

Holidates



Series

THE
LADY
& THE

Unicorn

RINA DAYNE

The Lady & The Unicorn

The Holidates Series, Book 17

Rina Dayne

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Prologue

Another Saturday Night

Liona

“You’re better off without him, Lee.”

“Too soon,” I mumble as I drain my glass.

“Maybe for you, but not for me. I could tell months ago that Johnny wasn’t right for you. He had no ambition, no plans for the future, and he was happy to let you provide for him. You deserve so much better.”

“I appreciate it Gabi, but it still hurts.”

“I know, sweetie.” She wraps me in an awkward hug from where we’re sitting in a back booth at Pig & Grapes.

Our waitress interrupts, clearing her throat before she asks, “Y’all need a refill?”

Unwrapping myself from Gabi’s embrace, I wipe my eyes and look up to see a familiar face.

“Hey Lil,” I say in greeting. “Can we get another pitcher of sangria?”

She jerks her chin in a nod. “One pitcher of forget-about-Johnny-sangria, coming up.”

I sigh as she heads back to the bar.

I love Jasper Mill. I was born and raised here. But everybody knows everybody’s business. I can’t even grieve the end of a relationship in peace. Glancing over at the bar, I see Lily has her head bent as she talks to Trip. The furtive glances in my direction confirm my suspicion that they’re talking about me. About how the relationship was doomed from the start. How so many people warned me about Johnny, but I just didn’t listen. How could I have been so dumb?

It’s no secret why I was attracted to him though.

Johnny B. is the town’s bad boy. The tight-jeans-wearing, tatted, motorcycle-riding, perennially-unemployed hottie your

mama warned you about. And he has women lining up around the block to sleep with him — mostly one-night stands, of course. Having spent six months in an exclusive relationship with him made me something of a unicorn among the women of Jasper Mill.

He was my opposite in many ways. I have a college degree, started my own graphic design firm, and present a professional image most of the time. But something about Johnny's spirit called to me. He was spontaneous and adventurous and funny. He even got one of my designs tattooed on his right shoulder.

But now it's over. I'm sitting here drowning my sorrows in cheap sangria and half the town is witnessing it.

"You know what you need?" Gabi asks.

"Hm?"

"You need to move on. You need your own one-night stand. Forget all about Johnny B."

Gabi has been my best friend since college, but sometimes I think she doesn't know me at all.

"One-night stands aren't for me, Gab."

"That's what you always say, but have you ever tried one?"

"No, and I'm good with that."

"Okay, fine."

Just when I think she has moved on to other topics of conversation, that wicked gleam appears in her eyes.

"What about dating sites? Where it's clear you just want one night of sex, or even just one date? Jump back into the dating game, Lee!"

Seriously? How could Gabi think I would *ever* go for that?

Grant

This little pub reminds me of home. From the dark oak paneling to the quirky name — Pig & Grapes — I could be at one of many watering holes in Scotland.

But I'm not. I'm sitting in a small town in Arkansas, the next stop on my tour of the American south.

You might be wondering — of all the places in the States I could visit, why would I choose Arkansas?

Don't laugh.

Promise?

Ok, good.

It's because I wanted to visit the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum.

Why? Well, that's a topic for another day.

Right now, I'm sipping a Guinness in the little town of Jasper Mill. I've been staying in Punning, the next town over, but decided to check out the competition. See if I can figure out what the inter-town rivalry is all about. I still have no clue, but the beer is good, and the bartender seems like a nice guy.

"So how long are you traveling for?" he asks.

"Eh, maybe a year or so. I'm about three months in now."

"Sounds like fun. No plans, just exploring."

"Aye, it is. But it does get a wee bit lonely, ya know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean." Trip gives me a wink. "You checked out any of the local ladies yet?"

"Nah. I've been busy exploring. Trying to find that raccoon I heard about."

He laughs. Way too loud. It makes me cringe, and I can feel all eyes in the pub turning towards us. I prefer to fly under the radar. But it's not that easy when you're a 6-foot-7 Scotsman with fiery red hair who prefers to wear the kilt. With a quick glance around, I note that everyone in the bar is now staring at us. Except for that one back booth.

“Want me to introduce you to some of the single girls around here?” Everyone in the bar goes back to their business and Trip keeps talking about my dating life like it’s perfectly normal.

“Er, no thanks. I can meet women m’self when I’m ready.”

“Do you have plans for Easter dinner at least? Everything here in town and in Punning will be closed for the day. Don’t want ya to be lonely and starving.”

“Hadn’t thought that far ahead yet. Thanks for the warnin’ though.”

I pick up my pint to drain it. But that doesn’t stop Trip from talking either.

“Have you heard of the Holidates app?”

I had every intention of being done talking, but the question is so far out of the blue...

“Mebbe I’ve seen an ad for it on social media or somethin’?” I set my empty glass back on the bar.

“Yeah, probably. It’s a dating site for the holidays. You could try to find yourself a girl ‘round here who will feed you Easter dinner.”

Cocking my eye at him, I’m tempted to say so many things. Like how I’m sure women don’t like being called girls. And how I can just get take-out the day before Easter. About how I don’t expect a woman to cook for me.

But no, I think I’m done with Jasper Mill. At least the bartender in Punning just throws bad puns at me all night.

“Thanks. I’ll check it out.”

As I walk out into the clear night, I’m certain I’ll do no such thing.

Chapter 1

Winning!

Liona

The mosh pit of anthropomorphized food won an award.

“Oh my gosh! I can’t believe it!”

“Right? I was a little worried about the Jasper thing because you’ve made so much of it, but the design spoke for itself,” Gabi says.

The generations-long conflict between Jasper Mill and Punning will not ruin this moment for me. I’m not going to think about it.

“I’m so excited! My first award for any design work I’ve ever done.”

“You deserve it, Lee. You’ve been working your butt off for — what, 7 years? — for this. I’m going to buy a table at the awards banquet, and you can plan to attend with a plus-one!”

Gabi’s high-pitched, fast-paced voice in my ear urges me to say yes instantly. It’s a kind gesture and a nice plan, and I really am excited. But I can’t. One, I don’t have a plus-one. Two, it’s in Punning.

Punning. The little town that ruins everything.

The place where all the good shop names go. The place with all the hip tourists, because who doesn’t love a good pun? And don’t forget that cayenne-pepper incident with Mauro Capsigo. That brought tensions to an all-time high last year.

“Lee?”

Gabi is one of my best friends. She was my college roommate and supplied me with all the cheap alcohol I needed to make it through. She has been by my side as I’ve struggled to get my graphic design business off the ground here in Jasper Mill. She hired me to design the logo and opening materials for her cafe, The Nosh Pit. And that’s the work that won me

this award. But she doesn't get it. She's new to Punning. She hasn't lived the history. She doesn't have family roots like I do. Roots that tie me down. Make it impossible to spread my wings and fly. Because no matter what, I can never be seen doing work for Punning.

“Liona?”

“Sorry. I'm here, Gabs. I wish I could go to the banquet. But you know I can't be seen there. They'll ostracize me. My family will probably try to kick me out of Jasper Mill.”

“Is this the middle ages? Is it the War of the Roses? The Montagues and Capulets? C'mon, Lee. We're living in an era where people are practically digital nomads. They move around all the time, work from anywhere, and have very little loyalty to any geography.”

“Maybe that's true for most of the people in your circle, but it's certainly not true for mine. Jasper Mill blood runs thick.”

We both sigh. She's heard my explanation more times than I can remember. And she'll never believe it.

“Well, I'm going to buy the table anyway. I'll save two seats for you. I hope you can make it.”

“Okay, love you. Talk to you soon.”

As I end the call, I resign myself to missing out on the Punning Unicorn Festival “Top-of-the-Town” Awards Banquet. My design work for Gabi and The Nosh Pit will have to remain anonymous.

Driving out to my parents' house that afternoon, I'm in a haze of my own thoughts.

I got a new client today. Tess Kearney, owner of the best — and only — bakery in town wants me to re-design her logo. My brain is swirling with ideas.

And that conversation about the Punning awards festival is still lingering in the back of my mind too. I really wish I could go. I can just imagine what the publicity would do for

my little business. Despite being a small town in the middle-of-nowhere Arkansas, Punning has really taken off. It's a destination vacation spot. They've designed public art pieces that lean into the punny nature of all of their businesses. They are on the map. If people knew it was Liona Earle behind the curtain of The Nosh Pit's marketing campaign, I would be swamped with new work.

No use thinking about that though. It's a non-starter.

I'm roused from my own thoughts by a strange sight. Walking down the side of the road is a large hulking figure. It looks like a man, but — is that a skirt? No, it's a kilt. The man's shaggy red hair and beard make me wonder if I've found my very own Jamie Fraser. My right foot suddenly becomes sentient and I'm pumping the brakes and rolling down the window before I realize what I'm doing. "Need a lift?" I holler out the window.

"Eh?" His low grunt seems annoyed.

"Can I drive you somewhere?"

"No thanks. I'm goin' the opposite direction."

Oh. Right. In my excitement over finding Jamie Fraser, the logical part of my brain must have turned itself off.

"Oh, ok. Well, see you around."

"Aye."

How very Scottish of him. He's the picture of a man transplanted from the 1700s too. The unmistakable yellow-and-black plaid kilt, flowy off-white shirt, unkempt hair. I bet he would smell like a man if I were closer. What does a man smell like? I don't know. You just know it when you smell it.

"Anythin' else, lass?"

"Huh?"

"Yer jus' sittin' there, starin'. Wondered if you had anythin' else to say."

Oops. I didn't realize I was staring. He's such a fine specimen to inspect though. His broad shoulders tapering

down to his waist, just barely visible under that billowing shirt. His tanned and corded forearms very visible from beneath his rolled-up shirt sleeves.

“Lass?”

“Er, no. Thanks.”

And with that, my sentient right foot puts the pedal to the metal, and I lurch off away from the Scotsman.

Glancing back in the rearview mirror, I see him shaking his head as he continues to walk down the lonely, dusty road away from Jasper Mill.

Sunday supper at my parents’ house is a tradition. Helen Earle does not scrimp on time or butter in preparing a feast for the family.

As I walk into my childhood home, the familiar smells of mom’s cooking overwhelm me and I head straight for the kitchen.

“Can I help, mama?” I give her a peck on the cheek as I inspect the stove.

“Hey sweetie. Can you watch the okra for me?”

“Yep!”

In addition to the fried okra I’m managing, I see creamed corn, parsley potatoes, and glazed carrots on the stove. The pot roast is in the oven, and mama is workin’ on the biscuits. I’m sure there’s banana pudding in the refrigerator. It’s a Southern feast sure to send me into a food coma this evening. And I’m okay with that.

“Oh, Liona?”

“Yeah, mama?”

“I invited your friend Gabi over for Sunday supper. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“You know it is. Thanks. I can use some girl time.”

Supper is every bit the gluttonous feast I expected it would be.

We've all moved to the living room to gossip and drink more wine when Gabi brings up a taboo topic. The one thing she should know better than to talk about in front of my parents. The one thing I warned her about this morning.

"So Mr. and Mrs. Earle, did Lee tell you about the award she won for her graphic design?"

What the fuck, Gab?

"No, she didn't," Mama says brightly. "What's it for, Liona?"

"Oh, some uh... design work for... a restaurant?"

"That new diner on Main Street?" Dad's voice booms across the room, but he doesn't look up from his newspaper.

And before I can get out a word, before I can control the damage, Gabi's voice rings loud and clear.

"It's for the logo she did for my new restaurant in Punning!"

Mama fumbles and almost drops her wine glass. Daddy peers at me over his readers perched on his nose, the newspaper unceremoniously thrown to the side.

It's as if, dear reader, you could hear a pin drop.

But no pins are dropping. My mother's opinion of me has dropped. My daddy's love for me has dropped. These things I know.

"You did what now?" My mother's voice is artificially bright. That saccharine tone she reserves for interrogations. When she asks a series of seemingly innocuous questions until she reaches a horrible, damning conclusion.

Mama would have made a badass courtroom lawyer.

"I designed a logo for Gabi's restaurant."

"And what's the name of her restaurant?"

