy.”

I feel warm at her suggestion that Luke's presence might be more than a celebratory one off. He holds his hands up in defence. "No snark from me, I liked it."

Megan gives my side a little squeeze under the covers. I cosy up closer to her, but I wish I could climb into Luke's lap and curl up with him instead. Bar the occasional explicit fantasy, I think I'm doing a pretty good job of keeping my feelings for him purely platonic, but every time I'm in a room with him it's like a goddamn friendship test. It's hard to relax when he's just over there looking that good. I notice the way he rubs at the cuff of his jumper and imagine him touching me in that way, casual and absent-minded.

By the end of the film Megan has dozed off next to me and Hattie is engrossed in her phone, no doubt arranging her next hookup. I've learned it's better not to ask. Luke stretches and stands up.

"I'm gonna take off," he whispers. "Working early tomorrow."

We've barely spoken all night, I realise. I've been quieter than usual getting used to having him here in my space, and with my friends. I feel like I've missed out on something more than just his company.

"I'll see you out," I whisper back, taking care not to jostle Megan too much when I stand up too.

"Thanks for inviting me tonight. Your friends are really lovely," he says at the door, hands deep in his coat pockets.

“Yeah,” I glance back through to the living room, where Megan sprawls out into the space I’ve just vacated. “They’re pretty special.”

“What do you have planned for the weekend?” he asks, pulling on his shoes. I like Late Night Luke, when he looks a little tired and ruffled from the day. It makes me want to hug him, but thankfully I restrain myself.

“Lazy day tomorrow. Mostly reading. Sunday I’m taking a van to an antique fair and see if I can pick some things for Claude.” I’m too tired to overthink it and catch myself before I ask. “You want to come?”

“Sounds good. Can you pick me up?”

“Of course. It’ll be early though.”

“How early are we talking?” he narrows his eyes and cocks his head.

“Like six? I’ll call you when I’m on my way.”

“Sounds great. Goodnight, Kara.” He gives me the tiniest peck on the cheek before he turns away. I guess we’re the kind of friends who do that now.

A day trip antiquing with Luke would be the icing on an already great week. I like knowing when I’ll see him next, rather than spending days without hearing from him. He’s doing a great job of keeping things in the friend zone. I’ve not felt a hint of flirtation from him since we agreed to keep things platonic, so that’s helpful at least. Then again, why would he

want a sadsack who is incapable of intimacy without bursting into tears?

I snuggle in next to Hattie with my head on her shoulder. She wraps one arm around me and puts a piece of popcorn in my mouth.

“I have a problem,” I whine quietly.

“What’s up sugarpuff?”

I cover my eyes as if I can hide from my confession. “I think I fancy Luke.”

“No shit babes.”

“What am I gonna do?”

“You could try shagging him?” she says. I haven’t told them about what happened that night on the sofa. When they asked how our evening went, I’d fibbed and said that we had dinner, talked about book club, and then I went home. I know I can tell them anything, but I was embarrassed and I know they’d want to interrogate the whole thing so much that I couldn’t bear to relive it. Except privately, at night, in my own bed, over and over.

“I’m not you, Hattie. I can’t go from twelve years with someone to a one-night stand. I’ve got too many feelings.”

“I know. It’ll happen in the right way.”

“Not with Luke, it won’t. He’s grieving, he needs a friend, and I’m enjoying his friendship. I feel like a terrible person when I have all these impure thoughts about him.”

“What do you want to do?”

I groan and pout. “As much as it pains me, I think I should start dating.”

“Seriously?” she pulls her head away from me to get a proper look at my face.

“Yeah,” I say, although I can’t quite believe I’m voicing what has, until now, been just a tiny ember of an idea. “You always say the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else. Maybe the thing I need to get over is my Luke crush rather than my Adam relationship.”

“OK,” she nods. “I think I see where you’re coming from. I can’t guarantee it will work, but it probably won’t do any harm to try. Even if it’s just chatting to guys and going for a drink, it’s all good practice for when you eventually meet the right person.” She pulls me in for a hug. “Want me to help you make a profile?”

“Yes. But you have to promise not to pester me into having sex with them.”

“I can’t promise that babes, you know I want everyone to be shagging all the time, but I will try.”

Chapter 16

Kara

THE ANTIQUE FAIR STARTS early, so I'm outside Luke's at 6am with a forty-five minute drive ahead of us. I picked up the van before the local rental place closed last night, and I've loaded the back with blankets and cushions to protect anything I buy.

I'm buzzing. Despite the early start, I love the thrill of the chase when it comes to antique fairs. It's like a treasure hunt, but you don't have a map and you never know what you're going to find.

Luke saunters down his path in jeans and a hoodie with a red checked jacket thrown over the top, looking every bit the sexy lumberjack that he is in my fantasies. Fuck, I'm supposed to be cooling it, not spending the day ogling. This will be tougher than I thought.

"I'm sorry it's so early," I say as I pull away from his house. "You've got to be at these things first if you want the best stuff."

"It's OK, I'm up this early if I'm opening the shop, and I don't sleep much, anyway."

“I usually go to these things alone because no way could I drag Megan and Hattie around a field at 7am.” The image makes me laugh. “I mean, I *could*, but I’d have to literally drag them.”

We listen to the radio as I drive and the quiet roads pass quickly. When we arrive I unload and unfold my pull-along wagon and we head off into the rows of stalls. The grass is damp with morning dew and I can hear skylarks chirping away somewhere in the sky above us.

“Right Luke, you’re gonna be my second pair of eyes today. You do this job well, and I’ll buy you an incredibly average bacon roll at the end.”

“Oh my gosh,” he gasps, one hand splayed across his chest, “not an incredibly average bacon roll. Here I was thinking this day couldn’t get any better!” He jabs me with his elbow and smiles brightly. *That had better not be flirting. Keep your head, Kara.*

“What are you after today?”

“I’m on the lookout for brass fittings; wall lights, lamps, switches, handles, anything like that. Any unusual light fittings, really. I’m also after vintage fabrics, so look out for curtains, bedding, blankets and whatnot. I need a few side tables for this place, ideally with drawers. And I’m always keen to pick up interesting artwork and frames. Got it?”

“Lights. Fabrics. Side tables with drawers. Art,” he counts them off his fingers.

“You’ll do well. I also need to source an incredible farmhouse dining table at some point, but I’ll be annoyed if I find one here because it won’t fit in the van. But if you see one, tell me anyway because it will help inspire me.”

We split up as we head down opposite sides of the wide rows of the fair. Luke calls me over now and then to show me something he’s spotted that perfectly fits my expectations. He’s got a great eye for this stuff, and before long my little wagon is full with two vintage brass lamps, a side table with two drawers that will be great for the living area, and a set of six framed intricate embroideries of British flowers that I know will be beautiful on the wall in Claude’s entranceway.

We’re about halfway round when the most typical thing happens. I’m so cross, I absolutely jinxed myself today. Luke has only gone and found me the most perfect dining table. It’s a beautiful, solid eight-footer made of rustic oak with chunky fluted legs. Pure farmhouse chic, I honestly couldn’t have designed a more perfect table for the space. I smooth my hand across the surface while the seller is busy chatting with other customers.

“Ugh, Luke, this is actually perfect. But there’s no way it will fit in the van.” I snap a few photos so I can remember its beauty and inevitably compare it to every nice, but not as nice, table I see from now on.

“Don’t worry, I spoke to the guy. Turns out he’s local to us and he said he’ll deliver it for twenty quid.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yep, it’s all yours if you’re happy with the price.” He smiles like he’s very pleased with himself, and I throw myself around him, pinning his arms to his side. He manages to wriggle one free and wrap it around my shoulders, and I enjoy being pressed against him for a few warm seconds before forcing myself to step away.

“Thank you Luke. You can come antiquing again for sure.”

After I pay the seller and make arrangements for the delivery of Claude’s beautiful new table, Luke and I take a walk through the rest of the stalls together. My phone dings in my pocket but I ignore it, content to just while away this time with him, the buzz of everything I’ve found so far not even close to wearing off.

The fair spans two fields, and when we’re done with the first, we take a quick trip back to the van to unload what I’ve already bought. Then it’s bacon roll time, and I’m glad because my stomach is rumbling, although I change my mind at the last minute and opt for sausage instead.

We stop to browse a stall selling books, and I pick up a few old regency romances. Luke holds them for me while I keep browsing and pays before I can stop him, carrying the stack underneath his arm.

“You know those are for me, right?” I ask, my brows knitted together.

“I know, but you always share your best books with me, so they’re basically mine, too.” The sun is shining, the skylarks are still singing, and I take a moment to appreciate just how

good I'm feeling right now. Luke catches me smiling, and then he's smiling too.

"There's something really nice about being surrounded by all of this old stuff, isn't there?" he says, his spirits clearly echoing mine.

"I know what you mean. I love it when I get to work on a project with a more vintage focus rather than a modern one, even if it's not the way I decorate my own home."

"It makes me think about where all these pieces have been," he points at another dining table. "Who's eaten at that table? Did they make happy memories around it? Which houses has it lived in?"

He catches himself in his thoughts and turns sideways to me while he walks. "Is that really wanky to talk about furniture being *on a journey*?" He does his best plummy accent, and it makes me want to kiss him, but I just smile like a dopey puppy instead.

"No, I know exactly what you mean."

"Like this... thing," he pauses at a stall and picks up a fire poker that's seen better days.

"A poker?" I try not to laugh at him, brandishing it like a sword.

"Yes! This poker. Who made this? How many hands have held it, how many people has it kept warm, Kara? Aren't you dying to know?"

“You want that, mate?” the seller snaps him out of his sentimental moment. “You can have it for twelve.”

“Oh, I’m just looking,” he puts it back sheepishly. “Thanks though.”

My phone dings again, and then again in quick succession. This time I pull it out of my pocket and find a stream of messages from Hattie that I’ve been ignoring.

Hattie: I’ve written a bio for you

Hattie: I’m using this pic

Hattie: And this one. You look stunning

Hattie: Are you open to dating women? I’ve set it up for men only but thought I should check?

Hattie: OK here is the link to your profile. You’ll need to download the app and log in with my email then change it to yours. Your password is ‘FindKaraAMan’

Oh shit, this is not good. But it’s her three most recent messages horrify me the most.

Hattie: OMG you’ve got a match already!!!!!!!

Hattie: And he’s SMOKING HOT!

Hattie: Shall I send him a message for you?

“Everything OK?” Luke asks.

“Yep, just Hattie sending me a load of dating profile stuff.”

“Her latest targets?” he jokes.

“No, um, she’s setting up a profile for me. I have no idea what I’m doing, so she offered to make me look good.” I click on the link she’s sent me, but I can’t see anything without logging in.

“Oh.” He takes a step back from me and wraps his arms tightly around my books. “I didn’t know you were doing online dating.”

“I’m not *doing* online dating. She’s just setting it up, I can’t even log in.” I shove my phone away and feel my chest tighten. I can’t wrap my head around there being a version of me that’s out there with a dating profile and matching with strangers when I’m also right here having the loveliest day ever with Luke.

“Well good for you, Kara,” he says, taking the wagon handle from me and walking ahead. “That’s a big step.”

“I know.” *I feel sick.* I skip a little to catch him up. “It’s weird, let’s not talk about it.”

“OK. We won’t talk about it.”

And just like that, the morning is ruined. We don’t talk as much while we browse the rest of the stalls, and I’ve lost my

enthusiasm for it anyway. I find a few old curtains that aren't the right size, but I can probably repurpose the fabric for something, so I buy them anyway then tell Luke I've had enough. We're quiet when we load the van, and even more so on the drive home. I feel awful.

My phone dings again just as I park outside Luke's house. I glance at it before he gets out.

Hattie: THREE MATCHES NOW.

Hattie: Where are yooooooooou?

"Hattie again?" he asks.

"Yup." I toss my phone into the side compartment of my door and stare down at my lap. The silence that hangs between us is agony. I don't want my time with him to end yet, but there's no good reason to keep him here.

"You don't need Hattie's help to make you look good, you know. I don't think you'll have any problem finding a date, Kara." He steps out of the car and I watch him walk off down his path and into his house without looking back. *Shit.*

Chapter 17

Luke

KARA IS DATING.

Kara is dating and I feel like shit about it. I know I don't have the right to feel any which about it at all, but I do. And I'm confused. She told me she swore off men, but now she's off out there matching with all of these random men in her phone. She's probably about to meet her future husband and I'm here skulking about the house, wishing I was more than just her friend.

If I was a shitty friend, I'd tell her how I feel and suggest a date with me, but if I push it and she says no, then I'll have lost her as a friend too. That's the last thing I want. Her friendship has been one of the best things to happen to me in a while.

This fucking sucks. The worst part is, I don't even feel like I can talk about it because Rob will just try to make me join a dating app too. Or drag me out with him as a wingman, or set me up with women he's already hooked up with and rejected.

I've been keeping myself busy with sorting out the garden and focusing on work so I don't think about Kara too much,

but she's got me reading this book *Under Our Stars* about two best friends on a camping trip so it's doing nothing for my ever inflating feelings, or libido. This morning I took it out on an overgrown hedge, hacking it back with an old pair of shears that I found in the little shed tucked away at the end of my garden. By the time I was done, my hands were raw, my arms covered in little scratches, but I didn't care.

We're not texting as much, and I don't know if it's because she's busy, or because I ended up being cold with her at the weekend. Worst-case scenario, she's off out on dates every night. All I know for sure is that I'm losing sleep over it.

And now here she is, appearing in the doorway at my workplace, which is weirdly sort of a place she now works too. Beautiful and poised, her hair hanging loose, a sweet smile across her face. I have to physically restrain myself from hugging her tight and not letting go, but she's not here for that. She's here to catch up before the next book club, so I keep my hands to myself and my mind on her order.

"Claude loved everything you found last weekend, by the way," she says, her face just begging to be cupped in my hands. I shove my hands deeper in my pockets.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"She says you have to come and visit once the job is finished." Knowing that she talks to her client about me lights a little fire in my belly.

I carry her order to her favourite table by the window and she hands me her phone to take a photo of her. A ping in my

pocket a few seconds later tells me she's already uploaded it and tagged me. Meeting Kara is one of the best things that's happened to Sunshine Coffee, and our accounts are certainly proof of it. Business has been booming, and after word spread about the book club, I've had a couple of enquiries from other groups who would like to use the space in the evenings. While Jo works the counter I grab a few minutes to sit down and catch up. We make small talk, and I hate myself because it's none of my business, but I can't avoid prying.

“So, how's the dating going?” I half mumble.

“Oh God, Luke.” Kara covers her face with her hands and lays her head on the table. “It's awful. Don't even ask.”

Thank fuck for that. I shouldn't feel this relieved. I ball my fists to avoid punching the air. “How so?”

“Honestly? I think Book Boyfriends have ruined real men for me. My expectations are too high. Where are the nice, kind men who read books?” *I'm standing right here.* “Where are the men who can carry an intellectual conversation beyond three messages? I'm not fussy, I'd take a bad boy mechanic who will eliminate a rival gang and then respectfully, but not too respectfully, make me his woman. But no, this app is just full of men who do the weirdest stuff. What am I supposed to say when a total stranger messages me to say *'nice tits'* and nothing else?”

Don't look. I pinch the skin on the inside of my wrist and keep my eyes trained on the courtyard beyond the window. I

will not be just another one of these awful arseholes. “Uh, I wouldn’t know what to say to that.”

“Me neither! One of them began our conversation with a message that said I remind him of Jennifer Lopez. Tell me Luke, is there anything about me that looks anything like Jennifer Lopez?” She scans her pointed fingers all over her body and I burst out laughing. They’re both beautiful, but completely different. “I think he must have had *several* drinks. There was one guy I was chatting with who seemed quite nice. He asked if I wanted to meet up and I was about to say yes, then Hattie Googled him and within minutes she’d found out that he is a married police officer with two kids.”

“Shit, so sketchy.”

“Exactly. Thank God I met you Luke, or I really would have lost hope in men entirely.”

How can one small sentence sting and make my heart pick up at the same time? I pick up my cloth and concentrate on wiping down the table next to hers. I hate the idea of her talking to these creeps.

“Have you thought about it?” she asks after a pause.

“Thought about what?”

“Online dating?”

“Oh no, no way. That’s not for me.”

“Sorry, I know you probably don’t feel ready for all that stuff.” *You have no idea what I feel ready for.* “I’m hardly selling it well either. Honestly, I think I’m just going to give

up. I'm swearing off men again. It's such a waste of time. Think of all the books I could be reading instead."

I suppose I should be thankful that the men of our local area are doing such an appalling job. Maybe she'll give it up and in time come to see that I'm right here if she changes her mind about the just being friends thing.

"Anyway, if you decide to give it a go at some point, make sure you use a different app or you'll probably just end up matching with me," she laughs. *What an unbearable thought that would be.*

Chapter 18

Kara

THE SECOND MEETING OF Sunshine Book Club is another huge success. Most of the people who came last month are back, along with enough extras that we nearly ran out of seats. I'm not as nervous this month thankfully, though again, that's down to Luke's words of encouragement before we got started.

We've been reading *Under Our Stars*, a sweet friends-to-lovers romance packed full of will-they-won't-they moments that have given us plenty to talk about. Natasha and Hamish have been taking a camping trip every summer since they were kids, but this year they end up having to share a tent when Natasha's tent poles go missing. We all agree it's a nice twist on the only one bed trope, and the confined space of a two-person tent builds on the tension that has always lingered between the love interests.

"What did we think of the sex scene? Was it worth the wait?" I ask, and I'm met with a resounding "Yes!" from throughout the room.

“I was practically cheering by the time they finally did it,” says Katy.

Luke agrees. “I thought it was so great, the way they understood each other in the moment, and it just happened, even without words.”

“The staying quiet thing was so hot,” says Megan. “It really proved how deeply they know each other.”

“Can we read something that’s not about childhood sweethearts next month?” asks Janice, one of the older members of the club. “I’m ready for a bad boy!”

“Am I not bad enough for you darling?” her husband Gerald teases.

“Give it a rest, you’ve not been a bad boy since 1976!”

The room erupts into laughter and I love that so many people are nodding in agreement. I was sure I’d have to wait at least six months before ramping up the spice.

“Of course Janice, I’ll pick something like that just for you. If you can all make sure your contact details are on the list when you head out, I’ll email you all tomorrow with our next book. Our next meeting will be on the first Wednesday of September. Before you all go, I want to say a huge thanks to my wonderful friend Luke for letting me run this book club. It’s quickly become the highlight of my month and I can’t think of a better room full of people to spend an evening with.” My eyes find his where he stands at the back of the

group and he turns away, embarrassed by the attention. “Big round of applause for Luke, I think!”

Everyone claps and cheers and he just shakes his head and folds his arms a little tighter.

I linger while everyone says their goodbyes and leaves. Luke finds me, Hattie, and Megan pushing the tables and chairs back to normal once he’s finished in the kitchen.

“Thanks for that Kara, I love being the centre of attention.”

“You’re most welcome.” I throw him my smuggest grin.

“Do any of you fancy getting a drink?” Luke asks as we’re putting our coats back on.

“I would smash a bottle of wine right now but I’m doing a company wide presentation at 9am and I don’t hate myself that much,” says Hattie.

“And I can’t drink on a school night, I’m afraid,” says Megan. “The kids always know. And then they bully me about it.”

I want to keep hanging out with him, but I have this heavy ache between my legs. I need to get home and get off while his words about how much he enjoyed the sex scenes still echo in my ears. I’ve got to stop thinking about him like this. It’s overstepping our friendship. *Just one more time*, I keep saying to myself, but I’m like an addict. A drink with only me and him is a bad idea. I’ll only end up flirting and embarrassing myself.

“I’m kind of tired,” I lie. “Ready for my bed and my next Book Boyfriend, haha.” *What a twat.*

“What are you all up to this weekend?” Luke asks.

“Kara has her boring bookfest,” Hattie says.

“Your what?” he asks, his face catching mine.

“It’s not boring, you bitch,” I jab Hattie in the ribs with my elbow before she sees it coming. “Once every few months I take part in a readathon where I see how many books I can read in twenty-four hours. It’s one of my favourite things to do and I am very much looking forward to it.”

“For charity or something?” Luke asks.

“No, just for fun. There’s an entire community of people who do it all over the world.”

“She’s always trying to get us to do it with her, but we can’t sit still or shut up for long enough,” Megan says.

“It’s true, they’re terrible reading companions.”

“So, how does it work?” Luke cleans the counter around us. “You have to read for twenty-four hours straight?”

“No, you just try to read as much as you can. You’re allowed to sleep.”

“Tell him what time you get up, you freak,” Hattie nudges me with her shoulder.

“I set my alarm for five.”

“That is obscenely early, even for me,” he laughs.

“I don’t know why any of you find this so shocking. It’s not like my love of books is a secret. Honestly, Luke, it’s great. I get my favourite foods in, set up comfy reading spots around the house, and then choose a lovely stack of books to read. I take power naps, drink loads of smoothies. It’s basically a spa weekend with an orgy of Book Boyfriends. What could be better?”

“OK, I’m in,” he says.

“What?”

“You said loads of people do it. I’m off all weekend. Where do I sign up?”

I study his face to see if he’s taking the piss. From the corner of my eye, I see Megan staring wide-eyed at Hattie.

“Are you serious?” I ask him.

“Yeah, I’ve got nothing better to do. I’m gonna struggle with getting up at five though. Can I join you a bit later?”

“Um, sure. Come over whenever you like.”

My phone lights up in my hand and when I glance down, I see there are new messages in our group chat.

Hattie: WHAT IS HAPPENING

Hattie: SEXY READATHON

I throw her a glare and usher them both out the door.

Chapter 19

Kara

LUKE ARRIVES A LITTLE after 10am and when I answer the door, he hands me a tray with two coffees from Sunshine, two bottles of green juice, fresh pastries and a punnet of grapes.

“Aww, your first readathon and you have got the snacks game nailed already.” He’s dressed in light grey jogging bottoms and a dark green hoodie, and even though he’s got a hint of just-rolled-out-of-bed about him, he smells great. That fresh, clean scent with a hint of woody spice that I’ve smelled on him before. Oh yes, when my face was mere inches from his bare skin the night I begged to stroke his stomach.

“I figured you might need a second breakfast after your early start.” He tucks his shoes neatly next to mine and I feel a little nervous flutter. This is the first time we’ve been alone together in my house. The first time we’ve been alone inside since the fateful night on the sofa. *Must not think about Luke’s stomach. Must not think about how I know he likes to have his neck kissed.* “How’ve you been getting on so far?”

“Two books down, but both were novellas. Come on through.”

“That’s impressive.” He follows me through the hallway and into the living room where I’ve laid out snacks and books on the coffee table for us both. The patio door is open and there’s a nice breeze coming in. It’s a perfect day for a readathon.

“So how are we going to do this?”

“I thought, if you’re keen, maybe we could read a couple of the same books together? You can have my physical copy and I’ll download the ebook, and then we can chat about them as we go.”

“You’re a much faster reader than me, though.”

“We could buddy read?”

“What’s that?”

“We’ll start each chapter at the same time. If I finish first, I can read something else until you’re done, and then we can keep going at the same pace.”

“You don’t mind switching between books?”

“No, I’ve usually got a few on the go.”

“OK, let’s do that then.”

I pass him my first choice and pick up my e-reader to download another copy for me. “Do you want sofa or armchair?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Take the sofa, stretch out. I’ve been reading in bed so I’d rather sit up for a bit,” I flop into the armchair and shuffle into my favourite position, knees tucked up to my chest. Luke does a couple of faux lunges, interlacing his fingers and stretching his arms out in front of him, limbering up before flopping onto the sofa with a little jump. I try not to think about his perfect penis just hanging out underneath those loose trousers.

Half an hour later, I deeply regret choosing *Ten Night Stand* for our buddy to read. It’s about an actress called Daisy who brings Marco home for a one-night stand. In a lot of romance books the sex doesn’t kick in until at least halfway through, but these two are going at it from page one. Unfortunately for Daisy, it’s pretty average, and she’s looking forward to kicking Marco out.

Even more unfortunately, since it’s set during the pandemic, they both take a test before he leaves and when it turns out they’re both positive she agrees to let him stay and quarantine in her flat with her. I like this spin on the Forced Proximity trope, especially since they’ve already done it and weren’t keen to stick around longer than necessary.

I finish the first chapter and wait for Luke to catch up, eager to hear his thoughts.

“OK, now what?” he asks, resting the book on his lap, his finger slipped between the pages as a bookmark.

“You tell me what you think will happen.”

“I reckon they’ll get on each other’s nerves before getting under each other’s skin.”

“I think the same. I bet there’ll be a huge misunderstanding. Marco will try to leave, but he can’t. Then they’ll clear the air with some great sex and live happily ever after. I’m hoping for a hallway confession of love.”

“Nice.”

Our predictions are *very* wrong. By day three, the small flat is sizzling with sexual tension, and Daisy and Marco decide to get to know each other a little better in a scene that is far too reminiscent of that night Luke and I asked each other questions on his sofa. I can’t help but feel turned on by the things they discuss, coupled with my own memories of that night. Luke telling me he loves kissing, letting me touch his stomach, pointing out his most sensitive spots.

By the end of the chapter they’re revealing their most intimate fantasies followed by incredibly dirty sex in the rain, on her balcony, in full view of a stranger across the road who barks orders at them while he gets himself off.

I’m not even sixty pages in and this book is *unspeakably* hot. If this is what they’re up to on day three of their isolation, lord only knows what else lies in store. It’s so hot that if I was alone, I’d be taking this book to bed and pulling a toy from my bedside drawer to help get me off fast. I obviously can’t do that with Luke here on my sofa, book in one hand, the other up behind his head. His t-shirt has ridden up a little, taunting me with a slice of tender skin above his hip.

I don’t know why I didn’t think about the fact that Luke would be here in my house reading smut. I’ve no idea if he

gets off while reading, but this book is pure filth and I thank my lucky stars that my arousal won't be as obvious as his. Except it probably is because I'm feeling flushed and fidgety. I have to squeeze my thighs together tightly to keep myself under control. I look down and, sure enough, you can see my nipples are hard through my t-shirt. This is unbearable, and I don't know what to do except get up and walk it off.

"Can you really read pacing like that?" Luke asks, looking up from his book.

"I'm just burning off some excess energy. Anyway, I've finished chapter three. I'll be back in a second." I escape to the bathroom, taking the stairs two at a time, and the second the door is closed, I can't help slide my hand down into my underwear to feel how wet I am. My eyes roll back in my head as I clamp my mouth shut in a silent moan. I don't think it would take me long to come, but that is so inappropriate when I have a guest sitting downstairs.

If this was a scene from a book, he'd have sensed how turned on I am, followed me in here, and pressed me up against the wall with the full weight of his body. Now I'm paranoid. What if he's on the other side of the door listening to me and I've accidentally been talking out loud like I sometimes do when I'm stressed?

I splash my face and neck with cold water, but it does nothing to keep my dirty thoughts in check, so I head back to the kitchen, run a glass of water, and down most of it. Leaning against the kitchen door frame, I try to guess how many pages

he's read so far. He must be close to the scene by now. I can see his eyes getting wider as they scan back and forth across the page, the gulp in his throat as he swallows deeply. It's unbearably horny watching him react to the filth I know he's reading. His jaw drops further open as he finishes the chapter and snaps his book closed.

Suddenly he stands upright. "Holy fuck."

I have to cover my mouth with my hand to stop a laugh bouncing out.

"Kara, this is the dirtiest thing I've ever read. This is torture." No matter how hard I try, I can't help myself from dragging my gaze from his face down over his body to where there's no hiding just exactly how tortured the scene has made him feel. I can see the outline of him straining against his jogging bottoms. I have a flashback to watching him stroke himself on his sofa, and my whole body feels fizzy. He must have followed my gaze because he sits back down and pulls a cushion onto his lap.

"I'm so sorry Luke! A friend told me this was a really sweet read. I mean, I knew there'd be sex in it, but I didn't realise it would be this graphic."

"Pornographic more like."

"I honestly did not see that coming." We lock eyes and both burst out laughing at the unintended innuendo.

"Do you want to take a shower?" I ask.

"Together?!" It comes out as half cough, half laugh.

“No! God, no, I mean a cold shower, to...” I wave my hand back and forth in the general area of his crotch, “you know... calm down.”

“It’s only...,” he turns his wrist to check his watch. “It’s not even 11am. This is a strictly after hours book.”

“Smut keeps no schedule.” I press my lips together, trying not to smirk.

“I might have to shelve this one and read something more PG rated for a bit. I’m an old man, Kara. I haven’t been training for public smut reading as long as you have. You have a problem. You’re a filthmonger.”

“I understand. Do you want to try *The Sweetest Little Pie Shop* instead?”

“Are the pies *actual* pies or vagina pies?”

I throw the book into his hands as I shake my head, laughing. “Normal pies. Edible pies. Sweet pies. Pastry pies.”

“OK, you need to stop saying pies.”

We fall back into our spots and he starts his new book while I keep going with *Ten Night Stand*. He must notice me getting a little squirmy because he lays his open book on his chest.

“Kara, how can you read a book like that and not need to, you know, relieve yourself?”

The frankness of his question makes me snort, but it’s a valid one. “I mean, if I was reading this alone, I’d have definitely come several times by now.”

“Jesus Christ.” He grabs a cushion and smothers his face with it. “Don’t be that honest with me again.”

Thankfully, the sex becomes slower, hot but intimate, as Daisy and Marco get to know each other more deeply. Sometimes a book will really blindside you and unlock a kink or plant a seed of a new fantasy that you hadn’t considered before. Though I’m pretty sure I don’t want anyone to watch me have sex, all I could picture during that chapter was Luke going to town on me, bending me over the balcony bars, rain soaking our skin. Thank fuck, I don’t have a balcony of my own. A concrete patio isn’t quite the same vibe.

At some point Luke dozes off with his book splayed on his chest, and I feel oddly touched that he feels comfortable enough to do that here. Our friendship has been such an unexpected joy lately.

After Adam left, a lot of our mutual friends fell off the radar, and I never really understood why I was the one who was left out. He’s the one who cheated on me, he’s the one who deserved to be abandoned, but instead he probably took his new girlfriend to all the events and pub quizzes and double dates that I should have been on. God knows how he explained himself. Only a handful of people even texted to say they were sorry to hear we’d split up.

Obviously, I love Hattie and Megan to bits, but it’s been nice to have some male company for a change. We both seem to have been able to get over what happened at dinner that night without too much awkwardness, though I can’t deny I’ve

been thinking about it a lot. Thankfully, setting up Sunshine Book Club has given me plenty of opportunity to keep things light and professional.

When I finish *Ten Night Stand* I take a photo and upload it to my Instagram account. I write a quick review, add multiple fire emojis, tag the author and the publisher and add all the readathon hashtags. My stomach is rumbling so I fix us a little platter of cheese and crackers and sliced fruits. I make a couple of coffees and when I come back to the living room he's awake and reading again. I hand him his cup and when he mouths *thank you*, this simple gesture makes my belly feel all warm. I want to run my fingers through his hair and see if it feels as soft as it looks, but I don't, because that's not something friends do, is it?

I get comfy again in my armchair and take a moment to appreciate how nice this is. Megan is always telling me to notice the good things in my life, something about being more in tune with what you have rather than focusing on what you don't have. Or, in my case, focusing on what you've lost.

I'm just getting into a sports rivals novella when I hear a happy little *hmmm* noise from Luke. I look up just in time to see him close his book and set it on the coffee table. He reclines back on the sofa, and stretches out like a cat, his arms flexing above his head. "I can't believe I've just read an entire book in one go."

"It's a good feeling, isn't it?" I love the way his cheeks practically bounce when he smiles. "What did you think?"

