


The
Hopeless
Romantic's
Guide to
Avoiding
Love



a novel

JOLIE HARRIS

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A NOVEL

OceanofPDF.com

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To my husband and my kids, for giving me the confidence to
follow my dreams

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Step 1: Admit the problem.

ONCE UPON A TIME, in a land far, far away...

I, Sylvie Hanson, awake to find myself in a grand canopy bed in the midst of a pop star music video. The room is ignited by sunshine, as are the roses and glitter that shower down around me, and exotic birds sing from the great oak tree just outside the bay window. The reason for this lavish celebration?

My birthday.

The birthday that I have deemed the most momentous of all the ones that have come before... because I am thirty. In the thick of the sparkles and rainbows, my super sexy, devoted boyfriend presents to me a warm platter of cinnamon rolls, a giant heirloom diamond ring and the promise of forever. He tells me I'm gorgeous and smart and that the only thing he'll ever need to make him happy is for me to say *yes*. Obviously, I say, "Hell, yes!"

With that, he informs me that he has transferred money from his trust fund so as to whisk me off to an island where we will consume tropical drinks, swim in the ocean, and have lots and lots of unprotected sex, which will ideally lead to pregnancy.

With a sigh of complete and utter content, I stretch my arms and roll over in bed.

“Wanna go again?” the deep voice of a man asks groggily as his hand clumsily feels around for my breasts. I open my eyes one at a time. *No, no, no, no*, I think to myself, because rather than a rich, sexy boyfriend, beside me lies Bert—my large, dumb, albeit very hot booty call. I slap my hand over the nightstand until I feel the smooth, flat rectangle of reverence—my phone.

A *Happy Birthday* text message from my mom confirms it, my *dreamy* thirtieth birthday is just that: a goddamn dream. I remember now that, thanks to his two premature ejaculations, Bert gave me the most mediocre birthday sex of my life, which means I have relapsed.

Bert is beautiful, strong, and, since college, has been bringing me sexual solace in times of desperation. He even obliges when I fantasize he’s a lumberjack and make him lick maple syrup off the most tantalizing parts of my body.

So, one may wonder, why are you so disappointed to see Bert lying next to you? He’s handsome, he’s reliable, and he licks syrup off your nipples. What’s the problem? The thing is, I’m breaking my recently instated rules by being here in his

bed. Which, if one is as nosy as I am, leads to the next question: *What rules?*

Let's start with the fact that I *love* Love. Capital L, Love. I am here for it. I'm here for all of it—romantic comedies, star-crossed lovers, the *Twilight* saga, and on, and on... That all-encompassing magic of storybook love is a fixation I have held for the better part of my life.

It first manifested in the form of acting out love triangles and sex scenes with my Barbies and drawing indecent pictures in my diary. Later, novels and nearly anything on early 2000's *The Learning Channel* (more commonly known as *TLC*)—basic cable channel 22 where I grew up —appealed me.

I spent many nights up late reading books like *The Time Traveler's Wife* and listening to the dialogue of *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *TLC's* series, *A Wedding Story*, as I slipped into sleep.

Frankly, I've never been head-over-heels for the classics, as I'm partial to neo-coming-of-age and contemporary romance, but I'm not so obtuse as to lack appreciation for how much the classics have revolutionized romance and feminism. It was during my first year of college, however, that I simultaneously discovered erotic chick lit and masturbating, making for — how should I put it? — a *formative* time.

Like all my favorite fictional love stories, I wanted a grand, beautiful, perfect (maybe even sort of demented) love! I wanted a Big. Epic. Love. I needed it. As with any good love story, there would be minor complications, of course, but they

would never amount to anything more than what my soulmate and I could handle because we would be armored by our love.

The full reality of how unrealistic and platitudinous this wee dream of mine is, as well as the fact that feminist icon Gloria Steinem would gag at such a notion, hit me full force as I approached this momentous thirtieth birthday.

I began to realize that my vivid imagination and appetite for romance have been lying to me. Indeed, my great aspirations of living out a fairytale love story have left me seeking perfection, and caused a series of relational misfortunes.

The great epiphany of turning thirty (at least I'd hoped) is that life is full of ambiguity, and that love in its truest form doesn't always resemble the stories that inhabit my bookshelf. As it is, I'm tired of ending up broken-hearted. Thus, I'm currently "in recovery" from years spent as a hopeless romantic, and I'm trying to do things differently these days.

So it's not that I have anything against Bert. I could even appreciate premature ejaculations (the enthusiasm) and mediocre sex (it's still sex). It's simply that, as much as I've hoped he could be *it*, he's not the aforementioned Big. Epic. Love.

Hence, I made a resolution. Though I can't bring myself to entirely give up on my own romantic endeavors, I've promised to practice more *pragmatism* when it comes to my love life. I must admit, however, I'm still unsure of how a pragmatic love life should look, and more importantly, feel. What I do know

is that it shouldn't look and feel like the last few years of my love life. But more on that later.

At any rate, the resolution involves: 1) refraining from casual sex; 2) going on *responsible* dates; and 3) avoiding *love*. All in all being a little less, well, hopeless. With that resolution solidly in place, my trusty granny-panty collection made her comeback, living life in the spotlight right at the front of my underwear drawer.

Obviously granny-panties didn't stop me from this particular sexual escapade with Bert, but no effort is wasted.

I fell hard and fast off the Casual Sex-Free Resolution Wagon when I called him last night in a drunken moment of weakness and requested his very naked company.

"So?" He awaits an answer.

I really should exercise some commitment and refrain, but seeing as I am already naked in Bert's bed and that it *is* my birthday, I'll resume my casual sex diet tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow will be the day. I'm getting back on that wagon and strapping myself in tight.

"Sure, why not," I reply as I wrap my hand around his shaft. He grunts with pleasure as he hardens and clumsily unfurls a prophylactic over his penis. He makes no move to take the lead, so I push myself on top and squeeze his gorgeous pecs.

"You're so hot," Bert says.

"So are you." I rock lazily a few times, as one does.

"Wait! Oh, oh!" he says as his body clenches. "Er, sorry."

“Um, that’s— that’s ok,” I say as I flop back on the bed and stare at the dirty ceiling fan. Like I said, starting tomorrow, I will resume overhauling my love life. “Today is my birthday.”

“I know. You told me last night. Happy birthday, bud. Wanna go to IHOP? My treat.”

This is thirty, I think. This... is... thirty.



My middle finger is outstretched at the tinted window of the pickup truck—assumedly driven by a male—that just honked at me. Growing up, my brothers always teased me for inarticulate comebacks, so now I don’t bother with anything more than a hand gesture.

I find it imperious, the action of honking a car horn at a pedestrian. Furthermore, I am a lady and inclined to think feminism and chivalry *can* coexist. The adrenaline pumping from my core slows, and I continue down the Denver sidewalk toward work.

The driver rolls down the window and flips me off in return. Huh, a woman. An anomaly, to be sure.

I wipe the sweat from my upper lip, as a passerby lights a joint. The aroma is comforting, reminding me of a simpler time when I could smoke weed while lounging in a bean bag in my friend’s dorm between classes.

The sun beams high in the sky despite the afternoon hour, the time of year currently nestled in that sweet spot between spring and summer when people and plants alike bloom to life

and wedding season is in full swing. This is of particular appeal to me as I am currently employed as a wedding coordinator.

As such, I take a painstakingly planned wedding—carefully assembled vendors, a meticulously edited timeline, the overall aesthetic of the event—and execute every detail with near-perfection at the city’s most beloved venue: Galileo’s Garden.

The Garden, as it is lovingly referred to by locals, occupies a historic house on Capitol Hill. A brick mansion built in the late nineteenth century with white trim and a dreamy wrap-around porch, the structure was originally the home of a family who became exorbitantly wealthy during the Colorado Gold Rush and, because of its location downtown, was later renovated into a commercial space.

The building has had a variety of tenants over the decades, including a Bed & Breakfast and a sex toy shop, but The Garden has lasted the longest. (Sidenote: one time I found a long forgotten box of unopened vibrators on the top shelf of a closet. They made for excellent Christmas presents.)

Its true claim to fame, however, is the landscaping that has been impeccably maintained by the same gardener for almost twenty years. Long grasses and marbled boulders line the property. Plots of blood orange poppies, pink rose bushes, multi-colored dahlias, and white peonies make up the bulk of the garden’s flora, and a rainbow of Colorado wildflowers surrounds each plot.

The grass winds like a river throughout and remains the perfect shade of Kelly green all year round. Galileo's Garden was even once featured in one of those rich people magazines displaying expensive houses and fancy gardens.

I grew up in a suburb a couple hours away and moved to Denver for college twelve years ago. There are things I have grown accustomed to about the city—the ever-growing skyline and extensive park space, for two—but the many tales of love and happiness surrounding Galileo's Garden have captivated me since I moved here.

I was drawn to this mansion for its beauty and rich history; working here all these years later is kismet.

I greet my sweet Italian boyfriend setting up his flower cart on the pavement outside. The fragrance is fresh and sweet, bringing instantaneous joy.

“*Ciao*, Guillermo, the flowers look *bellissimo* today!” I don't speak Italian, but I use a few phrases he has taught me over the last several months. Guillermo is pushing eighty.

Ok, so he's not my boyfriend, in this life that is, but perhaps in another.

“Sylvie! *Buongiorno*,” he says in his rich accent. I bounce over to his cart to smell the giant powder pink roses. “Let me tell you, *bella*, it's going to be a lucky weekend.”

“Is that so? Seems like a regular weekend to me. Maybe you're getting old and senile, G.” I wink.

Guillermo immigrated to the U.S. decades ago but retains his Northern Italian charm. He is a petite fellow, always clad in a neatly ironed button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up, slacks with suspenders, polished brown shoes, and a paperboy hat.

Most evenings, after working 6:30 AM until 2:30 PM as a high school janitor, Guillermo sets up his rickety wood cart to sell the fresh flowers he grows year-round in his covered community garden plot, as well as some he has imported from his extended family who remain in Piedmont, Italy.

His goal: to make a little extra money, of course, but also to nudge the city's sweethearts to fall in love.

Guillermo's most charming sales pitch is his confident assurance that if your date purchases even one flower from his cart, the stars have aligned to bring you *amore eterno*, or, eternal love. I fucking adore a sentimental old man. Take Guillermo's wisdom and the fact that he loves *love* as much as I do? Boom, dreamboat.

"Ah, this *senile* you speak of, this means *wise*, no?" He returns a wink.

I grin. "Something like that."

"You'll see, Sylvie. I can just feel it!" He hands me a soft pink rose in full bloom. The scent is divine. "Happy Birthday, *bella*."

Didn't I tell you he's a dreamboat? I kiss him on the cheek. "Thank you, G."

The pressure exchange from hot, dry air to the cool, air-conditioned interior blows wisps of hair from my tidy bun as I slide through the front door of the venue. The first level of the mansion houses our offices as well as French doors that lead to the patio and backyard, which is a half-acre of Eden.

The ceiling is high enough to accommodate an antique chandelier which is lowered by an electric pulley system(!). The west wall of the house has been entirely replaced with windows and, while a pain in the ass to clean, are unique to the building and allow for heavenly evening lighting.

Curiously, today, unlike others, there is a distinct vinegar smell.

I love my job here at The Garden, if for no other reason than the fact that I'm surrounded by the thing I hold most dear: true fucking love. However, being defined by my career has never interested me. Livelihood is important, of course, but I do not feel compelled to spend the bulk of my time working. The idea of doing one thing forty or more hours per week is anything but liberating.

I applied for this job at The Garden without the necessary qualifications, and much to my surprise I was offered the position.

Because coordinating events requires long hours and ample legwork, the position doesn't call for a conventional full-time commitment. Each coordinator works one to two events per week, plus two to three partial days of office work to provide

tours to interested couples, manage contracts, and establish a marketing plan that maintains our famous wait list.

The Garden's reputation means my primary function is to do everything in my power to ensure our clients are happy out of their minds. In the event that the wedding day does not go to plan, which they rarely do, my fellow coordinators and I must hide the flaws from the couple and their family members. The long days and myriad curve balls require stamina, creativity, and performance under pressure.

A year and a half later, the job suits me; I excel at it, and it allows me to be surrounded by romance. The position even comes with the various insurances one must concern oneself with as an adult.

“Hey, girl, heyyy!” I say energetically to my coworker, Ellie, as I whisk into the office and miss the swivel chair I throw my things toward. “Oh, my God,” I continue, “this guy outside was smoking a joint and now I'm dying to get h—” I stop short, realizing the unsettling vinegar stench is coming from this location and also notice there's a *Happy Birthday* balloon floating in the corner. “Aw! Is that for me?” I ask, touched that she remembered.

Ellie, the most seasoned of wedding coordinators, lifts her head from her desk, and it's clear I've misread the tone of the room. Her kinky black hair is falling out of its updo and she remembered to put mascara on only one set of lashes this morning.

There is a yellow-brown stain dribbled on the blouse covering her protruding belly, and a half-eaten bowl of something on the edge of her desk.

“Is that... mustard on spinach?”

As if to explain the insanity of her snack, she says, “I heated it up in the microwave.”

Because Ellie has had an other-worldly craving for expensive mustard throughout her third trimester, the smell and the stain can be attributed to Grey Poupon. What’s more, the buttons of her maternity blazer are fastened one hole too high. Ellie is waiting until she’s actively in labor to start maternity leave. Even as a hot mess, she still exudes a pregnancy glow that lights up the room.

“Sylvie, please. Please do this meeting for me.”

“What... happened?” My voice spikes abnormally high in an effort to maintain cheer. I discreetly peek at her calendar to see how many clients she’s interacted with today.

“Dan said his assistant couldn’t find those giant soft pretzels anywhere,” she says frantically and her eyes well with tears.

Dan is Ellie’s extraordinarily devoted husband and a heart surgeon, to boot. I believe etiquette would advise that I call him Dr. Stone, but there’s something gratifying about being able to call a prominent doctor by their first name—like knowing the owner of a fancy restaurant and getting priority seating (that’s never happened to me, but I imagine it’s a rush)—so I call him Dr. Dan.

Dr. Dan answers nearly every unhinged call and text no matter how busy he is at work. If he's in surgery when Ellie calls, he has provided his assistant a script of what to say to lift Ellie's spirits, as well as a menu of preferred lunches to be delivered based on her mood and the brand of mustard most readily available.

"Like, *no* store has giant pretzels? What the fuck, right? And then..." she lowers her voice. "Girl, I Googled what happens to your butt during childbirth. Let me tell you, it's not good. It's not good." She shakes her head and dabs her cheeks with a tissue. "It's not good."

I cringe. It wouldn't be helpful to say it now, but my cousin, Fiona, had a legendary ass before three hours of pushing flattened it like a pancake and left her with a feisty hemorrhoid.

"And, and! There's this pain, like, right here," Ellie gestures to her lower belly.

"Gas?"

"Probably... Anyway, I just can't seem to pull myself together."

I nod and enthusiastically say, "You know what? Your butt's gonna be fine. It's gonna be fine!"

She nods with me and laughs through her tears. "Yeah!"

"And you're gonna make this meeting your bitch!" There's no way I'm doing this meeting.

"Yeah!"

We're making progress. "And— and fuck giant soft pretzels!"

"What? No." Ellie starts crying again, and I know we've just lost all the ground we've gained.

"Too soon, huh? We're not ready to move on from the pretzels?"

She whimpers, then her cry turns to a laugh.

I walk around her desk and kneel in front of her. "What's happening now? Are you— are you laughing or crying?"

"Both," she says through hysterics.

I put my hands on each of her knees. "You know what? Pregnancy is hard. All those celebrities prancing around making it look so easy are full of shit. But when this is all said and done, you're going to have an adorable little *bébé*, and you and Dan will fall even deeper in love." I can feel my eyes widen like Bambi as I say it.

Ellie and Dan are a true love couple. They have that *light up when they see each other, grow old together* kind of love. I envy their connection, as my own love life has had its — how did I put it before? — Oh yeah, relational misfortunes.

In the years leading up to thirty, I spent about a year (if I'm rounding up) in the arms of a lanky, tattooed professional skateboarder with wild blue eyes, and a wild nature to match. Blaze, he was called, and he had me stumbling from the get-go. Eventually I stumbled into that cliché trap where I thought I might have what it takes—whatever that is—to convert a

moody, broken bird into a devoted husband. We got into epic fights, followed by epic sex.

I loved Blaze despite his flaws, at least I think I did. My best friend, Mo, argues that I only loved the idea of him. True to “moody skaterboy” form, he ended things when he decided he had a stronger connection with Moon (love her name), the assistant manager at the skate shop he frequents.

Following Blaze, I was in a relationship with Jake, The Adrenaline Junkie, which is actually how he would introduce himself at parties. We had a short-lived courtship that was primarily characterized by having sex in dangerous locales. Think, shark-infested waters or the edge of a cliff. After he almost paralyzed himself bungee jumping off a bridge to prove his love for me, as well as my therapist’s insistence that Jake was the reason for my benzo prescription, I broke up with him.

I am now proud to be adrenaline– and benzo–free.

Oh, and I almost forgot Aiden. Yes, forgettable Aiden, an engineer with oversized glasses and perpetual coffee breath. Aiden was kind but boring, both conversationally and sexually, the latter of which was quite confusing given the extensive porn collection on his cloud storage.

These incidents were a catalyst for my recently amended views on romance, for experimenting with a more practical vision of love. Thus, what followed was a series of responsible, albeit unsuccessful dates I had set up through various dating apps.

One such date ended with the gentleman (a term used sarcastically here) going home with an ex-girlfriend that had *coincidentally* been dining at the same restaurant. Because the ex-girlfriend's date happened to be a highly-rated Uber driver, my date tipped him handsomely to ensure my safe arrival home and sent me off with extra dessert in a to-go box.

Truthfully, I was perfectly content eating tiramisu in my bed. When I told my older brother, Elliott, about the incident he reprimanded me for my simple-minded faith in humanity and poor taste in men.

Another dating app “match” spoke repeatedly of his love for sailing. An odd hobby given that we live in a landlocked state with only a handful of modest reservoirs, but I didn't hesitate to accept the invitation to join him for lunch on his boat. I blame celebrity propaganda for my imaginings of basking on a yacht, being served smoked salmon crostini by the crew.

Consequently, I was utterly crestfallen when I showed up at the reservoir to find him preparing to “set sail” in a dinky, metal fishing boat his grandfather had built in 1963. There was no sail to speak of, and the cumbersome motor took up a third of the boat. My date was dressed to the yacht club nines, though—sweater tied around his shoulders, pennies in his loafers, and all.

Ever the good sport, and because I didn't want to hurt his dead grandpa's feelings, I hesitantly boarded the boat, inadvertently dragging one of my sandaled feet through a pile of goose poop and mud. The nightmare motor proved to not

only be unwieldy, but loud and stinky, and after sacrificing half our lunch to the deranged reservoir geese, we were forced to row back to shore with broken oars (also from 1963) when the engine refused to start again.

For the sake of not sounding entirely pathetic, it should be noted that I have had some relative successes in my love life. My first love, Nikolai, was an exchange student from Poland. Most of the girls wanted to climb him like the tree that he was, but I was the only one who succeeded.

Nikolai and I did all the things high school lovers are supposed to do together: homework, prom, virginity loss, smoke weed out of his foreign-made bong, and lots of gazing into each other's eyes. We lost touch after he returned to Poland and refused to get a MySpace account.

My sophomore year of college, I dated Tyson, a sweet, intelligent man whose parents immigrated from Ghana. We met at a fraternity party and he didn't argue when a few weeks later I began introducing him as my boyfriend. I was in love with him, to be sure, but as college went on, we outgrew the relationship.

Sprinkled throughout these uninspired love stories were mind-numbing hookups and one night stands. When I tired of trying to make sense of men and their impulses, I hooked up with some women in college. In time, however, I found myself craving the real deal millennium falcon.

These efforts (and in some cases, when the only sexual position I could muster was the starfish, the *effort* was strictly

left to my sexual counterpart) were all categorically fruitless. It took some time for me to admit this fact about myself: I am not a *One Hot Night of Passion* kind of woman. Rather, I want all the nights of passion... everyday... for the rest of your life.

And if I don't get them, I'll slash your tires.

Just kidding.

There's a song lyric from my favorite band, Juice, that says, "I don't ever get naked just for one night," which, in a heartbroken stupor, I narrowly avoided having tattooed on my lower abdomen as a reminder to myself and a warning to future lovers.

"So you'll do the final walk-through meeting for me?" Ellie's question brings me back from the rabbit hole of my underwhelming love life.

As coordinators, we meet with the couple a dozen times in the months leading up to their wedding and in most cases form a strong connection. Their wedding is their Oscars and we're running the show. I am entirely unprepared for a final walk-through with this couple. I don't even know their names.

But I would do anything for my fellow woman, especially Ellie, so I wipe the glisten from my chin, throw a floral blazer over my orange maxi dress and slam a shot of Pepto-Bismol.

"Fine, I'll do it. But only because you look famished. Eat your spinach and mustard."

I smooth the wrinkles of my dress while checking my appearance in the full sized mirror. My long, blonde hair that

those of us in the hair-dying game shamelessly refer to as “bottle blonde” is now falling from its bun, but I have time only to brush the fly-aways out of my face.

The summer before I started sixth grade, I cut my hair into a pixie cut on a whim and it nearly ruined my life. Since then, I’ve taken pride in keeping my hair long. I pay Mo, my aforementioned best friend and hair stylist, a significant fee every ten weeks to get my sandy-blonde hue just right.

“You look so pretty.” Ellie’s tears return as she watches me in the mirror.

“Babe, so do you! You’re like a pregnant Black Aphrodite. A fucking Goddess,” I insist.

I’m not exaggerating even a little bit. Ellie is a *total* babe—flawless black skin, curves for days, and enchanting eyes. She just looks like a celebrity whose “team” is taking the day off today.

I return to my reflection in the mirror. I look pretty enough, I suppose, but I’ve got nothing on Ellie. I’m just another basic blonde. So entirely basic, in fact, that on average I have to shake a person’s hand and look deeply into their eyes about four times before they remember me. *Four*.

My iridescent white skin was the bane of my existence until I eventually decided that, given my discomfort in the dark, having a skin color that can light up the night isn’t all bad. And I have nice eyes and a great ass, so there’s that.

It took nearly two decades of self-loathing, one year of an eating disorder, and countless self-reinventions to realize I'm fine without being the prettiest girl in the room. In fact, it's much better not to be. Women are spoon-fed the lie that we are only worth what we can deliver in beauty, but I have more to offer than my looks.

I have to remember to tell my therapist that; she'll be so pleased.

I roll my eyes internally when I see that the bride and groom (of whom Ellie offered minimal details) are flanked by mothers and aunts, superfluous family members who simply want to feel as though their attendance is required and will surely have opinions aplenty about how the wedding should be managed. I plaster a wide smile on my face and approach the group.

“Sarah, Jimmy! How are you? My name is Sylvie, I'll be meeting with you on behalf of Ellie today.”

“Oh my God! She had the baby, didn't she?” Sarah says excitedly. She reminds me of Cameron Diaz in *My Best Friend's Wedding*: naive and exuberant.

Without thinking, I reply, “Yes!”

Sarah turns to a woman who looks exactly like her in about thirty years. “Mom, Ellie had the baby.”

Dear God, did I just say yes?

“Oh, that's wonderful!” *mom* replies. “Boy or girl?”

Everyone looks at me, utterly thrilled and expecting an answer. The reasons for my lie are varied and ridiculous—inability to function like a normal adult, a desire to cover for Ellie’s soon-to-be flat ass, an unhealthy need to provide emotional satisfaction to those around me—but now that I’ve started I can’t stop. “I, uh— um— girl. Boy! It’s a boy.” Everyone falls silent at the awkwardness of the moment, and my stomach growls. “Anyway! Shall we get started?”

An hour later, I’m rounding home base on the longest walk-through of my short career. To hasten their departure, I’ve guided Sarah, Jimmy, and their attendants as close to the front door as I can without pushing them out. I conclude by reminding everyone what time they need to arrive here at The Garden next week, and just as I’m about to sigh with relief, there’s a muffled scream of my name.

Confused, I tilt my head toward the sound. The chit-chat dies down when everyone else seems to register a second, “Sylvie!”

As I start toward the office, Ellie waddles out, breathing heavily. “Something’s happening,” she says. Fluid is running down her thighs and her eyes are lit with fear.

Step 2: Listen to your therapist.

THE MOMS AND AUNTS gasp as they process Ellie's predicament.

"Oh my God! Ellie!" Sarah gives me a bewildered look.

"I thought you said she had the baby already," Sarah's mom says accusingly.

"Oh shit," is all I can manage. I know how totally nuts I must seem for being caught in such a preposterous lie, but I swear I was doing it for everyone's emotional benefit.

The unfolding scene leaves me feeling as though I'm free falling through space for half a minute before I kaleidoscope back to reality, landing steadily on my feet.

Sarah and Jimmy's matriarchs remove their purses and blazers to create a makeshift cot for Ellie to lay across as her screams of pain grow louder and closer together. I've never been so thankful to have uninvited aunts at a rehearsal, nor so caught in a lie.

I fumble my phone out of my pocket and call Dr. Dan, who I have on speed dial. He's in surgery. I tell his assistant to get this message to Dr. Stone ASAP: "Baby is crowning! Get your ass over here." Then, I dial 911, which I've never had to do before, and it's thrilling.

An aunt goes to insert two fingers into Ellie's vaginal canal before stopping to ask, "May I?"

"Um, sure?" Ellie responds.

"The baby's coming!" Auntie Two Fingers announces to the group. "You're going to have to push, sweetie." She shakes her head sympathetically at Ellie.

"This isn't how it's supposed to happen!" Ellie yells back. "I should be in labor for hours! Where's Daniel?"

The women, who have presumably all gone through childbirth at least once, coach her to breathe. I run to a closet to retrieve some blankets and trip over my own feet when I see the dark-haired head of the baby crowning.

"Sylvieeee!" Ellie screams.

I nudge a couple ladies out of the way and kneel between Ellie's legs, holding a blanket just under her vagina. Snapshots of Fiona's (my cousin with the... hemorrhoid) baby's birth flash in my mind, and I try to emulate the experience.

There were words of encouragement and counting, lots of counting.

"I'm freaking out," Ellie whispers, her face pained. She's desperate for reassurance.

“Ellie, you are beautiful and hilarious and the best wedding coordinator,” I say sincerely.

“Thank you so much, Sylvie, but what does that have to do with—aaaaahhhh!” she interrupts herself with a scream, then continues, “—giving birth on the goddamn floor?!”

“Right. Sorry. Wrong words of encouragement.” I look her dead in the eye and with all the conviction in the world, say, “Ellie, you are a strong, powerful goddess of creation. You can do this.”

She laughs wearily but nods in agreement.

I get goosebumps as I look around at our circle of femininity. This is practically biblical.

“Sylvie.” Ellie grabs my hand. “He’s gonna have the same birthday as you.”

Smiling through tears, I say, “I know.”

Two women hold Ellie’s knees and I count to seven, because it just feels right, while she pushes her sweet baby’s head out. The little guy immediately begins to cry before the rest of his body has even departed Ellie’s vagina. I huff out a breath of incredulity and encourage her to push one more time, then give the baby’s shoulder a gentle tug and guide the rest of his body out into the blanket.

Sarah’s mom sits behind Ellie, cradling her. The other women coo and cluck around us. As I rest the sweet baby boy with a significant head of dark hair on Ellie’s chest, Dr. Dan walks in with his old-school doctor bag and gets to work

checking the baby's vitals and cutting the cord. We all cry with joy and relief.

The darkness of the night is disorienting as I exit the now-empty venue.

Once Ellie, Dan, and the baby had left by ambulance, the aunts each gave me a tight squeeze, then left me to clean up the evidence. Fortunately, the old blankets from the closet had caught most of the blood and fluids, and the EMTs brought the placenta with them in a mini-cooler.

Exhausted, I mopped up a couple times, then replied to a few emails before giving up on getting anything of importance done.

I check my phone for missed notifications and there is not a one. The screen merely reminds me that it's a Tuesday night and my credit card bill is due. I stuff the phone back in my purse and zip my jacket up the last inch. The weather is threatening rain, but I couldn't possibly go home yet.

It may sound backwards considering my exhaustion, but too much has happened today to merely go home and crawl in bed.

Generally speaking, I am a homebody, but when I feel like getting out into the world and Mo isn't dragging me to a trendy bar, I go to the public library to read (or more often, re-read) the latest in my collection of romance novels. Mo makes me very aware of how lame this habit is, but I find weekday evenings at the library to be exhilarating.

Being surrounded by infinite, fantastic stories and people lost in thought and study provides a sense of connection and belonging. It's like meditating in a room full of strangers—a convention of elevated minds and glimpses of nirvana.

The library being within walking distance of both my apartment and my place of work is all the more reason for it to be a pseudo-regular hangout spot.

Entering the revolving door of the government-funded institution, an involuntary chyron runs across the screen of my mind. *I'm kind of lonely*, it reads. It's occurred to me before—the subject of my loneliness—but I rarely act upon it. However, having been a part of something so reverential as a group of women bringing a child into the world makes it that much more obvious.

High on the heroism of my improvised midwifery skills, I'm feeling quite sure of myself and deliberate on the idea of making a new friend here at the library this evening. I resolve to introduce myself to somebody.

I look around the library and spot him almost immediately at eleven o'clock. He's gorgeous—dark skin, curly brown hair, scruffy face, a couple arm tattoos, and deeply engrossed in study. Out of my league really, but it doesn't matter! Because I'm only in the market for friendship. Truly. The decided object of my (friendly) pursuit sits at a table alone, and I am about to be his study buddy.

From my purse, I fish out a small cosmetic mirror and grab whichever makeup-like cartridge I feel first. I don't wear much

makeup (not because I couldn't use it, rather I'm just too lazy to bother), but my Aunt Margaux recently became a consultant for a "clean beauty" brand and I've been ordering products willy-nilly due to the friends and family discount. Intent on my reflection in the compact mirror, I trace my thin lips with the sharp tip of a brand-new lip liner pencil, giving them a precise cabernet border.

Maybe I should treat myself to a bit of lip filler, after all. I was hoping to make it to the magical age of thirty-five before beginning what will surely be a life-long investment in injectables. Either way, the lip liner is too dark for my taste. I throw the mirror back in my purse, run the palm of my hand over my lips to remove the liner, and rub on some chapstick.

Without taking my eyes off my new friend, I unzip my jacket and adjust my bra.

Clearing my throat, I say coyly, "Mind if I sit here?"

He is startled, caught off guard by my standing before him, then perplexed, before replying with a simple, "Yes."

I am already pulling out the chair to sit down, as my question was more ceremonious, and think perhaps I've misheard him. Flustered, I stutter out, "Yes, you mind, or yes, I can sit here?"

"I mind," he says curtly.

"I just delivered a baby."

Without so much as an eyebrow raise, he looks at my shirt beneath my jacket then back to his sumptuous laptop, which is

so thin I could snap it in half over my Wonder Woman thigh. “Ok. Then that explains the blood on your shirt.”

“Um...” I look down and gasp. Between cleaning up birth fluids and replying to emails, I failed to assess my appearance. As I take in the mess on my clothing, I see now that I look totally insane. “Well, would you look at that? Yes, it does.” I go to zip up my jacket, but it gets stuck on my shirt. I frantically tug the zipper down, creating a hole in my shirt, then up once more.

“I’m trying to concentrate,” he confirms callously.

My face burns as I pivot my feet one-hundred-eighty degrees, desperately hoping no one witnessed this jerk’s flat rejection of me. I walk briskly toward the door, passing my usual spot—one of a set of oversized, emerald green, velour chairs framing the large sign identifying the *Romance* section—then detour to the bathroom to dab the welling tears and pull myself together.

I jump at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. What I thought was a rub of my hand to remove the color from my lips, rather smeared it outside the lines. And with the blood I look like a fucking axe murderer. My friendliest smile paired with my announcement that I just delivered a baby must have appeared to the hot library jerk as derangement, idiocy at best.

The helicopter rotor that is the habitual message of self-loathing I’ve been working to overcome in therapy is yelling, *You’re a total fucking dork, Sylvie! Like, the dorkiest of dorks!* I’m about to get the hell out of dodge when I recall the most

valuable tool I've learned in that very expensive therapy is how to deliver a killer internal pep talk.

Despite the horror of doing so, I look myself in the mirror and whisper, "Don't let that arrogant jerk with the manners of a Neanderthal get to you, Sylvie Hanson. You are cool... cute... fun." I shrug, unconvinced, but continue, "You own this library. From now until infinity you can avoid the library on Tuesdays, but tonight don't give that fascist the satisfaction."

My effort toward making a friend at the library has been swiftly thwarted. Leave it to me to throw myself at the only attractive man in the room. I cuddle up in my usual cozy, green seat, and hurtle myself into the loyal pages of fiction, recharging for my next attempt at avoiding lustful impulses.

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Step 3: Don't backslide.

ONE WEEK LATER, IN accordance with the coordinator dress code, I am entirely in black. A color that I, fortunately, look great wearing. High-waisted slacks make my ass look incredible and a sexy black lace bra is veiled by my sheer black blouse. As it is a bit revealing for work, I cover up with a blazer.

Traditionally, of course, black and sunshine don't fare well together, so I am grateful for the tree coverage the gardens offer. My hair is tied up in its summer-standard bun, and hoop earrings tickle the top of my jaw. This morning I felt inspired to put on some mascara and a new lipstick I found called *Diet Burgundy*, whatever the hell that means.

My developing bunions make wearing heels agonizing, but some exceptions must be made. Managing a wedding requires an authoritative presence, and I've noticed the taller I appear, the more attention I command. At 5'4 ½" (that half inch is important), I could use the boost, so I slide on my comfiest wedges.

As I round the corner to The Garden, I notice two men (likely groomsmen) conversing directly in front of the entrance. They are in my path but take no notice, so I silently back around the corner and wait patiently, appreciative of the opportunity to eavesdrop—a habit that is essential to my being.

At any given time, I feel a responsibility to meet the emotional needs of those around me, as well as a desire to control the energetic atmosphere. I recently learned that I am not alone in this effort, and there is even a name for it: emotional monitoring. By eavesdropping, I am able to monitor emotions.

I soothe any guilt at listening in to others' conversations by assuring myself that I'm doing it *for* them.

"I can't wait to get this over with," the first guy says to the other.

The other laughs. "Not everyone gets married in Vegas, bro. Are you... thinking about making things official... for real?"

Officially what?

"Shh, no," number one responds staunchly.

"Why not? You've been together forever."

"Love is a great idea, but I'm not interested in the idea of giving myself over to it. Too much to lose."

Ugh, another pessimistic love-hater. Just what the world needs.

Guy Number Two persists. “Jimmy said the wedding coordinator is cute. Maybe your cynical ass should talk to her tonight.”

Is he talking about me or Ellie? And I will be much too busy to talk, thank you very fucking much.

“Wedding coordinator?” the first scoffs. “The only thing more mindless than a wedding is the person who thinks it needs to be *coordinated*.”

“Damn.”

They both laugh.

My eyes widen. One of the pitfalls of eavesdropping is hearing people talk shit about you. Because I care deeply what everyone thinks about me, I subdue my urge to fall to tears right there on the sidewalk and once again round the corner toward the entrance. They both look up in my direction as I clear my throat.

I cannot bring myself to make eye contact with either of them but say sourly, “Excuse me. Wedding coordinator coming through.”

Realizing I’ve been standing within earshot for their less than flattering conversation, they silently step aside to let me pass. In the half second my eyes flicker to the sons of bitches, one of them averts his eyes and slides his hand through his hair.

As though to prove their expectations of my mental incompetence, I trip over the door’s threshold. Though I don’t

fall, the stack of papers I'm holding flies a yard in front of me and my overflowing purse falls to the ground. I bow my head in mortification as one of the men quickly shuffles the papers together and hands them to me.

“Thank you,” I say bluffly.

So much for confidence. Speaking clearly, maintaining control of my intestines, and hiding my pit stains is mental gymnastics enough. Now, in addition to that, I feel as though I must fake a brain full of neurons.

The lyrics of Taylor Swift's *Shake It Off* run through my head while I march toward my office like I own the place, breathing deeply in an attempt to regulate my blood pressure and regather poise. I wish Ellie were here.

May through October, considered “wedding season” due to the high volume of weddings, we circulate which coordinators act as lead and which work as a support coordinator. Today, I am filling in as lead due to the fact that Ellie is now on maternity leave.

My second-in-command is Ida, my absolute favorite coordinator to work with and the owner of Galileo's Garden. Ida is a small Jewish lady in her fifties with an abounding laugh. Her most defining physical characteristic is the voluminous bosom she loves to nestle teary-eyed people into. The second is her curly brown hair—an untamable animal resting atop her head.

Last year, Ida's oldest daughter, Tali, got married at The Garden and the entire family was genuinely concerned Ida

might have a stroke. At one point, Tali grabbed Ida by the shoulders and shook her furiously, yelling, “Pull it together, you crazy cunt!” They’re really close. The day of the wedding I gave Ida a Klonopin from an expired prescription I had lying around to help her calm the hell down and enjoy Tali’s night.

After two vodka sodas, I advised the bartender to hold the vodka, to which he replied he already had been. It was the best night of her life.

Ida is loaded. That she still bothers to work weddings is a testament to her dedication to client satisfaction. Control issues may also play a role.

The service staff and I are setting up what will be the reception area when Ida storms out of the kitchen in a huff. “Do you have one of those little Cloud pills, Sylvie? Today might kill me!” When she’s on the verge of a breakdown (which is often), Ida sounds like Jerry Stiller—her speech gradually increases in volume and depth of feeling.

“I hope that’s not true, Ida. You’re such a delight. And are you referring to *Klonopin*?”

“Is that what you gave me at Tali’s wedding?”

“Yes.”

“That was the best night of my life.”

“I know.”

Her hair is already attempting its escape from her clip. She rubs her eyes furiously, smearing a bit of mascara, and throws

her hands up in the air. “Anyway, the top tier of the cake is toppled. What kind of schmuck delivers a ravaged cake?!”

I follow her back to the kitchen and open the cake box. “Shit.”

“Exactly!” she yells. She grabs two spatulas and we get to work.

The Garden offers ample indoor space to host a ceremony year-round, but because of the breathtaking landscaping, an outdoor ceremony is practically a requirement in the months with an average temperature over 45°F.

Today, the air feels close to 80°F as I meet the bridesmaids, groomsmen, flower girls, ring bearers, and parents and grandparents of the bride and groom in the heavily treed portion of the garden where we hide the wedding party until it is time for the processional.

“Sylvie!” Sarah squeals and greets me with a hug, unaware that her warm welcome is desperately needed.

Out of my peripheral, I notice the two buttheads from my encounter earlier join the group.

“Sarah, you look incredible. The most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen,” I say.

“Oh my god, thank you, I’m sure you say that to all the brides.”

“No, just you. How are you feeling?” I ask Sarah happily while the attendees gather around.

“Mostly fine.” Sarah gives a lukewarm smile. “Except my aunt Lillith decided this week of all weeks to tell my uncle Ron she’s leaving him for her yoga instructor.”

“Yikes.”

“Lillith and Ron have been on the rocks, but the timing is... less than ideal.”

I put my hand on Sarah’s shoulder to comfort her. “Bold move, Aunt Lillith.”

“Oh, and she’s bringing her to the wedding.” Sarah rubs her fingers over her décolletage nervously.

“Oh!” *Juicy*. Honestly, being a third party witness to the family drama of a wedding is more thrilling than I’d ever admit out loud, so though I sympathize with Uncle Ron, this development is rather entertaining. An added benefit is I’m getting a headstart on monitoring the emotional atmosphere I’ll be dealing with today. “Who’s the mistress?”

“Feather is her name.”

Feather.

Speaking in front of a wedding party is my least favorite aspect of my job. A one-on-two situation is my sweet spot, and I don’t mean that sexually; I mean it in terms of a social situation. But speaking in front of a group larger than exactly three people forces my bodily functions into chaos, including but not limited to, an urge to vomit, visible shaking, and the redirection of all the moisture in my mouth to my underarms.

I just can’t handle it.

After my college counselor refused to make an exception, I was forced to take a Public Speaking seminar freshman year. The first day of class I threw up my breakfast in front of everybody. A royally embarrassing circumstance that was made worse by the fact that I had consumed a leftover Taco Bell Chalupa for breakfast (hey, it was college). Anyone who has ever regurgitated lettuce can attest to the grossness.

By the end of the semester I had ingested the entirety of a Costco-sized bottle of Pepto-Bismol and scissored nearly all of my t-shirts into tank tops.

The mental pep talk I traditionally give myself immediately preceding a “public speaking” engagement means my eyes glaze over during Sarah’s fleeting introduction of each wedding attendant and family member, though of course I remember some of the faces from the thrilling birth last week.

When Sarah’s finished, I speak loudly to wrangle the network of excitement. The moisture drains from my mouth and I choke out, “Mate to greet you all. Sorry, great to meet you all,” then launch into a quick rundown of what to expect, as well as important details that will surely be ignored.

These details consist of lessons usually learned before the first day of kindergarten—if you need to pee, go now; breathe; smile—as well as a couple reminders one is given before going off to college—remove anything from your pockets that could be mistaken for a hard-on and don’t get too drunk tonight.

As I look around the group wishing I had reapplied deodorant, I finally glance at one of the meany-heads who called me “mindless,” but he’s staring at me, so my eyes dart away. *What a dick.* My anxiety-induced amnesia means I have forgotten his name along with everyone else’s. If asked, I would likely take a few seconds to recall even my own name.

I hold the clipboard of notes in front of my face, calling out the groomsmen’s names in the order they are to process, grabbing the corresponding elbow and pulling it into place as I do.

“Woods,” I say and grab hold of a rock hard forearm. Involuntarily, I squeeze thrice. My blood sugar must be low because I am tempted to take a bite of this delectable forearm. Without pulling my hand away, I look up to see whose limb I’ve just molested. The person frowning down at me is none other than the dick who a few short hours ago insulted my wits and my job.

I hate him so much.

But... There’s something else about him.

Perhaps he bears similarity to the man in the delicious, recurring sex dream I’ve been having that I wasn’t expecting until my late-fifties. That guy is naked, though, and unfortunately, the man standing before me now is fully clothed in a well-tailored black suit.

Based on his clipped neckline, I’d estimate he has a fresh haircut, but evidently he sees aesthetic value in keeping those

feathery brown curls intact. His pretty neck leads directly to his clean-shaven, carved-from-stone jawline.

I've already determined that his large nose (not so large that it distracts from his other features, however) is my favorite part of his face. My eyes wander back to his. They're a warm brown, like a pan of brownies fresh out of the oven, and I can see each individual eyelash. The close proximity of a face this gorgeous is paralyzing.

I don't know, maybe I could get past that he finds me mindless.

He looks at me expectantly, like he's silently trying to get a message across when my memory rolodex finds his face, and I realize why, in fact, there is something about him: he's the ass from the library last week. The one who essentially told me to fuck off. I've humiliated myself in front of him twice now. God, this guy is the *worst!* And I also can't stop picturing him naked.

"What are you doing?" he asks with no particular emotion behind the question.

My breathing quickens. A shiver runs down my spine. Tiny beads of sweat are forming at the back of my hairline, and I absentmindedly drag my fingers down the side of my neck seductively. My underarms are like the Florida Keys in August. *Breathe.*

I gulp and say, "Just making sure... you- um..." I think I'm dying of said humiliation. I look down at my clipboard, coaxing my tongue to get a grip, and stutter out a few

incoherencies. I'm clawing my nails into the cliff of self-respect and praying that my somatic episode isn't as obvious as it feels.

When Ida and I have successfully sent each wedding attendant down the grassy aisle and Sarah and Jimmy join hands in front of the officiant, we silently claim two chairs in the back row.

“What the fuck was that?” Ida whispers. “Were you having a panic attack?”

“Oh God, was it that obvious?” I ask in horror.

As the bride and groom read aloud the vows they've written for each other, I take a gander down the line of groomsmen. Jesus, the library jerk is looking at me again. His head spins back to Sarah and Jimmy when my eyes meet his, and I shift in my seat. The awkwardness of catching him staring makes me feel slightly embarrassed, more for his sake than mine. My oh my, he does look good, though.

The beads of sweat return to the back of my neck, along with a tingle between my legs, and I am blushing uncontrollably.

I've grown accustomed to the attraction inspired by a dolled-up groomsman; stick any Joe Shmoe in a bespoke suit and he looks dapper as fuck. Fast forward three hours, however, and he's glassy-eyed, sweating out the bourbon as quickly as he's drinking it, and has pee on his shoes from swaying in front of the urinal.

The jerk from the library is somehow different, almost like he's getting paid to stand up there and look handsome. The simple, crisp, white shirt is magnificent with his Mediterranean sea captain skin, and the impeccable black suit hugs his muscles just right.

My eyes center back on the happy couple. I sigh and put my hand to my heart when the officiant announces, "You may kiss the bride." Glancing back at the library jerk for his reaction, I find that he's staring at me again.

What the fuck is he looking at? I peek behind me, look down to confirm I don't have a nipple hanging out of my bra, then look back up at him. He sweeps his hand through his soft curls and almost smirks.

My heart flutters and my vagina tingles again. Running through my head are scenes from 1980s-era porn in which I'm a stern, sexy librarian and this hell-raising library jerk must be taught a lesson.

"That Greek God up there has barely taken his eyes off you," Ida whispers. She raises her dark eyebrows and stands to clap.

I shake my head and grimace (though it's just an act).

Incredulous, she says, "You're not interested?"

"He's an ass."

"There's no ring on his finger. I should give him Rachel's number. Maybe he's a doctor." Rachel is Ida's youngest

daughter. The case of Rachel's singledom is something Ida is well on her way to solving.

"Has a Jewish mother ever successfully played matchmaker for her *own* children? Besides, maybe he likes men," I whisper.

"Oh." She nods in understanding. "Then I'll give him Ian's number." (Her son.)

"Ian's not into guys, is he?"

"It's the twenty-first century, sweetheart. Everyone's a little gay."

My eyes return to the sexy, mean groomsman for what I promise myself is the last time. I've managed to play coy with Ida, but the truth is I utterly adore that this man keeps stealing glances. While having the attention of a crowd on me is excruciating, I find individualized attention to be intensely rewarding.

Since I can remember, I've craved and relished the approval of others, particularly those I regard highly—teachers, superiors, and, oh yeah, handsome boys. No praise compares to that of a popular, hunky, or charismatic man. This guy, who is absolutely hunky, has made my ego bloom by throwing his dark gaze in my direction.

Like a debutante at a ball, I know I will walk the venue with more poise tonight, my facial expressions will be well thought out, I'll entertain guests' pointless jokes with cute giggles, and

make sure I'm more visible than under normal circumstances, all while pretending not to notice he exists.

After the ceremony, the guests flood the barroom set up in what was originally the home's dining room. There is a nook on the far side of the room that will serve as a staging area for me to pack up decor, gifts, and miscellaneous belongings at the end of the night. I store a couple boxes there, then head back out to the patio where the guests are enjoying cocktail hour with their fresh drinks.

The strap at the heel of my shoe slips off, so I shuffle to a quick stop, balancing on one leg to adjust it. I've incidentally stopped just a couple yards from the man I'm decidedly trying to avoid. Unsurprisingly, he stands alone, leaning an elbow on a cocktail table and sipping a beer. He looks somber and lonely.

I can't think of a logical reason why, but an intense longing to talk to him comes over me.

Perhaps it's out of *concern* that I feel drawn to him. He catches me watching and I quickly busy myself inspecting the leaves of a potted shrub for imaginary mites. After a few moments, I look back in what I hope is a discreet manner. My self-control could use some work.

An animated bridesmaid has struck up a conversation with him. He regards her out of the corner of his eye and sips his beer.

"Champagne bubbles just feel so funny on your tongue, don't they?" the bridesmaid says cheerily.

Woods snickers condescendingly and she walks away, seemingly unoffended. His mean magnetism draws me in closer.

“She’s right, you know,” I say in her defense. “Champagne bubbles do feel funny on your tongue.”

His face pinches together in a look that suggests I’m an even bigger idiot than the observant bridesmaid.

I cross my arms and stick my chin out subtly, hoping said body language reads *sarcastic badass*, then say, “Your fly is down,” and mentally high-five myself when he looks down in a humiliated panic. His fly, of course, is zipped up nice and tight—like his ass hole, I would bet. He looks back up at me with a scowl. “You should smile more, sweetheart. You’d look awful pretty if you did,” I say.

What has gotten into me? I have never behaved so badly in a professional setting. And again, I’m picturing him naked.

“Sylvie! Psst, Sylvie!” My eyes dart around until I find the frantic whisper. Sarah motions me over and says through her teeth, “Aunt Lillith is here.”

I look cautiously side to side and spot a woman in her early sixties in a long yellow muumuu style dress. Accompanying her is, unmistakably, Feather. Around the same age as Lillith, Feather has mocha skin and hazel eyes. Her long, curly hair is black with streaks of gray and she wears clip-in feather accessories, as well as feather earrings. Gaudy name tags in the unlikely event someone were to forget her name.

I am suddenly very aware of the feather tattoo I got on my lower back for my eighteenth birthday with my hard-earned babysitting money. Feather is ethereal in her flowy top and Birkenstocks as she floats closely behind Lillith, making their rounds to say hello to various family members.

I feel like a secret service agent as I scan the crowd for Uncle Ron. He doesn't make for a difficult target. A gentleman in an ill-fitting brown vintage suit and carrying an overfilled highball is headed straight for Lillith and Feather. Poor Uncle Ron. Time for me to work for the money.

"Uncle Ron! Is that you?" I walk toward him eagerly, grinning.

He is confused. "Uh, yes, that's me," he says almost as a question.