"The Nosh Pit."

“Cute name,” Mama says with a tight-lipped smile in Gabi’s direction before resuming her interrogation.

“And what does the logo look like?”

“It’s vegetables and other food. With faces and arms and legs. In a mosh pit.”

A closed-lip smirk. She doesn’t even like the idea that much.

“And where is the restaurant located?”

“In Punning.”

There it is. The damning conclusion.

“So you did work for a Punning business?”

Only it’s not a question. It’s her statement of the sin I have committed. The room returns to uncomfortable silence before Daddy starts in.

“Now Gabi, I know you aren’t from around these parts. You maybe haven’t heard of the... situation... between Jasper Mill and Punning.”

“Oh no, Lee explained it to me.” Is all of the butter and wine making her daft? Why didn’t she take the out that Daddy gave her? “I just think it’s foolish, so I ignore it.”

Oh Gabs. Oh my dear, sweet, about-to-be-former best friend. You have just sealed your fate.

“Then I guess this lecture is for both of you,” Daddy says as he stands up and walks over to the couch where we’re lounging. He peers down at us. “Girls. The feud between Jasper Mill and Punning has existed longer than I’ve been alive. My father used to remind us every Sunday over dinner.”

“That good-for-nothin’ town next door,” Mama chimes in.

“That’s right. That’s how he always referred to it.”

“But why?” Gabi asks.

“Well it goes back to the days of the gold rush...” As Daddy begins the story I’ve heard a thousand times, my mind

begins to wander. Maybe Gabi is right. Maybe this feud is pointless. It started well over 100 years ago, before anyone in town was born.

“Maybe it’s time we give it up,” I blurt out.

“Excuse me?” Daddy seems startled.

“Don’t interrupt your father,” Mama chimes in.

“Sorry Daddy, but I’ve heard this story my whole life. What I want to know is why anyone still cares. No one here was alive when the gold rush fraud thing happened. No one here is still looking for gold. And Punning has found the key to attracting tourists, while Jasper continues to struggle. Why don’t we learn a little something from them? Or even band together? Promote tourism in the whole county.”

“That sounds like a great idea!” But Gabi’s enthusiasm is squashed by the look that Daddy levels at her. “Or... not?”

“No daughter of mine is going to be seen helping anyone in Punning.” He crosses his arms over his chest to punctuate the pronouncement.

That’s it. I rise from my spot on the couch and find myself face-to-face with Daddy. I’m five-foot-ten without shoes and today I’m wearing my platform boots. Looking him straight in the eye, the words come out before I realize what I’m saying.

“Maybe I shouldn’t be a daughter of yours anymore then.”

“Liona!” Mama’s hand flies to her mouth.

“What did you say?” His voice booms but I don’t back down. I don’t sit, I don’t shirk. Instead, I take a half-step forward, further crowding his space.

“You heard me. All my life you’ve chastised me with the same ‘No daughter of mine...’ and you know what? I’m tired of it. It was a fight when I left home to go to college. It was a fight when I cut my hair. It was a fight when I wore red lipstick on Thanksgiving. I thought you were supposed to be on my side? But it never feels like you are. Every time I take a

step in the direction of independence, you try to pull me back. It needs to stop. You need to stop. I have my own business. I won an award for work I did. I'm going to continue building my business and I'm going to succeed. If that means I can't be your daughter, I guess this is good-bye."

Daddy looks shell-shocked. Glancing over at Mama, I can see she's crying into her wine glass. And I don't feel like fixing it anymore.

As I take another half-step forward, Daddy backs away. I glance down to see Gabi staring at me wide-eyed. Great. Not even my best friend is here for me in this moment.

My boots *clomp* in the stunned silence as I walk to the foyer and grab my things. I'm out the door without another word, and it's not until I'm driving down the long, dark road back into town that it hits me.

What the fuck have I done?

Chapter 2

Rocky Raccoon

Grant

What the fuck did I do that for?

Maybe I've been leaning in to the mysterious Scottish visitor thing a little too much. *Lass?* Who says that anymore, aside from my gramps?

The most striking woman I've ever seen speeds off down the road away from me as I shake my head at myself.

I spent a lovely morning hiking through the wilderness and exploring one of the local state parks. But a few hours of exercise in the humid morning air, combined with a kilt and my now-filthy shirt, probably makes me look like a madman. My truck is waiting for me just down the way, hidden by a few large trees in front of a pull-off area. Upon reaching it, I jump in and, glancing into the rearview mirror, I confirm my suspicions. My hair is sticking up in all different directions, there's a swath of dirt across my face, and I'm covered in grass thatch. No wonder she couldn't stop staring at me.

After a long shower and some grooming, I finally settle in the study of the little bed-and-breakfast I'm staying at. It feels like one of the stodgy places up in Orkney, really. Like someone's old family home that they can't afford to keep up, so they let the rooms to fund their living expenses. The breakfast is passable and the price is right, so I don't mind that the owner seems to avoid me at every turn. In fact, it feels like my own study as I sit down with my laptop to catch up on how things are going back home.

A check of my email reveals nothing more than junk mail and a reminder from my niece to order sweets for her school fundraiser. "*Don't worry. I'll eat them for you so they don't go bad while you're in the States.*" Love that kid. Nothing new on social media — my buds being dumbasses, ex-girlfriends showing off their asses in workout gear, and a cat learning to run on a treadmill. That last one was pretty damn funny.

After mindlessly scrolling the internet for a while, it's finally time for my weekly video chat with the fam.

"Heya Mum." She's always the first one to jump on our calls.

"How are you, m'boy?"

The usual pleasantries follow. Am I getting enough to eat? *Yes*. Is my bed comfortable? *Not long enough*. Have I met a nice girl yet? *Give it a rest, Mum*.

"Grant, son, how are you?" Pop interrupts at just the right time. He knows how much I don't want to talk about my love life.

"Good, good."

"Made it to the Clinton thing yet?"

"Nah, maybe after Easter."

"Uncle Grant!" My niece Violet climbs onto Pop's lap. "Out of the way, Gramps! I gotta talk to Unky."

"Whattya up to, Vi?"

"We're havin' a party for the baby!"

"You are? Is your baby there?"

"Well, he's in mummy's tummy still. But I think he can hear all the fun games we're playing, and taste the yummy cake when mummy eats it."

"I bet you're right, sprite."

"Ok, bye Unky!" She's gone just as quickly as she arrived.

"She's a spunky one," Pop says with a laugh.

Someone — maybe my sister — calls to Pop from offscreen.

"I'll be there in a jiff!" he hollers back.

"Well, I guess I better go, son. The baby shower is calling."

"Sure thing, Pop. Talk to you next week."

“G’bye.”

“Who’s—”

Meeting Ended.

“—next?”

Usually I get to talk to the whole family every Sunday evening. Maybe Pop hung up by accident. I try to reconnect but don’t get an answer, so I text my sister Evie.

Me: Oy. No chat tonight?

Evie: Sorry, Charlotte’s baby shower. All the aunties came too. It’s a madhouse.

Me: So no one can talk to me?

Evie: Nah, Aunt Louise brought her Sticky Toffee Pudding. You don’t rate.

Well that sucks. I really love Aunt Louise’s Pudding.

Me: Hey Char, happy baby shower. Is that what I’m supposed to say? Hope you like the gift I sent.

Me: Hey Liam. How’s the tour?

Liam: Here’s a thousand words for you.

The picture looks like it was taken onstage at the Hollywood Bowl.

Me: Tell me all about it!

Liam: Can’t talk now, man.

Sigh.

Can’t have my usual Sunday chat with the family, can’t have Aunt Louise’s pudding, can’t talk to Char, and my bud Liam — who frickin’ sings songs for a living — doesn’t even have time for me.

This is what I meant when I said traveling can get lonely.

Four hours and six pints of Guinness later, I still don’t understand baseball. Or why people watch it. It’s almost as

boring as cricket, but at least it doesn't go on for days.

At least I'm around other people as I sit at the bar at Sluggers.

The bar's name is a lower-class pun, so it doesn't get a storefront on Main Street. Punning takes its puns seriously, I've come to understand in the week I've been here so far.

Business owners have to present their proposed company name to the Pun Review Board in Punning. It's judged according to some mysterious ten-factor test before the Review Board announces which tier of commercial property can be leased. I don't know how legal all that is, but it's the way they do it.

Anyway, Sluggers was judged not to be top tier.

A well-dressed, 40-something woman approaches me at the bar.

"Are you here alone?"

She's attractive in a common way, but she's overdone.

"Aye."

"I love your accent. Where are you from?"

Skintight dress, those pointy high-heel things.

"Scotland."

"I've always wanted to go there."

Big hair, caked-on makeup.

"Why don't you plan a visit?"

Too much perfume.

"Oh, I'm terrible with foreign languages. I'd never be able to get around!"

And dumb.

I nod and offer her a closed-lip smirk before turning back to my beer. It's not my job to teach her that we speak English in Scotland.

"Can I buy you a drink?" She's crowding my elbow.

“No thanks.”

“Oh, but you’re almost done.” Leaning over my arm, showing too much cleavage.

“I think I’ve had enough.”

“Don’t be silly, the night is young!” This last is accompanied by a high-pitched giggle and flail of her arms.

Glass shatters. Guinness flows across the bartop. The woman falls into me, no doubt on purpose.

“I’m such a klutz,” she squeals into my ear.

“Aye.”

It’s a wholly ungentlemanly response, but I’ve had enough of this bar and its endless stream of cougars.

As I stand up from the bar, I lift her off me and set her as far away from my barstool as I can.

The bartender already mopped up the mess and asks, “Another?”

“Nah, mate. That’s enough for me today.”

“Beer or women?”

“Aye.”

“You should check out that new Holidates app. I know a few people who’ve had luck with it. Give you some better company.”

I sign for my tab, extend my hand, and offer my farewell.

“G’night, mate. See you next Sunday.”

“Nah, we’re closed, remember? Easter and all.”

“And Unicorn Day!” the drunk cougar yells to us.

I head out into the night, wondering if I made the right choice staying in a small town instead of Little Rock.

There’s more Guinness in my mini-fridge at the bed-and-breakfast. After finishing off another six-pack, I’m feeling

right pissed.

I blew my chance to talk to the stunner in her car. My family is too busy back home to even talk to me today. My best mate blew me off. Baseball is still mystifying. Drunk cougars keep hitting on me. And the whole damn town is closing down for Easter.

Now that two different people — bartenders, no less — have suggested it, I decide to give the Holidates app a try.

Pulling up the page on my laptop, I'm greeted by a sleek-looking purple and gray interface. It takes no more than a minute to set up my free account, and I'm on my way to creating my profile.

Name: Grant MacLeod

Age: 20-something

Location: Punning, AR

Occupation: Numbers guy

Likes:

Hmm.

Likes: Beer, Travel, Being outdoors, Not baseball

That works for now.

Holidate needed for: Easter

There. Now I need to upload a picture. I browse what's on my laptop and find one from before I left home last year. I was clean-shaven and well-groomed. What I might look like if I put in any effort. Good enough.

Maybe a dozen beers yesterday was not my best plan.

It's rough going on Monday morning. But after a quick breakfast, I head back out for another hike around Lake Taylor. I'm about a mile down the trail when I remember the Holidates app.

What was I thinking? A dating site?

Dating has never been a problem for me. With all my travels, I've become pretty good at chatting up new people. Learning a little about them, deciding if they will annoy me too much. I think I'm a pretty good judge of character at this point, with a knack for finding pleasant women to spend a short time with. Never had time for anything more serious, but I know I'm not missing out on anything. I look at my sisters, and how mundane their lives have become now that they're married and have kids. I don't need that. My wanderlust keeps me moving, and I've got plenty of company when I need it.

A raccoon jumps onto the trail ahead of me, interrupting my thoughts. He's standing on his hind legs, looking for all the world like he's ready to chat.

"Hey bud," I say in a low voice.

He just looks at me.

"Are you the one I've heard so much about?"

I swear the raccoon just grinned at me.

"You like stealing fish?"

His nose gets interested at the sound of the word *fish*. Tilting his head up, he begins sniffing the air.

"Sorry, bud, no fish for you today."