A sliver of bare skin peeks out from between his t-shirt and his jogging bottoms, and it takes a serious effort to concentrate on what he is saying.

“I liked it. It’s got all those classic traits. No surprises, the drama is low-stakes, the supporting characters are funny, the romance is cute. All in all, a perfect Saturday afternoon read, four out of five stars.”

“Why not five?” I ask, wishing I could take a seat in his lap and stroke my fingertips over the top of his waistband.

“Not enough spice,” he says with a wink. *Fuck fuck fuck, don’t wink at me.*

“Ha! You’re learning.” I look out to the garden to hide my blushes.

“How’s your book?” he asks.

“A little too twisty for me. I prefer when books hit all the beats.”

“What do you mean?”

I settle my book on my lap and turn sideways to face him. “For me, part of the joy of romance is that there are things you know are going to happen. I don’t want too many surprises or shock twists. I love it when I can see something coming a mile off and then it happens.”

“Give me an example.”

“Like when a character says something is impossible, you just *know* that very thing will happen. Or when two enemies

give each other nicknames, you just know they're going to end up in love. When a bad boy has a particular set of rules about dating, you know they're about to get broken. Or when a woman says she's never been able to come with a man, you sure as hell know he'll be giving her an incredible orgasm by the end of the book. Do you know what I mean?"

"Foreshadowing?"

"Exactly! See if you clock any in your next book," I say, nodding to the stack I've set out for him.

I always meal plan before a readathon to buy myself more book time and last night I prepared a big dish of macaroni cheese. When my stomach starts to rumble, I throw it into the oven with garlic bread for our dinner. We take a break from reading while we eat and discuss our feelings about the books we've read so far.

"Considering you hadn't read much romance until a few months ago, have you caught the bug?"

"I think it's safe to say I'm hooked. It's nice to be reminded that happy endings are possible even if you don't always get your own one." He looks pensive and I can tell he's thinking about Heather. It's sweet the way she is always in his heart.

"Oh Luke, there are so many paths to love. That's the best thing about romance characters. No matter what shitty hand life has dealt them, no matter how broken they are, everyone deserves their own love story."

He takes a long drink of water and stares at his plate, his eyebrows knotting together. The corner of his mouth ticks up like he's mulling something over. "Kara, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"I don't understand how you can be so addicted to love stories and also sworn off men." *Fuck*. He's got a real knack for questions that dig deep. I put my cutlery down and lean back while I think about my answer.

I've been hurt.

I'm too broken.

I'm scared.

I don't need anyone but myself. They all make me sound ridiculous. I know it's the opposite of the words I've just used to try and comfort him.

"I suppose I see couples and I think, good for them, I hope they have a lovely life together, but that's just not for me. I'm happy on my own. Really, I am."

I haven't mentioned it to Luke, but I've been texting a couple of guys over the past few weeks. It never goes anywhere, and there are as many creeps as ever. Nobody has even come close to how I feel when I talk to him.

Luke helps me clear the table and while I wash dishes he studies the photos, postcards, artwork, and calendar on my fridge door. I have a small panic that there are pictures of Adam and I on there, then I remember Megan took them all

down months ago and said I wasn't allowed to see his face before breakfast every day.

“Hey, it's your birthday soon!”

Ugh. It's coming up fast and I'd really just rather ignore the whole thing. “Yep.”

“How old will you be? If you don't mind me asking?”

“I'll be thirty.”

“A big birthday! Are you excited?”

“Um, not especially. Kind of dreading it to be honest. It will be my first one since Adam left.”

“Oh shit, sorry. Those first milestones are rough.” *They sure are. He gets it.* “Are you doing anything nice?”

“Not sure,” I lie. I'm planning to spend the day underneath the covers crying. “I'll be working then probably just the usual takeout, wine, movie with the girls.”

I deliberately don't invite him for this one. I don't need him to see me crying over Adam.

“What do you want for your birthday?”

My answer is instant. “A date with Matthew Braverman,” I laugh.

“The guy from *Love To Loathe You*?”

“Yes. My first proper Book Boyfriend.” I'm swooning, eyes closed and a big smile on my face as I remember Matthew Braverman in all his gorgeous, filthy glory. That book set the bar seriously high. Matthew is still a regular recurring

character in my late night fantasies, though lately there's a real-life man who features more often.

“Why do you love him so much?”

“I like that he has a good read on Briony, he understands her better than she understands herself. I love their fake date because they get to drop their guard for one night. They act like they're pretending, putting on a persona for each other, but every word they say is true, and then when they finally get behind closed doors the sex is immense.”

“I remember,” he says on a rough exhale. “I don't think they sell Matthew Bravermans on Amazon though.”

“Sadly not, but a girl can dream. What did you do for your thirtieth?” I ask. He shifts his hips to lean against the counter, scratches behind his ear. “Oh shit, I assumed you are older, I hope I've not offended you.”

“Not at all, I'm thirty-three. We weren't able to do much when I turned thirty, but I had dinner at the hospital with Heather.”

“Oh God, sorry, I wasn't thinking.”

“It's OK. It was really special in its own way.” Luke folds his arms across his chest, his shoulders bunching. “One of her friends cooked a meal for us and surprised me when I went in for visiting hours. The nursing staff turned a blind eye and let me stay late. We watched *The Notebook* together.”

“A classic.”

“It was her favourite. Especially near the end, she watched it most days. I think it gave her great comfort to see a couple be old together.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, it was kind of torture for me.”

It’s probably not the best time to tell him that I think Noah is kind of a stalker and it’s messed up how he manipulates Allie to go on a date with him. I finish drying the cutlery and put it back in the drawer in silence. It’s only 8pm, a glorious stretch of the readathon still lies ahead of us, but my mood has shifted from all this awkward birthday chat.

“What do you want to read next?”

“It’s getting late, I think I’m gonna take off,” he says, pushing off of the counter and pulling me into a hug. His touch takes me by surprise, and I’m helpless to do anything but melt into it. I rest my cheek against the wall of his chest and inhale the scent of him, a faint mix of detergent, coffee and a note of spice on his skin. My breath falls in line with his, and I shift a little to the left, my ear seeking the rhythm of his heartbeat. I haven’t been held like this in a very long time. Maybe not ever.

“If you’re sure?” I whisper. *Please don’t go.*

Luke pulls his head back and mine follows, until I’m staring up at his face, chest to chest, belly to belly. “I think I’ve had my fill of romance for one day.”

His fingers press into my shoulder. The pad of a thumb strokes a line across my neck. A deep hum and twitch of his lip makes me wonder if he can feel how much I want him, if it's written all over my face. If I had a penis, it would be jabbing him in the thigh. There's a low swoop in my stomach when my hips press themselves forward and I realise he's having that very same issue.

"I'll let myself out," he says, pulling away. There's the lightest kiss, maybe not even a kiss, just a whisper of his lips against my hairline. Then he steps away. "You keep on reading."

"OK."

Every nerve ending thrums. I try to get comfy in my armchair and side-eye the front door as Luke gathers his things. I give him my friendliest cheery wave as he steps out, but the second I hear the door click, I abandon my book and plunge my hand into my underwear, chasing the release that's been building all day.

Chapter 20

Luke

I WAKE UP HARD and aching. I'm pretty sure I've been like this all night, despite relieving myself in the shower as soon as I got home, my forehead pressed against the wall, replaying that scene from *Ten Night Stand*.

Sex is hot.

Sex on a balcony. Very hot.

Sex on a balcony in the pouring rain. Unbelievably hot even though probably a bit cold in reality.

Sex on a balcony in the pouring rain then realising a neighbour can see you, only for that neighbour to start giving you orders ending with '*fuck her until she screams*'. That has unlocked some level of hotness I wasn't even aware was possible.

I've never been much of an exhibitionist, but last night all I could think about was taking Kara like that. Thinking about turning her on so much it turned someone else on had me spilling over my hand in minutes. These books have got me acting like a horny schoolboy.

I mean, I blame the books, but deep down I know it's Kara too. She's the one I picture when I stroke myself off thinking about sex in a snow drift, in a stable, in a parked car down a dark lane. She's awoken something in me that I thought I was doing just fine without.

I could have stayed and read with her all night. I had a vision of us ending up stretched out on her sofa, her at one end, me at the other end, legs tangled together. I imagined myself dragging my thumb across her ankle, slowly inching up her calf.

Those thoughts are exactly why I had to go. I couldn't handle another minute with completely un-friend-like urges building inside me.

I roll onto my side and reach across to the empty half of the bed, wishing she was here. I'm a lovesick teenager again, pulling a pillow tight into my chest to fill the void. I'm trying so damn hard to keep things friendly, but spending the day with her, hanging out in her living room reading and chatting, it just made me want her more. I want so many days like that in my future.

A scrapbook of images floods through my brain. The first day she came into the coffee shop, that little bit of hair at the back of her neck that always falls loose from her ponytail, her bright pink cardigan that turns her into a beacon of joy, easy to spot in a crowd. The way she nibbles her bottom lip when she's reading. How she laughs with her friends, how she felt in

my arms last night. Every single one of these things make me want her more.

And that night on the sofa. Jesus, the amount of times I've thought about it. The memory of her sprawled out before me flashes into vision at the most random times. I can't sit on the sofa without thinking about it. I can't sit at the dining table without remembering her fantasy, I've had to start eating my breakfast at the kitchen counter instead. The filth pouring from her mouth, the lust in her eyes, the sound of her climbing to her orgasm. I could get high off of that sound.

It's not just that, it's the way she was afterward too. Vulnerable and human, soft and gentle. I want to see all those sides of her and the longer this goes on the harder it is to be around her. I want to see every smile, I want to be the one who makes her laugh. And if there are tears, I want to be the one to sit through them with her, to hold her hand and rub her back. I want to make her soup when she's sick, pour her bucks fizz on Christmas morning.

Oh my God, I want Christmas morning with this woman, though I have a feeling every morning would feel like Christmas morning waking up next to her and I never thought I'd feel that way about anyone ever again. My chest hurts at the realisation.

I don't know how much longer I can go on with this friendship and not tell her how I really feel about her. I also have no idea how to go about it. This is Kara we're talking

about. She's fine talking about Book Boyfriends but when it comes to the real stuff she clams up.

What am I going to do, just text her and say *'Hey I like you, can I take you out to dinner tonight?'*

I mean, I could, but I can't risk her thinking it's a friend invite when I want so much more. And though she might not feel worthy of it, the benchmark for dates in her head must be so high after all the books she's read. I wish I could show her that she is worthy.

Fortunately for me, I've got the number of one of the most successful daters on the planet, and he answers on the first ring.

"Hey bro, what's up?"

"I need date ideas."

All that earns me is a laugh. "You know I don't date."

"Oh. Well then give me advice on how you... I don't know, woo someone?"

"You can start by removing the phrase *'woo someone'* from your vocabulary," Rob says and I groan, already regretting asking for help. "I take it this is about book babe?"

"You know her name is Kara. And yes. I want to ask her out, and I have no idea how."

"I'm really the worst person to ask mate. I just like their photos, or lean against a bar and wait for them to take the bait."

I thump my head on the table a touch too hard, sit up and rub at the sore spot. “Right well that’s useless. Forget I asked. I’ve got stuff to be getting on with so I’ll catch you later.”

“Luke,” he says in a hurry, just as I’m about to hang up.

“Yeah?”

“I’m proud of you. Just be yourself.”

A few days later, I’m serving a young couple who are clearly on a first date, when an idea comes to me. A Matthew Braverman shaped idea. If that’s what Kara wants for her birthday, that’s what she should get. A fake date just like the one where Briony gets stood up and Matthew waits outside to make sure the guy isn’t a serial killer. Just when she’s about to leave he comes in and sits down opposite her.

She wasn’t wrong when she said it was an amazing scene.

I pull my phone from my pocket, create a new text group called *Shhh!* then add Hattie and Megan to it. Thank God Kara set up a Sunshine Book Club group chat or I’d have no idea how to get in touch with them. Before I can even type my reason for getting in touch with them I can see the little notification to tell me they’re typing.

Megan: What’s this?

Hattie: Why are you shushing us?

Luke: Quick question, do you have plans for Kara’s birthday next week?

Hattie: We do, why?

Luke: What are you doing?

Hattie: Girls night.

Luke: Same as every other week?

Megan: Yes, but with cake

Hattie: Why?

Luke: I was wondering if I could steal her away for the night?

Hattie: Why? Why? WHY?

Hattie: What do you have planned

Megan: We need details

Luke: It's a surprise

Hattie: It's a big birthday Luke, our BEST FRIEND only turns 30 once. If you're asking us to sacrifice our BEST FRIEND'S 30th birthday you're going to need to give us a lot more than "it's a surprise".

Luke: I want to do something special for her

Megan: DETAILS

Luke: I don't want to say too much in case you give it away

Hattie: Luke! Luke Luke Luke, you can trust us

Luke: OK, I will say this...

Luke: I asked her recently what she wanted for her birthday and the thing she said is technically impossible but I want to try and create a version of it for her. And remind her that good things are possible so she doesn't feel shitty about her first birthday on her own.

Hattie: What did she say?

Luke: I can't tell you

Megan: OMG

Hattie: What?

Megan: I know what she wants

Hattie: WHAT???

Megan: Matthew Braverman

Hattie: Who?

Megan: The hero from Love To Loathe You. That's what she wants for her birthday. That's what she wants for every birthday.

Hattie: Hmmm, what are you planning Luke?

Luke: (zipped face emoji)

Luke: If you can keep this secret and do a couple of things to help me I will make it worth your while

Megan: I want free coffees for a month

Hattie: And those cinnamon rolls too

Luke: Wow, thank you for supporting a local business. How about, as a thank you, and to make it up to you for stealing your best friend away on her 30th birthday, I take you all for lunch that weekend? Anywhere you like.

Megan: Roast at The Milling Barn

Hattie: BOTTOMLESS Roast at The Milling Barn

Luke: Done

Hattie: OK we're in. What do we need to do?

Chapter 21

Kara

I'M THIRTY, I'M SINGLE, and I feel like shit. I know it shouldn't matter. It's only one measure of success and I'm an idiot to be bothered about it, but it's just not where I thought I'd be. In the past I'd have said for sure I'd be married, maybe with a baby or at least one on the way, and right now that could not be further from my reality.

I need to remember that I have a beautiful home, a great job, the most wonderful friends, and more than enough Book Boyfriends to keep me going. That should be enough, but today it makes me feel pathetic.

My first birthday without Adam, and he hasn't even texted. I don't know why I thought he would. It's not like he's contacted me about anything else in all this time.

Months ago, I decided to take a day off work and blocked my diary out all day. I fully expected I'd need to give myself the grace to cry in bed until the moment it was acceptable to go to sleep again. Instead, I'm at Claude's, where I've been adding the finishing touches to her guesthouse and, although

I'm absolutely knackered, I'm sad this job has come to an end already.

What was a few blank rooms just six weeks ago is now a cosy, homely space with sage green walls, beautiful rich furnishings, vintage light fittings, and plush seating. The dining table Luke found for me is stunning, just waiting for friends to gather around it and make memories.

“Oh Kara, you are a genius, I adore it!” Claude screams when I guide her through the door and whip off the blindfold I've made her wear for the big reveal. I know she loves feeling like she's on a home makeover show. I guide her around the living area, pointing out the storage options and telling her about the origins of the huge floral tapestry I've hung along one wall.

“You know I'll never be able to get rid of my friends now,” she nudges me with her elbow, a huge grin plastered across her face. “I might even have to move in here for a bit myself.”

I stand with my hands on my hips and take it all in. I'm really proud of this one.

“You must bring your friend Luke over to let him see it.” She was just as impressed as I was with his antiquing skills. “Bring him for a cuppa tomorrow?”

“I'll see if he's free.” I reach for my phone in my back pocket, weirdly grateful for an excuse to text him.

Kara: Just finishing up at Claude's guesthouse. You fancy a visit tomorrow to see your finds in their new home?

Luke: Pretty busy this weekend. Maybe some other time?

That's it? I guess he hasn't remembered my birthday either. Now that I think of it, the only person who has wished me a happy birthday is my mum, with a sprightly text at 6:30am that definitely could have waited. I did not inherit her early-bird genes.

Claude, however, never forgets a thing you tell her. She's one of those people with Favourite Aunt energy. You feel you've known her a lifetime as soon as you meet her. I don't even know how she knows it's my birthday today, but when we walk back into the main house, she produces an enormous bouquet, and a box of chocolates I can tell were expensive because I've never heard of the brand.

"Now darling, I also got you a little something else that doesn't come in a gift bag, I'm afraid," she says, patting my arm. "I hope you won't mind, but I was talking to my dear friend Beverley about you the other day and she mentioned her son is single and just hates those awful apps." I have a feeling I'm about to deeply regret telling Claude that I'm doing online dating.

"So I've arranged a little date for you to meet him tomorrow." *Oh God no.* I don't need this. My heart really isn't

in it.

“His name is Jonty. He’s thirty-seven, he’s a dental surgeon, and I think you will just have so much in common.” I have to wonder what exactly she thinks it is that we’ll have in common. I’m also wondering why he’s single, and might it be because his name is Jonty? “I’m going to forward you his number and the details. Now, where are my glasses?”

“They’re on your head Claude. And honestly, this is too much. You don’t need to set me up with people.”

“Please darling, you’re *such* a catch. I simply can’t have you snaffled by someone who’s not good enough for you. Jonty is excellent, very loyal, really beautiful colouring.” I love how posh people describe people like animals.

We say our goodbyes, and Claude promises she’ll get her photographer friend to do a photoshoot and send me the images for my portfolio. She really takes good care of me, the least I can do is meet her friend’s son.

elle

Hattie and Megan must have sensed I was feeling shitty about my birthday, because they suggested dinner out tonight instead of our usual takeout. We’re going to the fancy Italian place everyone goes to for special occasions, as opposed to the slightly more low budget but still really excellent other Italian place. I’ve only been there twice, once for my parents’

anniversary dinner at the start of the year, and once to celebrate Hattie getting a new job not long after it opened. It will be nice to eat somewhere I never went with Adam.

My book and I take a long soak in the bath all afternoon, followed by one of my favourite activities; slathering myself in cocoa butter and dancing around my bedroom until it all soaks in. After closing the curtains, of course.

We don't have plans to see each other this weekend, so I ring my mum and dad while I do my hair and make-up. By the time I'm dressed, it's only 6:30pm, but I'm feeling excited about having a proper night out.

There's been talk of hitting up a bar after dinner to seduce some guys, no prizes for guessing whose idea that was. But it's my birthday after all, so instead of being a wimp about it, I make an effort to look hot as fuck.

I opt for a black mini-dress with a scooped neckline and sheer puffball sleeves. It's warm enough to go without tights, but I throw on some of my nicest matching underwear even though the idea that anyone else will see it tonight is utterly ridiculous. Plus, I don't want to be too hungover when I meet Jonty tomorrow.

After all my worrying, it has been quite a lovely day, and I'm barely thinking of Adam at all except to think *look how well I'm doing not thinking about him*. I take a good hard stare at myself in the mirror before I head outside and think, *here I am*. Turning thirty, off to dinner with my beautiful friends,

maybe about to meet the great love of my life tomorrow. *Yeah right, but let's pretend.* Life is good today.

The taxi Hattie booked for me picked me up on time, and I arrive at the restaurant at 8 o'clock sharp. I've worn my highest heels and I'm desperately hoping I don't roll an ankle as I head inside. I'm the first one here, so the waiter shows me to my seat, a small table for two up near the back of the restaurant. It's not like Hattie to make a cock-up, I bet she forgot to include herself when she booked.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, we're actually a booking for three."

"No problem, Madame," he says, touching my elbow and guiding me into the seat he's pulled out for me. "I will bring another chair for you in a moment."

Madame. That's what happens when you turn thirty, no more *Miss* for me.

The restaurant has had a makeover since I was last here, and it's really beautiful. Exposed brickwork lines one wall, with little alcoves along the way tiled with mirrors making the place look larger than it is. The lighting is stunning. It's cosy and intimate but not so dark I can't read the menu or sneak a glance at what other people have ordered when it comes from the kitchen.

I kill time reading the drinks menu while I wait for the girls to arrive. I already know I want a *lot* of wine tonight, but I'll wait in case they're jumping straight to spirits. For all I know, they're pre-gaming and that's why they're late. I check my phone for messages but there's nothing, so I use the time to

reply to a few DMs and comments on my latest Instagram posts.

Ten minutes later, there is still no sign of Hattie and Megan. It's most unlike them and I'm annoyed they've not even been in touch to tell me they're running late.

I'm just about to dial Hattie, whose phone is always in her hand, when a notification appears in our group chat. Quickly followed by another, then another.

Hattie: We love you so much, but we can't make dinner.

Megan: Sorry lovely. Hope you have a great night xxx

Hattie: #sorrynotsorry xx

Tears prick at my eyes. *What the fuck?* I've been so looking forward to tonight, and the two people who matter to me most have stood me up? What reason could there possibly be that they can't make it? This will go down in history as the worst birthday ever.

My shoulders shake and I hold my breath so I don't cry while I tuck my phone into my bag. I'm about to get up when the chair across from me slides away, and when I look up, my mind turns to mush.

"Hi," he says, reaching out a hand to introduce himself.

“Hi,” I whisper, my throat squeaking. I’m frozen in place, so he reaches for my hand and shakes it with both of his. He squeezes gently, his touch warm and reassuring.

“I’m Matthew. Matthew Braverman. You must be Briony. Is this seat taken?”

My jaw is on the floor. I can’t speak, but he sits anyway. It’s him. Luke. Luke in a dark suit with a crisp white shirt unbuttoned so casually it’s criminal. His hair is pushed back, his beard freshly trimmed, and he smells fucking incredible. He’s leaning forward, elbows on the table, his chin resting on his interwoven fingers, eyes locked on mine. *Holy fuck. What is happening?*

“What are you doing here?” I manage to ask.

“Did you get stood up tonight?” His voice is different. Lower, slower, playful.

“Yes,” I gulp. I’m not entirely sure how to play along here. Obviously, I know what he’s doing. I know this scene inside out.

Briony goes to meet a blind date, Matthew waits outside and when the guy doesn’t show, he walks in to take his place. Silently, they call a truce on their feud, halt their sabotage, and allow themselves one glorious, uninhibited evening. I’ve re-read it countless times, but I also want some genuine answers.

“I was supposed to meet my friends.”

“Well, I simply couldn’t bear to see you left alone. You need better acquaintances.” His face breaks into a smile then a

grimace, he knows he's saying something awful about my favourite people. He lifts his palm to his opposite cheek, whispering from behind it. "I don't really mean that, don't tell them I said that. They'll kill me."

He's too much, and I burst into laughter, something just a minute ago I never thought I'd be doing tonight. "Something tells me they were never coming?"

"Well, I'm here now, so let's turn this evening around," he says, sitting back and letting his gaze coast down to my neck, my chest. His lips part, and when he pulls the lower one between his teeth, I get that low swoop in my belly. "You look incredible, by the way."

OK Kara, breathe. This might be fun.

A waiter appears, and he orders an excellent bottle of red wine without even consulting me. If this happened in real life I would be livid, but the way Matthew takes control of Briony's disastrous date is one of the sexiest things about this scene and, *hang on a second*, this is my real life and on further consideration it's definitely sexy.

"So tell me about yourself, Briony. Not the Briony from work who's cold with everyone and only cares about..." I can see him struggling to remember what Briony in *Love To Loathe You* actually does, "...profits. Tell me about the real you."

I take a sip of my wine and lean back in my chair. "What do you want to know?"

He matches my every move, the wine, the lean, the dark smile. “I want to know everything there is to know about the stunning woman sitting opposite me.”

I must look deranged, my eyes darting everywhere as I take in his hair, his jawline, the tight fit of his shirt, the soft underside of his wrists. I don’t know how long we sit looking at each other, but the longer we stay silent, the more he goads me on with a hard stare.

“I expect you probably think you know me quite well,” I say, taking a sip of my wine as I step into character. “You think I’m cold. Controlling. Lonely.” That’s exactly how Briony comes across, and I take it all on, my voice icy and clipped.

“Are you lonely?”

“Absolutely not. I love my own company.”

“If you enjoy your own company so much, why are you on a blind date with some dickhead who’s not good enough for you?” Briony hates how much Matthew gets under her skin and it’s oddly fun to feel annoyed at his interrogation.

“Why are you such an asshole?” I ask, lowering my voice a little in case anyone is listening in to our play conversation.

“I have high standards. Why are you single?” he hits back with a tilt of his head, and I can’t believe he’s memorised this scene beat for beat.

“*I* have high standards.”

The smirk on his face is pure Matthew. I’ve pictured it so many times and Luke is nailing it. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“You strike me as a woman with high standards. A woman with great expectations, the kind of needs that not every man can fulfil.” A subtle lift of his eyebrow is the new hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

“I’m impressed. For once in your life, you’re right, Matthew. No man has ever been able to keep up with me.” I want to laugh at how ridiculous these lines sound coming from my mouth, but I feel fucking badass. Powerful, in control. Briony takes no shit, so tonight neither do I. He leans forward and raises one eyebrow.

“So far.” God, he wears Matthew’s cockiness well.

“Yes. So far.” A blush creeps through me, surely turning me pink from head to toe as the tension grows between us.

“Challenge accepted.” He tilts his glass towards mine and I meet it with a clink.

Our conversation flits in and out of character while we eat. We talk about music, movies, and memories, just like they do in the book, but we answer with our own favourites. We talk about food, clearly a subject with lots in common, and just like Matthew and Briony try to out-do each other, we invent wildly outrageous dreams.

“If you could do anything with your life, what would you do?” he asks me.

“I’d take a month long sabbatical and spend it reading books and eating bread and cheese in the South of France, on a

journey of self-discovery.” I let my voice singsong through the fantasy. “You?”

“I’d retrain as a lawyer, locking up the bad guys and throwing away the key.” He’s got a full sexy smoulder thing going on and I eat it up. “I’d rescue one of their wives and we’d go on the run from the mob, making love all across Europe, but always looking back over our shoulders.”

“Sounds like an awkward position,” I tease and he attempts it, palms flat on the table, head turned back over his shoulder, pouting.

“OK, I haven’t thought that one through. What else would you do?”

I keep my eyes on him across the top of my glass, another sip of wine, buying me time to consider another fantasy. “I’d be a sultry librarian with a penchant for helping meet customers’ needs between the stacks.”

“Let me guess, you meet a shy nerdy guy who has a dark side?”

“Absolutely,” I giggle. I love this game.

“I buy it. What else?”

“Hm, I’d run a tech company and spend years trying to take down a rival firm.” I add a hint of malice to my voice. “On the day I’m scheduled to buy them out with a blind offer, I’ll get stuck in a lift with their CEO and decide there is something I want even more than his business.”

“Is it his penis?” he raises one eyebrow.

“Yes,” I nod formally. “Yes, it is.”

“I’d buy a forest and build a cabin with my bare hands,” he says. “I’d sleep under the stars, bathe in the river, eat wild berries and embrace a life of solitude. Then one day a gorgeous woman will stumble into my clearing just as I’ve finished building the bed. I’m shirtless and sweaty, of course. Holding an axe.”

I snort laughing. “That’s a good one! I’d sleep my way through an entire Canadian Hockey team.”

“I don’t doubt it, you filthy minx,” he says, palming his mouth as his eyes sweep over me.

“Are you flirting with me, Matthew?”

He leans in close and skims his fingers along the side of my hand. “You fucking bet I am.”

Oh no, oh shit. Amidst all our bantering and roleplay, I’d stopped thinking about just how Matthew and Briony’s date ends, *as if I could ever forget*, and now I’m panicking. This is my Matthew fantasy come true, but when is Luke going to stop playing this game with me? What happens after we leave here? Am I just going to go home, or will Matthew, *Luke!*, keep this going? And if he keeps this going, do I want that? The heavy ache between my thighs says I do.

“Can I interest you in the dessert menu?” Our waiter appears just as we finish our wine, and Luke looks to me for an answer. I’ve already looked at every pudding on the menu,

and the tiramisu here is legendary, but they don't have the one thing I really want. Am I really going to do this?

Fuck it. It's my birthday. For one night only, I should be able to have whatever I want. I smile sweetly at the waiter, then turn to stare Luke straight in the eyes. "I'm in the mood for pancakes."

Chapter 22

Luke

PANCAKES. *Fucking pancakes.*

I didn't seriously believe she'd go there, but that's a clear signal, right? In the book, Matthew takes Briony back to his place. Things get heated, and afterwards he makes her pancakes and they eat them hot from the pan at his kitchen counter.

I'm trying to get a read on what Kara is really saying here. Does she want to leave? With me? Does she genuinely want pancakes? And everything that happens in between? The tiniest nod and the bite of her lower lip give me my answer.

"We'll just take the bill, thank you," I say to the waiter, turning my face towards him but never letting my eyes leave hers.

At the door I help her into her coat and when we step outside, I slip my hand into hers, interlacing our fingers, just like Matthew does with Briony. My place is ten minutes from here, and Kara's is in the opposite direction, but she doesn't question it when I lead her towards mine.

We're quiet as we stroll side by side. There's no walk home in the story, and I don't know what to say, terrified that if I ask her, *Kara*, about her day or anything else, I'll break this spell we're both under. This entire evening I've been grateful for Matthew's guidance, but I know our conversation has been real. Kara and Luke lurking just underneath these masks.

I'm nervous as hell, but her thumb sweeps slow circles around the knuckle of mine, which I take as a good sign. It's been so long since I held hands, it makes me feel... it's hard to describe, it just makes me feel a lot. I'm glad it's her. It's so easy to be quiet, there's nothing uncomfortable about our silence, I'm not questioning my thoughts. I try not to stare, but whenever I steal a sideways glance, I'm completely smitten with the half smile that isn't leaving her face. In this moment she looks so happy, so relaxed, and my heart is ready to burst knowing it's me who's made her feel that way.

“Are you warm enough?”

“Yes. You?”

“Yep. It's not much further.” I know she knows, but she must sense my nerves because she gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

When we get to my door, she hovers behind me while I unlock it before stepping aside to let her in first. She straightens up a little, a tiny shake of her head as she crosses the threshold. Kara sets her bag down on the side table as if she's done it hundreds of times. We could be coming home

from the supermarket, from our fifth anniversary dinner, from a parent teacher conference.

I know I have to stop this, stop imagining a future with someone who doesn't want one with me, but just for tonight, in this weird alternate reality that we've slipped into, I think maybe it will be OK to let ourselves go.

I slip her coat from her shoulders, hang it with mine, and turn to face her. She leans back against the wall and I mirror her body language, just a couple of feet apart in my narrow hallway. She's so incredibly beautiful standing there before me. I've seen it while sitting across from her all night, but on her feet I can finally take her all in. My eyes roam her face, down the slope of her neck, her breasts, her hips, all the way down to the heels that make her legs look even more incredible than usual. Her dress stops mid-thigh, and with a low neckline, it's not similar to the one Briony wears for her date.

Did Kara think about that when she chose it for tonight? She might not have read it for a while, whereas I've been re-reading certain chapters all week in preparation. Her hair is lifted away from her face, tumbling down her back, but there are these little loose strands I've wanted to tuck behind her ear all night. I'm grateful that the wall is propping me up, keeping me steady for whatever might come next.

The air is thick between us, and I cough to clear my throat. "Shall I make pancakes now or...?"

“Matthew,” she takes a step forwards and tilts her head up towards mine. “Pancakes are for after.”

Fuck. I want to give her what she wants, want to give her Matthew, and I want to give her me, but something makes me pause. I’m worried this is incredibly selfish, tricking her by pretending to be this fantasy man of hers. She’s giving me these hungry eyes that I’m pretty sure are begging me to keep going, but I need to know she wants this as much as I do.

“After what?” I ask.