"It is so nice to finally meet you," I say warmly and extend my hand. "I am Sylvie, the wedding coordinator. Now, I hear that you are the authority on quality music." This is not true. I was never told this. I link my arm through his and redirect him toward the DJ booth.

He chuckles. "Well, that's right! Word travels fast."

DJ Don J (this is his abbreviated moniker. When he plays his usual venue, The Back Door, his full stage name is DJ Don Jon) is making the final tweaks to his playlist and equipment.

"Uncle Ron, this is DJ Don J. Why don't you tell him your ten all-time favorite songs?" Don Jon looks at me like I have defiled him, which by definition is what I just did. I give

Uncle Ron a pat on the shoulder and mouth, “Sorry,” to Don J as I walk away.

After dinner service, I trade Don Jon a very dirty gin martini for his wireless microphone. He may consider forgiving me now. When I turn from the DJ booth, I catch you-know-who staring for the hundredth time.

Reflexively, I look down and around my body, again checking for an exposed nipple (which, by the way, has never happened, so I’m not sure why I’m so concerned about it. Furthermore, I kind of want this guy to see my nipples...?), or for a giant rip in my pants or length of toilet paper hanging from my waistband.

I give him an exasperated look and mouth, *What?* He smiles, not a toothy grin but a sweet smile, and time slows. The gorgeous creep sits there like a lighthouse in a storm; everything around him moves in a blur.

We watch each other, motionless, until a fork clinks against a wine glass, bringing me back to shore, so to speak, and I rush across the room to deliver the mic to Jimmy.

A note on wedding toasters: they carry the weight of the wedding on their shoulders by setting the tone for the rest of the night. A teary-eyed father remembering the day his baby girl was born, the hilarious best man reminiscing about the time the groom skinny-dipped in a lake and narrowly avoided having his pecker pecked by a brazen mallard, the bridesmaids team up to rap a fun little ditty about how right the couple is for each other, and so on, and so on.

I have been forced into wedding toast duty, and it was like Public Speaking Seminar dosed with some god-awful steroid. In my experience, profuse sweating and a deadpanning audience were heavy indicators that it did not go well. Some people handle the stress better than others.

The toasts at this wedding aren't particularly memorable, but short and sweet, which I'll take as a win. Prying the white knuckles of an overzealous toaster from a microphone is a task I do not relish. But before I can make my way through the chairs to reclaim the microphone, Feather is taking it into her skinny yoga fingers. *No, no, no*, but also *yes, yes, yes*.

I dodge back through the chairs to return to Ida's side as she whispers, "Well this is gonna be good."

I nod and smirk.

"Hello!" Feather shouts loudly into the mic. "Oops, sorry! Not used to being the center of attention." I laugh too loudly. *Right*. "I am Feather, Lillith's life partner." *Life partner? That relationship evolved quickly*. "I want to thank everyone here for welcoming me into your family today."

She has been Lillith's "life partner" for less than a week; I doubt she's being welcomed in as warmly as she perceives. "Sarah and..." Feather holds her hand over the mic and whispers something to Lillith. "...And Jimmy, of course. James, I like to call him."

Collective eye roll. I use the clipboard to hide my laughter and Ida elbows me. "I wish you both love and light on your

journey together. My only word of advice: we mustn't put money above our love for one another. That's it!"

She holds the microphone out in a manner that suggests she's expecting a servant to claim it from her. "Oh, and another thing," she sings into the microphone. "If there comes a time when one or both of you decide you are no longer right for each other, I wish you the courage to move on."

Burn. She puts her hands together and bows her head. "Namaste. Will everyone join me in three collective *Oms* to acknowledge the spiritual connection between these two souls? Yeah? Let's do it!"

Feather is under the impression she's leading a yoga retreat, Lillith is delighted, and Uncle Ron is red-faced. Feather bursts into *Om*-ing and, to my surprise, the guests seem up for it. I gauge Sarah and Jimmy's reaction, but their love adrenaline rush is keeping them from giving a shit about Feather's self-righteous performance. Once again, like a magnet out of my control, I return my gaze to the library jerk. He is not *Om*-ing.

Ida and I high-five each other when the cake is brought out and no one notices that it underwent emergency surgery earlier in the day. We were able to reposition the top tier, smooth out the icing, and cover the rougher spots with flowers we filched from the centerpieces.

As DJ Don J turns the music up and the lights down, Uncle Ron makes a bee-line for Lillith and Feather. *Dammit, Uncle Ron.* I weave through the increasingly inebriated guests and

step between Ron and Feather just as Feather says passionately, “Trust the divine order of the universe, Ron.”

“Lady, you gotta shut up,” I mumble under my breath. Sarah’s mother whisks Lillith and Feather away while Ida grabs Uncle Ron and gets to work on the dance floor, showing off the moves she learned at her Zumba class this week. Relieved, I step off the dance floor and snicker to myself at the dancing goofballs having the time of their lives.

Before I can escape into the kitchen for a break, I notice the man I now know as *Woods* standing to my right, ostensibly readying himself to engage in conversation with me.

Despite that he’s barely close enough to be audible over the music, he yells over the bass, “Hi.”

“Hello,” I reply stiffly.

“I wanted to apologize. Sylvie.”

He knows my name. I nod, permitting him to continue. His expression goes blank. “Go ahead, then,” I yell.

The music stops just as he shouts, “I’m sorry!”

I grin. *How embarrassing.* When the music picks up again, I tilt my head defiantly and say, “I don’t forgive you.” He almost smiles and my eyes wander to the crotch of his pants. For anyone wondering, I am imagining how large his penis is. “What’s your name again?” I know his name, but he doesn’t need to *know* that I know.

“It’s Woods.”

“Woods, that’s right,” I say, on the offensive. My heart flutters and he breaks his deep stare from mine when Jimmy’s mom pulls him in for a hug.

“Sylvie, go take a break!” Ida yells as she shimmies her voluptuous hips at Uncle Ron.

The caterers are boxing up the leftover food when I enter the kitchen.

“Hi Sylvie, I made you a plate,” the catering captain, Ben, says eagerly. Ben and I slept together a while ago after a very wild wedding. He is twenty-two, adorable, and looks at me like I am everything, but what am I going to do with a twenty-two year old?

“Ah, thank you, Ben. I’ve been looking forward to this mac ‘n cheese all night.”

“You’re welcome, Sylvie.” Ben’s pupils dilate and his mouth gapes slightly. One of the servers kicks the back of his knees and runs away laughing. “Son of a bitch!” Ben hollers and chases after the server.

“Like schoolboys on the playground,” another server says.

Allow me to reiterate that he’s twenty-two.

Ida huffs into the kitchen with a tray of full champagne glasses. “Anyone thirsty? These are extra.” She drains a glass before even setting the tray down.

“Damn, Ida!” I look at her with glee and amazement then grab the fullest glass. “I’ll have one if you promise not to tell the boss.”

She clinks her flute against mine. “Cheers, honey.”

“How’d it go with Uncle Ron?” I scrunch my nose sympathetically.

“Poor guy, huh? He’s kind of adorable in his brown suit that’s a little too small, don’t you think?”

“Hmm, I—”

“Anyway, I told him he could take me out next week.” She hands her glass to one of the waitstaff and struts out of the kitchen.

My blazer hangs over the side of a cardboard box. I removed it to give myself more flexibility in wrapping and packing, but I’m feeling a little silly in this practically see-through shirt. After filling two boxes, I step out from my hiding place in the nook to grab another, and I am in direct line of sight of the bar.

I absentmindedly watch the guests in the Last Call line when I meet Woods’ eyes once again. Relief and perhaps expectation soften his features.

The sizzling sexual tension between us has gone full neon, as has my tickling clit. The only explanation I can think of for my reaction to this mean man is that each time I see him it’s as though I’m taking in his breathtaking good looks for the first time.

All of that must be ignored, though, because I have a resolution to stick to, and I certainly won’t be making any exceptions for this egomaniac. There is far too much work to

be done to worry about winning this unofficial staring contest, so I accept my defeat and turn back to the task at hand.

The long day is settling and I feel slightly dazed from the champagne and exhaustion. *Shout* blares from the speakers and I sing along under my breath, continuing to pack up decor and gifts. When I next turn, I'm startled to find Woods standing in front of me.

The heat of what feels vaguely like a hypersexual adrenaline rush warms my body and my underarms start sweating.

"Sylvie," he says. And mm-hm, I really like the way he says my name. "I'm, uh, taking off..."

"Taking off your clothes? Or—"

"What?"

"Nothing." I let out an irritated sigh and put my hand to my forehead. "Er. Is there something I can do for you, Woods?" This is my polite way of saying, *What the hell do you want, you creep?* He's looking at me like he can see the neon sign and it reads, *I'm So Hot For You, I Can Barely Stand It.*

I glance away with an insecure flush then look back to him guardedly. He takes one step closer and sucks in a breath of bravery like he's the horse whisperer about to mount a wild mare.

"What are you doing?" I ask and look around frantically to make sure none of the guests can see us. His scent hits my olfactory system and it feels like I've been drugged. I push myself against the wall and breathe him in without shame.

It's not an overwhelming cologne or aftershave. It's just his essence—pheromones mixed with foreign soap and fancy deodorant. The scent reminds me of Christmas. No, more like the *anticipation* of Christmas, which is arguably better than Christmas itself—a blend of cedar, cloves, and maybe some vetiver. And a touch of sandalwood. (I used to be really into essential oils.)

“Yes, actually, there is something you could do for me.” Woods places his hands against the wall, caging me in, and bends his head down slightly until his face is centimeters from mine.

His eyes are even more captivating this close, like the dark brown texture of the bark of an old tree. And his lips. Those luscious pink cushions. My thin lips wouldn't stand a chance next to his. I really should have gotten the lip filler this year. “You could forgive me,” he whispers.

I'm flustered and wildly confused. That'll teach me for drinking on the job. “But... I think I might hate you,” I mutter and check again for peeping guests.

“I think I might hate me, too, but I just want to kiss you.”

You came knocking on the right door, buddy. This is the romantic scene of my dreams playing out, and it's starring *me*! A self-loathsome hottie who hasn't taken his eyes off me all night wants to *kiss* me, and it's all because—

“Why? Why do you want to kiss me?”

“This is what’s supposed to happen at a wedding, right? And I just... I need someone— you. I need *you*. Sylvie. To kiss me.”

Bloody hell, he is gorgeous; his unabashed directness and ostensible need for me is delectable.

“I won’t unless you say ‘yes,’ of course.” Doubt flashes across his face.

He’s right, these are the things that happen at weddings. Though I’ve never participated, I’ve encountered people making out in the back countless times. One little kiss couldn’t hurt. Permission to mount this wild mare? Granted.

“Okay. Yes. Kiss me.” I’m not even sure my answer is intelligible until he closes the space between our expectantly parted lips.

His mouth brushes so softly against mine I’d hardly call it a kiss, and I wonder if this is going to be disappointing. I can taste the flourless chocolate cake and champagne as his breath trembles. My stomach does a little flip, and the tingle between my legs is almost unbearable.

He kisses my cheek once, then traces his lips down my jaw and inhales deeply when he gets to my neck. The only indication of his eagerness is the heat coming off his body and the tickle of his quickened breathing on my skin. He is in perfect control.

Meanwhile, my arms have completely forgotten what to do in this situation, most likely because I have never been in *this*

situation. I move to place them around his waist, but decide that feels weird, so I go to grab his ass, but that feels too forward even for this encounter.

He kisses up my neck a few times and I close my eyes and let out the softest moan as my body shifts to allow him more access. Finally, I grab desperately at his lapels. He is pressed against me now, and the warm pressure of his body is sensual and comforting. The anticipation of his lips on mine is killing me. My senses are overwhelmed.

His face returns to mine and he plants the softest, most luscious kiss on my mouth, slipping the tiniest bit of tongue in. I'm practically drooling. Just as I start to sink in, he pulls away.

I open my eyes and before my brain can react, he is gone.

What. The. Fuck? I touch my lips. Is this another fantastic dream? I need to find a way to force myself back to sleep. However, if this is real life, then I need to tell someone about it immediately. I gather my wits off the floor and head directly downstairs to the office where I know Ida is typing up a managerial report of the evening.

“Ida!”

She jumps. “What! Who died?!” One floppy chunk of brown curls remains in her hair clip and her cheeks are suspiciously pink.

“Sorry. No one. No one died.” I put my hands on my knees and pant. “Except for maybe my vagina.”

She looks at me confused, then nods her head thoughtfully. “My daughter sees a wonderful gynecologist here in the city—”

I cut her off. “Something *very* erotic just happened, Ida.” My office chair catches me as I collapse back and roll it over to her desk.

“How did you know?” she asks.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I’m listening...” Ida relaxes into her chair and slides closer and closer to the edge of her seat as I relive every sexy detail of my encounter with the man she knows as the gorgeous groomsman who is potentially a doctor.

When the recollection of my dream (it had to have been a dream!) is complete, I become very serious. “That son-of-a-bitch!”

Her jaw drops. “Was this the doctor?”

“We don’t know he’s a doctor, Ida, and I don’t think doctors kiss like that.”

“Have you never seen Grey’s Anatomy?” Ida finds my lack of interest in doctors profane. She shakes her head in confusion. “Why are we upset by this? It seems like a best case scenario.”

I put my hand to my forehead and stand. “Things like this—*incredibly romantic* things—never happen to me, Ida,” I exclaim. “And now, when I’m attempting to adopt a more mature, practical, unromantic—whatever you want to call it—stance on love, *this* happens.” I’m pacing.

Ida stands and puts her hands on my shoulders to calm me. “Honey, it was one little kiss. Not that you’re not... enchanting, but he was probably tipsy.”

I take a deep breath and relax my shoulders. She’s right. “You’re right. It’s fine. Just a little backslide. Everything is... fine.” I begin rummaging through the supply closet. “Are there any double A batteries in here?”

Although Ida is the coolest boss ever, it would probably be inappropriate to share with her that the reason for my supply closet search has to do with the fact that my vibrator’s been dead for months. I used my hand last night, but I’m going to need something more substantial tonight.

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Step 4: Forgive oneself when one inevitably backslides.

I RE-CLIP MY HAIR loosely behind my head and rest my elbow on the unblemished tablecloth, the heel of my hand cradling my chin. A darling couple on what I assume is a first date are flushed with the enjoyment of each other's company, giggling at newly formed inside jokes. I am green with envy.

The lights are dimmed in this upscale hotel restaurant. For the lovers at the other tables, the lighting is romantic; for me, it just makes it irritatingly difficult to see my food.

I minimally scrunch my nose in annoyance when someone says my name, and I am returned to the reality that I am also on a first date. A date far less successful than the romantic scene taking place at the other table. Derek is his name, and he is not terrible looking but he and his complete lack of interest in anything about me are intolerable.

Derek is "in finance," and in case I have forgotten this fact he will remind me in 3, 2, 1...

“Working in finance is so demanding that I don’t have much time for anything else.”

Why haven’t I left yet? one would surely ask. Well, dating is hard, and Derek’s need to discuss *all things Derek* can likely be excused as first date jitters. Despite the displeasure of his company, we are comrades in the battlefield of dating, and I cannot bring myself to ditch him. *Leave no man behind.*

My mind wanders for the thousandth time in the last few days to that tall, dark, mysterious Sex God from the wedding (who also happens to be the ass hole from the library), when my phone buzzes on the table. Just in time.

Under better circumstances, I wouldn’t place my phone on the table during a date. Tonight, however, I am counting on Mo’s time-honored first date phone call more than ever.

“Derek, I’m so sorry, but I won’t be able to stay for dessert. I’m getting a call from work.” I hold up my phone as proof.

I wonder if Derek is questioning the likelihood of there being a wedding emergency I must attend to at once. He’s a single straight man, I remind myself, “wedding coordinator” is probably as vague and uninteresting to him as “in finance” is to me. Not to mention he didn’t ask for any further details about my profession.

“Oh, no problem!” Derek stops our server for the check. Since his finance career is allegedly so successful, I don’t even pretend to reach for it.

Once outside, I go to give Derek an awkward hug. “It was really nice to meet you, Derek.”

“It was great meeting you, Sylvie. I would love to do this again sometime.”

But would you, Derek, if you're being honest with yourself?
“You know, I'm really busy with work, and—” He starts in for a kiss and I quickly push him away. “You're a nice guy, but...”
Fill in the blank.

“Oh.” Derek musters a smile and reluctantly puts his hand out to shake mine.

“Thank you. Really,” I say and grasp his hand to show my sincerity.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening, Sylvie.” He turns toward his car, a BMW.

I breathe out a guilty sigh and call Mo back.

“I take it that it didn't go well?”

I groan in response, then ask, “Are you at Ivy's bar?”

“Yep.”

“I'll be right there.”

Ivy is the bar manager at Bar 112, a new local favorite only a block from The Garden. Mo met her recently when we were out for drinks. Ivy is a beautiful Japanese-American woman with buzzed hair and a tongue piercing. Her arms are covered in tattoos. A tiny but mighty badass, Ivy seems as stuck on Mo as Mo is on her.

I push open the door of the renovated warehouse Bar 112 inhabits. It is lit by modern light fixtures hanging from the high ceilings that one might confuse for art installations. The bar itself stretches all the way across the far wall. Because of the building's size, there are a variety of themed lounge areas as well as a dining area.

This place is a time and money vortex; it's easy to get stuck here for hours.

Ivy breaks up a bar fight by standing on her toes to wrap a tattooed arm around a frat boy's neck until the bouncer takes over, then returns behind the bar to deliver to me the already famous Bar 112 Signature Margarita. Ivy concocted this frozen delight; they have so much tequila, patrons are allowed to consume no more than two.

The details of my date are unimportant, so instead, I'm recounting for Mo (for the second time) my arousing incident with the jerk from the library who ended up being the hottest wedding guest I've ever seen. "...He came out of nowhere and we basically just breathed on each other for a few minutes."

"He sounds like a pussy," Mo says.

"No, it was super hot! And then he was just... gone..." I say dreamily.

"That's even hotter than when this chick fucked me in the bathroom of the Ritz-Carlton," Ivy interjects.

"Right?" I laugh.

“Poetic.” Mo rolls her eyes in contention and pushes her silky red hair behind her shoulders. Ivy winks at Mo. “He didn’t get your number. He’s a little bitch.”

“No, don’t say that!” I defend him. “Anyway, It’s better this way. If I make sure I never see him again, then I can pretend it never happened. I can move forward with my hopeless romantic recovery,” I say like an Oregon Trail traveler who’s ready to get back on the trail.

“Pretending it never happened might work if you could stop talking about it,” Mo retorts.

“I think you’re the little bitch,” Ivy says.

“*Excuse me?*”

Mo giggles and bites her bottom lip like Ivy’s meanness is a total turn on.

“You know he goes to the library. Go get you some.”

I shake my head. “No, I can’t.”

They both tilt their heads and slant their eyes in annoyance.

“It goes against my resolution! I need to be practical. No more backsliding.”

Mo pokes her finger into my bicep. “Practical doesn’t mean giving up on love.”

“Ow! It’s not love.”

Ivy shrugs. “What if he finds you?”

What *if* he finds me? Then what? Would I be forced to succumb to the universe’s influences and give it a chance, or

should I keep a healthy distance? Man, the rules surrounding this resolution are becoming convoluted.

I only pray when I really, really need a favor, and tonight I can't help but request, *Dear God, please forgive me for my sins and let Woods find me.*

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*Step 5: Prepare to fall off the wagon. Then hitch a ride
on the next one.*

SHREDDED WHEAT CRACKER CRUMBS slip down my shirt as I shovel a piece of smoked salmon on a Triscuit into my mouth. I drape myself across the couch, and Google presents me with the image results of my search: shirtless male celebrities. My favorites are the heavily-padded-crotch ads for Calvin Klein.

Mo is in my bathroom getting ready for her date with Ivy.

She and I have been best friends since the first day of sixth grade, and Mo (short for Maureen, a name she inherited from her aunt) has always been exceptionally pretty and exceptionally comfortable in her own skin. She is old Hollywood glamour in appearance and aura – graceful, put-together, tough as nails. The only real difference she has from traditional Hollywood glamour is that she’s mentally stable.

In all honesty, if she were straight, I’d be too envious of her beauty and confidence to be friends with her; the competition would be too fierce.

“Why are you eating that stuff again?” she asks from the bathroom.

“It’s basically sushi!” I say defensively. “Besides, my period just ended and I need the iron. Also, it’s chock full of omega fatty acids— Anyway...” I interrupt myself. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay here and drink wine and play JustDance with me?”

“I’m sure, loser.”

“The library it is,” I sigh and stand to say goodbye. “I can’t believe you and Ivy haven’t had sex yet.”

“You know I like to wait until at least the third official date.” Mo exits the bathroom and throws her makeup bag into her oversized purse. Her lips are a ruby gem with immaculate lines. They even shine like a precious stone. “Seeing as *this* is the highly anticipated official third date, I am expecting it will last well into tomorrow. Our sexual tension is insane.”

We’re quiet for a few seconds as Mo appears to analyze me, then she pulls me into her.

“Why do I feel like this is a pity hug?” I ask into her shoulder.

“Because it is.” I try to pull away but Mo squeezes tighter. “This isn’t you, Vie. Running from romance, avoiding love, going on awful dates.” She pushes me away carefully to get a look at my reaction.

“It’s the new me, Mo. What I was doing before—running straight into the arms of any romantic whim and calling it love

—wasn't working. I need to try something new.”

She sighs. “Heard. Just promise me one thing.”

“...What?” I ask.

“If you see Library Jerk Sexy Wedding Guy tonight, you have to interact with him.”

“N—”

“I'm not saying throw yourself at him! Just, you know, ride the wave. See where things go.”

I agree to this only because, by covertly standing just inside the entrance of the library and prowling my eyes across the great room every evening for the last two weeks, I've deduced that his library nights are Tuesday and Thursday. He can have 'em! Tonight is Wednesday. My night.

I push her out the front door. “Don't get pregnant!”

“Ha ha. I'll call you tomorrow.” She blows me a kiss.

Life as a dilettante has most recently led me to YouTube workout videos. Before setting out for the library, I laze through one such video promising toned arms in ten days, then enjoy a glass of wine, throw on a light sweater, and lock my door. As I saunter to the library, I return a voicemail from my mom.

“Hi, Syl!”

“Hi, mom.”

“I hear traffic, are you outside?” Why do moms always sound so frantic?

“Yep, just walking to the library.”

“The library again, huh? Have you thought anymore about going back to school? You love to read so much, maybe you could study English.”

I roll my eyes and lie, “Yeah, I’ll look into that.” Not finishing college is a point of contention with my mother.

“And how was your date?”

“It was... fine. How are you doing, mom?”

“Oh, good.” I can almost hear her hand waving the question away. “Nothing but the usual around here.” I wish *she* would go on a date. “I walked five miles today with Aunt Margaux. We went around the lake, then all the way through the Wildgrass neighborhood. Five miles! I told her you’re trying to avoid love and sex or whatever it is you’re doing, and she thought it was a moonshot,” she laughs.

I cringe at my mother’s mention of my sex life and wonder why the hell I tell her so much. “Nice...”

“It’s just that you have always been such a romantic, honey.”

I lean my head from side to side, stretching the muscles of my neck. “I’m working on it.”

“Anyway, she just got a great new eye cream in. I picked some up for you. You can pay me back later.”

“I don’t know if I need eye cream yet, and I’ve been spending a lot—”

“The trick is to start using it before you need it. That’s what Margaux said. Anyway, hon, you know I’m only an hour away, and I always stock your favorite food. Bring Mo!”

The woman knows an offer I can’t refuse, and I do like visiting her. However, my family has always been a bit codependent. My mom never wanted her baby birds to fly too far from the nest. I observed her request and stayed close to home, but my brothers managed to learn to use their wings.

When my dad was dying, it was very beneficial for me to be around, as I was active in caring for his physical and emotional well-being.

My older brother Elliott moved to North Carolina for college. He remained in the area for medical school, leaving him little time to visit Colorado. My younger brother, Clayton, is a talented graffiti artist serving time in jail in Seattle for trespassing and vandalism. (We are fully aware that the three of us are a case study in birth order characteristics).

Furthermore, throughout our upbringing my mom firmly believed that she always knew what was best for us. Decisions I made for myself were scrutinized, and any mistakes—of which there were plenty—were treated as family felonies.

While my brothers were able to push back, define their own ambitions and pursue them, even if it involved illegal acts, I regarded her opinion as law and often had a hard time standing my ground against the direction she saw my life taking. The combination of her desire for control and my lack thereof gave

me a general mistrust of my capacity to make decisions regarding what is best for myself and the course of my life.

In order to gain some independence and delegate *myself* as the authority in my life, I have had to practice distance from my mom.

A former boss once advised me to, “Cut the cord, Sylvie.” Better late than never, I suppose.

“Ok, mom, I gotta go. I’ll call you later.”

“Bye, Syl. I love you so much, honey. You know that.”

“Love you, too.”

I thank the handsome man who steps out of the way to allow me through the door first and breeze into the expansive library, bound for my emerald throne. I glance toward the table that Woods has likely carved his name into, and there sits a middle-aged woman reading a romance novel.

There’s a small part of me—ok, so maybe it’s a big part—that was hoping by chance Woods would be here tonight.

Like, maybe he had to switch study nights.

Or—silly me, it’s Tuesday!

Or, best of all would be that he rearranged his life in hopes of running into *me*.

Alas, the new Sylvie has accepted that shit isn’t real. It’s the old, hopeless romantic Sylvie imagining such nonsense. And, as Taylor Swift would say, “The old Sylvie can’t come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, ‘cause she’s dead.” Though,

clearly, the old Sylvie isn't dead. She's just... forcibly slumbering.

I laze through a couple chapters before setting my book aside to commence my traditional ten minutes of people-watching. First, I notice a sappy couple who appear to be reading poetry to each other. Next, there is a group of high school students spending more time gossiping than working on a research project.

Beside them are two college girls smiling and whispering, clearly infatuated with someone across the study area. Wanting in on the drollery, I follow their line of sight and freeze when I see the object of their infatuation. Woods. I rub my eyes like an over dramatic character from a silent film.

On the one hand, I'm thrilled to see him.

On the other hand, I'm unprepared.

As what is his usual method of operation, Woods is sitting alone at a table—though it must have caused him great distress to have to sit at a different table than *his*—looking between a laptop and a textbook.

I wish someone would rip off his shirt, but also tape a “kick me” sign to his back as they walk past.

He wears faded black jeans and a black band t-shirt. The only evidence of color in his ensemble are his stupid python skin sneakers, which can't even really be counted as color because they're just varying shades of gray. His arms are perfectly defined, his tattoos peeking out from beneath each of

his t-shirt sleeves. His clean-shaven look from the wedding is gone, and he's back to the thin layer of scruff he wore the very first time I spoke to him here at the library.

His allure has grown. No doubt his seduction tactics as a suited-up fairytale creature are a contributing factor. Tonight, however, he looks more real, more authentic, wearing casual attire and studying.

He frowns in concentration, and I am entirely aware of the now familiar sensation that starts in my chest and travels slowly down between my legs.

Woods looks up in my direction and does a double take. So enthralled was I in observing this wondrously confusing stud-muffin, that I managed to ignore the fact that I am not streaming a TV show from the comfort of my bed, and the surveilled can watch back. My jaw drops. Before I'm conscious of my actions, I force my book open in front of my face and pretend to read.

Sure, romantic Sylvie may have woken up just long enough to plant a seed of hope that Woods would be here tonight and we'd lock eyes across the room and everything would fall into place, but pragmatic Sylvie deprived that little seed of sunshine and water. It was a fantasy. *He* is a fantasy. Coming face to face with all of it is unsettling.

After several seconds of heavy breathing, I peek over the top of the binding. He's gone. There is no trace of him at his special little table. I pull the book down a little further and look around cautiously. My lungs find equilibrium and I relax

back into the chair but continue my visual prowl. While I was deeply absorbed in stalking my prey, someone sat in the emerald green chair paired with mine.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi,” I reply distractedly. I peel away from my stalking to side-eye the source of the irritation. Evidently, I don’t make for a very good huntress because my prey has snuck up on me.

Woods sets his backpack down and almost smiles. He leans forward slightly and rests his elbows on his thighs, appearing far more casual than I feel. I lay my book down in my lap deliberately and am briefly paralyzed, both with the memories that his scent arouses—pun intended—as well as my indecision as to whether I hate him or lust for him.

Let’s go with hate, for now.

I clear my throat and greet him bitterly, “Oh. Hi.”

“Sylvie.” He says my name as though he’s said it a thousand times. “How is your book?” He retains that intense, mysterious energy, and I am indisputably attracted to it.

“It’s great,” I stutter. “One of my favorites.”

“That must be why you can read it upside down.”

I look down in confusion to see that it does, in fact, appear that I’ve been reading the book upside down. I slam it shut and toss it in my purse.

“I, um, like to challenge myself.” A blush braises my face. “Woods, right?” I pretend that I haven’t been repeating his

name in my mind for four days. “What are you doing here?” I ask as though I own the library.

“Yes, Woods. I studied here while I was finishing up my PhD this past spring, because it’s more... interesting than the university library.” Aha, PhD, so Ida was right. He *is* a doctor. Sexy and smart. “I still come here to do research. Old habits die hard.” He looks away as if he’s tired of looking at me.

What does a girl gotta do to become one of your old habits?
“So, you’re now a doctor of... ?”

“Astrophysics.”

“Wow. Stars,” I reply moronically.

“Yep.” He nods and appears to abandon the urge to smile.

I wonder why he hides like that. Probably just trying to make me feel better about being an idiot.

“What do you do now?” I ask the question passively, feigning disinterest. It doesn’t feel natural; I am deeply interested in everything about this man.

“I’m a research consultant.”

I’ll give you something to research. I bite my lip as I get lost in the fantasy of straddling his lap, slapping him across the face, and licking his cheek.

“I was going to text Sarah tonight and beg her for your phone number,” he interrupts my fantasy. “Now I don’t have to feel... so exposed.”

I raise my eyebrows and bite my knuckle to keep from laughing. *I'd like to see you exposed.* “Interesting choice of words.”

We stare at each other for ten whole seconds. I count them. I hear Mo's voice reminding me to *Be cool* and *Ride the wave*, and I take a breath. “So, is that something you do often?”

“What?”

“Insult someone you've never met, then surprise her by taking her to the brink of orgasm?” The energy between us is so palpable, I'm convinced the librarian will be walking over any second to politely request that we get a room.

“Were you on the brink?” His eyebrows raise in pleasant surprise.

Ugh, I'm so obvious. I roll my eyes, mostly at myself.

“But to answer your question, no. That's not something I often do, nor have *ever* done, for that matter.” He looks away. “There was something about you—there *is* something about you—that makes me want to be near you. It's your energy.” He is matter-of-fact, hardly an edge of emotion in his voice. All the while echoing my sentiments for him, which are chalk-full of emotion.

I cock my head. I'm suspicious he may have forgotten that I am the crazy girl covered in blood that approached him here at this very library. So I test him. “But we hardly interacted. Aside from your rude estimation of my intelligence and... you know.”

“That’s right.” Woods looks me up and down once, in a way that suggests he’s truly admiring me, and I am not remotely offended. He is a stone-cold, awkward weirdo and I’ve never been more intrigued.

“Are you sure it wasn’t just the champagne and chocolate cake?”

“How did you know I had champagne and chocolate cake?”

“I could taste it.”

“I could taste your champagne, too. And cheese.” *Right, the mac ‘n’ cheese. Mm, I could go for some of that gooey goodness right now.* There’s another long pause and our eyes still don’t wander from one another’s.

“You’re kind of strange,” I blurt out.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

The Candid Camera crew (is that even a show anymore?) is going to burst out any minute and tell me that this has all been a ruse, after which I’ll go back to my lonely apartment and cry myself to sleep. *Keep it together, Sylvie, keep it together!*

Woods interrupts my thoughts with another confession. “You’re all I’ve been able to think about.” He looks at me unsure, like he has said too much.

Meanwhile, I want to dance around the library, shouting that this super-hottie sniffed my neck like a lusty vampire and now

he is telling me he can't stop thinking about me. Definitely too many romance novels. I shake my head and smile.

He checks his watch. "I have to go, though."

No! I try to hide my dismay.

He stands to leave and swings his backpack over his shoulder. "Would you mind, uh, walking me out?" His eyebrows arch and he glances down. My heart softens at his discomfort. It's perplexing but endearing that a man *so* sexy is *so* awkward. How did he come to be?

"Oh! Um, sure."

I grab my purse and turn to see the giggling girls watch us leave. I walk slightly behind Woods so I can fumble through my purse for something to cover my salmon breath.

Eureka! An old piece of wrapperless gum. I brush off the crumbs and pop it in my mouth. Another thing I love about being an adult: always having gum in your purse. I rub on some peppermint-flavored chapstick. *That should do it.*

We exit out a side door I've never used before. This is clearly not a popular exit, as there is no one else around. I am acutely aware of how alone Woods and I are and feel the fluttering throughout my body. The sun has just set, creating a heather light, the air is still and warm, the odor of dirty city potent. Car horns and restless engines echo off the tall buildings.

"I'm not going to make the same mistake I made last time and leave here without your number," Woods says, his

eyebrows pulling together. “I wasn’t a proper gentleman before, and I apologize for that.” He takes out his phone, then looks at me. “Would you do me the honor of giving me your phone number?”

My fingers brush his as I nonchalantly take his phone and enter my number. “I don’t think anything about what you did that night was very gentlemanly.”

The line between his brows grows deeper in what seems to be concern. “It certainly wasn’t. I’m sorry.”

“I guess while you were busy in the world of academia, you missed some important social cues.” That seems to ease his concern, though inadvertently on my part because I only half meant it as jest.

He snorts out a micro laugh and runs his hand through his hair. “It’s true. I’m, uh, a little more unsure of myself than I used to be. That, and there are some social cues I just don’t give a fuck about.” And the plot thickens. “Are you, um, are you... attracted to me the way I’m attracted to you?”

“Wait, what?” I chortle in shocked amusement. As no man has ever bothered to ask whether or not I was attracted to him, I find this a very strange question. It ought to be obvious, but what I’m learning of Woods is that he doesn’t make assumptions. In an attempt to make sense of this trepidatious yet upfront man, I study his face and find sincerity in his query. “Did that door lead us to the Twilight Zone? Of course I’m attracted to you. Have I mentioned how strange you are?”

I say gently and touch his cheek. “And unpredictable, and captivatingly handsome. You’re also kind of mean—”

His bottom lips pouts out just a bit. “*Mean?*”

I ignore his confusion. “And impossible to figure out.” I squint my eyes and shake my head in wonder. “Precisely my type.” He subdues a smirk and runs his hand through his hair. “I’m feeling generous tonight, so I could keep going if you really need the ego boost.”

“That’s okay. You can save it for next time.”

I look at his lips. *Don’t kiss him, don’t kiss him, don’t kiss him.* “Are we going to make out now, then?” my mouth spits out.

Woods steps cautiously closer, putting his hands around my waist. My eyes circle his face, trying again to read him. There is something tragic about him. He must have so much baggage. Only a man with a boatload of baggage could be so unpredictable.

“Is that what you want?” he asks. He leans down to my neck and inhales, just as he did the first time we found ourselves in this position, then lifts his head back up until we are face to face.

Just one more time. I’ll kiss him one more time to get it out of my system, and then I’ll go back to dating responsibly and avoiding these lustful whims.

I forgo a verbal confirmation and press my peppermint lips to his. What starts as a delicate kiss quickly escalates. For a

moment, I am in control as I force his lips open with mine and slide my tongue in his mouth.

My hands have figured their shit out and reach up to tangle themselves in his soft, thick hair. Mmm, those curls. He takes the cue and pushes his strong, warm body up against mine. One hand is behind my neck, the other at the small of my back as he grips me tenaciously.

Here I am, Mo. Riding the wave. I lose track of my gum and breathe him in slowly. The taste and smell of him is tonic. My mind is yelling, “Touch me!” so loud that he must hear it telepathically because his hand starts up my shirt.

Too suddenly, Poetry Couple flings open the door and I jump, pushing my make-out buddy away. We’re both breathing heavily. They nod, annoyed, and continue walking. We must have stolen their canoodling spot.

“You have to go,” I remind Woods as I laugh. It goes without saying I don’t want him to leave.

“How do I know you didn’t give me the wrong phone number?” He pulls my gum out of his mouth and hands it back to me. I place it on my tongue seductively (if one can seductively return a chewed piece of gum to their mouth).

My interactions with this man are so straight-forward in that he says what he is thinking and does what he wants. Yet, he is more enigmatic than anyone I have ever met. I feel like if I don’t solve this puzzle, it’ll haunt me for the rest of my life.

“Hm. Well, since I’m nothing but a mindless wedding coordinator, I guess neither of us can be sure I entered my number correctly.” My snarky smile seals our exchange as I push him away a little further and start toward my apartment. Resisting the urge to turn around takes more willpower than I knew I had.

My phone vibrates ten minutes later. I want it to be Woods, but he wouldn’t have already texted me. That goes against all the rules and regulations men have imposed on themselves and each other.

If you gave me the wrong number, it’s going to torture me

I beam in delight. God bless an insecure man flipping a double bird to social expectations. I type, *Who’s this?*

I can sense the fear in his silence. The words *game, set, match* run through my head, despite that I’ve never played tennis.

Kidding. I wouldn’t do that to myself, I reply.

He sends a sweaty-face emoji. *What are you doing tomorrow night?*

I have to work

What time will you be done? I have rehearsal til 9

Rehearsal? I wonder what he will be rehearsing. Kissing me, hopefully. *It’s an early one, so I should be done around 10*

I’ll pick you up from The Garden at 10

He's asking me out on a proper date? *That's awfully close to my bedtime*

This will be worth staying up late for

I hesitate. This level of sexual attraction couldn't possibly lead to good decisions. It never does, unless it's in a Tessa Bailey book, in which case it will lead to the truest of true love. Getting involved with this guy any further than I already am is like strapping myself into an airplane knowing it very well may crash and burn.

I type out my reply. *Is that a threat or a promise?*

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Step 6: Resist lustful impulses.

I STOP ABRUPTLY AT the office door. Ida has a tall gentleman pushed up against her desk. Their lips are mutually locked (although he has to bend over quite a bit to meet hers), and her right leg is wrapped around his thigh.

“Ida?”

She whips around. “Sylvie, hi! I wasn’t expecting you yet.”

“Clearly,” I say jovially and nearly shriek in surprise when I get a look at the gentleman’s face. “Uncle Ron? I mean... Mr. Ron... Ron, it’s nice to see you again.” I clear my throat. “How have you been?”

He nods, politely responding, “I am well, thank you, Sylvie. And you?”

Ida wipes the smeared lipstick from her face and rearranges her hair. My face heats but my body is frozen. Except for my reflexive swallow, there’s not another sound in the room. Nothing witty comes to mind so I turn and nearly run to the back gardens.

I am fluttering around, trying to distract myself by preparing the outdoor ceremony site for today's wedding when Ida finally appears out the French doors. I put my hands on my hips and shake my head.

"Well, well, well, Ms. Goldberg. Doing the clients in your office now? So bold!"

As she approaches, her joy radiates, and I feel a flash of guilt for teasing her. "He wasn't a client, he was a wedding guest." She smiles.

"Aw, Ida." I rub her shoulders. "You really like him, don't you?"

"He's a pediatrician! And a very generous lover." She winks.

"Um, wow. That's certainly more information than I needed, but I'm really happy for you. You deserve generous love." A bee sting of jealousy zaps my chest, and I can't help but wonder if Woods is a generous lover.

Ida gives me a list of tasks then cocks her head. "You seem full of energy today. I can't imagine walking in on me climbing Ron could have been responsible."

"Well..." I draw out the word. "Guess who I'm seeing tonight after work?"

"Who? No! Shut up!"

Despite her staccato response, I know her train of thought. "Yes," I snicker. "... and he is Italian."

“Huh! That’s wonderful. What’s his name?”

“Woods.”

“Woods. Like a forest?”

“Like a forest.” Pathetically, I can actually feel my own eyes twinkle. “And guess what else? He *is* a doctor.”

“I knew it! I know a doctor when I see one.”

“... of astrophysics.” I roll my eyes at what seems like a bluff. “But a doctor, nonetheless.”

“As long as you can call him ‘Doctor’ in the bedroom, am I right? Is he a nice boy? Do you feel safe with him?” Ida goes from thrilled friend to protective mother.

“‘Nice’ is one way to put it.” I grin, remembering the way it felt to be pressed against him.

She shimmies her shoulders.

My smile falls and my heart swells in a sort of panic as I consider how absurd it is to think my luck has changed in the love department. Sure, Woods is captivating, and he seems into me, and I want to kiss him until our tongues fall off, but if life has taught me anything it’s that none of that guarantees a happy ending.

The wedding that follows is categorically disastrous. Weddings tend to amplify already complicated family dynamics, but this one is especially rough. The bride’s parents are divorced. And, while her father is on wife number three,

her mother never remarried nor did she relinquish the grudge she holds against her ex-husband.

In an attempt to loosen up before the ceremony, the mother of the bride had one too many sangrias at the hotel bar and arrives at the wedding late and tipsy. We get her some water and a coffee. She stumbles only once on the way to her seat, and manages to keep her eyes open in most of the family photos – two major victories.

During dinner service, the guests receive undercooked chicken and the mashed potatoes run out half way through. Fortunately, catering will shoulder the blame. *Unfortunately*, Ida and I are tasked with helping to remediate the problem.

We order twelve large pizzas from the parlor next door. They don't arrive until dinner service is done, but work as a late night snack for the hungry guests with sloshing bellies of liquor.

The DJ, whose girlfriend broke up with him earlier in the day, cries throughout most of his set.

My body tingles all night thinking about Woods' warm scent and soft lips, and I barely have enough mental energy to concentrate on what seems like wedding minutiae. Luckily, I am acting as assistant coordinator, so I can be a work zombie doing only what Ida directs me to do.

I check the time every fifteen minutes, and with each passing hour my stomach twists tighter in anticipation.

Because the guests over-indulged in the liquor too early and had little food to soak it up, the wedding ends earlier than scheduled.

I text Woods, *Done early!*

He responds immediately, *On my way*

I opted for a sexy black satin slip dress this afternoon, and kept it work-appropriate with black tights and my usual blazer. In the office, I untie my hair, rinse with mouthwash, take off my tights, remove my *Diet Burgundy* lipstick (so I don't get it all over Woods' face), and switch out my blazer for a light-wash denim jacket.

In the mirror, I roll my shoulders back, raise my chin slightly, and pucker my thin lips, building a detached and mysterious facade to match Woods'. Then, I practice a few cute giggles and pull my tiny boobs up higher in the lacy bra I ordered on eBay and spent thirty dollars to have expedited.

Woods is standing on the sidewalk checking his phone when I exit the front door of The Garden, and I cannot believe this tall drink of water is waiting for *me*.

He is camouflaged into the night with a very soft looking black shirt and a charcoal Members Only jacket.

He must rent his closet out to funeral-goers. Although, tonight he wears dark blue jeans.

"Hey," I say, trying to sound affable.

He looks up at me and grins. "Hi."

It's the first time I've seen him follow through with a toothy smile. The wall of detachment and mysteriousness I built exactly one minute ago is already a pile of rubble at my feet. "Oh, good, you have teeth. I was beginning to wonder."

"Would you like me less if I didn't have teeth?"

"Who said I like you?" I smile and look away. His face returns to its solemnity as he steps closer and puts a warm hand on my cheek. I lean into it in a way that is far more comfortable than I should be with a man I hardly know. My mind goes off the rails as I imagine the pressure of those strong fingers on the most sensitive parts of my body.

If this little fling continues after tonight, I'm going to have to get accustomed to being perpetually turned on.

"How was work?" he asks kindly.

"Long and weird."

"I would never want you to work at my wedding."

"What? Why would you say that?" *And why would you assume we aren't getting married to each other?* Piqued, I pull away from his hand. I still haven't decided if he's a jerk or just really fucking awkward.

"I just mean, you're so stunning. You easily outshine any bride."

"Aha, nice recovery. How long has it been since you paid a lady a compliment?" I try to raise one eyebrow at him.

"What are you doing with your forehead?" he asks.

“I’m lifting one eyebrow at you.”

“What, like this?” He arches one gorgeous, dark eyebrow at me.

I slide my thumb across it. “You can do it. So unfair. Well, can you do this with your tongue?” I make a clover shape with my tongue.

“Wouldn’t you like to know what I can do with my tongue?”

Very much so, yes. I glare playfully and start walking toward Guillermo. “*Buona sera, G.*” I hug him and he kisses my cheek.

“Good night, *bella*. You will get home safely, no?” he asks with paternal concern.

“Yes, I have a bodyguard.” I grab Woods’ arm and lose my breath at the hardness of his bicep. “This is Woods.”

Guillermo appears impressed and delighted (although, I’m not sure why), and shakes Woods’ hand. “You are a lucky man, Mr. Woods. The only woman I’ve seen more beautiful than this was my wife, God rest her soul.”

When Guillermo talks about his wife, which is often, he regards her as a Goddess whom he worshiped. Everything looks better in the rearview mirror, but I’d be willing to bet that what they had was *sui generis*. That he has just compared me to the woman who holds the most sacred spot in his heart moves me to tears.

“Aw, Guillermo.” I brush my fingers across my cheek and push my hair behind my ears.

Woods says something to Guillermo in Italian and now it's my turn to be impressed and delighted. Guillermo assembles a small bouquet of light pink roses and peonies—my favorites—and Woods pays the man in cash.

There's something chic and responsible about having enough cash money in one's wallet to actually pay for things. At any given time, I have only a few one dollar bills shoved haphazardly in my wallet, maybe a five, which is merely enough to hand out to homeless people when I've had a couple vodka sodas, as vodka morphs my spirit into a generous Gaia.

"Thank you." I put my nose in the bouquet and wave goodbye to Guillermo. "That was surprisingly nice of you."

"My mom made me watch *What Women Want* with her more times than I can count, so I'm now an expert in—"

"What women want," we say at the same time.

I laugh. "You speak Italian?"

"Only a little. My grandma is Italian."

"Mother's or father's mom?"

"Mother's."

"You are full of surprises, Dr.... Oh, shit I don't even know your last name!"

"Callahan. Fleetwood Callahan."

"Fleetwood? Is that a family name?" I hope my face doesn't betray my amusement.

“No, it’s not a family name.” He sighs. “But it’s a long story.”

“I’ll get it out of you later.” He gestures for me to go first as we climb the stairs of the parking garage. “What do you have planned for tonight?”

“There’s a meteor shower. I have a spot outside of the city with a good view, away from the light pollution.” *Fleetwood* opens the passenger door of a ridiculously lavish car.

I am awestruck. “Holy shit. This is your car? Isn’t this a Porsche Taycan?” While I love a fellow environmentalist driving an electric vehicle, this car is pompous.

“You know cars? Get in, m’lady,” he says and walks around to slide into the driver’s side.

I lower myself into the passenger seat and gape at the sheer *cleanness* of the interior of this car.

“My best friend is dating a girl who is into cars, so she’s been researching them to try to impress her. I really don’t know much, but I do know this car is... well... extravagant.”

He must sense I’m a little put off by such luxury. “Yeah, it’s a bit much. It was a graduation present.”

“From The Prince of Monaco?”

Woods snorts a soft laugh and messes with the sound system. There are all kinds of gadgets and buttons plus a screen with additional buttons and setting options. It reminds me of a washing machine with all the superfluous controls and

settings. It's like, where's the button I press to just wash my clothes?

There is no denying this car is beautiful, though. I suppose I could get used to it. If I had to. I rest my bouquet on the center console.

"I have a more reasonable car I usually drive. I guess it was presumptuous of me to think you'd be dazzled by this one. I was hoping to impress you, not give further evidence to your opinion of me being a jerk."

Did I call him a jerk aloud? He smiles again. Definitely not toothless.

"What's a more reasonable car?"

"A Tesla."

I practice raising one eyebrow again and he does it back to me with much more grace. It occurs to me that I know nothing of the Prince of Monaco and that perhaps Woods is he. "Just my Imagination (Running Away With Me)" by The Temptations starts playing on the sound system as he reverses out of the parking spot.

"I did not peg you for a Motown person. I love this song." More quietly, I add, "My imagination is always running away with me."

"Mine, too. What kind of music did you think I listened to?"

"I don't know. Something dissonant and angry, lots of screaming." He responds with a sexy, almost rugged chuckle and I tell him, "You should laugh more often." His smile fades

and he seems to be lost in thought, and I'm not sure if I've said something wrong, so I rib, "Have you had sex in here?" to lighten the mood.

"In this car?"

I nod.

"Not yet."

I smirk to myself and am about to announce, *I'd be happy to change that*. It would be a joke, of course, because I'm definitely not having sex with him. I glance up to find him glowering at me, just as he did the first time I spoke to him at the library and subsequently squeezed his arm at the wedding, his suspicions of my brainlessness seemingly confirmed.

As a ditzy blonde who never finished college, I am hypersensitive to people thinking of me as "dumb" or akin thereof. I can recognize the look on someone's face when they're inwardly defining me as such. (It's yet to be confirmed that I am, in fact, a mind-reader, but I fancy myself one.)

Woods and I clearly have an undefinable physical connection, but why did he ask me out if he finds me so intellectually lacking?

A knot forms in my throat. *He's realizing this was a mistake*. We are pulling through the exit of the parking garage. This would be the ideal time for me to hop out and walk home, so I might as well just ask him before he's stuck on a date with a dumb blonde who's not even planning to put out (not that he's aware of that part).

“Why do you look at me like that?” I ask. I attempt to maintain eye contact but get spooked and look down at my fidgeting hands.

“Like what?” he asks.