He drops to all fours and begins ambling towards me.

"Are you the one who likes to break into campers too?"

He pauses and looks up at me. Another grin.

"You gotta stop doing that, man. You're scaring off all the campers."

He bares his teeth at me.

"Yeah, I know. You don't like all the rules, the trappings of society. Me either."

And he charges me. Jumps up, grabs the protein bar out of my hand, and runs off into the forest.

It all happened so fast, I didn't have time to process it. Just stood there like a dumbass and let the trash panda take my

snack.

Maybe sometimes there's a good reason for the rules.

Chapter 3

Just a Young Girl

Liona

Monday morning brings an awful realization. I disowned Daddy.

As I get ready for work, my eyes keep filling with tears. It's going to be a no-makeup kind of day.

Why does he have to be that way? Why does he need to control me? Can't other women my age choose their own lipstick shade without interference by their parents?

It's more than the lipstick and you know it.

My Jiminy-Cricket conscience pipes up with the ugly truth while I shimmy into my favorite black ankle pants.

The feud between Jasper Mill and Punning has lasted over 100 years. You can't ignore it for the sake of some silly award.

As I throw on a comfy tunic and top it with a lariat necklace, I find myself sniffing again. Is this how it's going to go all day?

Well, if you hadn't been so disrespectful to Daddy, you'd probably be having a better morning.

Ugh. Maybe work will take my mind off this.

It worked.

I've been so focused on putting together this pitch, I haven't thought about Daddy in at least a couple of hours.

We — and by we, I mean me and the one part-time employee I can afford to hire — have the opportunity to land some design work for a chain restaurant looking to open its first location in Jasper County.

Sure, they have all the corporate branding materials and logo. But they want to develop some promotional materials

specific to Jasper. Something that will be particularly attractive to the locals. As the only graphic designer in Jasper Mill, I have to believe I have a great shot.

“Ok, Annie, let’s put together the whole package.”

I’ve spent time every day for the last week creating two promo pieces. All that’s left is to fill out their form, make sure we followed all of the procedures in their RFP, and hit submit.

“Hey boss,” Annie calls from across the room.

“Yeah?”

“There’s a few blanks I need your help with.”

“Ok, let’s take a look,” I say, walking to her desk.

“This one here — *National Clients*. Do you have a list of those somewhere?”

“Uhm, no...”

“What about *Awards & Recognitions*?”

“None of those to list either.”

“Oh.” She pauses. “Well, I’m sure it will be fine. This is just a standard form, right?”

“Right.”

I hope I sound more confident than I feel.

“When are you supposed to hear back?”

“I think by next Monday. They said to expect a pretty quick process.”

“That’s *really* fast, right?”

I nod.

“I just hope they take the time to really look at all of the submissions. I would hate for this to be a waste of time for you, or just a formality for them.”

Now I’m worried about that too.

“Thanks Annie. See you Wednesday? It’s bookkeeping day.”

“You know it!”

She leaves with a smile and a flourish, no idea that she just upended my world.

Don't I have a good shot at this? I mean, I graduated top of my class. I've owned my own business for four years now. I've got a decent portfolio of work on the website. And I live in Jasper Mill. How could I not win this work?

Well, Liona, you don't have any national clients or awards to speak of.

This time it's not Jiminy Cricket, but my father's voice talking to me. Always more criticizing, more devil's advocate, less supporter of his daughter.

Did he even congratulate me when I opened Earle Designs? I don't remember anymore.

The ding of an incoming email distracts me.

It's from the submissions address already?!

Dear Ms. Earle - Thank you for your submission. We just want to make sure your submission is complete. We noted several blank spots on the form. Please let us know by 8 p.m. Eastern if you have any revisions to make.

No, submissions lady, nothing is missing.

Oh, who am I kidding? There's no way I'm going to get this work. I'm only 26, I don't have any big-name clients or referrals. I don't even have the stupid award from Punning that I can list on my submission.

Sigh.

But then I realize. Daddy's already mad at me. Why *can't* I get the Punning award? I just need to get ready for the Unicorn Festival. And that means finding a date pretty darn quick.

Liona: Gabs, I need your help.

Gabi: At your service.

Liona: Come to my house for dinner and drinkies. We have a dating profile to create.

Gabi: Really?! Yay! I'll be there at 7!

“What made you change your mind?” Gabi asks just as I take another bite of my crispy-potato taco.

I give her the index-finger sign to give me a minute. It may be Meatless Monday, but I can still have my tacos. And margaritas. I take another drink before diving into this conversation.

“I decided that since Daddy is already mad, I might as well take advantage of the opportunity.”

“Yeah, but you know you’ll make up with your Dad.” *I really hope that’s true.* “Won’t he be super pissed if you do it anyway?”

Shrugging, I reveal a little more truth. “There’s also the fact that I’m a fraud.”

“Liona Earle. What in the world do you mean by that? You’ve started your own design firm. You’re turning a profit. You even hired employees.”

“One. Part-time.”

“Don’t quibble about the details.”

I shrug again.

“What happened? Do I need to beat up somebody?”

“No,” I say and bark out a laugh, “it’s just that submission I’m doing for the chain restaurant.”

“What about it? You’re the only graphic designer in town. And the whole county. I’m sure you’ll get it.”

Gabi has more confidence in me than I do. A great quality in a friend, sure. But sometimes not a realistic assessment.

“I’m not so sure. The form has places to list your national clients, and any awards or recognitions you’ve received. I had

none to list either place.”

“So?”

“That’s what I thought. Until they emailed me back and asked if my submission was incomplete.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So let’s get me the damn award.”

“And find a date for you too!”

“I only need a fake date.”

“What do you mean?”

“C’mon, Gabs, a dating site? You really think I’m going to find true love on there? Or even a guy who’s gainfully employed and not living in his mom’s basement?”

“You know, there’s more to a relationship than the material things.” For the first time in a long time, Gabi’s tone is almost... reproachful.

“Well sure.” I backpedal. Gabi usually goes along with whatever drivel I’m spouting. Did I hit on a nerve? Is there something she’s not telling me?

“Maybe we can try that Holidates app I’ve been hearing about,” Gabi finally offers. “Where you’re only looking for a date for one specific holiday event.”

“That sounds good.” I leave it at that, and we go back to finishing off the tacos.

“Ok, let’s get to it.” Gabi takes her last bite, wipes her hands on a napkin, and stands up with her usual enthusiasm. Hopefully the... whatever it was between us... is a distant memory.

We hastily clear our dishes, refill our margaritas, and sit down in front of my laptop.

“Let’s see,” Gabi says, driving the mouse and keyboard. “Nice design, looks professional.”

“Does it say how many people are on there? Like, am I really going to be able to find someone in Jasper County?”

“It says... 12,473 live profiles. I can't tell if there are any in Jasper until we start browsing. But let's make your profile first.”

“Ok, what embarrassing personal info do they want?”

“Name? Liona Earle. Age? 26.”

Gabi is making the profile for me.

“Location? Near Little Rock, Arkansas.”

“Wait, why are you saying that? Why not just list Jasper Mill?”

“One, I'm widening your pool. Little Rock isn't that far away. And two, what if there *is* someone from Punning on here? We don't want to scare them away, right?”

“Right.” Gabi seems practiced at this online dating thing.

“Ok. Occupation: Kickass Graphic Designer.”

“Please tell me you didn't say Kickass.”

“Of course not. But it would probably prompt some fun chats.”

“No thanks.”

“Interests are next. Can I list kicking ass?” Gabi manages a raised eyebrow for all of one second before she starts laughing hysterically.

I join her, relieved that the earlier tension has disappeared.

“Let's skip that one for now,” I can finally say. “How about just listing margaritas, local history, and *Outlander*.”

“Got it,” she says, her focus back on the screen. “Last thing is date. And that is —” She checks her email before adding, “April 9, 2023. And save.”

“Are we done?”

“Oh no,” she says with a wicked look on her face. “It's time for a photo shoot.”

“Oh shit. Not a Gabi photo shoot.”

“Oh yes.” It’s all she says before she runs off to raid my closet.

It takes more than an hour, and another pitcher of margaritas, before Gabi decides we’ve got “the one.”

She uploads my photo to the site without showing me and quickly navigates away from the page. Lord only knows what she did.

“Ok, time to browse the men of Holidates!” she announces, too loud.

“It’s getting late, Gabs. And we’re drunk.”

“No problem. I’ll sleep here.”

There’s no convincing her otherwise when she gets like this. I don’t have any morning meetings tomorrow, so I refill my glass and plop on the couch. Gabby claps her hands together before running over to the couch.

“Let’s see,” she says. She bites her lip in concentration, still driving my computer. “Within 50 miles of Little Rock, Arkansas... oh shit, that’s like 400 profiles!”

“Can we narrow it by date?”

“Yeah.” Another moment of focus passes before she leans back with a smile. “There! Only 27 profiles to browse. And the first one is...”

Ack! We both gasp. It’s Tony Capsigo, the chair of the school board, smiling back from the screen. There were rumors of him trying to hook up with the new high school principal after his wife left him, but apparently her boyfriend Wes threatened bodily harm. By the entire Jasper family. Creepy ol’ Tony appears to have found online dating instead.

“Is there an age filter?”

“Good idea.” *Click, click, click.* “And we’re down to 8. Let’s send messages to all of them!”

Her enthusiasm is contagious, but practicality gets the best of me. “Let’s just send one tonight. Figure out how this

thing works. When that one doesn't pan out, we'll try another."

Gabi misses the self-deprecating comment, too busy scrolling through the profiles.

"Could I maybe take a look?" She just waves me off.

"Here! The perfect one! He's even got red hair like Sam Heughan!"

Turning the screen towards me, I have to admit that he's attractive.

Grant M., 20-something

Punning, AR

Numbers guy

Likes beer, travel, being outdoors, not baseball

Holidate needed for: Easter

"No way. He's in Punning."

"Perfect, right? Just like I said."

"Just like you said."

"So send him a message!" Gabi bounces on the couch next to me.

"What do I say? *Dear Hot Guy, Please come to a weird-ass banquet with me. Wearing a unicorn costume. Love, Lee.*"

She barks out a laugh. "Give me that," she says as she grabs my laptop back.

"Dear Grant," she says as she types. "It seems like we have a few things in common. Would love to chat more. Look forward to hearing from you. Liona."

She looks at me expectantly.

"That works," I say, nodding my head.

"And sent!"

"Now can we go to sleep?"

After we get Gabi settled in the guest room and I finally snuggle under my covers, I have time to reflect on my day.

What am I gonna do about Daddy? Am I really going to the Punning banquet? Do I want to find a date online?

No answers tonight. Just merciful sleep.

Chapter 4

Hear, Hear

Grant

Ding.

That can't be my alarm.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

I roll over. It's not time yet.

Ding. Ding.

Bloody hell. I grab my phone and toss it across the room.

I spend a few minutes getting comfortable again, and am half-asleep when...

A muffled *Ding*.

"Fuck it all, I'm up."

I climb out of bed but don't check my phone, instead hauling my tired ass into a long, hot shower.

Still mad at the phone, I refuse to look at it until I'm sitting down for breakfast in my hosts' dated dining room. There's only one other bloke in here.

"Okay. What is all the noise about?" I mumble into my tea as I pick up the blasted device.

Holy shit. I've got 53 message requests on that Holidates thing. That's what all the dinging was about.

The first one is from some random girl down in Little Rock. College girl, wants to travel. I send her a curt, "Hi. What's going on for Easter?"

The next one... oh no... it's from that older woman at Sluggers the other night. Her message is indecent. *Delete.*

Number three. One of her friends... *Delete.*

And it goes on and on and on. *Delete. Delete. Delete.*

I should just delete the whole fucking app.

Delete. Delete. Delete.

Falling into a delete rhythm, I'm not even really looking at the profiles anymore.

Oh, wait. Who's that? It looks like... nah, it couldn't be. I'll delete the rest of the crap and come back to this one.

Delete. Delete.

Only two message requests remain. The one I already responded to. And Liona.