She pushes up onto her tiptoes and loops her hands around the back of my neck. I let mine smooth over her hips, the soft material of her dress taunting me with the promise of what lies underneath. I dip my head down to meet hers, our mouths hovering just millimetres apart.

“Briony...” *I can’t believe I’m about to do this.* “You know if you were my girl, I’d never stand you up.”

Matthew’s words fall naturally from my tongue, there’s no holding back now. Kara has already shown me how well she knows this scene, but she pulls back a little. Her eyes search mine, checking we’re on the same page. When I give her an encouraging nod, she says the words that make my stomach flip.

“Matthew,” her chin tilts, her words a whisper against my mouth, “if you were my guy, I’d make you fuck me until I *can’t* stand up.”

Everything happens all at once. My hands reach down to her thighs, lifting her roughly. She wraps her legs around my waist as I spin her to the hallway wall and crash our lips together. There's no softness, no teasing and easing into it, just hot tongues stroking, greedy for each other.

I can't believe this is our first kiss. A first kiss can't be this good. This is the kiss of two people who know each other inside out. If kissing her feels this incredible, everything else is going to blow my mind. My nerves disappear when I suck her lower lip and nip it gently between my teeth. Her tongue searches mine and I forget what day it is, where we are, what my fucking name is when she moans into my mouth.

Bouncing her up a little higher, she tightens her grip around my waist. I'm so turned on by the heat between her legs pressed against my stomach, only the thin fabric of her underwear and my shirt keeping us apart. I keep her there with one hand, and with the other I cradle her face, turning it to one side so I can lick from her jaw to her earlobe in one long, firm sweep. The whimper that escapes her throat is the best sound I've ever heard. I want to hear it again, and again, and again.

The first time I read this scene, I was thankful I was at home in bed, my dick hard in my hand, stroking slowly at first, then faster and faster, before timing my release with the characters on the page. All these books she's had me reading, they're like instruction manuals for the best sex ever. I get why they're popular with women, but I can't believe more men aren't reading this stuff and learning a thing or two. Now that I'm

living out Matthew and Briony's first night together, it's even better than I could have imagined.

Just like Matthew, I loosen her grip around my waist and set her back down on the floor. Tugging at the hem of her dress, I lift it over her head in one swift motion. "Fuuuck," I can't hold back my real thoughts when I see her standing in front of me in black lace underwear.

"Get on your knees, Matthew," she says, and I snap out of reality and back into our game. I unbutton my shirt one by one, and lower myself slowly to the floor, never taking my eyes off hers. I can't get enough of watching the way she shudders and hitches her breath when I hook my fingers into the waistband of her underwear and drag them down her legs, my nails raking against her delicate skin. Her face betrays her need. She knows what's coming, and her eyes squeeze closed in anticipation.

"Look at me, Briony," I bark. She blinks open to watch me purse my lips and blow a long, slow stream of cool air against the heat between her thighs. "Look at how good I am for you."

Her leg lifts over my shoulder and I'm in heaven, teasing my tongue just at the edge of where she wants me to be. She squirms, and I press her to the wall with a splayed hand across her stomach. I'm not letting her get her kicks that easily.

Tormenting her only adds to my lust-fueled desperation. I've fantasised about this moment so many times, wondered what she would look like, taste like, feel like. Inevitably, I tell myself off for being such a shitty friend afterwards, but there's

nothing friendly about the way she urges her hips forward. I lose the will to be restrained and I grip her soft, perfect thighs, spreading them further as I bury my face into her. I never want to forget the way she tastes.

I've been holding back from touching her for so long. All those times I wanted to hug her, stroke her arm, take her hand in mine. Times I reached out and pulled back, pushed those feelings down. I've been starving for her and now I'm unleashed.

I'm not Matthew, I'm not Luke, I'm someone else entirely when I cup my hands under her perfect cheeks and nudge her other leg over my shoulder. I kneel upright, pushing her higher but keeping her pinned to the wall with my mouth.

She lets out a gargled moan, curls her fingers into my hair, gripping tightly as her hips buck and roll. My tongue thrusts deep inside her, but I want to make her explode. Dragging it to her clit, I suck that tight nub in between my lips, sending her eyes back in her head. She rocks herself against me and I can feel her pulsing, twisting and squirming as she gets closer and closer until finally she covers her mouth with both hands and screams my name. Just past the peak of her orgasm, I turn my head and suck hard into the shake of her inner thigh, knowing I'll think about this moment for the rest of my life.

Matthew and Briony aren't done yet, and neither are we, though I let Kara catch her breath, leaning back on my heels and lowering her to my lap. She sucks my tongue into her

mouth, tasting her orgasm, licking the wetness from my lips. That's not in the book, but no way am I complaining.

“Are you OK?” I whisper into her ear, nipping at the lobe with my teeth.

“Yes,” she answers through ragged breath. “Yes. More.”

It's all the permission I need. People say you're an ass man or a tits man, well right now I'm an *everything* man and I need to see all of Kara. I reach around to unhook her bra, pleased that I manage it quickly and haven't regressed to a clueless teenager. She arches her back, presses against me and I dip to trace my tongue down her neck, tasting the salty heat of hot skin. Further I go, hands roaming her back, gripping fistfuls of perfect ass while my tongue swirls over one tight nipple.

I can't believe we're doing this. I've played it out in my head so much, certain we'd have a nice dinner, joke around a little and that would be it. As much as I hoped it would lead to this, only in my hottest middle of the night dreams did I imagine I'd be sweeping Kara to the floor, legs lifting until thighs grip my hips, hands tugging through my hair as I suck her nipple, teasing, biting before giving the other the same attention.

She lands on the floor of my hallway with a gasp. I worry I've hurt her, but it doesn't stop her scrambling with the buttons of my shirt, pushing it off my shoulders. Her hands stroke across my chest, down to my stomach, where she makes the most incredible noise. I go somewhere completely off the planet, feeling her press her fingers into my skin.

She must know how hard I am, the length of me solid against the crease of her hip as she pulls me closer. In the book, Matthew doesn't ask Briony what she wants to happen next, he just goes for it, but I'm too self-conscious. If this isn't what Kara wants, I'll never forgive myself. Before I can think about it too much, she's unbuckling my belt, yanking it fully free from my trousers. Her hands make quick work of my zipper and I suck at her mouth, groaning when she reaches inside my boxers and palms my dick. *Holy fucking shit.* It's so long since I've been touched this way I might come any second.

I pull back, releasing myself from her grip so I can push the rest of my clothes off, throwing them down the hallway when I'm finally free. It's just me and her now, skin to skin and nothing in between. I hover over her, precariously on the knife edge of wanting to be deep inside her and never wanting this to end.

"Condom?" she whimpers against my mouth.

"Condom. Yes." *Fuck.* I break our kiss and lean forward, reaching up over her head for my trousers. Thank fuck Rob made me buy them. It was a shoot for the moon moment when I remembered to stash one into my pocket on the way out, though I now regret flinging my trousers so far when I took them off. I don't regret it for long. Kara lifts her head, running her tongue from my sternum to my belly button, then taking a chunk of my flesh near my hip in between her teeth. I yelp, but it's so hot and unexpected and I want to bite her back.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, soothing the pain with a gentle kiss. “Stomachs. I warned you I had a thing.” I’m utterly speechless, concentrating on getting the condom on without fucking it up, when I remember the spot that she showed me on her back during our sofa confessions. If I only have this one night with her, I can’t end it without seeing if what she told me is true. With my knees straddling her, I slip my hands underneath the small of her back and flip her over.

She is heaven from this angle. I could look at her like this for hours, but I also wish I could see her face, catch her expression when she realises what’s coming next. She turns her head to the side, resting it on the backs of her hands. I lean forward to sweep her hair away to one side, planting soft kisses along her jaw, down to her neck, teasing the shell of her ear along the way. I trace my tongue between her shoulder blades, savouring the taste of her smooth skin. She is perfectly still except for her ass pressing up, grinding hard. I retaliate with a hard suck between her shoulders and her entire body spasms underneath me, a possessed moan escaping her throat. This is so much better than what I’ve imagined, alone, late at night, unable to get her out of my head.

I grab a handful of her hip, my fingers digging into her as I take another bite, sucking harder this time. She jerks again, pushing her hips up into me, wriggling impatiently against my dick. There’s no doubt what she needs. I soothe her reddening skin with soft kisses, trailing them down to the small of her back, taunting her with the faintest drag of my teeth. She has the most incredible dimples at the base of her spine and my

dick twitches at the way she shudders when I lick them both, blowing cool air across her skin. Kneeling between her legs, I spread mine farther, nudging her wide open. Smoothing my hand over her ass, I go in for the third firm suck at the side of her back and force the breath from her chest, burying two fingers into her up to the hilt. She wasn't lying, everything is connected. I feel her grip around my hand until—

“Fuck, Luke, no.” She thumps the floor with tight fists. “It’s too much, it’s too good.”

I pull away and she twists onto her back. “No more teasing. I need you now.” She repositions herself, legs hooked around me, and it’s time I follow Matthew’s lead again. When I tease the tip of my dick inside her, she melts beneath me, but her eyes never leave mine. We’re in this together, falling without fear.

I’m blindsided by how good she feels, can’t get enough, easing into her inch by inch. That feeling changes with every thrust, every second hotter than the one before, I’m harder than I even thought possible. I want to make this so good for her, but I’m never going to last long like this. I can already feel the heat growing inside me, the telltale tingle in my spine.

Captive inside her, I lock her fingers into mine and lift her arms above her head, just like Matthew does. I cover her face and neck with hungry kisses, loving the way she mewls as my hips find their rhythm and grind into hers. Her moans vibrate against my cheek and I wish I knew what was going on in her brain. I want to hear that dirty mouth again, telling me every

thought she's had about me. Pressing my body deeper into hers, I hold tight and roll us so she can straddle me, but my hallway is considerably narrower than Matthew's and we both laugh when I accidentally bash her into the wall.

"Fuck," she rubs her hip with one hand.

"Shit, are you OK?"

"Yeah, just let me... ohhh." She adjusts her position and doesn't waste a second before bouncing on my dick.

Kara Wilson. Is bouncing. On. My. Dick.

I let her chase her own pleasure, blissfully happy to watch her grind her hips against me. Eyes closed, lips flushed from my kisses, teasing her nipples tight between her fingers and thumbs. She's so hot, so good, so Kara. *'They're not too sensitive, you can be a little rough with them.'* That's what she said that night on the sofa. I reach up and swat her hands away, replacing them with mine. I'm desperate to be the one responsible for every sensation her body is feeling right now.

We're way off script now. Briony doesn't end up on top, but I don't care and it doesn't matter. All that matters is the throb of her tight around me, the buck of my hips up into her, the pressure of my nails as I grip her skin and pull her down hard. I stroke down her thighs, then back up again, adding friction where our bodies meet. The look on her face is unreal. She throws her head back, eyes squeezed shut. One hand flies to her mouth, helpless to contain her moans.

“Stay with me, stay with me,” I beg. I’m so close, aching to come with her. When she lalts forward, I grab her face with one hand, fist her hair with the other, and dare to breathe Matthew’s words I’ve been aching to say into her mouth. “Where are you?”

She locks her eyes on mine and, to the rhythm of her bucking hips and hitching breath she tells me. “I’m. Right. Fucking. Here.”

That’s it. I’m gone. Explosions. Stardust. Obliterated. Kara presses her forehead to mine. Our bodies smash together and the wave of her orgasm crashes over me with her gasping into my mouth. She’s so fucking gorgeous, shuddering around me, and everything tightens when I drive my hips up and spill into the condom between us.

I’ve already left a five-star review for *Love To Loathe You*, but that’s not enough. I’ll need to send the author flowers, chocolates, free coffee for life. The past thirty seconds, fifteen minutes, four hours have been otherworldly, and I’d never have had them without this favourite filthy book of hers.

Kara collapses to my chest and presses her cheek to my heart as she sucks in air. I tuck her hair behind her ear, and stroke my hands up and down her back, suddenly aware that there’s no heating in the hallway and she’s covered in goosebumps. The sound of her breath slows to normal and I don’t want to move, don’t want to snap out of this alternate reality. I want to be Matthew and Briony just a little longer.

Except... a warm feeling spreads through my chest when it dawns on me. It wasn't Matthew's name she was moaning.

It was mine.

Chapter 23

Kara

OH GOD. *Oh. My. God.*

I'm naked on the floor in Luke's hallway, having some sort of out-of-body experience. Except, this out-of-body experience also somehow involves Luke being *inside* my body. The blood is rushing back to my head, the tremble of my legs is slowing, and Luke is stroking his big, warm hands up and down my back. *What did we just do?*

I squeeze my eyes shut and replay everything, desperate to commit it all to memory.

"Do you want to stay for a bit?" he asks quietly, as if he's not sure he should ask at all. I'm glad he has, though. High on orgasms, I'm not sure I would make it home without walking into traffic. I don't want to move, don't want to burst this bubble, the one where we've given everything we've got, taken everything we could, not worried about what happens after.

"Is that OK?" I pant into his chest. "I believe I was promised pancakes?"

He presses a long kiss on the top of my head. “All part of the deal, Buttercup.”

Buttercup. Matthew’s nickname for Briony. The one that she claims to hate but secretly loves. I climb off of him, gather my clothes, and duck into the downstairs loo while he heads upstairs, presumably to take care of the condom.

Staring at myself in the mirror, there’s no denying what just happened. My hair is a mess, my lipstick has been kissed right off my face, and my mascara is smudged. Thankfully, not from crying this time. I feel a little wobbly on my feet and sit on the toilet seat for a while, leaning sideways to press my forehead against the cool tile.

Matthew Braverman has been my number one Book Boyfriend fantasy for years, but what just happened out there with Luke was on another level. I’ve thought about sex with him so many times that I don’t fully believe I’m awake. When I tug my underwear back on, the proof is right there, a deep purple lovebite blooming near the top of my inner thigh.

I face away from the mirror, looking over my shoulder to examine my back. Two more bites between my shoulder blades, another near my hip I can see without the help of the reflection. I have to cover my mouth to shush myself. This is one of the filthiest things that has ever happened. My knees are pink from grinding against his floor, my mouth swollen from greedy kisses. Luke has well and truly marked me, and I love it, each an agonising reminder he was just right there all over me.

If a Book Boyfriend did this, I'd be sending screenshots to Hattie and Megan with the caption #WankBank. That it just *actually* happened is making me throb to my core.

No way can Hattie and Megan know about this. Except... *Oh shit*. I try to piece together the loose details I know of their plan. They were never coming to dinner. They knew Luke would join me, and presumably they knew, or hoped, this is how the night would end. They've both read *Love To Loathe You*. Those scheming bitches. Those brilliant angels. No matter what happens now, they've certainly made my thirtieth birthday a night I'll never forget.

That was so much better than anything I've imagined in my head. The way Luke touched me, the combination of Matthew's moves with a few of his own thrown in for good measure. I want to know every single thought he had when coming up with plans for tonight.

This is the first time I've properly touched his skin. Jesus, I could get drunk on his skin. What is a man as rugged as Luke doing with skin that soft and supple and why can't I stop thinking about touching it again. *Holy shit*. I've had sex with someone else and it was good. Better than good. Incredible.

A gentle knock at the bathroom door pulls me from my unravelling thoughts.

"Do you want something else to wear?" He's a mind reader. I've wriggled myself back into my dress and already feel exposed.

"Yes, please."

“I’ve got some stuff here.” I open the door a smidge and he hands me one of his t-shirts and a pair of his cotton boxer shorts. “Um, I don’t have any women’s clothes, but I figured these would be comfy. You can have a jumper too if you’re cold.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll see you in the kitchen. For pancakes.”

I’m more nervous to walk into the kitchen than I was to walk through his front door. More nervous than when I kissed him. More nervous than when he peeled off my clothes. Back then, I wasn’t nervous at all. It all happened just as I hoped, and it was good. *So. Fucking. Good.* But now? Now I have to walk in there and have a conversation with him. What are we supposed to talk about? Coffee? Books? Work?

I don’t know how long I’ve been hiding in the bathroom, but any second now it’s going to tip into ‘an uncomfortably long time’. His navy t-shirt is ridiculous, practically a dress on me, and no way will these boxers stay up. I’ll have to stick with my underwear or nothing. *Or nothing.* A clench in the pit of my stomach. *What the fuck.* Why am I getting turned on again thinking about walking around Luke’s house wearing only his t-shirt?

I take a deep breath, steeling myself as I close the bathroom door and make my way down the hallway. The clothes he abandoned have been tidied away. If the evidence wasn’t written all over my body, you’d never know what happened here. In the kitchen I find him whisking eggs in a bowl, and I

quietly take a seat at one of the high stools on the other side of the breakfast bar, tugging his t-shirt down as far as I can.

He's changed into jogging bottoms and a sweatshirt, and I want to rip it all off and go another round. It's a fucking gift that I've seen him casual in loungewear and brooding in a dark suit on the same night. For the rest of my life, when I picture him in my mind, it will be him sitting down across from me in that beautiful suit. Did he have it already, I wonder? Or I'll picture him the second before we kissed, the tiny smile when we both knew what was about to happen. Or I'll picture him hovering over me, pinning my arms above my head and...

"You're ruining my house, Kara." He pushes a glass of water towards me and I down it, quenching a thirst I didn't realise I had. *Never mind your house. You've ruined my body and my mind.*

"How's that then?" I ask.

"I can't eat at my dining table. I can't sit on my sofa without picturing you getting yourself off, and now every time I walk through the door, I'm going to be thinking about pinning you to the floor." Despite my filthy thoughts, his bold words make me bashful. We've never mentioned the night on the sofa, and it makes me feel woozy to know he's replayed it in his mind, too.

"Should I be saying sorry for that?" I laugh.

Luke reaches across the counter to give my hand a little squeeze. "No," he grins. "They're excellent memories."

I'm not sure where to look while he melts butter in a frying pan. Torn between feeling awkward about eye contact and wanting to sit here with my chin in my hands, swooning like Snow White on a fresh, dewy morning.

“Now, I've something very important to ask you.” The backs of my ears burn. Matthew teases this way, often leading Briony into these traps where she thinks he's going to ask one thing but goes with another. He lets me stew. “What would you like on your pancakes?”

He's making fluffy ones that rise in the pan, just like the ones in the book. They are perfect, and I wonder if he's been making these for years, or if he's practised especially for tonight. Then I remember he used to be a chef, he's probably made thousands of pancakes in his time. From the cupboard he's pulled chocolate spread, jam, and syrup. My brain is so scrambled, I can't remember what Briony chooses, so I opt for my personal favourite, nutella and banana.

“The best combo. Me too.” He hands me a banana and a knife to cut some slices for us both. I don't want to play the game anymore. I just want to be *me*, Kara, here with *him*, Luke.

“Was that the first time you've...” I want to know, but I don't know why, and now I feel like a shit for asking.

“Since Heather? Yeah. I told you she's the only person I've been with.”

“I know, but that was ages ago.”

“Do you think I’ve been with loads of people since then?”

“You might have been, I don’t know.” I’m defensive and I wish I hadn’t asked.

“Well, I haven’t. Not anyone.” He looks pensive, his brow tight. “What about you?”

“Since Adam? Nobody else. First time.”

“Well then, you definitely haven’t forgotten what to do with a penis,” he smirks and my cheeks burn at this second reference to our first, how did we put it, *interaction*. “Are you OK?”

“I’m good. Are you OK?”

“Yeah. I didn’t cry, so that’s an improvement.”

“So, who’s your Book Boyfriend this week?” he asks me when we sit down to eat. This is more like it. Like us.

“Jameson Finch. Small town mechanic destined to take over his father’s autoshop even though he dreams of running a record label.”

“Cool dream. He a good guy?”

“Sure, and he’s got this best friend, Kelli, who he’s known since kindergarten, their parents are best friends and she’s a talented pianist who’s about to go on tour with one of the biggest bands in the world all summer long.”

“Let me guess, she wants Jameson to go with her?”

“Yes! But he doesn’t want to let his dad down. Kelli is furious, they’ve had a big falling out.”

“Do they end up together?”

“I haven’t finished it yet,” I laugh. “But, I think you know the answer to that question.”

“And how’s the sex?”

“None yet. It’s a proper slow burn. I think it will all happen right at the end.”

Later, I will think of this as one of my best days ever. Just me and Luke in a post-orgasmic haze, sitting around eating pancakes after midnight and laughing about books. Soon I’ll have to go, turn back into a pumpkin and be Kara again. I don’t want to leave yet. I eat slowly, pushing my pancakes around the plate to mop up every last bit of chocolate spread.

Luke clears our plates away, and from the other side of the kitchen island he asks, “Do you want to stay over?”

Finally, I can breathe. I really don’t want to go home. “Would that be OK? I’m pretty tired.”

“Of course, the spare room is all made up for you.”

“Presumptuous,” I tease, and he breaks into one of those big, beautiful smiles I adore so much. “Hey Luke?”

“Yeah?”

“Would it be OK if I sleep in your bed? With you.” It’s a big ask. Despite everything that’s happened between us, I know sharing a bed with someone for the first time after losing Heather must be a big step for Luke. A big step for me, too. I’m used to sleeping alone now, but I don’t want to be alone

tonight. He turns away to load dishes, so I can't make out his expression and I'm terrified I've upset him.

"Like Matthew and Briony?" he asks.

Well, no, like us. "Sure," I say anyway, just relieved it's not a no.

In his bathroom, I wash my face in the sink, rake my hands through my hair and give my teeth a quick scrub with toothpaste on the end of my finger. I'm so nervous to come out that hiding in Luke's bathrooms is at risk of becoming A Thing That I Do. When I finally walk into his room he's sitting up in bed wearing an old band t-shirt and he lifts the covers for me so I can slide in next to him.

I roll to my side, facing away from him, and wonder how on earth I'll ever actually sleep this close to him. Luke reaches across me to turn out the bedside light, then curls himself around me, one arm folded up under his pillow and the other draped over my hip. This is how they sleep in the book, but here in real life, I'm longing for him to kiss my shoulder, stroke my stomach, pull me into his groin, and do everything we've done all over again. Yep, I definitely can't sleep when I'm this horny.

Luke's arm is loose, cautious, and I get the feeling he's obliging me. This kind, generous man who wouldn't know how to say no to me. I don't know what this is, I don't know how to feel. I told him I wanted a date with Matthew Braverman and he did this for me, because he knew I was dreading my birthday. Did I push him into this?

When I glance down at where he holds me, I see his tree tattoo and tears prick my eyes. I place my hand over it, overcome with a need to express to him, and to Heather, that I'm sorry for what I've done.

“Goodnight, Briony,” he whispers from behind me.

“Goodnight, Matthew.”

I close my eyes, listen to the sound of his gentle breathing. Exhaustion grips me, and as I drift off, I'm sure I hear him say, “Goodnight, Kara.”



I wake up curled into Luke's side. He's sitting upright reading on his phone, his right leg hooked over both of mine, his skin radiating warmth across mine. His hand is playing with my hair absentmindedly and he's so absorbed in his book that he doesn't notice I'm awake. The scent of his sheets, of him, is intoxicating.

“Hi,” I whisper, not wanting to scare him. “Did I keep you awake with my snoring?”

“No,” he laughs, glancing down to meet my gaze. He has no business looking this hot first thing in the morning. “Not with your snoring.”

“Oh no, was I drooling.” I wipe my mouth but thankfully find it dry.

“No, stop this, you’re overthinking it. You sleep beautifully.”

My heart swells, but it’s too much. It doesn’t feel real to be here in his bed like this. I press my eyes closed, rest my forehead against his hip, aching to stay in this languid haze a little longer. Then I remember it’s not real, it’s all pretend. It’s not Luke, it’s Matthew, it’s a game, and I’m a silly little fool thinking that this is something that it’s not. A panicky feeling builds in my chest. I untangle myself from his limbs and back up so I can get out of his bed. Feeling exposed, I pull his t-shirt down, remembering my clothes are downstairs.

“I’m going to head off.”

“Oh, OK.” He bookmarks his page and places it on his bedside table. “You don’t want to stay for some breakfast?”

“I really should get home.” He pulls back the covers to get up out of bed, and I’m a complete pervert because I can’t look anywhere but at his toned thighs and I clench at the memory of straddling him last night, leaning back, gripping them with my fingertips. “Thank you so much for my date with Matthew. That certainly was a unique birthday present.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t even say happy birthday!” he says, smacking his hand against his forehead. “I was a little caught up in our alternate reality there.”

“It’s OK. Happy birthday to me,” I sing-song awkwardly.

“What are you doing for the rest of the day?”

Oh shit. Jonty. With all of this happening, I completely forgot about Claude setting me up with her dentist mate. “Um, I have a date.”

Luke gulps like he’s swallowing a mouthful of sand. “A date? Wow, OK.” He folds his arms across his chest and stares at the floor.

“Yeah, it’s a, er, friend of Claude’s. She was pretty insistent that we meet. I think she considers herself some sort of incredible matchmaker.” I attempt to keep my voice light, but my sense of humour doesn’t land. This is awful. I can’t look at his face, so I leave his room and take the stairs two at a time.

He follows me but hangs back, sitting halfway down the stairs while I get my shit together. I’ve only got my heels from dinner last night, but I’m relieved that my coat is long and will at least hide the fact that I’m only wearing his t-shirt, my crumpled clothes shoved into my bag, and still no fucking knickers. I look at the floor, but I’m struck by the memory of what we did in that very spot last night, so I look at the ceiling instead.

“I don’t know if you know, but I’m taking you, Hattie, and Megan to Sunday lunch at The Milling Barn tomorrow. To make it up to them for stealing you away on your birthday.”

“Oh wow, no, OK.” *Sentences Kara, use sentences.* “I did not know that.”

“It was their idea.”

“It sounds great,” I say, opening his front door. “See you tomorrow then.” My voice has never sounded this high pitched or chipper. *Please don't let me leave*, I want to scream.

“Have a great date, Kara,” he says as I step out. He walks down the last few stairs and I wonder if he's going to kiss me goodbye. I make a deal with myself. If he kisses me goodbye, I'll come back in, I'll cancel the date, we'll go back to bed and this will be it. Me and him. Luke and Kara. Us.

There is no kiss. If anything, he puts distance between us, lingering in the hallway while I walk backwards down the garden path, waving like a maniac. I don't even bother trying to latch the gate, I've already embarrassed myself enough. I round the corner of his hedge and when I hear his front door close, I burst into tears.



I don't want to go on this date. After last night with Luke, all I want to do is take a long bath and go to bed at 3pm with a stack of books. My body seems to still be twitching in random places, my muscles remembering and craving his touch. I want to text him and tell him I had fun. I want to tell him I haven't been able to stop thinking about him. I want to tell him I want more.

As much as I'm loath to admit it, I have to go on this date with Jonty. I owe it to Claude, who is wonderful and who I know only wants the best for me. I hope I can get away with

calling him Jon for short. I step into the shower and ignore the fact that half of the water is coming from my eyes.

I throw on a summer dress and a light cardigan that I hope says *hello I'm a very nice person*. Would Luke like this outfit? I try to see myself through a stranger's eyes. I'm OK, aren't I? I look like someone people might want to get to know. Someone they'd treat kindly. Most importantly, I don't think I look like a person who deserves to be broken up with and left without an explanation. Not that anyone does.

I spend so much time hoping he won't hate me that I forget that dates are a two-way thing and it's just as important that I'm interested too.

Chapter 24

Luke

WHAT THE HELL JUST happened? How did we go from having the most incredible night together to me waving Kara off into the arms of another man? *Fuck*. I wanted to kiss her goodbye, but what kind of prick would kiss a woman who just told him she's going on a date? I'm already messing with my own head, it's not fair to mess with hers too.

'Thank you for my night with Matthew.' Those are the words spinning round and round in my head.

That's what she'd dreamed of, and that's what I gave her, but I *am* Matthew. Matthew is me. And though I could slip into his character, not once all night did I picture myself with Briony. Kara was the only woman I saw at dinner, in my hallway, over pancakes, and in my bed all night long.

'Thank you for my night with Matthew.'

That's how she sees it. A fake date, a one-night thing. One sensational, unforgettable night. At least it was for me, but she's at home getting ready for her extremely not-fake date.

I didn't know that's how our night would end up. Obviously, I hoped, but the way she went along with it all felt so real to me. I thought it was the beginning of something between us. I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up, thinking this was anything more than a bit of fun for her birthday. I'm an idiot.

I'm not on the staff rota for today, but I know I'll just keep going round in circles if I stay in the house. I need a distraction, so I take a quick shower and head out.

"I didn't think you were in today," Katy says, pouring freshly foamed milk into a latte. There's no point in having three of us behind the counter, and now that I'm here I don't really want to face anyone.

"Thought I'd get a head start on the stock take," I lie. Hiding in the cupboard, I'm even more ashamed, but I'm here now, so I crack on tallying up supplies. Jo brings me a coffee a while later.

"You OK, boss?"

"Yep." I can't face her, but she gives my arm a little squeeze.

"Let us know if you need anything, OK?"

I'm a terrible friend. Kara has been clear that's all she wants from me, but then I've pushed her into this stupid sexy roleplay that I thought would make her happy, and it's left me more confused than ever. But I think she *was* happy. We both enjoyed ourselves, with none of the awkwardness from our night on the sofa.

I don't think you can fake those kinds of kisses, and there was absolutely nothing fake about the way she clenched around me when she came. My dick twitches every time I think of it. How can she not want to do that again? Maybe she does, just not with me.

You can't fake how good it felt to lie in bed together, either. Waking up with her in my arms, her head tucked into my chest, one hand slipped up underneath my t-shirt. I could have held her like that all day. I had to distract myself with a book, so I didn't just lie there staring at her. Now I wish I'd spent every second memorising her hair fanned out across my pillow, the little freckles across her nose, the curve of her neck just begging for soft kisses.

Was that really nothing? Am I totally deluded? I should have kissed her. I should have woken her up with kisses and pulled her on top of me and convinced her to stay for more.

Back home I try to watch a movie but I fuck myself over by clock watching all night. She'll be meeting him now. He'll be checking her out. They'll be eating their starters now. He'll be touching her knee under the table. Filling her wine glass. Tucking a stray bit of hair behind her ear. Asking her about her childhood and her hopes and dreams and sowing the seeds that he'll be coming along for the ride. All the things Book Boyfriends do. All the things I want to be doing. The thought of someone else's hands on her is unbearable.

By the time I go to bed, I can't resist it any longer. I'll never sleep if I don't ask.

Luke: How did your date go?

I know it's none of my business and she's totally within her rights to tell me to piss off. I get up and go downstairs for a glass of water, pacing the kitchen when her reply makes my phone buzz in my hand.

Kara: Good thanks. Off to bed. See you at lunch tomorrow x

Off to bed? It's 10pm. *Oh fuck.* Does she mean she's off to bed with him? Her messages always take one of two tones. Direct and polite when she's busy, playful and charming when she's got time to chat. We've spent a few nights texting into the small hours when we've both been home and bored. She must have gone home with him.

elle

Sleep evades me. I've got this Sunday lunch with the girls, and if it was anybody else, I'd sack it off and spend the day in bed in my own misery. Jesus, it's been a long time since I've had one of those days. The days of crying and wallowing and pining should be well behind me.

I can't skip out on lunch. I made a deal with Hattie and Megan, and I'll never hear the end of it if I back out. If

nothing else, I'll get to see Kara and hopefully have a few minutes to tell her how I'm feeling. I don't care if it makes me a shitty friend. I can't keep this stuff to myself much longer. If she wants to date, I want her to know I'm open to it too.

I arrive at The Milling Barn early, hoping she'll do the same, and I'm shown to our table by the window out in the old orangery. My heart both sinks and soars when I see her walk in. She looks stunning in a long, pale blue flowy skirt paired with a black roll neck jumper. Her eyes catch mine and she blinks away, pulling her neckline higher. She must be hiding the marks I left there last night.