“Like you think I’m a total idiot.” I laugh it out hoping to cover the quaver in my voice and look back in his direction. I’m telepathically saying, *It’s ok! We don’t have to do this. We can ~~make out~~ [insert wholesome date activity here] real quick and then you can drop me off at home.*

“No,” Woods says quickly and rests his hand under my chin in a sweet gesture. I’m worried the automatic barricade of the parking garage exit is going to come down on his fancy car. How do those things know when the coast is clear? He continues, “That’s not– Sorry. I, um... I was looking at you like that because you’re different than I expected.” He pushes my hair out of my face. “You’re *unexpected*... and funny.”

“Ok.” I don’t believe him, but I’m willing to pretend. “People commonly laugh when something is funny.”

“I guess it’s been a while since I did that.”

I pull away from his hand and sit up straighter. “So, you’re like the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*?”

“Yelling and clawing furniture and eating soup like a maniac?”

I laugh, but the energy has changed. We are silent as the song plays out and a new one begins. My responsibility to others’ emotional well-being says I need to reestablish a

lighter mood, but also my guard, so I pick up my phone and say his name aloud as I search for him on Instagram.

“Damn. ‘This account is private.’” I’m not entirely convinced he would accept, but what the hell, I’ve got nothing to lose. I hit *Request to Follow* and his phone pings.

“Are you trying to stalk me mid-date?” He accepts my request.

“I have to make sure you’re not a murderer, or worse, an influencer.”

“If I were a murderer I wouldn’t post it on Instagram.”

“Touché. Wow! There you are in...” I squint and look more closely. “... Italy!” I scroll his grid. “And, oh my, look at that *babe*. Who is she?” I scroll further. “Hmm, no topless photos, unfortunately.”

“Is that what you’re looking for?”

“Did I say that out loud?”

Woods drives us through the city at a responsible speed. Surely, when we are out of city limits he will pick up the pace. But, to my surprise, he stays within the posted speed limit on the empty, dark road. A car like *this* being driven like a four-cylinder Honda is unreasonable, even to a car novice like myself.

He steers with his left hand while his right elbow rests on the console next to my flowers and his fingers stroke across his chin contemplatively. I find that a man looking so at ease driving a death trap is soothing and sexy.

“Are you afraid to drive fast?” I tease.

“I don’t like to be reckless.”

“That’s okay.” I pat his knee in mock reassurance. “My grandma doesn’t, either.” He scoffs and hits the gas. We accelerate around the twists and turns of the dark road so fast I am forced against my seat. Although it’s exhilarating, I regret my badgering. “I didn’t mean for you to try to kill me,” I joke when he’s slowed the car again.

For the briefest moment, his face is pained before he quietly says, “There’s still plenty of time to try to kill you,” the way a real murderer would, then, “We’re here!” with the joy of a middle-aged dad on a road trip.

And I’m unexpected? I’m not put-off by his creepy comment—that’s what *Twilight* has done to me—but, like a responsible adult woman who is on a date with a stranger in the middle of nowhere should, I send Mo a pin of my location as Woods jogs around to open the passenger door.

I secure my knees together in an attempt to exit the car gracefully without revealing my underwear. It’s only to keep up ladylike appearances, however; I couldn’t care less if he sees my underwear.

From the trunk of the car, Woods pulls out what appears to be a handmade quilt, a bottle of wine and two stemless glasses. He hands me the wine bottle and lays out the quilt on a nearby patch of grass. The wine label reads *Callahan Estates 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon*.

“That’s funny, it’s your name. Is that why you chose it?”

We sit, and he twists the corkscrew in and pops the cork out of the bottle faster than I’ve ever seen. “My, uh, parents own a vineyard in Sonoma. This is their wine.”

“Oh my God!”

Startled by my boisterous reaction, he asks, “Is everything ok?”

Because I can’t think of anything to say that won’t make me sound like a provincial fool, I swirl the wine in my glass, sniff, and take a sip. The rich, tannic fermented beverage coats my mouth like butter, leaving behind the smell of flowers. It’s the best Cabernet I have ever had, which isn’t saying much considering a \$12.99 bottle is the top of my typical expenditure. Anything above that is a major splurge.

“Oh, an aspiring sommelier, I see.” He sips from his glass without all the fluff.

“Now I’m just trying to impress *you*.”

He returns to the trunk and lifts out a telescope—the act of which brings to mind the classic scene where Mary Poppins retrieves oversized objects from an undersized receptacle—and proceeds to set it up on a tripod. He messes with the knobs as he looks through the eyepiece.

I text Mo, *His parents own a vineyard!*

“Come look.” He beckons me over and indicates various planets and stars for me to observe.

I toss my hair to the side to get it out of the way and look through the eyepiece. “Stellar,” I say. I couldn’t wait to use that one.

“Ha!”

“Laughing when something is funny. See? You’re getting the hang of it,” I respond, without moving my eye away from the eyepiece.

I took an introductory astronomy class in college, but Woods is gifting me with my own private planetarium presentation.

One of the traits that attracts me most to a person is their instinct to teach me something, even if it’s silly or unusual. It shows passion and patience, both of which are helpful in dealing with yours truly. But also, what fulfills us personally can be a rather intimate thing; it is a vulnerable action, inviting someone in to witness that.

Woods and I meander back to the blanket for the main event: the meteor shower (not a make out session).

I nest my near-empty glass into the grass and lay back. “Ok, Dr. Callahan, what else have you got for me?” He takes off his jacket and rolls it neatly into a log, placing it gently under my head like a pillow. “Why, thank you, kind sir.” Woods’ scent wafts from my fashioned headrest, and now I have a view of his magnificent arms for which I am more grateful than the pillow. “I didn’t notice that one before.” I point to a tattoo of a wolf on his left forearm.

Instead of explaining the tattoo, he lies down next to me and grabs my hand and, per usual when he is near, I am tingling. He points out a few of the more well-known constellations—Ursa Minor, the Dippers, Orion’s Belt—before directing our gaze toward the meteor shower.

Like trying to estimate where a fish will next jump from a lake, I catch only the tail-end of one meteor, then another, until the showering meteors are too plentiful to miss. As a kid, I remember a pretty sky full of stars during family camping trips, but this... this is electrifying – endless twinkling lights and shooting stars.

The harmony of the universe is creating a swirling sensation at the crown of my head. It is simply magical, and I feel connected to a grander energy I can’t explain.

“This reminds me of the sky back home,” Woods explains and turns his head to gauge my interest. “Oh no, I’ve bored you to tears.”

Indeed, my eyes have sprung with tears, but it is in reaction to the glory of it all. “No!” I laugh and wipe my tears. “Not bored. It’s breathtaking.”

“Good, that’s the reaction I was hoping for.”

Woods pushes himself up on his elbow and takes a sip of his wine. I do the same. “Aside from how obviously beautiful this is, why did you decide to become an astrophysicist?”

“Growing up, my little sister and I used to sit out on the back patio for hours just watching the stars move across the

sky. I was always fascinated by outer space and space travel.” He pauses momentarily. “In my senior philosophy seminar I came across this quote by Boethius, ‘Contemplate the extent and stability of the heavens, and then at last cease to admire worthless things.’ And that expressed what I had always felt as a kid looking up at the sky, but didn’t know how to articulate.”

I scoot closer so that when we lie back down I can rest my head on him. He is solid but cushiony as he wraps his arm around me. It’s eerily quiet, and in trying not to breathe too loud, I stop breathing entirely.

“I think what fascinates me the most...” he continues, and I pick up breathing again, “...is that this is above us all the time. We get so caught up in life on Earth that we don’t think about how much is happening out there. We just forget to look up.”

He’s so deep. I am wrecked from stardust and my growing affection for this guy. My finger traces his full lips and he brushes a missed tear from my cheek. I really shouldn’t kiss him, but I grab the collar of his shirt and pull him to me. Every time I lick his mouth, he tastes better. I throw my leg around his hip. Fortunately, his lusty desire matches mine. He sits up and pulls me with him until I am straddling his lap.

My mini dress is up around my hips and I can feel him getting harder through his jeans as our kiss gets more desperate. *Who cares if he thinks I’m dumb.* I run a hand down one of his perfectly sculpted biceps and lace the other through his hair, giving it a soft tug. He breathes out, almost moaning,

and pulls my ass in closer until his rock hard muscle is rooted against my wet panties, then moves me back and forth slightly.

There is nothing dry about this humping.

I tug his shirt up so my hands can explore. Each ab muscle is as hard as his penis, and my fingers run along the trails between them. Just as I hook my finger in the waist of his pants, a set of headlights zooms past us on the road. We both jump with the harsh reminder of the world outside our lust bubble.

“Oh, shit,” we say simultaneously, our laughter trembling.

He looks from the road to me and gives my ass a little squeeze before moving his hands to put his fingers in my hair. “You glow.”

I laugh and inspect my legs. “I know! God, I’m practically neon.” It’s been some time since I’ve felt uncomfortable about my skin color.

“I mean your skin, your hair, your eyes, all of you just glows. You’re like a star.” *How wonderfully cheesy.* “I know I didn’t say it eloquently before, but... you are seriously beautiful.” He kisses my lips softly once more then puts his nose to my neck for an inhale.

“Why do you do that?” I whisper. *And, why have I never fully appreciated the eroticism of a man’s breath on my neck?*

“Because I’ve never smelled anything so delicious in my life. It’s like woman and cookies and sex all in one. I can’t get enough.”

“Well, you know what they say: everything in moderation.”

He inhales once more, then easily moves my hips from his lap to the spot next to him. We look at each other then back up at the stars. The energy between us has been galvanized—a vibrant, crackling rope of sexual electricity.

The entire drive back into town I lean my head on the seat and watch Woods drive. I let it slip that I am imagining him naked in the driver’s seat. The thought I do not share with him is that there is definitive concern that I am going to leave a small puddle of “pleasure juice” in his passenger seat as I give him directions to my apartment. He parks the Porsche in front of my building and opens his door to get out.

“You don’t have to get out.”

“Of course I do. You think I’d let a woman kiss me like that and then dump her on the curb?” He goes around to open the door for me. If he keeps this up I’m going to lose my door-opening faculties. Briefly, I get a vision of being trapped in an unlocked car with no idea how to escape.

After walking me all the way to my front door, he holds my flowers while I fumble through my purse for my door key. I am flushed, giddy, and exhausted, like I’m coming down from an emotionally rewarding psychedelic trip, which I kind of am.

“When can I see you again?” His words are laced with fervor.

I locate my key but can barely get it in the lock. My sex drive is threatening to override my resolution. Everything in

me wants to say, *Come in, stay forever, I'll call in sick for the next two weeks and we can have sex on every surface of my apartment.* But I remind myself that this is probably just infatuation, and a distraction from my new, practical approach to dating.

“Um, I have to work and get some stuff done around here for most of the weekend, but I'm free Sunday.”

“That's too long.”

I shrug and grin drunkenly. “Duty calls.”

He sighs. “Ok. I'll pick you up Sunday afternoon.”

“I'll drive to you. My Prius could probably use the road trip.” I say it like I'm describing a sexual fantasy and look at his lips. I recently brought my bank account dangerously close to zero when I decided to treat myself to a brand new Prius. (Well, it's seven years old, but for me that's brand new.) However, I only use it when a journey necessitates driving or I'm feeling lazy.

“I insist,” he says.

Fleetwood Callahan gives me one last kiss, thick with lust, and turns to leave. I lock the door behind me and head straight for my room, flipping the window air conditioner unit on as I do. After dragging my dress up over my head, I crawl under the cool sheet and am asleep before my head hits the pillow.

Step 7: Avoid wine, pasta, handsome men who play acoustic guitar, and other aphrodisiacs.

I DA IS AWAY ON a spontaneous trip with Ron, and the only thing that got me through work this weekend were the explicit text messages Mo and I exchanged regarding our sex lives. She and Ivy have given Mo's strap-on a name, Mo Diddy. Gentlemen may not kiss and tell, but ladies sure do.

Additionally, Woods sent me a couple songs he says make him think of me. However hard I try not to overthink the gesture, I do hope he means for me to take the lyrics literally.

"These are fun," I say to my reflection in the mirror as I pull on some red shorts (not too short, because I'm thirty now). Since I have been in stuffy black attire all weekend, I pair the shorts with a white boho blouse that hangs off my shoulders. I debate whether or not to wear a strapless bra and decide against it, as there are few physical pleasures comparable to that of titty freedom.

I tousle my hair with some dry shampoo, then blow out my new cedarwood and vetiver candle on the way to answer the light knock on the door.

“Hi.” I fear the breathiness in my voice gives away that I’m nervous.

Woods peeks down quickly, trying to hide that he’s checking me out. “Hey.”

Before I can welcome him into my home, he playfully kicks the door closed behind him and places his hands on either side of my neck, tilting my head up to gain better access to my mouth. His lips smash against mine and it’s like fireworks are going off. My vagina shivers awake.

It was a fool’s errand to think a couple days away from him would dim the current between us. He bites my bottom lip and traces his hands down my neck, over my shirt, until he reaches my unrestrained breasts.

“Ugh,” he groans in pleasurable distress. I reach down to the indisputable hardness representing said distress. All it took was two days apart and being braless to have him wrapped around my finger. Women have so much more power than we realize.

Woods gives my breasts a tender squeeze and I return the favor. The feeling of his hands on me—a delicacy I can only afford modest amounts of for fear of over-indulging—is more than I can handle and we both feel my nipples harden.

He sniffs the air. “It smells great in here.”

Does he notice it smells like him? I bought the candle at Target yesterday after smelling every single one in the aisle. I

was high on essential oil fragrance by the time I got to the self-checkout.

Changing the subject, I say, “You haven’t been inside my apartment. This is it!”

My five-hundred square foot abode glows a lovely marigold, the sun reflecting off the dust specks floating around the eclectic decorative gems I’ve found at thrift stores and flea markets: a bubblegum pink mid-century chair, a floral woven area rug, a bamboo shelf full of books, trinkets, and a small pile of junk, among other things.

I hadn’t noticed until now how feminine my living space is. It’s tidy, but not squeaky clean. The dozen house plants pull it all together.

I guide Woods through to the less tidy bedroom. This room has light blue walls and only receives morning sun, giving it a cooler feel by this time in the afternoon. The vine of a decade-old pothos plant drapes across the bed’s headboard. During the summer, I use only a top sheet, which I carelessly parachuted over my bed this morning. A few articles of clothing are scattered about, and disorderly piles of partially-read books are stacked atop my bedside table and dresser.

“No blanket?” Woods cocks his head minimally and his eyebrows pull together in question.

“Not in the summer. I have warm Viking blood,” I say proudly.

Jake The Adrenaline Junkie jokingly called me a bedwetter, because it's unusual for me not to wake in a cold sweat. But that's a detail about myself that I like to let my bedmates find out firsthand. There's nothing sexier than waking up in someone else's sweat, right?

Back through the living area is a small galley kitchen opposite an over-sized bathroom with gray and white hexagon-tiled floor and a small claw-foot tub. Originally a hotel, my building is one of the oldest in Denver. The For Rent advertisement I replied to described it as "vintage."

Woods nods. "It's very you." He doesn't know me well enough to know how much my apartment reflects my personality, but I don't contest. "You still up for coming to my place? I wanted to make you pasta."

My hand waves away even the slight notion of staying here. "God, yes. Give me pasta or give me death!"

He catches my hand and we're out the door.

My shoulders droop in disappointment when I see the Tesla parked out front. "You didn't bring the Porsche."

"You don't like the Porsche."

"I like the Porsche. It's just a bit pompous. Like you."

"I'm not pompous." He manages to pout and smile at the same time.

"Ok. Well, since you brought your lousy old Tesla, can I drive?"

“No, no, no.”

“Why not? I’m a great driver... and really good with technology.” Bold face lies. He contemplates. “Please.” I give him my cutest smile.

“Ok.” He concedes, shaking his head with reluctance. I skip to the driver’s side, grinning. With his hands on his hips, Woods stands outside the passenger door.

“Get in!” I’m still grinning.

“I’m waiting for my date to open the door for me.”

I gasp for dramatic effect. “Why, please excuse my lack of manners, gentle sir.”

What feels like a full minute passes as I move the seat forward far enough to reach the pedals and adjust the mirrors. “Just some minor adjustments.” I wink at Woods, self-satisfied. My fingers wiggle over all the buttons and I look around for an ignition. “How the fuck do I start this thing?”

“I thought you were really good with technology. Just start driving.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hit the brake and use the stalk to put it in gear.” He taps on the stick poking out from the steering wheel.

“The stick.”

“No, the stalk.”

“That’s what I said.” A sexy R&B song blares from the sound system when I hit the brake. “Whoa, nelly! How do I

turn it down?” I panic and tap the touch screen erratically.

“I got it, I got it. Just pay attention to the road.”

“Isn’t that a little loud for you, grandma?”

“I forgot my hearing aids.”

We lurch to a stop at a red light. “Oops! Touchy brakes, huh?”

“Oh my God,” Woods whispers. His knuckles are experiencing a complete lack of blood flow as he grips his knees.

“Chill out, bud. You’re as freaked out as my mom was when I was learning how to drive.” I tousle his hair playfully. It’s impossible to pull my hand away from his soft curls. *Note to self: get a look at this guy’s conditioner.* I lean over and whisper breathily, “So, Fleetwood, how did you get such an unusual name?”

“Is your foot on the brake?”

“Of course my foot is on the brake. Don’t these cars drive themselves, anyway?”

Every time he smiles it gets more mesmerizing and I feel myself unraveling anew.

“You didn’t forget,” he says and puts his hand over his eyes. I shake my head. “It’s not a very interesting story. Green.”

“Green?”

“The light.”

“Oh, sorry.” The car lurches forward. “I still want to hear it.”

“Fine, but don’t laugh. And, let me preface this short tale by saying my parents were hippies. After they got married, for their honeymoon, they bought a cheap travel trailer and road tripped around the country.”

“I love that! How sweet.” Silence. “So where do you fit in?”

“The trailer was a Fleetwood, and I was, you know... conceived... in it.”

My guffaw echoes around the car.

“Also, Fleetwood Mac. No explanation necessary.” Woods turns his face to the window to hide that he’s laughing with me. “You said you wouldn’t laugh.”

I nudge his elbow with mine. “Incredible story. How many people know this about you?”

“Basically no one. It’s immensely embarrassing, and I try not to think about my parents...” he cringes, “...conceiving me.”

“It’s part of your origin story! Nothing to be embarrassed about, but your secret is safe with me,” I say reassuringly.

“I have much bigger secrets than that.”

“Oh? What does a girl have to do to hear the *big* secrets?”

He squeezes my thigh. At the next red light, I pick up his hand for examination, running my fingers over the smooth skin and protruding veins, then over the large knuckles of each

finger. His fingernails are perfectly trimmed, not a speck of dirt. There is a paper cut on the inside of his thumb. Probably from turning the pages of his textbook so furiously. His large hand is heavy in mine and I imagine the weight of it all over me.

Hands are a crucial part of my attraction to a man. They should have a particular shape and a specific feel when I slide my fingers between them. After inspection, I can conclude that Woods' hands are perfect. I place his ring finger on my tongue then very slowly wrap my lips around it and slide it all the way down to the first knuckle and back up. He shudders.

There's no doubt that my feelings for Woods are growing rapidly. I feel like Audrey II from *Little Shop of Horrors*. Soon, I'm going to be a giant, man-eating Venus Flytrap about to smother Woods to death; instead of yelling, "Feed me," I'll be yelling, "Love me forever!"

Quelling these feelings is going to be the ultimate test of my recovery from hopeless romanticism. As I'm prone to infatuation and jumping in too fast, I *have* to remember this doesn't mean anything. It's just chemistry and infatuation.

I return his hand to the console in an attempt to create physical distance. He tries to read my face—which I maintain at full poker—then replaces his hand on my thigh.

"Do you know what your name means?" His blithe tone is a welcome redirection from the contradictory atmosphere I've created of intense sexual energy and forced withdrawal.

"I think it's something about a forest nymph?"

“Close. It means *spirit of the wood*.”

“You looked it up?” I ask and he nods. “Well, that’s certainly significant...” Chills skitter down my arms. That hint of destiny—that serendipitous detail that seemingly connects us—is what I needed to finally admit to myself that, despite my best efforts, perhaps this could be more than chemistry and infatuation.



In his building, leaning against the elevator handrail, I watch Woods’ thumb slide over the screen of his phone. His fitted t-shirt is very nearly black, but has a green hue. My breathing picks up thinking about what’s underneath the fabric.

I make a bid for his attention. “Your shirt is bordering dangerously close to green today. I’ve only ever seen you in black.”

He looks up from his phone and smirks. “What can I say, Ms. Hanson? People change.”

My phone pings with an Instagram notification. A one, *Woods Callahan*, has requested to follow me. I mask my joy by pretending to contemplate, then tap *Accept*.

He grabs my cold, clammy hand as we step off the elevator and guides me quickly down the hall. If he had blindfolded me and kept the destination a surprise (now I’m daydreaming about being blindfolded in one of his fancy cars), I would guess we were in a Best Western Plus. It’s not fancy, per se, but it’s nicer than a Best Western without the Plus.

Just before arriving at the door at the end of the hallway, we pass a very pretty woman, maybe in her mid-forties, who appears to be fixing something on the frame of her door.

She perks up when she sees him: back straightens, eyes widen, chin tilts demurely. “Oh, hi Woods!” she says.

“Hello.” Woods nods politely and pulls me past as I wave. A flash of what might be disappointment crosses her face.

“Who’s that? You were kind of rude,” I whisper.

“My neighbor, Jennifer. We slept together once.” His confession is as nonchalant as the way he unlocks the door.

Awe and jealousy saturate my blood. “Ah, I see.” *Stay cool, Sylvie.*

Woods flips a switch, casting his stunning apartment in dimmed lighting. The air is sweaty with the aroma of oregano and tomatoes that must have been cooking for hours. Any other time and I would think I’d just entered heaven, but I’m too distracted trying and failing to smother the embers of envy to truly appreciate it.

Unfortunately, jealousy is one of my constitutional emotions. Often, I can’t even look through a *House Beautiful* magazine or scroll social media without feeling like my life is totally inadequate. But why I’m having a rather intense jealous moment—regarding a man with whom I have only a physical connection and a woman he was allegedly intimate with only once—is disorienting.

Against my better judgment, as Woods puts on soft, soothing jazz music, I say, “And does *Jessica* still make a guest appearance in your bed?” It’s more an accusation than a question, and now I’ve shown my cards.

“Jennifer. No, it was a one time thing. I’m not going to say it meant nothing, because she is kind and attractive and that would be rude, but it’s not something she and I will be repeating.”

I’m not sure if it’s because he called her attractive or because he used the phrase “she and I,” but I’m in serious danger of *becoming* a green-eyed monster. I try to keep my tone curious as I ask, “How long ago did you sleep with her? Was it at your place or hers?”

The details of his romp with Jennifer are hardly my business. In fact, they’re not my business at all, but I can’t help myself, and I’ve escalated the situation to awkward and humiliating.

At once chuckling and frowning, he takes my face in his hands. “A few months ago. Hers. Are you... jealous?” His smile pulls up on one side when I blush. His grip, though gentle, is preventing me from moving my face, so I look down in an attempt to hide. “Trust me, *you* have nothing to be jealous of.” He gives me a few sweet kisses then kicks it up a notch, his tongue easily advancing and retreating from my mouth. I’m worried my knees might give out when he pulls away. “If I’m lucky, you’re the only one who will be making a guest appearance in my bed.”

Wow. My head is spinning, but I suppose we've settled that. I remove my gladiator sandals to embark on a self-guided tour of his apartment, as he heads into the kitchen.

Like his musical taste, Woods' home is unexpected. Warm and colorful. Being on the top floor of the building allows space for vaulted ceilings and large windows, giving the place a feeling of regality. A leather sofa sits in the middle of the living room, adorned with brightly colored and patterned pillows to match the expensive-looking Aztec rug.

I run my fingers over the knots of a live edge wood coffee table. A miniature tabletop water fountain bubbles nearby. Throughout are some steel-made shelves and decorative pieces for a masculine touch. The place is clean, but not sterile, and I am relieved not to be in the man-cave of an American Psycho.

Woods is watching me curiously as I stop to look at some photos on a bookshelf. In a picture that must have been taken in college, I recognize Jimmy and a few other wedding attendees standing alongside Woods.

I look longest at a yellowed picture taken of Woods with who I assume is his immediate family. The four beaming faces are sun-kissed and free of worry as they sit casually around a patio table in warm-weather clothes. Woods' lovely Italian features are clearly inherited from his mom, while the young woman seated next to him in the photo has a slightly lighter complexion and blue-gray eyes, like their dad.

I move from the photos to peruse Woods' book collection, the bulk of which is astronomy textbooks.

“My mom came out to decorate after I bought it,” he explains, unsolicited. “She thought I’d get homesick so she made it look similar to our house in Sonoma. They have since redone their house, though.”

“You *own* this place?” Why would it surprise me that a man who owns both a Tesla and a Porsche and has access to unlimited wine purchased his own apartment?

I saunter past his bedroom pretending not to look too interested. The walls are painted dark gray and the furnishings and decor are minimal. I smile at the wood canopy bed that sits squarely against the window, made with only a flat sheet, no comforter or blanket, just as I prefer my own bed in the summer. No wonder he was intrigued.

“God, I always wanted a canopy bed,” I say loud enough for him to hear from the kitchen.

I slip into the bathroom and take my time peeing, peeking into the shower to inspect his conditioner. It’s some brand I’ve never heard of – probably expensive. I wash my hands leisurely before opening the medicine cabinet. Naturally, the cabinet must be checked as I’m still not entirely convinced Woods is not a murderer or a vampire, the latter of which I’d be really into.

Anyway, it’s just the usual stuff here: Ibuprofen, toothpaste, shaving supplies. There is also a pink hair tie. *Hm, I wonder if that’s a souvenir from his time with Jennifer.* Even the way I say her name in my head is ridiculous.

I close the cabinet and examine my reflection, sliding an index finger over my imperfections. Nothing catastrophic, but sources of annoyance nonetheless: faint under eye puffiness, fine lines forming between my eyebrows, the hint of a zit on my chin.

Sometimes, when I look in the mirror I think how strange it is that our family and friends know the nuances of our face better than we do—the way our mouth turns down when we're sad or our eyes glisten when we're moved, the way our eyebrows crinkle for a fraction of a second when we're lying.

I've only begun to know the slight imperfections and variations of Woods' face, and I find myself wanting to know them further.

After drying my hands, I stand at the bathroom door for a moment, watching him assemble a pasta maker. His expression is the same one he wore at the library while concentrating on his research. His eyebrows pinch together, forming a very thin wrinkle that disappears almost completely when he relaxes them (which I'm certain is thanks to his olive oil-saturated DNA), his plush lips press together, and his nostrils flare ever-so-slightly.

“Are you trying to initiate a staring contest?” he asks without looking away from the pasta maker.

“I wouldn't want to beat a man at his favorite game in his own home.” I meet him in the kitchen and he cracks a smile. “There's something about watching someone just *being* in their home, you know? It's kind of like seeing your favorite

musician live. Sure, you enjoy listening to them on your headphones at work or as background music while you cook, but when you see them in person it changes how you see them, don't you think? They're vulnerable... and real."

Woods is gathering the ingredients: flour, eggs, olive oil, salt. "You found my stash of hallucinogens in the bathroom cabinet, didn't you?"

Like a predictable phantom, blushing has haunted me since childhood, her provocation often made worse by how *easily* I am embarrassed. I turn my head away from Woods until the heat in my cheeks subsides, then change the subject.

"When you said pasta, you meant *pasta*. Italian food is my favorite."

"Is it really your favorite?"

"Hell yeah! I would eat Italian food every day if I could, but I usually settle for bread and cheese in less appetizing forms."

Woods steps in front of me and rests his flour-covered hands on my neck. You know how when a guy's hands are so large that his palms rest on your neck, but his thumbs reach all the way to your cheeks and his fingers are tangled in your hair? He could manipulate my beautiful little eight-pound head anyway he wants but he cradles it gently and pulls my face closer to his.

"I do know what you mean... about watching someone in their home. That's why I started watching you through your window."

“Ha! I wish.”

Without a kiss, a sniff, or even a brush of his nose against mine, Woods releases my face. It leaves me wanting and I wonder if that was his intention. He pours each of us some wine and proceeds to make a mountain of flour on a cutting board, digging out a nest in the middle, then cracks three eggs into the nest and pours in some olive oil and Mediterranean sea salt. The flour walls remain perfectly intact as he whisks the eggs together, next combining the ingredients with his hands.

I sip my wine cautiously. Consuming alcohol around this gorgeous Italian freak is a bad idea. “You’re really good with your hands.”

“So good,” he confirms.

“I’ve been imagining what those fingers would feel like...”
I lift my eyebrows at him.

“On your earlobes?”

I laugh. “Somewhere with more nerve endings.” Talking to him like this is easy and fun.

Once the ingredients are combined into a shaggy ball, he grabs my waist and slides me into place to knead the dough, then puts a pot of water on to boil. When I’ve worked the dough into a smooth ball, he instructs me to wrap it in a cloth to sit for thirty minutes.

“Cheese?” he asks, unwrapping a natural-rinded cheese and slicing a few slivers.

“Absolutely. I like my cheese like I like my men... Hard.” I’m beginning to sound like the star of the world’s worst porno film. “Sorry,” I laugh, “that one was bad.”

While the pasta dough rests and I implore myself to eat the sweet and salty cheese less aggressively than I would if I were alone, I recall for Woods some of the most memorable of The Garden’s wedding mishaps and reflect on Feather’s impromptu speech at Sarah and Jimmy’s wedding.

Woods is relaxed, even jubilant, as he tells me a story from a familial wedding at his family’s villa in Sicilia in which he, then eleven years old, and his slightly older cousin loosened the straps of the walkable pool cover causing two dozen guests to fall in the water. I laugh, though preoccupied by the idea that a guy this handsome with a family home in Sicilia is way out of my league.

Yet, we’re on our second date. These last two encounters *have* been dates, right?

Woods runs the dough through the pasta maker until it forms perfect fettuccine noodles. I push myself up onto the counter so I am closer to his eye level. He carefully places the fresh pasta in the boiling water then moves to stand in front of me. The combination of *vino*, hard cheese, and the promise of fresh pasta means I can’t resist him any longer.

I open my knees and pull him closer by his waistband. He puts a tiny drop of olive oil on his right thumb and swipes it across my lips. I lick it off and kiss him tenderly. His hands squeeze up my thighs until they rest just under my shorts.

I shiver and bite his lip, then say, “I could slather you in olive oil and eat you for my first course.”

“You’re on fire tonight,” he whispers.

“You have no idea how fiery I feel right now,” I whisper back and lick his cheek.

He drips another drop of olive oil on his thumb, and reaches his hand under my shorts. I really like where this is going. I put my arms around his neck and pull his mouth to mine roughly. He smiles against my lips as his thumb travels beneath my panties until he reaches his destination. I whimper into his mouth. Just as I imagined they would be, his large fingers are soft, the weight of them heavy against my clit. I swear I can almost feel the minute fingerprint pattern of his thumb as it performs two slow circles.

“Oh, Dr. Callahan,” I moan, half joking. He picks up the pace. I try to keep my whimpers and moans as sexy as possible, but I am so starved for sensual touch that I start yelling, “Yes, yes, yes!” This will not take long. In fact, it’s almost done, and I’m going to be fiending for more.

“*Ti desidero,*” he says softly in my ear then pulls his head back and holds my face tenderly so he can watch me. His thumb enters my opening then travels back up, completing a few more circles.

I hold onto his neck for dear life. “Fleetwood,” I say breathily as my whole body tenses in pleasure.

His thumb continues circling slowly until my muscles relax. He kisses my cheek and licks his thumb. *Jesus, that's hot.* I drop my head, too weak with post-orgasm pleasure to hold it up, and grip the counter.

“Are you always going to say my name like that?” he asks. I can actually *hear* him beaming, no doubt at his ability to get the job done so quickly.

“If you keep touching me like that,” I murmur.

“Well, shit.” He lifts my face, examining its features like there's something to decode. There is not, I'm a completely open book. “You're so pretty after I make you come. Dinner is ready.” He lifts me off the counter by my waist, and I am high on him.

I text Mo, *Shit. I think I might really like him.*

I lounge on Woods' sofa with my feet curled up and a blanket draped over me. No matter the season, the coolness of a leather sofa requires a blanket. I'm flipping through a copy of *Astronomy Magazine*, very little of which I comprehend, when Woods sits down next to me, placing two slices of flourless chocolate cake and two glasses of champagne on the table.

I gasp with glee. “What's the occasion?”

“You, Sylvie Hanson, are having dinner with me. It's worth celebrating.” He says it as though I'm someone important.

My eyes flutter closed when I shove a forkful of chocolate nirvana in my mouth. It is moist and decadent and *warm*.

“Wow,” I say orgasmically.

“Oh, let’s save some for Jennifer. I’ll bring her a piece later.”

“Fuck off.” I laugh.

He smiles and catches my ankle as I playfully kick him. After finishing the chocolate treat in three bites, I return my cake plate to the table, pick up a champagne flute, and watch Woods lick the last bite off his fork. *So sexy.*

“You act like a jerk, but you’re actually quite pleasant to be around.”

“Pleasant, huh? Gee, thanks. I was going for something more like *irresistible* or *exceptionally kind*.” He raises his one glorious eyebrow.

“You’ll get there.” I smile. “Can I ask you some questions?”

“Like an interrogation?”

“I was thinking some simple first-date-style questions, but if you prefer something more consequential...”

He runs his hand up my leg. “This isn’t our first date, so you can interrogate me all you want.” *Okay good, so these have been dates.*

In response, I run my hand up his arm and squeeze his bicep. For my first question, I’d really like to ask if he’ll take me to his bedroom and give me a detailed presentation of how he gets such a toned physique. Instead, I start with the niceties—favorite color, childhood pets (he had a horse!). Then, a few

that dig a little deeper—what he was like as a kid, a teenager, did he pledge a fraternity? (no, thank god)—and finally, the nitty gritty questions...

“Democrat or Republican?”

“Democrat, obviously. I was conceived in a travel trailer, remember?”

“That could really go either way.”

“My parents are more responsible now, but they still have Free Lovin’ Hippie in their bones.”

I nod in approval. “Tits or ass?”

“Oof, the heavy hitters. Hm...” He moves my hip to the side for inspection. “Ass.”

“Wait, are you into butt stuff?”

“Eh, I could take it or leave it.”

I run my hand over his stomach, feeling his ab muscles through his shirt. “Do you work out?”

“Yes... And I’m a jamskater.”

Because I am still unfamiliar with the nuances of Woods’ sense of humor, I take this for a joke and almost squirt champagne out my nose. He looks at me guardedly and slowly sips from his glass. Silence. *Sweet Mother of Pearl.*

I push myself further up on the couch and put my hand over my mouth to hide my smile. “Oh, you’re serious.”

Woods nods.

He is an impossible mix of hot and dorky. “That’s like dancing on roller skates, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s more than that. We perform a few times a month at Central.”

“Central is a huge venue.”

“We’re popular.”

“With Denver’s population between the ages of three and nine, or... ?”

“It’s different from what I think you are imagining. You’ll have to come watch me sometime.”

My next swallow stops midway down my throat and I cough. I’d rather do cardio alone in my living room. “Watch you?” I’m uncomfortable just thinking about it.

“Yeah.”

“I would probably need to bring my friends for moral support.”

“You certainly would.”

“I also wouldn’t want them to miss out,” I say sarcastically.

“You’re a good friend. I’ll start putting your name on the list. If you ever decide you’re up for it, go to the VIP line.”

There’s a VIP line? And a list? “That gives skater boy a whole new meaning, I suppose... Anyway, how many times have you been in love?”

“Uh, probably twice. How many times have *you* been in love?”

“Hm. If you had asked me a few months ago I would have said ‘too many times.’ Now, I’m not sure.”

“Huh. Intriguing. Do you think you’ll fall in love again soon?”

“Funny you should ask, because I have no intentions of falling in love anytime soon.” As if I’ve ever had control over it, but that’s what this new Sylvie is all about.

Woods looks perplexed. “And why is that?”

“Well,” I gulp my champagne and set it on the table. “I’m a romantic by nature, the hopeless variety. I’ve gone into previous relationships with excessively high hopes and I always ended up disappointed and heartbroken. So, when I turned thirty—”

“When did you turn thirty?”

“About a month ago. June first. Anyway, I decided to redirect from that hopeless romantic ideal and be more responsible.”

“And by responsible you mean...?”

“To put it simply, I’m refraining from casual intimate relations.” I pause to make sure he understands my meaning as *sex*, which of course he does, he’s a grown man. “Also, I’m working on accepting the fact that true love and romance and all that mushy stuff that makes my mouth go numb are, more often than not, only found in novels and screenplays. True love takes time and patience, and even then it’s sort of luck of the draw.”

Woods eyes me with what looks like suspicion and again says, “Huh.”

Seventy-five percent of my brain is saying, “I don’t know, Sylvie Hanson, maybe this could be true love! Maybe you’ll ride off into the sunset together!” Nevermind the other, very jaded twenty-five percent of my brain—the part concerned with self-preservation—that’s saying, “Don’t buy into it. True love is a lie!” Because the big, bad truth is, I like Woods. A lot. And the lover-of-love part of me is beginning to think this could be real. Maybe we *could* be something... epic? I roll my eyes at my battling brain.

“Wow, that looked like it hurt. I could practically see your retina.”

“Shut up.” I laugh and rub my eyes. “It did kind of hurt, actually.”

When he returns to the kitchen, I notice an opened legal size envelope with a stack of papers laying atop it on the coffee table. Nosy as I am, I pick up the stack and read the first page:

Dr. Callahan:

We are pleased that you have accepted the position of Chief Scientific Officer at the Hixon Observatory and Center of Astrophysics in Austin, Texas. Please, find enclosed your contract and description of benefits...

Blah, blah, blah...

We look forward to the commencement of your position in August.

My heart skips a beat, but not in the same way it does whenever I look at Woods. More in the, “I’ve never been so disappointed in my life” way. I’ve done it again—I’m doing my hopeless romantic thing and have already fallen halfway in love only to be setting myself up for heartbreak. I mean, that’s that: there is a timestamp on our arrangement. Although a vague beginning, there will be a clear ending.

Then again, maybe I should be relieved. It’s better this way, of course, because I won’t harbor any false hopes of what he and I could be.

I won’t write out our future in my mind, only to be heartbroken when it inevitably doesn’t go to plan. I won’t have to edit myself or overcompensate in order to fit into the figurative box of what he’s looking for in a partner, all of which will be entirely based on my assumptions.

Maybe we can just keep each other company and hook up like conservative, sex-curious high schoolers until August. Better yet, maybe that’s all the more reason to have sex with him as soon as possible. Hell, maybe I’ll start calling him Edward to really tap into my fantasies; what do I have to lose?

I lay the stack of papers back on the coffee table as he rejoins me on the couch.

“You read my mail, I see.”

“I did.” I’m not ashamed. If you leave your mail out when you have company over, you should expect that it will be read. “I guess congratulations are in order!” I muster cheerfulness. “Sounds like an incredible opportunity.”

He nods, and we lock eyes for what should be an uncomfortable amount of time. The pleasure of it turns to sadness when I think about the predestined absence of those eyes. I exhale a small breath and look past him to the wall. “Do you play?”

He turns to look at the acoustic guitar I’ve pointed to. “I can play a few songs. I’m not very good, though.”

I need a distraction. “Play something.”

He runs his hands over his face and through his hair, thinking on my request. “Ugh, I should have hid that thing.”

“And your mail.”

“Alright,” he agrees with a frustrated sigh. “Unfortunately, I have a hard time saying *no* to beautiful women.”

“So it seems.” Jennifer pops into my head briefly before I realize he was calling *me* beautiful.

Woods smiles and shakes his head. He tunes the guitar and plays the first few chords of a recognizable song.

I freeze in a sudden rush of terror. *Oh God, what have I done?*

The idea of an acoustic serenade by a beautiful man in dim lighting with half a glass of champagne coursing through my horny veins is a fantasy for singles like me to feed off for months. But the anticipation of a sexy man *actually* carrying out such an impromptu performance is nearly intolerable.

What if he fumbles over the chords or his voice is terrible? What if I laugh at him? What if it's just generally a cringe-worthy experience that totally kills the vibe we've created? Woods has already revealed to me that he's named after an '80s travel trailer and that he dances on roller skates as a hobby. A girl can only take so much.

I toss my hair nervously, put my hand on my forehead, and curl into a tight ball on his couch. *Please don't sing, please don't sing, please don't sing.* I am ready to hide behind a pillow when I nail down the song – a ballad by a female powerhouse vocalist. *Ballsy.* Woods glances quickly in my direction but can't even make eye contact with me. *Not good, not good, not good.* The clearing of his throat makes me jump in surprise, and I brace myself for the most awkward moment of my life.

He starts out so quietly I can barely hear him. I let out a sigh of relief. He's good. Really good! I take a big swig of my champagne and relax, allowing myself to enjoy this intimate performance. Woods has a beautiful voice, actually. I might even go so far as to say that I would willingly watch him at an open mic night in a quaint coffee shop.

Truthfully, this is almost worse than if he royally sucked. With each revealed talent, he gets harder to resist. I am entranced, resting my head on my hand, as he finishes his warm and haunting rendition of the song, then places his guitar down and finally looks at me with such insecurity that my heart all but leaps out of my chest.

“Woods.” I love the way his name feels rolling off my tongue. I love the way his *tongue* feels rolling off my tongue. “That was incredible.”

“It’s something I’ve been... testing out recently.” He rubs his hand through his hair, clearly still shaken from my forcing him to entertain me. “Most of the songs I know are Bruce Springsteen.”

“Oh, I *love* Bruce.”

“You and every other WASP-y woman in America.” *Right, you are.* “I learned my mom and sister’s favorite songs so I could play for them.”

“You are a man of many talents. I’m not exceptional at *anything*, or even a little bit good at a lot of things.”

He returns back to the sofa. “What do you mean? Didn’t you deliver a baby? On a hardwood floor?” He twirls a piece of my hair between his fingers.

“That baby kind of delivered itself, but yeah. Yeah! I guess I did do that.”

“You’re a very caring person, Sylvie. At the wedding, the way you were tending to everyone and making people you didn’t even know feel better... I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

I tilt my head down and smile to myself.

“You’re forgiving, even to jackasses like me. And you’re an incredible kisser.”

I shake my head in disagreement. “Those aren’t things I can show off or brag about, though.”

“You can with me.”

He kisses me once and I lean in for more. “What did you whisper in my ear earlier?”

“*Ti desidero.*”

“What does it mean?”

“I want you.”

Oh fuck it. Without warning, I shove him back against the couch and crawl on top of him. I could eat him alive. If he’s afraid I might, he doesn’t show it. I wish I hadn’t said anything about my stupid, sexless resolution. Now that I know he’s leaving, I don’t see the point in holding out.

“I know that only moments ago I said I wasn’t going to have casual intimate relationships, but I changed my mind.” I bite his bottom lip.

“What?”

“Yeah. We don’t have time to fall in love, but we have all this sexual chemistry!” I say between passionate kisses. “What’s the point in holding out, right? So let’s just do it. Let’s do casual intimate relations. Lots and lots of them.” I’ll get back to my practical plan when Woods leaves in August.

He sighs. “Goddamn, you’re making it hard to deny you.”

I sit up and roll my hips against him once. “Why would you deny me?” He grumbles as my hands sneak under his shirt to

probe his abs.

“Well, I’m not– I’m not sure we’re on the same page.”

Cue the halting record sound. There is an obvious attraction between us, but has my confidence gotten the best of me in assuming he wants to get me naked as much as I want to get him naked? Woe is me, perhaps that is not his intention, nor his desire at all!

“I think we should– I don’t know... Wait... a little... bit.” The rejection nearly shatters my delicate ego. I wish desperately that I had driven myself here this evening so I could relieve myself of this humiliation ASAP.

“Ok.” I look at the clock on his wall and crawl off his lap. “Oh, it’s later than I realized. I should probably get home.”



Woods walks me to my door, and I ache with self-pity. I’ve already let myself slide too far and I feel ashamed by my lack of willpower.

“Well, good night. Thank you so much for dinner.” I use a tone that implies we’re merely acquaintances—truly, that’s all we are—and avoid physical contact as I walk through the doorway of my apartment.

“Hey.” Woods steps closer and grabs my waist but remains on the other side of the threshold. He searches my eyes—I hope they don’t give anything away—then pulls me in for a warm, all-encompassing hug. I wrap my arms around him and take in a lung-full of his scent, but I don’t allow myself to

relax. He embraces me for about six seconds, which is just the right amount of time for dopamine-release, then kisses my cheek. “Good night, Sylvie.”

Great. Our live-wire of sexual energy has devolved to his rebuff of my carnal desires and a kiss on the cheek. I’ve somehow managed to misread this situation. Men’s messaging can be so mixed.

Then again, maybe I didn’t misread the situation, rather he simply changed his mind once he decided I’m a nut-job. Men are fickle, after all. Ultimately, I suspect that I simply came on much too strong. Surely, a man as attractive as Woods with his level of education must tire of women savagely throwing themselves at him.

I perform my usual skincare routine – cleanse, tone, night cream, eye cream (none of which I’m entirely convinced does anything about my incoming wrinkles) – and brush my teeth thoroughly (I don’t have a dentist appointment for three months, so I forgo flossing), while *Outlander* serves as background noise.

To avoid stalking Woods’ social media, I open almost every app on my phone. Bank account looks surprisingly robust, no new celebrity pregnancy announcements, eBay still doesn’t have the shoes I’m looking for in a wide size, the Dictionary.com Word of The Day is some obscure word I’ll never use, and so on.

At last, Instagram is the only app I’ve yet to open, so I compromise: I’ll allow myself one scroll through my feed, but

I cannot, under any circumstances, look at Woods' grid.

This should be no problem. Just refrain from stalking the guy that I can't fall in love with but am probably falling in love with who doesn't want to have sex with me.

My thumbs team up against me and immediately navigate to Woods Callahan's page. I deep-dive his grid until I'm too tired to keep my eyes open and, once again, resolve to begin anew tomorrow.

OceanofPDF.com

Step 8: No matter what, don't look at his Instagram.

THE WORK WEEK BEGINS with two days of office work. I give a tour to this great couple, and we bond over our favorite TV shows and love of mini Bundt cakes. They got on the venue waitlist before they were officially engaged, so they put their deposit down for an available Saturday this coming winter. I enthusiastically agree when they request that I be their lead coordinator and note it in the booking.

The second couple is looking for something with a different “aesthetic.” In other words, higher end. I recommend the small contemporary art museum a few blocks away.

Meantime, if there is a plane beyond horny, I am levitating past it after Woods blue-balled me last night. On the bright side, my vibrator is delighted by our reunion. We pick up right where we left off.

Woods texts me with what I'm certain is a, *I enjoyed getting to know you, but...* text. Instead I get simply, *Hi*.

Oh joy, he's going for the "slow burn bail," in which he'll build up to the break-off. I groan. It'd be easier if he just ghosted me. Then, I could talk shit about him with Mo for weeks until I finally get over it.

He texts me again the next day, asking if I'll be at the library. I want to tell him that, because of him, I have arranged my schedule such that I never spend Tuesday evenings at the library, but instead simply say, *I have plans*.

Ida returns from her trip with Ron, engaged.

"No way!" I shove Ida gently, then pull her back toward me by her left hand to get a look at the ring. "Now, that is a rock!" Surely my eyes give away my concern.

"What is it?" she asks.

"It's just... you haven't known him very long, Ida."

"Honey, when you're my age there's no use playing games. Besides, that's what a prenup is for."

She's right. Plus, just because my love life isn't magical doesn't mean everyone else's isn't. I give Ida a big hug and congratulate her with sincerity.

"I guess that fruity-tooty Feather was right. You gotta trust the universe."

As she says it, Ellie breezes into the office carrying her little nugget in a baby carrier. "Hey bitches."

Seeing Ellie and being reminded that I helped bring her tiny, magic human into the world lifts my spirits.

“Ellie,” I squeal and nearly jump into her arms.

“Be careful. She just gave birth, for Moses’ sake,” Ida says.

Ellie sets the carrier on the floor, puffing out a breath as she takes a seat in an office chair. I plop myself in front of the baby and stare.

“How the hell are you, you incredible warrior woman?” I ask.

“Let me tell you, having a newborn is very real. Very hard.”

Ida and I nod.

“But, damn, he’s cute.”

“He’s so beautiful,” I agree and stroke his fuzzy head. “Did you decide on a middle name?”

“Oh my God, you’re gonna love this. It’s Sylvio.”

“Sylvio? Like... Sylvie, but with an O?”

“Yes, girl! Daniel insisted we honor you.”

I tear up. “Ace Sylvio Stone. Now *that’s* a name.” I reach for Ellie’s hand. “What an honor, indeed.”

“We love you, honey.” Ida wraps her arm around Ellie and gazes at Ace Sylvio. “He’s perfect.”

“How’s your butt?” I ask.

“Eh.” She grimaces. “How are things going with your Greek astrologer? Ida told me about him.”

“Astrophysicist, and he’s Italian.”

“Right.”

“Ugh.” I put my head in my hands. “I came on way too strong and now I’m taking bets with myself on what his excuse will be to never have to see me again.”

“I came on pretty strong too, honey, and now look at me. I’m getting married!” Ida practically yells.

“Girl, the only way to come on is strong. If he’s not down, then fuck him.”

“Shh, the baby is listening,” I scold.

Ida tosses me her AmEx business card and directs me to go down the street to Flora to get a gift basket for Ellie. Flora is an overpriced flower and gift shop housed in a cursed retail space where tenants are doomed to fail. Ellie’s love language is getting gifts, so she encourages me to pick out her favorite things.

I call Mo as I walk toward the venue exit to tell her about Ida’s whirlwind romance and Ellie’s perfect life. “Even middle-aged divorcees have more luck in love than I do, Mo!” I whine.