Liona E., 26

Near Little Rock, AR

Graphic Designer

Likes margaritas, local history, and *Outlander*

Holidate needed for: April 9, 2023

It *is* her. After spending a long time studying her profile photo — maybe too long — I realize this *is* the stunningly beautiful creature I met on the side of the road on Sunday. The sultry look she's giving the camera doesn't hurt either.

What are the chances?

"She's hot, man." My breakfast companion pauses to look over my shoulder at my phone. "You should definitely message her."

"Yeah, thanks, mate." I put the phone down, go back to eating breakfast, and unsubtly dismiss the guy.

When he finally leaves, I go back to the Holidates app and open Liona's message.

Dear Grant, It seems like we have a few things in common. Would love to chat more. Look forward to hearing from you. Liona

I can work with that.

Liona, I too would love to chat. On the phone, if you don't mind. Grant

I finish with my number.

There. Now I can go do that art walk in Jasper Mill today.

Liona

Ding.

I'm an obsessive phone checker.

It's the Holidates app. And it's Grant.

Me: He messaged me back. He wants me to call him.

Gabi: So call him!

Me: What do I say?

Gabi: Dude, you talk on the phone for hours every day. I'm sure you can handle a little conversation with a potential date.

Me: Ugh. Fine.

Before I can overthink it, I click on his number and dial.

“Ello?”

Oh dear God in heaven. He has an accent. A panty-melting Scottish accent.

“Is this Grant? From the Holidates app?”

“Aye. Is this Liona?”

The way my name rolls off his tongue. The sound caresses me, a warm embrace for my frazzled nerves.

It's not the nasal, tacky *lee-OH-nuh* that everyone else calls me.

No, it's something special. A deep rumble with a gentle breeze running through my name. *LEE-uh-nuh*. I can't wait to hear him say it again. I sure as hell won't be correcting his pronunciation.

“Liona? Are you there?”

Oops.

“Yes, I'm here. It's so nice to meet you.”

“And you.”

And just like that, I fall into the conversation, forgetting all of my hesitation and nerves.

“I saw you’re in Punning?”

“Aye. Spending a little time here as part of my travels.”

“How long are you here for?”

“Another few weeks. No set deadline.”

“Will you return home after that? Where is home?”

“Home is Cumbernauld, a town in Scotland not too far from Glasgow. But no, I won’t go straight there. I’m spending a year traveling through the States, learning about the history of the Southern states.”

“How fun! Where have you been so far?”

“Tampa, where my uncle lives. Savannah. And a little town in Alabama.”

Not sure how those are connected, but whatever. I just want to hear him talk some more.

“Tell me what you saw in all those places. What you learned.”

“Well, that might take a while. But in Tampa...”

His voice carries me away. The melody of the brogue, the deep resonance in his chest, the enchanting “erm” vocal pauses. He could read me the phone book.

I’m not sure how long he’s been talking when I hear him singing my name again.

“Liona?”

“Oh, sorry. I just got distracted.”

“No worries. I’ll let you go.”

“Oh! That’s not what I meant at all! Your voice... it’s distracting... and enchanting... and sexy.”

“Ahhh... thanks?”

“Now I’ve embarrassed myself and you. Sorry. So sorry.”

“Nah. I’m just not used to a woman being so straightforward. And I find you terribly sexy as well.”

I laugh off the compliment. He’s only seen Gabi’s boudoir shot of me. I hope reality doesn’t disappoint.

“What are you doing today?” I ask.

“Touring an Art Walk I heard about.”

“In Jasper Mill? That’s where I am!”

“In that case, sweet Liona, would you join me for lunch today?”

“Um... I don’t know.”

“Why not? What’s your hesitation?”

“Well, I thought the Holidates app was just for a one-time thing. Like, we go on a date for one holiday, and that’s it.”

“If that’s all you want it to be, that’s fine. I just thought since I planned to be in your town anyway, we might get to know each other a little bit?”

He’s right. Why am I being ridiculous? I guess the thing with Johnny B. really scared me off relationships, or even the idea of a relationship. Surely, it couldn’t hurt to have one lunch with this guy. We’ll get to know each other, be sure we have something to talk about, all before we commit to the Holidate. And I guess I should tell him that although April 9 *is* Easter, this isn’t really a date *for* Easter. Punning insists on going forward with its festivities on National Unicorn Day, no matter if it *is* a major Christian holiday this year.

“You still there?” he asks.

“Oh. Yes. Sorry.”

“So... lunch? Or no?”

What’s the worst that could happen?

“You’re right. Let’s get to know each other. Would you like me to choose a restaurant since you’re new here?”

“Na’ necessary,” he offers, the sound of a grin evident in his tone. “Meet me down by the river. Near the old mill’s waterwheel.”

Huh?

“You know where it is?”

“Um, sure.”

“Can you clear your afternoon?”

Without checking my calendar, I know there’s nothing else scheduled for the day. But I’m getting a little nervous now.

“I’ll check with my assistant and text you later.”

“See you at noon then. Looking forward to it.”

“G’bye Grant,” I offer. It’s all I can get out.

Is this guy a serial killer? Who lures in unsuspecting women with the sound of his voice? And then takes them to a van down by the river, where he ties them up, rapes, and kills them? Or maybe I watch too many police procedurals? Yeah, probably.

Grant

That went way better than I expected. She seemed really interested in my travels, and wanted to know about me. She was also refreshingly honest. The world could use more of that.

And now, I have a picnic to put together.

Knowing what I now know about the rivalry between Jasper Mill and Punning, I think I’ll head Jasper-way to source what I need.

“Good morning, I’m Tess!” I’m greeted as soon as I walk in the door at Tess’s Treats thirty minutes later.

“G’morning, Tess, I hope you can help me.”

“I’m sure I can. What do you need?”

“Well, I’m putting together a little last-minute picnic lunch for today. Hoping you could provide some desserts.”

“Of course. Who are you lunching with?”

“Erm, do you know a LEE-uh-nuh? Graphic designer?”

“I know a lee-OH-nuh, sure. She’s doing some design work for me now.”

She let me mispronounce her name during our whole phone call? Maybe not as straightforward as I thought.

“Oh. Good. Can you recommend something she’d like?”

“Of course...”

And so it went at the diner, the florist, and the little wine shop on the corner. By 11:00, I’ve ordered everything I need and I head down to the river to set up.

I can’t wait for lunch.

Chapter 5

Down by the River

Liona

“Gabi, I’m headed to lunch with Grant down by the river. If you don’t hear from me in two hours, call the Sheriff.”

“Don’t be overdramatic, Lee. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“I hope—”

Wow.

“You hope what?” she asks into my ear.

“It’s going to be fine,” I tell Gabi abruptly before hanging up on her and throwing the phone in my purse.

Oh wow.

The riverbank is full of faces I know. Stella from the Diner, Tess—holding her signature pink box, Terry from Bloomin’ Fabulous, and even Alex from the new wine shop. In the middle of it all, directing traffic in his deep brogue, is Grant. Who, I now realize, was also the guy I saw walking down the road in a kilt when I was driving to my parents’ house on Sunday.

He’s got a blanket laid on the ground. He has Stella unpacking the dishes she brought, Tess is arranging a tart on a beautiful piece of carnival glass and accenting it with nasturtium, Alex is chilling a bottle of white wine in a stand next to the blanket, and Terry is setting a gorgeous arrangement of daisies in the middle of the blanket. I’m about 10 minutes early, so when Grant finally looks up in my direction, a look of surprise crosses his face followed quickly by a broad smile.

“Lee-OH-nuh,” he calls out across the grass.

My face falls.

He strides over and takes me by the elbow.

“Is something wrong?”

“N-no...”

“Well, what is it?”

“I like your pronunciation of my name better,” I say to my feet.

“Ah,” he says with a chuckle, “well then, LEE-uh-nuh, may I show you to your table for lunch?”

He holds out his elbow and I loop my arm through. For once, I feel dainty. Doesn't happen so often when you're five-foot-ten. But he's huge. Towering almost a foot above me, and broad—so very broad—shoulders.

We walk through the grass and, approaching the blanket, it's like the seas part. Stella, Tess, Terry, and Alex all step aside to reveal the... the... most perfect thing I've ever seen.

It's not a blanket, I now realize. It's his friggin' kilt, spread on the ground to host this picnic.

This is what dreams are made of.

In the kindest, most polite way I've ever heard, he dismisses everyone.

“Thanks for your help, Stella, Tess, Terry, Alex,” he says as he looks each one in the eye individually. “Could'na done it withou' ya. I'll return everything tomorrow morn.”

Is it my imagination, or did the brogue just thicken?

Every last person disappears. It's just me and Grant, standing by this amazing spread.

“M'lady,” he says, releasing my arm with a slight bow, “please take a seat.”

Trying my best to look elegant, I sink to a sitting position on his kilt. So glad I wore pants today.

Grant settles across from me and looks at me expectantly.

“So?”

“So what?” I know exactly what he's asking, but a little teasing is in order.

“Do you like it?” His grin tells me he knows I'm teasing.

“You know I do,” I say with a laugh. “It looks like you asked everyone in town what I like.”

“Tha’s mebbe exactly what I did.”

“Well, it’s delightful. I’m touched, really.” His grin turns into a full-blown, magnificent smile. His whole face lights up, I see a hint of dimples, and the crinkly lines around his eyes tell me how genuine it is. “I’m also starving. Can we eat?”

“As you wish.”

He opens the first dish from Stella, and the delectable scent of bacon wafts towards me. My favorite appetizer. Dates stuffed with blue cheese and marcona almonds, wrapped in bacon. I don’t wait for him to offer one before grabbing it off the platter and stuffing it into my mouth whole.

“Mmmm.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever tried this combination before,” he says, inspecting one of the stuffed dates. He bites off half of it and chews thoughtfully. “Good,” he says after a moment.

“Does that mean I have to share?” I eye the three remaining dates.

“No, you go ahead,” he says with a laugh. I don’t hesitate, polishing them off in a matter of minutes.

“Up next, some sandwiches.”

Only these aren’t just any sandwiches. The warm, spicy aroma of curry curls through the air. “Curry chicken salad!” I clap my hands together. I freakin’ clap my hands.

Grant hands me a plate with one of the delicious sandwiches, and then stands to pour the wine.

As he offers me a glass, I hesitate for a moment. “I don’t usually drink at lunch.”

“Ok, no worries,” he says, setting the glass aside.

I stare at the glass. A lightly sweet scent floats towards me.

“What is it?” I ask, curiosity getting the best of me.

“Alex picked out a Gewurtztraminer to go with the curry. But I can save it for later.”

A brief moment of internal debate. “I changed my mind. May I have a glass, please?”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” He hands me the wine glass and—

What was that?!

When our fingertips brushed, I felt a spark of electricity. Weird. He must be one of those static-electricity-charged people.

“Cheers,” I say, gesturing my glass towards him.

“Slainte,” he says over the melody of our glasses chiming.

We enjoy our sandwiches and wine in a comfortable silence. I can’t remember the last time I had a picnic on the riverbank. The sound of the water gently rushing by is soothing.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Grant interrupts my reverie.

“Hmmm? Yeah.” I say, with a quick smile at him. “Sorry I’m not too talkative right now. The last week has been really busy at work, so I’m enjoying the opportunity to relax.”

“Tell me about your work?”

“I have my own graphic design firm.”

“Impressive.”

“Yes and no. I only have four years of experience so far, but I really wanted to move back home to Jasper after college, and there weren’t too many design jobs available nearby. The best option was to start my own firm.”

“Makes sense.”

“How about you? What do you do when you aren’t traveling the South?”

“I went to Uni to study accounting. I work in the family business, handling the books and some family investments.”

“What kind of business?”

“Totally cliché, but whisky. My family owns a small-batch distillery.”

“That’s cool though. Especially to someone here in the States.”

“Yah, I guess.”

More companionable silence as I finish my wine.

“Are you ready for dessert?” he says when I’ve taken my last drink.

“Dessert from Tess? Always. What did she send?”

“A Meyer lemon tart with raspberries.”

“Yum.”

The crisp scent of lemons energizes me. As we dig into the tart, I’m feeling saucy.

“So Grant, I have to ask. This is supposed to be a one-time, holiday-fake-date thing. We just matched last night, and you’re already hosting a bespoke picnic for me. I don’t want there to be any misunderstanding, which is why I hesitated over lunch in the first place. What are you thinking here?”