Her hair is smoothed back in a neat ponytail and I want to wrap it around my fist, tug her head to one side, slip a finger into the collar of her top and plant more sucking kisses there. I want to grab her hand, lead her straight out of here and back to mine. Would we even make it or would I be pulling her into my lap before I even started the engine?

Unfortunately for me, Hattie and Megan are on either side of her. I guess an honest conversation can wait. It's not fair to cram it into a few minutes, anyway. I stand to greet them with a hug each, though Kara avoids it and takes the seat across from me, Hattie by her side and Megan on my right.

"This place is lovely. Thanks so much for taking us all out, Luke." Megan looks up and around, turning her head to take in the room. It really is stunning. With a high glass ceiling, the room glows with warm sunshine. Huge potted trees brimming with oranges, lemons, and limes separate tables dressed in

pristine white linen. Hattie gives me the side-eye while fumbling with her cutlery, tied in a bunch with her napkin and a sprig of fresh rosemary. She pulls it out and huffs deeply, her eyes searching mine for answers.

I didn't speak to either of them yesterday, so I don't know if they know how Friday night went down.

Our waitress appears to take our drinks order and Hattie goes straight for a bottle of Merlot and four glasses, but I change it to three and order a pint of fresh orange and lemonade. I'm not hungover, but I do feel sick. Booze is the last thing I need right now. I'm glad of the choice because I think I might pass out when Megan asks, "So Kara, tell us all about your date."

Chapter 25

Kara

THIS IS AWFUL. I'D told Megan and Hattie about my date with Jonty before I knew anything about the surprise birthday dinner. At this point, I don't even know which date she's referring to, and I don't want to talk about either of them in front of Luke.

My head has been a scrambled mess since I left his house yesterday. When I got home, I took a shower and replayed Luke's every move, longing to be back with him, kissing me against the wall, biting me, tangling his fingers through my hair when we came together. He found all those pressure points that make me weak and went to town on them.

Afterwards I laid on my bed and sobbed my confused little heart out for a bit, before getting dressed and heading to meet my utterly pointless date. Jonty had arranged with Claude for us to meet at his local village pub and suggested an afternoon pint, followed by a walk. A perfectly acceptable, if average, suggestion. I tried to make an effort, but my head was so full of Luke that Jonty didn't exactly get the best of me. Not that he was anything to write home about.

“It was good, he was fine,” I lie. It was like a meeting with a colleague.

“Where did you go for dinner?” Hattie asks.

“We didn’t go for dinner, just had a drink in the afternoon.” Luke lets out a long sigh and pinches the top of his nose. He’s barely said a word to me since we got here. I wish I could have a few minutes to chat to him alone. The air feels heavy between us.

It took hours to get to sleep last night. I almost considered taking one of the sleeping tablets my doctor prescribed me after Adam left, but the memory of how groggy they’d made me held me back.

All morning I’ve felt hot, sad frustration waiting to burst out of me and I’m not good at dealing with this much emotion. Usually a quick run clears my head, but I’ve been so busy with work and book club I’ve not been in ages. I cut it short when it was clear it wasn’t making me feel any less stressed.

I can’t stop thinking about Luke’s kiss. Our first kiss. He kissed me like his life depended on it. Like he’d read every page of that story a thousand times and knew exactly what was destined to come next. Now I’m supposed to sit across from him at this lunch and act like nothing happened? My whole body is tingling at the sight of him. I would climb this table and grab him right now if we weren’t in company and in one of the fanciest restaurants around here.

And if he hadn’t let me leave.

“Earth to Kara. Are you even listening to me?” *No.* Hattie is waving her hand in front of my face and I come back down from my dizzying thoughts. “Is he hot? Who does he look like?”

“He reminded me of a razor clam.”

Megan claps her hand over her face to stop her wine coming out of her nose. “He what?”

“He wore a brown jumper and his head poking out the top reminded me of those razor clams we saw when we went to Whitstable.” I do a silly little impression, my head slowly bobbing up and down. They were weirdly captivating and gross at the same time. I’m trying to be funny and break the tension, but nobody laughs.

“Will you see him again?” Luke asks bluntly, and I narrow my eyes in his direction. I can’t get a read on him. Is he just being friendly? Is he jealous? Angry? I wish the girls weren’t here, so I could tell him I don’t want to date another man for the rest of my life. Why is he asking questions? He probably just wants to be a supportive friend. ‘*Have a great time on your date,*’ he’d said. Clearly, the events of the previous 48 hours hadn’t meant the same to him as they had to me.

“I doubt it.”

“Oh love, why not?” asks Megan.

“He was fine, but he had that Local Character kind of vibe. Everyone in the pub knew him. He talked about his work too much, and I can’t say I’m interested in dentistry. Then he

asked if I needed any fillings and winked. I couldn't tell if he was flirting or pitching for business." I bury my head in my hands and groan.

He was so boring I made my excuses after the drink and headed home to get into my pyjamas and watch TV in bed. I didn't even feel like reading. That's how messed up I feel. I'd tried a few pages of my newest book but realised I was constantly picturing Luke as the love interest and had to put it down. Come to think of it, the last few books have all featured leads who remind me of Luke, too.

"Oh, Kara," Hattie refills my glass and rubs my back. "Onwards and upwards, babes. What about that estate agent who was messaging you?" *Shut up, Hattie.* I want to scream. I'm beginning to regret telling the girls about dating, and I don't want Luke to know any of this.

"Enough dating chat. Change the subject." I can feel myself getting pissy, and I don't want to ruin what should be a lovely lunch.

"Well, um, how has the rest of your weekend been?" Megan asks, quirking one eyebrow. *I walked into that one.* I glance up at Luke, who is sitting opposite me, his face completely deadpan.

"It's been lovely, thank you. Nice and chilled." I am a brick wall. They're getting nothing from me.

"Well, what about Friday night? How was your birthday?" Hattie probes. "We were *so sorry* we couldn't make it to

dinner.“ Elbows on the table, she rests her chin on her interlaced fingers, wearing the smuggest grin I’ve ever seen.

As if they are going to interrogate me about this in front of Luke. If it was just the three of us, I would be happy to tell them what happened, every exquisite detail. But I can’t let on how much I enjoyed myself, or how much it meant to me, because as far as he’s concerned, he was just doing a nice thing for my birthday.

“Yeah, why was that, exactly?” I lean back and fold my arms across my chest. I’m going to catch them in this stupid lie. “Just went home and ate pizza on the sofa after you stood me up. Not my favourite birthday ever, if I’m honest.”

They both snap their heads in Luke’s direction, *what the fuck?* written all over their faces. He just shrugs. I assumed they’d have spoken about it afterwards, but now I’m thinking maybe not. Didn’t they text yesterday? I’m more confused than ever, getting tangled up in the threads of their collusion. “OK, I’m not doing this.”

“Doing what?” says Hattie.

“I’m not playing *I know that you know that she knows that he knows* or whatever the fuck this is. I know full well that you were never coming to dinner. I know you and Luke planned for him to take me out instead. We had a lovely meal, that was it.”

When I look at him, he’s staring out of the window, his glass of - *is that squash?*- raised to his mouth but not actually drinking. What is he playing at? On Friday night he was all

over me. I slept by his side all night for goodness sake, and now he can't even look at me?

Except it wasn't him, was it? I have to remember that it was Matthew, not Luke, and now I'm freaking out knowing he can act so convincingly. He can't hide the fact that he's embarrassed about it. If that's how he feels, he never should have bothered in the first place.

"Oh, was that it?" Hattie asks.

"You didn't go anywhere afterwards?" Megan looks back and forth between us.

"You tell me." I snap. "The three of you are such good friends now, I assume you've already had a debrief behind my back?" The three of them look absolutely horrified, as do the customers at the table behind us.

Our lovely waitress chooses this exact awful moment to approach us for our orders and I snap at her too, picking up everyone's menus and shoving them into her hands. "Everyone will have the beef roast. Thank you very much."

"Perfect," she smiles brightly, "any extra sides with that?"

"Just bring one of everything for the table, thanks."

Megan and Hattie stare into their glasses of wine. Beside me, I see Hattie's shoulders shaking.

"Did you even want beef?" Megs whispers from the side of her mouth, not very quietly, and we can't take this tension any more. All four of us glance up at the same time and burst out laughing.

It's not funny though. My face is hot and I'm right on the edge of tears. "Look, I'm sorry for shouting. I'm just feeling really overwhelmed." You'd think my best friends would know better than anyone how I'm feeling right now. "I'm thirty and I'm single, I haven't even had a text from Adam, and I'm tired. Clearly, I've turned into a miserable old crone overnight, so can you both just stop winding me up and let's all have a nice time."

"Fuck that guy," says Hattie, and she tops up my wine.



We do not have a nice time. Conversation is tense, we're all on edge, and not our usual happy, chatty selves at all. I have too much wine and call a taxi to take me home, a spiteful move that I insist on even though Luke absolutely could drive all three of us since he hasn't had a drop to drink.

I'm exhausted and sad. It should have been a lovely afternoon. Luke was so kind to take us all out, but I've ruined it by behaving like a little shit. Mostly I'm upset that I'm cross with my friends, who I never argue with, and devastated that I've probably destroyed my friendship with Luke by a) taking things too far and b) possibly developing more than just a crush.

But then... I've read *Love To Loathe You* at least six times. He read it on my recommendation! We both know what pancakes is code for. So if he didn't want to have sex with me,

why didn't he stop me? Why didn't he put me in a taxi and send me home to a Book Boyfriend and my vibrator? He can't honestly have felt nothing.

I mean, I know he felt *something*. He was hard from the moment our lips touched. I know I'm not exactly an expert, but there's no way you kiss someone like that and don't feel good about it. It was so fucking good I want to cry remembering it. So why be so cold with me at lunch?

I'm giving myself a headache, so I pull ice-cream from the freezer, a spoon from the drawer, and flop onto the sofa for a night watching whatever nonsense the TV throws at me. I've got a mouth full of cookie dough when my phone buzzes.

Hattie: We fucked up and we're really sorry.

Megan: It was all Luke's idea. Not that we're blaming him, we really thought it was a good idea too and that you'd like a date with Matthew.

It hadn't even occurred to me it might have been their idea. Perhaps they think *I* think they came up with the idea and roped Luke into it because they were so desperate to get me laid. I hate stupid games and schemes, and I'm livid to be on the receiving end of it. I'm trying to think of how to reply when another notification pops up.

Luke: Are you OK?

No, I'm not bloody OK, but I don't want him to know that. And what does he care, anyway?

'Have a great date, Kara.'

How can you have sex with someone, really absolutely mind-blowing sex, and then pretend it never happened?

Kara: I'm fine

Luke: You didn't seem fine earlier, but I couldn't tell if you were annoyed with Hattie and Megan, or me, or all three of us.

I *am* annoyed at all three of them, but I still can't really properly explain why. All I know is I don't want to have this conversation anymore. Or ever again.

Kara: Look, I appreciate what you did for me. But the three of you winding me up makes me feel like you pity fucked me and now you're all having a laugh at my expense.

I send it before I even think about what I'm saying. Is that how I really feel? I definitely hadn't felt like that during the

act itself, or afterwards, or even when I woke up in his bed yesterday morning. It's only a feeling that's been creeping in ever since. He didn't ask me to stay, or act like he wanted more. Just '*have a great date,*' then he packed me off out the door.

Luke: Kara no, it wasn't like that at all.

Luke: I don't want to talk about this over text. Can I call you? Or come over?

Absolutely not. I don't want anyone to see me when I'm like this.

Kara: I don't need to talk about it. I'm going to bed. Goodnight.

It's only 9pm, why have I said I'm going to bed? I'm angry at myself now, my fury unleashed. I swipe back to my chat with the girls.

Kara: Why are you trying to set me up on all these apps and get me dating strangers while also helping Luke to fuck me? Am I a game to you?

Too harsh? I don't give a shit. I can barely see my phone through the tears that are now impossible to hold back.

Kara: Please do not meddle in my love life ever again.

I turn my phone off and shove it under the sofa cushions. Too upset to watch TV, too upset to read, I think about calling my Mum, but we're not really the chat about our feelings types.

This stupid day needs to end already. Rooting around in the bathroom cabinet, I find those sleeping tablets and take one, scooping water from the tap into my mouth. I climb into bed and wait for sleep to take me.

Chapter 26

Luke

I'VE ABSOLUTELY FUCKED THIS up. I thought giving Kara a date with Matthew Braverman would make her dreams come true, and everything about that night was perfect to me. We were in sync. When I made my move, she made hers, and by the time we left the restaurant there was no doubt in my mind that we wanted the same thing.

Then today at lunch everything fell apart. I didn't realise she hadn't spoken to her friends about it already, and I would never disrespect her by talking to them about our night behind her back.

When she left mine, she seemed excited to go off for her date. Though I hated it with the fire of a thousand suns, I tried to act happy for her. It takes a lot of guts to get back out there after a long relationship, I just didn't realise she was taking dating that seriously. Clearly I'm a fool to hope that I'd be the first contender, but I'm so relieved that he didn't do it for her.

At lunch, I couldn't even find words to speak. I didn't give a shit about her date, didn't want to talk about our night together

in front of Megan and Hattie, and so I just sat there. And now she thinks I've *pity fucked* her? She couldn't be more wrong.

If anything, it's the other way around. She only went along with it because it was Matthew. I couldn't even look at her today without replaying our time together.

I have another night of fitful sleep and around 5am I decide there's no point in lying in bed any longer. I shift to the sofa with my book but it's pointless. I can't get invested in someone else's love life when mine is all over the place.

Sunshine Coffee is my only salvation. I open up early and the Monday co-working group keeps me busy and out of my head. After the lunch rush, I spy Hattie hovering near the door, looking sheepish.

"Take a seat outside. I'll bring you a drink."

Jo isn't really the sort for gossip, but I don't want her eavesdropping. I tell her I'm taking a quick break and head outside to sit with Hattie, who clearly isn't just passing by. She fidgets for a bit, and I don't know what to say either.

"I've come to say sorry for ruining lunch yesterday. Megan wanted to come too, but apparently teachers can't just ditch in the middle of the day to check on their friends. Are you OK?"

I sigh and it comes out all shaky. I didn't realise I'd been holding onto my breath so tightly.

"I honestly don't know what that lunch was all about, or why Kara was so angry. I'm fine, more worried about her than anything."

“Listen,” she says. “Megan and I, we know we shouldn’t ask, but what happened on Friday night?”

“I don’t think that’s fair of me to be the one to tell you. You really haven’t spoken to her about it?”

“We’ve only seen her at lunch with you, and she clearly didn’t want to talk.”

“Well, you need to ask her.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “For fuck’s sake, why are you such a gentleman?” The compliment makes me smile even though smiling hurts right now.

“All I can say is that from my perspective, I thought it was a perfect evening, and I didn’t want her to go, but she just thanked me for her birthday present and said she had a date.”

“Did you ask her to stay?” Hattie asks.

“No. She said she had a date to get to.”

“Oh. I think she would have stayed. If you’d asked.”

“She said she had a date, I didn’t think it was an appropriate time to ask her to stay.”

We sit in silence for a while and then she sighs, taking a big gulp of her coffee. “How can we make this right?” I ask.

“We can’t meddle. We got a bollocking last night and told to stop interfering in her love life.” *Jesus. What have I done?*

“I got a bollocking too, but it doesn’t make sense. The Matthew Braverman thing was my idea.”

“I don’t think she knows that.”

I groan and press my forehead to the heel of my palm. “This is such a mess. I should never have done it.” I don’t really believe that, though. There was something there between us, I’d never take it back.

“In fairness, Luke, it’s exactly the sort of thing she loves in books. We wouldn’t have let you go through with it if we thought she’d hate it.” Hattie reaches out, her hand resting on top of mine. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you *like* like her?”

“Yeah, I really do.” God, that feels good to get off my chest.

“I think you should tell her,” she says with a small smile, “but this is going to be a really shit week for her. Saturday is the anniversary of Adam leaving.”

“Oh. Yeah, those anniversaries suck.”

“She’ll probably want to lie low until it’s over. We’re in the bad books with her too, so that doesn’t help.”

Poor Kara. No wonder she’s feeling all over the place. On the first anniversary of Heather’s death, I was a wreck. I drank my way through it so I could pretend it wasn’t happening. I woke up on the bathroom floor, having missed the toilet bowl when I’d thrown up. That first year was filled with shitty anniversaries. Twenty-four hours without her, seven days without her, one month without her, six, seven, eight. My birthday, her birthday, Christmas, Valentine’s. Every single one left me cold and angry with the world.

On the second anniversary, I quietly opened Sunshine Coffee without telling anyone. The only customers were two ladies looking for the old haberdashers, but were kind enough to stick around for a coffee. I went home a failure but decided the only way to get better, to salvage my promise to Heather, was to get up the next day and try again. I ordered a sandwich board sign for the street and painted our name with an arrow pointing into the courtyard. I asked the local printing shop to do some flyers for me and posted them to all the nearby streets before opening up every morning for two weeks. Gradually, customers came. I wonder what the third anniversary will be like.

Kara's first anniversary is a horrible milestone, and Hattie is right. She needs to get through the other side of it and feel whatever she needs to feel rather than avoid it. When I tried to avoid my first anniversary, it took me months to pull back from that wave of depression.

"I hate that I've caused this argument with you three. She really needs her friends right now."

"Don't worry about us," says Hattie, standing to pull on her coat. "We'll get right with her. But please just think about telling her how you really feel. She deserves to know Luke."

Chapter 27

Kara

LUKE AND I HAVEN'T spoken since our disastrous lunch, but I keep rubbing the lovebite on my leg, my eyes glazing over at the memory of his mouth there. I haven't heard from Hattie and Megan all week, either. I keep meaning to text them but there's been sudden progress on my hospital project, and to be honest, I just don't know what to say. Every day that's gone by with no talking has made it even more confusing.

We've never been in a fight before and I hate it. I make a stupid mistake with my Instagram account by posting a brand collaboration a day early, then get a furious email from their PR lady that makes me cry in the toilets at the hospital. I seem to be crying more this week than I have in ages and I don't think it's just because my period is due. I miss Luke, I miss my friends, and by Friday I'm certain I've ruined our friendships forever.

They're done with me and my pathetic love life. They've given up a year of their lives coming over and mopping up my tears, and they're over it. I get straight into bed after work and

turn off all the lights. Not long later, I hear the front door unlock. I sit bolt upright.

Adam?

No, it can't be, Hattie made me change the locks.

"Kara?" Megan calls up the stairs. I'd forgotten they have my spare key.

"I'm in bed," I call back, just loud enough for them to hear. I hear them both climbing the staircase and I hide under my covers, the mattress sinking beside me when one of them sits down and starts stroking the lump of me through the bedding.

"That's my bum," I mumble from underneath the duvet, where I'm getting a bit hot and sweaty.

"Best bum in town, babe," says Hattie. She carefully pulls the covers back to reveal my face while Megan climbs in next to me. "You OK, poppet?"

I grumble a bit more, but let them both snuggle in.

"Kara, we are so sorry about our meddling. You have every right to be angry with us, we shouldn't have interfered. I promise we had your best interests at heart," Hattie says.

"We've missed you so much this week." Megan smooths my hair away from my face and plants a kiss on my forehead.

"I'm fine. I'm just sad."

"How about I order pizza for dinner and we can talk about it some more?" I nod and wipe my face with my sleeve. I hadn't even realised I was crying.

Downstairs, we sit around the coffee table. I ask them both about their work and update them on my projects, but we mostly eat our dinner in silence. I don't feel like drinking tonight, and every mouthful feels like it takes a colossal effort to get through.

"Is it OK if I just eat and go to bed? I'm not really in a very social mood, sorry."

"Of course, darling," Hattie says, "whatever you want to do."

"Hey Kara," Megan says quietly. "It's OK if you don't want to talk about it, but you still haven't really told us what happened last Friday?"

"It's not that I don't want to talk about it. I'm just confused."

"How so?"

"We had a lovely dinner, and then we went back to his house and we... I... I stayed over." They both raise their eyebrows and I look down to hide the blush creeping up my neckline. "Then the next morning I just felt embarrassed that he'd had to pretend to be someone else to... kiss me. So I told him I had a date and left."

"Oh, honey." Megan rubs my back, those lovely slow circles she does to calm me down. "Did it feel like he was pretending?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know. We just got a bit too into character, I think."

“God, I can’t bear this!” Hattie thumps the table. “I know you’re confused, but please just tell us what happened in bed. He sent us a selfie before he came to meet you and he looked so fucking hot! Did you shag him?”

My chest aches and I have to bite my lip to stop from laughing. “I can’t talk about it. I’m too embarrassed.”

“Hnng,” she groans out. “Fine, but answer me one thing.”

“What?”

“Was the sex mind blowing?”

“He gave me a lovebite on my thigh,” I say, covering my face with my hands. The two of them collapse to the floor, kicking their legs and shrieking.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Megan laughs.

“How many times did you come?” Hattie pauses in midair and grabs my leg.

“No comment.” I get up from the table to hide my smile and find my phone in the kitchen. Still nothing from Luke.



Three hundred and sixty-five days.

Twelve months.

One whole year without Adam.

I knew this day was coming. I knew it would hurt, I knew I should prepare for it and throw myself into a fun distraction, and here I am still feeling like a stinky bag of turds.

After dinner last night, I sent Hattie and Megan home and told them that under no circumstances were they to come back over today. I don't want love and support or words of encouragement. I don't want to sit around and cast curses against his name and penis. I just want to be alone.

Tears fall from the moment I wake up. I pull the pillow from his side of the bed into my chest and curl myself around it. It hasn't been his side of the bed for a long time, and none of this bedding has ever touched his skin, but today I feel like he might have just stepped out of the room. I let the tears come and the time pass, sniffing and sobbing until the cloud of sadness dissipates and I'm left an angry shell.

How fucking dare he? What kind of man leaves his girlfriend of twelve years, his home, his life, with no explanation? I don't know why I'm even wondering. There will never be a day where those questions come with answers. What an absolute prick.

I want to wallow here all day, but I am bloody hungry and I'll have to eat before I get even angrier.

Stomping down the stairs, I make it halfway before noticing a large shape through the frosted glass of my front door. I snatch it open and find a bunch of flowers, a cup of coffee, and a paper bag that I instantly know contains two cinnamon buns. I look up the garden path and there he is, standing at my gate,

tapping away on his phone, no doubt texting me before his sneak retreat.

“Oi!” Luke nearly jumps out of his skin when I shout at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Shit, sorry Kara, I er—”

“Who sent you?” I snap, my eyes searching the garden for my two best friends who are terrible at following orders.

“Nobody,” he hangs back and I’m aware I must look unhinged, out here on my doorstep with my flannel pyjamas on, my hair piled into a bird’s nest on the top of my head.

“Then why are you here?”

“I just...” he shoves his hands deeper in his pockets, his shoulders lifting to his ears. “I knew you’d be having a shitty day.”

I’m standing with my hands on my hips, my eyes ablaze with fury. How dare he presume to understand how I’m feeling when he hasn’t spoken to me all week. How dare he be so kind when I want to kick the shit out of everything. How dare he even *exist* in front of me right now.

“I’m going,” he says, waving his phone in my direction. “I was texting you to say you had a delivery. I only wanted to make sure you were OK.”

“Don’t be nice to me!” I shout, not caring which neighbours might be twitching their curtains. I pick up the flowers with one hand and the coffee and paper bag with the other.

“Fucking men!” I yell, slamming the door behind me. In the empty quiet of my hallway, my breath hitches and my shoulders shake. I’m an awful, awful cow. I open the door to apologise, but he’s gone. “Thank you, Luke,” I say into the ether as my voice wobbles and breaks. I close the door before he hears me howl.

Leaving his flowers in the sink, I skulk back to bed with the coffee and buns. My choking mix of upset and rage have wiped me out. The day is a blur of romcoms that I don’t laugh at, chocolate biscuits, and snotty tissues piling up around me. I sleep on and off, but I open the window and let the breeze blow through my curtains so I can at the very least pretend I am Juliet of fair Verona.

When it gets dark outside I dig my phone out from under my pillow and order takeaway from Gurkha Cottage, the exact meal I ordered a year ago today. I’m torturing myself here, but I figure their excellent business shouldn’t have to suffer lost sales just because *he* ruined Nepalese food for me.

It’s a good decision. By the time it arrives, I’ve changed into what I will call my Evening Pyjamas and ventured downstairs. I’m still moody and miserable, but I can trick myself into feeling like a capable human by being moody and miserable just in a different place.

I plate up a bit of everything and eat it watching Saturday night telly. Despite my dark cloud, it’s all delicious. Of course it is. Food is still good without him. My house is still good

without him. My life is still good without him. *I* am still good without him.

With every bite, I feel better. For the longest time, the idea of being happy ever again was completely unfathomable, but I am fine without Adam. Insulted and rejected? Yes. Confused and stressed about my feelings for Luke? Yes. But despite all that, I think I'm happier than ever.

I am going to be OK. I am going to fix my friendships. I am going to sort my life out. And I'm going to call my solicitor on Monday and ask about getting the house in my name. A year is long enough for him to piss me about and not pay anything. I'm going to keep dating until I find a great man and if not, then there will be a thousand more Book Boyfriends to spend my nights with, and that will be just fine. That will be my happy ever after.

Chapter 28

Luke

ON MONDAY KARA COMES to see me at Sunshine, just as I'm closing up. She looks gorgeous as usual, her hair in a high ponytail, and all I can think about is how much I want to press my face into her neck, breathe her in, then kiss her and hold her close.

She looks tense, hands clasped together in front of her waist, mouth opening and closing while she finds her words. I hate seeing her this way, when she's normally open and relaxed around me. I extend my hand to her usual table, but she doesn't move.

"I can't stay long," she says, eyes to the floor. "I just came to say sorry."

"For?"

"For my behaviour recently. Well, ever since I met you, really."

My throat feels dry, my tongue too big for my mouth. "You've got nothing to apologise for, Kara."

“I do. You were really clear when you said you can’t imagine yourself with anyone except Heather.” *Did I say that? When did I say that?* “And I just bulldozed my way through that and disrespected you.”

“Kara, that’s not—”

“Please let me finish.” She holds up a hand and takes a deep breath. “I wanted to say thank you, again, for my birthday. I had a really good time, it was a very sweet surprise, and I wanted to make sure you know I’m not mad at you, or Megan or Hattie about it. I’m sorry, again, that I took things too far by kissing you and then...” she’s as stuck for words as I am, and I can’t help looking at her beautiful lips and wishing I could spend the day exploring them with mine.

“I really hope our friendship can survive it, because I like having you in my life, Luke.” *I like having you in my life so much.* “I’m so glad we’re friends. I promise I won’t cross that line again.”

I can’t do anything except nod, afraid of what I’ll say if I open my mouth, and she just keeps going, ripping my heart into pieces.

“To be honest, I’ve found all of this really confusing. I think because I had the anniversary of Adam looming, and I know I need to get on with my life, I just needed to get past that milestone. Then what happened between us made me realise I should probably stop being such an introvert and start getting out there a bit more. Going on a few dates and stuff.”

I think I'm going to pass out. We spend the most amazing night together, and it sends her running to meet other guys. This cannot be happening. I knew in my heart that even if it was only a one night thing I'd still have been so lucky to have that. I was so stupid to believe it might have been the start of something more.

"I wanted to clear the air before book club next Wednesday," Kara continues, "so things aren't awkward between us." *The rest of my life will be awkward if I never get to kiss you again.* "I've missed you Luke. I'm sorry I was so awful to you. I'll be a better friend from now on, promise."

She drives the knife in further. This is not what I want at all. I don't know how to be friends with this amazing, beautiful woman who I can't stop picturing naked in my bed at night.

"Are you OK?" she asks. "You're not really saying anything."

I know she needs an answer and I struggle to keep my voice even. "I'm OK, just listening. I hear what you're saying. Air cleared. Friends."

She breathes a sigh of relief, her face instantly lighter while I am crushed. "So, are you enjoying the book?" *Great, we're making small talk are we.*

"I've not started it yet," I lie. I have, and I hate it. I can't read about people falling in love and having hot sex right now. I can't read any of this stuff without wanting to do all of it, and more, with Kara. It's torture.

“OK, well I’ll let you get on then. You can crack into it when you get home.” And then she’s off out the door, waving goodbye. “Can’t wait to hear your thoughts.” *If only I could find the courage to tell her my actual thoughts.* I want her so much, but if the only way I can have her in my life is as a friend then I’ll just have to get used to it.



Rob rings me up later in the week, the vibration of my phone snapping me out of a trance. I’ve been lying on the sofa staring out at the garden for who knows how long.

“Hey,” my throat croaks.

“Hello, mate. Just ringing to see what you want to do for Heather’s birthday?”

I check the date on my watch. Shit, it’s in five days. *Had I forgotten?* No, I can’t have forgotten my wife’s birthday. I can’t be that much of a bastard. I’m sure I’ve just been distracted with the shop and everything. *Oh, fuck.* I’m the worst person on the planet. I hadn’t realised it was coming up so soon.

“I don’t really feel like doing anything.” I lie.

“Hey man, I know she was your wife, but she was my friend, too. We all miss her, so I think we should do something.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” I can’t believe this. The light through the window shimmers, the room spins, everything blurs in and out of focus. “Fuck, I think I’d forgotten, my heads all over the place at the minute.”

“Do you want to go up to the meadow? We could have dinner, or we could just get a pint?” My chest feels tight. When did I last go to the meadow? I can’t remember. *How can I not remember?*

“Yeah, pint, OK. I’ve got the book club that night, so maybe before. Or come along?”

“Ha, unlikely. I’ll swing by for a quick one after work, though.”



Work is a welcome distraction. I focus on staying busy. Each customer, each coffee, each refill of the beans. Concentrate on the work, take each hour as it comes, and push my feelings aside. Rob arrives at the same time as Kara, just after I’ve flipped the door sign to *closed*. I let them in and feel a hot sensation at the back of my neck. I don’t want Kara to know it’s Heather’s birthday, and I don’t want Rob to know anything about Kara at all. The three of us stand there awkwardly until I break the silence

“Rob, this is Kara, who runs the book club,” I say, my eyes pleading with him to keep his mouth shut. “Kara, this is Rob,

my oldest friend.”

“Nice to meet you, Rob,” she says, heading to the back of the cafe to shift furniture into position.

“Likewise, though I’m not that old,” he says with a wink that makes me want to punch him. It’s weird them being in the same room together.

“We’re just gonna grab a quick pint before book club. You OK on your own here for a bit? Katy will be back soon to handle drinks.”

She waves us off with a smile. “Sure, have fun.”

“She’s cute,” Rob says as soon as we’re out of the door, nudging me with his shoulder. “Have you fucked her yet?”

“Shhh.” I look back to make sure she didn’t hear him. “Don’t speak about her like that.” I haven’t told him about her birthday. If he knows we slept together he’ll think I’ve gotten the first time after Heather out of my system. He’ll want to go out on the pull with him, start setting me up on dates. I won’t be able to explain that I want that even less now.

“I think I might have matched with her on tinder, you know?”

“Please tell me you are joking.”

“Of course I am, mate, but come on, you should see your face. You’re clearly into her.”

“We’re just friends,” I insist.

“I don’t buy it. I don’t think you can be friends with women without wanting to get into their knickers.”

“Did you want to get into Heather’s?” I ask, my tone accusing.

“That’s different. She was yours, and she was something else.”

“Yeah, she really was.”

Chapter 29

Kara

I HATE, HATE, HATE dating. I'm trying my best, but I am over it.