“Ivy thinks you should try dating women again. She says the girls would go crazy for you.”

“Until they find out how clingy I am,” I grumble.

“Babe, lesbians *love* clingy.”

“Oh!” My phone fumbles to the ground as I run into someone just outside the front door of Galileo’s Garden. “I’m so sorry—” I say, then stop as I register it’s Woods retrieving my phone from the ground and handing it back to me. My

breath catches in my throat and my stomach flips. “Mo, let me call you back.”

“Is it him? What is he saying? Don’t—” I fumble my phone again as I end the call and catch it mid-air. How mature of him to go for the face-to-face goodbye. Chivalry can die now.

“Hi,” Woods says confidently with a smile.

“Hi! Um, here to book a wedding?” I laugh awkwardly.

“Not yet. I’m looking for this charming, stunning woman who works her ass off to give people the wedding of their dreams. Maybe you know her. Sylvie is her name.”

“You’re dumb.” I laugh. Less awkwardly this time. “She’s just headed out on an errand for the boss.” I look at him questioningly and tilt my head for him to follow me to Flora.

“Why have you been avoiding me?”

I scoff and shake my head in denial. “I– I haven’t been avoiding you.”

“Did I offend you on Sunday?”

My eyes widen. This is an entirely different confrontation than I was anticipating. “No. No, I’ve just been busy.”

“Wait.” As I reach out for the door of Flora, Woods tugs my arm gently, pulling me aside to face him directly. “It was my singing, wasn’t it? I knew I shouldn’t have believed my mom when she told me I had the voice of an angel. That’s just what moms are supposed to say.” He’s adorable and his smell is sublime. How terribly frustrating.

I put my hand to my forehead and let out an amused breath.
“No, your singing is fine. It’s good, even.”

“Seriously, if I did something wrong, tell me.” He looks deep into my eyes, and I squirm.

“You didn’t, Woods. I thought– I thought *I* did.”

He’s intelligent enough to read between the lines, I’m sure, but if he starts prying for details about how humiliating it was to be denied sex, I might die.

Woods takes one of my hands between his. “Not at all, and I did not mean to make you feel that way, Sylvie.” He looks at the ground. “I, um, it’s just that I haven’t– I don’t do... *casual*.”

Ah. If I could raise the one damned eyebrow, I would. I run my finger down the bridge of his nose to confirm I understand, and I’m relieved he’s cleared things up. Woods smiles and nods toward Flora. “Is this really where you were headed, or were you just trying to make a quick getaway?”

“Heh. I’m going in to get a gift basket for Ellie.”

He gives me a confused look.

“Ellie.” I motion my hands down between my legs. “With the baby... on the floor...”

He laughs. “Of course! Ellie, your first patient. Well, I’ve never been in here. I’ll join you.”

After filling a basket full of the most expensive flowers, wine, and baked goods, I grab a box of fresh-baked cookies for

myself and hand two to Woods. He describes for me some exciting discoveries of his research as we amble back to The Garden. Though I'm not certain, I imagine he must "dumb things down" in order for me to follow along, and I am wholly absorbed.

"I got you something," he says when we reach the door of Galileo's Garden. He places in my hand a dark blue, crushed velvet bookmark with tiny decorative gold dots connected by gold lines that create a Gemini constellation – my astrological sign.

"Did you just buy this?" I try to hide how touched I am.

Instead of further explaining himself, he hesitantly pulls me toward him by my waist and kisses me. It feels as exhilarating as ever. I kiss him back, guardedly at first, but he cups his hands on my neck and tilts my face up to his. I surrender, melting into it and wrapping my arms around his shoulders. I hope he can't feel that I'm sweating.

Ida is holding the baby and chatting with Ellie when I return to my desk and take a massive bite of a cookie just as my cell phone vibrates with an incoming call. *Woods*. Assuming it's a pocket dial, I tap the green *Answer* button but say nothing.

"Hello?" His voice sounds deeper through the earpiece. I've never spoken to him on the phone.

"Oh, hi," I say with a full mouth, pieces of cookie falling out like Cookie Monster. "Sorry, I thought this was a pocket dial." I swallow a huge lump of cookie and mouth to Ida that I need milk.

“I wanted to tell you that you’re hot and funny and I missed you.” *Aw, cute.* There’s no way he’d be saying that if this were a video call, though. I dig the cookie crumbs out from where they’ve collected between my crotch and the chair. Ida sets a glass of milk on my desk.

“Where did you get this?” I whisper to her and Ellie, then clear my throat and say into the phone, “Why didn’t you tell me that five minutes ago?”

Ida makes a squeezing gesture toward Ellie’s breast, implying I’m drinking breast milk, and they laugh hysterically.

“I thought you were going to tell me you didn’t want to hang out anymore,” Woods answers.

I take another bite of a cookie. “Hmm, nope. No, I think I like hanging out with you.”

Woods asks if he can come over to my place tomorrow evening. Alas, I have plans to go bowling tomorrow night, but I suggest I may call him after I’ve slaughtered the competition.



“Fuck yeah, bitch!” Ivy yells as all the bowling pins clatter against the waxy floor.

It’s Grown-Up Night at the bowling alley, so the only person offended by Ivy’s foul language is the crotchety old man at the lane next to ours. Considering I’ve been describing for over an hour all the ways I want Woods to screw me, he shouldn’t be caught off-guard.

“Are you going to let him come in your eyes?” Ivy asks.

“What? No, of course not. Why would I do that?”

Mo says, “Ivy...” and shakes her head.

“I don’t know. Aren’t straight people into that kinky stuff?”

“Are you that out of touch with the heterosexual lifestyle?”
I ask. “This is why porn is problematic.”

“You’re up, kid.” Ivy tousles my hair.

“I hate this game,” I say like a pouty first grader losing at Candy Land.

“Don’t worry about it. Ivy wins at everything,” Mo reassures me. “Have you put his manhood in your mouth yet?”

“Yugh!” Ivy says in disgust.

“No, we haven’t had sex! Also, giving head is not my favorite thing.”

“Is it anybody’s?” Ivy asks, her face nearly angry in disbelief.

“My dentist told me I have a petite mouth, so I try to avoid putting anything larger than a small banana in it.”

Mo says, “Well if he happens to be smaller than a small banana, tell him to eat mango. It’s supposed to make his come taste sweeter.”

“Hmm. I’m more of a savory person.”

“Mashed potatoes, then?”

“He eats a lot of pasta, so...” I shrug.

“Are you in love with him?” Ivy asks.

“Aw, babe. I love it when you show your sensitive side,”
Mo coos. They lick each other’s mouths.

Since there are no kids here tonight, the six pound bowling balls were readily available. I stick my fingers in the turquoise and silver swirled ball I carefully chose when we arrived and think about how elegant the surname *Callahan* sounds with *Sylvie*. I bowl a spare.

A pitcher of beer later, and we realize we never established a designated driver. After some deliberation between the two of them, Mo and Ivy suggest that I call Woods to pick us up. An idea that, if I were sober, would no doubt be met with pushback or outright shutdown. However, when you’re tipsy with your girlfriends, there’s no such thing as a bad idea.

“Hiiii, Fleetwood Callahan.”

Woods chuckles. “Hello, Sylvie Hanson.”

“What are you doing?” I shovel some french fries in my mouth.

“I recently stepped out of the shower and am just sitting down to read some educational literature.”

“Hot.”

“What are *you* doing?”

“I just finished hydrating after exerting myself in an athletic competition.”

There's a shuffling sound on his end. "Bowling went well, huh? Do you need a ride?"

I gasp. *Mind Reader*. "How did you know?"

"I'm on my way."

Because Woods is aware of Ivy's appreciation for ostentatious cars, he brings the Taycan. She rides shotgun and they chatter away while Mo and I sit in the back giggling like we've always done. Woods glides the car to a stop in front of Mo's house. After thanking him profusely, Ivy jumps out and opens the back door.

Mo scoots out of the back, then pauses and drunkenly says, "Thank you, Fleetwood. Truly. Sylvie is obsessed with you, and now I can see why." She cups her hand over her mouth as if to whisper. "She even thinks about you while she masturbates."

Ivy claps her hand over Mo's mouth and laughs. "Shut your mouth!"

"You slut," I say quietly and shove her out of the car. "I hate you."

"Text me," she says as I transfer to the front seat.

"Thanks for that," I mouth back, and she holds her fingers in the shape of a V against her tongue.

The night is suddenly very quiet as I sit silently, trying to avoid looking at Woods out of humiliation. I can feel him looking at me, but I need to wait for my face to cool down.

“Hi,” he says.

I dip my head in his direction and smile. “Oh, hi.”

He squeezes my thigh affectionately, then casually rests his hand over the steering wheel the way I like.

I turn my body to face him, forgetting that I’m deeply embarrassed by Mo’s oversharing. “Would you feel emasculated if I told you you are beautiful?”

Woods’ face lights up with amusement. “No. My mom tells me all the time.”

“Well, then, you are beautiful.” I’m only slurring a little.

He kisses my hand and looks deep into my eyes. “Thank you.” My heart flutters, reminding me how much I want him.

“Are you taking me to my home or yours?” I ask.

“Yours.” His tone turns responsible.

This is it. Tonight is *the* night. I’m going to get him ass-naked. Although, I’m not sure why he wants to do it at my apartment since his is fancier. Perhaps, given how loud he knows I’ll get, he wants to avoid Jennifer hearing us. How considerate!

I unlock my door, eager for my houseguest to follow me inside, but Woods simply kisses me and says goodnight.

“You’re not coming in?” I don’t hide my despair.

“Not tonight,” he says quietly and brushes his fingers across my cheek.

“Why, Woods? I want you to.” I tug him closer as my neighbors squeeze past, greeting us courteously. Woods waits until they close the door of their apartment to respond.

“Tonight’s not a good night for... that.”

“Is this your way of maintaining control?” Everyone knows someone with a significant other that dangle marriage, procreation, or even sex in front of the other until they beg. It’s a manipulation tactic, of course, to get the other to over-compromise and under-commit. I continue, “Or, if I’m missing something here can you please tell me so I don’t keep coming across as desperate?”

He shakes his head in disagreement and motions for me to open my door. *Ha! Guilt: a faithful tool.* I open the door and flick on the light with the same excitement I possess when I get off work early and remember I have a bottle of red and a wedge of fancy, hard cheese waiting for me inside.

“The only person I’m trying to control is myself,” he says. “I want you so bad it makes me feel like I could, I don’t know, tear a door off its hinges.”

I laugh loudly at what seems a preposterous statement and the accompanying visual.

Contrary to his aggressive declaration, he gently tucks my hair behind my ear. “I’ve wanted you since the day I saw you. But when you initiated sex the other night, you had just finished telling me how you were not... doing intimate relationships, or however you put it, and I didn’t want to take advantage of you in a moment of weakness. And tonight

you're drunk and I'm not. I don't want you to wake up confused about anything. I want you to be clear headed when I make love to you."

Everyone knows that rejecting a drunk girl takes finesse but that was pure artistry. My hands clap slowly together; I'm not even mad anymore. "Touché, Dr. Callahan. But you've got to leave me with something."

"Alright," he agrees.

My triumph returns. "Don't act like you don't want a little something, too."

"I already told you how much I want."

"In that case—"

He interrupts, "Don't tempt me, I beg you."

If you had told me one month ago that in the very near future I'd be desperate to bone a guy who dances on roller skates as a hobby, I would have dropped everything and bought a one-way ticket to Switzerland. But here I stand, desperately wanting to bone a guy who dances on roller skates.

Woods pushes me softly against the wall and rests his hands on either side of my head, the way he did at the wedding. He leans in and traces my lips with the tip of his tongue. I shiver, causing him to smile quickly before returning to his serious facade. He runs his lips across my jaw and kisses down my neck. I close my eyes and moan as his hands cup my breasts then slide down my waist over my hips and land at the line where my ass cheeks meet my thighs. He sinks his fingers into

each crease and licks from between my breasts up to my neck. When I open my eyes, his face is once again in front of mine.

“Do you know all the things I want to do to you?” he asks seriously.

“Tell me,” I tremble out.

“I want to rip your clothes off and take your sweet nipples in my mouth. I want to lick your clit until you scream.” I bite my lip and nod just enough to encourage him to continue. “Then I’m going to make you forget what planet you’re on, Sylvie.”

“Holy shit.” I kiss him with adoration, like I love him. I can’t help myself. I *do* adore him. “Please stay.”

“Trust me. When you wake up tomorrow, you’ll be relieved. And when I *do* have you, it will be worth the wait.” He smiles and gives my chin a little pinch. “I’ll text you tomorrow.”

I wash off my makeup, brush my teeth and get into bed. I guess I am pretty drunk. Good thing my trusty vibrator doesn’t care about taking advantage of me. She buzzes quietly while an episode of *Outlander* plays on the TV.

Step 9: Heed red flags.

THE ONLY THING THAT would have made last night truly superlative is if the politically correct nerd of my dreams had properly fucked me. My two favorite electronics—my vibrator and my phone—lie side by side on the table next to my bed. I reach for one, then the other, and go back and forth undecidedly until finally one of them vibrates. The phone. A warm glow surrounds my heart when I see that it's a text message from Woods.

Good morning, gorgeous. Oh, how I love when he calls me “gorgeous” like it's my nickname. Because we talk on the phone now, I call him.

“Hi!” he says enthusiastically, obviously already sixteen ounces deep in drip coffee.

“Oh, good morning, hi.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Um, well. My favorite YouTube fitness...” *Lady? Guru? Person?* “Person... is releasing a new workout video, so I was

probably going to do that in my living room. I doubt you could propose something more thrilling.”

He laughs so loud that I have to pull the phone away from my ear, then says, “You’re right. Never mind. I’ll talk to you later.”

“No, wait! I... could be swayed.”

“A group of some friends are getting dinner at Buttercup. Would you want to come with me?”

Ugh. Buttercup is where I had my date with Derek, which doesn’t leave me with a fond association, but even before my distaste for Buttercup was conditioned by the experience with Derek, I wasn’t a fan. It’s a snooty place with tiny portions, full of overpaid patrons getting rich off of hard-working, lower middle class Americans.

Anyway, I suppose I can step down from my soapbox for one evening to join Woods and his friends for a simple dinner party.

“I’ll need to change after work, so I will meet you there.”

“Call me when you’re done, and I’ll swing by your apartment.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“Ok, I’ll see you later.” I don’t end the call right away in hopes that we’re going to argue over who should hang up first. He ends the call.



I hit send on a video chat to Mo to get her approval of my outfit, then quickly press end three times when Woods taps lightly on my front door.

My palm slams the door open against the wall. “Whoa, that door used to be heavier.”

He looks me up and down in his admiring way, and I fidget with self-consciousness, then realize in all likelihood he thinks I look incredible.

I busted out an old dress that hasn’t been worn since my last trip to Vegas ages ago: a silver sequined, long sleeve number with a hem that rests just below the curve of my inner thighs. The plunging neckline plays up my barely-there cleavage. It might be a little much for a night out in Denver, but I pair it with black military boots to dress it down.

I put my hands up to mimic being blinded by a bright light and shout, “My eyes! It’s too bright! My eyes!” then snicker at my acting prowess. “You’re wearing blue.”

“I know,” he grumbles and pinches the shirt between his fingers. “But who cares what I’m wearing. Look at you.” He pushes the door closed behind him with one hand without taking his eyes off me.

I put my hands on his cheeks and kiss him softly. “I’m ready. Let me grab my purse.” When I turn to gather up my things, he lets out a loud exhale and gently tugs my hand to spin me back toward him. I guess this dress looks good from

behind, too. He laces his fingers in my hair and pulls my lips to his mint-flavored mouth.

“Are you coming from the restaurant?” I ask.

“Yeah, why?”

“You don’t taste like you’ve been drinking.”

“I wanted to wait until you were there.”

“So, each of us is clear of mind and thirsty for blood...”

“Blood?”

“It’s a metaphor for sex.”

“Right. And you’re obsessed with me.” Woods brushes his lips softly against mine and I get a nervous knot in my throat.

“No,” I say weakly. I was hoping that detail had escaped his memory. He takes a long inhale of my neck then kisses up to my mouth. I hold his shoulders to keep from tipping over.

“That’s too bad.” The warmth of his whisper and the memory of his threats from last night have the hallmarks of a waking wet dream. “Because I was going to say the feeling is mutual.” He tenderly squeezes a breast with one hand and pulls me tightly into him with the other. When I whisper his name he loses control and kisses back down my neck vehemently. His fierceness doesn’t let up as he lifts me up to rest my ass on the back of my pink chair and nestles himself between my spread legs. “Let’s stay here,” he says between kisses. “I suddenly have an aching desire to stay in.”

I squeeze his pecs through his blue shirt. “I want you inside me so bad, Fleetwood,” I whisper. His lips are on mine and his tongue is in my mouth. My fingers find their favorite place in his hair and his hands are pushing my dress up. “But no,” I push him away and frown with self-resentment.

“What? Why?” He is dumbstruck.

“If you don’t go back to the restaurant, your friends will know exactly what we’re doing. Or they’ll think I’m a cannibal. Plus, I can’t waste this.” I Vanna White my hand down my body.

“It wouldn’t be wasted.”

“We can tend to your aching desires later.” He rests his forehead on mine and growls out the side of his mouth. “Rejection is a bitch, isn’t it?” I say villainously.

He pulls his head away and smiles. “You’re worth a thousand rejections.”

While my explanation seemed to make sense to us both, I can’t help but wonder if it’s the real reason I just refused this gorgeous geek.

I touch his bottom lip. “You smile so much more than when I first met you.”

I kiss his wrist and push myself off the chair. The mirror in my entryway reflects a disheveled version of myself. I tousle my hair, smooth my eyebrows back into their natural arch, and grab my clutch.

I am now aware that the two most satisfying experiences in this world are: 1) Being served only a plateful of bread alongside a pot of fondue cheese (but that's a story for a different time), and 2) How unbelievably desired I feel at this moment. Honorable mention goes to flourless chocolate cake, especially when it's being licked from a seductive stranger's mouth during working hours. But, I digress.

As we walk from my apartment to the bar, Woods grabs my clammy hand. "Are you nervous?"

"Yes," I say, irritated that he has caught on to me, and pull my hand away.

"There's nothing to be nervous about."

"It's just that, I worry about people finding me unlikable or... unintelligent." I cross my arms over my chest in retreat.

This admission, as well as the memory of Woods' comments at the wedding that were like a sharp pin sliding exactly into the wound of my insecurity, leave me feeling quite vulnerable. In addition to the apprehension surrounding my perceived intelligence, I'm going to be reintroduced to Woods' friends as the person he's not-exactly-dating-and-definitely-not-sleeping-with. The awkwardness of which will be amplified by having already met them in a professional capacity at Sarah and Jimmy's wedding.

Woods stops to face me, and I try to side-step him. He wraps an arm around me and tilts my chin up until my eyes meet his. I'm not crying, but having someone this close to my

face when I'm emotionally exposed makes me want to bolt or call my mom.

He says, "Oh man, I am a world class asshole." I nod in agreement. "Well, I like you, Sylvie. A lot. And I love the things that are going on in your head. Plus, I make everyone look likable."

"It's true," I laugh. "You do." In case I hurt his feelings I add, "But I still like you, too. A lot."

I get the distinct sensation that I'm going to need to run to the bathroom as we approach a table full of people who are a precisely measured cocktail of calm, cool, and merry. The restaurant is buzzing and Woods' group of friends are ten deep (Woods and I make twelve) occupying a table near the back. I recognize about half of them from the wedding. Drinks and appetizers line the table indicating that the party has already been here for at least thirty minutes.

This simultaneously feels far too intimate and much too large a gathering for my delicate vomit reflex. I am royally intimidated. Sarah waves and smiles warmly from the other end of the table as people shuffle to make room for me to sit next to Woods.

Woods introduces me by simply saying, "This is Sylvie. You probably remember her from Sarah and Jimmy's wedding," and pulls out a chair for me.

I hold my breath and give them a dishonest smile that says *I don't feel awkward at all about being here with you very hip people*. Everyone looks at me expectantly, waiting for

something. Of what, I'm unsure – the second half of the introduction? My thoughts on Britney Spears' freedom? A song and dance?

“We're not sleeping together,” I finally announce, assuming that must be the question on everyone's mind. *Nothing to see here, folks. Just the world's most mortifying introduction.*

All the chirping crickets in the city play a lovely sonata before Jimmy kindly says, “Well, alrighty then! White or red?”

Everybody laughs then continues conversing as they were before I so brazenly interrupted with my tardiness. A sloppy, glassy-eyed giant sits opposite me.

He leans across the table, smiling like he's just thought of something clever. “You're the hot wedding planner... from the wedding,” he says stupidly, spittle hitting my face.

Ick. I try to smile politely through disgust and irritation. “I'm sorry. Do we know each other?”

“You don't remember me?” He is white girl wasted and offended by my inability to recall our unremarkable first meeting. He stands up and comes around the table to ask the guy sitting next to me to switch seats with him. “It's Sophia, right?” More drunken spittle lands on my face and he strokes my arm with his sweaty fingers.

Woods reaches behind me and shoves the guy so hard he almost falls out of his chair as I say, “It's Sylvie, actually.”

“Back the fuck off, Arnie.” I snicker at the name *Arnie*, because I'm juvenile. Guests at the surrounding tables look in

our direction.

“What?” Arnie eye fucks me while he says it then stands to walk away. I shiver in revulsion.

“I’m sorry about him, Sylvie. Are you okay?” Woods says.

His concern is appropriate and somewhat endearing, I suppose, but the truth is, I’m not *okay*. I was just lazily introduced to a group of people I barely know, a lack of courtesy that would make even Amy Schumer uncomfortable, a discomfort that was swiftly followed with sexual harassment by a drunken stranger who is apparently a *friend* of these people.

The fact that this group, of what I initially thought as “cool” people, would keep the company of someone like Arnie leaves a very bitter taste in my mouth. I would like to get up and excuse myself without delay, but Arnie has made me feel far too disconcerted to be alone for any length of time.

I grab the nearest bottle of wine to fill my half-empty glass and accidentally mix white with red. Woods exhales a laugh at the unintentional act, and I lean my body towards him in what a Body Language Interpreter would likely describe as “needy.”

What I wouldn’t give to be spread out in my bed right now.

“I’m fine, I guess, but why is he here with you guys?”

“He’s alright when he’s sober, but he has a problem. We’re usually babysitting him to make sure he doesn’t ruin anyone’s life.”

I cringe. “And by that you mean rape someone?”

He nods.

“Woods, that’s absolutely repulsive. Guys like him should have their dicks locked in a chastity belt.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, which is why we watch him closely. If we cut him loose, there’d be no one to shield the world from him.”

He puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me in closer. I’m fortunate to have a male protector tonight. But what about the women who don’t? Arnie is akin to a monster under a bridge waiting for the right time to attack.

Of all the fears that are unique to being a woman, sexual assault is, for me, at the top. The concept of being overpowered while doing essentially anything alone is a fear women have to live with every day. The idea that our extraordinary bodies can be so violently violated is abhorrent, revolting. Being in the company of someone who is evidently capable of such violence is sickening.

Truthfully, I loathe Arnie, I loathe men like him, and I have very little respect for people who enable men like him, which is everyone at this table. It is reckless and disrespectful to keep a person like Arnie in their circle of friends.

I try to shake off the encounter as Sarah comes to say hello. “Ugh, sorry. He can be the worst,” she says.

“Very rapey,” I say solemnly. She nods. *Why is everyone taking this so lightly?* I put on a smile and change the subject. “So, how’s married life?”

“Mmm,” she sighs. “Amazing. A never-ending parade of orgasms.”

I gawk. “That sounds... delightful.” I get lost in the idea of Sarah and Jimmy doing it everywhere. A daydream that quickly evolves into Woods and me doing it everywhere. “Wow, really delightful,” I say to myself.

Jimmy either has superior hearing or just misses Sarah being so far away, because he moves to our end of the table to join in our conversation.

“And you, Jimmy?” I ask. “How does it feel to be a married man?”

“It’s the best! I can’t believe how lucky I am.” His eyes twinkle as he looks at Sarah and she sparkles back.

“Aw, Jimmy Poo,” Sarah says adoringly. My stomach aches wishing that someone would look that deep into my eyes. They look back to me, and I hastily bring my glass to my lips, pretending that I wasn’t just envisioning myself in the middle of their romantic gaze. On my other side, Woods kisses my cheek then stands to head to the bathroom.

“So, you and Woods, huh?” Jimmy says like a 1950s detective.

I laugh. “Um, yeah. Woods and... me.” I nod and wince slightly. The wine is going down *real* easy now. *In fact, is this water?* I wonder, and look at my glass to make sure. “I don’t know how much he’s told you, but it’s nothing serious.” I make a show of detachment.

“Yeah, he hasn’t mentioned much about it.” *Damn, that’s not a good sign.* “But he seems like he’s doing good.” Jimmy looks at Sarah and she nods enthusiastically.

“Heh. What do you mean?” There’s a flutter in my chest. *Tell me more, Jimmy Poo.*

“I don’t know. He’s happier.” I’m not sure how Jimmy has deduced this given that Woods seems no less pouty tonight than he did at the wedding. “More like how he used to be, before...” Jimmy trails off, implying that I know how the sentence will end.

“How did he used to be? Before what?”

“Well, as long as I’ve known him he’s been crazy smart, but when we met in college he balanced it with fun. We got our first job out of college together at the same place and he was instantly the guy everyone else at work wanted to be around, go out with, etcetera. I was always kind of jealous of him, honestly. But after Leah died he became very depressed.”

“Understandably so,” Sarah adds quickly.

Jimmy nods in agreement. “He stopped smiling and started wearing black. I think he feels like he shouldn’t really enjoy his life since hers was cut short.”

“Oh,” I say with concern. My tipsy mind is disoriented as I take in this new information. “And who is Leah?”

“His little sister,” Sarah says. “He hasn’t told you about her?”

I shake my head. “His sister? That’s so tragic.”

“She was amazing,” Jimmy looks away at nothing in particular as he remembers her.

“You knew Leah?” I feel like an imposter saying her name.

“She used to visit. Woods had to threaten all of us to stay away from her,” he laughs. “It was awful when she died. I’m sure Woods will tell you about it when he’s ready.”

I pull my eyebrows together in an attempt to hold the tears. Selfishly, the restrained tears are also fueled by feelings of hurt that Woods hasn’t yet told me about Leah. Then again, why would he have? And, more importantly, *when* would he have told me? I’ve known the guy less than a month and we mostly just make out. Despite my sound explanation for why I do not yet know about his dead sister, my romantic brain had hoped for more—that we could discuss the deeper stuff.

I’m lost in thought when Arnie retakes his seat across from me and sourly says, “So, *Sylvia*.”

“Ugh, fuck off,” I grumble and take a sip of wine.

Put off by my abrasive response, his eyes flash with an idea that says he is going to take this one-sided conversation in a different direction than he initially intended, and I instinctively feel nervous. “How come you and Woods haven’t fucked yet?”

“Arnie, don’t...” one of Woods’ female friends threatens passively. I would love to watch a band of angry, non-passive women beat the shit out of Arnie right now.

“Ah, I see.” Arnie rolls his eyes in recognition then looks straight at me with an evil smirk. “It must have something to

do with the fact that he and Claire *just* broke up, what was it now? A couple weeks ago?"

I choke on my drink and start coughing. Sarah, still next to me, pats my back. "Whoa. You okay? Don't listen to him."

"I'm just saying, man, if I had been fucking the same person for seven years up until a *couple weeks* ago, it'd be hard for me to move on, too. Be patient with him," he says condescendingly.

The room is spinning, and I know the wine isn't to blame. I get that awful feeling like a colony of rabid bats is migrating from my stomach all the way up to my throat, wreaking havoc on my nervous system. Arnie knows he's hit all the right buttons and laughs.

I empty the last of Sylvie's Homemade Rosé, wipe the back of my hand across the dribble on my chin, then grab my clutch and fly out of my seat.

"If you think that's bad, just wait until you hear about Vegas!" Arnie says as I bolt.

Hasn't anyone ever told Arnie what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas? But what did happen in Vegas? I'm spiraling.

"Sylvie!" Sarah and Jimmy both call after me.

Woods walks toward the table from the restroom, obviously unaware of what has just transpired, and doesn't see me nearly running for the front door. There's no way I'm walking home alone, but the hasty wine consumption means I have to get out of here before the maudlin water works start.

My shaky fingers order a car on my phone. The tears welling in my eyes make it nearly impossible to see if I've ordered a car, a scooter or a helicopter, but it honestly doesn't matter. A polka-dotted punch buggy full of clowns could pull up and I wouldn't question it. I admit, that would be a questionable choice, but worse decisions have been made in the name of drunken theatrics.

The cool, dry air is like cold water running over a fresh burn as I push out the front door.

"Fuck!" I put one hand on my hip and the other on my forehead as I look eagerly out into the road, awaiting my ride. I jump when I feel a set of hands wrap around my waist from behind. Thinking it's Woods, my muscles instinctively relax, but when the hands whip me around, it's Arnie. He is awfully agile for a wasted slob.

"Let me hold you," he says.

"I wouldn't let you hold me if I were being attacked by a pack of hyenas," I say acidly and try to push him away.

He leans in and his hot whiskey whisper is the cherry on top of this nightmare. "No one has to know."

One pathetic tear escapes my eye. I reach down and take his loathly testicles into a death grip. "My mom bought me a lifetime supply of stress balls and I squeeze the shit out of those things when I'm pissed. Your gonads feel awfully similar."

Arnie coughs and puts his hands up in surrender. Not only do I feel like a fool, but now I feel dirty, too. Woods slams out the front door of the bar and punches Arnie twice in the face, hard. When he falls to the ground, Woods kicks him in the gut. Watching a stone cold fox fight for my honor arouses a visceral satisfaction.

Even though I'm crying, I can't help but laugh in delighted shock as Woods slowly proceeds toward me. The relief is fleeting and I turn back toward the road, checking my phone impatiently for my ordered car's location—just a few minutes away. Woods is close enough now that I can smell his warm spice mixed with Cabernet and guilt.

“Sylvie—”

I cut him off. “Who the hell is Claire, Woods?” When I turn to face him he is closer than I anticipated and I practically stumble into him. He puts his hands out to catch me but I shove my clutch into his chest and push him back. “Was I your mistress?” *Oof, Rosé does make me awfully dramatic, and I believe one has to actually have sex with another in order to classify as a mistress.*

“No, of course not. That's not— that's not what this is at all.”

“Oh, well glad one of us knows what *this* is.” The truth is, of course, that I want to be more than Woods' rebound. I want *this* to be more than just a summer fling, and I certainly want to be more than his accomplice in adultery. And, the truth is also that I'm more angry at myself than I am at him. It's high time I just accept my fate as a spinster. I will go to the humane

society tomorrow and adopt as many cats as they will allow and live out my destiny. Woods is so incredibly handsome standing here, though. The parking lot lighting creates shadows that accentuate the heartache written on his face. Only Fleetwood Callahan could look good under the light of a dirty streetlamp. Beautiful people really can get away with anything. I lose a bit of my edge. “I don’t even know what question to ask first. I mean, did you cheat on your girlfriend of seven *years* with me?”

“No. I didn’t, Sylvie.”

“And why didn’t you tell me about your sister?” My edge returns as I realize that maybe I’m not as perceptive and empathetic as I thought.

“Sylvie, please, can we go back to your apartment and I’ll tell you everything?” He looks like he might cry. *Aw*. I haven’t seen a man cry since my ex-boyfriend, Aiden’s, bike got stolen.

“Not tonight,” I shake my head. “Oh, finally!” I say a silent prayer that I managed to order a sedan. My credit card will thank me later.

“Fancy meeting you here,” I hear my favorite person say (well, second favorite as of late). I turn toward my angel to find her walking down the sidewalk in our direction.

“Mo!” Months apart wouldn’t make me happier to see her than I am now.

“What are you doing here?” she asks happily. “I was just on my way to see Ivy.” Bar 112 isn’t far. “Want to—?” At once, my sister in intuition senses the energy and her face turns to anger. “What’s happening?” she says to me, then turns to Woods accusingly. “What did you do?”

“I just need to go home.” I slide in the backseat of the car.

“I’ll come with you.” She gently scoots me over and slides in next to me.

“No, you don’t have to do that. Ivy is expecting you.”

“Chicks before strap-ons, babe.”

Woods grabs the car door as Mo pulls it closed. “Can I call you later?” he begs.

“Is this dude bothering you?” The large and intimidating driver turns abruptly in his seat, his polarized Pit Vipers directed at me. He looks like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, but less hot.

“No!” I say in Woods’ defense. “He’s not bothering us. I just need to go home.” Woods steps away, deflated, and I watch out the back window as he rubs his hands over his face and through his hair.

“What did he do?” Mo’s eyes are lit up. The girl loves drama.

“He has a girlfriend and a dead sister he hasn’t told me about.”

“He has a girlfriend, presently?” she yells in shock.

I lean my head against the window. “Well, not presently, but *just* broke up with one.”

“But he doesn’t have a girlfriend now?”

“No.”

“And you haven’t slept with him,” she says it as a statement rather than a question.

I bring my head back upright and look in her direction. “Well, no.”

“Have you told him about your dead dad?” Mo asks skeptically.

I break eye contact with her. “I suppose it’s a little... hypocritical... of me,” I say tepidly.

Mo nods like a therapist who’s just helped a patient arrive at a breakthrough. “Sad people do weird shit, Sylvie,” she says.

“Sad people do weird shit,” the driver agrees, unsolicited. “When my grandma died I bought a used hot tub and hooked it up in my living room. Leaked everywhere. I sat in it and watched *Shrek* every day for a month.” He shakes his head, reminiscing. Mo and I snicker in judgment. *At least we’re not that bad off.*

Back home, I lie in bed snacking on a wedge of cheese and a sleeve of crackers.

“Didn’t I see you drop that cheese on the floor?” Mo asks.

“Yeah, but I brushed the crumbs off. Want to watch that movie about the teenage robots that fall in love?”

“Sure,” she snuggles into me. “Speaking of robots, are you going to forgive Woods for being a human?”

“No,” I sigh. I fall asleep in the first five minutes of the movie.

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Step 10: Move on.

I OPEN MY EYES and groan, lamenting much about the night before. Fortunately, I don't have to work today. A note from Mo rests on the pillow where she kept me company last night.

Vie,

You deserve better. But also, call him.

Love you,

Mo

P.S. You can put a used hot tub in your living room, but please don't watch Shrek everyday for a month.

My phone alerts me to three missed calls – two from Woods last night, one from my mom at 6:58 this morning (this is as close as she can get to honoring my request that she wait until at least 7:00 AM to call me); and six text messages – one from an expensive underwear company informing me of a flash sale and five from Woods.

I'm sorry

I'm so sorry

Please call me back

Sylvie

I'm coming over tomorrow morning

I groan again. My head is throbbing and my mouth tastes like actual shit. I drag myself to the bathroom and take a gander in the mirror, confirming that I look as bad as my mouth tastes. “Dammit.” A teacup poodle could comfortably fit in the bags under my eyes, and last night’s makeup is smudged down to my cheeks.

My anger is mostly gone, replaced by paranoia that I overreacted last night. A loud knock on the door freezes my whole body. If life were a horror movie, I would be the first to die. I don’t fight or flight—I just stand there. Woods wasn’t kidding when he said he’d be here in the morning. I look at my phone again – 8:01 – and rub the smeared mascara from beneath my eyes.

“Be right there!” I clumsily load my toothbrush with toothpaste and shove it in my mouth as I stumble to the door. To my utter surprise, Guillermo is standing before me. He is holding the most extravagant bouquet I’ve ever seen.

“Buongiorno, bella!”

“Guillermo!” I say around my toothbrush. I hold up a finger, “Just a second,” then run to the sink to spit and rinse my mouth. “What are you doing here? These can’t be for me.”

“Delivery *speciale*,” he says.

“Wow, they’re beautiful! To what do I owe this stunning surprise?”

“You mean, to *whom*. They’re not from me, they are from Mr. Woods. He either really made a mess of things or he really loves you.” Guillermo shrugs and extends the bouquet toward me. “Or both.” He laughs.

I shake my head and take the bouquet.

“Look, go easy on him, ok? Men do stupid things but he is good, Sylvie.”

“I don’t know, Guillermo...”

“In Italy we have an old saying, ‘*l’amore non e’ bello se e’ litigare*.’ It means ‘love is not healthy—love is not beautiful—without a quarrel.’”

“Thank you Guillermo,” I say softly, admiring the flowers.

“Ok! I’ll see you.” He smiles and waves.

I put on a charcoal masque that’s probably expired since I use it so infrequently and chug a Gatorade as I trim the flower stems. I stuff the bouquet in a vase and move it around my apartment a few times before finally deciding she looks prettiest on the sill of my window. The light yellow bed sheet floats through the air as I straighten up before taking a cool shower. I pull on a chambray mini dress and check my phone for notifications.

Do you like the flowers?

Yes, but only because they're Guillermo's

A soft knock makes my stomach twist with nervousness, but at least this time I have my teeth brushed. I open the door and Woods looks disheveled and adorable, like a sleepy puppy. His hair is a mess, he has dark circles under his eyes, and his black t-shirt is wrinkly. I'm glad I'm not the only one who looks like shit. He's holding a brown bag and a tray with two to-go coffees cups.

I've already forgiven him.

"Back to black," I remark.

He looks at the cups with confusion. "There's plenty of cream in it."

"No, your shirt," I laugh.

He looks down. "Oh... yeah. I just grabbed something."

"You may enter," I say in an English accent and motion for him to come in. He goes to the sofa and sets the bag and the coffees on the table. The name on the cup is spelled Wudz.

"Is this for real?" I point to the cup and sit on the opposite side of the sofa.

He shakes his head. "It's a joke."

"Between you and the cute barista?" I guess.

Woods covers a smile.

"I'm right!"

"You could just pee on me and claim your territory."

“I’ve considered it.”

Out of the bag, he pulls two single serving flourless chocolate cakes, then looks deep into my soul. I swear he can hear my heart stop in response to the undeniably romantic gesture. “I am so sorry about last night, Sylvie.”

“Which part?” This is a test to see if he can name all of them.

“First, Arnie.”

“He is depraved, Woods. I’m disgusted, frankly, that you and your friends would associate with someone like that.”

“I know. He is going to rehab. He was disgusted with himself once he sobered up.”

I nod but remain skeptical. I’ll believe it when I see it.

“Second, I am sorry I wasn’t honest with you about the timeline of my last relationship.”

“I know nothing about your last relationship, let alone the timeline.” I look down at my cup and say more gently, “What’s the story?”

He blows out a deep breath, trilling his lips, in preparation for his explanation. “About seven years ago I started dating Claire.”

“God, *seven* years!” I didn’t forget about that part, I just... chose not to think about it, and it sounds more extreme today. I’ve never come close to dating someone for that long.

“Let me explain, please.”

In a huff, I stand to retrieve two forks from the silverware drawer and throw Woods' utensil on the table, then shovel the cake into my mouth.

“Shortly after Claire and I started dating, my sister, Leah, died.” He says it quickly and without tone variation, like he's practiced reciting it. “It was the most brutal time of my life. I was a mess. Claire stuck around for that and supported me, and I will always be grateful to her. But we weren't in love, I wasn't going to marry Claire.” He pauses.

I make an impatient gesture for him to continue and ask with a mouthful of cake, “Then why did you stay with her for so long?” I wash down the bite with a gulp of blistering hot coffee. My hand fans in front of my face as if it can do anything about the areas inside my mouth that have already melted away.

“I guess I felt like I owed her. The last six months of our relationship was basically platonic, we weren't even sleeping together, but we had been through so much that it was hard for either of us to follow through with a breakup. We finally ended it a few weeks before Sarah and Jimmy's wedding. No one knew because we didn't want it to overshadow the wedding.”

“Was she at the wedding?”

He hesitates. “Well... yeah.”

“What the hell?” I put my head in my hands. “Wait! Didn't you say you slept with Jennifer a few *months* ago?”

“That was an... indiscretion,” he sighs. “I was coming home after a night of drinking and Jennifer invited me in. I told Claire about it the next day and it didn’t bother her.”

“Ok, this is too much.” *I know this guy less than I thought I did.* The next bite of cake arrives at my mouth subconsciously. There’s just suddenly chocolate on my tongue.

“I know how it sounds, but Claire and I had a weird relationship. She slept with other people multiple times. I am... a mess, for sure, but I’m a loyal person, Sylvie,” he says a little more defensively.

I slow my breathing. “Since it’s not in the cards for you and I to have a legitimate relationship, I guess I can get past that.”

The corners of his mouth turn down slightly and he looks out the window, and I regret making such a hurtful comment. I want it both ways by expecting him to tear down his walls and be honest and vulnerable, while I’m putting great effort into maintaining my own walls.

I’m reminded of one of my favorite quotes from the show *Downton Abbey* in which the family matriarch, Lady Violet, says to her granddaughter, “I’m a woman, Mary. I can be as contrary as I choose.” I’ve never forgotten the quote, because it seemed to be permission for existing in my contrarian ways. But perhaps I can be as contrary as I choose while taking a kinder approach.

“So... Do you mind if I ask... What happened to your sister?” Despite my own relationship with the death of a loved

one, or perhaps *because of*, speaking of it bluntly gives me anxiety.

“She died in a car accident when she was twenty-five.” I don’t mean to let out a pitying sigh, but I do, then pinch each of his fingers between mine, waiting anxiously to see if he’ll tell me more. “We were spending the holidays in Sonoma and many of our friends were, too. I was driving Leah home from a party. It was really late. Next thing I remember was being blinded by headlights followed by the most horrific sound of scraping metal. I woke up in a hospital bed and the first person I saw was my mom, and um—” Woods takes a deep breath. To gather his emotions, of course, because revisiting the worst moment of one’s life gives the overpowering sensation of being right back there in the moment. “I’ll never forget the look of anguish on her face, and I knew immediately that the worst had happened. They told me a drunk driver had hit us head-on and killed Leah instantly.”

“Woods. I’m so sorry.” My hand hugs his muscular forearm. “Were you hurt in the accident?”

When his body turns toward me and our eyes meet, it’s like something in him opens—something that has never known it was allowed to be released.

“Just a broken ankle and some cuts and bruises.” He brings the back of my hand to his cheek the way a child snuggles a blankie. “I’m still grappling with the guilt and anger. I always protected Leah, and I— I completely failed her. Losing her instilled a mistrust in myself and life. I’m afraid another

person I love is going to be ripped away from me, or that I'm going to get someone killed again. And, I'm afraid that enjoying my life would betray her." He uses my snuggle hand to cover his eyes. "It sounds illogical."

Logic. Logic and love rarely coexist. I pull my hand away so he can't hide. "I don't think it sounds illogical at all."

He lifts his head and gives me a half-smile. "You mean you can make sense of the fucked up workings of my mind?"

"Is that the best you got? Honestly, your so-called fucked up mind is nothing to brag about." Losing my dad is not something I often talk about, mostly because people stopped asking about it a few weeks after he passed, but I should level the vulnerability playing field here. "I know what that loss feels like." I place my hand to my forehead and take a deep, calming breath. "My dad died six years ago. Even though he had been sick for a while, his death was sudden. A pulmonary embolism." My spine straightens as I grow more confident in my vulnerability. "I was ruled by anger and anxiety for years, and I thought that showing everyone I felt that way was proof that I missed my dad. Until I finally realized that I didn't have to stay angry to prove my sadness. It only ate away at me."

Woods kisses the back of my hand, and I move closer to touch his face.

"I think I'm starting to understand you a little better, Dr. Callahan." My lady parts tingle. Discussing death leaves me burning hotter for him than ever before. It's the same reason mourners hook up after funerals, I suppose. The idea that our

time could be up any minute—our souls potentially blanketed in darkness—kicks the pleasure centers into overdrive. We need to feel wanted, connected, alive. We need fornication. Woods nods and looks from my eyes to my lips. I kiss him slowly and sensuously. “I want you. You can’t say no to me forever.”

He breathes out shakily and pulls me onto his lap so my legs straddle him. “I’m not saying no.”

He massages my calves and flexes his groin into me. My mouth is compelled to his. All of our kisses have been pretty unbelievable, but this one is a force. He’s reckless, edging toward losing control, as his fingers entwine in my hair, and I want him to lose control. This is going to happen, even if I have to tie him up (consensually, of course). The idea of tying him up makes me more certain of what I want. Woods firms up against me.

“Are we going to do this?” he asks.

Duh, dude. “Do you really think you could stop me right now?”

I tug his shirt up, and he helps me get it over his head. Once it’s completely removed, I am a deer in headlights. This is the first time I’ve seen Woods totally shirtless. He is ripped, but not like a Fabio kind of ripped. Woods is defined and athletic. His skin is smooth, his muscles flawless. Dark hair sprinkles his chest and a smaller patch peeks above the line of his pants. The shape and heat of his body this close is enough to finish me.

“Wow,” I whisper as I place my hands on his pecs and squeeze, then run them up around his tattoos—which I now see continue up over his shoulders—and back down to his abs. “You are so hot. Fuckin’ jam skating, huh?”

The humility of his bashful smile turns me into a primal sex fiend. When I breathe out it’s a soft roar, and I pull his face back to mine aggressively. Woods is along for the ride.

“Do you forgive me?” he says against my lips.

“I’m not sure yet. You could beg.”

“Okay,” he says eagerly. “I can beg.”

He stands and, without breaking his lips from mine, carries me to the bedroom and sets me on the edge of the bed. I am yearning, nervous and desperately turned on. Also, I’m hoping I remembered to sweep the cheese and cracker crumbs out of my bed this morning. He pushes me gently back on the bed and kneels down, sliding my dress up past my hips. I know where this is going and I am already overwhelmed. Cunnilingus overpowers my nervous system and I don’t usually handle it very well. I cover my face with my hands as he slowly removes my underwear.

“No, wait!” I shout.

He pauses. “You don’t want me to beg?”

“Yes,” I moan and grab the sheets feverishly. He wraps his hands around my ass cheeks. “No,” I say again urgently.

“No?” He’s bemused.

“Yes,” I say frantically. The tip of his tongue traces up my inner thigh. “But wait!” I yell with deluge.

“Ok, what is happening?” He rests his elbow on the bed and surveys my face.

“It’s just– It’s too much. I can’t handle it. It feels too good.” My heavy breathing says as much.

“I haven’t even started yet.”

“Exactly!”

He chuckles with gratification. “I’ll go slow.”

“That’s part of the problem.”

“So, you want me to go fast, then?”

I try to envision him speed-licking my clit. “Um...”

“Just relax,” he says as he scoots me a little closer toward him.

I let out a long moan and toss my arm over my eyes. Releasing my muscles, I sink into the bed. Woods’ slow licks up my thigh turn to kisses, and I can feel the curves of his lips as he inches closer to my center. There’s a half second of stillness and then his tongue strokes gently on the single most alive part of my body. Every nerve ending has convened into this tiny area to ensure my sexual demise. I gasp and tense up.

He rubs my thighs reassuringly. “You’re doing great.”

Oddly, I have a brief flashback to my last gynecological appointment when Dr. Thayer said the same thing. (Dr. Thayer is male. Yes, I have a male gynecologist, and no, he doesn’t

usually intrude on my sexual thoughts.) I push Dr. Thayer from my mind, breathe out and relax.

Woods uses the tip of his tongue to do one full circle around my clit, then slides it down slowly until it enters me. That does the trick. I surrender to the glory of his tongue and groan in pure satisfaction.

“Shit, you taste incredible,” he says. That might be the best compliment I’ve ever received. “I could eat you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“It would kill me,” I gasp.

His tongue continues its gentle caress. I tug on his hair and look down at him because, surely, he’s drowning. He seems fine and continues with some kind of swirly thing.

“Do you forgive me yet?”

I moan his name, but just as I become thoroughly invested he pulls away and gets to his feet. “What are you doing? I need more,” I say, confused, and push myself up on my elbows. I feel like a crazed cat lady whose decade-long celibacy has been passionately interrupted by the strapping young man who came to repair the dishwasher.

Woods smiles and slides the zipper of his jeans up and down teasingly. He knows the ball is in his court and he can play me any way he chooses. It’s glorious and maddening.

“You’re a monster,” I growl and throw myself back on the bed.

He pulls his pants off seductively. Fleetwood is divine.

Just like the hot celebrities in the Calvin Klein ads, he's wearing white briefs; they're blindingly white, which tells me he either bought new man-panties for this occasion or he maintains a *very* clean undercarriage. If I took a picture right now and sent it to the Calvin Klein headquarters they would have it blown up and plastered all over the exterior of their building.

I am in a full sprint to rub my naked body against this man, but he is taking his sweet time. He puts his thumbs in his underwear and pulls down just enough to show me the thickening hair, then slowly removes his briefs completely.

My jaw drops involuntarily and I put my hand to my forehead, certain my face is a shade of red it's never been before. "Oh my... stars." I've never given cock size much thought, they have all seemed pretty average. But this... this is not your average cock. Woods walks around with the Eiffel Tower in his pants. The Leaning Tower of Pisa might be a more appropriate comparison given his heritage, but he is not leaning. Either way, one can see my point. He's monumental. "That's not going to fit," I whisper, mostly to myself.

There flashes a flattered smile across his face as he closes the space between us and draws me up to standing. I don't trust that I can hold myself up. "Don't worry. I'll fit."

I respond with a shaky laugh.

He helps me drag my dress over my head. There is no bra for him to struggle with, although I doubt it would be much of a struggle for him given he's not shaking the way I am. Woods

swallows audibly as his eyes linger over all my confidences and insecurities. He takes my ass in his hands, pulling me closer until the length of his muscle is pressed against my stomach, and kisses across my collarbone. He is hot and throbbing.