“No mistake. I know just what we’re signing up for. But life is short. Why not enjoy every moment? We coulda gone to some restaurant you’ve been to a hundred times. Or we could have this picnic by the river, and I get to experience some of your favorite things. I choose to savor life at every turn. And I’ll be gone from this place in a few weeks, so I’ll enjoy its unique charms while I can. You, Liona, are one of Jasper Mill’s unique charms.”

I brush aside the compliment. “Ok, good.”

He gives me an indulgent smile.

“Do you have more time? You never said.”

“Oh. Yes.” I forgot about the little lie I told when I didn’t know how much time I’d want to spend with him.

“Great,” he says as he lies back on the blanket and pats the spot next to him. “Join me?”

I mean, this is a little weird, right?

But I lie down on the blanket next to him anyway.

“What’s your favorite thing about Scotland?” I ask him.

He pauses for a moment. “I’d have to say the openness of the landscape. We have a few big cities, sure, but there’s a lot of land that’s just undeveloped and open and ready to be explored.”

“That sounds nice,” I say and close my eyes.

“Aye,” he says and then pauses, “...as long as you don’t mind the sheep.”

A giggle bubbles up from my throat.

“Lemme tell you about the sheep—”

The lilting rhythm of his voice lulls me into almost a meditative state.

I’m focused on my senses and, though I’m still listening to him, I’m overwhelmed by the smells around me.

Freshly-cut grass on the ground surrounding me. The unmistakable scent of the may-apple blossoms adorning the trees above. Mossy rocks exposed at the river’s edge, baking in the early spring sun. A whiff of leftover lemon tart swirling through the air.

Turning my head in Grant’s direction, I inhale his unique man-scent. The smell of tanned leather, slightly musty from having been left out in the rain and then dried. A sweet note of vanilla. Subtle freshly-cut pine. The last probably from his deodorant or something. I breathe deeply, taking it all in.

“Liona,” he rumbles softly.

“Hmm?” I ask lazily.

“Were you dozing off?”

As my eyes slowly open, his face materializes. Close enough for me to absorb the details. The freckles adorning the

bridge of his nose, the closely-trimmed auburn beard framing his face, and peridot-green eyes staring back at me.

A lazy smile spreads across my face. “I guess maybe I was.”

“Perfect,” he says, leaning down to place a chaste kiss on my forehead.

He stands up from the kilt and begins packing up lunch.

“I can help,” I say, raising myself up onto my elbows.

“Nah, you relax. I’ve got this.”

Drifting back into that place between wake and sleep, a warmth settles over me. The sun shining down, a belly full of some of my favorite things, and a guy I just met who seems content to clean up and watch over me. I could get used to this.

I don’t know how much time passes before I stir again, but the sun is noticeably lower in the sky.

“What time is it?” My voice is heavy with sleep.

“About 4,” he says, laying down a book he’s been reading.

“What?!” I say, sitting up with a start. My head objects. “Ouch.”

“Lay back down for a moment. Take it a little slower.”

“But what will everyone think?! Gabi probably thinks I’m dead.” My voice just keeps getting higher pitched.

“Hold on, Liona. Don’t ruin your relaxation. Gabi already stopped by and introduced herself. She said you could use some rest.” His soothing tone lowers the pitch of my voice.

“What about the rest of town? The gossip?”

“Aye, we’ve had quite the parade of walkers and fishermen and playdates nearby.”

“Oh God.” I bring my hands up to my face, but my voice is back to its normal pitch.

“Nothing untoward happened. We had lunch, you had a nap, I read a book.”

“They’ll talk about it anyway.” He shrugs. Rising slowly this time, I move to a sitting position. “That’s just life in a small town.”

“Let ‘em talk.” His dazzling smile emerges again. “Did you have a good time? Feel more rested?”

“Yes and yes.”

“Then tha’s all that matters, right?”

“Sure, I guess.” Yikes. I don’t want to sound ungrateful. “I did have a wonderful time, Grant. It really means so much to me that, without even knowing me, you went to all this trouble.”

“’Twas no trouble. I had to eat lunch too.” Crinkly eyes and another genuine smile.

Without pausing to think, I ask, “Will you eat lunch tomorrow too?”

“Aye.”

“Will you eat lunch with me again? This time, my treat? And maybe I’ll stay awake long enough that we can actually talk.”

“Sounds smashing.”

“Great. I’ll text you the details tonight. Right now, I’m going to run off and make a couple calls before the close of business.”

He rises as I do, and I give him a quick hug before I run off.

“Talk to you soon,” I holler over my shoulder as I hurry back to the office.

Chapter 6

The Nosh Pit

Grant

No Art Walk for me today. But I did spend an entire afternoon with Liona. She's enchanting.

I already knew she was stunning. Shining dark brown hair cut short and framing her face. Luscious lips painted bright red. And a tall, lithe figure. But her personality, her mind—they now have me entranced too.

What kind of shoddy relationships has she been in, to think it so unusual that a guy would put together a picnic for her? She's a few years younger than me, but I can't imagine that she hasn't had at least one solid boyfriend. Maybe I can ask Gabi about that. And Gabi is another story.

While Liona was napping this afternoon, Gabi came walking by on the trail that runs along the river bank. She spotted me leaning against the tree and came over to introduce herself.

"Hi, are you Grant?"

"Aye."

"Did you sedate Lee with chloroform or something?" she had asked, jutting her chin in the direction of Liona lying on the ground.

"Nah, she was just really tired. After we ate lunch, she was fighting to keep her eyelids open, and I just let her doze away."

"Good man. She's exhausted."

"Working too much?"

"That, plus she had a big blow-up with her parents the other night. I know she's losing sleep over it."

"Ach. She needs the rest then."

Gabi had nodded before offering her parting warning, “Don’t hurt her, Grant. She needs this date to help her business grow, but she’s just coming off a tough break-up too. Can’t have you adding to her heartbreak.”

So Liona is coming off a bad break-up, just had a major fight with her parents, and needs a date to help her business. Despite all of that, she was chatty, animated, and positive throughout our lunch—when she wasn’t napping, that is. She’s obviously a glass-half-full type, and that works for me. I can’t imagine what kind of Easter gathering is going to help with her graphic design business, but whatever. I look forward to spending more time with her.

After dinner that evening, she texts me.

Liona: Lunch tomorrow. Can you meet at The Nosh Pit in Punning at 11:30?

Me: Aye, see ya then.

Liona: Oh, and I assume you’re okay with the holiday thing? I filled out the contract on the website. I think you need to sign it or something.

Me: Ok. I’ll check it out and do whatever I need to do.

Liona: Great!

Kind of weird to me that we need to sign a contract. I mean, we already hit it off. I would be her date for Easter whether we signed a contract or not. But maybe she needs some reassurance.

Logging into the website, I can see that I have 39 more message requests. Good thing I figured out how to turn off those blasted *dings*. I need to delete this app straight away after our Easter date.

I navigate to the section of my account where I can see the contract that Liona mentioned and read it over. Date on April 9, 2023. Attire to be provided by Liona. That one’s a little weird, but whatever. I’m not particular about what I wear. No obligations after that date. Good enough. I add my electronic signature and send it off.

Grabbing another beer out of the fridge, I settle on the couch to watch re-runs of *Eureka* before heading to bed.

I walk into The Nosh Pit promptly at 11:29 to be greeted by Gabi.

“Fancy seeing you here,” I say and extend my hand.

“Nothing fancy about it. I own the place.”

“I hope that’s okay,” a familiar voice adds from behind me. Liona.

When I turn around, the sight of her leaves me breathless and my dick rock-hard. She’s got on a tiny skirt, revealing legs that go on for miles. A close-fitting shirt that accentuates her curves in all the right places. And the boots. Oh, the boots. These glorious brown leather numbers that hug her calves all the way up to her thighs, leaving just a sliver of creamy white skin exposed between the very short skirt and the very tall boots.

I want to see those thighs of hers wrapped around my head while I make her come.

Damn. I can usually contain those thoughts better. Get a grip, man.

“Hello, sweets,” I finally say to her, leaning in for a hug, but careful that she doesn’t feel my erection. “This is great. I’ve been wanting to check out the place, and had no clue that Gabi owned it.”

“Great! Gabs, lead the way.”

Our table is a small circular booth tucked in the back of the cafe. The decor is simultaneously casual and luxe. I can tell that Gabi put a lot of time and money into creating the place.

“You two look over the menu and see what sounds interesting,” Gabi directs, “and I’ll be back in a few to make some recommendations.”

“You look stunning.” I scoot around in the circular booth to put my arm around Liona.

She shifts a little and practically whispers, “Thank you.” She’s not used to compliments on her appearance.

“Let’s look at this menu.”

We look over one menu in between us, weighing our options. The cuisine is a little eclectic—like Asian-fusion-tapas with a Southern flair.

“I think I’m just going to let Gabi pick,” Liona says. “There’s too much to choose from.”

“Perfect choice!” Gabi says as she returns to the table with a flourish and places a small plate of potstickers between us. “Pulled pork and pickled red onion potstickers, with a sweet barbecue dipping sauce.”

“Yum!” Liona digs in.

“This is a unique menu you’ve got here, Gabi. A lot of flavors I’ve never tried before. I agree with Liona—we’ll let you choose what to serve us.”

“Happy to do it. The menu is best sampled as tapas, so I’ll bring you a lot of little dishes.”

“Ah, that makes sense with the Nosh Pit name,” I offer. “I think of a nosh as a small bite.”

“Exactly!” she says excitedly.

“And these graphics are perfect. Little bites of food dancing and moshing around. Brilliant!”

Gabi’s smile turns into something like the cat that ate the canary as she reveals, “The brilliant artist is sitting right next to you.”

I turn to face Liona, still under my left arm and still eating potstickers. Her bright red lips turn to me, and her gulp is nearly audible. Why so nervous?

“You didn’t tell me, Liona. This is fantastic! Bloody brilliant, and hit the nail right on the head for Punning, I’m sure.”

A slight tinge of pink sprouts on her cheeks.

“I think it’s why the Punning Review Board put me on Main Street,” Gabi adds. “Because of Liona’s design work.”

“Doesn’t surprise me one bit. It’s something to be proud of, for sure.”

“Thanks,” is once again all Liona says. She’s not very talkative today. I wonder what thoughts are running through her head.

“Let me get back to the kitchen,” Gabi says as she hurries off.

The blush is still highlighting Liona’s face, so I pick up a potsticker instead of filling the silence.

The pulled pork is the most tender meat I’ve ever eaten, with an occasionally crispy bit of the black pepper and garlic seasoning. The pickled onions add just the right tang. The dumpling wrapper isn’t too thick or doughy, and the whole thing is steamed and then pan-fried to perfection. The barbecue sauce is almost unnecessary, but adds a sweet counterbalance that makes the bite complete. “This is really fucking good,” I say after a moment.

And the dam of tension breaks with a loud laugh from Liona.

“Yeah, it really is. I get to taste a lot of Gabi’s food, but it’s different when it’s served to you in a restaurant on cute little plates.”

“I’m sure,” I agree, as I shove another whole potsticker into my craw.

We polish off the plate seconds later, and I can feel Liona relax into my side.

“The graphic design work really is smashing, Liona.” I stare into her eyes and they twinkle. I swear to God. A twinkle of green flashes at me from those hazel eyes, hinting at the sparkling personality that is hiding under a shy shell today.

“Thank you again,” she says, but she once again shifts uncomfortably.

“What’s going on sweets?”

“It’s just—”

“Shrimp and grits!” Gabi announces as she places a small bowl in front of each of us. “Stone-ground blue-corn grits, topped with a tempura shrimp drizzled lightly with plum sauce.” Before either of us can say anything, Gabi rushes off again.

I put my hand out, getting between Liona and her food. It’s a dangerous place to be, but I’m not letting this go.

“It’s just what?” I ask, as I move my hand to her chin and turn her face to look at me. “Why do you feel uncomfortable about the graphics?”

Her eyes flick down to the table and back up to me.

“Well, I might have misled you a little bit.”