“Have you ever killed an animal?” Ryan, 27, asked me last Thursday. When I shook my head and edged further away from him, he told me about a time he hit a badger and dragged it for miles down the road.

The son of another friend of Claude's stood me up last Saturday. It was rude, but I didn't care. I was grateful for a night in the bath with my book. As bad as those were, tonight's date takes first prize.

Kara: This is the worst date I have ever been on.

Kara: I can't believe you made me skip girls night for this.

Megan: What's happened? Are you OK?

Kara: I'm in a taxi on my way home. Come over immediately and bring fish and chips.

I'm dumping kitchen paper, ketchup, and mayo onto the coffee table when Megan rings the bell.

"Just you?"

"Hattie is with someone. What happened?"

I take the bag of food and she follows me through to the living room, stepping out of her shoes along the way. The salty, vinegary steam hits me in the face as I unwrap the paper and get stuck right in.

"He invited me to dinner at what I thought was going to be a nice hotel restaurant. I actually worried he'd end up saying he had a room upstairs or some cheesy line like that. Anyway, I met him in the bar, he seemed like a nice enough guy, decent looking, but it turned out he was using me as his plus one for some work awards ceremony."

"No," she gasps, bringing her hands to her face.

I shove three chips in my mouth at once and keep going. "Yep. And he introduced me as his *girlfriend*. So I had to sit at a table with him and eight strangers for two hours while they handed out trophies."

Megan is agog. "No. No. I'm sorry that I'm laughing, but no. You're making this up?"

"I'm not! We had zero chemistry, and there was no food, not even free booze."

"What did you do?"

“He said he was getting an award, so I stayed until then and made my excuses when the dancing started.”

“You need to write a book about your dating life.”

“Absolutely never. On the plus side, I now know the best plumbers in the county.”

We are laughing so much we’re in tears, struggling to breathe as we roll about on the floor.

“What’s going on with you?” I ask when we finally get ourselves together. “You two are so obsessed with my love life that I haven’t pestered you about yours for a while. Any news from Max?”

“There isn’t much to report. He says he’ll be back after Christmas, so hopefully we can pick things up again then.” I’m not hopeful. Megan’s ex is ten years older than her, and made no secret that he has kids back home in Australia. I think he’s stringing her along, and I’d love to see her with someone who can give her as much as she gives them.

“Oh, there’s a cute new teacher in the history department.”

“A sexy professor?” I wiggle my eyebrows, “say more.”

“I haven’t spoken to him, just admired him across the staff room. His name is Samuel.”

“Samuel, not Sam. That’s hot.”

“I don’t know,” she says, shaking her head. “I’m hardly going to get involved with a colleague.”

“Still nice to have a little crush though, eh?”

“Speaking of little crushes, how are things with Luke?”
Lovely, lovely Luke. The best man I know. But not *my* man.

“They’re fine. I apologised for how I behaved at The Milling Barn, and we’ve spoken a couple of times since then. Back to just friends, which is how I want to keep it.”

“Do you really?” *No.*

“Of course. There is no crush.”

“Are you lying to me?” She fixes me with a beady stare.

“I’m not,” I laugh it off and look away. “I can be friends with him.”

“OK babe, I believe you. You’re tougher than me. I can’t even stand to think about people I’ve been with let alone be friends with them.”

“Well, I can. I’ll prove it to you and see if he wants to come with us tomorrow.”

Kara: Hey, what you up to?

Luke: Falling asleep on the sofa. You?

Kara: Watching *Sleepless In Seattle* with Megan. We’re planning a little road trip tomorrow if you’d like to join us?

Luke: What do you have planned?

Kara: Garden centre with a cafe that we like up the A1, and then a walk around a nature reserve.

Luke: I'm working but that sounds nice.
Ask me next time.

Kara: Will do x

Luke: Night.

“See. That was fine. Just friends,” I say after I read her the messages. I'm totally not paying attention to the aching pang in my belly, or the lack of a kiss on his last message.



The following Friday I'm clearing away our dinner plates and boxing up all the leftovers. The girls are picking a movie, but I don't think I can take another night of watching other people's happy-ever-afters. I'm bored and stuck in our routine, especially now I'm not spending every one of these Friday nights crying about my broken heart.

“I want to go clubbing,” I shout through from the kitchen, the words surprising me as much as the girls.

“Yes!” Hattie punches two fists up into the air. She loves dancing, but has long given up asking me to go with her, and usually goes with her workmates instead. “We're doing it.”

“Clubbing?” Megan is slathering moisturiser up and down her arms. “We don't go clubbing.”

“Why not? We’re not dead yet. We used to love dancing. Remember the Year 11 disco?” I remind her of the best and worst night of our lives. Best because we felt so grown up, tipsy on vodka smuggled in in water bottles, our whole lives ahead of us. Worst because we danced so much that we shredded our feet in strappy heels we could barely walk in. We spent the entire summer nursing blisters.

“We are thirty, though.”

“Practically babies,” Hattie laughs.

“But... but... we go to garden centres and take day trips to visit independent bookshops,” Megan objects. She’s not wrong, those are two of our favourite things.

“I’m sick of meeting guys on these apps. Can’t I just meet someone the old fashioned way by sticking my tongue down their throat on a dancefloor and hoping I don’t catch glandular fever?”

“The Hattie Method?” Megan laughs.

“Hey, it works!”

“But I’m already in my pyjamas?”

“Come on, Megan. Please?” I’m not above begging now I’ve decided this is what I want to do. “It will be fun. Maybe we’ll meet our future husbands tonight.”

Chapter 30

Kara

HALF AN HOUR LATER, we've raided my wardrobe, slapped on a bit of make-up and are piling into a taxi. We may not look our absolute finest, but we'll do.

Riley's is the only place in our town that could really be called a nightclub. It's upstairs in what used to be a pool hall years and years ago. I think my dad played there in his younger days. Outside there is a short queue, and I feel ancient compared to everyone else in it. Either that or they're all fifteen and we've inadvertently turned up to an underage disco. It's colder than I expected, but of course we didn't bring coats, so I'm grateful when the bouncer waves us inside and we walk upstairs and through the doors to the club.

It's loud, stifling, and grimy. Packed tables and chairs flank the large dance floor in the middle of the room, which we have to cross to get to the bar that lines the back wall. Thankfully, a disgusting smoke machine fills the air, so I don't feel like I'm on display at a meat market.

We've been here a few times, usually for people's birthdays, but we're not exactly what you would call regulars. We

squeeze in at the bar, Hattie grabs a barman's attention and orders three double vodka and cokes. I'd rather have a crisp glass of white wine, but it's not really that kind of vibe here.

"This is horrible!" Megan shouts into my ear. "I feel so old."

"Me too!" I yell back and down my drink. "Let's go dance." We're about to head onto the dancefloor when Hattie is served a tray of tequila shots. She is such a bad influence, I didn't even see her order these. I know I'm going to regret it but I down mine anyway and grab their hands to drag them to the dancefloor.

We find a good little space for the three of us near the DJ booth. I really love dancing. Or at least I love moving my body in a way that I hope resembles something akin to dancing. I don't really have any rhythm, can't always remember the words, but if a song has a good beat then there's nothing better than having a jump around. Especially when I've had enough alcohol to not care what anyone thinks. The bass is coursing through my veins, and it's enough just to feel alive and free for a while.

Adam and I never used to go out to places like this. At first it was because we were saving so much, but even once we were older and we'd finished the house, it wasn't something we fancied. Sometimes we'd go out for friends' birthdays, but Adam would always stay right by my side, and we never stayed long. I thought he was so romantic, never wanting to let me go, always protecting me, but now I think maybe that

wasn't such a good thing. He could get quite jealous at times, even if there was never anything to be worried about.

I don't know this song, my feet are killing me, there's no sign of Hattie, and I'm so sweaty from dancing I'll need a shower when I get home.

"Drink?" I signal to Megan and she nods and follows me back to the bar.

We've just finished another vodka and coke and are heading back to the dancefloor when Megan grabs my face with both hands and turns my head. In the corner, Hattie seems to have found herself a man, someone who looks like he's squeezing her bum so much he might pull it right off her body. We look back at each other and burst out laughing.

"Do you see anyone you like the look of?" Megan shouts into my ear and we both try to glance around discreetly as we dance together, then shake our heads.

"I think this was a terrible idea," I yell. I honestly don't know what I was thinking. Everyone here is much younger than us, and though age doesn't seem to bother Hattie, I feel gross thinking about pulling a 22-year-old. We don't fit in, we look super awkward, and the longer we are here, the more I feel embarrassed I dragged them out with me.

After dancing past eleven without even a sniff of interest from our fellow clubbers, I'm ready for my bed. I wrap my hands around Megan's waist and pull her in close to me. "Do you want to go?"

“Yes, I really do, sorry, is that OK?” she shouts over another song I don’t recognise.

“It’s fine! Let’s get Hattie.”

It turns out that Hattie is quite happy to stay in the arms of whoever this is.

“I’ll text you when I get home,” she shouts, and Megan and I make our way outside. There’s a big queue for the limited number of taxis, so we link arms and huddle together as we head down the little high street that leads towards my side of town.

“I don’t know why I thought that clubbing would be a good way to meet a man, Megs.”

“I don’t know either, my darling, but I think this is one of those lessons you need to be reminded of now and then.”

I laugh, hiccup, and burp at the same time. “Why did we let Hattie buy us tequila?”

“I don’t think we had much say in it. Shall we get chips?”

“Yesss! I love you!” I roar.

The chip shop is just beyond the alley that leads up to Sunshine Coffee, and as we walk past, something catches my eye.

“Hey look,” I point. “Luke’s lights are on. Let’s go in.”

“It’s nearly midnight, it’ll be shut.”

“Well then, he’s left the lights on. I’ll snap a photo and tell him.” We hold each other up as we wobble up to the courtyard,

taking care not to go over on the cobbles in our ridiculous shoes. The door is locked, but when I peek through the window I can see Luke inside. We knock loudly until he comes to open up for us.

“What are you two doing here?”

“We’ve been to a club,” Megan says, bounding inside and hopping herself up at a table with the high stools. I’m weirdly annoyed. I always sit at our table by the window and I think he catches me staring at it.

“Why are you here so late?” I ask. He looks so good in his dark jeans and a burgundy t-shirt that, because he was made to torment me, he’s rolled it up a little at the sleeves showing me even more of his biceps. *Mmmm biceps.*

“I couldn’t sleep, so I came in to re-varnish the tables. I’ve been meaning to do it for ages.”

He starts rubbing away at the surface of a table with a cloth, his forearms all tight and horny and all I can picture is me laying naked on his bed and him rubbing me all over in the same way. I need to get a grip.

“You want coffee?” he asks.

“I’ll get it,” I say, making my way behind the counter, but he reaches over from where he’s standing and catches me around the waist, pushing me back. The firmness of his skin against my stomach has a moan whooshing from my chest.

“No, you won’t.”

“I don’t mind,” I shake my head.

“I do,” he laughs and guides me back to the table where Megan is making a tower out of sugar packets. “You don’t work here, Kara.”

He busies himself with our drinks and when he brings them over he says, “So how was Da Club?” and I love that he is like a really sexy old man.

“Luke, it was awful,” says Megan, a little more slowly than usual. “It was disgusting. The floors were sticky, it was too loud, and a guy groped Hattie’s bottom.”

“Outrageous. I bet she hated it.” Luke smiles across at me and he looks so... so... I can’t put my finger on it. Obviously like always, but something else too.

“There were people dry-humping in the corner!” Megan says.

“I didn’t have you three down for a bunch of prudes.”

“Well, Hattie isn’t,” she laughs. “She’s probably dry-humping in the corner right now.”

“We thought it might be a good way to meet men, but they were all about nineteen, so we felt like cougars,” I say, then wish I hadn’t.

“Kara was hoping someone would snog her on the dancefloor.”

“And did they?” Luke asks, standing up straight and folding his arms across his chest.

“No, don’t worry,” Megan reassures him. “A guy squeezed Hattie’s bum, though!”

“So you said.”

“Really, though it was awful.” I think Megan is really quite drunk, and we haven’t even had that much. Then again, we rarely drink spirits, and definitely not doubles, so we’ve probably had more than we think. “The music was, I mean, I don’t want to sound like such a nana, but I didn’t know a single song, and they all sounded the same.”

“That sounds like a nightclub alright,” he chuckles and I want to swim in his laugh.

“You should put on gigs here!” I say, sitting up straight and beaming. I’m rather pleased with my idea and I hope it impresses him.

“I’d really love that, but I don’t think I have the room. I have a little dream about opening a second venue that would be a bar and events space.”

“Can you sing Luke?” Megan asks.

“Oh god, no.”

“Play any instruments?”

“A bit of guitar.”

“Oh Kara, *he plays guitar.*“ Megan swoons at me and I smack her a little too hard on the arm. “We had a thing for a Book Boyfriend who played guitar last year, there was a whole playlist that went with the book and everything.”

“Nick,” I remind her.

“Niiiiiiiick,” she drones. “Nick was so hot. Maybe you could get him to play here.”

“Nick’s not real, Megan. He’s a made up man,” I burst out laughing and then she’s laughing and Luke leans against the counter, his palms spread and all I can think about is how much I want to be squeezed inside the space between his arms.

“I’m going to drive you both home.”



“I know it’s Friday but is it OK if I just go sleep at home?” Megan slurs from the back seat while Luke leans across me to pull my seatbelt around me. It’s the closest we’ve been in ages and I’m a match, waiting to be struck into flames.

“Of course,” I try not to breathe on him. “Is that OK, if we go to Megan’s first?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you Luke-o.”

Megan bursts out laughing. “Uh-oh! That’s how you know she’s really drunk. She starts adding ‘O’ to everything.” Now I’m laughing too, it’s true, I don’t know where it comes from.

We pull up outside Megan and Hattie’s building, and Luke gets out to help her to her door. I wind my window down and she leans in to give me a big wet kiss.

“Doesn’t Luke look handsome?” she whispers loudly. “See you tomorrow, my angel.”

“Night-o gorgeous.”

Back on the road, I lean my head against the cool window and watch the streetlights whip by. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

“I haven’t heard from you much lately,” I say, turning sideways in my seat to face him.

“I’ve just been busy with the shop, that’s all. You OK?”

“Yep. Just miss you.” I say like I’m not fantasising about having sex in the back seat of his car right now. “This night ended up being way more fun than I expected.”

“Why’s that then?”

“Because I saw you, dumb-o.” He keeps his eyes on the road, but I see the corner of his mouth curl up and mine does the same.

At my house, he helps me out of the car and holds my elbow as he guides me to my front door. I sit down on my little garden bench and hunt for my keys before handing them to him. He opens my door and when I brush past him he smells so lovely it makes me stop and look at his lovely face which is so lovely and sexy. Time stands still when I look at his mouth. His jaw ticks and he presses his lips together. I want to kiss him there in that exact spot, close my eyes and brush my lips over his, and wait for him to unfurl and kiss me back. I want it more than anything. I need it.

“Kiss me.” I lick my lips and lean a little closer.

“What?”

“Kiss me,” I say, my head tilted up towards him, ready and waiting. “Like you did on my birthday. Please?”

“No,” he shakes his head and steps away from me, reaching his arms out to usher me inside with minimal contact. “No, Kara, that’s the booze talking. You don’t really want that.”

“Yes I do. I’m not that drunko,” I say. I roll my ankle as I pull my shoes off, grabbing onto my coat rack to steady myself. Sure, I’m wobbly, but not *wasted*. “Just a little kiss? No! I changed my mind. A big kiss.”

OK, maybe I am a little bit wasted. But it still doesn’t mean I want it any less. I want more than kissing. I want tipsy sex where you’re all giggly and silly. And hangover sex. *Oh fuck do I want hangover sex.*

I like it when you’re a teensy bit hungover, not the spewing kind, but the kind where you just want to stay naked in bed all day with warm hands on you and maybe eat a big bag of popcorn and watch a movie but then you realise you’re not watching at all because you’re kissing and smiling and tucking your legs in between each other and then having hard but slow sex and then you come and fall back asleep again.

My hands can touch both sides of the hallway if I stretch them out wide and I’m doing it now, bouncing back and forth, hiccuping as I go.

“Are you going to be sick?” Luke asks.

“NO!” *Oops*. “I didn’t mean to shout at you.”

“OK, let’s get you some water and something to eat.”

“Have you got any Coco Pops?”

“Kara,” he laughs. I want to eat his warm laugh so it lives inside me forever. “This is your house. Have *you* got any Coco Pops?”

“Hahaha, oh yeah. Oh. No. I don’t. Booo.” *Hic*.

He sits me down in the armchair and brings me a glass of water, standing over me until I’ve finished it. “Stay there. I’ll rustle something up.” He hands me the remote and there really is no other option for being drunk on a Friday night. I press play at the point where I last finished watching, about a third into the film. When he reappears a few minutes later, I’m curled up under a blanket. He hands me a plate.

“What’s this?”

“Fried egg roll with chilli sauce. No better way to prevent a hangover.”

I scoot myself upright and take a big mouthful and it is so delicious and salty and spicy and warm and already making me feel better. Luke sits on the sofa eating one he’s made for himself. “What are we watching?”

“Pride and Prejudice.” It makes him smile. “It’s my favourite. The ultimate Book Boyfriend.”

“Why is he the ultimate?”

“Look at his big, moody face. Such a hot, grumpy bastard.” I take another mouthful of my roll, but keep going. “He could have anyone. Everyone wants him, but he only wants her. Of course, they misunderstand each other all the time, give each other the wrong impression about their feelings, push the other away.”

I can tell he’s trying not to laugh at me when I finish my roll and start swooning about the room, reciting my favourite lines to him.

“*You have bewitched me, body and soul.*” I fawn and then burst into tears. “I always cry at this bit,” I say, even though it’s a lie.

Chapter 31

Kara

I DO NOT FEEL good.

I am definitely hungover, but unfortunately it's not the kind that comes with a total memory blank. Instead, I'm lying in bed unable to stop my brain replaying the events of yesterday, and it seems I remember quite a lot about last night.

I remember how excited I was to see Luke. I remember how Megan made it painfully obvious that I fancy him. I remember that he drove us home, and we made him play Like A Prayer twice in a row.

I bury my head under my covers when I get to the memory of him walking me to my door where I asked, no, *begged* him to kiss me. Desperate and pathetic. I remember how he stepped away and held me at arms length like... like... like a bag of garbage. And all after I promised I wouldn't cross the line again. I'm an awful dickhead.

I remember him making me drink water and feeding me, and I remember forcing him to watch *Pride and Prejudice* with me and prattling on about how sexy hands are and

miscommunications and something about rebelling against expectations, I think?

I don't, however, remember how I got to bed. I look down and see I'm still in my dress from last night. Thank God he didn't attempt to change me into pyjamas or I'm certain I would have embarrassed myself with further horrendous and mortifying attempts to seduce him.

It occurs to me that he might still be here and I go cold all over. I peek my head above the covers and listen very carefully, but there is no noise coming from anywhere in the house. My limbs ache from stupid shoes and stupid dancing, but I force myself to get out of bed and creep downstairs.

There is no sign of Luke, but when I walk into the living room I realise he can't have been gone long. On my coffee table sits a bunch of flowers, fresh pastries, a punnet of grapes, a massive bottle of energy drink, a packet of paracetamol, my house keys, and a box of Coco Pops. I unfold a little note he's left on top of the grapes:

Had to go to work. Hope this helps with the hangover.

I want to cry. This is so nice and once I've thought about crying, there isn't much I can do to hold back the tears. He's such a good friend to me and I'm an absolute shit for trying it on, yet again. The sight of croissants makes my stomach grumble but I need coffee before anything else. While the kettle boils, I head upstairs and change out of my dress and into my fleecy pyjamas.

I'm supposed to be shooting DIY tutorials today, but I'm a write off. I just want to lie down, eat, read books, and wallow. Maybe later I'll manage a bath and hope I can get through it all without being sick.

As if I couldn't make myself feel any worse, I text Luke a selfie of me looking like absolute garbage to prove just how rotten I feel. It's the punishment I deserve.

Kara: I am very sorry about my behaviour last night. Thank you for looking after me.

I have visions of him dashing about this morning, picking these things up for me, thinking about what I'd want, and what I needed, and knowing exactly how I'd be feeling. It's ultimate Book Boyfriend behaviour, and it makes my heart sore.

I send the same photo to the girls.

Kara: I feel grim.

Megan: I've been sick.

Megan: Twice.

Hattie: I'm just walking home.

Kara: WTF? Where have you been?

Hattie: Guy from the club's house.

What the hell? Hattie doesn't do sleepovers.

Kara: You stayed over?

Hattie: Lol no, haven't slept yet.

Christ, I don't know where she gets the energy.

Hattie: Do you want a coffee on my way home?

Megan: No. Too soon

Hattie: Do you have a man in your bed Kara?

Kara: No.

Megan: Luke took her home.

Hattie: WHAT

Megan: OK actually bring me a coffee and a doughnut and I'll fill you in.

Kara: He's not here. Stop talking about me. I'm going back to sleep.

Megan: Make it two doughnuts and a lucozade.

My hangover gets progressively worse throughout the day. I can't concentrate on anything, so I drag my duvet to the sofa and watch old episodes of Dawson's Creek while I doze on

and off. Sometime mid afternoon I eat all the leftovers from last night's takeaway and wash them down with the drink Luke left for me. It helps a lot physically speaking, but emotionally the shame and embarrassment will take a lot more than a nap and Pad Thai to recover from.

As the sun disappears, I pull the curtains, then summon the energy to shower and change my bedding. It's an improvement all round, and I spend a bit of time replying to Instagram messages, updating my book journal, and re-reading a steamy office romance novella from last year. I've barely read anything this month. All of this dating and stressing about my feelings for Luke is playing havoc with my reading time, so it's nice to get sucked into a short story.

By the time I go to bed Luke hasn't replied to my text, but that's understandable. He's probably rethinking the whole *let's be friends* thing since I seem to be incapable of being a decent human being around him.

For one final bit of icing on the self-torture cake, I scroll through ancient photos of Adam and me on Facebook. I barely recognise the woman smiling back at me. What was that life? And what life am I living now?



By Thursday I still haven't heard from Luke so after my last meeting I take my laptop to finish work at Sunshine and

hopefully catch him there. He's not behind the counter, and when I ask if he's out back, Katy says he's sick.

“Oh no, what's wrong?” Would he tell me if he was ill? Are we those sort of friends? I'd hope so.

“He got a bug of some sort on Monday,” she says. “He said he hoped he'd be back in by this weekend.”

“And you haven't heard from him since then?”

“No, we've got everything under control here.”

Shit. So he hasn't been seen or heard from in a few days. Is that normal for Luke? I don't know. I just thought I was getting the silent treatment. What if he's had an accident, what if something's really wrong? “I don't suppose he keeps a spare key for his place here?”

“No, why?” I don't want to alarm her, don't want to let on that I'm thinking of worst case scenarios.

“I'll pop round with some food for him I think, don't want to drag him out of bed unnecessarily.”

I try to call him on my way to the supermarket, but it goes straight to voicemail and I'm really worried now. He isn't reading texts either. I thought he was just mad at me, but has anyone seen him? Is he sick alone? When I arrive at his house, there are no lights on and I can see post sticking out on the other side of his letterbox. I'm trying not to overreact, but I also know I have a tendency to fill in the gaps sometimes when I don't know what's going on. It was the same when

Adam left, days and weeks of searching for answers, my brain thinking the worst.

What if Luke's had a heart attack, and he's lying dead on the floor? What if he's fallen off a ladder and broken his back? What if he's been stung by a bee and it turns out he's allergic?

I've got no choice left but to knock, and knock, and knock again.

Chapter 32

Luke

I'VE LOST COUNT OF how long I've been underwater. Sometimes it hits me like a wave. I never know when it's going to take me down, or how long it will keep me below the surface.

I don't know if it's stress from work, this entire mess with Kara, not sleeping well, throwing myself into doing extra jobs in the cafe, or just general grief shit, but I'm wrecked. I see myself from an out-of-body perspective, lying here in a pathetic state of despair, powerless to do anything about it.

My head is pounding. *Thump, thump, thump*. It eases for a moment, then another *thump, thump, thump*. It slowly dawns on me that it's not my head, it's my door. The lights are off, hopefully they'll take the hint and fuck off.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, it continues. And then I hear my name. I'm not expecting anyone, but this person clearly knows who I am. My body creak when I get out of bed and slump downstairs to answer the door. I must look a right state because Kara gasps when she sees me.

I let her in without speaking. She kicks off her shoes then heads through to the kitchen, but I use the energy I have left to climb the stairs and back to my room. I don't know why she's here, and I don't really care. I just want to go back to sleep.

"Hey Luke," she whispers, standing in the doorway. "Katy said you were sick, so I've brought you some bits and bobs to keep you going."

I can't even find the words to say thank you, but her presence squeezes something in my chest.

"They're all in the fridge for you. I didn't know what you might need, or want, and I realised I don't know anyone I could ask, so I got a bunch of different things. There's some fresh fruit, nice bread and butter, chicken noodle soup. Poptarts which, I don't know about you, but I always love to eat when I'm sick and I actually think they taste best straight from the packet and not toasted even though Hattie says that's a crime against food and toasters. I also brought you a room diffuser with eucalyptus oil in case you needed a fresh air hit without actually heading outside. I didn't know if you have a cold or not. Sorry, I'm rambling."

The sound of Kara's rambling is all the medicine I need right now.

"Do you need anything else before I go?"

"Not sick," I croak out from underneath the covers.

"What's that?"

I clear my throat when I realise it's the first time I've spoken in a few days. "I said I'm not sick."

"Oh. OK. Katy said you had a bug or something."

"I lied."

"Can I come over there?" She takes my shrug as a yes and makes her way around to my side of the bed. A small side table separates my bed from a beat up old wingback chair where I often sit and read. "Can I sit here?"

I don't answer, but she sits anyway. "What's going on, Luke?"

"I'm not sick. Just sad."

"Has something happened?" she asks. *Something. Nothing. Everything.* It's impossible to explain.

"No. Just a grief thing. I just needed a few days."

"It's OK, I understand. Well, I don't fully understand, obviously, because I've not experienced it. But I accept it. Your grief isn't going anywhere." Platitudes never help me, but her words are a small comfort and I'm grateful she doesn't tell me things will get better.

"I've been texting and calling. I thought you might have had an accident."

"I don't know where my phone is."

We sit in silence for a while. I couldn't tell you how long, I'm still hiding under the covers, I don't want her to see me this way.

“Luke,” she says softly after a while. “Shall I run you a bath?”

“No thanks. I’d rather not be alone.”

“I could sit by the door. Swear I won’t peek while you’re getting in.” I hear the smile in her voice.

“I’m good here.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but you don’t smell the freshest, Luke. Bath or shower, which will it be?”

“You’re bossy.”

“I know, you know this about me.”

I hear her pad along the landing to the bathroom. She runs the water and after a while she calls through to tell me it’s ready. I drag myself out of bed and walk into the bathroom where the air is nice and hot and I can see she’s made it extra bubbly, probably to spare any awkwardness about being naked around her.

“I’ll wait out here,” she says, stepping out and sitting down with her back against the wall outside the door. I don’t really give a shit if she sees me. I step out of my clothes and into the bath. The water is the perfect temperature, but my body feels like hell and I sit upright, my knees to my chest, and lean my head against the tiles. They’re wet with condensation, and my face is wet with steam and tears.

“Do you have any medication that you take?” Kara asks after a little while from her spot in the hallway. “Are you behind on anything?”

“No, I don’t take anything.”

Another long pause. “How long have you been feeling like this?”

“Few days.”

“Are you the kind of person who knows they need help and asks for it, or do you just go off grid?” She must already know the answer. “What I mean is, does anyone else know you’re feeling like this?”

I don’t say anything.

“Oh Luke,” I hear the worry in her voice. “It makes me sad to think how long you could be like this with nobody checking in on you.”

“Rob texts me most days.”

“I’m gonna need a number for him.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not OK. When you didn’t reply, I thought maybe you just weren’t talking to me, which is fine, but I was worried about you. I know I can be dramatic, but when I was on the way over here, I genuinely thought I might have to break down your door and find you stuck on the floor upstairs with a broken hip or something.”

“Jesus, I’m not that old.”

“I know, but I’ve got an awful imagination sometimes. Anyway, I would appreciate having the number of someone else in your life, just in case of emergencies.”

“I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“I’m a worrier. I’m always going to worry. Let me get you a drink of water.”

My face crumples when she leaves, my shoulders shaking like I’m about to cry, but my tears are stuck inside me. I hate that she’s seeing me like this. And I hate that I care. My grief is all I have left of my wife. I’m supposed to feel like this every day. I lie back and sink my head under the water, letting it all escape there instead. When I come up for air, Kara is standing there with a glass, looking anywhere but at me.

“Where do you keep your spare bedding? I’ll change your sheets while you finish up.”

“In the hall cupboard.” And she’s gone again. I drink the water, and the icy liquid coating the inside of my throat feels harsh against how hot the rest of my body is.

“Luke,” she calls through. “Is there anything in here I can’t wash?”

“What do you mean?”

“Anything special. Like this scarf.” She reappears in the doorway, sounding choked up and when I look at her face, I know she knows. I don’t know whether I’m upset that she’s found it, or I’m upset that she clearly gets it.

“Can you just put it on my bedside table, please.”

“OK. I’m being really careful with it,” she says, her voice small and quiet. I can’t breathe, so I sink underneath the water again and come up just in time to see her head off down my

hallway. After a quick scrub, I slowly climb out and reach for a towel. She's left a clean t-shirt and sweatpants by the sink for me.

Back in my room, Kara has changed the bedding, opened the curtains and thrown the windows wide. There's a chill in the air, but I appreciate the freshness. I fold Heather's scarf and place it back in my bedside drawer. Kara has cleared away all my empty coffee cups and cereal bowls. I think about going downstairs, but hovering at the top of them, I can hear her stacking the dishwasher.

"Hey Luke," she calls up. "You want to hang out on the sofa or go back to bed?" I appreciate the permission to not have to venture out of my bubble.

"Bed." I yell down, my voice still croaking.

"OK. You get comfortable. I'll bring you up some food."

Crawling underneath the covers, I've never appreciated clean sheets so much in my life. They're cool and fresh and I'm mortified all over again thinking about how much I've been wallowing. I'm a pathetic, disgusting slob.

"Time to sit up buddy," she says when she walks back into the room, a little more upbeat. I do as I'm told, and she plumps an extra pillow behind my back.

"You're making me feel a hundred years old," I moan, even though that's the way my sad, aching, tired body feels after the way I've treated it this week. She's found a tray in the kitchen and filled it with little dishes of things; toast, fruit, cheese,

nuts, fresh juice. It's so nice it's like being punched in the chest.

"I wasn't sure what you fancied, so I brought a few things. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Just sad."

"Do you want to be cheered up or stay in the sad?"

What a way to put it. "Stay in the sad."

"OK. Let's just find a safe way to be in the sad. Want me to stay for a bit?"

"Don't you have plans?"

"I cleared the rest of the day." Well, now I feel guilty. I shouldn't get in the way of her life by infecting her with my misery.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to be sad all the time. Just for a bit."

"I hear ya pal," she says, patting my arm. "How about we make a deal, no more apologising for our feelings, OK?" We sit quietly while I eat. I hadn't realised how hungry I was, or how little I've had over the past few days. "Have you been feeling this way a lot lately?"

"Not for a while. Used to be like this all the time and then the waves got further apart, and I'll think I'm doing OK, but then another one will take me out."

"I get a bit like that, too. Sometimes the sad eclipses the good stuff. It pulls the curtains around you and makes you feel like that's the only feeling you'll ever have. But I know I'm

not sad all the time, and I don't think you're sad all the time. I've seen you laughing and smiling and you're a bloody good actor, if that was all pretend."