“You’re better than I imagined,” he whispers.

I sit and scoot myself carefully back onto the bed. “Tell me about it, stud,” I say like Sandy from Grease. I mean this rhetorically, but Woods indulges my request.

“Your pink nipples on your creamy skin are... Gah.” He traces the contour of my breasts.

“Are they pink? I’ve always considered them more of a dusty rose.” I breathe heavily.

His fingers continue down to my waist, then to the crest of my hips. “The way your waist draws in and then—”

I interrupt him with a frustrated growl and tear my bedside table drawer open. A handful of condoms fly onto the bed in a frenzy. I grab one and rip the package open with my teeth. I am an animal.

I roll the condom on him in record time then look back to his face with concern. “It’s too small.”

“It’s fine.” Woods readjusts the base of the condom then leans down to frame his forearms around my head. The tip of his dick rests at my entrance. His stalling is torturing me.

I kiss him and say, “Go, go, go,” as though I’m coaching an Olympic relay race.

“Since you’re not planning to fall in love with me, don’t hold back, okay?”

“Why would I hold back?” I laugh and clap my hands against his shoulders. “Just fuck me already.”

He carefully slides in. My muscles release and he slides in further. We both gasp in relief. He fits, despite my reservations. His Chippendale dancer hips roll into me slowly, with control. My hands are all over him – arms, chest, stomach, his ass and thighs.

“And your tight pussy,” he continues his indulgent rhetoric, then stops. “I hope you don’t mind that term.”

“I love it. I love it!” I reply fiercely. His lips return to mine and we are lost in each other. I say, “Yes, yes!” as I press my hand to the headboard and push against him.

He rolls deeper and quicker into me. The intensity is brimming toward a deluge, while at the same time I can’t get enough of him. I smile when I recognize the look of concentration that indicates he’s researching me. I’m on the edge, but I pull back, challenging myself not to give in yet. I put my hands over my face to hide what feels like ugly pleasure.

“Don’t.” Woods grabs each of my arms and secures my wrists above my head with one hand. “I want to see what I do to you.” Heat radiates off his body. The restraint of my hands paired with Woods’ fast and deep pace gives way to the control I’ve maintained over my screams.

“Yes, Fleetwood. Yes!”

“Goddamn it, Sylvie, I’ve wanted you for so long. Just let go.”

Well, it can’t be that long, but it doesn’t matter. I scream louder and scratch my fingernails down his back. I’ve had plenty of sex in my adult life, but I have never felt this *naked* with someone. Every part of our bodies is moving with each other in unison and it’s waking up more than my G-spot.

Without releasing my wrists, Woods does one slow lick up my nipple then sits upright to change the angle.

“Fleetwood.” That lick kicks off the journey of the longest orgasm of my life. It takes me to the stars and I am free falling through galaxies. What sounds to me like a paean of ecstasy explodes from my diaphragm, but it probably sounds like an injured raccoon to my lover. “Don’t stop! Don’t stop or I’ll kill you.”

He grips my waist with his free hand and keeps his pace. My orgasm is the energizer bunny, it won’t quit. I must look like the exorcism of Sylvie Hanson. I yell out obscenities until finally my body goes limp. Just as I’m descending from my climax, Woods comes and I feel another wave of pleasure rip through my body.

Holy shit. We are face to face, breathing heavily. Is *love at first fuck* a thing? Woods rolls gracefully off of me and we lay side-by-side, paralyzed.

After some time, I ask, “So... does this mean you do *casual* now?”

“To be determined.” He stands from the bed and disappears into the bathroom. I bolt upright. “You have a tattoo on your ass!”

“Yep.”

“Amazing.”

“You’re the only one who can call me Fleetwood from now on, by the way.”

He returns from the bathroom and slides under the sheet, pulling me to him. I run my hand through his hair, then turn my back against his naked body and we indulge in a morning nap.

Step 11: Ah hell, where were we?

I WAKE TO FINGERTIPS sliding down my face, my arm, across my torso and my hip, down my thigh and back up.

“Mmm.” I roll to face Woods and he’s closer than I expected—our lips meet. I press myself into his hardness. He tangles his fingers in my hair and kisses me.

“Damn, woman.” He pushes himself into a seated position and pulls me on top of him, taking a long slow breath in, his eyes blazing. I laugh and toss my hair out of my face. Like an underwear model, I tilt my ass out a little and his hands move all the way down. He inches his fingers together until they meet at *le vestibule*. I shiver. “You’re so wet,” he says.

“I’m always this wet when I’m with you. It’s pretty inconvenient, actually. I’ve had to start carrying an extra pair of underwear.”

His fingertips enter me slightly, rewarding me for my honesty.

I sigh and continue. “That first night you took me to see the stars, I was worried I may have left a puddle in your passenger seat.”

This time he’s the one in an absolute frenzy to find a condom. He fumbles it on as I smile with satisfaction. He lifts me up and slides me onto him fluidly. His strong arms wrap tightly around me, my hips rock rhythmically on top of him and he kisses my breasts. I tilt my head back and grip his neck.

I’m glad it’s the middle of the day on Friday, hopefully my neighbors are at work. Scratch that. I hope my neighbors are home to hear this.

I have been reduced to the longevity of a thirteen-year-old boy who just discovered porn. “I’m already there,” I say breathily.

A quick study, he takes my nipple in his mouth.

“Oh God, Fleetwood,” I say weakly and hug him in tighter. This climax isn’t as long-lived as the first one, but just as intense.

A short, loud grunt echoes out of his throat as he climaxes. We hold this position for a few seconds while he breathes heavily into my chest.

“You are ridiculously sexy when you come,” he says exhaustedly, his eyebrows slanted in what looks like despair.

“Aren’t all women? Isn’t that part of the appeal?” I move to dismount him, but he squeezes his arms around my waist.

“Yes, but you’re the *sexiest*.”

I smile and rest my head on his curls. “What if the sex gets better every time? We wouldn’t stand a chance.”

He lays me gently back onto the bed. “I know. We’ll have to quit our jobs. And you’re pretty loud. We should probably buy an island, so we don’t bother the neighbors.”

I put my hands over my face and laugh. “Sorry.” I’m not *really* sorry, because I feel sublime, even if I sounded out of my mind arriving there. Turns out the cure for a hangover is chocolate cake, coffee, and excellent sex.

“Never apologize for that. I’m going to make you my ringtone.” Woods returns from the bathroom and begins dressing.

“What are you doing?” I ask sadly.

“I’m starving. Let’s go get food.”

I hadn’t even realized how hungry I am. “You’re right. I need a buffet.”

“I don’t know of a buffet around here, but one of my parents’ buyers has a really authentic Italian restaurant in Platt Park.”

“Perfect.” I rise out of the bed.

Woods takes my face in his hands. “Shit, I’m scared,” he says.

“Of getting a raging boner while we’re at lunch? I would be too.” I slip my dress on. “I’m so glad I don’t have one of those things to contend with.”

“Ha! I think my penis is falling in love with your vagina.”

“Probably. She is lovely.” I make eye contact with Woods briefly in the mirror as I twist my hair into a bun and hook some thin, gold hoops through my ears.

On our way out the door, Woods very seriously says, “Hey, uh, did you hear about the pasta and its cooking water?”

“Huh? No. What is it?” I say with concern, reacting only to his tone rather than fully comprehending the absurdity of his question.

“Their relationship was strained.” The commitment of his downtrodden character is remarkable, his comedic timing unexpected. This joke is precisely dumb, yet with my endorphins still in turbo drive, I laugh myself in and out of tears for the entire walk to the restaurant.

Simply called *Roma*, the restaurant is an intimate establishment filled with natural light beaming in through large windows and pendant light fixtures made from delicate glass. Booths colored in earth tones line the wall and a handful of tables stand just by the windows, as well as sprinkle the outdoor patio. It is more upscale than I am used to, and I’m glad that by happenstance I’m wearing a dress and earrings. An older couple dines at an indoor table, and a younger gentleman in a suit sits alone at a booth scribbling in a spiral notebook.

The owner, Gianna, greets Woods warmly with a hug and offers me the same when I am introduced. She is about my height and, based on the fabric of her clothing, is likely

wearing an expensive Italian designer. She smells expensive too.

“I’ve known this guy since he was this big!” Gianna squeezes Woods’ arm maternally and holds her other hand just above her knee to show how small Woods was. “His parents went into business around the same time I opened my first restaurant in California,” she says, reminiscence in her eyes. Gianna goes on to explain that we picked a good time to come in, as it is the quiet between the storms of lunch and the happy hour rush. “Anyway, sit wherever you like!” She waves her hand around the dining room.

Woods motions toward a table on the patio. “Because I know you like people watching,” he says.

He knows that I like people watching? Upon settling outside, I notice a couple I wasn’t previously aware of sitting at a table on the far end of the patio, engaging in unabashed PDA. I raise my eyebrows to Woods in awe.

“I know how they feel,” I say as he sneaks a peek at them, then turns back to me and winks.

Usually I dislike when a man winks—it comes off as patronizing—but when Woods bats his pretty black lashes, my heart does a backflip. He silences his phone then tilts an ear in the direction of the exhibitionist couple. Their words are, to me, indistinct, but their body language speaks volumes as the gentleman strokes the woman’s thigh and she feeds him chocolate mousse.

“They’re speaking Italian,” Woods says.

Elated that I have a translator, I ask, “What are they saying?”

Woods’ eyes gape. “It’s not appropriate for the dinner table.”

“What about the lunch table?” He shakes his head. “Please tell me,” I persist.

He chooses his words carefully. “Let’s just say, he *is* into butt stuff.”

I raise my menu to cover the heat rising in my face, then scan it, instantly overwhelmed. Woods looks at his menu for only a few seconds before resting it back on the table. “You already know what you want?”

“Yeah. Do you... want me to order for you?”

I slam my menu closed. “Absolutely.”

The meal is exquisite. Woods has ordered us three heavenly courses and a bottle of wine with a bunch of words on the label that I can’t pronounce. I’m so full by the end that even dessert doesn’t sound appetizing. Plus, my sweet tooth was satisfied by the hand-delivered chocolate cake breakfast.

Without even peeping at the bill, Woods hands his credit card to our server. Only ballers can do that. Gianna returns the bill to Woods herself, accompanied by a server carrying two espressos, the entirety of which I swallow in one gulp in order to keep myself from sinking into lethargy. I tell Gianna what a pleasure it is to meet someone who has known Woods for so long and thank her for her hospitality.

“She’s a keeper.” Gianna winks and nods at Woods. Her approval of me is more gratifying than I care to admit. Woods nods back at her and I get the feeling there is more to that conversation than was spoken aloud.

“That was the best meal I’ve ever had. Thank you,” I say to Woods.

“What did you like the most?”

“The company, of course.”

“Who, them?” Woods gestures behind him without looking. The horny couple is now making out without so much as an ounce of hesitation. “Italians.” He shakes his head. “So! Now that I’ve spoon-fed you the best Italian food in town, it’s my turn for an interrogation.”

Oh no. “Tit for tat, I see. By all means, ask away,” I say dispassionately, as carbohydrates and caffeine go to battle in my stomach.

“Where did you go for undergrad?”

“Ugh.” I put my head in my hands. “You ask as if there was education beyond undergrad. Why is that your first question?”

“What’s wrong with that question?”

“Only a total nerd uses his first interrogation question to delve deeper into the history of my education... I didn’t finish college,” I grumble.

“So? Who cares?”

“‘So’? That’s unexpected coming from a doctor of outer space.”

He laughs. “I just kept going to school because I was too afraid to enter the real world. Besides, Bill Gates dropped out of college.”

“I hate that comparison. I am no Bill Gates. Plus, he’s a moron for letting Melinda get away.”

“Ha! You’re too hard on yourself.” To my relief, he changes the subject. “What’s the best compliment you’ve ever received?”

“My last boyfriend once called me a fucking nightmare,” I answer sarcastically.

Woods winces. “What’d you do?”

“Told him I loved him. I think it was his way of saying ‘I love you too.’”

His eyebrows pinch together. Concern or pity. Probably both.

“Honestly? The best compliment I ever received was from you... a few hours ago... when you mentioned how incredible I taste.”

That answer hits the mark. He stands from his chair and puts his hand out to help me out of mine. He asks if I have any siblings and to describe my relationship with my mother.

I begin hesitantly, making the decision to get the bad news over with first, “My little brother, Clayton, is in jail. But he’s

getting out soon,” I add quickly. “He’s actually one of the best people I know—charming, funny, artistic, compassionate. He idolized me growing up. I can’t help but feel like I failed him a little.”

Woods holds the front door open and nods, understanding my admission perhaps more than anyone else could. He doesn’t ask for the reason for Clayton’s detainment and I am in awe of his self-restraint. I continue the rundown of my family tree by bragging about Elliott’s accomplishments as a physician and describing the relationship with my mother that I am trying to redefine.

“What are you doing next weekend?” he asks when I’ve concluded.

“Next weekend? That’s Fourth of July weekend,” I realize as we start strolling up the block. He nods. “Let me think. I have to work the second and third, but I have the Fourth off. I was just going to have a couple friends over to watch the fireworks from the park near my apartment building.”

“Would you want to spend it with me? I usually hike in the afternoon, then host a party at my place. There’s a great view of the fireworks from my balcony.”

I squint my eyes in mock contemplation. “Okay, I’m in!”

He grins widely. “Have you ever been to Italy?”

“Not yet! Would *love* to go someday.”

“I’ll take you.” My breath catches and he is clearly surprised by his own statement of plans for the future, so he

quickly adds, “For now, let’s go back to your apartment so you can remind me how good you taste.”

There’s no way I’m letting him down there after a heavy Italian meal.

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Step 12: Remember that the square root of love doesn't equal sex. Or something like that.

THE MOMENT MY PHONE vibrates I pull it from my pocket like Annie Oakley sliding a pistol from her holster. My last three phone checks turned out to be nothing but phantom vibrations resulting in Charlie Brown-level disappointment. This time, I glimmer with excitement.

How's work? he asks.

Better now

Can you take a break?

Maybe

I'm out back

Individually, Woods and I have each had a busy week, leaving us very little time to do anything more than text each other risqué pictures. Ida warns me that those pictures will live forever in the internet ether, to which I reply, "Good." One evening, during a brief interlude between his research and rehearsal, we did make time for a hot make out session behind the library. It was accompanied by my giving him a hand job.

I tell Ida, “I’m going to check the sprinkler system.”

“The sprinkler system?” She lets her head bounce easily to the side and says, “I had three teenagers under my roof, honey. I’ve heard much better excuses than that.” She waves me away. “Take your time.”

I run downstairs, out the French doors, and into the darkness. There is a gate near the back of the garden that can be accessed from the alleyway. However, the ivy is so overgrown on the alley side that only employees of Galileo’s Garden know of its accessibility.

Just as I reach the gate someone grabs me from behind. I scream in terror and make eye contact with Woods as he puts his hand over my mouth. I cackle with relief when he removes his hand. This feels much like sneaking out as a teenager.

“How did you know about the gate?” I whisper.

Woods shrugs mischievously. Tonight he wears a backwards baseball cap. I have not yet seen him in a hat. For a typical man, the accessory might come across as a failed attempt to look youthful, cool. But the way Woods wears it with his scruffy face and defined arms is in a different class than *cool*. The lights strung around the garden brighten his eyes and give his skin a golden glow.

I push him behind a bush and go straight in for those soft lips. How someone can simultaneously be so soft yet so hard is beyond me. His skin warms under my touch. Fleetwood wants me so bad.

“This is awfully reckless for you, isn’t it? Sneaking into The Garden is sacrilege,” I scold. One of his hands feels me up while the other one sneaks down to unbutton my pants. “Wait, wait. Are your hands clean?” My tone turns serious.

“Yeah, I went to the bathroom before I left the bar,” he whispers.

“And...?”

“And I washed my hands,” he whispers a little louder, annoyed.

I bite his bottom lip. “Don’t get short with me, Dr. Callahan. I just don’t want to get a UTI.”

“A UTI,” he repeats as he nods in a way that says he’s realizing something he hadn’t previously considered. His mouth returns to mine as his hand descends down the front of my pants.

I inhale sharply when his fingers start circling while his other hand tenderly holds my face to his. His natural aroma mixed with the smell of beer on his breath is my rocket fuel. I go weak in the knees.

Woods turns us so my body is pressed against the fence and continues to slide his fingers between my legs marvelously. It’s imperative that I don’t get as loud as I usually do, so when my lips part, threatening a roar, Woods crushes his lips to mine. I hold tightly to his shirt and melt like butter into his hand. He beams and licks the proof of his triumph from his finger.

Casually, he says, “This isn’t real grass,” as if it is plainly the next point of conversation.

My brain is lounging lazily in a post-orgasm hot tub, so my first thought is that he’s using Boomer lingo to refer to some bad marijuana. “What?”

“It’s artificial turf.” He squats down to run his hand over the ground.

“No way!” I join him near the ground to pinch the faux blades of grass. “I can’t believe I never noticed.”

“It’s the first thing I noticed.”

This beautiful, green grass that I have been in awe of for years is fake! I look at Woods and can’t help but wonder if it’s depressing seeing the world simply for what it is. Perhaps part of the reason Woods studies outer space is because the observations of Earth can be disheartening, even boring. On the other hand, seeing the world as I do, from a romantic perspective, through rose-colored glasses, can be exhausting.

I remember reading that professional comedians reference their perceptive view of humanity as the reason both for their comedic gift as well as their immutable grief. A double edged sword: they see the hilarity of life but they are also acutely mindful of the hopelessness.

“Can I come over tonight when I get off work?” I ask.

“No, I have to organize my textbooks.”

“Oh.”

We stand and he squeezes my cheeks together, kissing my scrunched lips. “Obviously, I’m kidding. I’ll be eagerly awaiting the arrival of your gorgeous face.”

I give Woods a six second hug for the extra hit of dopamine. This is the first time I’ve felt the urge to tell him I love him. Not because I’m totally in love with him, necessarily, but because I love everything about him. And, I remind myself, loving everything about him is, of course, entirely different than being *in love* with him.

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Step 13: Don't get caught in the rain.

I GREW UP HIKING near my home, but for reasons such as a recently developed fear of bears, it hasn't been a priority in my adult life, so I am less familiar with the trails near Denver. Woods drives us to a trail I've hiked only once but that he knows well.

Because it's blistering hot, and because I want to show off the barely-there muscles I've been halfheartedly sculpting in my living room, I wear an athletic tank top with tiny bike shorts and tie my hair up in a high ponytail. Part of the appeal of these snug-fitting shorts is their "built-in underwear," which merely means there is an extra piece of fabric for sweat and discharge to soak through, so I don't bother with panties.

A gray line of clouds that reaches from north to south as far as the eye can see creeps slowly from the west, threatening to veil the sun. The expanse is not exceptionally ominous, but will likely bring moisture. Afternoon thunderstorms are common this time of year, and the cool rain is usually a welcome relief from the heat.

“It’s probably going to rain,” I say, almost as a question.

“When I checked the weather, the prediction was for clear skies all day.”

Regardless of what the clouds may bring, we pursue the trail without pause.

After nearly laughing the piss out of myself at Woods’ very dry sense of humor that I am catching onto, I find a tree off-trail behind which to pop a squat. As I drip dry then rearrange my shorts into their proper position, thunder rumbles softly above.

I traverse the rocks and piles of sticks back to the trail where Woods has already removed his shirt to keep it from getting soaked. I could never get used to that body of his. I look up just as a raindrop lands on my cheek, another on my eyelid, and I catch a few more drops with my outstretched hand.

“Uh oh.” The corners of my mouth turn up and my eyes widen with amusement.

Woods says, “If it really starts coming down, I brought a sheet of metal to shield us from the rain while I set up some portable electronics to keep us entertained.”

“Genius.”

It begins pouring and my skimpy outfit is quickly soaked through. Getting caught in the rain is more often a pain in the ass than a dreamy rom-com scene. But for us, right now, having nowhere to be and nothing on our minds but the echo

of our naked bodies moving together, it is the manifestation of said dreamy scene. We run until we find a coniferous tree with branches crowded enough to shield us from some of the downpour.

I lean against the jagged bark of the trunk, catching my breath, and watch as the raindrops cling to Woods' caramel skin and trickle unpredictably down his muscles. He swipes his wet curls back from his forehead, as a drop of water runs down his nose and off his bottom lip. In my mind, dramatic orchestral music accompanies the live cologne advertisement mere inches in front of me and crescendos when Woods smiles.

“What? What are you thinking about?” His eyebrows peak to make the familiar triangle on his forehead. I swallow loudly and look away. As intimate as we've been with each other, I feel flustered when he catches me staring.

“Nothing.”

“*Nothing*. Oh. Interesting,” he replies sarcastically. Woods leans forward, pinning me against the tree, and I run my hands over his slick muscles. “You want to know what I'm thinking?” he asks softly, his eyes gleaming.

“Mhm,” I whimper—something I do an awful lot of around this guy.

“I'm thinking about how I want to lick the rain off of every inch of your body.”

I bite my lip and grip onto the tree behind me. I'm so turned on, it's practically nauseating. He presses harder against me and some of the air rushes out of my lungs. Our sexual tension volcanoes and he kisses ferociously down my neck. Two of his fingers slide up the tiny leg of my shorts. He lets out a surprised breath when, instead of finding underwear, his fingers press into the softness of my opening.

He looks in my eyes questioningly; I know what he's asking. While our daypacks are filled with water, snacks, and first aid essentials, it's unlikely we have a condom. As much as we want each other, I know if I said "no" he would, of course, pull away without hesitation and that would be that.

Just as I'm about to shut this whole thing down, Woods' eyes light up. From a tiny pocket-within-a-pocket in his backpack, he pulls out a small square package.

"Thank God!" I yell and run my fingers up into his wet hair.

He pulls his shorts down just enough to release his rock-hard cock, then lifts me up by my thighs. I yank my shorts to the side and pant as he enters me. The scent of dirt, pine, and rain fills my lungs and the tree bark digs into my lower back as Woods flexes slowly into me. My roars of pleasure resound off the rocks and trees. For this, he increases the pace, pressing my back harder against the bark.

The primality of lovemaking in nature paired with the audaciousness of *doing it* somewhere we could get caught is so blissful. I am completely present in my body, giving me

heightened awareness of every flinching muscle, every aroused nerve-ending, every part of my skin that meets his.

Woods breathes rapidly as he puts his forehead to mine and thrusts a few more times. I yell his name in ecstasy and grip harder onto the tree as I erupt like a tiny geyser onto him. He finishes and I laugh with euphoria. He steadies my legs back on the ground and pulls my shorts back into place before tucking himself back in.

His smile turns down in concern as he looks from my face to the ground. "I'm sorry," he says. "I could not help myself."

I grab his face and scold him, "What? Don't be ridiculous. I wanted that more than you did."

His smile returns. "Doubt it."

"Never doubt how much I want you, Fleetwood." I kiss him affectionately, so he knows I mean it.

His brooding clears with the rain, and we make our way back down the mountain.

"That was kind of reckless," he says when we get back in the car.

"Delightfully so, in my opinion, but you don't like being reckless."

I'm worried the pouting has returned, but he looks at me with a sly grin. His arm slides against my thigh as he retrieves his phone from the glove compartment and scrolls through dozens of texts and calls.

“Crazy ex-girlfriend trying to get a hold of you?”

He ignores the question. “That’s the thing about you, Sylvie. You make me do reckless things.”

“Is this where *I’m* supposed to apologize?” I reply, feeling defensive.

“No, not at all. I like being reckless with you.” He smiles again to himself and turns the music up.



After a warm shower, I nurse a glass of wine while assisting Woods with a few things in the kitchen for the party. Guests will be arriving soon.

“Your birthday was in June, right?” he asks. I tilt my head quizzically.

An odd question, I think. “June the first.” I sip casually from my stemmed glass. “When is yours? I don’t remember you ever telling me.”

“Today,” he says without acknowledging me with his eyes.

My mouthful of *vino* dribbles down the sides of my chin, and my cheeks warm. “Is that one of your weird jokes?”

He snickers and shakes his head.

I punch him in the arm. “What the hell, Woods? Were you going to wait until people came in yelling ‘Happy Birthday!’ for me to find out?”

“No. I just told you.”

I scoff.

“Are you mad?” he asks.

“Well, no, I can’t be mad at you because it’s your birthday,” I say impatiently. “This is shameful. I’ve been treating you like a normal person all day.” My hand goes to my forehead as it does when I’m in an uncomfortable social situation, which is often. “And everyone is going to ask me what I got for you, and when I say ‘nothing’ they’re going to think I’m a thoughtless gold digger.”

“I would disagree that you’ve been treating me like a normal person. And anyway, we can tell them what you got me is a private matter.”

“Then they’ll assume I’m a thoughtless gold digger who gives blow jobs as gifts. Plus, I haven’t even given you one of those!” He laughs and takes me into his arms. “Seriously, I feel terrible,” I say more gently. “I don’t know what the hell I would have gotten you, but it would have been good... Probably. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to get me anything. I just wanted to be with you,” he says sweetly and kisses me.

Whoa, what? “That’s silly.” He shakes his head and frowns in disagreement. “How old are you today?”

“Forty-two.”

I try and fail, once again, to raise my one eyebrow.

“No, I’m thirty-one.”

I sing him my best Marilyn Monroe version of *Happy Birthday*. Then, when he is distracted, I text Mo who is surely already on her way to the party.

Breaking news. It's Woods' birthday! Please help.

I'm on it

Will you stop by my place and grab that lego set? I'll owe you BIG TIME

Anything for you, babe

She and Ivy walk in thirty minutes later carrying a flourless chocolate cake, ornate vagina candles, a bottle of Absinthe, and a bouquet of “Happy 3rd Birthday” Spiderman balloons.

The party is nothing short of fantastic—a sophisticated house party attended by mostly unsophisticated people, a few of whom I’m confident are thrilled to return to their college partying days for just one night. Things get a little out of hand when someone opens the Absinthe, and Woods has to reprimand his friend Sean for peeing off the balcony.

After a few hours, the power unexpectedly goes out in the building, making for a perfect opportunity for Woods to send everyone home. Once they’ve gone, he sets up a small lantern in the bathroom so I can perform my bedtime routine, then supplies me with a plush white robe, of which he sports a matching one.

“Dr. Callahan, you have to stop,” I say guiltily. “You’re spoiling me when I should be spoiling you.”

Woods has lit candles around his apartment and opened the sliding glass wall leading to the balcony. The power outage means the air conditioning isn't working, so the light breeze that blows in is vitally refreshing.

He hands me an espresso cup and saucer. "This is cold, leftover coffee from this morning. It's the best I could do with no electricity."

"Mm, my favorite."

"The fireworks are about to start."

I step out onto the balcony and relax into a lounge expecting that Woods will claim his own chair next to mine, but he motions for me to make room for him and nestles in next to me.

"This view is perfect." I clink my miniature mug to his. "I noticed tonight that while everyone else was thoroughly inebriated, you didn't drink too much."

"When you grow up around copious amounts of wine, you learn self-control pretty early. Plus, getting too drunk tends to bring up memories of a pretty terrible night, so I try to avoid it."

I nod, then take a deep breath to build up my nerve for his gift reveal. "Okay. I do have something for you. It's dumb, though, so don't get too excited."

Mo slipped me a small box when she and Ivy arrived, and I retrieve it from where I stashed it in my bag in Woods' bedroom. I return to the balcony holding the box behind my

back and glance down, shuffling my foot nervously before handing it to him, unwrapped.

It's an eighty-four piece NASA-inspired LEGO set. I found the set the same day I went looking for a candle that smelled like Woods at Target, but I don't dare expose myself any further by revealing that detail. He takes the box from me, speechless.

I sit down next to him, trying to explain myself. "I saw this one day shortly after we..." *Ah shit, what is it we're doing?* "...started hanging out, and it made me think of you. I was planning to keep it for myself to remind me of you, but since you sprung your birthday on me today, I had to think of something on the fly." I laugh in an attempt to assure him that I am aware of the childishness of the gift.

Woods turns toward me and smiles with glistening eyes but remains silent. A knot of emotion forms in my sinuses for being foolish enough to think a grown man would like a *LEGO* set. *How moronic.*

"Ugh, I'm sorry. I told you it was dumb." I reach to take the box back.

Woods snatches my hand and says, "Sylvie, no. This is perfect."

I snort an awkward laugh. "It's okay, Woods. You don't have to—" the first firework booms, startling me into quiet.

Thankful for the interruption, I stand to lean against the balcony and take in the display. As a couple more fireworks

explode, Woods spins me around to face him and kisses me. Rather than the typical *physical* depth that pervades our kisses, this kiss is emotionally impassioned.

The fireworks continue in the distance and he pulls his lips barely away from mine. “I love the LEGOS. Truly.”

I put one hand around his waist and the other in his hair and kiss him again. He’s already so hard, it almost hurts as he presses against me. His fingers loosen the belt of my robe and it falls open. Woods cups my naked breasts then runs his hands down my torso to my hips. He kneels down in front of me, adjusting my legs wider, and pulls me closer to his face by my butt cheeks.

“No, no, no. What are you doing?”

“Thanking you properly for the best birthday present ever.”

“Don’t mock me. You’re going to miss the fireworks.” I tug on his hair.

“No, I’m not. Just relax,” he says playfully.

My breathing quickens as his tongue does its signature move—around the clit, then slides inside. The robe slips off my shoulders as I grip onto the balcony and pray that it’s sturdy enough to hold me through this. My blissful cries are in perfect time with the exploding fireworks. “Ah!” *Boom*. “Ah!” *Boom*. “Ah!” *Boom*. “Yes, yes yes!” *Boom, boom, boom*.

Before I know it, the grand finale is crackling wildly, and the pleasure of Woods’ tongue on me is obscenely satisfying.

He grips my thighs to hold me up, as I am nearly swooning. “Fuck, Fleetwood!” *Boom!*

He smiles and wipes his mouth then turns me around to face the fireworks once again, removing my robe completely as he does. He pulls my hips back onto him as he slides his cock inside. He says something but I can’t hear it over the popping.

This is the second time I feel like I want to tell him I love him, and this time I’m concerned it’s because I’m in love with him. *Damn it, Sylvie!* I consider that maybe I could just ignore these love feelings. Woods is leaving soon, anyway. I can deal with this *being in love* thing until he leaves. Easy!

I lay belly-down, naked across Woods’ bed, clicking the flashlight on and off. He appears at the bedroom door and I shine the flashlight between his legs as he makes his way across the room, places the LEGO set on the bedside table, and removes his robe.

“Oops, you missed a layer.” The light beams across his briefs.

He smiles. “The HOA sent out a text to everyone in the building saying they’re working on getting the power on ‘soon.’ Whatever the hell that means.”

Woods lies on the bed, arranging himself perpendicular to me. I hover the light over his left shoulder, giving his tattoo a closer look. I haven’t taken the time to fully appreciate his body art. This shoulder piece is of our galaxy, no surprise. It is black and gray and quite intricate.

I move the flashlight down to his forearm to find the portrait of a wolf, also done in black and gray. “The galaxy piece is obvious. Why the wolf?”

“It was Leah’s favorite animal.”

At the mention of his sister, I check his face to make sure he’s not crying. He’s not. If he were, of course, I’d cradle him in my bosom the way Ida does when people are crying. “They’re beautiful. Let me see the other one.”

He rolls onto his stomach and I shine the flashlight on his right shoulder. Like the others, this one is colorless – a realist-style landscape with a vineyard in the foreground.

“Italy,” I say with pride at the recognition. I was hoping I might discover a secret code within his body art, but it only reaffirms what I already know about him. “Did the same artist do all of these?”

“Yeah, a friend from college. He owns a shop in Denver.”

Woods startles a bit when, without warning, I pull his briefs down to get a closer look at his fourth tattoo. “Aw, it’s a flower.”

“I’m full of surprises, aren’t I?”

“Kind of. Did your friend do this one, too?”

“No, actually. The artist for that one was an ex-girlfriend.” I pull his briefs back up and snap. “Ow!” He sits up and flips me back onto the pillow so that I’m lying on the bed properly. “So *jealous*,” he says softly, then kisses my face a dozen times. “Remember what we did earlier today?”

“Ah, you must be referring to our super hot forest sex.”

“Exactly. It got me thinking about having sex with you without a condom.”

“Me too.” I pull the sheet over my body and think back to my days of high school sex-ed class when the students would roll their eyes as Mrs. Southard explained the importance of discussing safe sex with one’s sexual partners. She’d say, if we weren’t ready to talk about it then we weren’t ready to *do* it. “I’ll start,” I say like the teacher’s pet I was. “I am tested for STDs at my annual gynecological appointment and, at my most recent appointment, I had a clean bill of health. I’ve only had sex with you since then.”

“Ok,” he remains upbeat. “I got tested after our first date, and I couldn’t be healthier.”

“After the first date, huh? You were feeling confident.”

“I thought it went well. However, I am not on birth control, Ms. Hanson.”

“Very funny.”

His voice turns ragged, “What if I told you I’m a vampire, so my sperm has rotted away?”

I push myself onto my elbows. “Don’t even joke about that. It would drive me wild. It would also mean I could be pregnant with your demon baby.”

“Vampires can’t procreate.”

I shake my head in disappointment. “You haven’t read *Breaking Dawn*, have you? Female vampires can’t get pregnant, but male vampires can impregnate human women.”

“That’s sexist.”

“Yeah, but it’s also science.”

“Huh. So, are you... pregnant with my demon baby?”

I shrug. “I suppose I could be, Dr. Callahan. I’m not on birth control either.”

“Is that something you would consider?”

I look at him questioningly. “Having your demon baby?”
Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.

“Well, sure, but birth control, I mean.”

“Oh.” I shake my head and feel my face flush. “No. I’ve tried a few different forms of birth control, and I prefer condoms.”

He kisses the palm of my hand then slowly up the inside of my arm. “Do you want kids?”

I’m not sure if he’s asking because he’s simply curious, given that people of childbearing age seem less and less interested in doing so these days, or if he is wondering what I would choose should I become pregnant with his demon baby.

I answer without thinking, “Yes, I do,” revealing more to myself than to him. “But not yet... um, obviously.” I attach the disclaimer in case all this talk of babies has given away the

fact that, indeed, I have thought about being impregnated by his gorgeous sperm.

Our baby would be adorable and Woods would be a quiet but enthusiastic father, but it would take being dangled off the edge of a cliff for me to admit those thoughts.

“Me too,” he agrees, his eyes narrowing and the corners of his mouth turning up knowingly. Often when he looks at me I feel like a Windexed window, the inner workings of my mind clear as day for him to scrutinize.

I shift my body closer to his so I can lean my head onto his hard chest. Despite it being hot due to the lack of air conditioning, I revel in his delicious warmth.

“Happy birthday, Fleetwood.”

As soon as my eyes close, I slide quickly into the hypnagogic state. A lucid dream presents silky white chalk on a blackboard, writing out the words of the letter confirming Woods’ new job, “*We look forward to the commencement of your position in August.*” Then the blackboard grows legs and starts chasing me.

I jolt and inhale sharply.

“Did you fall off a cliff?” Woods asks.

“Something like that,” I say sleepily. My exhaustion prevails and I slip back toward sleep. He kisses my forehead and I’m out like a light.

When I wake the next morning, I take a quick inventory of my surroundings. I vaguely remember that at some point

during the night all the lights in the apartment came on, but I was too paralyzed by drowsiness to rouse myself to help turn them off. Woods is still asleep next to me. His body odor wears through the scent of his deodorant. I roll over and rest my nose next to his underarm.

“What are you doing?” he asks groggily.

“I like your stink.” I take another whiff.

“That’s a first.” Without opening his eyes, he strokes my hair.

“I slept like the dead last night.”

“Do you remember our conversation?”

My heart races and I perk my head up. “What do you mean?” I’m terrified I divulged one of any number of embarrassing secrets.

He exhales an amused breath and opens his eyes. “After I turned all the lights off and came back to bed, you asked me why I was leaving.”

“Oh. Well, I do talk in my sleep sometimes.” A tendency that is often partnered with admissions of guilt, desire, or the like. “What was your response?”

“I recited a Shakespearean quote.”

“That must have really confused me.”

He chortles. “It did.”

I lay back on the pillow and examine the lines of my left palm. “Did I say anything else?”

He pauses. “Um, no.”

“Your words are saying ‘no,’ but your tone is saying ‘yes.’ What else did I say?” Gracefully, I roll myself on top of him and graze my nipples across his lips. “Whoa. That was harder than I was expecting, Dr. Callahan.”

His large hands grip my hips and grind me against him. He bites his lip, then says, “Morning wood.”

“Precisely. Morning *Wood*. I guess my work is halfway done, then.” I slide down under the sheet and perform the second part of his birthday present.

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Step 14: If one absolutely insists on having sex, don't do it in a public place.

THE CHEAP AIR CONDITIONING unit rages as I purge my underwear drawer. As usual, I find the lingerie ensemble shoved in its coveted back-of-the-drawer space.

My very Lutheran grandmother gifted me this lingerie set for my twenty-first birthday for reasons I'll never understand, and it's so revealing that, in the nine years I've owned it, I haven't felt confident enough to pull it off. When I asked my mom how it came about that Grandma purchased such a sexy number for me, she said she didn't want to talk about it.

As I examine the lace detailing and consider throwing it in the donation box, an idea dripping with recklessness comes to me. Woods is doing research at the library tonight. On the evenings when his research isn't followed by rehearsal, he stays at my place.

Do you have rehearsal tonight? I text.

Nope

Want to come over when you're done?

I thought you'd never ask

I slide a razor up my right shin once then decide I don't give a shit, swipe on an extra layer of deodorant, and pop a Pepto-Bismol tablet. The lingerie is a little snug in some areas (waist) and a little loose in others (boobs), but fits well enough. I admire myself in the mirror before throwing on a beige, knee-length trench coat, cinching the belt tightly around my waist.

I part my hair down the middle and slick it back into a low ponytail and apply a dark mauve lipstick. To really nail the part, I put on the glasses I use for night driving and movie theaters and test a few accents in the mirror before settling on French. "*Perrfect.*" I slam an insufficient glass of wine and regretfully shove my feet into a pair of heels.

The library is busy, as to be expected on a weekday evening. I scan the study area for a table accommodating a dark and handsome science nerd. Found him. God, he's sexy when he's concentrating. Would anyone believe I have sex with this guy on a regular basis? I catch my reflection in a window. Of course they would, look at me.

I roll my shoulders back and make my way across the library, trying not to waddle. A few sets of eyes watch me covertly, surely wondering who had the audacity to order a lady of the night to a public library. After what feels like an eternal journey, Woods looks in my direction. He does a double take and swallows hard as his fingers slide off his keyboard. His awe suggests I am surrounded in a halo of light.

I grin at my triumph and lean against his table to take some pressure off my feet.

Speaking just above a whisper in my throaty French accent I say, “May I *seet* here?”

“Y-yes. Yes, you may,” he stammers and fumbles the chair next to him out from under the table.

“*Merci*, Dr. Callahan.”

His chest moves up and down rapidly. “What are you doing?”

I peek around to make sure our audience is minimal, then sit delicately in the chair facing him and spread my legs slightly. “*Eet* would be rude to deny a lady, no?” I glare at him.

“It would.” He clears his throat. “I wouldn’t, uh, I wouldn’t do that...” He shudders and fiddles with the pages of his textbook.

Oh, but he would... “*Eet* would make me cry.” I pout my bottom lip and open my legs a little more. A pained look crosses his face. *Maybe he’s not into this.* Nonetheless, I continue, “Are you studying *zee* stars, Dr. Callahan?” I glance around again, then rest my black stiletto gently against his crotch so that he can definitely see up my coat.

“Oh my god,” he breathes out and bites his knuckle. I look at his lap and he is growing.

“*Mon dieu!* What *eez zees?*” I put my hand to my chest, feigning innocence and gesture to his crotch. I open the top of

my coat just enough for him to see the black lace, then whisper, “Will you teach me about *zee* stars, Dr. Callahan?”

He can only manage a whisper in return, “Yes.”

“*Oui?*” I push my heel a little harder against him.

He catches my ankle and smirks. “*Oui.*”

I tighten my coat as I exit the library. Under normal circumstances, I would feel unnerved walking home wearing nothing more than underwear and a robe, but knowing Woods isn’t far behind brings a sense of security.

“Stupid fucking shoes,” I grumble as I hobble into my apartment and kick the horrendous heels across the living room.

I swing myself onto the back of the couch, laying my body across it, but teeter off almost immediately. That won’t do. I strike a sexy pose in my pink armchair, but sitting here requires that I turn my head awkwardly to see the door, so I hurriedly Google “sexy poses” and adjust my body to mimic my favorite of the images—I lean against the wall, pouting seductively and slide the coat off my shoulders.

As soon as I situate my body in what feels like a very sultry position, Woods barges through the front door. I flinch with exhilaration. His eyes smolder like he’s thinking about draining the blood from my hot YouTube-workout-video body.

“That was reckless,” he growls, angry with passion.

I am delighted. If I didn’t trust him so much, I’d be scared. He soothes himself in his usual way, by rubbing his hands over

his face and through his hair.

I let my trench coat drop to the floor and continue with the erroneous French accent, “I heard *zer ees* a conjunction tonight between some planets. I forget which ones.”

“Shut up,” he laughs.

One blink and he’s in front of me, his right hand lifting my thigh to his hip and the other clutching my ponytail. I pull his face to mine and kiss him with everything I’ve got, which is a lot considering my adrenal glands are firing on all cylinders. I trail my hands up under his shirt. His breath in my mouth drives me wild. My breathing pattern resembles hyperventilation, so I put my face to his neck, the way he does to mine, to hide the sound.

“I need you. Right now.” He’s begging.

“Take your clothes off.”

I pull a little square package from the front of my lacy panties. He strips faster than a conservative politician in the Red Light District and I roll on the condom. I only have time to release my breasts from the lingerie before he turns me around and bends me over against the wall, groaning as his hand slides between my legs.

“You’re so wet for me,” he says, then rips the remaining lingerie off my body. Edward Cullen’s got nothing on Fleetwood Callahan’s controlled strength right now.

“Only getting wetter,” I say urgently over my shoulder. My hand slams against the wall as he enters me and twists my

ponytail around his fist. “Yes!” I yell, relieved to finally have him inside me. His other hand moves to cup my breast as he pulses faster and faster. He’s quite vocal and barely lasts a full minute. My hand slams against the wall a second time as he finishes and says my name as he does, then he pulls me upright and sucks on my neck.

“Mmm,” I moan. “I want more.”

“Meet me in your room.” Woods’ lust for me has given him a superhuman refractory period. We move like a well-rehearsed dance—he goes to the bathroom to remove the used condom as I dive onto my bed. For a moment I revel in the coolness of the sheet and flop onto my stomach, pulling my right leg up into my favorite sleeping position.

“Is that how you want it?” Woods asks from the doorway.

“No,” I laugh and toss him another tiny package. “I just love my bed.” He strides toward me. “You’re so hot. I’m losing my mind.”

“I already lost mine,” he says as he hovers over me. “You are the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I can’t. Ugh, I can’t...”

His overwhelm is endearing. I stroke his face comfortingly. Woods owns me right now; my body is his. I am not ashamed of this feminist heresy, because the way he needs me means I own him equally.

There is a pause as we sappily stare into each other’s eyes and I do a quick calculation of where I am in my cycle. In between ovulation and period, I confirm. I reach my hand

down and tentatively roll the condom up an inch. He kisses me, approving the action. I roll it up a little further. He looks down and watches as I gently tug the unused condom off by the tip.

The soft “pop” of the latex is like the gunshot that commences a race. Woods licks me everywhere before taking my nipple in his mouth and I scratch my nails down his thighs. No matter how consumed by sexual passion he is, he always enters me like a gentleman.

We are so utterly desperate for each other it feels like we’re falling from space toward Earth at 1,000 miles per hour. His irises swim as he looks fixedly into my eyes, rolling his hips into me and making satisfied little grunts. The electric wire that connects us is going berserk. Everything slows and my body lightens.

Well. It’s official. I’ve done it again. I am head over heels in love.

I lie motionless, drained, as though we’ve just survived a hot sex hurricane. The intensity was overpowering. I’m in a sort of meditative state as a tear runs down my cheek and into my ear. I look over and a single tear trails down his cheek, too.

“What the fuck was that?” I prop myself up on my elbow and drag my tongue over his tear.

“I don’t know,” he responds as he wipes the tear from my cheek. Nothing more needs to be said; we both feel the new energy that blankets us. It occurs to me that maybe we’ve been making love all along, but tonight’s alignment of the stars has

merely heightened my awareness of it. “You’re going to have to move,” he says after a while. “Your neighbors are going to start complaining about the noise.”

“Definitely,” I sigh. “But the only other place I could afford is my mom’s basement.” I laugh at the thought. It’s not necessarily true—I could find an affordable apartment elsewhere—but having to move back in with my mother is a legitimate fear.

“I could think of another option,” Woods says sweetly and rubs his hand over the goosebumps on my arm.

I pretend not to understand what he’s talking about and ask, “Want a scramble? I can push eggs around a skillet like you wouldn’t believe.” I pull a lightweight robe around myself, tie my hair in a loose bun and step into the kitchen.

Step 15: Don't be reckless.

SYL I'M OUT. COMING to CO til I'm back on my feet.

The text is from a number unsaved in my phone, but the first sentence tells me everything I need to know. My mom must have already added Clay to her phone plan with a new phone number.

Can't wait to see you baby bro.

He never answers, but I dial Elliott to share the news.

“Hello.” His voicemail. “Helloooo?”

“Oh, hi. Hi! I thought it was your voicemail. Clay's coming home!”

There's beeping and other hospital-like sounds in the background. “I know.”

“He told you first?!”

“No, he hasn't reached out to me at all. I just got off the phone with mom, seconds ago.”

“Please come visit.”

Elliott mumbles something about overnight observation, and I can imagine him speed-walking through the halls of the hospital in his white lab coat. “Clay doesn’t care to see me.”

A growl of aggravation on my part. “Elliott, we’ve gone over this. You are his big brother. He wants to feel like you love him.”

“I do love him.”

“Then please show him that by making the effort to see him.”

He exhales loudly. “Alright. I’ll see if Dom will cover for me.” Dom is Elliot’s female “friend” from work. He thinks my mom and I don’t know they’re more than friends, but we do because I follow her on Instagram and Elliot is all over her grid.

Elliot managed to get a red eye out of Raleigh-Durham and arrives in Colorado before Clayton. After a nap, he and I decide we have just enough time to get pedicures before picking up Clay from the airport. Mom had originally planned to retrieve Clay alone, so she is thrilled that Elliot and I offered to do it instead. The first reason being that she now has extra time to get his room ready and go to the grocery store to pick up his favorite food, and the second being that the thought of all her babies together again makes her, in her own words, “so happy I could die right now.”

“Does Dom know you get pedicures?” I ask Elliot as the nail salon chair massager begins bouncing me forward and back.

“I don’t get them that often, but yes she knows... She comes with me usually.”

“Aha, I knew it!”

He scoffs and smiles. “Knew what?”

“She’s your *lovahhh*.”

“I can’t take you seriously when you’re bouncing around like that.”

I lean back against the massager and say, “Mmm,” as the nail technician begins pampering me. “Do you ever feel guilty about Clayton turning out a little messed up? Like, we weren’t sufficient older siblings? Or maybe we failed him?” I scrunch my nose and nod at Elliot, assuming he’ll agree with me.

Elliott closes his eyes in relaxation. “Nah, he had a good mom and dad and you and I tried to watch out for him. He’ll be okay. He just has to find a rebellious cause that’s more beneficial to society.”

“I suppose.”

“I feel more guilty about you.” He opens his eyes, looking for my reaction.

“What’s that supposed to mean?! I’m practically perfect.”

“Not as perfect as the oldest, but you’re alright.”

I shake my head.

“You don’t have enough confidence in yourself, Syl.”

“I’ve been working on it,” I say defensively.

“I know you have, but you still date far below your plane.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. You’re a catch, sis. Be more discerning.”

“Aw. Thanks, bro.”

“I wouldn’t say anything if I didn’t know how important love and partnership is to you.”

I nod.

“So, what kind of loser are you dating right now?”

I punch him in the arm.

“Ow. That was pretty good.”

“I’m not seriously dating right now, remember?” We are quiet for a moment as each of our technicians massage our legs. “Okay, there is this guy, though.”

“*I knew it!*” he mimics me in an impossibly whiny voice. “Give me the deets, little sis.”



Clayton looks different than I expected. He’s always had the appearance of a little angel: wavy, dark blonde hair; big, bright eyes; dimples for days; and his genetic code includes a skin color that is capable of tanning. But serving time has left him with pale skin, dim eyes, and a shaven head. Elliott and I give each other a worried look and watch as Clay’s thin, tattooed body—carrying only a beat up backpack—moves up the

escalator. His eyes meet mine as he arrives at the top and some of the blaze I know of Clayton Hanson returns.

He starts toward me then stops in his tracks when he realizes the tall, red-headed presence standing next to me is Elliott. His shock sends a wave of concern through me. Perhaps I misjudged the circumstances and Clay is opposed to having Elliott here. My concern is quickly squashed, however, when my brothers practically run into each other's arms.

They are a stark contradiction—Elliott, a FitBit-wearing picture of health, and Clayton, a young man who has clearly had a rough go of it—but their adoration for each other is more evident than ever. I wipe a tear from my cheek, admiring the bond between them that has had its interruptions, but has never fully disappeared. After a few moments they pull me into their reunion.

“How darling.” An older woman with a bright floral rolling suitcase stops to admire us. “You must be siblings. You all look just alike!”

Elliott buys us all tickets for the Rockies game that will be taking place the following day and insists I invite my *boyfriend* (again, said in a whiny voice that ostensibly sounds like me...?).

We stand in the kitchen fighting over whether or not Woods is my boyfriend when Clayton gets involved. “Who are you talking about? Woods?”