“How so?”

“I won an award for my graphic design work for The Nosh Pit, and it’s going to be awarded by the Town of Punning as part of their Annual Unicorn Festival, and Unicorn Day is April 9, and that just happens to be Easter this year, and they’re having the Unicorn Festival anyway, and I made you think you were getting an Easter date, and that’s why I was so anxious to get you to sign the contract, and we need to wear unicorn costumes to the awards ceremony, and there will be a crazy unicorn-egg-hunt thingy, and I totally understand if you hate me now and don’t want to go with me.”

She said that all in one breath. My brain is still processing it, but my sense of humor doesn’t wait. I start laughing. A full-on belly laugh, tears springing to my eyes, removing my arm from around Liona just long enough to wipe them away.

“Shhh...people are staring,” she says as she glances around furtively.

“Liona. Sweets. I don’t care one whit about what other people are doing. Let’s eat our shrimp and grits before they get cold, and then we can talk about all of this.”

Her body sags against mine, and she picks up her spoon.

This dish is no less amazing than the last. The grits are coarse-ground, giving them a little more texture, and eliminating my usual complaint about the mush. They're salted perfectly. A brilliant base for perhaps the best bite of prawn I've ever had in my life. The tempura is still crispy, which tells me it's fresh as can be and the plum sauce was truly added at the last minute. The shrimp itself—the sweet, tender meat of a crustacean. Not tough, not overcooked. And a hint of ginger beer in the batter, if my senses are on point today.

“Oh my God,” Liona moans next to me.

My dick stirs in appreciation of the expression, wishing it were in a different context. *Down, cock.*

“Aye,” is all I can muster.

Gabi returns with another dish, and so it goes for the better part of an hour. Each dish more creative and delicious than the last.

In between the orgasmic bites, we talk about all of Liona's concerns.

“I'm not mad about the Holidate thing,” I begin.

She brings her hand to cover her eyes.

“No really,” I interject. “I mean, I thought it was a little weird that you were going to dress me for Easter anyway. But this makes so much more sense.”

“It's okay if you don't want to go. I know you were looking for an Easter thing.”

“Honestly, I just wanted something to do that day because everybody told me that the whole county shuts down. Doesn't matter to me what we do,” I say, pausing to brush a lock of hair away from her face. “As long as I get to spend it with you.”

Somewhere in the middle of short ribs, I lean in to kiss her. It's a short kiss, a peck on the lips, but my body short-circuits. I feel a new spark of life running through me, and I can't help but think of everything I'd like to do to this woman

when I finally get her in bed. I'll make her scream my name so loud, the whole town will hear.

“Okay,” she says. “I'm happy to spend time with you too. Just remember, this is a one-time thing.”

Sure.

Chapter 7

She's Got the Look

Liona

For the next few days, Grant and I text each other regularly about the awards banquet. What size suit does he wear? *Huge*. Where are we getting dressed? *My place*. What time should he be there? *Not so early that I will have time to jump your bones, like I've been wanting to do all week*.

His continued support of me is more attractive than any bad-boy looks that Johnny B. might have. Grant thinks I'm beautiful, he thinks my design work is amazing, he wants to spend time with me no matter what we're doing. And he tells me all of this regularly. With Johnny, none of it was ever said. He never complimented my outfits, I'm not sure if he got that tattoo because it was *my* design or because he just happened to like it, and getting him to commit to time together was difficult at best. The men couldn't be more different.

By Saturday afternoon, I have everything we need for our unicorn costumes, thanks to online ordering and overnight shipping from One Horn Depot.

"Are you wearing your fancy underwear?" Gabi asks, inspecting the costumes laid out on my bed.

"Why would I? It's a freakin' unicorn costume. It doesn't scream *Fuck me!* or anything."

Gabi shrugs before adding, "You won't be wearing the costume the whole time, will you?"

"Probably not. It's gonna get hot, right?"

She nods with a knowing look.

"Fine. I'll wear fancy underwear."

"That matches."

"Yes, mom. Fancy underwear that matches."

"Speaking of your Mama..." Gabi waits for me to pick up the conversation, but I'm not doing it. I'm not ready to talk

about it.

“Have you talked to them since last Sunday?”

“No.”

My unicorn headband—complete with rainbow tulle veil—looks fabulous as I complete a twirl in front of my full-length mirror.

“Are you going to talk to them?” she asks after a long pause.

Spinning back around towards her, I let out a pent-up sigh. “I don’t know, Gabs. I hope so. They’re my parents. I hope I haven’t lost them forever. But I’m also tired of the... the... everything. It’s like their entire world revolves around me and everything I’m doing. They want to talk about the neighborhood I’m living in, my new haircut, who my clients are—it’s like since Griff died, they need to control every aspect of my life. And it’s just... it’s too much. I can’t take it anymore.”

She cocks her head at me. “Have you told *them* any of this?”

“You saw how well that went.”

“No Lee, I don’t mean blowing up at them in anger. I mean sitting down and talking to them when everyone is calm and open to discussing a difficult topic.”

“Are you saying Sunday is my fault?” My body tenses, my chin tilts up.

“No. Fault is not something I care about. I care about you, and your family, and making sure you all work through this situation. I know how important your family is to you, Liona.”

And just as quickly, the anger leaves my body.

“You’re right.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“Well, I won’t be able to see them this weekend because of the Unicorn Festival, but I’ll go over next Sunday and see if

we can't talk it out.”

“Good. Glad to hear it,” Gabi says with a smile. “Now, show me the fancy underwear.”

Grant

Okay, man. Keep it under control. Yes, Liona is hot as hell. Yes, it's been a long time. No, it's not happening right now.

Yes, I'm talking to my cock. I just got to Liona's house to get ready for the awards banquet, and dude needs to calm down.

She answered the door in her robe—a short, white, terrycloth number, with the V of the opening hanging a little wider than she probably intended. It's doing nothing to hide her miles-long legs or the amazing creamy flesh of her breasts. And I am so here for it. So is my dick.

“Okay, so if you want to change in my second bedroom, I set your costume in there. I'll keep working on getting ready in my room.”

Good. A chance to get away from her.

I mean, I don't really want to get away from her. But I also don't want my cock to embarrass me. So I'll have a few minutes to calm down and get my body into a more presentable state.

“Point me in that direction,” I say with a smile.

The unicorn costume is still safely packaged in plastic. “Let's see what I've signed myself up for,” I say aloud to no one in particular.

It's... indescribable. Scratchy white fur. Pastel rainbow accents. Like a mascot costume. I hold it up in front of me. And that's when I realize it's only the back half. Where is the head?

Heading back out to the living room, I see that Liona has disappeared. She must be in her bedroom down the other hall, so I stroll down there.

And what should I come across but Liona, standing in her bedroom, naked except for the tiniest little red bra and panties. Those long, long legs. Her skin just begging to be touched. I'm still busy gawking when she looks up and screams.

"So sorry," I say and I turn around to give her a little more privacy.

A moment later, she appears in front of me, white robe back in place.

"What the hell, Grant? I didn't shut the door because I figured you'd be busy changing. Were you just waiting to get a look at me naked? A little Peeping Tom action?" As she speaks, her voice gets louder, and the color rises up from her décolletage to her neck.

"Nah," I say, and then add more forcefully, "No. I wouldna do that to you."

"Then what the hell are you doing here?"

"Well, um..." I shift uncomfortably in these blasted jeans. There's a reason I prefer a kilt. "There's, uh... a problem with my costume."

"A problem? What kind of problem?"

"Seems like they only sent half 'a it."

"What?!" Her voice raises another decibel and another octave.

"Aye. Come have a look."

She rushes off down the hall in front of me. When I reach the second bedroom, she's holding up the butt end of a unicorn. The look on her face...

"What are we gonna do now? The dress code requires unicorn costumes for the awards banquets!" She looks increasingly more agitated.

"I mean, I'd rather go with ya, but I can stay home. You go to the thing without me."

"But the whole point was... I wanted..." she says before bursting into tears.

Without a moment's hesitation, I pull her into my arms. Her slim body pressed against mine. My hands around her, rubbing her back in small, slow circles. Incoherent hushing noises like Mum used to make. I get a whiff of her fruity-smelling shampoo from the top of her head. "Shhhhh."

Down boy. Ye can't be rising to the occasion when the girl is upset and crying. Think of that damn boring game of baseball. Mrs. Higginbotham from back home. Anything except how hot she is.

But he doesn't listen. It's just a matter of time before Liona—

"What is that?" she says, jumping back away from me.

My time to turn red. "It's, er... me?"

"Are you sure?"

"Ah, yeah."

"But it's... it's..."

"It's what?"

She's a purply-red shade now. Maybe magenta?

"It's huge!" she shrieks and runs out of the room.

And this whole thing is so ridiculous. All I can do is sit down on the bed, put my head in my hands, and laugh.

Liona

Do dicks really come that big?

Surely he's teasing me. Right?

But it would be proportional I guess. Because the man about to get naked in my spare bedroom has to be an optical illusion. Or a fairytale. Or all of my romantic fantasies rolled into one larger-than-life male specimen. He's a 6-foot-7 wall of muscle. Jeans stretch across his upper thighs, holding on for dear life, hoping that his quads won't bust through. His simple linen button-down is cuffed up over forearms sinewy with muscle. A man's man.

Sigh.

I'll just put on my costume, and get my mind off all... that.

As I shrug off the robe again and lift up my costume, I make a horrific discovery.

It's only the front half of a costume.

I sink to the floor, unicorn head in hand, and begin laughing. Because what else are you gonna do?

When I finally get myself back under control, I find some leggings and a tank top to throw on, and then march back to the second bedroom.

"It seems there's something wrong with my costume too," I say as a way of announcing myself.

He looks up from his hands with concern. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I only have the front half."

"But that means..."

"Yeah. That means we each have to wear half a costume. And you've got to bend over and hold on to my ass all night."

"I mean, I've had worse offers," he says, laughing as he stands up from the bed. "So ah, what do we wear under?"

"Well, I'm just gonna wear what I have on now. And you can wear whatever you want."

"I guess I'll just wear jeans then."

"Don't you think you're going to get hot?"

"Probably. But I, uh. I don't have any knickers on underneath."

"You were gonna go commando in the unicorn costume?!" I shriek at him.

A sheepish grin crosses his face. "Well ya know, I don't wear them under a kilt. And a lot of times, I just... forget to put 'em on."

"Oh my God." *OH MY GOD!*

“S’okay. I’ll just wear the jeans.”

“I can’t let you do that. You’ll overheat. It’ll feel like the middle of July in there!”

We stare at each other for a moment.

“I know! I’ll go next door and ask Chad to borrow some of his!”

I’m already rushing out of the room when I hear, “Liona. Wait.”

I turn around to see him standing in the hall.

“Ye can’t just go ask your neighbor to borrow some of his boxer shorts.”

“You don’t know Chad. It’s far from the weirdest thing I’ve ever borrowed from him. And probably won’t even be the weirdest thing he loans out tonight.”

A look of pure confusion.

“I just... what?!... if you say so.”

He shakes his head, turns around, and heads back to the second bedroom. I catch him muttering something about this “weird little town.”

Grant

She returns a few minutes later with a pair of boxer briefs, packaging and tags still attached. It’s still weird as fuck, but at least I’m not wearing some bloke’s used shorts.

“Thanks,” I say. “Let’s get this show on the road then?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Meet you in the living room with my half on.”

It takes me a little bit to take off boots, jeans, shirt, put on random new boxers, wriggle into half a unicorn costume, adjust the straps, and get my boots back on. And I have to say that I’m very glad I won’t be wearing jeans under this. I’m already working up a sweat, just trying to get dressed.

I wander out into the living room, still adjusting the finicky suspenders on the costume, when I hear someone mumble, “Holy shit.” Looking up, all I can see is a huge unicorn head pointed in my direction.

“What is it, sweets?”

“Ah, nothing?”

“You sure?”

“Um, yeah. You just, uh. You don’t have a shirt on.”

“Oh, right. Hope that’s ok?”

“Yeah. Yeah, definitely ok.”

I don’t know how unicorns typically flirt, but I swear that one batted her eyelashes at me.