She gets it. Sometimes I only want to live in the grief. Some days it breaks my heart that Heather has never seen this place, her things aren't scattered all over the place. I've had to make a new home without her. Other days I'm so glad because I'd find it so hard to see her ghost everywhere, but then I feel guilty about feeling glad she's not here even if the thought only lasts a millisecond.

Being busy is good because it forces me to stay active, and distracts me from my feelings. But those feelings don't disappear, they pile up beneath the surface until they burst out like this. It's like a tidal wave, I can see it coming but I'm powerless to stop it. I can quickly make calls, Katy is covering everything at the shop, but then I just have to hide until I'm on an even keel again. I never know when the last wave will subside.

"I think the sad might always be there. Some days it's smaller. Today it's the big feeling. That's OK, Luke." I can't speak, so I just nod. "Can I play some music for you?"

"No, thanks."

"Put a movie on? Do you have a favourite show?"

"I just want to sleep." I've done nothing but sleep and mope for days. How can I still be this exhausted?

“OK.” She takes the bowl of nuts from my tray and sets it on the bedside table before heading downstairs with the rest of the things. I roll onto my side and curl up into a ball. From here, I see the trees in the garden swaying in the breeze. I wish I was a leaf so I could float away on the wind with my wife.

Kara reappears at my side, strokes my hair a little and tucks my covers tight around my body. Even though I normally hate that, there’s something nice about being cocooned right now. It’s the next best thing to a hug and I’ve really missed her touch.

“Is there something you like to have with you? For comfort?”

I look up to see her face, I think it’s the first time I’ve really looked at her today. Her lips wear a gentle smile, but she looks cautious. “You mean the scarf?”

“Yeah,” she whispers.

“No, it’s OK. I don’t sleep with it every night or anything. Just sometimes I need it. It still smells of her perfume. It’s the last trace of her, I’m terrified one day it will all be gone.”

“I understand. I’ll head off in a minute, do you have everything you need?”

“Can you stay for a bit? Just until I fall asleep.”

“Of course.” She turns on the bedside light and angles it low and away from my face before taking her seat in the armchair. I watch her gaze out of the window before closing the

windows and the curtains. The fading light puts her in silhouette and I feel my eyes getting heavy.

“Kara?”

“What do you need?”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve got you. Go to sleep.”



I don’t know what time it is when I wake up. I’m still not sure where my phone is. Kara is folded up like a pretzel in the armchair, her head balanced on her wrist, bent at an angle that makes me feel a bit sick to look at. In her other hand her e-reader is dangling loose, ready to drop to the floor at any second. A little drool pools at the corner of her mouth, I guess she’s been out for a while. I get out of bed and crouch down in front of her, taking her book and setting it on the nightstand. When I carefully uncross her legs she jolts awake, disorientated as she looks around to remember where she is.

“That can’t be comfortable, come and lie down.” She doesn’t object when I take her arm and pull her to her feet, sliding the other around her shoulders to prop her up. She shakes her cardigan loose, and I guide her to the other side of the bed. She slips in underneath the covers and lets out a lazy moan.

“Mmm, that’s better.”

I climb back in from my side and turn out the light before rolling to face her. It feels so nice to have her here again. When I think about her birthday, I obviously think about the sex, but I also think about how good it was to wrap my arms around her and hold her while we slept. The smell of her shampoo takes me back to that night, and I can't take my eyes off of her when she stretches out and gets comfy. When she rolls onto her side to face me I feel caught in my infatuation, but she reaches one hand up and smoothes away a tear I didn't realise was there.

“Can I kiss you?” I whisper, half hoping she will, half hoping she won't even hear my needy begging. She bristles and looks away, holding her breath before letting out a slow sigh.

“Oh Luke. I don't think you really want to. I think you're sad and it will help for a second and then it won't. I don't want that for us, not like this.”

My eyes float closed. “I should have kissed you.”

“What?”

“Last week, when I drove you home.”

“Oh, no, I was drunk and handsy and it was completely inappropriate.” She scoots back a little, barely noticeable, but I catch it. The distance between us feels like miles. “You did the right thing.”

“You're right. I'm sorry.” I think I'm going to properly cry, so I roll away onto my stomach and bury my face in my

pillow. A few moments later I feel her hand on my back, stroking slow circles across my shoulder blades, easing the edge off my heartache.

“It’s OK. You’re not yourself. But I hope you know I’m really fond of you, Luke. You’re such a great guy. I like spending time with you. We have a beautiful friendship here,” she yawns softly. “Let’s be kind to each other, let’s look out for each other, I’ll always be here for you. That’s enough isn’t it?”

“Of course.”

It’s not enough.

Today she showed up for me in a way I’d forgotten people are capable of doing. She didn’t tell me to get a grip, she didn’t try to fix me, she just did everything I needed. Even the things I didn’t know I needed. So here we lay, side by side in the pale light, her soft circles slowing until she falls asleep with her hand on my back. I’m not tired any more, I’m just broken hearted. Sad for my past, sad for my future, and all I can do is watch her until the sun comes up.

Chapter 33

Kara

I DON'T EVEN NEED to open my eyes to remember I'm in Luke's bed. His sheets are soft, the pillow smells like him, the covers are warm with the heat of two bodies sleeping side by side. Except only one of us is sleeping. When I roll over and discover a Luke-shaped gap in the bed, I panic for a second but when I run downstairs I find him mopping the kitchen.

"Coffee?" he asks as I lean against the doorframe and catch my breath.

"Please."

"Hop up so you don't ruin my nice clean floor." I sit at the breakfast bar and remember the last time I sat here and watched him make pancakes for me. He looks better than yesterday and sounds it too. He's fresher in the face, he's trimmed his beard a little, though his hair is all dishevelled in that way I like best. I love morning Luke, he's got a good energy to be around this early. Never grumpy.

"How are you feeling?" I tentatively ask.

"Better, thank you. Out of bed, which is an improvement."

“What do you have planned for today?”

“I’m taking one more day off. I don’t want to push it. You?”

“I cleared my diary.”

“For me?” he asks. There’s a layer of emotion beneath the question, excitement perhaps. He sets my coffee down and I pull it across the counter towards me.

“Well, yes, just in case you needed company or anything.”

“You don’t need to cancel your plans for me, Kara.”

“Perk of being the boss, eh?” He doesn’t say anything so we sip quietly and I stare out of the window. It looks like a mild day, and I wonder how I’ll fill it. I haven’t taken a day off in months. I could go and get a massage and a pedicure, or take myself out for a lunch, drive over and see my folks, but when I look at him across the counter, I know there’s nobody I’d rather make plans with. “I think we should go on an adventure.”

He thinks for a while, staring out into the garden at something, or nothing. “I haven’t seen the sea for a while.”

“Perfect. I need to nip home, but I’ll be back in half an hour.”

Back home, I shower and brush my teeth, change into jeans and a thin jumper, then throw a cosy hoodie into my bag just in case it’s cold on the coast. I grab two bananas and figure we can get lunch somewhere on the way. I don’t think I’ve properly recovered from the stress of worrying about Luke,

but I am excited to spend the day with him. It will be good to get us both out of our usual routines.

I beep my horn outside his house and try to keep my face positive when he steps out. The man looks exhausted. He's changed into jeans, a thick, warm hoodie pulled up over his hair. I'm reminded of a teenager being dragged to the supermarket by his mum.

"You sure you want to do this?" I check.

"Yep. I made you a bacon roll," he says, passing me a warm bun wrapped in kitchen paper then doing up his seat belt. "Wasn't sure if you like ketchup, but took a punt and put on a dollop, anyway."

"Oh my god," I unwrap it and take a big bite. "Why are you so good to me?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full. Didn't your parents teach you any manners?" he goads, and then we're on our way.

The roads are pretty clear for a Friday morning. I plug my phone in and tell him he's in charge of music.

"This feels like a test," he says, scrubbing at his beard as he looks through my account. "Am I supposed to impress you with my music knowledge?"

"Ha!" It's a ridiculous thought. "I know nothing about music, I pretty much only listen to the radio when I'm in the car, and podcasts about books."

"What kind of music do you like?"

“Just play me what you like.”

We spend the next hour mostly silent, listening to his selection of songs, which are what I would describe as Sad Man Rock. It’s soothing and befitting of the mood we’re both in, coming up for air underneath the heavy weight of our lives. After a while, he changes the music to something more upbeat and I can feel my shoulders shifting to the beat. “This makes me think of being at one of those beach clubs in Ibiza.”

“You’ve been?”

“God, no, I just imagine that’s what it’s like. Did you and Heather travel much?” I ask, hoping I’m not stepping over a boundary. He shakes his head and bites his cheek.

“Not really. We wanted to, but then she got sick, and a lot of plans got put on hold.”

“How long was she sick for? If it’s OK to ask.”

“A long time. She was misdiagnosed a lot, things were passed off as viruses, then they said it was chronic fatigue stuff. By the time they figured out it was cancer, it had spread, so she needed a lot of treatment.” *Jesus, the poor woman.*

“That’s really sad. Where did you hope to go?”

“Everywhere really. We quite fancied a stint living in Australia. She loved animals, so she wanted to go to places where she could see them in the wild. After she died, I considered doing all those things in her memory, but the thought of being that far away without her just sucked. And now I’ve got the coffee shop, so that’s what I’m focusing on.”

I keep my eyes on the road, blinking away the wetness pooling in my eyes.

“What about you and Adam?” he asks.

“No, we never went anywhere.” I swallow thickly to clear my throat. “We were so focused on saving for a house, and then doing renovations. We actually did treat ourselves to our first ever holiday, but he left about a month before we were meant to fly out.”

“You didn’t go?”

“On my own? No way. I was too broken. I heard he took her instead.”

“What a prick.”

“Yep. So yeah, I’ve never been abroad. I’m a bit more of a homebody I think. I really enjoy where we live, but I like trips like this, just getting on the road for a bit.”

“I’ve only been abroad on a school trip to Paris when I was fifteen.”

“Was it fun?”

“Yeah, but we had to do loads of school work while we were there. Like go into a chemist and buy a toothbrush in French. So weird. All I remember is *où est la discothèque?*” His French accent is surprisingly good, and incredibly sexy.

“An essential phrase. Play something French.”

“Like what?”

“Um, *Encore Une Fois*. I can’t think of any other French songs.” He plays it loud, and I roll the windows down and we bob our heads, pointing fingers and dancing along in our seats, both attempting to sing even though we don’t know any of the words except *Encore Une Fois* which, thankfully, make up most of the song. When it ends we are out of breath, burned through our burst of energy. He chooses something more laid back and we fall into our comfy silence again.

When we pull off the dual carriageway and start on the single lane roads, he speaks again. “Do you think being with Adam held you back? In your life, I mean.”

“Wow, what a question,” I glance across at him and he’s studying my face. “You moonlight as a therapist?”

“Sorry, you don’t have to answer.”

“It’s hard to think about. I suppose I thought that I was happy at the time, doing everything we’d planned to do. I love my house and it led to my business, so I don’t regret it, but I do sometimes wonder if I missed out on a chunk of my twenties.”

“What do you mean?”

“We were joined at the hip, so it was only when he left I realised I didn’t really have many friends or hobbies that were just mine. Everyone was out having fun and making memories and we were just at home watching TV or doing DIY. Hattie and Megan did loads of stuff together that I never went to. Weekends away, festivals, even just nights out, but I turned them all down to save money or because I wanted to be a good

girlfriend. Looking back, I knew he wouldn't approve of me doing things without him, so it was always an immediate no from me. I never questioned it."

He's quiet, giving me the space to process these things I haven't really thought about before.

"I was a real mess, having to learn how to be by myself. I couldn't sleep with the lights off. The girls stayed with me for ages. Then I read a book about a woman healing from a controlling relationship, and while it wasn't quite as bad as that, there were some things that resonated."

"Like what?"

"I guess I found it quite upsetting to realise how much of my personality was actually just copying him. I think when you've been with someone for so long, you get really used to doing things their way. We went where he wanted to go, we ate what he liked to eat. You find out that things that meant the world to you didn't carry the same weight for the other person. I didn't know my own mind for a while, it was as though part of me died." I don't catch myself in time, and I wince. "Sorry, poor choice of words."

"It's OK, I know what you mean. Heather died, but the man who was her husband went with her. You're not grieving because he's died, but your life with him was gone and that's a loss too."

"Yeah," I nod and blink back the tears threatening to fall. "This is cheery."

“This is everything, Kara. Thank you for sharing with me and letting me talk.”

It’s surprisingly easy to talk about this stuff while I’m focused on driving. There’s space for it to come out unfiltered, and it feels good to talk about it to someone who isn’t immediately jumping to slagging Adam off the way the girls do. Though there are plenty of scoffs and signs to tell me he’s not best pleased either.

“What we had together wasn’t perfect, but it didn’t feel broken to me. I was shocked. It really hurts that he didn’t respect me enough to do anything to make things better.”

“Maybe he did.”

“What do you mean?”

“He left you.” I still don’t follow. “Do you ever think your life is better without him?”

The thought of it knocks the breath out of me. “Jesus Luke, you’re really getting into the raw stuff today, aren’t you?”

“Sorry. I’m in a contemplative mood.”

“I’ll need to think about it more. How is it for you? You were with Heather for a long time.”

“I guess I only look back on the happy stuff. I try not to think about how awful things were at times, but then those times were because she was sick, not because our relationship was bad. It’s not the same as your situation, if that makes sense.”

“It does.”

“I know what you mean about feeling your identity is so wrapped up in another person. We were such a team, always together, it’s like a piece of me is missing. There’s only half of me left. Who would want half of me?”

“Even half of you is amazing, Luke,” I say without thinking. “I wish I’d been able to meet her.” Then he goes quiet, and I think that’s probably enough deep chat for a while.

Our destination is a small seaside town, and I find a quiet car park near the beachfront. While I pay for parking, Luke gathers our things and one of my furniture blankets from the back.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, passing a fish and chip shop on the boardwalk. He nods, so I order for us both and I read the adverts on the notice board while we wait for our fish to fry. A lost dog, a found set of keys, Irene’s ironing service. I say yes to salt and vinegar and we head off again, the wrapped parcels warm in my arms. We walk a little further away from the entrance to the beach, though it’s quiet enough that we’re not surrounded by people. Luke spreads a blanket out and we sit and eat. The sea breeze blows my hair into my face so I tie it back, though thankfully it’s not strong enough to whip the sand along with it.

I love fish and chips by the sea, though I cannot for the life of me remember when I last did this. When I was little, we had a few holidays further up the coast. Adam and I had the odd day trip in warmer weather when the beaches were packed. I’d

always come home sticky, scratchy, and sunburned. It's somehow nicer on a cool day like today.

Waves break on the shoreline and I zone out, senses taken over by the hypnotic crash and roll. I've never quite settled on whether I find the sea scary or comforting, constant yet unpredictable. I suppose powerful things are bound to be both. The ocean, brains, feelings. I'm drawn to it despite the fear.

After my food, I slip out of my shoes and push to my feet. "Paddle?" I reach out my hand to help Luke up, but he shakes his head. Pottering down to the water's edge, I try to stay light-footed in the spiky shingle. It's freezing, of course. I'm not bold enough to be a wild swimmer, but I let the water lap at my toes and bend to wash the grease from my hands.

As a kid I remember digging into the wet sand with my big toe, scooping up great clumps, admiring the stones and shells and tiny treasures I unearthed. I love the way the beach returns you to your childhood. I can't help but feel small and playful here. In time, Luke appears at my side. "Want to walk?"

We head north along the water's edge and I keep looking backwards to watch my footprints get gobbled up by the water as it pulls back out to sea. The evidence of me there one second, gone the next. It's humbling. I count three ships far out to sea, with no idea where they came from or where they're going.

"Do you like the sea?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"Sure."

“The sea makes me quiet and pensive. When I’m near it, I can’t think of much else.”

“Seems like a good day to not think.”

“Mmm,” I agree. “This was a perfect suggestion for our adventure day. Thank you.” I link my arm through his without thinking, but he doesn’t reject it. Instead, he pulls his elbow in closer and me along with it.

“Did Adam make you laugh?” His question comes from nowhere. I’m sure he must have, but pressed to answer I can’t recall a time.

“No.” I shake my head and press my mouth into a tight smile. “Not for a long time.”

“You know,” he pauses with a heavy sigh, “when Heather died, she made me promise her three things, and one of them was that I would laugh every day. I think it’s one of those things that’s easy to overlook in life.”

“That’s very sweet. Do you keep your promise?”

“Most days. Not in a belly laugh way, but I try to pay attention so I notice more things that give me a little smile.”

“Like what?”

“Just little things. A kid pulling faces in the cafe, stupid adverts that make no sense, or that thing where you almost bump into someone in the street and you both move the same way to avoid each other. That makes me laugh. I suppose some things that people would get annoyed about, I try to see the funny side.”

“That’s a good way to be. What else did you promise?”

“Oh, um, well, the big one was that she wanted me to follow my dreams, and I’d always talked about how nice it would be to open a cafe. So that one is ticked off, at least.”

“What about number three?”

“I promised her I’d fall in love again.”

“Oh. Right.” We both look at the sand ahead of us and I give his arm a gentle squeeze. “I feel like that’s a much bigger challenge than Sunshine, you know.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he whispers, and we’re quiet again.

Towards the end of the sandy beach, we make our way up to the rocks. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” he shrugs.

“Did you used to wear a wedding ring?”

“I did.”

“When did you take it off?”

“It’s kind of a funny story. It’s somewhere under the floorboards in the cafe. I took it off to wash paint off my hands and it rolled off the counter and dropped in between a gap. I was about to rip the place apart, but I decided it felt fitting in a way.”

“How so?”

“Um.” He pauses, lets go of my arm and turns to stare out at the sea, the pale shoreline turning a deep grey where the sand

drops away. “I lied to you about something, back when we first met.”

I take a step back and hold my breath.

“You asked me if there was a story behind the name for the cafe and I said no, but that’s not true.”

“Oh. What’s the story?”

“Sunshine was my nickname for Heather.” *Ah*. “I’m sorry I wasn’t honest about it. It was only the second conversation we’d had and I just wasn’t ready to get into all that.”

“It’s OK. That’s a beautiful tribute.”

“Yeah, that’s what I hoped. But I don’t like to share that with too many people.”

I root around in the sand, mostly to avoid my feelings and his expression. Luke crouches by my side and I show him how to hunt for sea glass, digging deep down under the pebbles to find the hidden gems.

“Is this seaglass?” he asks, holding out a little aquamarine piece of glass that’s been rolled over years into a smooth oval. It’s comforting to me to know that even though the sea is changing every day, things like this can last for decades here. They never give up.

“Well, would you look at that. Keep it. A nice memento of a shitty day.”

He pockets it, and when we turn to retrace our steps he slings an arm over my shoulder and pulls me into his side.

“This is so far from a shitty day, Kara.”



“I think it probably is better, you know,” I say when we get back on the road to head home.

“What is?”

“Life without Adam.”

“I think so too. I’m glad he left. We might not have met otherwise.” Luke smiles softly, a contented hum rumbling in his throat. Elbow against the window, he leans against his hand and before long he dozes off in the fading sun. He sleep for most of the ride home and I turn the radio off and just listen to the sound of his breathing.

Back at his house we both head inside.

“You sit down, I’ll rustle something up for dinner.” There is still soup in the fridge from the other day and I heat up two bowls and butter some bread. I’m not particularly hungry after such a big portion of fish and chips and he seems exhausted so it’s plenty. We hang out on the sofa and skip around Friday night telly, happy to just sit together watching a gardening show, a panel show, a late night chat show. At some point, he lifts my feet into his lap and strokes my tired calves with his thumb.

“Can you stay again?”

“Do you want me to stay?”

We don't even ask the questions. When he turns off the TV, I follow him upstairs and into his room, where we change with our backs to each other. I slip into the t-shirt he's left out for me before. It's mine now.

“There's a spare toothbrush in the cabinet under the sink, by the way,” he says. While I brush, I avoid looking at myself in the mirror, a little fearful of what I might recognise that I am still pretending isn't happening to me. To us.

Slipping under the covers, he asks if I want to read and I nod so we sit, propped up side by side with our books. I'm too tired to take in my story though, so I set it down on the bedside table, scoot down and roll into his side.

“Come here,” he whispers, and I lay my head on his shoulder, taking care not to block his view of his book. He lifts my arm, pulls it across his stomach and my body softens into his as he keeps reading.

It's not romantic, but it's not just friendly either, it's something more. Warm. Safe. Peaceful. It's no wonder I fall asleep with his soft t-shirt against my cheek, his hand on my elbow, his thumb stroking my skin.

Chapter 34

Kara

APPARENTLY LUKE DOESN'T LIKE to laze in bed in the morning because I wake up alone again. Music streams up from downstairs, so at least I don't panic that something bad has happened this time. Instead, I stretch out in the middle of the bed and do a body scanning thing Megan taught me. Head, OK. Shoulders, stiff from driving. Chest, heavy. Stomach, hungry. Legs, wriggly. Heart, all over the place.

Something has shifted this weekend. At least it has for me. Despite the heaviness, I haven't once wanted to be anywhere else. And though we haven't exactly been laughing it up as we've periodically purged our feelings, it's been special in its own way. A deepening of our friendship.

I find Luke downstairs dressed and pulling on his trainers. "Are you going to work?"

"Yeah, I promised Katy I'd be back by the weekend and I'm on the early shift. Sorry, I didn't want to wake you."

"It's OK. I'll head off too."

“Do you have a date today?” he asks, his eyes glued to the laces that slip between his fingers and into a knot.

“No,” I say. “No more dates.”

I give his arm a squeeze and head back upstairs to get dressed, desperately hoping he understands what I mean.



The sea air and quiet evening with Luke have done me good, but I'm wrung out by the time I get home. I've been at Luke's since Thursday, and even skipped girl's night to make sure he was OK. Hattie and Megan understood. I told them Luke needed some company, and we'd be back on for next week. His grief is not my story to share.

And my God, he is grieving. I'd worked myself up into a right state by the time I got to his house. I haven't spiralled like that in a while, but that's the thing about not having answers, you tend to imagine the worst. I'd thought he was ignoring me because I'd been a drunken sleaze. When Katy said he was sick but he wasn't answering his phone, I filled in the gaps in the worst possible way. Panicked that he'd had an accident, or done something to himself. If I'd have gone around a couple of days before, maybe I could have helped sooner.

I change into my pyjamas and crawl back into bed to read, but the book I'm reading seems dead set on hurting me. It's the

second of the Taylor Sisters novels and this is Penny, the middle sister's story. She's a veterinarian who starts dating one of her customers, Toby, when he rescues a lovely old greyhound. And guess what? He's a widower still nursing a grieving heart. I can only picture him as Luke, and I can only picture myself as Penny and even though I have absolutely zero knowledge about animals or vet stuff, I want to be doing all the things Penny and Toby do together.

The weight of my feelings is becoming too much to carry. When I catch myself zoning out in the hallway thinking about him, I shake myself out of it, and pull my phone from my pocket. I've been doing it for so long now that it's almost a Pavlovian response.

Think about Luke. Get sad. Can't concentrate. Open up a dating app. Swipe a few profiles. Wait for messages to come. It's a unique self-torture. I know it won't lead to anything, it's always been a quick distraction.

I've got three profiles now. "You've got to cast a wide net," Hattie said, even though I've definitely declined some of these men on multiple apps now and the pool of local candidates feels tiny.

My head isn't right when I'm on them. I hate sending the first message, even when that's the way it works. I refuse to reply to men who only say "Hi" or "What u up to?" And I spend most of the time blocking men who are just plain creepy, and then feeling guilty that I haven't given them a proper chance.

I don't *want* to give them a proper chance. If I wasn't trying to hide my feelings for Luke, I wouldn't be messing about with apps at all. My life of being sworn to die alone and celibate was just fine until he came along and cracked open something I'd locked up forever. Who wants to be in a relationship, anyway? This friendship, this quiet companionship I have with Luke, it's enough.

I'm deleting the apps.

Today.

Now.

I run a glass of water and I'm walking through to the living room when it happens. A press of the thumb to open the app, a sharpness behind my ribs, my vision swimming. I fall against the doorframe when my legs crumple beneath me. My chest caves in, the glass slips, water spilling across the carpet, as I land awkwardly on my knees, a broken howl rising from my throat. Through blurry eyes I look again, and there on my phone is his face.

Adam, 29.

elle

"He's single, and he didn't even tell me." I sob into a cushion, face down on the sofa.

"Oh darling, why would he?" Megan says, crouching next to me and stroking my hair. "He's not in your life anymore. I

know that's not much comfort, but it's true."

Hattie paces the room, scrolling through his profile on my phone. "He's not even got a single decent photo in here that isn't one he's cropped you out of. Adam, twenty-nine. What a shithead."

"Isn't he thirty?" says Megan. "His birthday is before yours."

"He's a liar." Hattie spits. "He's probably put twenty-nine so he's in more people's age bracket. Catfish prick."

"Why are you on here anyway, Kara? I thought you'd been with Luke the past few days?" Megan asks.

"I was," I groan, "I was about to uninstall the apps. There's no point, I'm going back to being sworn off men."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Hattie shouts, drawing out the *sake* and genuinely terrifying me a little. "Sit up, you beautiful idiot." She hooks her arms under mine, pulls me upright, then stands over me with her hands on her hips. Megan sits at my side, one arm around my shoulders, a box of tissues in her hands. I take one and blow my nose hard.

"I've had enough of this now," Hattie says.

"Enough of what?"

"You and your Book Boyfriend."

I'm confused. "Toby?" I haven't even told them what I'm reading this week.

“Luke! You have clearly, so clearly, got it bad for him. He has *clearly* got it bad for you.”

“He’s like a puppy when you walk in the room,” Megan says, stroking my hair.

“Seriously, just being around you two is making me consider pitching a throuple.”

“We’re just friends,” I sniff. “I was with him because he’s not been well, he’s hurting.”

“Aren’t you hurting right now?” Hattie shouts, and Megan and I both recoil. “Aren’t you in *agony* depriving yourself of something that is good and right in front of you?”

“Come on, lie down and be a starfish.” Megan slides off the sofa, pats the floor and makes me spread my arms and legs out wide. She sits by my head, smoothing her thumbs from between my eyebrows out to my temples. I don’t know what TikTok or YouTube she’s seen this on, but it helps when I’m spinning out into a rambling meltdown.

“OK, so you and Luke are friends. Is that what you want?” she asks in her sweet teacher’s voice.

“Yes. I love Luke, but we’re *just* friends, and that’s enough.”

Hattie punches the air and shakes her hands like she’s throttling someone. “Excuse me while I scream into a pillow.” She does exactly that, smothering her face with one of the sofa cushions, shrieking into the down. When she’s finished, she

sets it back on the sofa, plumping it carefully before turning back to me.

“Kara, do you hear yourself speaking?”

“What?” That telltale lump is growing in my throat as she looms over me.

“What did you *just* say?”

“I can’t remember.” I turn to look up at Megan, who is sitting with her lips pressed into a tight line, her face all doe-eyed and her hands folded over her heart.

“You just said that you love Luke. L. O. V. E. You love him,” she fawns.

“You’ve loved him for ages,” Hattie says. “Do you know what it’s like to be in a room with the two of you? The chemistry is unreal. I’ve definitely thought about you doing it when I’m wanking.” Megan and I both gasp and clap our hands to our mouths.

“That is very rude, Hattie,” Megan says through her giggles.

“Well, I don’t give a shit. You’re both hot, it was a good wank, I’m not apologising for it. My point is, you love this man. You think about him all the time, you talk to him every day, you spend entire afternoons *reading* together. You care for him when he’s sick. He helps you with your work. You’re basically a couple already.”

“He doesn’t think of me that way.”

“Must I remind you he literally had, in your own words, *mind-blowing* sex with you.”

“That was just for my birthday,” I protest.

“Oh, sweet innocent baby angel girl, you cannot be this stupid. Look, I know you’ve only ever had one boyfriend, but as someone who’s been with forty-five thousand of the fuckers, I can tell you for certain that men do not do that kind of thing for women they’re not into. A romantic fake dinner date where he pretended to be your dream man followed by, and again, I quote, *mind-blowing* sex, which he had to enlist your two best friends to help coordinate? That’s never *just* for your birthday. He did that for *you*.”

The heavy feeling in my chest is reaching its tipping point, my shoulders shake when I sit up just in time for a big wobbly sob to pour from deep in my chest. I pull my knees to my chest and curl into a ball. It doesn’t matter how much I try to forget him, the heart wants what it wants and mine wants him badly.

“You’re holding yourself back because you’re scared,” Hattie continues. “It’s understandable. That bastard fucked you right up, but that doesn’t mean you should avoid all chances of happiness for the rest of your life.”

“How is the serial shagger the wise one about relationships all of a sudden?” I laugh, though it comes out all shaky.

“Because I’m the queen of avoiding my feelings, and I know exactly what it looks like.”

“What if he breaks my heart? I wouldn’t survive it twice. You know how hard it was to piece me back together.”

“What if he doesn’t though, babe?”

“Fuck,” I scream. “What a mess. Why did you make me join all these apps?”

“Umm,” she looks over at Megan, but Megs shakes her head.

“I never approved this. I believe I was asleep at the time.”

“I’m sorry, Kara,” Hattie says, dropping to her knees in front of me. “I figured if you went online, you’d see what a bunch of dumdums are out there and snap Luke up. I thought that’s who you really wanted.”

”I *do* want him. I want him so much,“ I howl.

“We know angel,” Megan says, and they both wrap their arms around me and squeeze tight. “So tell him how you feel.”

“I can’t.”

“You can!” they cheer together.

“When will you tell him?” asks Megan. “A plan like this needs a deadline.”

“Soon.”

“Do it today.”

“He’s working today,” I sniff, reaching for another tissue.

“Tomorrow then?”

“He might be out.”

“Stop making excuses.” Hattie rattles me gently and I wipe away my tears. “No more torturing yourself like this.”

“I will, I promise. I just need to figure out what I’m going to say.”

Chapter 35

Luke

TWO NIGHTS. THAT'S ALL it took for it to feel like Kara belonged here. Although that's not entirely true. Having her in my home felt right from that very first dinner, and now that she's gone the place is quiet without her.

My first day back at Sunshine was a usual busy Saturday, nothing I can't handle, but after the week I've had, it was exhausting being on my feet all day. I took a nap on the sofa when I got in, then spent the rest of the evening in bed reading Kara's latest book club pick and trying not to text her and tell her I can't stop thinking about her.

I know I'm going to have to tell her soon, but something is holding me back. Guilt, anxiety, fear. Some awful combination of all three.

I don't feel well rested, though my mood is getting better. I manage to eat a banana for breakfast, can't stomach much else, then grab my keys to take a drive over to see Granny Annie. It's only a thirty minutes to Ashden, back through the small town I grew up in, and into the driveway of one of the last houses before you're back onto country roads.

Heather's parents owned the house three doors down, but after she died, they sold up and moved to be closer to her sister and their grandkids in Wales. They still keep in touch, and I've been meaning to visit, but with lockdowns, and moving, and opening Sunshine, it's just not happened yet.

My lovely wee Granny is standing in the doorway with her pinny on, waiting for me to arrive. I greet her with a hug and she pats me on the arm as she sends me out the back door. This is our routine. A quick hi, a bye, and then a proper chat when I come back in from the meadow.

I walk down the garden path, realising with a sadness that my Granny might need a bit more help than she's been letting on. A lot of her plants have gone over, in need of deadheading and a good cut back. I'll try to do a bit before I go home today.