“How the hell do you know about Woods?” I ask.

“Mom told me. I agree, you have to invite him. If you don’t, Elliott and I will corner you and pelt you with Nerf gun darts.”

“I might rather that.”

Clayton grabs my phone off the kitchen counter and says, “Dear Woods, please accompany my family and me to a baseball game. My brothers will hunt you down if you don’t show up.”

I jump on Clay’s back and scream, “Clayton! If you fucking text him I will kill you!”

“Oh, don’t do that. Mom would have a stroke if two-thirds of her children were delinquents,” he teases and continues searching through my phone. “*Fleetwood*. That must be him.” He evades my flailing arms and quickly types out a text to Woods. Elliott leans against the counter and laughs.

“Clayton!! Aaaahhh!!” I scream in his ear. “I wish you would have stayed in jail!”

“You don’t mean that. Look! He already texted back. Wow, must be more serious than you’re letting on. He said, ‘I’d love to meet your family.’ What a dork.”

“He did?” I say in surprise and slide off Clay’s back. He hands me my phone back as proof. “He’s not a dork, you jackass.”

“Well, we’ll find out tomorrow, won’t we?” he says as he and Elliott high five.

Step 16: Under no circumstances should he meet one's family.

MY KNEE JIGGLES ANXIOUSLY as I check my phone for a text from Woods.

“Chill out, Syl. We’ll be cool,” Elliott reassures.

“Speak for yourself,” Clayton laughs.

“I’m so nervous. I feel like I might poop my pants,” I say quietly.

“Clayton,” Mom scolds. “Woods will have fun with us, hon. We are a great family,” she adds cheerfully.

“I don’t know if I’d go that far. If any of you embarrass me, I’ll—” My phone vibrates and I gasp. “He’s here.”

I look behind me up the stands to see Woods standing at the top waiting for me to meet him with his ticket. He smiles and waves; my shoulders relax, my stomach unwinds. I take the stairs two at a time until I reach the top and he pulls me into him.

“Hey,” he says, and it’s like a shot of tequila hitting my bloodstream—equal parts relaxing and exhilarating. I stroke the back of his head and pull him toward me, planting a mushy kiss on his lips. He puts his arm around my waist and squeezes, then turns us to start down the stairs.

“Wait.” I make no move to descend. He gives me a questioning look. “If they say anything embarrassing about me, just assume it’s not true.”

He snickers. “Ok.”

“And if Clayton is mean, just ignore him. He can be a jackass.”

“I have interacted with humans before, Sylvie, and I have a general understanding of the idiocy of brothers.”

We continue down the stairs at a much slower pace than I raced up them. When we reach my family, I introduce them to Woods then take my seat between him and Elliott. Mom and Clayton sit in the row in front of us.

“We’re so glad you could make it, Woods,” Mom says. “Sylvie has told me all about you.”

“No, I haven’t, mom,” I say to her, then to him, “I haven’t told her all about you.”

“It’s ok,” Woods mouths with a smile. “I wouldn’t miss it. Who do I owe a beer for these seats?” he asks jovially. We are in the fifth and sixth row behind home plate.

“Get your cold beer here!” the beverage vendor yells right on cue. Woods orders a round of beers for everyone.

“Hey, Sylvie,” Clayton says mischievously. “This beer reminds me of that time you drank too much and peed your pants. Remember that, Elliott? You were there.”

I grit my teeth and growl, “Clayton,” then say quietly to Woods, “That’s not what happened exactly.”

“Oh, yes it is. We were taking the light rail home and she couldn’t hold it anymore, so we got off, like, four stops early so she wouldn’t pee on the train. She couldn’t make it to a bush in time and peed in her pants, anyway.”

“Oh my God, Clayton,” I whisper and flick him in the back of the head.

“It was like a stream down the sidewalk. Unbelievable how much that girl can pee, man.”

I sit back in the seat and cover my face. “I think I’m dying.”

“Everyone has a peeing their pants story,” Woods says sweetly.

“Not me.” Clay says. “I have never peed my pants.”

“What do you mean, Clayton Hanson?” my mom says in a tone that shuts him down.

Thank you, mom! Thank you, mom!

“You couldn’t do sleepovers until the sixth grade because you’d wet your bed. Ha!” Mom cackles and she and Clay start arguing about the history of his bedwetting problem.

Elliott and Mom come through with reminders of how totally cool I am—like how I’ve traveled to ten countries and

can recall every teacher I've ever had from preschool through the two years of college I completed.

Once my family and I are back in the car, I give Clay an earful for his juvenile antics. He defends his actions by saying he was just making sure Woods didn't *scare easy*. Mom says the day was perfect, the only thing missing was Dad. Elliott claims Dad was there in spirit, which is a distinctly out of character comment for Elliott.

Look at us in all our self-actualization glory.

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Step 17: Are you even trying at this point?

“**S** HIT.” I’M IN FLEETWOOD’S bathroom, door ajar.
“What?”

Woods purchased us tickets to see my favorite band, Juice, at an outdoor venue tonight, and we’re running late.

“I started my period.” I’m not remotely surprised by it—my sweet, innocent period arrives right on time for her shift every month—but the persistence of monthly blood flow can get tiresome. “Will you go ask Jennifer for a tampon?” I snicker.

“Ummm...”

“Ha ha, just kidding. But will you bring me my bag?”

“You’re so funny.” I hear him shuffling through my stuff before waltzing through the bathroom door with my bag slung over his forearm.

“What are you doing?” I cross my arms over my legs.

“What? I can’t find a tampon.”

“Yeah, but you just walked right in while I’m bleeding on the toilet.” I reach into my bag and pull out the discreet satchel that holds my menstrual cup. “And I don’t actually use tampons.”

“I’ve seen you in more compromising positions than this.”

“Have you, though?” I remove the cup from the satchel delicately.

He smiles awkwardly. “What is that thing?”

I hold it up for him to inspect. “If you had to guess…”

“Wow.”

“So, are you going to watch me put it in, too?”

“Is that an invitation?”

“Woods.” I tilt my head in irritation and point to the door.



When we arrive at the venue, Woods gets in line to grab us each a beer while I find our seats. The temperature is hovering right around sixty-eight degrees, but feels warmer on account of the thousands of other concert-goers. I breathe in the calming aroma of hops and weed lacing the night air and tilt my head back, releasing the breath slowly.

The stars are vivid, inspiring stillness in my mind. I trace a couple of the constellations I’m now familiar with and begin counting how many days I have left with the sexy space nerd I’m inconveniently crazy about.

More often than not, my dreams present a life-or-death situation in which I am being chased by some sort of threat. When I try to run from the threat, my legs are jelly, incapable of carrying me to safety. The dream always ends before I am caught, but still scares the shit out of me. Love, as of late, is creating a similar sensation—my legs give out when I try to run from it. I just hope I'm going to wake up before it can catch me.

“Hey, can I sit here?” A deep voice brings me plummeting back from the stars and I look to see the most handsome man that has ever existed standing in front of me.

I grin at him. “I was saving it for my boyfriend, but sure, go ahead.”

“Your boyfriend?”

Suddenly self-conscious, I whisper, “I'm just playing along.”

“Lucky guy. How did he land a babe like you?” He sits and holds out a beer for me.

I take Woods' face in my hands and kiss him with all the force of the love that's chasing me down, then take my beer. The stage lights go up, the crowd cheers, and we join the standing crowd.

Juice performing live is a lightning storm of sound and energy, comprised of a lead vocalist, two electric guitars, an acoustic guitar, a bass, a violin, and drums. Most guys I've

dated wouldn't be caught dead dancing, but Woods is more free than I've seen him. It's entrancing, really.

The band busts out a couple of their ballads as the show is winding down. Woods hugs me to him tightly, but I pull away a few inches so I can look at his face. I don't want to waste a moment neglecting his deep brown eyes, incredible bone structure, and those feathery curls.

He brushes the tip of his nose up my jaw and whispers the lyrics in my ear, "Damn, I wasn't ready. Didn't think she'd get me. Now I wear this heart on my sleeve."

"You know this song?" I ask with surprised joy.

"I do now." Then his face turns serious. There's a look of uneasiness, like he has something tragic to say or a sudden diarrhea stomach ache. "Sylvie, I..."

Yes, he's going to reveal his biggest secret of all. Or! Or, or, or... maybe he'll confess his love for me and we'll live happily ever after. My logical alter-ego slaps me across the face. The song blasting from the stage modulates up a half step, then another, increasing the anticipation of the moment. My stomach knots and my mind races.

"What is it?" I wrap my arms around him tighter, attempting to squeeze the secret out of him.

"I—" At the very moment he's about to spit it out a young woman trips over something (probably her own drunken feet), and I watch as her cup, fully of fizzy, yellow liquid, soars through the air straight toward us. Liquid soaks our clothes,

and I lose my breath from the shock and identify the look on Woods' face as nothing short of furious. We reek of hops.

The young woman looks like she's readying herself to take a punch. "I am so sorry," she says slowly.

I erupt with laughter as I tie my soggy hair back and wipe beer from my face. "Don't worry about it."

Someone hands us a wad of napkins. Woods' anger hasn't subsided as he brushes the napkins uselessly down his shirt.

I gently pull his chin until his eyes meet mine. "It's no big deal. Right, Woods?"

He relaxes his tensed shoulders and nods at the young woman. I suck some beer off his scruff and say, "Let's get out of here." We step over purses and drinks and slide against strangers as I tug him down the row of seats until we get to the stairway that will lead us to the parking lot. My hand wraps around his waist. "What were you about to say?"

"Huh?"

"You were about to say something before we got beered." I use my most sugary tone.

"Oh. I don't... remember."

He's lying. Damn it. I'll get it out of him later.

Back at Woods' apartment, we take a shower.

"I love your shower. I love your apartment," I say as Woods shampoos my hair for me. The water pressure drowns out my

hearing as I close my eyes and let the downpour rinse the suds from my head, but I could swear he mumbles, “I love *you*.”

My eyes shoot open. “What?”

“I said, I love it too.” *Wishful thinking*. Without hesitation he circles my ass cheeks with his soapy hands and we have a steamy, wet make out session.

I pull on a clean pair of panties I found floating around at the bottom of my purse and Woods starts a load of our beer-soaked clothes in the washing machine. I climb into his bed, mostly naked, and drape the sheet loosely over me. The crossword puzzle from his daily newspaper lies on his bedside table next to the now-assembled LEGO set. I rummage through the drawer to find a pen and start working the puzzle.

Woods slides under the sheet next to me and I ask him about the clues that are already tripping me up. Naturally, he knows the answers. I flip my hair and twirl the pen between my fingers while I silently focus on the puzzle. As is typical, he sits quietly next to me, but I sense him looking in my direction.

“What?” I wipe my hands over my face to get rid of any smudges or particles he is evidently looking at, then conclude he must be looking at the loose skin under my chin that is starting to accumulate with age and jut my jaw out subtly to pull the skin tight. Woods smooths his thumb over the worried line between my eyebrows.

“I’m just looking at you. Don’t stress out,” he chuckles. I squeeze his bicep and return to the crossword. “Tell me about

your dad.”

Caught off guard by his request, I look up in surprise. “Um... Well. He had been sick for a while—”

“No,” Woods interrupts. “You told me how he died, but what was he like?”

“Oh, um...” I stare at him blankly for a few seconds thinking about what characteristics truly defined my father and his life. Shamefully, I realize it’s been quite some time since I thought about his qualities, his aliveness. Most of the people in my life, currently, knew my dad and how he walked through life, and those who didn’t, ask only how he died not how he lived.

“He was... funny. Like, really funny. Inappropriate jokes were his specialty. He could find the humor in almost every situation, and sometimes it drove my mom crazy. He was understanding, calm and... even. I often felt more comfortable confiding in him than my mom. He went through some tough stuff, and struggled with himself, but he had a big heart. He wanted to be better. I wish he could have seen the greatness in himself that I saw.” I wipe a tear from my cheek and smile.

Woods grabs my hand and massages my fingers. “What was your favorite thing about him?”

“Hm... I suppose it was his wisdom. He knew how to help me look beyond myself. I miss his advice.” I laugh out a couple more tears, the remembering bringing both happiness and sadness.

“What was your least favorite thing about him?” Woods persists.

An exhale flaps my lips. “He was... an addict. He couldn’t recover from self-medicating his pain.”

Woods wipes away my tears and I go back to the crossword puzzle. “I’m going to Sonoma next weekend. I’ll be there for a few days.”

“Bummer. I have next weekend off,” I say without looking up. He pauses for a suspicious amount of time, and I look over at him again. “I’ll miss you and your huge penis. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Do you want to come with me?” he asks apprehensively.

While shocked by the invitation, I’m not deterred. Who in their right mind would outright refuse the opportunity to visit a successful vineyard and its vintners?

“Really? Will your parents be there?”

It seems unusual to introduce a temporary *situation* to one’s parents, but I remind myself that Woods’ parents are hippies, so they hold no contempt for casual lovers. And besides, I’m great with parents. *Maybe if I charm them enough he’ll... Oh, never mind.*

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Well, they’ll only be there part of the time. Then they have to fly somewhere to meet a client.” His voice catches and his fingers wrap around the fist of his other hand. He makes eye contact with me hesitantly, then looks

back down at his hands. “You just seemed so excited about the vineyard, I thought you might want to see it.”

Condescending as it may be, I find his vulnerability precious. “Sure! I’ll come with you, Fleetwood,” I say and stroke his cheek.

“Yeah?”

“Of course. I’d love to see where you grew up.” I am both confused and amused by his nervous proposal. I try to penetrate his mind with my gaze, but fail.

“Okay, good. I’ll add you to my flight.” He starts typing away on his phone.

“Well, wait, I need to know how much the flight costs before you book the ticket.”

He gives me a puzzled look and says, “I’m paying for it,” as if I should have assumed as much.

“What? No, you don’t have to do that.” I reach for his phone, but he pulls it away.

“Don’t be silly. I invited you as my guest. I insist.”

“Wow, okay, an all-expenses-paid vacation. Thank you.”

His thumbs move hastily across the screen. “Done.” He sets the phone on the table.

I grab his arm and write my name in tiny lettering on the inside of his bicep where he doesn’t have any permanent ink. “What were you going to say to me at the concert? Don’t say you forgot.” He throws the crossword puzzle from my lap and

pulls me onto him. “Hey!” I hold the pen up, about to draw on his face but he throws that across the room, too, and stares at my face for an awkward period of time.

“I was going to ask you if you wanted to come to Sonoma with me.” He traces my lips with his thumb, then lays me back on the bed and flips on the TV.

There’s something about the way he says it that doesn’t feel entirely truthful. One by one, I wrap my fingers around the television remote and very gradually, as if doing so will make him less aware of my intention, slide it from his grip. “Have you ever watched Outlander?” I ask as I navigate to Season 1, Episode 1.

“The movie?”

“No. There’s a movie called Outlander? I’m talking about the TV show.” Woods shakes his head. “Okay, then prepare to be seriously turned on, because this is like porn but dripping with romance.”

“And that’s... better than porn?”

“The modern day porn industry would have you believe it’s not, but it absolutely is. Men are propelled by emotions just as much as women are, especially when it comes to sexual arousal.”

“What about sex addicts?”

“Particularly sex addicts. They’re just confused with how to process all their emotions, so they try to release them through sex.”

“Ha! Oh really? Are you a psychologist?”

“I took a psychology class my freshman year, but that specific observation is based on a personally derived theory. Okay shh, this is the first episode.”

Atypically, Woods falls asleep before I do, so I use the opportunity to catch Mo up to speed:

I'm going to Sonoma next weekend

With Woods?

Yes

Wowowow. Are you going to meet his parents?

Yes

What is happening?

I don't know

Have you been having tons of sex?

Yes

I should tell you that every single 80s band sent a fax saying they want their hair back

??

From your pussy!! Your vagina is 2 hairy. Probably your butt hole too

Real men like a whole mess of pubes

I wouldn't know, but that can't be true

I reply with a wooly mammoth emoji.

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Step 18: Under no circumstances should one meet his family.

WE PULL OFF THE main road onto a dirt drive and I gasp. The lush estate is lined with blue spruce trees and hedges only wealthy people know the name for. Neat rows of grapevines expand up the hill behind the house.

The house itself is a chic design—ivory painted adobe with charcoal window frames and a terra cotta tile roof. It has a large, wood wraparound porch and a green lawn with two mature oak trees. The dirt drive turns to a pebble driveway that circles around an immaculate garden and large fountain.

“This is where you grew up?” I ask in disbelief.

“Yeah. But it wasn’t always like this. When they bought it, it was a small house on a patch of dirt. They’ve done a lot of work over the years as they’ve become more successful.”

I squirm in my seat. “You mean rich.”

I don’t necessarily have anything against rich people, they simply heighten my awareness of the characteristics I have that rich people tend to scrutinize—like bad manners,

inappropriate joke-telling, and an unimpressive career status.
Okay, what the hell am I doing here?

“Don’t be nervous. They’re not what you expect.”

Woods jogs around the car to open the passenger door for me then goes to retrieve our suitcases from the trunk. I check my face in the sun visor mirror and take a few deep breaths before getting out of the car.

“I’m surprised they’re not outside to greet us.” He leads us up a flagstone pathway, looking like a total dork rolling both suitcases behind him. The grand front door is unlocked. Woods stashes our suitcases in the entryway and takes my hand to lead me through the house. “Mom!”

Giggles echo from another room. Woods pulls me around the kitchen, through a passthrough, toward a room that looks like what my family would call a TV room, but I’m sure the Callahans have a fancier name for it. We stop abruptly when it becomes clear that the giggling is coming from the older couple making out on a cream-colored loveseat.

“Jesus! What are you doing?!” Woods says loudly and covers his face in horror. I bite my lip to muffle my surprised laughter.

“Woodsy!” his mom chirps. “Sorry honey, we’re not used to having anyone around.”

“You knew what time we were coming,” he says while exhaling in frustration.

“Oh sweetie, don’t be such a prude. Even us old farts like to get it on sometimes,” Cindy says as she gives him a big, warm mom hug and sneaks me a wink. His dad sits on the footrest buckling his belt, likely softening up.

“Gross. You’re so embarrassing.” Woods has regressed to a mortified high school version of himself and it is priceless.

Cindy is only a couple inches taller than me and wears a flowy dress, which more or less conceals her body shape, although she clearly has great boobs. Her wavy, shoulder length brown hair is graying, and it’s plain that Woods gets his wise, dark eyes from her. Her skin is unnaturally smooth and plump for her age. Likely a combination of good Mediterranean genes and regularly scheduled injectables. The only true evidence of her wealth are her elaborate rings and bracelets; there’s a little bit of everything—gold, turquoise, diamonds.

In an attempt to lighten the mood, and because my nerves make me a basket case, I say, “Well if you get pregnant, you could call it Loveseat.”

Woods’ eyes widen like a serial killer’s.

Cindy laughs hysterically. “Oh, what a riot! *Loveseat*. Did you hear that, Lar?”

Larry has finally stood to join our cringeworthy exchange. He is a tall, Scandinavian man. Frankly, not as handsome as I expected given how good-looking Woods is, but his quiet and protective presence gives him an allure. “Like Mary Tyler Moore,” he says monotonically with a twinkle in his eye.

“For Christ’s sake, Larry, no one understands that reference. Join us in the twenty-first century. She’s more of a Kate McKinnon.” Cindy smacks Larry’s arm playfully then shakes her head and winks at me again. Look at us, we already have two inside jokes. Cindy and I will get along swimmingly. My worries have all but disappeared.

Woods pulls himself out of his trauma. “Anyway, Mom and Dad, this is Sylvie. Sylvie, Cindy and Larry.” He says my name with a *gusto* I’ve never heard before.

I smile wide. “It is lovely to meet you. Thank you so much for having me here.”

“Oh, honey, the pleasure is ours!” Cindy puts her arm around my shoulders and guides me toward the back door, off the kitchen. She smells glorious. Like warm vanilla, flowers, and musk. Maybe I should start wearing perfume. “It’s wonderful to have Woods’ new girlfriend to visit.”

“Oh my God,” Woods whispers from behind us.

“Shoot, I wasn’t supposed to call you that. Woods warned me beforehand. Sorry, honey!” She waves a hand behind her at him. Cindy has a Midwestern way about her that I wasn’t expecting from a wealthy vintner descended from Italians.

We exit through the sliding glass door to the backyard, which is even more of a utopia than the front of the house. A large, sparkling, aquamarine pool sits in the middle of the yard, surrounded on three sides by a red brick patio with lounge chairs and potted flowers.

“This is like a resort,” I gasp.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Cindy says modestly. “We had the pool redone four years ago, or so. I was so happy Leah got to enjoy it before she died. She loved the water; loved swimming. Didn’t she, Lar?”

My breathing stops at the mention of Leah and I prepare my muscles to catch Cindy’s limp, sobbing body. She doesn’t break down as I anticipated, so I pick up breathing again. We continue past the pool toward a guest house situated on the far left side of the yard. I believe the only time I’ve ever seen an actual guest house was in a magazine.

“Now, I have to tell you, Sylvie, Woodsy told me how pretty you were, but my, you are just stunning!” I remember the time Woods called me stunning. It was slightly less eloquent, but a compliment I treasure nonetheless.

“Oh, thank you,” I say shyly. I’m glad that, because of Woods’ orientation behind me, he can’t see me blush.

“You’re welcome. Anyway, this is the guest house where you and Woodsy will be staying.” Cindy keeps her arm around my shoulder as we step inside. The boys follow wordlessly behind us. “I don’t know if he told you but Larry and I are free spirits. Live and let live, love and let love, if you get my drift,” she winks at me and laughs heartily.

I laugh with her and raise my eyebrows at Woods. Cindy turns to Woods and with great concern says, “Oh honey, you’re sweating. Why don’t you take a dip in the pool to cool off.” She gives him another hug and admires his face the way

a mother does. I have a feeling that if I weren't here, she would tell him how beautiful he is.

"Thanks, Mom," Woods says with some annoyance, working to remain calm. "We need time to get settled." He runs his hand through his hair and blows out a breath.

"Of course! Okay, you kids get settled," Cindy says like it was her idea and grabs Larry's arm to pull him out the door of the guest house. "We'll see you in a couple hours for a good old-fashioned wine tasting followed by a pasta dinner. It'll be fun!"

"Thank you so much, Cindy. I'm really looking forward to this weekend," I say sweetly.

"Well, aren't you just sugar on a stick?" She comes back through the door to squeeze my arm.

"Okay, Mom, thanks!"

"Alright, alright, Woodsy. We're leaving." She slides the glass door closed. Woods pulls the curtains but doesn't turn to face me.

"Wow." It's impossible not to hear my grin as I say it.

When he does turn around, Fleetwood can't make eye contact with me. I'm certain if there were a rock big enough, he would hide under it.

"Shit." He tilts his head back in utter vexation. "I left our bags in the house." Just as he says it, there's a knock on the glass. Woods slides it open with an irritated sigh. It's Larry, with our bags. "Thanks, Dad." Woods sets the suitcases by the

side of the bed. “Can you tell Mom to chill out?” He says it quietly, hoping I won’t hear, but my ears are going to be on high alert all weekend, listening eagerly for every disagreeable sigh and panicked whisper.

“Already did, son. Hey, I’m happy you’re home, Fleet.” Larry offers him a bear hug and the moment is so tender that my amusement turns rapidly to stifled tears. What a sweet man.

Larry turns his attention to me and I flutter my sappy, wet gaze away. “And Sylvie, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.” He smiles warmly at me, but beneath that warmth I recognize the same sadness in him that I now know of Woods.

I wish I had known Larry before he was tainted with such heavy grief. Out of fear a sob will erupt from my diaphragm, I simply smile and nod in response to his hospitable remark as he exits. Woods removes his shoes and lies on the bed, closing his eyes.

I open the fridge. “Stocked to the absolute brim with hard seltzers. Cindy must have heard that’s what the kids are drinking these days. You want one?”

“God, yes.”

I grab two cans and slip off my shoes to join Woods on the bed. He can’t yet muster the courage to open his eyes, so I crack the can and wrap his hand around it for him.

“Cheers.” I tap my can to his and swallow a large sip. “Ahhh, how refreshing.” I overplay the statement. “Are you

going to be too embarrassed to look at me the rest of the weekend, *Woodsy?*”

“Ugh. Probably. Being here makes me feel like a child.”

I straddle his waist and kiss his lips a few times until he finally opens his eyes. “Man, you’re cute when you’ve got a mouth full of humble pie.” I kiss him again. “I’m just glad she doesn’t call you Fleetwood. That would give things a weird Freudian twist. Want to go swimming? You *do* look a little sweaty.” He glares. “Besides,” I continue. “I paid a random stranger to rip out my pubic hair with hot goo for the occasion. So, yeah...” Far too daunting was the idea of shaving my nether region with a razor dulled by nearly two years of use. So, I went to Mo’s *girl* to get waxed. I’m still rocking a decent bush.

After setting our cans aside, Woods sits up and I slide from his waist to his hips. He gently pulls the waistband of my pants to get a peek inside. “Oh. Wow,” he says. “I’m glad it’s not *all* gone.”

He puts his hands on either side of my neck and puts his lips to mine. I close my eyes and moan faintly. That’s all he needs to upshift. He opens my mouth with his and rolls his tongue against mine. After half a day of travel, his breath isn’t fresh, which I somehow find enticing. I remove his shirt and rock my hips once.

He tangles his hand in my hair and pulls my head away from him gently. “I was just planning to tease you, but now I

can't stop." He flips me onto my back and we make a mess of the very well-made king size bed.

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Step 19: And definitely don't visit his childhood home.

IN THE CLOSET OF Woods' childhood bedroom is a massive LEGO collection. Some sets are constructed, all of which are space-related, but most of the pieces are loose, floating aimlessly in a latched blue box like satellites fallen out of orbit.

"I guess I really nailed it, huh?" The birthday present, that is.

"I told you I loved it."

"I thought you were lying."

"I only lie about the really big things."

I explore his room in a circle, looking around at the old decor and trophies offering a peek into less evolved versions of Woods than the one I know now. This version of Woods—the one whose posters still plaster the walls, the one who decided which photos with friends triggered the best memories and hung them above his desk—is more vibrant.

There is a proof of life in this bedroom that is relatively absent from his bedroom in Denver. I stop when I land on the real-life version of him leaning against the wall working a Rubik's Cube.

"Hey, Fleetwood."

"Yes, Sylvie," he responds without looking away from the Cube.

"I like you."

He lifts his head and smirks, then gives me an intentionally sloppy kiss.

We join his parents on the patio as Larry is setting out a fifth wine flight. For whom the extra flight belongs, I am uncertain. Cindy lounges in a patio chair reading a magazine, which she quickly hides behind a cushion when we come into view.

"Oh, you caught me!" She purses her lips and raises her eyebrows as though we've caught her reading porn. "Catching up on celebrity gossip. One of my guilty pleasures."

I indicate that I wholeheartedly share in her "guilty pleasure" by wrapping my arm around her shoulder. "America's royalty. Fill me in."

Cindy tells me all she knows about the latest reality star's divorce as we sit down side-by-side at the striking wood table that classifies as something much more grand than patio furniture.

"On the topic of celebrities," I say proudly, "last summer our venue hosted the wedding of Denver's most popular news

anchor, Steve Steadman.”

Cindy gasps. “Lar, did you hear that? Larry loves the news,” she says excitedly.

“Steve Steadman,” Larry says thoughtfully. “He the one who says, ‘Until we meet again, Denver, I’m Steve Steadman’?” Larry impersonates Steve’s overly enthusiastic demeanor perfectly.

“That’s him!” I am thrilled by Larry’s knowledge of out-of-state newscasters. “And would you believe he talks like that in real life?” We laugh.

The wrinkle between Woods’ eyebrows fades, his brown eyes gleam, and he grins widely. The reluctance that often accompanies his joy is gone, at least for now.

“Is Nonna here?” he asks.

Larry nods.

“She wanted to make dinner for us tonight,” Cindy says joyously. Enthusiasm is this woman’s *modus operandi* and it creates an irresistible atmosphere.

“Who’s Nonna?” I ask.

“Woodsy’s grandmother, my mom!”

Woods explains that Nonna lives in a quaint cottage on top of the hill at the edge of the property. She helps tend the vineyard, cooks here and there, and performs other tasks around the estate, but mostly she sits on the patio playing cards and drinking wine.

As he finishes the description of how Nonna spends her days, a small, round elderly woman wearing a blue knee-length dress and a sunshine yellow apron comes speeding out the backdoor. She sets a platter of antipasto on the table directly in front of me—fresh caprese salad, thinly-sliced salami, fancy cheese, olives that are clearly not from a jar, and roasted nuts. I immediately salivate.

“Sylvie, this is my mom, Giulia.” Cindy introduces me with a pleasing accent on Giulia’s name and a look of great admiration for her mother.

“Cinzia...” Giulia shakes her head disapprovingly at Cindy and adds something else in Italian. “Call me Nonna,” she says to me and kisses my forehead. All of these people smell so good. Although I can’t put my finger on it, the fragrance from Nonna reminds me of the beach—perhaps salt, sunshine, and sunscreen—together with the breadly sweetness of a bakery.

Nonna talks animatedly in her native tongue, and they all laugh. I blush self-consciously and look at Woods.

He shakes his head minutely at Cindy before saying to me, “Nonna just asked if you like emeralds. She thinks they would look good with your skin tone.”

“Emeralds?” No wonder they laughed. Old ladies bring up the most random topics. I nod to Nonna. “Green is my favorite color, actually.” Her cool, sun-spotted hand takes my warm, clammy one—her fingers stiff from decades of working and creating—and lovingly squeezes twice before she runs back inside. I smile to myself. *We just had a moment.*

“Nonna has survived breast cancer twice. She swears she owes her survival to Barbera d’Asti,” Cindy says.

“Barbera d’Asti?” I ask, feeling dim.

“It’s a red wine from Piedmont,” Woods chimes in quickly.

“Piedmont!” I say with the enthusiasm of a ditz who just caught up to the *last* conversation. “Guillermo is from Piedmont.” I direct the comment at Woods, given he is the only person here familiar with Guillermo.

“Is he? What brought him to the US?” Cindy asks.

“I’m not sure, actually, he’s lived here a long time.”

“He’s Nonna’s age,” Woods adds.

“*Is* he, now?” Cindy winks at Larry. He replies simply by smirking and shaking his head. It’s no surprise that Cindy evidently fancies herself a matchmaker. I glance at Woods just as he finishes typing something on his phone and slides it slyly back into his pocket. Larry presents the first wine for us to try: a Sauvignon Blanc with notes of lime and ginger. It is delightfully refreshing.

“So Sylvie, you must like Woods quite a bit if you came with him to visit us,” Cindy’s unwavering efforts to humiliate Woods since our arrival here in Sonoma are better than live comedy.

“For the love of God. Dad, can you stop her?”

Larry chuckles. “Wouldn’t want to even if I could, bub.”

Cindy looks back to me with a warm smile, waiting for my answer.

“Not really. I’m just using him to teach me about outer space and wine.” I scrunch my nose to feign distaste and shake my head at Woods.

He smiles and relaxes his shoulders.

“Smart girl,” Larry says.

“What’s not to like, though?” Cindy says adoringly and squeezes Woods’ cheek. She’s starting to remind me of Jerry’s mom in *Seinfeld*, and I mean that in the best way.

“I can think of a few things,” I mumble and swig the remainder of my Sauvignon Blanc.

“Cindy, ease up. We’re trying to drink wine here,” Larry says soothingly.

“Oh alright, alright. What else do you have for us, Lar?” There’s no breaking this woman’s spirit.

Nonna rushes out of the house with a family-style bowl of salad and a small black box. She speaks animatedly to Cindy as I discreetly move from my seat to Woods’ lap.

“I *love* Nonna. I want her to cradle me in her arms and rock me to sleep,” I whisper. “And for the record, I’m actually using you for your *Moby Dick*.”

He laughs one loud “Ha!” and kisses me too passionately for a family gathering, running his hand down my thigh as he does.

I push him away in surprise at his boldness. His eyes search mine and his eyebrows twitch minutely in question. I tilt my head slightly toward his family as they talk amongst themselves, surely only *pretending* to have taken no notice of our intimacy, then I find my own chair next to Woods. He settles back into his seat. Underneath the table, I lace my fingers through his and he lifts my hand to his nose and smells, sealing our wordless conversation.

Nonna approaches me quickly, leaving behind the black box, which is now open and empty on the table. The tickle of the item she clasps around my left wrist sends goosebumps up my arm. I assume her gift for me is a silly trinket, but when she pulls her hands away I find, resting delicately on my wrist, a thin gold chain with a gold-plated emerald.

My teasing smile turns uneasy. “It’s breathtaking,” I say quietly. “But—”

“Ah! You, see?” Nonna looks around at everyone for approval then turns back to me. “I knew it would look good on you. It was my mother’s. You have it,” she says cheerily.

“Oh no, I couldn’t...” I slide forward in my seat and look at Woods for help. He says something to her in Italian and she brushes him off with one word and a wave of her hand.

Woods doesn’t look entirely thrilled about what is happening, either, which makes me feel even worse. But, like any halfway intelligent man, he knows the power he holds over the women in his life is negligible and accepts the gesture

as final. Therefore, it appears I am left to bear the burden of his family's misunderstanding about our relationship.

"Sylvie, do you enjoy yoga?" Cindy asks, clearly recognizing a subject-change is in order.

"Yeah, I do!" I chirp.

"You should join me tomorrow morning for pool-side yoga."

"Mom..." Woods says, exhausted from continuously trying to censor his mother. I don't know why he bothers.

"Woodsy, she's a grown woman. She can tell me if she doesn't want to."

"Here?" I circle my finger toward the pool. "I'd love to. That sounds great."

Cindy nods approvingly then turns to Woods. "Sheri will be there, it'd be nice if you would come say 'hi.'" I look at Woods, about to ask who Sheri is, when Nonna comes rushing back outside with a spectacular tray of pasta. She's a typical Italian grandmother, making sure our bellies are full.



"Why did you let Nonna give me this bracelet?" I ask with irritation when Woods and I return to the guest house.

"I told you, she said emerald would look good with your skin tone."

"You know that's not what I mean."

“Why does it matter?”

“Because you just let me sit there and accept a family heirloom which I will have to return almost immediately. It’s awkward and humiliating.”

“Why would you return it?”

“I would never keep something like this! It should stay in your family, not be given to some summer hookup you’re never going to see again after August.” Reminding myself of his departure sends me into a sad spiral.

“Relax. I think you’re overthinking it.”

“Did you just tell me to *relax*?” My eyes widen. “I’ll wear this while we’re here so I don’t offend Nonna, then give it back to you when we leave.”

“She wanted you to have it. She has tons of that kind of stuff she’s trying to get rid of. Don’t worry so much about it.”

“Nice. So there will be plenty of precious gems left over for your big-haired Texas slut.”

He laughs. “Jeez. Yeah, I guess there will be.”

“You’re a stupid bitch,” I say as I pull on the oversized t-shirt I brought as pajamas, then aggressively move the bed sheet around looking for my phone. “Damn, I left my phone in the house.”

After dinner, we moved indoors to enjoy port wine and Nonna’s mouth-watering tiramisu while pouring over old photo albums. As suspected, Woods was an adorable baby,

confirming my supposition that our children would be gorgeous.

“I’ll go get it.”

“That’s awfully nice of you considering I just called you a stupid bitch... I’ll get it.” I don’t so much stomp as “walk heavily” out of the guest house and hear Woods snicker behind me. *I’m an embarrassment to adult women everywhere.*

Fortunately, the glass door of the main house slides open almost silently. With the exception of the light glowing from the TV room (the Callahans do, in fact, call it a TV room), the house is dark. Since I’ve worked myself up, I don’t want to have to speak to Woods’ parents, especially Cindy. There’s something about being in the presence of a caring mom while I’m upset that makes me want to bare my soul. I feel the same way with my own mother, of course.

I find my phone on the kitchen island where I left it, and I hug it to my chest. As I tiptoe back toward the door, I hear sniffles echoing from the TV room.

“I just miss her so much. She would have loved Sylvie, don’t you think?” Cindy says through soft sobs.

Leah? Leah would have loved me?

“I miss her, too,” Larry says.

I put my hand over my heart, then quietly continue out the back door, stopping to sit in a poolside lounge chair. The cloudless night sky is as spectacular as Woods described. The

Milky Way's pastel glow creates what looks like a vast, glittering scar across the navy sky.

I'm over my argument with Woods; there are more concerning things on my mind. Cindy is warm and bright despite the monumental loss that will forever weigh heavily on her soul. It must be an arduous task to present herself in such a way, when in the shallows lurks pain and sadness. To me, she is brave and generous.

When my dad died, my mother grieved for what I perceived as too long. It's only recently that she's begun to enjoy life again. I felt a responsibility to try to relieve her grief, and soothing hers while confronting my own was exhausting. After a while, I didn't have it in me anymore.

Listening in on Cindy's pain gives me insight into the aching my mom must have felt and her individual experience with grief. Mo's words, "Sad people do weird shit," echo. I bow my head in shame at my lack of compassion toward my mom and open the *recent contacts* on my phone. She picks up after the first ring.

"Hi, Syl! Are you having a great time?"

"Hi, Mom. Yeah, I am. Woods' parents are very kind and the property is... well, unbelievable."

"I can imagine. I'm so glad you're having that experience. You remember how much dad liked wine. He would have loved to be able to hear about your time at a vineyard."

"Yeah, I remember," I say quietly. "Hey, Mom."

“What is it, hon?”

“I’m sorry you lost your husband.”

There’s a long pause. “Thank you, Syl. I’m sorry you lost your dad. I know– I know maybe it didn’t feel like I saw your pain, but I did.”

These simple words bring with them a subdued epiphany: since my dad’s passing, I’ve felt that my mother has been so deep in her own suffering that *my* loss has gone unnoticed. I wanted her to see my sadness the way I saw hers. This verbal recognition of my pain, our shared pain, brings some relief and a renewed sense of empathy.

“I love you. I’ll talk to you when I get home.”

“I love you, too, hon. Hey, enjoy yourself out there in wine country.” She hangs up and I journey the rest of the way to the guest house.

Woods has turned off the lights and chosen a war movie.

“I’m sorry,” he says when I climb into bed next to him. He scrutinizes my face. “Are you still mad?”

I shake my head. “Cindy was crying when I went in there.”

“I think she still cries every day.”

“Do you still cry about it?”

“Not really. Sometimes when I’m tired and I see her pink hair tie in my medicine cabinet I tear up.”

“That’s hers?”

“Did you think it was Jennifer’s?”

“Yes, actually. And then I thought maybe it was Claire’s.” Woods laughs and puts his nose to my neck. “Your mom said Leah would have loved me. Do you think that’s true?”

He lifts his head to look in my questioning eyes and strokes my cheek. “Of course she would have. You are one of a kind, Sylvie Hanson.”

I press play on the movie and complain about the violence almost immediately. I can practically hear Woods’ eyes roll in the darkness, but before he can complain about my complaining, I apologize and explain that I do not appreciate war dramas the way he does. He thanks me for my self-awareness but does not turn the movie off, so when my eyelids begin drooping heavily about halfway through, I allow myself to fall asleep.



My brain has just registered the fluttering music of my cell phone alarm when I hear a gentle knock on the glass door. Cindy peeks her head in to let me know yoga will be starting in fifteen minutes. I thank her and climb out of bed to quietly pull on some yoga pants and a sports bra, throw my hair in a messy bun, and brush my teeth.

I feather my fingers over Woods’ tattooed shoulder, admiring the way he’s curled up in a precisely fetal position, his lips parted just enough to smell his morning breath. A tell-tale sign you can tolerate someone for an extended period of

time is if you like the way they smell in the morning. Woods is an undeniably pretty creature.

I wonder if he's ever watched me sleep. I wonder if I look that good while sleeping. Considering how often I wake in a puddle of drool, probably not.

“Hey,” he whispers, evidently more conscious than I thought.

“Hi.” My voice is husky with sleep. I kiss Woods’ forehead and run my fingers through his hair. “How was the other half of the movie?”

“Other half?” He squints his eyes open.

“Yeah.”

He chuckles. “You fell asleep, like, fifteen minutes in. The movie was two and a half hours long.”

“Did I? Huh, a lot happened in the first fifteen minutes.”

When I arrive poolside, Larry gives me a jubilant smile and hands me a glass of orange juice. “Fresh squeezed,” he enthuses and sits back down at the table, reading a national newspaper. He must be a morning person.

“Thank you, Larry.”

The vibrancy of early morning means the pool is a blinding explosion of shimmering light, the plump, purple grapes glow on the vines, and the sky fades seamlessly from orange horizon to blue expanse. I sip my pulpy juice and close my eyes, letting the sun warm my face. There are a total of four

other women laying out yoga mats. As I don't have my own mat, Cindy has rolled out an extra one near hers.

“Good morning!” She beams and waves me over. “Sylvie, this is Maxine, she'll be guiding us in our practice today.”

Maxine is nothing like the most recent yoga instructor I interacted with, Feather. Like Cindy, Maxine is middle-aged. She is probably only five feet tall, muscular, and rocks short bleach-blonde hair.

“And this is my dear friend, Sheri, and her daughter, Cici,” Cindy continues.

Sheri resembles Cindy with a more rounded figure and similar hair style; however, she proudly rocks facial wrinkles – evidence of her happy life.

While Sheri's appearance makes her approachable, Cici is intimidatingly striking. She is tall, tan, and lanky. I would pay many months of rent money for her toned arms. She wears her shiny, sun-kissed brown hair in a high ponytail, exaggerating that her large eyes don't quite fit her narrow face. Like me, she is wearing yoga pants and a sports bra, but she looks like a real life Fabletics ad. *I wonder if her boobs are real.* If I had the choice, I wouldn't dare stand within ten yards of this woman; she makes me look like an anemic, small-breasted frump-a-lump. I stretch my pants up over the little pooch of my lower belly that I am normally fond of but, in the company of this gorgeous flat-stomached woman with iron-rich blood, now find unattractive.

“Cici and Woods were good friends from elementary school through college,” Cindy adds as an afterthought. *Oh great. The one that got away, no doubt.*

“It’s so nice to meet you, Sylvie,” Cici says too sweetly and extends her slender arm to shake my hand. The timbre of her voice sounds like an angel’s, and I’m worried I might snap her hand off her dainty wrist.

“Well, you certainly didn’t peak in high school!” I laugh nervously. “Quick, let’s hide you away before Woods sees what he’s missing.” I glance back at the guest house and jokingly pretend to shoo her toward a bush. All the women laugh.

“Actually Cici and Woods dated,” Sheri says, her tone as sugary as Cici’s, not an ounce of malice. Cindy cringes and I look at Cici questioningly. Oh yeah, her picture is on Woods’ grid, but she wasn’t tagged, so I could never figure out who it was. It’s Cici, evidently. *Wait a minute... Cici?* My body goes into fight-or-flight mode.

“Are you Claire?” I ask in slow motion.

Her face lights up. “Yeah! Fleet calls me Claire. Most everyone else calls me Cici, though.”

Did someone just punch me in the gut? My shoulders slump and my forced smile falls to a gape.

“*Fleet*,” I confirm with a nod. Claire morphs into an even more perfect specimen right before my eyes. “No shit.” My whinny of a fake laugh reverberates off the brick patio.

“Cici is living at home with her father and me temporarily until she decides what to do next,” Sheri adds and looks at Claire adoringly. Claire rolls her eyes and wiggles her head back and forth as if to say, *Oh, Mom*.

I put forth a great deal of effort focusing on my “mind-body connection,” while out of the corner of my eye I watch as Claire performs every pose perfectly. I hate her. When I’m not envying her impeccable form, I’m checking the guest house to make sure Woods isn’t on his way out to propose to her. I imagine that he’s probably already managed to arrange for Larry to take me to the airport as soon as possible while he makes elopement plans; it will be such a romantic story for them to tell their grandchildren.

Maxine guides us into *Shavasana* and my mind stills for the first time in the past hour. I’m absolutely spent from trying to keep up with Claire while my anxiety and jealousy beat me to an emotional pulp.

“Sylvie... ” a voice sing-songs in the distance. “Sylvie, wake up.” Claire stands above me with her rolled up yoga mat under her arm. “You fell asleep, silly.”

I sit up quickly and look around. The older ladies are chatting away, leaving Claire and me to ourselves.

“Oh! Silly, indeed,” I say reluctantly and use my hand to shade my eyes from the sun.

Claire extends her arm to help me up. “Do you practice yoga a lot?” she asks.

“I used to belong to one of those culty studios, but it’s been a while since I’ve attended a class. Unless you count the live YouTube videos I do from my living room twice a year.”

Claire giggles in a jarringly cute way, but the fact that she laughed at something I said gives my ego a boost.

“Well, you have great form, and you’re strong,” she says.

Ten more points for my ego.

“Thank you! I was just trying to keep up with you.”

“I was trying to keep up with *you!*” Claire giggles again.

One hundred points to my ego. She is sweet and adorable. No wonder Woods couldn’t break up with her. I change my mind: I love her.

“Well, it was great meeting you, Sylvie. Tell Woods ‘hi’ for me.”

I definitely won’t. “Will do, Claire.”

She hooks her arm through her mother’s, and I watch as they walk around the house to the front yard.

Woods is blending a smoothie when I return to the guest house. Odd that I should notice while he’s doing something as dull as pressing buttons on a blender, but Woods has an air of youth, a playfulness, here in Sonoma that I haven’t noticed in him before.

“Hey! Did you enjoy old lady yoga?”

“They’re not old. And it was great.” I say with forced enthusiasm and hop onto a stool at the abbreviated breakfast

bar. “Cici was there. You really dodged a bullet with that one, huh?” I scoff.

“Claire was there?”

“She sure was, *Fleet*, and she’s a fucking angel.”

“I didn’t think she’d come to yoga,” he says, looking away contemplatively.

“Oh, she came to yoga alright.” *Mayday, mayday, we’re going down!* I’m trying not to spiral out of control. “Why do you call her Claire?”

“Because Cici is a child’s name.”

“And you’ve known her basically your whole life? What is the story there, Woods?”

“Our parents have been friends for a long time, and they always joked about us getting married.”

Ah, so they want Woods and Claire to end up together. Perfect. “And...?”

“And, so, we kind of started dating just to appease them, and then Leah died and Claire and her family were there for us in a way no one else was.”

I sigh loudly. “Why didn’t you tell me all this before? Are her boobs real?”

“I don’t—” He runs his hand over his face and through his hair. “I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want you to misinterpret my relationship with Claire. I didn’t want you to think you had any reason to be jealous,” he says pleadingly as he sinks an

aluminum straw into a tall glass full of a light purple sludge and slides it across the counter to me.

“I’m not jealous. What I’m feeling right now is beyond jealousy. They don’t even have a word for it here on Earth.” I pull the smoothie through the straw forcibly until I get a brain freeze. Fleetwood is impossible to stay mad at. “You didn’t answer the question about her boobs.”

He laughs. “Yes, they’re real.”

I involuntarily scream in a way that reminds me of Ellie giving birth on the hardwood floor.

“Stop,” he says kindly. “Claire is kind and beautiful, but we weren’t right for each other. She lacked intrigue.”

“*Lacked intrigue?* Like, in bed?”

“I don’t think she’s ever read a book for fun, and she... I don’t know... I guess— I guess I never felt like I really *knew* Claire. Like, she never truly opened up even though we knew each other almost our entire lives.” He smiles. “But yeah, that too.”

“I mean, I read the *Twilight* series in rapid succession, often. And, I believe it was you who pointed out how mindless I am.” I glare teasingly.

He leans over the counter and pulls the back of my hand to his mouth. “Please forgive me, Sylvie, for all my foolishness.” Then, for drama’s sake, “Please, Sylvie. I can’t live with myself if you don’t forgive me. You’re the only one for me.”

I ignore his diversion. “Also, how would one be intriguing in *bed*? Reciting the alphabet in three different languages while doing backwards cowgirl?”

“I believe the proper name is reverse cowgirl.” Woods steps around the island, pulls the waist of his pants out so I can peek inside.

I gasp like a tantalized virgin. “Has anyone ever told you you get hard abnormally fast, Dr. Callahan?”

“Nope.”

“How do I know you didn’t get that from thinking about Claire’s tig ol’ bitties?”

Woods sticks his fingers down the front of my pants. “I told you, I’m an ass man. Besides, she never got as wet as you do.”

“Hate to break it to ya, stud, but that’s just yoga sweat.”

“Liar.”

“Tell your appendage to settle down until we can sneak up to your old room.”

“You want to look at my third place track and field day medal while I do you from behind?”

“Actually, I was thinking you could lay me across a bed of LEGOS.”

“I didn’t know you were into S&M.”

Step 20: Be mature.

CINDY AND LARRY DEPART early Sunday morning.

On their way out the door, Larry puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “You always have friends here in Sonoma.”

As previously stated, sentimental older men are my weakness, so I tear up as I have numerous times this weekend. The remainder of Sunday is a day of delightful contradiction as Woods and I simultaneously play house and act like responsibility-free doofuses.

After a sunset swim, I throw a woven tunic over my swimsuit and cuddle up on the ivory cushions of a wicker chair, draping a plush towel over my legs. I have just opened my book when I hear someone approaching from behind. Assuming it's Woods, I turn with a smile, which quickly fades to what I'm sure is a look of terror. Before me is a Viking of a man whose masculinity is softened only slightly by his thinning blonde hair and crystal blue eyes.

He stops dead in his tracks and addresses me like I'm a wild grizzly bear ready to attack if he doesn't proceed with caution. "Oh. Hi."

I sit up straight and roll my shoulders back confidently. "Hi."

"Who are you?"

"Who are *you*?" I rebut.

He laughs, seemingly assured that this grizzly won't attack. "I'm Sid. My parents live next door. They said something about Woods visiting for the weekend." *Next door* isn't exactly accurate since the estates are so large, but I understand his meaning.