Chapter 8

Sweat

Liona

Holy shit, that man is hot.

He came into the living room all distracted, fiddling with his suspenders. A light sheen of sweat coated his bare chest beneath. The pecs. Oh my God, the muscles. Every part of his chest and arms rippled with exertion as he moved across the room towards me. And the memory of that dick.

Holy shit. I'm wet just thinking about him sliding into me.

No time for all that just now.

Grant offers to drive us to the awards ceremony, and I immediately say yes. His pickup truck will be a lot easier to wedge these costumes into than my little convertible would be. It still takes us a good 10 minutes of squeezing, and adjusting, and grunting, to get everything loaded in the truck.

I'd like to do a different kind of squeezing and adjusting and grunting with him.

Dammit, Liona, get a grip.

The thirty-minute ride over to the Punning Chamber of Commerce is awkward. I took off the unicorn head for the ride over, so we can at least hear each other. But what is there to talk about when you're two halves of a unicorn about to spend an afternoon face-to-ass?

"So Gabi bought the table, right?" he asks.

"Yep."

"Do we know who else will be sitting with us?"

"Actually, I don't. I mean, I know Gabi will be there and she'll grab some random hot guy to be her date. But I didn't think to ask who would be filling out the table."

"Okay."

More heavy silence.

“This thing should only last about two hours,” I offer. “A banquet lunch and then the awards presentation.”

“No worries. I don’t have any other plans today,” he says, throwing a half-grin in my direction.

We finally get to the Chamber of Commerce building and begin the process of extracting ourselves and our costumes from the truck.

“We have to be in full costume to enter,” I explain. “There’s a pretty strict dress code for the Unicorn Festival. It’s like they want to believe that unicorns really exist, and that we all actually are them.”

“Then let me see that ass,” he says.

“Grant!” I say, pretending to be scandalized. “What happened to being a gentleman?”

He pauses for a moment, a contrite look coming over his face, before I start laughing.

“There’s no fucking way to be a gentleman when you’re face is going to be in my ass for the next couple of hours.”

“Aye,” he says with a wicked grin. “Who knows what trouble I’ll get up to down there?”

And with that, he folds himself in half, puts one hand on my waist, and begins attaching our costume together.

In no time, we’re standing in the lobby of the Chamber.

There’s a table marked “Unicorns check in here!”

“We’re with The Nosh Pit table, under Gabi Carrera,” I tell the woman checking us in.

“Names?”

“Liona and Grant,” I say.

“Grant’s the ass-end!” I hear him holler from behind me.

The woman chuckles.

“You’ll be at table 5. Here’s your program, and enjoy it.”

“Thanks so much,” I tell her.

Grant and I begin our waddle into the banquet room. We could have used a little more practice with this thing before taking it on the road. But I keep walking at a slow-ish pace, assuming he will keep up with me and not fall flat on his face. So far, no complaints.

“Hey, why are there people dressed as rhinoceros... rhinoceri... rhinoceroses?” Grant asks.

“They’re real unicorns,” I say with a laugh, “didn’t you know?”

“I did not.”

“It’s a fun group of body-positive Gen X-ers who like to remind everyone that *Real unicorns have curves*. I even have a shirt with the motto on it.”

“Nice. I like to see inclusion in all ways.”

At the moment, I am happy to see that we aren’t the only two-person unicorn here. There are a number of them around the room, standing awkwardly next to tables.

“Ugh. How are we going to sit down?”

“I think we’re not, sweets. We’ll have to bribe Gabi to shove food inside the costume for us. You said we’ve got to look like a unicorn at all times. That means no removing the costume, and no quartering the unicorn.”

“Well, won’t this be lovely.”

Peering through the eyeholes of the costume, I finally spot table 5 up in the front row, off to the right-hand side. At least we’ll be able to make a quick exit out that door. I have a feeling I’ll want to jettison this costume as soon as possible.

“Okay, turning left up here. Watch out.”

We make it over to the table with only a minor incident of Grant getting a mouthful of my ass.

“It doesn’t suck,” he assures me as we arrange ourselves on the edge of the room.

“What doesn’t suck?”

“Getting this up-close-and-personal with your butt.”

“Oh good,” I say, my eye-rolling evident in the tone of my voice.

“Liona? Is that you?”

I recognize Gabi’s voice from the unicorn approaching us. The sexy unicorn, with the skin-tight white leotard and tulle skirt, wearing beautifully-done facepaint and a headband that matches the one I thought I would be wearing today.

“Sadly, yes.”

“What happened to your costume?”

“There was some mix-up at One Horn Depot, I guess. All we got was this two-person monstrosity. And my cute little headband that does me no good under this huge freakin’ head.”

“Well, you’re dressed as a unicorn at least. You know it’s required.”

I nod before adding, “Hey, we’re gonna need some help eating while in costume.”

Gabi laughs too loud. “I’ll do my best, but it’s also just banquet-rubber-chicken, so you won’t be missing much.”

“True.”

From behind me, a brogue rumbles, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Grant and I maneuver ourselves into the most comfortable position we can—which isn’t saying much—and settle in for the luncheon and awards ceremony. I notice other people joining our table, but I can’t tell who they are underneath the costumes.

Gabi was right. The food is wholly unforgettable. Fortunately, the program begins soon enough.

“Welcome to the Punning Unicorn Festival Top-of-the-Town Awards. I’m your host, Tony Capsigo.” *Ew, Tony.*

“That guy was on the Holidates app too,” I whisper over my shoulder to Grant.

A low rumble is all I get in response. “Hmm.”

Soon it’s time for my award.

“This next award is for Best Punny Marketing by a Punning business,” Tony announces. “And the award goes to... Gabi Carrera at The Nosh Pit.”

“Come on, unicorn dream team,” Gabi says to us. “Let’s go accept this award.”

We slowly make our way up to the dais behind Gabi.

“I think we’ll stay down here,” I say to her. “Stairs might be more than we can manage.”

She nods her head, and bounds up the stairs to accept the award from Tony.

Speeches really aren’t part of the ceremony, but she grabs his mic anyway. “Thanks to my awesome graphic designer Liona for The Nosh Pit’s logo!”

“That was lovely of her,” Grant says from somewhere near my left ass-cheek.

“Yeah,” I respond. He can’t see the smile on my face or the tears in my eyes. I really appreciate all that Gabi has done, and continues to do, to help my career.

Returning to the table, I see that two of our guests are standing. The taller one approaches me and gives me a hug.

“We’re so proud of you,” he says. The shorter unicorn nods in agreement.

Daddy? Mama?!

And that’s when the tears start flowing for real.

“Grant.”

“Hmm?”

“I have to get out of here. Now.”

And so the unicorn dream team trots our happy asses out to the parking lot of the Punning Chamber of Commerce, followed by Rick & Helen Earle in unicorn drag.

I yank the head off my costume.

“What are y’all doing here?” I ask my parents. “Grant, you can unhook from my ass now,” I add as an afterthought.

“Gabi invited us,” Mama begins.

“And we’ve been feeling so bad about what happened last weekend,” Daddy continues, “we thought we should come support you.”

“And since we’re in costume, no one will know we were in Punning anyway!” Mama finishes with a flourish.

“I know you don’t fully understand or agree with the town feud, honey,” Daddy says. “But know this. You will always be more important to me than anything else in this world. Than a good-for-nothing neighboring town. Than a stupid unicorn costume. I love you, Liona, and I’m so proud of you.”

“Oh, Daddy,” I say as I grab him in a tight hug. “I’m sorry for what I said to you. It’s just—since Griff died—”

“I know,” he says, patting me on the back, “I know.”

“And who’s your bottom here?” Mama asks, clueless at the double entendre she just dropped.

“Grant MacLeod,” he says, extending his hand first to Daddy, and then taking Mama’s hand in his before bringing it to his lips for a kiss.

“Oh my. Such a gentleman,” Mama says, fluffing her hair.

“Well Mama, Daddy,” I say, “I really appreciate you coming, and we sure have some stuff to talk about.” They both nod their heads. “But I gotta get home and get out of this awful costume half.”

“Aye, me too,” Grant adds. “It was lovely to meet you both,” he says to my parents.

Gabi comes jogging up to our group just as we're saying our good-byes.

"You guys made quite a scene all running out of there before the banquet was over."

"Sorry, Gabs. Hope it doesn't harm your relationship with anyone."

"Nah, it will be fine." With a gleam in her eye, she adds, "I just told everyone it was an urgent rainbow-unicorn-fart situation."

Mama covers her mouth with her hand, slightly horrified by the whole thing.

The rest of us laugh it off and pack up into our vehicles.

I can't wait to get out of this damn costume.

Chapter 9

Touch Me

Grant

That unicorn costume was fucking hot. Like, temperature hot.

As it turns out, bending over and holding on to someone's waist for the better part of two hours is not nearly as sexy as you might think. Or as I thought it might have been. No, it was just uncomfortable and sweaty.

I'm thankful we got to unhook the costume while standing in the parking lot. I was so focused on avoiding heatstroke, I barely registered everything that was going on between Liona and her parents.

But I did manage to shake hands with her dad and kiss her mom's hand. That should earn me some points.

As we drive back to Liona's house, I've got the air conditioning on full blast in the truck. I don't care that I don't have a shirt on and my nipples are hard as rock because of it. I need relief from this fucking costume.

"Oh my God, I'm so hot," Liona echoes, putting her head right by the a/c vent.

"Aye. I'm too miserable to even make a lame joke about how hot you are."

"I have two showers at my house. I'm running to mine as soon as we walk in the door. Feel free to use the other."

I nod. A shower will do me good.

Twenty minutes later, standing under a stream of cold water, I can finally think straight again.

What is this thing with Liona? I'm leaving Arkansas in a couple more weeks. Do I really want to start something and then have to leave? I can see myself falling for her so easily. She's physically attractive, sure. But the drive she has. The

determination to succeed, no matter what others think. That makes her irresistible.

She doesn't seem interested in more than just today though. She's reminded me several times that this is a one-time thing.

These thoughts are still swirling in my head as I'm toweling off, standing buck naked in the middle of Liona's second bedroom.

So imagine my surprise when Liona comes bursting through the door, wearing nothing but a towel around her.

My hands stop moving and I stand there staring at her. What is this?

Her eyes are roaming every inch of my body, her gaze becoming more heated by the moment.

"Did you want to cover up?" she finally asks.

"I don't mind being nude in front of you," I say as I slowly shake my head. "Does it bother you?"

"No, it definitely does not."

She prowls towards me, a lion on the hunt. I have to remind myself to breathe. My heart threatens to beat right out of my chest.

When she stops in front of me, my hands ache to reach out. But this has to be her choice.

"Do you want to see more?" she asks, tugging at the collar of her robe.

I dip my head in a nod. Her hands slowly move to untie the robe. As it falls away from her, I drop my towel too. Now we're two people standing in front of each other, naked.

"What now, Liona?" I murmur.

"Anything you want."

A wave of desire washes over me. Slowly, so slowly, I reach my hands out to rest on her arms. Treating her like a wild animal I don't want to spook.

I reach up with one hand, allowing the back of my fingers to brush gently down the curve of her neck. My hand trails lower, to the top of one breast and then over to her breastbone. The skin so velvety smooth, my lips ache to have a taste. Down her abdomen to the dip at her belly button. Over to the swell of her hip, where I guide her closer to me. She presses into me, the hard length of my cock between us.

Looking down into her eyes, I watch as hers darken. Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips and I instinctively do the same.

Lowering my mouth to hers, my whole body thrums in anticipation. And she does not disappoint.

This is not a chaste kiss. This is a hungry kiss. A wild kiss. Her lips may be soft, but her tongue is insistent, probing. My dick throbs in time to the rhythm of our kiss. I don't think I've ever been so turned on by a kiss. She hasn't even touched me yet.

A deep guttural groan wells up, and I break our kiss too soon.

Liona

Grant groans and pulls away.

“What is this thing, Liona?”

“What do you mean?” I ask. My hands begin roaming his chest. That hard wall of muscle in front of me, its swells and ridges begging to be explored.

“You keep reminding me this is a single date, a one-time thing...” His voice trails off and his eyes close as I reach down and begin stroking him.