At the bottom of the garden, I open the little gate and head out into the meadow. As a kid, this was my playground. I spent hours running around here, making up games, building dens, peeing in bushes, only coming back to the house when I needed to wolf down a sandwich and a packet of crisps for lunch. When Mum had weekends off work, we'd spend hours out here on a blanket, reading books and playing games. She's often told me how guilty she felt that she wasn't here to take me to school or tuck me in every night, but those memories from our days in the sun make up for it.

The tall oak tree sits in a circle in the middle of the meadow. Once a mown path kept the route clear, but that was my job

and I've not been here for a while. Now it's overgrown and patchy, but I can still make my way through.

I take a seat in my usual spot at the base of the trunk. Our spot. A perfect little nook for two, where ancient roots have breached the soil.

"Hey, Sunshine," I say out loud.

Heather and I had our first kiss in this spot. It had been coming all summer long. We'd always spent school holidays dicking about together, exploring the woods, dragging cardboard boxes and bits of old wood out to the meadow and building a world of our own.

The summer we turned fourteen was different. We were almost adults, far too mature for anything that could be seen as childish. Awkward in our own skin, easily embarrassed. On school days, we struggled to balance not trying so hard we drew attention to ourselves with feeling like we mattered. It had always been easy when it was just us. There was no pressure to be anything else, but we spent that summer under the tree overthinking every moment, unable to find the language to express our feelings.

Heather had started to care more about her clothes and her appearance. She wore dresses and tight shorts now, not our regular tracksuit bottoms and t-shirts for climbing in. She'd bring a picnic blanket every day and we spent hours listening to music, one headphone each. At night I'd download music and burn mix CDs for us to listen to, carefully searching the lyrics to make sure there were enough hidden meanings to

confess my feelings for her. We'd lay on our backs perfectly still in the shadow of the tree, trying not to move in case the disc jumped. I was always aware when we were lying real close. If I moved, I might touch her, but I wasn't brave enough to find out if that would be a good or bad thing.

Sometimes we'd bring books and read quietly next to each other, or sometimes read sections out loud. She loved the power of words, and her passion for books was infectious. Sometimes she'd nab old romance novels from her mum's bookcase and we'd roll about laughing at mentions of *rods*, and *members*, and *glistening orbs*. It would make her laugh to know I'm reading romance again now.

We fantasised a lot. But the adventures we planned were less about our childhood missions to Mars, and more about the lives we hoped we'd live. We talked for hours about where we might go. The things we might see and do. Who we might meet on our travels. We talked about the people we hoped we'd become. We mapped it all out right there under the tree, making endless promises, never once saying the things we weren't saying.

It was always 'we'. There was never a doubt that we wouldn't experience it all together.

She taught me how to braid friendship bracelets, holding one end tight between our knees while our fingers tied knot after knot until intricate patterns appeared. Mine were shoddy as fuck, hers a work of art.

We spent that summer inching closer and closer together, and by the final week she was reading to me while I lay with my head in her lap. She'd stroke my hair and sometimes sing to me. Sometimes we'd hold hands while we listened to music, and at some point we'd started to hug goodbye when we went our separate ways for dinner.

One morning she arrived in a bad mood. I helped her set out the blanket but when I sat down she leaned against the tree and pouted with her arms crossed.

“What’s wrong?” I’d asked.

“Are you *ever* going to kiss me?” she’d huffed.

I stood to face her. I put my hands on her hips. She did the same to me and we bent at the waist and changed our lives. I immediately regretted that I hadn’t kissed her on day one of the summer holidays. How much time had we wasted being shy when we could have been snogging each other all day every day. It turned out snogging was everything.

In my head I see that day as a time-lapse movie. The tree in the centre of the frame, the sun climbing from through the morning haze to its apex, then lowering to the other side. And there, underneath it, we are a tangle of limbs that don’t separate until sunset.

We did the same the next day, and the day after that, and only in the morning the day after that because her Mum took her to buy new shoes. I remember they were shiny black and chunky and looked a bit daft at the end of her long skinny legs, but what did I know about shoes and fashion?

We turned up for the first day of Year 10, our wrists adorned with all the friendship bracelets we'd promised we'd never take off. By lunchtime we'd both been written up and told to leave them at home the next day. We acted like it was the biggest injustice in the world. It's funny now but back then we felt like Romeo and Juliet being torn apart. Young rebels in love, we wore one on our ankles, hidden under long socks and trousers. Our little secret. I still have them all in a box.

Sometimes I wish we'd buried her here, so I could lie on the ground and feel close to all of her. Instead we scattered her ashes. She's in the soil and the branches and in the breeze all around, always just out of my grasp. I stroke my fingers through the grass anyway.

"So I've met someone." My heart hurts so much when I say it out loud. In any other context this would be awful news to share with your wife. "I slept with her, Heather."

I slump over and start sobbing into my knees. "I'm so sorry." I need this cry so much. The kind of cry that feels horrible but necessary. I've got to get this off my chest.

"Her name is Kara," I keep going. "I met her in the cafe and I think you'd really like her."

I pick at the stitching on my shoe and the tears keep coming, tumbling out along with the feelings I've been keeping to myself for far too long. "I feel awful telling you though, Sunshine. I know I promised I'd move on, but it feels like such a betrayal. She's getting over a long relationship, and she's shit

scared too. I think she's afraid she'll get hurt again, and to be honest I'm terrified I'll hurt her. And I'm scared because—”

I can't believe I'm saying this. I can't believe I've not realised until now what a horrible secret I'm keeping. “I'm scared she'll die too.”

Tears come harder, I don't bother trying to stop. Deep, heaving sobs that pour out of my face and my chest leaving me breathless and snotty. I fish a tissue from my pocket, and the strangest thing happens. It starts to rain. All around me is transformed by the downpour, but here I stay dry under the canopy of the tree.

Probably it's not that strange at all. Probably I just didn't check the weather app and sudden showers were predicted. Probably I am in such a state of grief that I look for signs wherever I go. And this feels like one of those signs.

Since Heather died I've often felt strange things happen here. A leaf falling to the ground in the height of summer. A new flower that's never grown here before. A rustle of the branches on a still day. The things we might overlook if not desperate for proof that those we've lost are still with us, that we are seen and loved.

I choose to take it as a sign though. When Heather and I got into movies we always loved a rainy scene. *The Notebook* when Noah and Allie get caught in the rain on the rowboat and she finds out about his letters. Or *Garden State* when they climb on top of the old trucks and start screaming then kissing.

Every feeling intensifies in the rain. Anger comes out, fears are unleashed, sadness is washed away. Sitting here in this downpour I can't help but laugh as I am, what, cleansed? Reborn?

“I think you'd really like her, Sunshine,” I sniff. “She's an interior designer and she's obsessed with these romance novels that she's had me reading. Well not that she's forced me, I asked her for recommendations. I thought maybe she'd be someone to have a couple of dates with, get back in the water so to speak, but we've become friends. It's more than that for me though. I like having her in my life. I feel happy around her. She's kind of shown me that there are lots of different paths to love and I think it might be time for me to take this one a bit further. But I still miss you so, so much. It's bloody awful living without you, but I really hope you can hear me wherever you are, and that you're proud of me.”

I sit for ages, back against the bark. Our tree was here long before me. Long before Heather, before Heather and I were an *us*. And it will be here long after we've all gone. It's seen me at my happiest and it's seen me on days I didn't want to exist any more. And in the whole time it lives on this planet, I have to believe that it will see more happy days than sad ones.



When I open the back door I hear chatter in the kitchen, and I'd burst into tears if I hadn't cried them all out down in the

meadow. I walk through and see Rob sitting at the dinner table, my wee Granny listening to his news, one eyebrow permanently raised. He gets up and scoots around his chair to wrap me in a big hug. Granny must have called him when I went outside and given him orders to get over right away.

“Come and have some mince and tatties, boys.” I don’t know where she’s whipped this up from since I don’t remember smelling cooking when I arrived, but she’s always got food ready for us in a heartbeat. We take our seats and dig in as soon as she sets our bowls in front of us. She’s always happiest feeding people, and when I was a boy this table was always bustling with extra people, whether it was Rob, Heather and her sister, or some medical students my mum would send over for a good feed. It’s been years since my Grandad passed, but it makes me sad to think how many nights she must just be sitting here by herself now. I must come and see her more often. Even though I’ve sometimes avoided it, trying to outrun painful memories of being here with Heather, I know in my heart this has always been a house full of love.

The food is hot and restorative, and I can feel the tension in my chest easing off a little. This is the taste of my childhood, my teenage years, late nights sitting by the bed watching Heather sleep. We eat in comfy silence, and I’m grateful they wait until the food is done before speaking again.

“So how are things?” Rob asks, caution in his voice.

“They’re good man.” It’s a lie, and they all know it. “Sunshine is doing really well. House is fine. Can’t complain.”

“And what about with Kara?” I didn’t tell him how bad things were this week, when she had to look after me, but Granny knows. I told her I had to skip our Friday call and she was livid I hadn’t come home like last time. I hadn’t known how bad things were until I was too far under.

I let out a long, slow sigh that tells him all he needs to know. Granny clears our bowls away to the countertop and takes the seat next to mine while Rob gets up and runs a sink full of water for the dishes. I’m sitting with my head in my hands and she rubs my back slowly up and down, just like when I was a boy. “What is it that you want, darling?”

“I just want her.” My words catch in my throat. “She’s brilliant. I feel so happy when I’m with her, but...”

“But what?”

It sounds ridiculous to say it. “I can’t get past this feeling that I’m cheating. Betraying Heather somehow.” The words are heavy in my throat.

“Moving on doesn’t mean letting go, Luke. It means living in the now and not staying stuck in the past. You’re allowed to want to look to the future.”

“And you’re allowed to get your dick sucked,” Rob calls over from the sink, ducking his head when Granny throws her napkin at it.

“It could be worse my boy,” says my Granny with an elbow to my ribs. She jabs her thumb over her shoulder. “You could be like this one here, disgusting fella so he is.”

“I think Kara is terrified of being with someone and getting hurt, and *I’m* terrified of being with someone and getting hurt. But I just don’t think I can hurt any more than I do right now. She’s been on all these dating apps and every time she meets one of these guys I worry I’ve missed my shot. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but I want it to be me. Except I’m pretty sure she thinks I never want to date again.”

“Why would she think that?”

“She knows how much Heather meant to me. We’ve spoken about it a lot. I haven’t exactly been giving *I’m ready to date* vibes.”

“Oh, deary me.” Granny slinks back into her seat just as I push mine back from the table, suddenly feeling crowded in.

“I can’t keep going like this. I have to tell her how I feel.”

“Yeah, you do!” Rob cheers.

“Even if she doesn’t feel the same, at least it’s out there.”

“When are you gonna tell her?”

“Today. I’ll go round and see her when I get back.”

“Good lad,” says Rob, drying off his hands and wrapping his arms around me in the tightest squeeze, then lifting me out of the chair. “No time like the present, go and get in the car.”

Granny Annie gives me a big squeeze and helps me back into my coat, even though she has to reach up high to do it. She still does my zip up like I'm off to my first day at school. "And make sure you bring that lassie here soon so I can get a good look at her."

Chapter 36

Kara

IT'S A STRANGE SENSATION to be so clear-headed after months of confusion.

I want Luke. I have no idea how I'm going to tell him, or even if I'm going to get the response I want, but I know I have to tell him soon.

The words are going round in circles, so I throw on my trainers, hoping that the clarity of a run will mean I've got a plan by the time I get home.

The morning showers have come to an end and I gorge myself on that beautiful petrichor scent that drifts up and fills my nose. Thoughts come thick and fast as I pound the pavement down to the bottom of my street, rounding the corner towards the park I like to run laps in.

"Hi Luke, I know you told me you never want to be with anyone other than your wife, but is there any chance I can convince you otherwise?" *Bit formal.*

"I'm scared, but I don't want to be single anymore."
Pathetic.

“I can’t stop thinking about you. I want you so much. Please, please, please say you feel the same?” *Desperate.*

“Will you go out with me?” *Am I fourteen years old?*

“I think I love you.” *I’m going to cry.*

How do people do this in real life? It seems so much easier in books. How will I ever be able to tell him about my feelings when I can’t even explain them myself? Halfway around my route, I have the gut-wrenching realisation that Adam and I never spoke about our feelings. Surely we must have, but I wrack my brains and struggle to recall a single conversation where we sat down and talked about emotions.

He never told me how he was feeling, and I never told him. It seemed normal, we just weren’t a *feelings* kind of couple. Is it any wonder his departure blindsided me?

He was the love of my life, I would have sworn I knew him so well, but I also couldn’t tell you a single thought the man had in his head beyond what was happening at work, and what DIY project we’d be tackling next. Yes, we had our whole life planned out, but we were going down the most obvious, logical, predictable path without ever stopping to check if it’s what the other one wanted.

I’ve blamed myself for him leaving without me noticing we’d drifted apart, but how on earth would I have known? No clues, no change in his behaviour or attitude. I was never getting the whole of him in the first place. God, I should have paid for therapy when he left.

So we weren't a feelings couple, but I know *I* am a feelings kind of person. Oh boy, do I have a lot of feelings, and I want to be with someone who lets me embrace them all no matter how messy they are. I want to be with someone who I can talk to for hours and never get bored. And also someone I can sit quietly and read next to without being judged or interrupted. I want someone who is there through good and bad, and someone who makes me laugh. Someone who loves me as much as I love them and never gives me reason to doubt it.

I want Luke. I want everything about him. That's what I'll tell him.

My heart rate is returning to normal as I puff my way back up my road, mentally raiding my wardrobe and planning what I'll wear to see him. I open my garden gate, and there at the top of the path I see two figures sitting outside my front door. I nearly shit myself when they both stand up and talk over each other.

“Kara—”

“Kara—”

elle

Oh, fucking hell. Kill me now.

Luke is here.

And so is Adam.

I can't believe it. It's the first time I've seen him since he walked out on me and my heart gallops into my throat at the same time as my stomach drops. I want to cry and scream and throw up all at once. I feel wobbly, hot from my run, but covered in goosebumps as I rapidly cool down.

Adam leans against the door with his arms folded across his chest. I'm smacked with a vision of him at seventeen, gorgeous in his untucked school shirt. Twenty-three, fit and topless painting our bedroom walls. Twenty-five, so handsome at his surprise birthday dinner. And now, he's not that man at all. It takes me a second to realise I'm not even attracted to him anymore.

I don't know how long I stand there, but when I look over and see Luke's face I want to rush to him, to cover him with my body and shield him from Adam. Not because I think Adam will do anything, but because I don't want his gross negative energy anywhere near the kindest man I've ever known.

"Who's this, Kara?" Adam asks, jabbing his thumb in Luke's direction while his eyes stay trained on me.

Why do I feel like I've done something wrong? This is a place where I've survived, no, *thrived* on my own without him. This is my house, my life, and it makes me sick to see him standing in front of it. They both start talking at the same time again, but my head is spinning and I can't hear them, or hear myself think.

“Both of you sit down,” I hiss, worried the neighbours will be dining out on this for weeks if they catch a commotion. They do as they’re told, squashing up against each other on the little bench outside my door. Adam does his best manspreading and Luke scoots up as far as he can.

I turn away from them, lift my head to the sky for a deep breath and it’s only when I turn back that I clock Adam’s old gym bag sitting on the doormat. *Oh, christ.*

“Luke. Are you OK?”

“Yeah. Um,” he rubs at the back of his neck and gives Adam the side-eye. “I just wanted to talk to you about something.”

Oh God, this is terrible timing but I’m so happy to see him. I just wasn’t expecting to see him *yet*, I wanted to shower and eat something so I don’t feel nervous and then practice what I want to say a hundred times. I absolutely did not want to confess my feelings for him all sweaty on my doorstep in front of my dickhead ex-boyfriend.

“Adam, why are you here?” I ask, pacing side to side in front of them.

“We need to talk. And my key doesn’t work. Did you change the locks or something?”

“Yes,” I scoff. “You moved out a year ago. Did you think you were just going to let yourself in?”

“It’s still my house.” *Fuck.* I knew in my gut this would happen sometime. By all accounts, it is still his house. Yes,

I've changed the locks, but I was never exactly sure of the legalities, and the last thing I want is to cause a row out here in the garden. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Luke ball his fists.

He's back. The absolute bastard for making me deal with him right now. I kick Adam's bag to one side and fish my key out of the tiny awkward pocket in my running leggings. I blink a thousand times to stop the tears from coming. When I unlock the door, they both stand.

"Right, Adam, go inside. I'll be in in a minute." I'm absolutely mortified when he throws a smug grin Luke's way. God knows what went down before I arrived. How long were they both waiting here for me?

Luke looks crestfallen, and his face makes me hurt in my chest. "I see. OK." He sighs, puts his hands in his pockets and makes off down the path.

"Luke, wait," I call, and chase after him, glancing back at Adam, who's already off somewhere inside the house. "Why are you here? Was there something you wanted?"

I watch his face contort before me, his lips opening and closing while he stares at the ground. I dip my head a little, trying to make him look at me. "Just say it."

No words come, and I feel a lump growing in my throat so I stand up tall, pulling my shoulders back and look up at the sky. I'm so sick of crying in front of him. He wouldn't normally just pop round and see me unannounced, there must have been a reason he is here.

“Say what you’re thinking right now, Luke.” He pulls me into a hug, and my arms instinctively wrap around him, too. It’s a warm, tight, loving hug that I never want to end, but too soon he pulls away, his fingertips circling my wrists as he sets my arms back down by my sides.

“You think he still has your heart,” he whispers. “But he doesn’t.”

I take a step back, folding my arms across my chest and holding my breath for whatever comes next.

“Look at you. You’re all tense, your voice is sad, you look like you’re going to cry. I don’t know why you’ve invited him in.”

I don’t know either. “It’s complicated.”

“Kara, listen,” he swallows thickly. “I came here to talk about *us*. And nothing about us is complicated. Being around you is the most natural, uncomplicated thing. My wife dying is complicated. Moving somewhere new and building a new life is complicated. Starting a business on your own is complicated. Sorry, I know you know that one—”

“Shut up. I can’t think.” *Us. Us.* “You’ve said complicated so many times now it doesn’t feel like an actual word. Complicated. *Com.plic.a.ted.* What are you really saying?”

“Look, there’s a lot I want to say to you, but not while your ex is making himself at home again.”

“What do you mean?”

He lets out a long, slow breath and rolls his lips between his teeth. “I just want you to know that if you think you have to choose, choose uncomplicated.”

My jaw is on the floor, my eyes searching his, when I hear Adam call from just beyond the door.

“Babe?”

I turn towards his voice. “Yeah?” I sound different. This silly voice I used to use with him is not my own.

“You coming in? You’re letting all the heat out.” I’d forgotten his stupid obsession with the heating. It’s not even fucking on.

I roll my eyes and turn back to tell Luke I don’t want him to leave, but he’s already pulling his car door closed and turning on the engine.

Chapter 37

Luke

THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING. This can't be happening.

I don't know what to do. How can I have been so close to telling her how I feel, to asking her to give me a chance, and then that dickhead rocks up assuming he can just walk back into her life. Surely she can't still feel the same way about him.

I shouldn't have left. I should have stayed, walked in with her, told him to get fucked, but this is Kara. She's strong willed, even if she doesn't think so, and she needs to make her own decisions. She needs to want this as much as I do. And I want it so damn much.

I try to keep myself busy. Cleaning the kitchen, plumping the sofa cushions, dusting my bookcase. Anything to distract myself from the twisted knot in my stomach. The thought of her alone with him, talking things through, making up, getting back together again, kissing. Fuck, it's torture. I might actually be sick.

She can't take him back, she just can't. Not after the way he treated her, the way she's had to pick up her life without him.

She's doing so good, she said it herself. I have to do something.

Think Luke, fucking think!

What would a Book Boyfriend do?

Flowers, chocolates, gifts, they're not enough to convey how I feel.

A billionaire romance hero would send a car, take her to a private jet, whisk her away to some fancy dinner for two on a tiny island where he confesses his love.

Aiden in *Got Wood?* would just turn up, knock the door down and haul her into his arms and off to his bed.

One of those Ice Hockey bros she's got it bad for would win a game and get down on one knee in the middle of the ice for her. I've never skated in my life. How quickly can I learn?

I need a big, bold gesture, and fast. Can I buy her a wall, a cabin by a lake, an art studio? No, these things wouldn't mean anything to her.

I can't rope in her friends. No more meddling, she was clear about that.

I look at my bookshelf, the row of novels that have stacked up in the weeks since I've known her. She loves these books. She loves these men. She loves their spice, but more than anything she loves it when they have a way with words.

I pick up a pen and paper and start writing.

Chapter 38

Kara

“CHOOSE UNCOMPLICATED.” Luke’s words run through my head to the beat of my heart, but I snap out of it when I see Adam’s shoes kicked off and abandoned in the middle of the floor like a fucking teenager. Glancing along the hallway, I can see him through the living room door having a good look around the place. I slam the door behind me, put my own shoes in the shoe rack, grab a hoodie from the end of the bannister and walk through the living room to the kitchen.

Before I even realise what I’m doing, I flick the kettle on to make him a cup of tea. It’s only when I reach for his favourite mug I remember it’s not even there. The asshole took it with him. Imagine leaving your girlfriend of twelve years and having the forethought to take your mug with you. For such a long time I believed it was a sudden, irrational decision he’d made, and now I’m reminded, as I am now and then, that he planned to leave me for quite some time.

I steel myself, shoulders back, head high, and take his tea through to the coffee table in front of him. The coffee table

I've put my life back together around every Friday night for the past year.

"Didn't know you got a new sofa." *No shit, how would you?*
"I love what you've done with the place." This pisses me off. I don't want his eyes on my stuff and I especially don't want him to enjoy what I've done for myself. "So who's the guy?"

"My friend Luke."

"Boyfriend is he?" A mix of shame and fury sets a fire in my throat and I want to scream *'Yes! Yes, he is my boyfriend!'* but he's not. Not yet.

"What do you want, Adam?"

"Come and have a seat here, babe," he says, patting the sofa next to him. My stomach churns. How many times have I wanted him to come home to me, to snuggle up on the sofa and go back to normal. Now he's here and I don't want him at all. I sit down in the armchair and lean forward, steadying myself with my hands on my knees. I can feel myself wobbling. Post run crash? Adam anxiety? *Choose uncomplicated?*

"Why are you here?"

He mirrors my body language, leaning forward and rubbing his palms back and forth. "I want to come home."

"HA!" I clap my hand over my mouth, shocked at how loud that laugh came out of me.

"What's so funny?"

I stand and start pacing. “Why? Why do you want to come back, Adam?”

“I made a mistake, I shouldn’t have left.”

“Why did you leave?”

There’s a long pause before he deigns to give me anything. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Try Adam. You left me in fucking limbo, not sure where you were, if you were coming back, what’s going to happen with the house.”

“I’m back now, babe, that’s what I’m saying.”

“I’ve spent a year trying to figure out what happened, when your feelings changed, how I could have been such an idiot to not see it was coming. You haven’t once thought of a way to explain yourself?”

He doesn’t speak, he just stares into the middle of the room, a little boy getting told off.

“Where’ve you been?”

“What?”

“You walked out of here, *a year ago*, and told me you’d met someone else. I haven’t even heard from you since, so where have you been?”

“In a flat in St Albans, I got a job over there.” He’s a moody little shit, begrudging me the answers I deserve so much.

“With who?” He hangs his head. Too bloody right, he should feel ashamed. “With who, Adam?”

“Jen.”

“Ah! So that *is* her name.” I’m absolutely fuming now. “It’s a funny thing when your boyfriend of *twelve years* leaves you for someone else and doesn’t even tell you where he’s gone or who he left you for. I found out her name from your mum, who was so embarrassed she stopped talking to me. She was like a second mum to me, that broke my heart even more. When did it start?”

That’s the thing I’ve been most desperate to know. I burn him with my glare until he answers. “Last April.”

“So...” I quickly do the maths. “Five months before you left? You cheated on me for five months?” My chest feels tight, I can hardly see straight, I have to lean against the doorframe and he has the fucking nerve to just sit there staring at the floor. “It just happened, my arse. It just happened is what you say when a pan of pasta boils over, not when you’ve put your dick in someone for five months, quietly packed all your shit, and then walked out on your girlfriend while she’s serving up your fucking dinner.”

“She said she’d get me fired if I didn’t leave you.”

“What?” I almost feel sorry for him, but I catch that feeling fast and mentally bat it away. We do not feel sorry for liars and cheats in this house.

“She threatened me. I had no choice.”

“You had a choice to not cheat on me. And then you lost your job, anyway, am I right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you realise how pathetic this sounds?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” Jesus, he is such a twat.

“Adam, I know you’ve split up with her. I saw you on Tinder. Unless you’re cheating on her, too?”

“I ended it. I realised I shouldn’t have left you.”

“You finally realised that after a year, did you? That doesn’t really explain the whole online dating thing, does it? You think you can just walk back in here and act like nothing happened? Like nothing has changed.” He scoffs, looking cocky and dismissive, and I just stand there, heart pounding, face fuming.

“Wait, what are *you* doing on Tinder?” he laughs.

“What?” It’s far from funny. I know what he really means. Who would want me? “Was I supposed to just sit around here waiting for you to come back? Do you really think I’m that much of a doormat? Actually, don’t answer that, because I probably was that much of a doormat when you left. But you’re not the same person I fell in love with, Adam. And I’m not the same person you left.” I’m Wonder Woman now, standing with my hands on my hips, taking up space in my own bloody house that he is nothing but a stain on. “I don’t want you back. You can’t come back.”

“You’re forgetting something, babe.” I used to love that nickname. Now it makes me want to punch him in the face and throw him off a bridge. “This is my house, too.”

Even though I knew this moment would come, it's a slap in the face. I remember something Megan taught me a while ago and take a slow deep breath to avoid screaming. I've got to get this next bit right without crumbling into hysterics.

"Adam. You haven't paid a penny of the mortgage since you left. I've paid all the bills myself."

"My name is still on the deeds." *There we go.* A dick move from a dick guy.

"I'll buy you out." He lifts his head and I realise that for the first time since he got here, he's actually looking at me. I've put every penny from my Instagram income in savings since he left and thank God. "I don't want to talk about this right now, but I'll call the solicitor on Monday and speak to you through them. I've got the money, I'll buy your half."

He's genuinely speechless.

"Look, it's time for you to go." I motion for him to get up and he stands and walks out of the room, which tells me everything I need to know. He didn't really want to come back. He doesn't really want me. He just hasn't got anywhere else to go.

I follow him through to the front door, where he's pulling his shoes back on. When he opens the door to leave, I take a deep breath, summoning the strength to say my final piece.

"Adam."

"Yeah," he pauses, half in, half out of my house, my life.

"You haven't even said sorry."

“What?”

“The actual words ‘*I am sorry*’ have never come out of your mouth, not even once. I am sorry for cheating on you. I’m sorry for breaking your heart. I’m sorry for leaving you alone. It’s like you never even cared about me.”

He stares at the floor. Even when I’m asking for it, he still can’t even say it.

“If you’d come back six months ago, maybe even three months ago, you’d have found me so sad and pathetic I probably would have taken you back. You were the only person who’d ever had my heart, and you smashed it to pieces, and I still loved you even despite that. But I’ve recently realised I deserve so much better than you.”

“What changed?”

“I met Luke.” And with that, I close the door in his face.

I expect to burst into tears. Heavy and shaky, months of tension pulling my body down as I flop onto the sofa and wait for tears to come. Except the sofa is warm, and I realise my face is in the same spot where Adam just had his bum. Repulsed, I leap up and the only sound is laughter. I roll with it, letting my feelings escape my body faster than I can process them. From the kitchen I hear the radio playing some song about being free and I consider it a gift from the universe.

I turn it up and start swaying to the music, closing my eyes and shaking my limbs loose. The lyrics transform me. I skip and jump and punch the air and scream along with the words,

neighbours be damned. When the song ends, I collapse to the floor, sweaty and breathless, my hair sticking to my face and my neck.

But I feel great, so fucking great. And also gross. I need to freshen up and pull myself together. This is the first day of the rest of my life and I've got somewhere very important to be.

Chapter 39

Kara

“KARA, WHAT ARE YOU doing here?”

“Can I come in, please?” Asking is pointless, I’m already stepping inside and tucking my shoes away. “I owe you an apology and you’re going to have to bear with me because I’m losing my mind about it.”

I walk through the kitchen, stopping in the middle of his living room. “I know, I know, yet another apology. I seem to spend half my life apologising to you.”

“Kara, I need to say something first.”

“No, please—”

“Sit down. I’ve got a whole speech written.”

My head whips up. *A speech! For me?* “You have?”

“Yes, and I can’t keep this from you any longer, because I’m losing my mind about it too.” His warm hands squeeze my shoulders and he walks me backwards until my calves hit the edge of his sofa. There go the flutters in my belly again.

I pull my feet up, cross my legs, and watch him lift a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. He pushes his fingers back through his hair and coughs to clear his throat, his eyes locked on mine. My heart softens under that look and I see it all, everything that's about to unfold, without a single word spoken.

"You ready?" he asks, and he's so damn cute I want to leap into his arms. I bite my lip and nod.

"Kara—" he smiles so wide. It may be the best smile I've ever seen, and I'm powerless to do anything except smile right back. We pass a good thirty seconds just grinning at each other.

"Is that it?"

"Sorry, you just look right at home there." He shifts from one foot to the other and I realise he's as nervous as I am.

"OK, here goes. Kara, You walked into my life four months ago and made everything better. I know Adam broke your heart, and I know you wanted him to come back, but I don't think you want that anymore. And I get it, I know it must feel weird to be with someone who's been married and still would be if life hadn't dealt him a shitty hand. This would all be so easy if it was a book, but this isn't a book, this is real life. I know things feel complicated, but I'm right here and, complicated or uncomplicated, I want to be with you. As more than just friends, just to be clear."

My heart. It just can't be possible that it will fit in my chest any longer. It's beating so fast and ready to explode.

“I don’t presume to know what you want, but I know you love a Book Boyfriend. So I’m telling you right now, I’ll be any Book Boyfriend you want me to be. I’ll be Aiden from *Got Wood?* I’ll be Jason in *Dealbreaker*. I’ll learn to skate and be one of your *Ice Kings*. I’ll be Toby, I’ll be Anders, I’ll be Jameson. I’d say I’ll be Marco in *Ten Night Stand*, but I’m going to need a hell of a lot more than ten nights with you. And you already know I make a good Matthew Braverman.”

A telling smile is written all over his face. He’s not even looking at the paper. He knows every word of this speech because it’s from his heart. Mine is swelling as he spills his words out for me.

“That night on the sofa,” he continues, “I’ve replayed it so many times. You told me your favourite Book Boyfriend is Matthew, because even though he might seem like her enemy, he’s always looking out for Briony’s best interests. Well, I’ve been besotted with you since the day we met. After that first night here I was worried I’d rushed you and I didn’t want to add any stress to your life or make you feel like you had to do anything. But I can’t keep my feelings from you any longer. All I’ve wanted this whole time is what’s best for you because you deserve the world, Kara. And I wouldn’t be looking out for your best interests if I let you get back together with... *him.*”

Besotted! Luke is besotted!

My blood is roaring in my ears. It takes everything in my power not to roll back onto the sofa and kick my legs up and

down in the air like a kid on their birthday, because that's how I feel right now. He doesn't need to say all of this. I already know it, and I've felt it for ages, but I let him keep going because this is the most Book Boyfriend thing that has ever happened to me. Apart from the coffee shop meet-cute. And the night on the sofa. And all the making eyes at each other across Book Club, the reading weekend, and the fake dating birthday dinner. Everything about Luke is pure Book Boyfriend.

“The night of your birthday. I wasn't faking. I know I was pretending to be Matthew, but I wanted everything that happened that night so much. Then you told me you were going on a date and it crushed me. I just wanted you to stay for the rest of the day, all weekend, forever really. I wish I could support you dating, but I can't bear to see you meet shitty guy after shitty guy and lower your standards because—”

“Luke, stop,” I cut him off.