"Sid! What's up, man?" Woods steps out onto the patio, shirtless and shoeless, wearing only a pair of ugly, old khakis (which detract from his hunkiness, not) carrying a bowl of guacamole in one hand and a bag of tortilla chips in the other. He places the snack on the table next to me and starts in at Sid like he's going to tackle him. Sid pulls him in for a hug instead. "Did you meet Sylvie?"

"Sylvie." Sid eyes me with a squirm-worthy stare, but whether it's sexual or suspicious, I can't tell. "My mom told me you brought a *friend*." He punches Woods in the arm playfully. *Bros*. Sid continues, "You owe me a game of pool, man."

"That I do," Woods agrees. He volunteers Sid to carry the chips and guacamole and helps me up from the chair, holding

my hand in a subtle display of both affection and territory marking. I'll play along.

We enter through a backdoor of the main house I haven't yet spent time in and Woods switches on the lights to display a mosaic-tiled room with a pool table atop a basic gray rug in the center, pool sticks racked along the wall and a dartboard hung in a corner.

"Ah, the good old billiard room," Sid says as he sets the food down on a table in the corner and pulls a chair out for me while Woods racks the balls. The gesture is kind enough, although I don't appreciate the presumption that I will be sitting quietly in the corner.

While they discuss Sid's recent string of sexual pursuits, I follow the mosaic-tiled floor into an adjacent sunroom complete with a breakfast nook and myriad tropical plants, then continue into the kitchen in a quest for beverages. I grab three beers and return to the billiard room as Sid says, "I just prefer a fuller bush, you know what I mean?"

Woods nods.

"He knows what you mean," I say as I hand Sid a beer. "First impression says you seem like a less-is-more kind of guy, though, Sid."

"Really?" Sid's forehead wrinkles in surprise. He circles the blue chalk on the end of his pool stick.

I nod, "Mhm," and sip my beer.

“Thank you, by the way.” Sid returns from his profound thoughts of vaginas with varying degrees of pubic hair growth and raises his beer bottle in my direction.

Woods smiles at me, a much-needed reminder that it is Sid who is the third wheel here, not I. Even so, if Cindy were home, I’d go chat with her instead.

We play a series of three player games. I’m not terrible, but I stand little to no chance against these two, so I drop my normally competitive spirit. It’s reminiscent of when I was a child trying to play with my dad and uncle: they’d humor me by letting me hit the pretty balls with the big stick.

Sid and Woods catch up on the last few years of their lives and briefly reflect on high school stunts. One of which involved manure and almost got them expelled. I interject here and there which seems to entertain them.

At one point, Sid asks if I have any party tricks. Unfortunately, I’m not one of those people who has perfected opening a bottle of beer with my butt cheeks or balancing a pool stick on my nose, so I sing them “Fifty Nifty United States” by Ray Charles, in which every state is sung in alphabetical order. When I’m finished, I swig the last gulp of my beer and set the bottle down on the table triumphantly. They are speechless and reward me with a round of applause.

Later, I wander back through the sun room to the kitchen, shoving a chip loaded with guacamole in my mouth and search the refrigerator for new refreshments. As I do, I hear Sid ask Woods, “Aren’t you moving to Austin for that job soon?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you planning to do about her?” *Do they honestly think I can't hear them?*

“I haven't decided.”

I haven't decided?! My stomach sinks with rejection and humiliation. Evidently, I'm just a situation that needs to be handled at some point very soon.

“I'd turn down a job for that,” Sid laughs then makes a grunt like he just got punched in the gut.

What a charmer this Sid is.

“Her party trick was that impressive? You don't even know her.”

“I'm just saying, when you screw it up, I'm buying a one-way ticket to Denver.”

Every time I'm reminded that Woods is leaving, it adds to the hurt. Though it often feels like more, what we have is a tryst. It's temporary. After me, Woods may have many women—or worse, just one. Whatever dust has settled on my envy is brushed away, and I start tailspinning. *Game on, mother fucker.*

I return to the billiard room a new woman and hand each of them a bottle. Woods sets his down on the table, unopened. *Self-control, one of his most valued characteristics.* I lean against the pool table and turn my body to face Sid. “With a physique like that you must be an athlete.” My eyes soften and

I pucker my lips i(n a way I hope looks alluring) as I make the *innocent* observation.

Sid looks down at himself. “Thanks for noticing. I play football in a recreational league. Played in college, too. Defensive lineman.”

“Oh, so you can really throw people around, huh?” I squint my eyes and nod as though to appear truly intrigued.

“I can toss a guy to the side, easy. I’m more gentle with the ladies, though.” He winks.

“Is that so? You don’t make them sign a liability waiver?”

“Only the really little ones.” His eyes graze my body. Woods looks back and forth between us, his mouth agape.

I lean toward Sid. “And *I* would fall into that category, I suppose?”

And with that, Woods has had enough. “Sid! It’s time for you to go.”

“I’m just messing around, man,” Sid says as Woods pushes him out the door. They start across the yard toward Sid’s parents’ property, and I wander out onto the patio.

“Bye, Sid. It was nice to meet you.” I wiggle my fingers at him before becoming spellbound by the night sky.

“It was nice to meet you, Sylvie.” His tongue wags.

Step 21: Don't get jealous.

“**W**HAT WAS THAT ABOUT?” Woods asks when he rejoins me on the patio, looking piqued.

The storm cloud of reality, absolutely brimming with hard truths, bursts above me as I say, “Well, since you’re still undecided about what to *do* with me when you move, I figured I’d simplify the issue for you.”

Like my passport the morning after I turned twenty-one, my pragmatism is drowning in a puddle of old beer on the floor of a dingy bar. In an attempt to avoid the impending confrontation, I walk without a particular destination to wallow in my piteousness. The tears come as I enter the maze of vines.

“Sylvie.” Woods is right behind me, and I’m not going to lie, I absolutely love that he’s chasing after me. He grabs my wrist gently to slow my pace and turn me toward him. “Are you crying?”

Indeed, I am crying, and to my dismay, I begin to laugh as well. It's been years since I've done this. The emotional intensity of being either in big trouble or thoroughly angry at someone causes me to laugh without control. It's a nervous habit I've had since I was a kid. I thought I had finally outgrown it, being that the last time I had an episode was three years ago when I got into a stupid fight with Mo. I already utterly loathe myself for my petty, juvenile display, as well as for the familiar predicament I've found myself in—the laughing is merely the icing on the cake.

I collect myself briefly to sigh in irritation, then swiftly return to belly laughs. “Yes... I'm crying.”

“*This* is you crying? It looks an awful lot like laughing.” Woods is understandably bewildered. With a great deal of effort, I am able to quell my laughter. If Woods wasn't already aware of how insane I am, he certainly is now. He rubs his hands over his face then pushes them through his hair and smiles. “You're such a unique creature.” He pulls me into him and waits patiently for me to continue.

“You're just gonna fuck me and leave me.” I laugh over his shoulder and wipe the tears from my face.

“Isn't that what you want?”

“I mean... Yeah, I guess it is.” I've become worryingly good at lying...

He abruptly bites my neck in response. It doesn't actually hurt, but I say, “Ow,” in surprise.

He moves his mouth to mine. A sensation like that of a bag full of flailing fish moves down my anatomical center. If our kisses are usually harmonious and sweet, this is dissonant and rough in an angry-sex kind of way. It's incredibly hot.

Woods swiftly removes my tunic and lays me on the ground, numerous grapes squashing beneath me. I don't have the energy to dissect what he's trying to prove with this kiss, but I am steeped in excitement at the prospect of having sex in a vineyard.

I tug Woods' head back by his hair so I can reach my other hand down to the buttons of his hideous khakis. Because my cheap bikini is essentially being held together by shoe laces, he pulls three strings and I am fully naked. The God-forsaken button of his pants finally comes undone and I take his hardness between my hands.

He rests his cheek against mine and whispers into my ear, "I was never just fucking you."

I growl and guide him inside. More grapes squash beneath me as I grab his ass and push him in harder. With every pulse, my moans grow louder. I'm not ready to give in yet; I want him forever.

Woods moves his head to rest against my neck so he can focus his energy on his hips and bites me again. Like when his tongue meets my nipples, his bite pushes me over the top. I dig my nails into his thighs and yell out obscenities as he says my name.

Step 22: If given the opportunity to have sex in a unique locale, ignore steps 1-21.

I SWIRL THE SLICK satin of my pajamas between my thumb and forefinger – the repetitive motion and silken texture of the fabric soothing my nerves – as I brush my teeth. I did the same thing to my childhood blankie to relieve stress. It was a tattered mass disintegrated by finger oils by the time my mom insisted I throw it away at the age of eighteen. I was devastated.

My crow's feet look more pronounced than ever as I examine my face in the mirror, then toss my hair to the side and smooth out my eyebrows. When I exit the bathroom en suite, Woods is lying in bed reading a scientific article.

“Nerd.”

“I know you are, but what am I?”

I crawl in next to him and survey his face. “Hi.”

“Come with me,” he says.

“I already did,” I reply jokingly.

He smiles and shakes his head. “No, come with me to Austin.”

I laugh and grab my book from the bedside table. “Is this a joke or a guilt-driven rash decision?”

His face falls. “Is that a no?”

“Sorry if I’m not jumping at your half-hearted invitation, but this is something you should probably consider for more than an hour.”

“I’ve been considering it for weeks.”

“We’ve only known each other for, what? A month?”

“—ish,” he confirms.

I want to scream *yes*, but of all the stupid things I’ve done in the name of love, that would be the most careless and moronic. Wouldn’t it? I don’t even know if Woods loves me—he may just need someone there in Austin to help him carry boxes from the moving truck into his new house.

But, say he does love me and I agree to move with him, experience says that shortly after uprooting my life, we’d realize we weren’t right for each other and I’d have to move my pathetic, lonely, unemployed self into my mom’s basement. It wouldn’t work out, and I am not going to let myself imagine otherwise.

I pretend to return to my reading without offering an answer.

He brushes his fingers through my hair. “It’s just that, you were just crying about how I’m fucking you and leaving you...”

I’m embarrassed that he brought it up. “I know I did, but that doesn’t mean we have to turn this into something it’s not.” I’m willing him to tell me he loves me. That’s all I need, really, to agree to give it all up for him.

He looks hurt. “You’re all over the place.”

“I know. Trust me, I know. It’s exhausting.” I release a frustrated sigh.

He returns to his article and says, “We’ll talk about it later.”

When he is once again preoccupied with his article, I look at him out of the corner of my eye, thinking about how quickly I could get used to a nightly ritual of reading our respective literature in bed.

When I awake the next morning, I’m worried things are going to be awkward between us, as I assume Woods will inevitably regret the rash proposal he made for me to accompany him to Austin. What’s worse is that when I turn in the bed to look at his sweet sleeping face, he’s gone. There’s not even a goodbye note on his pillow. I panic.

“Good morning,” a deep voice comes out of nowhere. I jump and put my hand to my head. He’s there, next to the bed, handing me a mug of cream with coffee, just the way I like it.

“Good morning. You’re here.” I smile and take the mug between my hands.

“Where else would I be?” he asks as he returns to the small guest house kitchen.

I shrug. “What time is our flight?”

“We have a few hours.” From the bed, I watch as he divides an egg scramble between two plates and puts a piece of buttered oat toast on each. Finally, he forks two slices of smoked salmon onto the toast. “What do you want to do?” he asks as he sets my plate on the bedside table.

“Hmm... You. And lounge in the pool.”

“Done and done.” He smiles as he sits on a barstool and flips the TV to the morning news. I stack a fork full of eggs on the smoked salmon toast and smoosh it into my mouth ravenously.

Last night, I revealed my insecurities to Woods, further exhibited my contrarian ways, and even turned down the most dreamy invitation. Yet, here he stands, smiling and cooking me breakfast. In my experience, men flee at any indication of neediness, or feelings that drive one to behave with lunacy, but it would seem Woods doesn't scare easily. What a fucking relief.



Woods' parents reserved for us two seats on a plane their friends chartered for a business trip they happened to be making to Denver. There are six other passengers on the plane, plus two pilots and an attendant.

The entire interior of the aircraft is pristine and an elegant shade of beige, like Duchess Kate's shoe closet or a Kardashian's bathroom. In the center of the plane there is a table top surface with a spread of food fit for aforementioned royalty—charcuterie, a platter of fresh fruit and yogurt, a cake stand with varied desserts, and champagne that has already been poured into flutes.

This level of luxury seems wildly unnecessary. First Class on a commercial flight apparently isn't enough for these people.

“Guess they're expecting a smooth takeoff,” I say to Woods out of the side of my mouth as I nod toward the full glasses and raise my eyebrows to express to him my disapproval. His eyes say, *I know, I know*. We're getting pretty good at this wordless communication thing.

Part of me wants to refrain from eating the food in protest of such opulence. But wasting the food is worse than enjoying it, and Woods' parents' friends are insistent that we help ourselves to whatever we want, so I smile politely and express my gratitude.

We take our seats and my body responds by going limp in the large, buttery-soft leather hug. Woods puts on the next episode of *Outlander*, and we hit the mini-buffet when the plane has completed its ascent. Turns out, the Gates of Heaven are a private luxury plane.

“So, why don't you want to come to Austin with me?” Woods asks casually as we return to our leather thrones.

My eyes widen and I shove a giant chocolate-covered strawberry in my mouth.

“Take your time,” he says and watches me move the sugary mass from cheek to cheek.

I can barely breathe, the strawberry is so large, so indeed, I do take my time with it, then swig my champagne.

“You’re bringing this up again? *Here?*” I whisper and look around to make sure no one is listening. The other passengers are completely distracted, engrossed in heaps of paperwork while wearing noise-canceling headphones.

“I told you we’d talk about it later. It’s later.” He is amused by my discomfort. “So...?”

“Woods, that would be crazy. My mom would think I’d *really* lost it if I moved with you to another *state* when we’ve known each other for such a short time.”

“Your mom?”

“Yes. Besides,” I continue at a contrived, even pace. “We’d move there together and then you’d get sick of me, and all you’d have to do is put me on a plane back to Colorado. Your life would be relatively unchanged, while I would have given up everything. And...”

Maybe it’s foreboding of the heartbreak I’ll feel when things undoubtedly end in catastrophe, but my throat suddenly tightens and I have to hold back tears. I turn away from Woods and take two deep breaths in an attempt to compose myself.

“And what?” He pulls my chin back toward him.

“And I don’t even know how you feel about me,” I say a little too loudly. I can’t help but expose my irritation at this point.

“You don’t know how I feel about you?” Woods raises one perfect eyebrow.

“I mean, I guess I do.” Now I’m flustered, feeling like I’ve just asked him to admit to something he doesn’t feel. “I know this is just... well, I don’t know *what* this is, but I know it’s nothing serious...” I try to think of a metaphor to explain that I love him without actually saying “I love you,” while also indicating that I don’t expect him to love me back, but I am so lost in my head that nothing manifests quickly enough. As I fumble over my words, my irritation turns to anger because he has watched idly as I become borderline unhinged. “Fuck it. I’m in love with you, ok?” I whisper-yell at him then look around again. “You are sexy and sweet and smarter than anyone I’ve ever met and I laugh at all your stupid jokes, even when they’re not funny, because I just want you to feel good about yourself. Are you happy now, you ass?”

I stuff another strawberry in my mouth and cross my arms, looking straight ahead. I was so determined not to fall in love with him, and now look at me! I’m crying over him on a chartered plane full of affluent, etiquette-obsessed strangers and expensive champagne.

I’m still entirely hopeless.

Now, it’s self-pity behind my tears. Woods pushes the armrest up between us and puts his nose in my hair. I pull

away and look at him like he's a public transit creep.

"Wha-?" Before I can finish asking what the hell he's doing, he pulls my face toward his and kisses me adoringly. I wrap my hands around his wrists to resist, but give up quickly and melt into it. There's no use not kissing him back.

He pulls away and pecks my lips two more times. "I know you love me. You already told me."

I scoff. "No, I didn't."

"You did. Fourth of July when you were talking in your sleep in my bed."

I swear, every one of my organs simultaneously shut down with the horror of this divulgence.

"So, it's settled. You'll come with me," he says quietly.

"You are incorrigible," I say through gritted teeth.

"*Because,*" he puts his finger to my lips to shush me. "If you had been lucid you would have heard that I said I love you too, Sylvie Hanson. I am in love with you. Hopelessly in love," he says in his deep, sexy, bedroom voice and sniffs my neck.

"You are?" I try not to smile.

He frowns in disbelief at my doubt. "Yes! I brought you home to meet my parents. And asked you to move to another state with me. And you *don't know how I feel about you?* Isn't it blatant?" He licks some chocolate from my mouth and laces his fingers in my hair.

This is the first time I can ever remember feeling real butterflies in my stomach, and not the demonic kind that make you nearly shit your pants. “Some things have to be *said*, you idiot.”

“I am an idiot. And a jerk. But holy shit, I love you, and I need you to come with me.”

“I can’t just pick up and leave,” I say between kisses. “I have a job and a lease and— and family and friends.”

“I know, I know.” He sighs and contemplates, probably deciding the best way to say what he’s about to say. “You, uh, wouldn’t have to get a job right away... in Austin... or, at all, really.”

I scoff, which he interprets as me taking offense, but actually I’m excited at the prospect.

“I mean, obviously you can do whatever you want, and you don’t need me to tell you that, um—” He’s flustered. His warm, brown eyes are swimming with devotion, and I take a few beats to simply enjoy them. This is everything I’ve been wanting, everything I’ve dreamed of, isn’t it? “And I could help you sublet your apartment, or buy you out of your lease—”

“Fine,” I concede. “But if it doesn’t work out you have to give me your Tesla.”

Woods looks surprised that his rambling monologue seems to have worked. “It’s yours.” He kisses me again in a way so passionate that he must have forgotten we’re not alone.

I push him away and look around at the other passengers. No one has the slightest clue of the notable conversation that has just occurred between us, nor the ensuing kiss. “Who are these people, anyway?” I ask him in a whisper so low it’s almost soundless.

“They’re lawyers who take on corporations that have violated human rights laws.”

“Oh.”

I will address both my general underachievement and judgment of others when we land, but until then I’m going to enjoy being in love. I practically climb into Woods’ lap and bite his bottom lip until he winces, then we continue our make-out session until the flight attendant asks us to fasten our seatbelts.

After exiting the plane, Woods and I make our way through the airport as quickly as possible without garnering attention. Like the gentleman he is, Woods tows his and my luggage behind him as we walk briskly toward the parking garage. He has parked in the closest, most expensive airport parking garage, making for a short walk from the terminal, few other cars, and, presently, no witnesses.

He puts our bags in the trunk and slams it shut. I hop up on the closed trunk and pull him between my legs, kissing him fiercely. I can’t wait another second to have him. I undo his pants and stroke him until he’s hard. He takes my free hand and sucks on my finger, then guides it between my legs.

“You know I’m already dripping for you,” I whisper in his ear.

He puts his hand up my romper and pushes my panties to the side, then grips my thighs and pulls me against him. As is unfailingly the case, his entry brings a wave of euphoria, alleviating my desperation. I start moaning and he covers my mouth with one hand so my moans don’t echo through the nearly-empty parking garage. He holds me firmly in place while the sound of us clapping together speeds faster and faster. His eyes don’t stray from mine until we both break.

He puts his lips to my neck and says, “I love you.”

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, hugging him in as tightly as I can and rub my cheek against his soft hair. I can’t believe he actually loves me back.

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Step 23: Well, you're fucked.

ARRIVING HOME FROM VACATION is bittersweet. The sweetness lies in the comfort of recognizing your surroundings and knowing the roads home. The bitterness, of course, lies in re-entering a world that includes responsibilities, clear thinking, and an immediate end to day-drinking and naps.

When I am away on vacation, there is an anxiety to return home to make sure everything is as it should be. As though some catastrophic event has taken place in my absence. Once I've returned to see that everything is, in fact, just how I left it, I beg the Universe to transport me back to vacationland. Such is life for someone with chronic discontent.

This homecoming, however, is pure sugar—as though our trip of mush and passion has merely been extended in a different locale. I see now that everything is just as I left it, but there's no ache to return to Sonoma; vacation joy followed me home.

I lean my elbow against the window and let the weight of my head rest against my fist as I watch the runways fade away and the city come into view.

“You tired?” Woods grabs my left hand and kisses my ring finger.

“Mhm.” I rearrange my head to lean on the seat so I can gaze at him.

We cross the invisible line from airport property to the neighboring county and my stomach drops so fast, it’s as though I’m riding the world’s fastest elevator. Just like that, the sugary magic of *vacation time* – and *vacation us* – seems to flit away.

There’s something about leaving the airport, leaving behind the thousands of people who will collectively travel all over the world, that brings reality swinging down like a gavel. Perhaps it’s my tendency toward a romantic ideal, but reality has always hit heavy when returning home from a trip. This is especially so, as I’m returning from a vacation that opened portals I wasn’t expecting in my relationship with Woods.

I was wholly prepared to keep it casual until he departed to Austin, at which point I would nurse my broken heart (as I have many times before) and resume my responsible-dating-casual-sex-free resolution. In a matter of days, however, everything has shifted.

His childhood home is breathtaking and calming, I want his warm family as my own, and most notably, Woods *loves* me and wants me to be with him, no matter where life takes us.

It all seems too good to be true. Fear and panic are twisting my heart and causing my head to flood.

Woods cruises down the center lane of the road, approaching the traffic light at which he can turn right to his apartment or left to mine. I begin sweating as he looks back and forth between me and the road, waiting for my directive.

“Left,” I say.

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Step 24: Don't panic.

I HAVEN'T SEEN SWEET Fleetwood Callahan since I swiftly convinced myself that moving to another state with a man I've known for less than a season is, in fact, a terrible idea.

On our way home from the airport, I metaphorically weaved myself into a sweltering sweater of apprehension. As he parked the car in front of my apartment, I exited and declared to Woods that I would be unable to accompany him to Austin, Texas, after all, and watched through sobs as he drove away.

I am a mess. Frankly, I've lost track of how many days it's been since I've showered, and I reek of dry shampoo and old perfume.

Every night I type out approximately three text messages to Woods before throwing my phone across the room. Some evenings I even go so far as to *call* his number, which I have memorized, before pressing end half a dozen times in a panic. I've visited the library, not because I want to go back on my

decision, but because I want to see him, to make sure he's okay, but his table has been empty.

Ida is about to take me off the summer's remaining weddings and isolate me to office work because my energy "screams divorce."

"Here's the thing about soulmates, honey," she says. "Despite what most people think, there are lots of them out there—people we can love with abandon and with whom we can build a life—but finding one is still extraordinary, and if you can keep that one from getting away, you should."

"What are you saying, Ida?"

"What does it sound like I'm saying, Sylvie?" She gives me a *serious mom* look. "He's a doctor!"

I huff onto a bar stool and give my friends a sad little smile. Since I single-handedly ruined my love life and for once have no one to blame but myself, I have spent a majority of my time at Bar 112 with Mo, Ivy, and Ivy's ex-girlfriend-turned-best friend, Georgia, than anywhere else. I'm the despairing, drunken, disheveled mascot for this cool group of lesbos.

"You look really pretty," Mo says kindly. I can always depend on her for ample amounts of pity in the weeks following a breakup. Eventually, she'll have had enough and give me a kick in the ass, but until then she treats me like the baby I am.

"Thank you."

“Have you come to your senses yet, you cocksucker?” Ivy asks with a teaspoon of bitterness.

“Ivy,” Mo scolds.

“What?” Ivy laughs. “She’s a literal cocksucker. Why are you so against falling in love with him, Vie?”

“I only sucked his cock once. Maybe twice. And, I’m not against falling in love with him,” I reply defensively. “I *am* in love with him. Madly in love. Which is precisely the problem.”

“*What* is the problem?” Georgia asks.

“I haven’t been able to commit to anything! Not college, or a career, or moving away from home, or even that kitten I owned for a week. Remember that kitten, Mo?”

“Yeah,” Mo agrees. “She was so cute.”

“I still have nightmares about the litter box. I set a goal to not fall in love or have sex, and I have to stick with it. I have to prove to myself that I can follow through, finish something.” I end the explanation on an impassioned note.

“Didn’t you already have sex *and* fall in love with him? Why don’t you prove you can commit to something by moving with him to Austin?” Georgia looks at me skeptically, but without judgment, like she’s really trying to get through to me.

I squish my face into the palm of my hand.

“She doesn’t want to get her heart broken so she just went ahead and did it herself.” Mo waves Georgia’s attempt at reason away. “She hasn’t seen her therapist in a while.”

The girls discuss trivial topics that have little to do with my love life (like America’s failing education system and all the plastic in the ocean) while I wallow.

Ivy sets a fluted glass of a bubbly, rose gold beverage in front of me then grabs a wet pint glass from a rack of glasses and twists a microfiber bar towel around it. “Woods was in here last night. We talked for a while,” she says nonchalantly.

I lean over the bar and clutch Ivy’s shirt by the collar, yelling, “Did he ask about me?! What did you say to him?!”

“Jesus, Vie,” she laughs and pushes me away.

“Babe, you are acting nuts,” Mo says while crunching a piece of ice in her mouth.

“Sorry. I’ll try to compose myself.” I resume my questioning in the tone of a small-town sheriff questioning a witness. “Ivy, I would appreciate it very much if you had any insight to share from your conversation with Dr. Callahan.”

“He said he’s leaving in a week.”

“And...?”

“And, yes, he asked about you.”

My eyes widen. “What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Bad. She’s doing bad.’”

“You did? No, why’d you do that?”

“Because you’re acting like a fucking lunatic.”

“What else did he say?” I ask urgently.

“I gotta get these customers.” Ivy shrugs and retreats to the other end of the rapidly filling bar to take orders.

Mo begins a story about a high-paying client who insisted on bringing her two cats into the salon and wanted her ex-boyfriend’s name shaved into the side of her head. It’s somewhat refreshing to be reminded there are more disastrous love lives than my own.

Down the bar, a group of guys around our age laugh like hyenas and look repeatedly in our direction. Each is dressed in a well-tailored suit and sports a slightly varying style of the same haircut.

Ivy flutters four shot glasses in a line on the bar in front of us and runs a bottle of top shelf tequila over them, filling each glass perfectly without spilling a drop. It’s magic. “These are from the suits at the end of the bar,” she says without a hint of jealousy.

Mo and Georgia sip their shots and ignore the guys. I take two big gulps to get mine down and wince at the laughing hyenas.

“Whoa. You’re supposed to open your throat and let it waterfall down,” Georgia says with concern.

“That’s what he said,” Mo cackles.

The suits don’t take the hint and move toward us. As they approach, I realize Bad Date Derek is one of the bros.

“Oh God,” I groan as I stick my nose in my left armpit. The stench is formidable. Payback’s a bitch.

“Hey Sylvie,” Derek says smoothly as he slides into the tight space between my stool and the next. His store brand aftershave and gin martini breath is overwhelming. “You’re just about the most beautiful group of girls in here.”

I look around the bar for an ostensibly more beautiful group of *girls*. “Just about, huh? I suppose that makes you pretty brave,” I say sarcastically. I look over at Mo and Georgia for help, but Derek’s finance friends have infiltrated their personal space, as well.

“What are you drinking tonight, Sylvie?”

I hate the way he says my name. I let myself imagine for a moment that it’s Woods leaning on the bar saying my name in his deep, soothing voice. “Another glass of bubbly, I suppose.” I might as well let the guy pay for my next drink.

“I pegged you as a tequila girl.”

I cringe. “Please don’t ever use the phrase ‘pegged you’ in my presence again.”

Derek shouts his order at Ivy. He is worse than I remember. Must be the gin and lack of pretense. Ivy glares at him and grabs a couple glasses from the rack. Derek starts in on some day trading bullshit and my eyes glaze over. He puts his hand on my lower back protectively as someone squeezes in on my other side to order from the bar.

“You look different than you did on our date.”

“Well, it was really dark in that restaurant.”

He leans too close. “Can I tell you something?”

I pull away. “I guess.”

“I’m wearing a thong right now.”

“What? No. Derek, that’s great for you, it really is, but I don’t want to know.”

“I’ve been wearing one for a week.”

“Like, the same one? That can give you a UTI.”

“No, I wash it,” he says flippantly. “But is that true?”

“Thong-Wearing 101, bro. Thong-Wearing 201 is don’t sleep with it on. Could give you a butthole infection.” I’m pretty sure that’s not true, but Derek could use a little more fear in his life.

“Huh. Anyways, tell me, how many drinks will it take to get you to come home with me this time, Sylvie?”

“That depends, Derek. How much money did you—” I use air quotes, “trade” in the “market” today? Take that number and multiply it by a trillion.”

Derek says, “None. It’s Saturday.”

“You dress like this on a Saturday?”

The person who has squeezed me intolerably close to Derek clears their throat and I turn to welcome the interruption.

The large sip of champagne swimming in my mouth spews everywhere. “Fleetwood!” Woods wipes away droplets from

his face with a look of disgust. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry!”

Ivy is a lifesaver and slams a stack of napkins down on the bar in front of me. I go to wipe them across Woods’ face, but he pulls the stack from my hand and dabs himself.

“I’m really sorry,” I say carefully. “I’m just so surprised to see you. How are you doing?”

He eyes Derek. “You’re getting back out there, I see. Good luck with that.”

“What, him? No, no. He’s nobody!”

“Ouch,” Derek says.

“Thanks, Ivy,” Woods says as he grabs his drink and traipses away.

“Wait!”

“I’m glad to see you’re doing so well, Sylvie.” He calls back as he disappears into the crowd.

He thinks I’m doing well? Good thing he’s not a psychiatric doctor, because he would be utterly incompetent. I am entirely *unwell*, for crying out loud. I thought he could read my mind. The idea that his superpower of seeing right through me has dried up nearly causes me to keel over.

A white plastic bucket we borrowed from Bar 112 sits next to my head while I am sprawled out in the backseat of Ivy’s car. The bucket smells of bleach and the leather seats of Weiman leather cleaner, making my nausea that much more insufferable.

“Don’t throw up. I just had this baby detailed,” Ivy says.

“I’m not gonna throw up,” I slur and wave my hand at her as the sunroof window spins clockwise. “Ivy, you want to know something so special?”

“Sure, Sylvie.”

“You can spell *your* name from *my* name!”

“That is kind of special, actually,” Ivy laughs and grabs Mo’s hand.

“You guys would make such beautiful babies. Why hasn’t science figured out how to do that yet? I demand an answer!”

“We *would* make beautiful babies,” Ivy muses. “And I want lots of babies.”

“You do?” Mo says with surprise. “So do I.”

“Man, you guys are cute. Do you think I’m cute?” I burp. “Like, as lesbians, would you hit on me? How about date me? Would you date me?” I’m on a roll.

Ivy and Mo laugh.

I close my eyes and all I see is Woods. He’s smiling and calm. Like a bad dream, an arrow shoots through his heart and his smile vanishes.

I hurl into the bucket.

Step 25: Don't give up.

I RETWIST MY HAIR into a bun as I exit The Garden.

In the summer months, it often seems that the sun is being pushed unwillingly behind the mountains by an invisible force, rather than its inevitable setting simply being an effect of the Earth's rotation. The sun's rays stretch up the way a child's arms reach for a parent, begging to be lifted to a better view.

Occasionally, there are clouds available to scatter the remaining light, but this evening the waning moon begins her journey across the sky alone, shining brightly, reflecting the sun's light with pride. I am half aware of the cleansing lunar energy coming from above as I check social media. After many days of light-to-medium stalking, I confirm that Woods is performing his last jams skating show at Central tonight before he embarks on his journey to Austin.

Just as I look up with a sigh of regret, I run into my wise, old Italian friend and hug him eagerly. "Guillermo!"

“Sylvie.” His accent soothes. “How are you, *bella*? You look unhappy.”

I nod pathetically. “Woods and I sort of ended things.”

Guillermo frowns. “Why? He is a fool to let you go.”

“I guess you could say I’m the fool, then.” I smile sheepishly.

He clicks his tongue. “Why, *bella*?”

Talking to Guillermo when I’m upset elicits a similar reaction to that of speaking to my mom—no matter how composed I felt before the conversation, their sympathy brings forth my uncontrollable breakdown.

“No, no, no,” he says soothingly and wipes my tears. “Love makes fools of us all, Sylvie.” He places a dainty, yellow flower behind my ear. “Don’t give up.”

It’s a simple notion, really. Nothing that hasn’t been said before. But there is a level of divinity in Guillermo’s sage advice. With it, the moon’s glow seemingly intensifies.

A timid young man approaches Guillermo’s cart to purchase a flower for the even shyer looking girl standing beside him. My heart squeezes as I watch the way they gaze at each other, and I have the sudden urge to run.

“Thanks, Guillermo!” I yell as I start jogging toward my apartment. I fumble my phone out and get motion sickness as I text Mo, *I’m going to win my man back. You’re coming with me*

Let's go get him

BFF. Love you!

Mo and Ivy are making out on the front step outside Mo's house when I pull up. Most cars would screech to a stop, alerting Mo and Ivy that their ride has arrived, but my Prius is notorious for performing all her tasks in silence, so I honk the horn and scream out the window, "Babes, come on!"

They look like they're about to eat each other alive; their tongues aren't even making it into one another's mouth.

"Hey homos, we gotta jet!" I lay on the horn and they surface from their make out session.

"Ok, ok, we're coming!" Mo screams.

Central is lit up with LED lights and disco balls, but there are few people outside the venue.

Woods and his crew are in way over their heads thinking they can perform at a venue this large, I think to myself. The bouncer at the *VIP* line entrance must have just come from his day job as an assassin. No one is getting past him unpermitted. I give the pretty, half-dressed door girl my name, praying that Woods hasn't removed me from the list.

"Here for Woods, huh? I'm surprised he kept you on the list after you broke his heart." She says it kindly, but smiles acidly. The bouncer opens the door for us. Door Girl gives Ivy a seductive up-and-down before the door closes behind us.

"She's slept with Woods, and she wants to sleep with me," Ivy says matter-of-factly.

Mo elbows Ivy. “Maybe she just knows Sylvie shattered Woods’ heart into a million pieces.”

I cringe.

It feels like we’ve entered an alternate dimension. When Woods first mentioned his roller dancing hobby, I imagined a few people in the center of a dinky skating rink making asses of themselves to ‘90s hits, while some old ladies rented out the private party room for bridge. This is more like a Kesha concert with drug mafia undertones. I laugh at the inconceivability.

A very handsome gentleman in a light gray suit appears and introduces himself as Alonso. “How can I be of service to you beautiful ladies, this evening?”

“Oh, hi, Alonso. This is our first time here. I’m a guest of Woods.”

“Ah, you must be Sylvia.”

I’m so completely flattered that he knows who I am that I almost refrain from correcting him. “It’s just Sylvie, actually.”

“My apologies, Sylvie. Right this way.”

He shows us to the bar where we can order drinks and food, all of which will be covered by Woods. It occurs to me that this must be where the American branch of the Italian Mafia has been congregating for their murder meetings, and somewhere along the way they decided it would make a better cover to dance around in roller skates. I order champagne for

all of us—*fuck it, why not?*—and Alonso shows us to our seats in the front row.

The crowd here is wild, both in composition and disposition. There are women who could be Playboy centerfolds, ladies who look like my mom, and many, many gay men.

“There aren’t any kids here,” I say to Mo and Ivy.

They look at me like “duh.”

The lights go down and an announcer says, “Give it up for the Jam and Biscuits Roller Crew!” *Jam and Biscuits?* The crowd erupts in cheers and applause. I start sweating. I’m so embarrassed about the performance I’m about to watch and the I-want-you-back monologue I’m practicing in my head, I feel like I’m going to have a panic attack. Mo appears just as stressed.

“Why are you both so tense?” Ivy yells over the blaring music. “Where there are gay men, there is joy! Relax!” She rubs Mo’s shoulders.

A disco ball descends from the ceiling and multi-colored lights flash explosively. The overwhelming energy of the crowd is also cause for my panic. It’s a strange sensation, but being in a mass of people makes me feel like one tiny puzzle piece in a horde of thousands that’s teetering on the edge of a table. One push in the wrong direction and I could tumble off, becoming lost in the carpet, only to be vacuumed up later and dumped in a garbage bin.

Ten men skate out from the darkness. Their complexions are quite varied and, while they're all fully clothed, it's clear they are each in fantastic shape. I turn to get a look at Mo and Ivy's reactions. They're making out. I look back to the performers just as Woods skates by me. He is, without a doubt, the hottest one out there. He looks altogether stunned to see me sitting in the front row. The color drains from his face, then is quickly followed by a rosiness in his cheeks I don't recognize. Maybe because I can sense his vulnerability, his reaction incentivizes me to relax. The dancers get in formation and start into an acrobatic breakdancing routine.

I jab Mo with my elbow. "It's starting!"

Just before my current YouTube workout video fixation, I dabbled in YouTube breakdance tutorials (I ended up shattering a candle and knocking my favorite houseplant to the ground). Given the basic knowledge I extracted from that foray, I recognize that Woods is doing the breakdance moves known as flares and freezes, which require significant arm strength. That explains the biceps. His hips roll like ocean waves and, my God, I miss those hips rolling into me.

After an hour, a cocktail waitress I haven't seen yet tonight refills Mo and Ivy's champagne. I have not touched mine. The girls and I clink our glasses.

"To true love!" Ivy says.

"Aww, babe!" Mo whines back.

I roll my eyes, wondering why I brought them. I scoot to the edge of my seat and gawk as the performers remove their

shirts suggestively. I am roused with competition and envy at the fact that this crowd of thirsty women and gay men is seeing Woods shirtless. And, considering the fanbase, many have probably seen him in this half-dressed state many times before.

After one by one ripping their pants off to reveal a rainbow of speedos, the jam skaters form a line. The first skater cracks open a bottle of beer by squeezing the cap between his thighs. He carefully places the bottle on the toe of the roller skate of the man next to him, who kicks it gently up into the air. Woods catches the bottle in his Speedo – *in his Speedo* – and from body part to body part the bottle is balanced, making its way down the row of men until the last guy chugs what is left of the beer. They bow, and the well-lubricated crowd goes wild.

Woods makes eye contact with me as he skates back into the darkness. I am still relatively embarrassed for Woods, but more than that I'm jealous, flabbergasted, and very horny. If he doesn't take me back, there's no telling what I'll do.

“Girl, you look like Charles Manson's favorite disciple right now,” Mo says, combing out my hair with her fingers and adjusting the yellow flower I had completely forgotten about.

“That's exactly how I feel.”

The cocktail waitress escorts us back to the VIP bar. I'm a lovestruck teenager, waiting after the big game for her winning-touchdown-throwing boyfriend. Mo and Ivy wait with me by what is called the *Artists' Entrance* where we guess Woods will exit. Ivy situates herself so that she can warn

me of Woods' approach, allowing me a few extra seconds to collect myself.

"That's the first time I've been turned on by a man," Mo says goofily.

"Baby, what?" Ivy's face is pained, though she's not truly concerned.

"No, no. I'm just kidding," Mo soothes.

"Which one?"

"The little Asian one, of course," Mo says erotically. Ivy growls and licks Mo's cheek.

"Are you guys watching?" I ask with urgency.

"Oh! There's your boy, twelve o'clock," Ivy says coolly.

My body is frozen, but my face burns. "Is he coming this way? Oh no, I'm freaking out."

Mo looks back at Woods. "Yep, there's no other way for him to go."

"Shit," I breathe out.

"You can do this. Call me when you're done," Mo combs her fingers through my hair once more and I turn my body to face him.

His hair is damp from showering, he wears his usual black on black and carries an athletic bag slung over his shoulder. Woods saunters in my direction but appears not to have taken notice of me yet. Just as at Sarah and Jimmy's wedding, everything slows and his surroundings blur. He is a lighthouse

and I am a fool. As he looks away from a group of adoring fans with a slight smile, his eyes catch mine. I picture myself closing the distance between us to jump into his arms and kiss the crap out of him.

Door Girl must have had a similar vision because she runs up to Woods, throws her arm over his shoulder, and taps his gorgeous Italian schnoz with her finger. My good friend, Fiery Jealous Rage, grows bigger as Door Girl proceeds to whisper sweet nothings in his ear. If there weren't so many witnesses, I'd consider murdering that twat. I groan and turn around, hoping I'll find Mo and Ivy waiting for me in the proverbial wings. When I find that no one is there to rescue me, I close my eyes and remember Guillermo's words, "Love makes fools of us all... Don't give up."

I turn back toward the *Artists' Entrance*, prepared to chase Woods into the crowd, but instead slam into a warm, fragrant brick wall wearing a soft black shirt. I gasp and flush as I look up right into his brown eyes, forgetting entirely what I came here to say.

"Hey," Woods says. As I study his features, he is even more perfect than the man who's been perpetually appearing in both my nighttime and waking dreams.

I put my hand to my forehead and clear my throat. "Hi."

"How are you?" he asks sincerely. I feel nervous and awkward in a way I've never felt with him before. I think everyone is taken aback by the loathsome easiness of the shift from lovers to strangers (I mean, should we even bother

counting all the songs with lyrics about it?), but currently that shift is causing me actual physical pain.

“Good. I’m good! I’m so good.” I lie. “How are you... Fleetwood?” I pause too long before adding his name onto the end of the question and it exacerbates the awkwardness.

“I’m fine.” He looks down as he says it, his eyebrows pulling together to create that slight crease. He’s lying, too. “I like your flower.” Not a lie.

I lightly touch the flower behind my ear and glance away.

“Well, it was good to see you. Thanks for coming.” He turns to walk away, in what could be mistaken for slow motion, probably waiting for me to stop him.

I briefly weigh the option of not declaring my everlasting love for him and letting him walk away.

“I’m lying,” I shout after him. *About time*. My romantic internal monologue and logical alter ego finally seem to agree.

The surrounding crowd’s attention is now on us. *An audience is just what I need*. Under normal circumstances this would cause me to head for the hills, but I won’t let Fleetwood Callahan get away again. He turns back to face me, his eyes pleading for me to continue. True to form, my mouth dries and my armpits are rapidly soaking my t-shirt. I step closer.

“I’m completely miserable without you.”

Woods seems to only now become aware of the audience and grabs my hand. He pulls me toward the back of the building—the opposite direction of the venue’s exit.

“Where are we going?” I ask. My twisted delight at the prospect of him wanting to kill me returns. *Twilight!!* He pushes through a side door to a parking lot empty but of his Porsche. “Do you know the secret exit of every building?” I laugh unnaturally.

The muscles of his arms flex as he folds them over his pecs. He stares at me, stoic, waiting for my brilliant explanation. I want to untangle his arms and force his hands on the places of my body where I’ve been imagining them since I stupidly broke up with him. I’m almost certain he would oblige.

Then again, maybe he’s too furious with me for pulling the rug out from under him quicker than I had unfurled it. Maybe he won’t take me back no matter how much I grovel. But he needs to hear the words and, perhaps more importantly, I need to say them. I blow out a deep breath.

“Ok.” I put a shaky hand to my head. “I miss you like crazy. I’m an idi—” I stop cold and hold my breath. *Not now, not now, not now!* An explosion of laughter erupts from my diaphragm. He’s seen me react this way out of discomfort before, but not at his expense. A look of devastation, much like the one he wore when I dumped him, crosses his face and he stalks off toward his car.

“No, Woods! Please!” I run in front of him and use all my strength to hold him in place, but I still haven’t gotten the laughing under control. “I’m not laughing at you! You know it’s just a nervous thing I do!” I try to hold onto his arms and stand my ground, but he easily dodges around me. I have to

make him understand. “It’s like when you lick me!” As luck would have it, just as I yell this, a group of sexy twenty-somethings walks through the parking lot and giggle. I continue in a whisper, “It’s like when you lick me and it overwhelms my nervous system.”

Woods breathes out a sigh and runs his hands over his face and through his hair. “You’re so incredibly weird.” He’s trying not to smile.

“I know. But please listen to me.” I take a self-soothing breath and get my laughing completely under control. I know Woods is physically incapable of saying *no* to me if I can appeal to him properly. I squeeze his tattooed biceps and get distracted for half a second by how hard they are. “I got scared, okay? It scares me how much I love you. If I fall for you and you break my heart, I may never recover. Any other jackass that’s broken my heart is nothing compared to the damage you could do.”

As I lay my heart and soul out on the table for him, I realize just how true my statement is. I am completely coming undone. Despite my best efforts, I’ve already totally let myself fall in love with Fleetwood Callahan, and I am terrified. He looks me in the eye, and I fidget. If he doesn’t say something soon, I’m going to collapse to my death right here. I have one last grand statement left in me.

“I love you! I love your dad jokes and how good you are at crossword puzzles. I love your brilliant mind and your damaged heart. I want to be with you, Fleetwood. Wherever

you are. Forever... basically.” I mumble that last part and look down as I remove my hands from his biceps, the vulnerability excruciating.

He pinches my chin gently and tilts my head up until I gain the nerve to look him in the eyes. My hands move hesitantly around his waist and I am briefly distracted once again by his body. He is so intense and mysterious, he could intimidate a tigress, and I’m not sure what the hell is coming next. I look at his lips, imploring him to put them to mine.

“Say it again,” he says roughly.

“I want to be with you?”

“No. The last part.”

“Forever,” I whisper, reservedly.

“Basically,” he quotes me.

I’m expecting an aggressive, passionate kiss, but he puts his lips to mine slowly, softly, like he’s in a dream. The top of my head swirls, goosebumps cover my limbs. His warm breath and hot body (literally and figuratively) is the only thing I’ll ever need. I lace my fingers in his hair and tug. Our lips move together with more intensity and I pull his arms tighter around me.

“Why did you bring the Porsche tonight?” I ask between kisses.

“In case I took Destiny home,” he says spitefully.

“Door Girl?”

He snickers. “Yeah.”

My lips embody my apology as I kiss down and back up his neck, across his chin, then bite his bottom lip. The confession of his intention to bring another woman home to his bed is sarcasm, but it sends me spiraling and I begin to cry. This time, it’s not jealousy, but sorrow.

“I’m sorry, Woods.”

I clasp my hands around his neck and bring his lips back to mine so he can’t see my tears, but he pushes me away gently and sighs heavily.

“I’m kidding, babe. If I brought someone else home I would have been imagining she was you. I probably would have even called her Sylvie and not given a shit.” He wipes the tears from my cheeks and licks them off his thumb.

I sniffle and laugh, then open the backdoor of the car. “Your chariot awaits, Dr. Callahan.”

He could easily resist my gentle push, but chooses not to and sits back into the seat, banging the back of his head on the doorframe.

“Have you ever sat in the backseat of your own car?” I pull the car door closed as I climb in over him and flop back on the adjacent seat.

“No.” His hands squeeze tenderly up my thighs.

I unbutton my shorts and pull them off then go to lift his shirt. He tugs it over his head, and I run my hands down his abdomen, exhaling impatiently. There’s no time to wait for

him to catch up to me. In a swift movement, I sit up, straddle him, pull my shirt off and unclip my bra. Woods lifts my arm and puts his nose to my underarm, taking an uncomfortably deep whiff (he doesn't realize that a simple sniff will suffice given my lack of bathing and deodorant application), then he runs his finger down the stubble.

“You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I've thought about you a thousand times in the last few weeks, but my imagination didn't do you justice.” His hands explore me as though for the first time, the weight of them like a full body massage, and he kisses across my breasts. My fingers fumble over his fly until I finally get it open and take him in my right hand.

“Did you think about me while you did this,” I ask as I stroke him.

“Yes.”

I inhale sharply when he reaches down and rips the underwear off my body. I place him inside me in a fever and he groans. I tilt my hips back and forth slowly. His large hands encircle my waist as he flexes deeper.

“You have to stop ripping my undergarments.”

“Say my name,” he says, ignoring my comment.

“Fleetwood,” I whisper and grind my hips faster.

“Louder.” He takes my nipple in his mouth.

“Fleetwood,” I moan.

He lays me gracefully across the seats, his breathing quickening as he thrusts into me. My body weakens with the fullness of the emotions I am finally letting myself feel. I don't allow my eyes to wander from his body; I want to see every flexing muscle and facial expression.

“Ah! Ah! Ahh!” Vocally, I've always been a maniac, but this time I let go of my pretend practicality and *really* feel it. If anyone is walking past his car they will think someone is engaging in hand-to-hand combat with a bobcat, but I don't give a fuck. As cliché as it sounds, I completely surrender to the moment—body, mind, and heart. He surrenders too and grunts with every thrust. I laugh when I regain some of my strength and clench around his penis as I climax.

“Come on, say my name.”

“Fleetwood!”

Me saying his name is what he needs to give in. “Yes, Sylvie,” he says, and I understand what he means about someone saying your name as they orgasm. It's deifying.

A light pink blush sweeps across his cheek bones. He looks like an Italian model who is returning to the dock after a day on the yacht. He smiles and a knot forms in my throat. I am nauseated from love and terror, but I smile back and hug my arms around his neck.

I say, “We finally christened the Porsche,” but as the words leave my mouth I become self-conscious of my presumption. “At least, I *hope* this was the christening of the Porsche. Maybe you and Destiny...” I look at him questioningly. Any

woman, especially Destiny, would be thrilled to fuck him inside this luxury vehicle. Why would I assume he'd wait for me?

“Yes, we finally christened the Porsche,” he confirms. I shed a tear of relief. He continues, “Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“When was the last time you showered?”

“I don't remember. Do I smell terrible?” I put my nose to my underarm and my nose wrinkles involuntarily, but I kind of like the smell.

“No, no. Just more... pungent.”

“Do you find it romantic that I was so depressed without you that I couldn't even bring myself to bathe?”

He nods. “I like your stink.”

My hand strokes his cheek gently. “I *really* love you, Dr. Callahan. I was out of my mind to leave you.”

“I *really* love you, Ms. Hanson. I was out of my mind to let you go.” I smile again and hit my hand playfully against the foggy window, letting it slowly slide down, like Rose in Titanic. Woods shakes his head. “Now I'm going to have to get the car detailed.”

“Make sure you point this out to them.” I do my best impression of his voice: “And this area right here. This really needs a good cleaning.”

And just like that, we're lovers again.

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Interlude

*N*OW THIS, MY FRIENDS, would be a lovely place for a happily ever after, don't you think? Many romance novels and romantic comedies would agree. But, real love is obligated to reality. Problems arise, people are flawed, and we're all just trying to figure this love thing out. So, for better or worse, the story of Woods' and my love continues. Might want to pour yourself a glass of wine for this next part...

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Step 26: Okay, so you fell in love after all!

ON A TYPICAL NIGHT, my excessive tossing and slight sweating make sleep-cuddling unreasonable for both me and my bed mate. Last night, however, I was so physically and emotionally exhausted that I fell asleep in Woods' arms.

I wake in the same position. When my eyes flutter open I am dazed. I hold my breath in concern that last night was nothing but a vivid dream. But relief effuses me when I notice the weight of his hand on my waist, and I roll over in his arms to kiss his chest and take a whiff of his underarm.

“Mmm, good morning,” he says groggily.

“How was your slumber, Fleetwood?”

He half opens his eyes and traces his finger down my nose and around my lips. “The best I've had in weeks.”

My stomach turns with adoration and guilt. Why did I put this near-perfect man and myself through weeks of hell? I caused us both pain, and my reasoning hardly seems legitimate

now. It occurs to me that perhaps I didn't feel that I truly *deserved* to have a healthy relationship full of requited love.

Alternatively, maybe I knew that if I said yes and went wholly willing into his arms, this could be it. All that trouble of trying to find love and force it into a silly little box would be over. My single days would be a thing of the past; a new era would begin. As a creature of habit, that is a significant change to process. Maybe I had grown accustomed to chasing something I didn't have and even started to find comfort in merely running, enjoying not knowing where I would end up.

The vulnerability of fully surrendering to falling in love can be as uncomfortable as standing naked in the cold. But when *your* person meets you there in that frozen tundra, the terrain transforms into a tropical climate where the breeze blows steady and the ocean ebbs and flows with ease.

I prop myself on my elbow, circling my fingers around all the muscles of his torso and breathe out a deep breath. "Can I still come with you to Austin?" I ask timidly.

His eyebrows form the triangle on his forehead, but they soften when he opens his eyes wider and recognizes the sincerity of my question. He mirrors the way I am lying on my side so we're face to face, but instead of answering my question, he just looks at me. My throat aches with chagrin, my muscles tense, and my face heats. After all that, he's going to reject me. He's going to say that I've hurt him too much or that he's fallen in love with Destiny. I try to arch one eyebrow to hide my freak-out and hurry his answer along.

“What is light if Sylvie be not seen? What is joy if Sylvie be not by?” he finally says.

I say, “Ok, Captain Cheeseball,” then throw myself back on the bed, pull a pillow over my face, and scream. He places his hand on my solar plexus.

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Step 27: Take chances.

THE ROAD TRIP FROM Denver to Austin is long and strewn with fast food stops, so at a certain point if I hold my flatulence in any longer it may require a trip to the emergency room. I weigh my options and ultimately decide to go for it. I squeeze my butt cheeks tight, letting a squeal like that from a tiny piglet escape.

“Was that a fart?” Woods asks. I nod as I eat the whip cream off my chocolate milkshake. “That was adorable.”

Now that my gut knows the sweet relief of setting the first fart free, there’s no stopping it from releasing the others. Another one threatens to escape. I relax my butt hole and let her rip. She’s deep and raspy.

“Whoa, ok. That sounded wet. Should I pull over?”

“Why? Because you’re so turned on?”

“I just think maybe you should check your pants.”

“No, it’s fine, but you should open a window.” I slurp the milkshake loudly, and he rolls down the manually operated

window, pretending not to panic.



The weeks leading up to the departure from my life in Denver were a blur as I trained a replacement at work, found someone to take over my lease, and dealt with my mom's incessant badgering about whether or not I was making the right life decision. Each time she asked, I recited a loose version of the scripted line my therapist recommended: "Maybe not, but it's none of your business."

Ida insisted that I return to Colorado for her wedding to Ron next Spring, even offering to purchase my plane ticket. I assured her that I wouldn't miss it for the world. Ellie and I cried in the office until her breasts started leaking milk, and after she fed Ace I held him while he slept and promised Auntie Sylvie would Skype with him as soon as I could.

Mo and Ivy said they'd come visit as soon as Woods and I are settled, and when I told Guillermo I was moving to Texas with the love of my life, he laughed heartily and yelled out an Italian proverb accompanied by stereotypical Italian hand gestures. When I asked him what it meant, he said, "Like the cheese on macaroni, *bella!*" Later, Woods explained the proverb's meaning as something along the lines of *making a good thing better*.

Last time I visited Austin, I used my favorite real estate app to see how much houses cost, just for fun, and threw my phone across the room in defeat after ten seconds of scrolling the

listings. Woods purchased a craftsman-style bungalow downtown. The home is light blue with white trim and a large southern-style porch. There are two bedrooms, two bathrooms, an open kitchen and living space, and an office that doubles as our library.

I didn't ask how much he paid for the house, but eventually looked it up online. My knee jerk reaction was wild envy before realizing that I would be residing and getting laid in the overpriced house at no cost to me. I suppose I must have done some great act of service in a past life to deserve my current setup.

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Step 28: Leave a little mystery, babe.

I AM LOADING THE dishwasher as I've always done and assume most others do: by squeezing as many items as will fit into every possible cranny. It brings me extraordinary joy to puzzle the dishes together in a wondrously full design. I move a few things around until I can cram the last cup in, then laugh victoriously.

"Those aren't going to get clean," Woods says, startling me from my moment of triumph.

"Yes, they will. It's perfect."

"It's too full. The mugs are all going to have specks of food stuck in them."

"How dare you question my dishwasher-loading abilities," I say, resentment lightly dusting the sarcasm.

He's probably right, but in my old life when I lived alone I would just run the dishwasher a second time on the *Quickwash* setting if the dishes didn't get clean the first time. I'm unaccustomed to having someone checking my work over my

shoulder. The appliance begins to whoosh. I watch Woods back out of the kitchen slowly, before I set about pretending that chores are a natural part of my life. If he hasn't already put the pieces together, Woods will soon find out that they are not.

Two hours later, I have entirely forgotten about our playful disagreement when the dishwasher beeps, signaling its completion. We are in the office, me lounging in a chair reminiscent of the one I adored at the Denver library that I found at a garage sale in town, and Woods at his desk, engrossed in our respective reading.

Apparently, he was listening for the concluding *beep* of the dishwasher more closely than I because he stands from his desk chair as though he's heard a wartime gong. We eye each other, challenging the other to a race. I jump out of the chair and take off full speed toward the kitchen. Woods is right behind me, merely speed walking to keep pace. I reach the dishwasher first, yank it open, and begin shoving the steaming hot dishes into the cabinets willy-nilly.

“How do they look?” he asks, impersonating enthusiasm.

“They're the cleanest dishes I've ever seen!” I lie.

He catches my wrist, turning it gently to check the mug in my hand. “Ha!” He smiles and shakes his head, then returns the mug to the top rack and sets the dishwasher to *Quickwash*. “That's a waste of water. I thought you were an environmentalist.”

I tie my arms around his neck. “Are you regretting bringing this little contrarian with you here?”

“Not unless you have *more* seriously disturbing secrets I don’t know about.”

“You mean, aside from my overzealous dishwasher loading skills? I might. We don’t know each other *that* well.”

“Hm. What else, then?”

“I blow my nose in the shower.”

“You’re filthy.” He says it in a way that implies he is referring to my sexual doings rather than my questionable hygiene, then tilts my face to his.

I kiss him. “I’m craving fettuccine.”



The vacation-like start to our time in Austin is disrupted by Woods’ grueling first week at work. He spends long hours at the observatory, leaving me ample alone time to tweeze the unwanted hairs from my body (which has always been a chief concern of moving in with a boyfriend) that seem to grow more plentiful every year.

In doing my darndest not to become a homesick housewife and to distract myself from feeling lonesome, I’ve also decided to start a blog discussing romance novels and romantic comedies. Half my time pursuing this new hobby is spent Googling celebrities or browsing used clothing online.

When Woods calls me on his way home from work on Friday afternoon, I am fluttering. I hope he can't hear the slight quiver in my voice. The time apart from him has me nervous with anticipation of spending the entire weekend uninterrupted.

I've decided to make homemade pasta for dinner in an attempt to comfort him. A venture I fear I have no business setting out on alone. I've already carefully formed Flour Mountain on a cutting board and carved out the nest, so once I end the call with Woods, I begin cracking the eggs. The third egg proves to be too much for the undersized nest as it overflows down Flour Mountain. It's like a bleached active volcano. *Great.* I unsuccessfully try to return the egg lava up Flour Mountain by way of scooping with my hands, but things are going downhill fast, literally, so I frantically start combining the ingredients.

Eventually, although my hands are caked with gooey dough, I arrive at the shaggy ball I recognize as on-track to being sufficient for pasta. I add a sprinkle more flour and smooth the dough ball to a finish. Instead of seeking out the dough wrap and bringing it to the ball, I inexplicably decide to take the dough ball with me on the search around the kitchen, resulting in my dropping the dough ball to the ground twice.

Woods arrives home just as I'm manhandling the rolling pin over the dough to prepare it to go through the pasta maker. I've only found a few stray crumbs and pieces of fuzz, so that's promising.

“Hi!” I say cheerfully.

He is exhausted or possibly defeated, maybe both. My inability to discern which sends me into a neurotic tailspin. Woods takes me in his arms and nestles his face in my neck.

“I’m making dinner.” I stroke his neck and smile to myself thinking about how cringey it would be if someone had filmed my food preparation process.

“I just want you.”

He hastily, but gracefully, strips off my clothes and kisses me fiercely. By the time he lays me on the floor, I’m already out of breath and quite pleased that he appears to have missed me with the same intensity I missed him. He smiles and removes my panties then throws them across the room and puts my knees over his shoulders. He makes me come with his tongue, then enters me with tenderness. It feels like the first time we’ve ever done this. I scream his name the whole time. When he’s finished, he collapses to the side.

I prop myself up on my elbow and trace my finger down his nose and around his lips. “Welcome home, Dr. Callahan.”

He turns to me and strokes my cheek. “You couldn’t possibly understand how happy it makes me to come home to you, Sylvie.”

“Fleetwood... Of course I understand. *You* come home to *me*.”

We eat the dirty pasta dinner in bed, naked, with a sexy movie playing in the background and he tells me all about the

first week of work.

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Step 29: Or not...

“I MISS YOU,” MO says over speaker phone.

“I miss you, babe,” I say with my mouth half-open, concentrating on applying mascara in the bathroom mirror. “How’s everything in good ol’ *Colorado*?”

“That Spanish accent was *no bueno*. And, it’s less fun because you’re gone!”

“Aw, Mo. You’ve always been a good liar. How’s Ivy?”

“I’m not lying! She’s good. She... asked me to move in with her.”

I gasp. “That’s so great! Are you going to ghost her now?”

Mo pauses and I can picture her pursing her lips in exasperation. “I don’t know. It seems like such a big step.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t know,” I say sarcastically. “You should do it. Ivy is your soulmate.”

“Maybe. I guess I have nothing better to do. Speaking of soulmates, how’s yours?”

I sigh. “He’s amazing. Works a lot, but that’s good because then I don’t have time to get sick of him. Whenever he’s not working, we’re just together... being in love. We even found a great make out spot in a corner of the public library by the cookbooks.”

“Ew.”

I twist the lid on the mascara tube. “It’s too good to be true, honestly, Mo. I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Don’t do that, Vie. Let yourself have this.”

“Thanks, babe. Well, we gotta get going to this party. I’ll call you later. Tell Ivy I’ll fly home to help her kidnap you and lock you in her basement.”

“I will, you bitch. Bye.”

“Bye.”

For the observatory’s grand opening, they host a costume gala. A theme I don’t love. Woods and his colleagues are expecting some important government people who are considering working with the observatory on government contracts (probably has something to do with hiding aliens), so I plan to be on my best behavior.

I dress as Bella from *Twilight*, because I’m basic. It feels exciting enough that I’ve chosen to be Bella *after* she becomes a vampire. I bought topaz eye contacts and subtle but impressive vampire teeth that don’t take over my entire mouth, and use temporary brown hairspray. Woods dresses as Uranus, as his team is going as the eight planets in our solar system.

When we arrive at the gala, I feel like the mistress of a politician. I drink wine and follow Woods around, while he talks to various people, most of whom are dressed in ridiculous costumes that make it hard to take them as seriously as they take themselves. My cheeks ache from smiling at the approximately two-hundred people I am introduced to, and my bladder is rapidly being stretched to max capacity.

A moment alone with Woods is quickly cut short when a woman dressed as Saturn approaches to let him know Dr. Hixon is waiting for him and the rest of the planets at the bar to take a celebratory shot. It seems the government people are impressed. I wordlessly tell Woods I'm slightly annoyed by attempting to lift my eyebrow.

"You're not going to give up on the one eyebrow thing, are you?" Woods smirks.

At that moment, I spot a bathroom—the perfect destination for me to walk off my irritation.

Before I reach the black lettering that reads *Ladies*, someone steps in front of me and lightly grabs my arm.

"Bella? Where have you been?"

I look up in irritation to find a set of topaz eyes matching mine. He is tall and carries himself a bit awkwardly, like a puppy growing into his ears and feet. His bronze hair is swooped like Edward Cullen's and he wears a thin layer of white paint on his face to appear paler. His goofy smile feels like a warm spotlight on me. The culmination of his physical

features, his youthful aura, and that he is dressed as the Edward to my Bella is comforting.

“Edward!” I play along. “I’m about to pee my pants, actually.”

“Of course. How silly of me to forget that humans must regularly excrete urine.” He smiles and I bark a laugh.

“Edward would never say that,” I scold on my way through the bathroom door.

Rather than check each stall before choosing the cleanest one, I potty-dance my way into the first stall, yank my pants down and squat over the toilet just in time before pee gushes out.

“Ahhhh...” I sigh loudly in relief. Because the toilet paper dispenser is stocked with that horrible, single-ply crap, I protest by using an excessively large wad to wipe. I’ll have to talk to Woods about upgrading that. I exit my stall at the same time Saturn exits hers. I didn’t realize anyone else was in here.

“That good, huh?” she asks. Not one muscle on her face flinches. Botox or robot, I can’t decide.

I disapprove of her comment—what happens in a bathroom stall is private, no matter how loud—but for the sake of making friends with Woods’ colleagues, I laugh and say, “Better than an orgasm.”

“I would bet that Fleetwood is capable of giving incredible orgasms,” she says, her eyes blazing into mine like lasers.

“Oh! Um...” I was joking, of course. Woods *is* capable of giving incredible orgasms, but that doesn’t mean we have to discredit the authentic joy of emptying a full bladder. And, did she just call him Fleetwood?

“You’re a lucky girl. If he were available, I can count on two hands the highly educated women that would be clamoring for his affection.”

God. Usually, I consider myself witty enough to tell off a rude bitch when necessary, but again all I can manage is, “Um...” The best I can do is laugh when her costume gets caught on the door frame on her way out the restroom door, but then I unhook the piece of fabric that got caught on the hinge and help her out the door.

“You’ve been with those filthy dogs, haven’t you? I’ll never forgive myself for leaving you,” Edward says with rehearsed drama as soon as I step out of the restroom, bewildered.

I can’t make sense of the interaction that just took place in the women’s restroom, and it’s making my stomach turn. I laugh distractedly and look around quickly for Saturn. That heinous bitch called my boyfriend by the name I thought only *I* was allowed to use. But what bothers me most is that she called me a *girl*. I’m a mother fucking lady.

“Were you... waiting for me?” I ask Edward with surprise.

“Yeah. No. I mean, I just happened to be standing here, I guess.” He fumbles through his response before landing on, “You have a beautiful smile.”

“Are you talking to Bella or me?” I turn my head flirtatiously and hope that I’m wearing enough makeup to cover my blush.

“You,” he answers quickly. “Whoever *you* are.”

“I’m Sylvie.” I extend my hand to shake his. Instead, he pulls it gently toward his lips and plants a delicate kiss.

“Beautiful name to match a beautiful smile.”

“You’re laying it on thick, aren’t ya?”

“No amount of flirtation would suffice,” he says smoothly, like a nerd who landed a super hot prom date.

Maybe my love story is actually about moving with this one guy to Texas only to end up meeting *this* guy. I shake the thought from my mind. *You’re ridiculous*

“My name is actually Edward, but everyone calls me Eddie,” he says.

“Seriously?”

“Yep. I went by Edward until college. High school was rough. So, do you work here, or...?”

“I’m here with, um, someone.” I wave my hand as if to say *whoever I’m here with doesn’t matter*. I’m here with the man who is the love of my life! But evidently he’s the love of other women’s lives, as well. Two hands worth of them, in fact. God, it’s almost as if my jealousy has gotten worse by crossing state lines. Of course, it could also have something to do with the fact that I’m in a city that’s not my home, at a party with

people I don't know, and a stranger just implied she wants to bone my boyfriend—I'm wildly uncomfortable!

Eddie asks, "Would it be too bold to ask if I can get you a drink?" unknowingly slamming the brakes on my tailspin.

Before I can decline the offer, a warm hand meets my lower back and I feel a tiny kiss on my neck. My eyelids fall heavily in relaxation with the smell that envelops me more securely than his arms, and I melt into Woods.

"What's up, Eddie?" Woods says. If I'm not mistaken, there's a hint of jealousy in his tone. And let's not forget I'm an expert in the art of jealousy.

Eddie straightens his posture and glances at me before looking back to Woods. "Not much, boss. You having a good night?"

Boss. Wonderful.

Woods turns me toward him and tilts my chin up until my lips softly meet his. Without breaking his eyes from mine he answers Eddie's question, "It's better now. I've been looking for you. Ready to go home?"

"Sure," I say.

Apparently, I've turned into glass again, because Woods' eyes lock into mine like he's reading my thoughts. I pull myself out of his grasp and turn toward Eddie's stunned face.

With the utmost sincerity I say, "I'll see you in Biology, Edward." Eddie smirks and gives me a forlorn wave.

Woods graciously says, "See you Monday, Eddie."



I'm lying in bed watching *Twilight* when Woods exits the bathroom naked, rubbing a towel over his face and says, "So, Sylvie Hanson, were you trying to make me jealous at the gala?"

My eyes are glued to his body. "That depends, Dr. Callahan, were you jealous?"

"Naturally. You met Edward. We all know how that ends."

"Well, it shouldn't cause you much of a problem because you have Saturn ready to pounce."

"Ha! Esther's jealousy rivals yours." He climbs into bed and rolls on top of me playfully.

"Saturn's name is Esther?"

"Yes, and she wants me so bad."

"Woods!" I punch his arm and he pretends it hurts. "She called you Fleetwood."

"She's never called me that to my face."

He kisses the spot on my neck that might as well have his name tattooed on it, then just below my jaw, once on my cheek, and finally finds my lips. My body relaxes into his warm muscles, and I hold his face to mine. I slide my tongue against his and his breath fills me. He squeezes my ass then slides his large hand down my thigh and pulls my leg up to hook on his hip. I move against him and he presses his fingers

over my underwear on the rapidly heating spot between my legs. The pace of his breathing says he wants me.

“*Esther* said she could count on two hands how many women want you.”

“She still needs to use her hands to count?” Woods shakes his head slowly. “That’s a problem. I’m going to have to speak to her project manager.”

I laugh.

His eyes search mine. I let him search. “I’m scared of you leaving me, too, you know,” he says.

“You are?”

“Of course. You were the most beautiful woman in the whole place tonight. Plus, you’re sweet and enchanting...”

“And smart, and hilarious, and—”

Woods laces his fingers in my hair and kisses me again to force me to shut up. I am melting.

“You can be soft with me, but be hard with all the other girls,” I command.

He barks a laugh. “I don’t think you mean that.”

“It came out wrong. I’m exhausted.” I yawn and roll back onto the pillow.

“It will always only be you, Sylvie. A lifetime with you won’t be enough.”

“Yuck,” I tease.

“You love it.” I pull my underwear off under the covers and drape it over his head. “How about you? It’s your turn to reassure me that you’re not going to run away with Eddie and have crazy vampire sex.”

“I suppose there are probably Edwards everywhere, but I love you and only you, Fleetwood.”

Then he makes me forget what planet we’re on.

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Step 30: Don't get pregnant.

RATHER THAN MY USUAL cream and coffee, the idea of which disgusted me this morning, I sit on the porch drinking tea out of my garish *Dirty Flirty 30* coffee mug my mom gave me for my birthday. Woods sits across from me tapping his pen on the glass tabletop while looking over the crossword puzzle I've already marked up.

“Stop tapping the pen like that, and your breakfast smells funny.”

He smiles, unfazed by my crankiness. “Whoa. Feisty today, are we?” I bring my mug to my face to hide my grin. “You’re so cute when you’re grumpy. Do you need to go back to bed?” He strokes my thigh.

“My period is a week late,” I say matter-of-factly and sip my tea. I scrutinize his reaction.

Not one muscle in his face moves in a way that would signify his inner alarm is blaring as loudly as mine is. “Oh. Okay. Have you taken a pregnancy test?”

“Not yet.” Usually, my cycle is very regular, but I’ve assured myself it’s the stress of the move and the time zone change causing its delay.

“I’ll pick one up from Walgreens on the way home from my lunch meeting.”

“Lunch meeting? But it’s Saturday.”

“I know, I know. We got approved for those government contracts, though, so we have to get all our planets in a row.” He winks.

“Ha! Good one.” I laugh before realizing the news he delivered. “Oh my god! That’s so exciting! I know how hard you were working for that, babe. Congratulations.” I kiss him a few times, then ask, “Will Esther be there?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, Sylvie. I’ll make it quick.”

“She’s a fast comer, huh?”

“Not as fast as you,” he teases.

I huff and roll my eyes, then imagine Woods’ impending experience shopping for a pregnancy test—his overwhelm when he sets eyes on the multitudinous options, visibly sweating as he paces up and down the aisle, then finally resolving to ask an elderly clerk for advice—and delight in the vision.

Pregnant. The first test spells out the word. The second test presents two pink lines. The third test is a smiley face.

Woods looks at me expectantly and says, “So... how do we feel about this?”

This is the first time that I can recall being devoid of any specific feeling. Usually, I’m bubbling with one emotion or another. Or, maybe I’m feeling all the feelings right now. I’m sure there’s a word for that in Spanish. Or Thai.

“I don’t know. You go first.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, please say something!” I demand.

Just as the results bloomed unhurried in the small plastic window of the test stick, my joy is doing the same. Also blooming is a bit of trepidation and panic. Woods is, in all likelihood, trying to quell his freak out.

“Ok, ok,” he says soothingly. He tosses my hair to the side the way I usually do. “I know I’ll have babies with you someday, so now or later, it doesn’t matter to me.”

Whoa.

“And I also understand if you’re not ready for that. Whatever we decide to do, I’ll take care of you.” An uncontrived and unexpected response. It’s perfect, really. What a dreamboat.

Laughing and crying at the same time, I say, “That’s so fucking nice.”

I go to the bedroom to examine my belly in the full-length mirror. Aside from some extra bloating, which could be

attributed to the sugary shredded wheat cereal dipped in peanut butter I snacked on earlier, it doesn't look much different. Although, it instantly feels different. I circle my hand below my belly button and catch Woods watching me from the doorway.

“I like the idea of having your baby. Especially if it has your hair. It's all just happening so fast.”

He wraps his arms around me and we consider our reflection, visualizing ourselves as parents.

“Don't ask me to marry you, okay?” I say.

“Marry you? Why would I want to marry you?”

I reach my hand down to squeeze his testicles.

“Ow! I'm kidding. Why shouldn't I ask you to marry me?”

“Because if you did, I would wonder if it was because you really want to be stuck with me forever, or if you felt a sense of obligation to the blastocyte in my uterus.”

“I'd marry you tomorrow regardless of our blastocyte. Anyway, I think it qualifies as an embryo now.” Still facing the mirror, he rests his hand on the place where my belly will soon be protruding and studies my face. “Are you worried?” I nod. “Why?”

“When people have kids they lose each other. You and I are just getting started. I don't want to lose you.”

He turns me around to face him. “We're not like other people.”

“You think we’re more in love than everyone else?”

“What I feel for you is more than love. We’re on a different level.”

I cover my face and laugh.

“Why are you laughing? You love that cheesy shit. I thought of the most romantic thing I could say.”

“I do! It just feels a bit silly when someone drops a line like that in real life.”

“You don’t feel the same way?”

He obliges when I push him backward onto the bed. “Of course I do, you dumb nerd. If I could, I would trap you on an island where you couldn’t do anything except be with me, and no one else would bother us.”

I kneel at his waist and unzip his pants. When he’s sufficiently aroused, I climb on top of him, leveraging myself up and down by pushing my hands against his chest. His breathing intensifies. I sit up straighter and rest my arms on my head, gliding my hips back and forth. Woods takes my breasts in his hands and bites his bottom lip. I glide faster, feeling him deep inside me, until every muscle in his body flexes and he lets out a, “Gah!” I ease off of him and fall against my pillow.

“What was that for?” he asks.

“I just wanted to show you how much I love you.”

He returns his hand to my belly. My mind has cleared of but two visions. The first, a glimpse of the future: myself and Fleetwood Callahan, both aged by decades, sitting on the porch of this very house. The second is a memory from the weekend of Sarah and Jimmy's wedding. How strange it would have been if, at the moment Woods and I locked eyes, someone had whispered in my ear, "He's your person." Stranger yet, would have been if I had received such a message the very first time we interacted at the library in Denver.

"I wish my dad were here," I say with melancholy. "He would be thrilled to be a grandfather."

"I know what you mean. Leah would have been the first person I told."

I run my fingers through his hair. "We should get married," I say.

"What?" he laughs. "But you just said I shouldn't ask you to marry me."

"But I didn't say *I* couldn't ask *you*."

"Do you have a ring for me?"

"Er, no."

"So, you didn't put much thought into this proposal, then."

I purse my lips and look side to side. He smiles, shakes his head, and stands to move toward the closet. After some shuffling around, he returns to kneel beside the bed, holding a small, black velvet box. Carefully, he opens the box to reveal a

sizable solitaire emerald gemstone set in a delicate gold band. It is an obvious accompaniment to the bracelet Nonna gifted me, which Woods refused to take when I attempted to return it.

“What the fuck?” I whisper.

Uncertainty flashes across his face, making my heart drop instantly in empathy. I don’t want him to think for half a second that I wouldn’t want him, or that ring, forever. I push myself to the edge of the bed and wrap my arms around his neck with the strength of a boa constrictor and kiss his face a dozen times.

“Sylvie,” he says shakily.

“Shh.” I put one finger to his lips, then clear my throat and look into his eyes. “Fleetwood Lorenzo Callahan, will you marry me?” I choke over the last word.

“Yes I will, Sylvie Reba Hanson.”

His eyes glisten as he removes the ring from the box and slides it on my finger. It’s a perfect fit.

“Now I can start calling you Mrs. Doctor Callahan.”

I hold my hand up to admire the precious jewel that now adorns my finger. “I was actually thinking we could both change our surname. To Hanahan.”

“Hanahan. Sophisticated yet fun.”

“Like us. Just kidding. I definitely want to be Mrs. Callahan. I’m a bad feminist. You can call me Mrs. C, though, to keep it fresh.”

He laughs.

“When did you get this ring?”

“Nonna gave it to me when we were in Sonoma before I even told her I was going to try to get you to marry me someday. I guess she just knew.”

“I freakin’ love you, Fleetwood.”

“I love you, Mrs. C.”



At what I calculate to be about ten weeks along in the pregnancy, Woods and I breeze into our carefully chosen midwifery practice, bright-eyed and full of naïveté, for my first ultrasound. We have arrived at a place of ebullience at the notion of becoming parents together, even if it is happening sooner than planned. Excited, even if narcissistically so, that the legacy of our sweet love story will live beyond us in the form of our offspring.

Woods stands over the table I lie on and we laugh at one of his stupid jokes while the midwife squeezes the cold, blue goo on my belly. After confirming the date of my last period, her face falls. Our joyous bubble turns to a dark cloud of gloom, hovering ominously over my belly. The embryo is underdeveloped and no heartbeat can be detected. The pregnancy is not viable.

Upon returning home from the appointment, Woods watches helplessly as I tear through Google for superstitious remedies—lie on your left side, eat calcium and protein rich foods,

meditate for hours on end—that will encourage the little mass of cells to keep growing, and miraculous stories of women who were told the embryo would not survive only to hear a heartbeat a few weeks later.

I oscillate between devastation and hopefulness, and Woods tries to keep up.

The following evening we go to dinner at a lively restaurant, ignoring the stress of what will inevitably occur in the coming days, to enjoy each other's company. Before we have even placed our order, I feel it: a warm gush from my vagina. I can sense the color drain from my face as I excuse myself to the restroom where I confirm what I already know—that my underwear is full of blood.

Woods gets us home in record time, and I sit on the toilet for two hours while my uterus empties out the cushy home it had carefully constructed for what it thought would be a developing fetus. The cramping makes me moan out in pain and I don't think I'll ever forget the smell that accompanies the staggering loss of blood.

The gore of watching so much blood released from what is the most feminine and powerful part of my body is a trauma matched only by the dream that disappears as I flush it all into the sewer system. My experience of miscarriage is not that we lost a child, rather the *dream* of a child and what that would have meant for the course of our lives.

“Do you want to try to get pregnant again?” Woods asks gently when the bleeding has finally turned to pink discharge.

“No, I just want to be you and me for a while.”

“You and me,” he agrees.

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Step 31: Expect the unexpected.

CHRISTMAS, IN AND OF itself, is humdrum, but I revel in the anticipation of the holidays—the build-up.

I am headed toward home after picking up a few small gifts at a shop downtown. Austin is abuzz with colorful light displays strung about. A holiday concert plays in a nearby park and a three-story tall tree stands outside the capitol building, covered in lights and giant Christmas balls.

What's more, *this* holiday season is not accompanied by snow, but rather an easy sixty-five degrees that requires only a light jacket. And, there is moisture in the air. With a few exceptions, such as the indoor pool at the rec center, winter air in Colorado is so dry that one inevitably starts the day dehydrated and inhaling deeply gives the sensation that one's sinuses have turned to dust.

A radiant woman with a bright-eyed newborn strapped to her chest walks past. The sight stings me with heartsickness, in the most literal sense, but there is also a peacefulness in the promise that I will someday be in that woman's shoes. I realize

that, for me, the *idea* of having a family with my epic love, though not promised, and the belief that I am good and worthy enough to receive his love, is enough.

The street lamps light up in perfect synchronization as I turn up the street that will lead me home, and I can't help but feel that it's a sign—the light is returning after a brief period of darkness; the future is bright. My body and mind are still healing from the pregnancy loss, but every time I look at my left hand (which is often) I am reminded of the man I get to marry and I feel sincerely joyful.

Because Woods took some time off work to support me in recuperating from the miscarriage, he has been working late to play catch up. And, because I think we could use a night of passion, I decide this evening is a good opportunity to get back to *us* and reiterate my affection for him and the promise he has made me. Just as the thought occurs, I pass a lingerie shop. I stop in and, without trying anything on, purchase a black lace number.

My belly remains slightly bloated, so I suck it in, examining myself in the mirror with a self-consciousness I haven't felt in some time, then relax to my natural shape. Despite the sense of discomfort in my body, I adjust the lace into place and slide into my trusty trench coat. I do my best to recreate my look from the night I surprised Woods at the library in Denver—slicked back hair, heavier makeup, and my glasses—forgoing the heels this time for a cute pair of retro sneakers.

As I step into the foyer and consider whether or not my purse is necessary for the short walk to the library, I notice a legal size envelope addressed to Woods on the credenza. I tug the large envelope from underneath a few other rather dull looking envelopes and notice the return address is that of a lawyer in Las Vegas.

Surely, it's not a felony to open your fiance's mail, I think as I tear the envelope open carefully and pull the first page up just enough to read the title: *Joint Petition for Divorce*. My heart stops.

What the fuck? This can't be right.

Quickly, I turn the envelope over to confirm it is addressed to Fleetwood L. Callahan, then tug the first page up a little further to find the name again, *Fleetwood L. Callahan*, scrawled along the line designated for *Joint Petitioner (Husband)*. My eyes wander a centimeter lower until I see it, *Claire M. Sheabrooke, Joint Petitioner (Wife)*. If it is possible for one to remain alive while the lungs empty entirely of air, indeed I do, while every other one of my organs knots tighter.

Woods is married? Woods is married?! To Claire?! So THAT'S what happened in Vegas!

I read the form again to ensure I'm not certifiably insane then drop the envelope to the floor and put my hand to my forehead.

This is the other shoe dropping.

The tickling sensation behind my nose portends the torrential downpour about to burst from my facial orifices. Even though no one is around to see it, I want desperately not to fall apart. I have to get out of here. I have to run as far as I can, as fast as I can.

My hands shake as I search the pocket of my coat for my cell phone, then navigate to recent calls and click on *Mo*. The line rings and rings before going to her voicemail. *Fuck*. I begin the search for my suitcase with no idea where Woods stored it, nor the capability to think clearly on where suitcases are typically stored. Ordinarily, I would text him to ask where it is.

“Son of a bitch,” I snarl in aggravation when I find the suitcase lodged on the top shelf of the hall closet.

I stand on my toes, struggling to dislodge the stupid luggage until it comes crashing down, very possibly breaking four of the five toes on my left foot, but I’m too angry and distraught to even feel pain. I march into the bedroom and tear off my coat. This development has me feeling justified in the physical insecurity I brushed off moments ago—like I’ve never measured up and I never could.

I pull on jeans and a t-shirt without bothering to remove the lingerie. I manage to mindlessly overload the suitcase with not only an asinine collection of clothing, including dirty underwear and a robe with a missing belt, but indiscriminate items such as a small plastic bag of foreign money, a box of condoms, and a faux succulent plant.

Woods wouldn't do this to me. There has to be a logical explanation. I owe it to him to wait until he gets home before I bolt so he can explain and tell me everything is ok.

My stomach does a painful roll every ten seconds. I'm sick with anxiety. The worst case scenarios keep getting worse in my head. If idle hands are the devil's workshop, then an idle body is his fucking football stadium.

After what feels like a long time, but is probably not that long at all, my panic and anguish are too much. I'm on the brink of losing my mind, and I can't take any more of the torture that is my stewing and imagining.

I roll the cumbersome bag to the front door and lift my left hand to remove the Tesla key fob from the hook Woods installed by the front door so I wouldn't keep misplacing it. The emerald on my finger glimmers. I consider keeping it, then remove it slowly.

In the office, I pull out a pad of paper and Woods' beloved space pen. With an increasingly shaky hand, I begin a note by swooping my fiance's name at the top of the paper. No combination of words captures my devastation, so I simply sign my name at the bottom. I place the opened legal letter next to the note and set the beautiful ring on top in the space between his name and mine.

And just like that, another dream is shattered.

Step 32: If it's true love, risk it all.

“HI BABE!” MO SOUNDS tipsy.

“Hi,” I sniffle. That sobers her up. She puts me on speakerphone so Ivy can hear.

“Oh my God, what’s happening? Are you having another miscarriage? Should I have Ivy drive me to the airport?”

My laugh pushes the tears from my eyes and sends them streaming down my cheeks. “No, I’m not, and that won’t be necessary.”

I sit in a plastic seat at a terminal in Austin-Bergstrom International. Once I arrived at the airport, I was able to book a seat on the last available flight for the evening from Austin to Denver with my favorite airline. I even upgraded to Business Select using Woods’ credit card.

“Vie. What is going on?” She’s irritated that I haven’t told her the reason for my crying yet.

An attendant announces that boarding has begun for priority boarders. I stand, feeling out of place as I squeeze into the line

with the other Business Select ticket holders. “Listen, I’ll call you in a couple hours. Everything will be fine. Don’t do anything crazy,” I say.

“*You’re the crazy one! You don’t do anything crazy!*”

“I’m not... I don’t think. I’m just getting on a plane.”

“Call me the second you land.”

I read through Woods’ text messages to me and listen to the voicemails he’s been incessantly blowing up my phone with for an hour. It’s safe to say he’s losing his mind. After some back and forth, I decide a courtesy text is in order. I send, *I’m going to Denver* then flip my phone to airplane mode and press play on *Crazy Rich Asians*, what I would call a rom-com classic, provided free of charge on the airline’s wifi.

The door of the rental car (also upgraded from economy to mid-size sedan) makes a soft latching sound as I pull it closed. I breathe in what is likely my first full breath in hours and fill my lungs with freshly detailed car scent, then take in my surroundings. The cement fortress that is the rental car parking garage is eerily quiet and lit up with fluorescent light panels. The one above me flickers. Through the exit I can see that the darkness is lit by dim orange light posts.

I pull my phone from the side pocket of my purse and switch off Airplane Mode. As ever, I am eager to see *Fleetwood* appear under Missed Calls and Texts. Aside from the numerous calls and messages I received from Woods before take off, it would appear I did not miss a single call or text while on my flight from Austin to Denver.

I bang my forehead softly against the steering wheel, unintentionally honking the horn and startling myself silly. “Touchy, touchy,” I say as adrenaline surges.

Opening the map application reminds me of the last thought I had before boarding the plane in Austin, *where should I go when I get there?* The idea of going to my mother’s is entirely unappealing given that she’ll surely be prepared with some version of, “I told you so,” and Clayton will threaten to kick Woods’ ass.

I could navigate to Mo’s, but she’ll want every juicy detail and I’m too exhausted and emotionally whiplashed to recount for her how I found out the man I thought was the love of my life, the man whose baby I almost carried, is, in fact, married to someone else—a gorgeous sweetheart with huge, natural boobs.

That leaves only one other option that I can think of: the library. It won’t be open for much longer, but I still have time to sit in my favorite chair and untangle this massive web of thoughts. I set the downtown public library as the final destination and click on the seat warmer as the car jolts forward out of the parking space.



Safely in my happy place, I run my fingers across the neat row of book spines as I saunter through the rows and rows of books. I used very little brain power while driving here, relying heavily on muscle memory and the direction of the

map application. With equal enervation, I walk toward the romance section, and a crestfallen sigh falls from my lips as I collapse into the emerald throne that is mine.

I'm in that familiar spiral: imagining. Imagining Woods marrying his childhood sweetheart in Vegas in what was probably the most romantic night of both their lives, that he is *still* married to her, that his parents will presumably never love me the way they love her, and worst of all, that he lied to me about all of it.

I recognize, however, that none of that is necessarily true—there has to be an explanation—and even if it were, I still want to look up and find him standing before me. I want Woods to tell me I'm the only one for him and sweep me off my feet. I want a big romantic gesture that would rival any romance novel.

But if the last few years have taught me anything, it's that true love and soulmates and grand romantic gestures are *surely* nothing but fiction, right? Love stories—my favorite thing in the whole world—have betrayed me in the worst way. I'm not even entirely sure *how* love stories have betrayed me, but I blame my current predicament on them!

Being here, back at this library, gives me that returning-from-a-vacation feeling. Everything is just as I left it. There are still endless lifetimes and universes within these walls. Fire-breathing dragons and rebellious women, broken hearts and mended souls, but most importantly there is love. Fictitious, true, *complicated* love.

I pick up *New Moon* and skip ahead to the part where Bella and Edward reunite. I always thought of it as Edward coming back to Bella, but it's Bella who goes to Edward. All those years of "life" experience and he was still such an idiot when it came to love.

The patient librarian announces it's closing time, and I make my way across the vast room of stories. As I push out the front door, the cold air swirls around my bare arms, causing goosebumps to rise and my jaw to tighten. I go to grab my sweater from around my waist and realize I must have left it in the rental car. I glance up at the sky to check for evidence that it could snow. Purple clouds are clearing out, moving slowly east, revealing a quarter moon and stars above.

Ah, the Big Dipper. Oh wait, no. I squint. Orion The Hunter? Shit, I don't remember.

"Cassiopeia." My gaze drops and there he is: Fleetwood Callahan stands before me. "Sylvie." He says my name with relief. His dark hair wisps wildly above his head. He's probably been tugging at it furiously, but it looks amazing. The way it does after we've had cosmic sex.

"Wha— why— *how* are you here?" I look around for a flash mob or clouds descending from the sky, anything that might indicate this is a dream. "Is this real life?"

"Sylvie, you— you hate me right now, I know. But please, if it's the last thing I say to you, let me explain." He wraps his jacket over my shoulders.

“I’m sorry, I’m just having trouble understanding how you are here. At the Denver Public Library. How did you know I’d be here?”

“I can read your mind.”

“But how did you do all of it so *fast*?”

“How did *you* do it all so fast?”

I lift my chin. “I asked you first.”

“The Taycan is quick, and I begged a kindhearted stranger to give me their seat on the soonest flight I could find. She made me promise to text her if you took me back. But look, Sylvie, none of that matters—” He’s frantic.

“Fleetwood,” I try to interject, but he keeps going.

“Marrying Claire in Vegas was an immature, *insane* thing to do, and I was so drunk I don’t even remember it.” Woods starts pacing. “There was nothing remotely real about the marriage, Sylvie. The whole thing was empty and meaningless. A joke! It wasn’t a fraction of what I have with you.”

“Then why are you just now getting divorced?” I yell as I cross my arms to offer myself protection from an explanation that will surely hurt like hell.

“Because Claire hired a shit lawyer who didn’t handle the annulment correctly!” he yells back. He’s not yelling at me. He’s yelling at the universe, and I know exactly how he feels. It’s like everything was starting to make sense—the planets

were orbiting, the stars were aligning—when an asteroid came unexpectedly crashing in and threw everything off its axis.

He stops pacing and stands in front of me, but he knows better than to touch me right now. “We— *I* filed the annulment the day after Claire and I... you know.” In what is likely an attempt to spare my feelings, Woods uses “you know” in place of “got married.” Frankly, I appreciate it. “As far as she and I were concerned, it was null and void.” Woods runs his hands through his hair. Knowing his mannerisms as I do, I could’ve copied him exactly. “I— I just found out about it. There were extensive background checks run when the observatory was awarded the government contract, and mine... listed a spouse.” He waits for me to respond.

“Wow.”

“Yeah. It was shocking.” He looks away, readying himself to go on. “I started the divorce proceedings immediately, but with everything you were going through— everything *we* were going through... I just—”

“You could’ve told me earlier, though, before everything, that you married someone in Vegas once.”

“I mean, it wasn’t just someone. It was Claire. I knew you’d freak out.”

He’s right. I would’ve freaked out. Between my lack of trust, which materializes as crazy jealousy, and my addiction to perfect love stories, I’m a nutjob.

The librarian closes and locks the door of the library and smiles at us like she's read this book before and knows exactly how it ends. A breeze makes me shiver, and Woods tugs at my arm and pulls me closer to his warmth.

“Sylvie, I need you to know that the first time I saw you walk into this library and sit in that big green chair everything blurred around you and the Earth could have very well stopped spinning. You were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. With your incredibly sweet demeanor and perfect lips, *you—*”

“You think I have perfect lips?” I interrupt.

Woods traces my mouth with his thumb. “Yeah. Why?”

“No reason. Keep going.” I stand there, enveloped in Woods' intolerably wonderful scent, and hope that this is one of those *I can't live without you* monologues.

“And the way you would just watch people like everyone was doing something so fascinating... I'd get so fucking distracted by you, I could barely foc—”

“Wait, wait, wait, hold on. What do you mean *the first time you saw me?*”

“Well, yeah, it must have been *weeks* that I had a major crush on the girl at the library.”

I scoff. “You're full of shit.”

He shakes his head. “That night—the night you asked to sit with me and I was an ass—you were reading *New Moon*, of which you usually only read your favorite parts. Before you started that, you were reading *The Hating Game* for what I

think was the seventeenth time, and just before that it was *The Time Traveler's Wife*.”

So... all those nights I was watching everyone else, he was watching me? How the hell did I miss this sublime man? It's almost like I didn't see him until I was ready to.

Woods continues, “I have never believed in soulmates and all that love at first sight bullshit. The world has too many people, there are too many galaxies, for Christ's sake. But the first time I saw *you*, Sylvie Hanson... I can't explain it.”

“Then why did you reject me so brutally?” I furrow my brow.

“I— I couldn't believe my luck when I looked up and you were standing in front of me. I'm not used to being overly kind to people. Also, you were covered in uterine blood, and that was... bizarre.”

“I wouldn't say I was *covered* in it—”

He ignores my protests and continues on. “And when I saw you at Sarah and Jimmy's wedding I thought surely the universe was fucking with me because, to you, I was the jerk from the library, and then I made that awful comment about your intelligence. You hated me.” He lifts my chin gently, as I'm now accustomed to. “But you seemingly could forgive that I was a jackass, and I thought maybe I had a chance. Truly, I was out of my mind for you before you even knew I existed.”

I think again about my favorite love stories and their many complications. No matter the heartthrob, or the sassy female protagonist, or the nipple-tingling sex, or the happiest of happy endings, the road to love is complex; within that complexity lives the magic to which I've been so devoted.

What Woods and I have *is* a real love story. And I can choose—right here, right now—to loosen my death grip on childish dreams of perfection and whimsy, and whatever else seduces my self-sabotage. I can grow the fuck up and accept my only-slightly-flawed heartthrob exactly as he is.

Beyond everything—the sublime, the bad, the unbelievable—the simplicity of it is this: I trust it all. I trust who Woods is. I trust that he is sincere. I trust that our love is better than fiction.

But most importantly, I trust myself.

“I'm so sorry, Woods.”

“Sorry? You don—”

I grab his shirt in an effort to make him understand. “Yes, yes I do. I'm a mess of a person sometimes. I have been all over the place – up, down, and sideways – and expected you to keep up. And you have! You've been so patient with me. But you needed me, too—needed me to *be* with you without the jealousy and insecurity. You couldn't even trust me enough to be honest with me, I was so wrapped up in my own shit, my mistrust and my fantasies... And I'm– I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.”

“No, it’s not. Because I love you, Woods, and I want to show up for you. Without all the baggage.” I bring my lips within a centimeter of his. “I want to be with you. Forever.”

“Basically,” he says and smashes his lips to mine like it’s the first and last time he’ll ever see me.

“One more confession: I told Nonna I wanted to marry you before we went to Sonoma and that’s why she gave you the bracelet.”

“Oh, that’s a good one. I’m keeping you on a very tight leash from now on.”

“Leash me, chain me, tie me up, whatever you need to do.”

“Ooo, can we bring the LEGOS?”

He digs in his pocket and pulls out my ring, then carefully takes my left hand in his and tests the ring on my fingertip. I grip my fingers back into my fist and hear his heart stop, then slowly unfurl them and watch as he slides the ring back where it belongs.

I hold my hand up against the sky, the emerald managing to shimmer despite the slack of light, then I wrap my hands around Woods’ face and smoosh my lips to his. “So what are we going to do now?” I ask.

“We’re going to stay at the hotel I booked for us here in town.”

“Ok, good. I really don’t want to have to tell my mom about this.” Woods directs us toward the parking lot.

“There will be flourless chocolate cake and champagne waiting in the room.”

“I don’t know what’s more impressive, your confidence in winning me back or your ability to get things done extraordinarily quickly.”

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Epilogue

“OH, MRS. C,” WOODS says as he enters me from behind. “This ass is mine forever.”

“It always has been.” I’m bent over the pool table in the good old billiard room with my wedding dress pushed up around my waist. “Fuck me like I’m your wife, Dr. Callahan.”

“You are my wife, and I’m making love to you.”

I simultaneously laugh and moan with pleasure. He finishes quickly, which is fine because we have a wedding to get back to. I turn to kiss my husband’s sweet lips and wiggle my ivory dress back down to its proper position.

“What are you doing? We’re not done yet.” He says as he pulls my dress back up and slides his hand down the front of my lacey white panties. Wet from a severe case of horniness, his fingers slide easily.

“Yes, Fleetwood. Fleetwood, Fleetwood, Fleetwood,” I get louder with each call of his name until he puts his mouth to mine to silence me. Once I’ve finished, he pulls away and

smiles at his easy victory over my orgasm and my heart. “Come on, husband. Our guests are going to wonder what happened to us.”

“I don’t think they’ll wonder.”

Woods and I wander onto the back patio and I hear a guest ask another, “Where are they honeymooning?”

To which the other replies, “Italy, of course. Where else, darling?”

The sky is like that of a painting in a fabulous Sante Fe art museum—deep pink and purple clouds create waves across the tangerine sky, pockets of blue remind us of the magic beyond our atmosphere. The backyard is aglow, basked in twilight as well as the string lights and Italian lanterns Cindy had the event rental company hang to her specifications. Candles float serenely around the pool, and the grape vines are so alive, they appear to grow before our eyes.

Our family and closest friends traverse the property with full wine glasses. Elliott and Clayton team up against Jimmy and Sid for a competitive game of cornhole. My mom and Cindy bond over the joy of marrying off a child. Two guests sit alone at a table, speaking animatedly and laughing loudly. I squint to get a better look at their faces just as Guillermo steals a kiss from Nonna. Woods gasps quietly and I look over to see that he’s noticed the same interaction I have.

Maybe our love story is basic, maybe it’s complex. Maybe it’s boring, maybe it’s fun. But above all, it’s ours and it’s as fantastic as fiction.

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About the Author



Aside from reading and writing romance, Jolie's favorite things include baked goods, babies, and astrology. She enjoys writing romance that's dreamy and love that's steamy from her home in Denver where she lives with her husband and two kids.

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