“Please, just let me finish.”

“No, stop. I need to tell you something right now.” Standing up, I step closer to him, take both his hands in mine and get ready to change our lives.

Chapter 40

Luke

HER HANDS WRAP AROUND mine and it's only then I realise how much I am shaking.

“Luke. I know things were really confusing back there, so I just need to clear things up,” she tries to swallow but her throat is croaky. “Actually, could I please have some water?”

I rush across to the sink to get her glass and sit her back down again, taking my spot on the other section of the sofa. She downs it, places the glass on the table, and takes a deep breath.

“I was coming to see you. I was running home to shower and come straight here. You know that often infuriating but essential moment in my books where it seems like all hope is lost? I didn't want that for us. I got home yesterday and wanted to come straight back, even if you were at work, I just wanted to be here. The last few days with you, I know they've been strange, but they felt good to me, and I thought maybe they did to you, too. But then I went to delete my dating apps and I saw Adam on there and it sent me into a spin, so I needed to get that out of my system.

“I promise you Luke, I was coming to see you today, but then he turned up out of nowhere and I thought, well this is too on the nose, the villain returning for the third act. I know it looked bad, but I let Adam in because I needed some answers. Yes, it’s taken me a long time to get over him, but I can see now that’s only because I was left with loads of loose ends.”

I nod along with what she’s saying, and she shuffles closer towards me.

“But the truth is, there is nothing he could have said that would make me take him back. The only thing I felt was pissed off. It turns out I didn’t know him very well at all. He’d been sleeping with her for months before he left. Apparently she’d threatened to get him fired if he didn’t leave me, which doesn’t exactly seem like a great foundation for a relationship, but honestly, none of that matters.” I watch her face closely in case she’s about to cry, but all that’s written on it is bewilderment. “I’ve also been terrified that he might sue me for the house or something, and I needed to tread carefully, but that’s sorted now I think. Or at least it will be.”

She lifts my hands to her mouth, pressing a kiss into my knuckles while she catches her breath.

“What Adam did completely messed with my head. I didn’t know what I wanted, I didn’t know who I was, I felt like I couldn’t trust myself or anyone else. Twelve years is a long time to be with someone, but I think you know me better after twelve weeks than he did after twelve years. Your speech was beautiful, but you’ve got me all wrong.” She scoots closer

again, angling her body to face mine, and our knees press together. There's a lump in my throat when she strokes her fingertips across my cheeks and holds my face in her hands. For a while back there, I was panicking I'd never get to feel her touch again. "I don't want Matthew Braverman. And I don't want Jason or Aiden or Toby or Marco. I don't want any of those guys, and I definitely don't want Adam."

"What are you saying?" I whisper.

Her eyes lock with mine, searching. "I want you, Luke."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. Only you." She rests her hands on my chest and I cover them with mine. "I'm so sorry you thought all was lost. It's not lost. Adam is my past. I'm ready for the future."

"A future with me?" I croak out. I think I'm going to cry.

"Yes, with you." Kara plants the tiniest of reassuring kisses on my cheek. "And also with Matthew Braverman's best friend Alex because there's a sequel coming out soon and I should give you fair warning because he is *hot*."

"That seems reasonable." I laugh. She always knows how to break the tension. "I know I might not live up to your Book Boyfriend standards but—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she shakes my shoulders. "You've been Book Boyfriending me ever since the day we met. You sidled up to a stranger in a cafe to ask me about books, you gave me the push I needed to run a book club, you've cooked for me, you initiated a very steamy sofa Q&A

which will forever be one of the hottest things that has ever happened to me, you came antiquing, you set up a fake date for my birthday, you looked after me when I was drunk and never once took advantage, you've listened to me, you've held me, you've been—" she stops herself, pausing for a deep breath and to straighten up and face me. "You've been everything to me these past few months. You're the best Book Boyfriend, but I want a real one."

"I volunteer as tribute," I laugh.

There it is. Her beautiful, brilliant, incredible smile. I lean in to kiss her, but she pulls away a little.

"I'm sorry, I have a bit more I need to say." She curls inward, a shade less bright, more cautious as she presses her hand to my chest to give herself a little distance. "It sounds silly, but I just need you to know that I've been feeling really afraid. I think I'm afraid to be with another person because, truthfully, I don't know how. I don't know how to be with someone who isn't him, and I'm terrified I'll get things wrong because I know not all men are the same. You're nothing like him, but I want you to know what you're dealing with here. I want to be with you so much, but I'm afraid you'll leave without warning. I'll probably always be panicking that you'll leave."

He's broken her so badly, but it will be the honour of my life to spend every day showing her just how much I want to be with her. I take her hands and hold them tight, my thumbs caressing her skin as I keep them pinned to my heart.

“I am not him, Kara. I would never end things without telling you. I would never end things full stop. And you know what, I’m afraid too—” I let go of her hands and she leaves them there while I tuck her hair behind her ears. I sweep my thumb across her jawline and nudge her chin up so there’s no avoiding what I say next. This is the most vulnerable I’ve been with her, but I need to say it, and I need her to hear it.

“I’m afraid to be with you in case I fall in love with you and you die.” Now we both look like we’re going to cry. “I’ll always be panicking that something bad will happen to you. But guess what? I went ahead and fell in love with you anyway, and I’m still worried. When you go to meet a client, when you cross a road, when you leave a room, I’m worried. I can’t help it.”

“You’re in love with me?” she says with a soft gasp, tears threatening to spill over her lash line. I nod and slip my fingers behind her knees, pulling her into my lap.

“I have been for a while, I think. I know it’s fast, and I don’t expect you to be on the same page, but there’s no way I can deny how I feel.” I lean my forehead against hers and wrap my arms around her waist. “Don’t cry, sweetheart. If we’re both afraid, let’s be afraid together.”

Uh-oh. That really has sent her over the edge. I wipe her tears away with the pads of my fingers.

“I honestly didn’t think I’d be able to love someone else until I met you. I thought maybe you get a set amount of love in your life and I’d given all mine to Heather. But you brought

the love with you the moment you sat down in my cafe and started reading.” I cradle her face in my hands, tilting it up towards mine. “I adore you. I miss you when I’m not with you, but I also miss you when I *am* with you because I feel like I’ve had this tiny taste of what it would be like to be yours and we just dance around it. You’re always just out of reach.”

Our mouths are millimetres apart, the whisper of her breath warms my lips. “I’ve been miserable every minute I’ve not been with you. All those times you said you were going on a date. All those times you apologised for crossing the line, and insisted we just be friends. Miserable. I’m begging you, Kara, please, put me out of my misery.”

Chapter 41

Kara

HE'S IN LOVE WITH me.

And I'm in love with him. Even though I don't say it back, I know I am, and that I will say it soon. So I close the gap, catch his lower lip between mine and I kiss him, and kiss him, and kiss him, and I don't know what planet I'm on, but it's not this one. His hands reach around my back and pull me tight to him as our mouths crash together.

I've been aching for this for what feels like a lifetime and I know it's the same for him from the way his tongue searches mine. Pressed to his chest, my body lights up when he slides his fingers through my hair, cups the back of my head and lifts me off of his lap. He sets me down in the corner of the sofa, and his thighs scorch mine when he straddles me and tugs my head back to kiss my neck.

“That night you touched yourself here, I wanted to climb over and do this so much,” he whispers against my earlobe. An aching sob escapes my throat and his lips find mine. I fist his t-shirt with one hand, pulling him closer, as the other tangles in his hair.

Eventually we come up for air, breaking our kiss but clinging on as though we both believe that if we let go, it will somehow not be real.

“Hi,” I whisper, cheeks flushed, breath ragged.

“Hi.” It’s as if we’re meeting each other again for the first time, our fears cast aside. He pushes my hair back from my face and I bask in the feeling of him looking at me, roaming my jawline, my eyes, my lips.

“What now?”

“I hadn’t thought beyond the speech, to be honest.” He climbs off me and flops back on the sofa by my side. Silence hangs over us for a bit until I glance sideways and catch him doing the same, with a matching beaming grin.

“Have you eaten?” he asks, taking my hand and pressing it to his lips.

“No, actually, I was going to make something when I got back from my run and then... that all happened.”

“I have an idea.”

“Please say it’s one of your ideas where we end up naked?”

“Behave yourself,” he says, planting the most delicious kiss on my neck, the kind that makes me want to do the exact opposite. “How about we take a walk over to your house, and pick up sandwiches on the way.” A walk has never sounded so horny.

“Hmmm, I definitely thought we were about to have sex there for a minute.”

“Oh, don’t worry, we will, but today is the first day of the rest of our lives and I’m going to need a little time to get myself under control.”

“What happens when you lose control?” I nibble his earlobe and his little growly whimper is somehow both adorable and arousing all at once.

“Oh you’ll find out,” he smirks, standing up and turning away to adjust himself. “Come on, let’s go get you fed. I’ll hold your hand the whole way.”

“Might make eating awkward.”

“OK smartass, I’ll hold your hand as much as is feasibly possible. Then when we get to yours you can pack a bag of overnight things, and we can drive back here and spend the rest of the day reading on the sofa. I’ll rustle up something for dinner, and then you can stay over.”

“That sounds like a perfect day. Can we read naked? Like when Ana and Ned go on honeymoon in *I Do, I Don’t?*”

“You’re welcome to try, but I can tell you now that I will not manage a single page if I’m in the same room as you without clothes on. Maybe not even a sentence.”

I laugh when he slips his fingers into mine, tugging me up from the sofa. “Challenge accepted.”



I am out in the street, my hand in Luke's, and it feels like the most normal thing in the world. The number of times I've wanted to touch him in public or pulled away when I've reached for him, it should feel shocking to be finally walking down the street hand in hand. It's not shocking, it's perfect. It's right.

"Have I ever told you it took at least fifteen minutes for me to get the courage to come and talk to you?"

"Really?" I laugh. "It took you that long to come up with *'what are you reading?'*"

"You remember?"

"Of course I remember."

He doesn't let go when we walk into Sunshine. I feel zero hesitation, but still appreciate the reassuring way he squeezes my hand. Nope, no hesitation here. I feel like his pride and joy. Katy clocks us from where she's pouring steamed milk into a latte and kicks her leg out to nudge Jo, who looks up at us both. Her face lights up and she starts quietly clapping from behind the till.

He doesn't let go at my house either, squeezing tight while he kicks off his shoes. He shrugs one arm out of his jacket and then swaps the hand in mine for his other so he can slide it off his shoulder without ever breaking contact. It lands on the floor, and he stoops to pick it up, his thumb stroking my skin

in slow circles. I'm about ready to faint from swooning, it's the best foreplay ever.

I lead him up to my room and pull him down to lie with me. I can't stop smiling and we take it slow, staring at each other, kissing gently, stroking each other's faces like we can't believe this is really happening.

"How many Book Boyfriends have you had in this bed?" he whispers.

"Oh, hundreds."

"And how many nights have you thought about me?"

"A few," I tease.

"Only a few?" He nips at my hip, a perfect excuse to tug up my top and sneak his hand underneath. Warm fingers slip over my skin, kneading, scratching, smoothing.

"Maybe a few hundred."

"I haven't even known you that many days."

"Oh, but I'm in bed multiple times a day, Luke." I roll onto my back and count them off on my fingers. "Early evening, late evening, middle of the night, first thing in the morning. I'm quite a fan of a mid-afternoon nap."

"I can't tell whether you're confessing that you're incredibly lazy or incredibly filthy."

"Definitely both."

"What have you thought about me?" he asks, his thumb sweeping over my lips.

I laugh, a bashful red creeping up my neck. “So much, I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“OK, tell me later. If you tell me now, we might never make it back to mine.” He grips the crook of my knee, lifting it over his hip before rolling himself over me. His knees nudge my thighs apart with barely any effort, and I want to remember this moment forever. The light from the window, the scent of him so close, his thumbs caressing the soft skin of my wrists as he pins them either side of my head. My pulse thrums under his touch.

“You look good like this.”

My feet instinctively hook around his back. I lift my hips to press against him, but he sits up and grips the sides of my waist, pushing me down into the mattress.

“Nope.”

“Why not?” I whine. I’m so needy for this man.

“I want you in my bed.” He climbs off of me and off the bed entirely. “Get packing so I can take you home.”

I fist my duvet and thrash about. “But I can’t think straight.”

“Book, hairbrush, underwear, change of clothes. Bring pyjamas. Or don’t. You won’t be wearing them tonight.”

“I won’t?”

“Definitely not. But bring spare stuff so you’ll always have things at mine.”

Chapter 42

Kara

I'M PINNED TO THE wall in Luke's hallway where he is devouring me with a room spinning, spine melting, back arching, tippy-toes kiss. We've been here since we got in the door, his hands spread across my lower back, my fingers in his hair. I whimper when he skims up my sides to cup my breasts through my shirt, my nipples aching and sensitive to his touch. I want him so much, I want him uninhibited, I want him now.

"I've been dreaming about kissing you here." He groans, pressing his mouth just below my earlobe.

"And here." Another where my jaw meets my neck.

"And here." A lick at the hollow of my throat. I could live for weeks on any single one of these kisses.

"I want our first time together to be—"

"Um—" I press my hand to his chest and push him away from me, my face searching his. "I don't want to sound like a brat, but we've already had sex. Did you forget? Because I didn't. I thought it was pretty unforgettable, actually."

I wish I could take a photo of the way he bites his lip when he smiles. “No, I didn’t forget.” He smooths my hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ears. “But that night you were happy to pretend I was Matthew, and this time I want you to know this is all me.”

“I knew it was you. Of course I knew it was you.” I unzip his hoodie and slide my hands underneath his soft grey t-shirt. Reading books is the furthest thing from my mind, I just want to spend the rest of today touching him everywhere, so it’s torture when he removes my hands and places them at my sides.

“Luke! Why won’t you let me touch you?” I stamp my foot and he laughs but still doesn’t give me what I want.

He plants a little kiss on top of my head and then walks away, through to the kitchen. “I want to savour every bit of today.”

I rush after him, impatient, not wanting to be more than a few inches away from him after so long keeping my distance. I don’t know how he can be so calm and patient about what I have been lying awake at night dreaming about. I follow him around the kitchen island and hug him from behind as he fills two glasses of water.

“Listen, this isn’t a one time thing. We can do it now, and we can do it again later on tonight. We can do it tomorrow, we can do it every day if you like, but right now I am done with savouring.” He moves further away from me but I can tell he’s enjoying it, so I keep going, shoving my fingers into his

waistband and pulling him back towards me. He lets out a high-pitched squeal that sends us both into fits of laughter while he wriggles out of my grasp. “I’m not too proud to beg, Luke. I’ve waited long enough, I need your tongue in my mouth and your hands—”

Then I get my wish. He turns abruptly and I crash into him, completely at his mercy, when his hands weave into my hair and pull my head back, his tongue coaxing mine into a desperate battle.

I forget my name when I dive into the deep end of him, lost in his taste, hands roaming everywhere I can get a hold of when he nudges me up to the edge of his dining table and suddenly pulls away.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I plead, throwing my head back in frustration. “Why are you stopping?”

“So I can see you like this.” He cups my face in his hands and plants a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth. “And so I can start kissing you again. There’s nothing hotter than the sight of you waiting to be kissed. Look at you, so needy and desperate for me.”

His words make me shake. Will I ever stop feeling drunk when his eyes meet mine? Those beautiful freckles in his iris will be the death of me. He tugs my shirt out of the waistband of my jeans and takes his time with the buttons, but his need overtakes his patience and he drags the whole thing up over my head, throwing it to the floor. Palms on the table, I lean back and let him take me in, the agony on his face letting me

know I made the right choice with my dark green lace underwear.

“Take this off,” he barks, but his reaction makes me feel so naughty, I want to see how far I can push his temptation. I arch my back and shimmy my shoulders, pushing my breasts higher towards him.

“If it makes you look at me like that, I think I’ll keep it on.” I press a finger to his lips, coaxing them apart until he lets me slide between them and over his slick tongue. His hands ball into fists against my hips when I slowly trace the wetness down my neck, slipping my finger under the thin fabric and rolling it around my tight nipple.

I sit further up, the promise of a gentle kiss turning into a bite at his throat that makes him growl. He snaps up straight and pulls me off the edge of the table to the floor. Hands on my waist, he spins me around and bends me over in one swift movement. Breath rushes from my lungs when he presses me to the table, one big hand spread between my shoulder blades.

“For that, I’m going to make you wait even longer. I’ve waited months, tortured myself at night thinking about having you bent over my table like this. Now it’s your turn to ache for me.”

“Oh *trust* me, I’ve been aching. I’m desperate to feel how turned on you are. Show me.”

He drives his hips up against me, fast and firm. The thick ridge of him is sublime even through my jeans. Thank God for bones, every part of me is jelly right now. He unhooks my bra,

slowly sliding the straps off my shoulders, then yanks it roughly from underneath me. He reaches around my waist to undo my button and zipper, and drags my jeans to the floor, taking my underwear with them. How is this man so capable of always doing everything I want, everything I *need*, without me even telling him what to do?

Last time, the first time, the Matthew time, I was so caught up in the moment of how hot he was that afterwards I wished I'd paid more attention to how he felt. The softness of his skin, the stretch as he filled me. This time I'm 100% here, lapping up every sensation, tattooing it into my brain.

Running his hands up the back of my thighs, I'm wrecked by the tight hiss he makes when his fingers meet silky skin. "Oh, you're so wet for me. Good girl."

Oh Jesus. My drunken, lust-filled confession about my dining table fantasy. He remembers. Multiple Book Boyfriends have unlocked a praise kink buried within me and I could come just hearing him call me a good girl.

His fingertips work slow circles over me, dragging back and forth against my clit. When he presses a finger to my core, easing his way inside, my head spins. I reach my hands back to grip the edge of the table, but drag my nails up his thighs along the way. He grunts and steps away from me and I hear the unmistakable sound of him undoing his zip and pushing his jeans down over his hips.

"I can't wait. I'm sorry, I promised I'd wait, but I need to be inside you, like, yesterday."

“Don’t wai—”

I don’t even get the final syllable out before I feel him drop to his knees, his tongue sweeping through me while he fetches a condom from his pocket and rolls it on. The moan that escapes me is so loud it shocks me. Standing back up again, he leans over me, rubbing the head of his cock between my legs. His taunting is too much. I’m desperate for him, right now, here where I’ve fantasised about being taken. I press back into him, greedy for more, but he grips my hips tightly, not granting me the permission.

“Tell me exactly what you want and I’ll give it to you.”

“Fuck me,” I plead. “Please Luke, I need it so much.”

I feel him nudge my legs wider, then the swollen column of his dick buries into me, inch by agonising inch. When his quads press into the back of my thighs, my back arches and I push against my forearms to meet the force of each thrust with one of my own.

“Fuck, you’re taking it all, Kara. You feel incredible.” Hands on my hips, he pulls away and flips me round to face him, lifting me onto the edge of the table before plunging right back in. “I need to see you.”

One hand cups the back of my neck, pulling me into a savage kiss that I feel all over. It’s so hot because it’s really, genuinely us. Not discussing hypothetical sex on his sofa. Not pretending to be Matthew and Briony. Just us. Luke and Kara. Kara and Luke. When he kisses down my neck, I turn my

head, opening myself up to him more. I gasp as the realisation hits me.

“Luke, Luke stop—” I punch my fist against his chest and he freezes, his eyes wracked with confusion. “Your blinds are still open.” Though the doors that line the back wall of the room only look into his garden, there are gardens and houses beyond them and with the lights on in here, we must be putting on quite the show.

“Oops,” he laughs and kisses me more. Slipping out of me, he bends to step out of the jeans and underwear pooled at his feet and then he does my favourite thing ever. He slams inside me again and I cry out when he pulls me to his chest, grips my ass and lifts me from the table. Had I told him I love it when Book Boyfriends do this? I wrap my arms around his neck and hold on tight, firmly impaled on him. He carries me out of the kitchen, along the hallway, pausing for a second to pin me to the wall and hoist me higher.

“Ooft, this seems way easier in the books,” he laughs and I giggle into his neck.

“You can put me down if you like.”

“Never. Do you know how much I’ve thought about the night we fucked here?” He lifts me again with a deep thrust. I bite my lip so hard I almost pierce it.

Then he’s climbing the stairs, kicking the door to his bedroom open and tumbling us both gently onto the sheets. The rush of the scent of him floods my brain. I think about the nights I’ve stayed here this week. How I held him, and he held

me, and how I pushed the ache for more away. Now here we are, tearing into each other, feasting on the inevitable.

“I’ve pictured you here so often.” His fingers nestle into mine and he lifts my arm above my head, pinning me. “After tonight you’re never leaving this bed.”

My breath goes choppy and my heart swells and of course, of course I’m leaving this bed, but I’m never leaving him and he’s never leaving me. I feel important and wanted and needed and loved. And right where I’m supposed to be.

He grips the mattress above my head and slams into me. This kind, gorgeous man, unable to hold back now we’re naked. My man. *Nice men who turn feral are my weakness.* My words replay in my head as he makes me see sparks.

I tilt my hips up to his, my fingertips clutching at the sides of his chest, as he slowly withdraws and does it again, and again, and again. The smack where our bodies meet is exquisite. “Do you like this?” he asks, my earlobe in his teeth.

“I love it,” I gasp when he knocks the breath from me, edging me further up the bed. “I love you.”

Our pace changes then, his eyes on mine as his hips roll deep and slow. He moans from low in his throat. “Say it again.”

Those three tiny words unlock everything I’ve been keeping secret for so long. “I love you,” I cry out, emotion flooding me from head to toe. And I really do, I mean it so much.

“I love you too,” he groans. He says it to my face, then again into our kiss, and again into my ear. He covers my body with his, his arms under my waist pulling my body closer and I just can’t get enough of the way he fits me, holds me, owns me. I’m climbing higher and higher and everything throbs when I watch him lick his fingertips and reach down between us, pressing firmly against me.

“Oh shit, Luke.”

“I know, I know. Let yourself go.”

My back arches and my eyes squeeze shut as I grip fistfuls of sheets.

“Look at me. I want to see your face when I make you come. You’re so beautiful when you come.”

I open my eyes and watch his light up as his deep thrusts draw pleasure from every part of me. I never want this to end, and I have to remember the reassurances I gave him. We can do this again, it’s not a one time thing, I don’t have to hold back.

He sees it all, reads my face and I accept my fate when he rubs harder. The feeling builds in my thighs first. A twitching, then a tightening, then it takes over the rest of me, my body engulfed in flames as I reach my heavenly peak with his name on my lips.

I go limp in his arms, losing control of my body as I shake beneath him. Luke pulls me harder against the force of his

thrusts, fast, fast then still as his hips grind against me and he groans into my chest with his release.

“Oh Kara, oh Kara, oh mine.” He presses his forehead to my neck, only ragged breath between us as we climb down from our high, my body still twitching around his as he lowers himself fully against me. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, stroke his hair, kiss his temple. And there we stay; breathless, satiated, held, loved.

I see it in his eyes, emotion flushing his face, telling me wordlessly what I already know. He loves me. He’ll never leave me. He’ll do anything for me. And I don’t doubt any of it.

Luke and Kara. Kara and Luke. He is everything. My friend, my champion, my love. My nice man who turns feral. The one Book Boyfriend I’ll never want to replace.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Luke

“SO, WHO ARE WE going to be tonight?”

“With this stage and these lights?” Kara breaks into a Southern drawl, her hand on one hip as she pops it out to the side. “I think I’m gonna be Shannon, a small-town girl with a voice like honey who’ll do anything to catch her big break.”

“Oh, then I’ll definitely be Dickie, a grumpy talent scout from a failing record label, looking for solace at the bottom of a whisky bottle. I’ll be blown away by your voice and your... charm and develop a sudden obsession with knowing what’s between your legs.” I cup her ankle gently and shift my hand slowly up and past her knee. She wobbles a little on the ladder and bursts out laughing.

My dick twitches at the memory of having her in my hands like this before. I’ll never get bored of her thinking up these sexy scenarios for us, though, of course, by the time we’re done, it’s always my name on her lips, and hers on mine. And

of course, I'll keep dishing out five-star reviews for every book that gives us new inspiration in the bedroom.

“Are you laughing at blown away?”

“Yes. And Dickie? Seriously?”

“You are so immature,” I say as she fits the final lightbulb. I lift my palm to take hers in mine, guiding her down the steps.

“But you still love me?” She gives me the fright of my life when she jumps from the second last rung, throwing her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist, but there's never a doubt that I wouldn't catch her.

“I certainly do.” I pull her into my chest and meet her lips with a deep kiss that shows her just how much.

We signed a lease, together, on this space a few months ago, the same week Kara moved into my place permanently. We've barely spent a night apart since we confessed our feelings, and one weekend we went hill-walking and by the time we came down we'd made a plan. Sell her house, lease a second venue, collaborate on an events space with a plan for community classes and workshops during the day, then drinks, music and comedy at night. Then carry on living our very own Happy Ever After.

Some might say it's too soon, but I know more than anyone how fleeting life can be. When there is joy you lap it up, when there is love you hold on tight, and when there is hope you go after it together.

When I set her down, she walks over to the stage, turning pirouettes across the dancefloor, and I watch closely, still in awe I get to call her mine. We step up onto the stage together and I flip the switch that sparks our glowing neon sign to life.

Moonshine Bar. Her idea and a completely perfect choice. I move behind her, sliding my arms around her waist, kissing the slope of her neck as we admire our handiwork.

The place finally looks finished now we've fitted the lampshades over the bar and in the booths that line one side of the room. The electricians have completed their work on stage lighting and a sound system, and I've asked a local band to come in and do a soundcheck for us tomorrow. It's been a labour of love, a lot of late nights either grafting here or at our dining table researching sound proofing, flooring choices, entertainment licences. I've loved every minute because we've done it together, and here we are at the finish line.

Tonight we have Friday Night Dinner with our friends. These nights look a little different from the days when I first met Kara, back when she'd spend them crying on the floor eating takeout around her coffee table with Megan and Hattie. We were weirdly nervous to introduce our two groups of friends, but they hit it off so well we ended up turning Friday girl's night into a bigger monthly dinner. According to the group chat, Megan and Rob are already enjoying stiff margaritas. Hattie will be on her way soon, no doubt ready to rip him to shreds when he brags about his latest dating antics.

There's just one thing I still need to do before we head home to join them. I hold Kara tighter to my chest, if that's even possible.

"I think we should have a wedding here," I whisper into her ear.

"That is *such* a great idea," she says, pulling away. She stands at the front of the stage with her hands on her hips and I can see her brilliant brain flooding with ideas. "We could offer exclusive hire and partner with a couple of local food trucks on catering. We could put a photobooth over near the doors. Ooh, we could—"

"No, Kara—" I interrupt. "*We* should have a wedding here."

When she turns around, I'm exactly where I want to be, on one knee in front of her, holding out the ring I've been carrying until I found the perfect moment. This moment. Kara's hands come up to her face just in time to catch her shriek.

"Oh my God, is this really happening?" I can see the sweetest little tears building and she fans her face with her hands. "Oh shit, shit, shit. Sorry."

"Kara..." I reach one hand out to take hers, pulling her closer towards me. "My heart woke up the moment I first saw you in my coffee shop, and every day since you've helped it grow. Meeting you is one of the best things that has ever happened to me and I never want to be anything other than yours. You made me the happiest man on the planet when you

asked me to be your Book Boyfriend, but now I'm asking, can I please be your Book Husband?"

"Yes. YES!" she nods, wiping away her happy tears with one hand while I slide the ring onto her finger. "Oh my God, yes."

She pulls me up to stand, wrapping her arms around my neck. "I love you so much, I can't wait to be your wife."

We kiss for a while, there under the stage lights, until she pulls away and whispers into my ear, "Hey Luke, is the CCTV on in here yet?"

"No, why?" Her hand unbuckling my belt is the only answer I need.

elle

Kara

I once said that the only thing better than curling up in bed with a good book is finding a little window seat in a cute cafe and meeting a new Book Boyfriend for the first time. Turns out I was wrong. It's this.

It's lying here on the floor, the warmth of a thousand suns washing over me, partly from the stage lighting, partly from the heat of my boyfriend who has just collapsed on to my chest, well-fucked and utterly spent. I could bask in this glow for hours.

Did I say boyfriend? Sorry, I meant fiancé!

I am pretty sure I'm in shock. Not because I'm flat on my back naked on the stage of our new bar and events venue, it was inevitable that it would happen at some point, but because *I'm engaged*.

Me, Kara Wilson, the girl who thought she'd never love a real man again yet met the most incredible one who has made her feel loved every minute of every day since. And now he's going to be my husband? I would never have written this story for myself.

I stop stroking Luke's hair and lift my hand to admire my ring more closely. I got so caught up in the moment listening to his proposal that I didn't really pay attention to it and my heart stops when I see it properly.

"Luke. This ring. Is it... the seaglass?" My heart thumps in my chest and he must hear it. Two diamonds sit encased in silver, and nestled between them is a bright piece of turquoise seaglass, the one we found on our first trip to the beach together.

"I know you said you'd never want something flashy, but if you've changed your mind I'll get you something else." I did say that. I spend far too much time with paint on my hands to wear something I'd worry about damaging.

"It's perfect. I can't believe you kept it all this time."

"Of course. You said it was a memento of a shitty day, but that's the day I knew I had to tell you I love you. Hattie helped

me find a designer.”

“She knows? Does Megan?”

“They know about the ring, but not that I’ve asked you. I figured you might be OK with a tiny bit of meddling in this case.”

“I’m going to cry now,” I laugh, and out comes the flood of tears and heaving sobs. Luke rolls to my side and props himself up on one elbow to gently wipe away my tears.

“You’re so beautiful. I’m so lucky,” he says, his lips pressed to my hair.

“I’m the lucky one,” I choke back a gasp.

“We’re going to have to agree that we’re both lucky, I think.”

Luke holds me and breathes me in and I want to lie here forever. “We should get dressed. There are margaritas to drink, celebrations to be had, bridesmaids to inform.”

“I think,” I say, rolling him to his back and climbing on top of him, “we can be late...”

Also By Holly June Smith

Just a Little Crush

<https://amzn.to/41mFz4q>

Bec Charlton knows three things for sure.

1. You can't beat a good aged gouda.
2. Her Grandpa's old Ford Cortina is her pride and joy.
3. The women of Thatch Cross are obsessed with Alistair Rendall (who is always just 'Rennie' to her)

Bec can't blame them. When he isn't fighting fires, Rennie runs Rhyme Time at the local library, teaches self-defence classes, and drives his elderly neighbours to their doctor's appointments. The man is a saint in a body made for sin.

They've known each other since they were kids, so the last thing Bec needs is to have him pull her from a car wreck while her latest audiobook blasts out the spiciest sex scenes...

Bec is lucky to escape with minor injuries - and major embarrassment - but the narrow stairs to her flat are impossible on crutches. When Rennie insists she recuperates at his house, she doesn't exactly have a choice.

All she needs to do is stay put, let him look after her, and keep her outrageous fantasies in check.

After all, it's just a little crush... isn't it?

Just a Little Crush is a standalone childhood friends-to-lovers romance novella packed with heart, humour, and heat.

Acknowledgments

In late 2021, I was 70,000 words deep in another novel and I'd lost my way with it. I took myself off for a massage, and by the time I left, I had an outline in my head for *The Best Book Boyfriend*.

I came home, wrote down everything, and figured I'd come back to it when I finished the first book. By the end of the day I'd written 10,000 words. I must apologise to that first book, for you have not been touched since.

So firstly, thank you to that massage therapist for giving me an hour of peace to create these two sweethearts.

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