“It is,” I insist. “But you told me you take the opportunity to savor every moment. If I only have this one day with you, I want to savor every inch of your body, taste your lips on mine, feel you inside of me.”

Another groan rips from his throat, but no more words. His hands grasp the back of my thighs and he hoists me up.

My legs circle his waist and he carries me back towards the guest bed.

As he lays me down gently, my eyes soften. This big, strong Scotsman — brute of a man, really — is so tender with me. So careful as he folds the blankets back and arranges me on the bed.

“Comfy?” he murmurs.

“Mmmm.” I close my eyes and his tongue traces where his hands were before. He kisses down my neck, from the shell of my ear to my collarbone. Each touch of his lips to my hot skin sends a shiver and a thrill through me. As his lips reach the top of my breast, I can’t help but whimper a little. He continues to tease kisses down my chest, to my belly button, and keeps ongoing.

With every move he makes closer to my pussy, I feel myself getting wetter.

“I can smell you, sweets,” he murmurs from somewhere below.

No response from me. I can feel the rumble of his voice radiating through my core, can feel the slickness on my inner thighs, can feel his body heat coursing up through me with every move he makes.

“Please,” I whimper.

“Please what?”

“Please, fuck me.”

“Ah, not yet, my sweet. First I need to taste you.”

My whole body ignites, the words just as important as the touch. And I find myself thrusting up towards him before I know what I’m doing.

“So impatient,” he chuckles.

But before I can respond, his fingers are in my folds, spreading me wide open. A gentle lap at my core is all it takes for me to lose control. I begin bucking at his mouth, until I feel his large hands press down on my hip bones.

“Slow down,” he urges. “I want you to enjoy this.”

“I’ll try,” I whisper, “but please. Don’t. Stop.”

“Deal.”

His tongue finds its rhythm again as I writhe for him. And when he gently slides a finger inside of me, a moan rips loose, “Oh God, Grant. Yes.”

“You like that sweets?”

“Mmmm-hmmmm.”

Another finger slides in, his tongue and his fingers now moving together in a choreographed masterpiece. My core begins to tighten.

“That’s a good girl,” he murmurs.

As he begins to beckon toward that spot inside of me, the pitch of my voice rises higher and higher. I ride the overwhelming sensations to a crest.

“Come for me Liona,” he commands. And I do.

My body shatters. My legs twitch. My screams are incoherent gibberish. And suddenly I feel a release. A rush of liquid between my legs.

Grant pulls his face back slightly. “You didn’t tell me you were a squirter. God, that’s sexy.”

He strokes me down from my climax, his fingers continuing their rhythmic assault.

It’s almost too much. Just on the edge of pain. I’ve got him clamped inside of me though, and I don’t want him to go anywhere.

Kisses cover my abdomen, his fingers still working. Stretching me open, forming ever-wider circles.

His mouth makes its way back up to mine. I taste, I smell, I breathe my own essence. The blend of his scent and mine fills my senses, and I feel my heat rise again.

“Aye, there’s what I was looking for,” he says as his fingers continue to circle.

I reach down and find him hard as steel. He's just as big as I worried he'd be earlier today.

He must sense my hesitation. "Dinna worry, sweets. I'll make sure you're ready for me."

As I continue to stroke him, he moves his mouth to my nipples. First one, then the other. He finds the direct connection between my nipples and vagina, and I feel myself getting impossible wetter for him.

"Grant," I pant.

"Mmmm?" he murmurs, still sucking and nibbling.

"I need your cock inside of me now."

Slowly, his fingers pull out, stretching one last circle as they depart. His kisses move back up my mouth, until he rocks back on his knees. He reaches for his jeans and pulls out a condom.

I grin at him. "Am I that predictable?"

"Actually, no. I always have one on me, but this is it. So we better make it good."

As he rolls the rubber down his length, a silly giddiness overcomes me.

"Oh boy," I say, rubbing my hands together and laughing.

He laughs too, but then he moves deliberately over me. Lines up with my pussy and enters me. My laugh disappears, my eyes roll back into my head, and I'm lost to the sensation again.

Focused only on the feel of his dick now making those circles like his fingers did. Him slowly pushing inside of me as he circles.

At long last, I feel him reach the end. Sigh at the delicious feeling of him filling me. Too full, but so good.

"You doing okay?" he whispers as he brushes a piece of hair from my face.

"Just fine," I respond with a smile.

“Open your eyes for me?”

I slowly open them, to find his gorgeous green eyes staring back at me. “Watch me,” he commands, as he begins to stroke inside of me.

Moaning on every little thrust, I strain to keep my eyes open. But I do. I watch his eyes as they turn dark. I watch his lips press together, the sheen of sweat gather on his face and chest. I watch him put every bit of deliberate work into fucking me. Into bringing me higher and higher.

His rhythm increases, and I can't watch him any longer. My eyes clamp shut, my hands grab the sheets on either side of me, and my hips begin moving with his. A wordless dance between us, as we each search for our release, each bring the other impossibly higher.

“You first,” he grunts out as he lowers his mouth to my nipples once again.

And I'm gone. I'm screaming, I'm bucking, I've lost all control. The wetness flows between my legs once more.

“Harder!” I pant out.

And he does it. He fucks me as hard and as fast and as deep as anyone ever has, and my orgasm continues to radiate through me.

“Liona... fuck... yes,” he growls. “Yes!” he roars and I feel his warmth release inside the condom. Feel him keep pumping. Feel as he collapses on top of me.

Grant

We lay there, both silently panting, for some time.

When I finally regain control of my extremities, I slowly pull out of her. Rolling over, I drop the condom on the floor next to me and wince as I see it spill some of its contents.

Rolling back over, I reach for Liona and drag her into my arms. Pulling her close to me, I inhale the scent of her hair. Admire the graceful curve of her neck. Taste the sweat on her

skin as I kiss that spot just below her ear. Touch her velvety smooth stomach as I pull her still closer. Hear her gentle breathing as she dozes off. And feel the beating of her heart, in rhythm with mine. Telling me this is home.

What am I going to do?

Chapter 10

Angel of the Morning

Liona

The sun streams through the window, low in the sky, as I stir in Grant's arms. His deep breathing tells me he's asleep too, but as soon as I turn my body a little, he's instantly awake.

"Morning, angel," he rumbles softly.

"Shit. It's not morning, is it?"

His deep laugh vibrates through both of us.

"No. It's late afternoon. We both just had a short nap."

"Oh good. I don't want this day to be over." I shimmy my ass up against him to emphasize the last.

"Me either." His arms tighten around me. "But I *am* starving."

"Me too. We didn't really eat much at lunch, and now we've used all that energy." He chuckles as I continue, "What would you like to eat?"

"Well, you," he says and pauses, "but for dinner, I'm not picky. Is there a place you like to order from?"

"I don't want more restaurant food. Let me cook something for us."

"Only if you let me help."

"Deal. Do you like steak, and do you know how to grill it?"

"Yes and yes."

Neither of us go anywhere though. I enjoy luxuriating in his warmth, reclining in his embrace, for a few minutes longer.

It's the grumble of his stomach that finally gets me out of bed.

"I'm going to go put some clothes on. You might want to do the same, lest you scandalize the senior citizens of Jasper

Mill.”

“Huh?”

“Shady Grove is behind me. The retirement home. The old women are often sitting out there gossiping when I go outside to grill. So you should probably put some clothes on for them.

“Ah, okay.” He gives me a lopsided grin from where he’s still lounging on the bed, and my stomach does a little flip at the sight of him. Broad shoulders, defined pecs. Large muscular thighs. And his impressive length lying against those thighs. An audible sigh escapes my mouth.

“Okay, going to get dressed.” I say it more for myself than for him, and walk out of the room to the sound of his chuckle.

Ten minutes later, I’m standing in the kitchen, whipping up a red-wine marinade, when Grant’s arms circle my waist. His warm lips trail kisses up my neck.

“Don’t distract me,” I scold as I gesture at him with a whisk, leaving oil droplets in my wake.

“Give me something to do then.”

“Can you peel some potatoes?”

“Aye. Consider it done.”

I step out of the kitchen just long enough to turn on some music. As P!nk sings the opening line of “Walk Me Home,” we fall into a comfortable, quiet rhythm. I finish the marinade and season the steaks before dropping them in, he peels and then dices the potatoes so he can put them on to boil, and I begin making a salad.

“This is nice,” Grant says as the first song ends.

It is. The companionship, the working in the kitchen together. The sight of him bare-chested at my kitchen island. The delicious soreness of him having rearranged my organs.

“I’ve become a fan of P!nk the last couple of years.”

Oh. He meant the music.

I nod and smile, jettisoning thoughts of having him here in my kitchen all the time.

We finish preparing dinner without much conversation. I do notice, and enjoy, how we move together in the kitchen. Anticipating each other's needs, sharing tastes and opinions on the food. By the time we sit down to dinner, I'm in my feels again. I'm drawn to him. Drawn to not just who he is, but how he makes me feel. A warm glow envelops me. And maybe the red wine has something to do with that, but I'm enjoying it.

"You've gone quiet on me," Grant says as we sit down to eat.

"Just thinking."

"What's going on in that beautiful head of yours?"

"Ummm..."

"You can tell me anything, sweets."

Total honesty it is.

"I'm thinking about you, about us. About how right this feels. How nice it is cooking and talking and just being with you. Wondering if it can last."

He glances down. "You know it can't," he says to his hands.

"But why not? Life can change. We can make different choices."

"Aye, we could—

Knock, knock, knock.

What was the rest of that sentence? What was he going to say?!

Knock, knock, knock.

"I'll get it," he says, pushing back from the table.

I follow him to the front door just in time to see him open the door to Mrs. Hall. She's holding out her famous cheesecake and ogling Grant's chest.

“Hello, Mrs. Hall,” I say with a smile. “Why don’t you come in?”

“Hello, dear. I thought you might want some dessert to go with this snack,” she says, gesturing at Grant. She’s laughing at herself so much, she can barely get the sentence out.

“Your grandsons been teaching you slang again?”

“Oh lordy, yes.” She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Mrs. Hall, this is Grant. Grant, Mrs. Hall. She lives in the building behind me.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Hall,” he says as he picks up her hand to kiss it.

“Oh my,” she says and brings the hand to her chest. “What a gentleman.”

Knock, knock, knock.

We haven’t even made it past the foyer.

I open the door to see Mrs. Dyer, with what looks like her famous chocolate-pecan cake in a Tupperware carrier.

“Come on in, Mrs. Dyer.” As I gesture her inside, I get a text alert on my phone.

Gabi: What—or who—are you doing?

Me: Ha ha.

Me: Apparently I’m hosting dessert for the neighborhood. Come over.

Gabi: On my way!

By the time Gabi gets here, I’ve got six female residents of Shady Grove sitting in my living room and kitchen, and six different desserts spread across the kitchen counter.

“I have wine!” she announces as she lets herself in.

“Oh good, we already finished Liona’s,” Mrs. Hall calls back to her.

I get up to pour nine glasses of red wine, and the conversation continues without me. Grant did manage to find his shirt, but he's still holding the rapt attention of seven women with just the sound of his voice. I hear his laugh and the giggles – yes, even 75-year-old women still giggle – surrounding him.

Another sigh. I'm happy. Too happy, considering this can't last. But this. This deep sense of belonging, the nearly-tangible love radiating through the conversations... this is what I long for. Why did I manage to find it with a guy who's leaving in two weeks?

“—since her brother Griffin died...”

That's all I hear walking back into the living room before the “shhh”s take over.

It's like a slap in the face. A long awkward pause engulfs the room before I can find my voice.

“Were you sharing my business, Mrs. Hall?”

“Well, dear, we just wanted Grant to know a little more about you.”

“And you don't think I should get a say about when he learns what about me?”

“Well—”

“Evelyn, hush,” Mrs. Dyer says to her as she rises from the couch.

“Ladies, I think it's time for us to take our leave.” Mrs. Dyer urges her five neighbors up from the couches and begins the long process of getting them all out the door. I'm so grateful for her.

“Liona, you return those dishes whenever it's convenient for you,” she says, gesturing to the kitchen.

I find my manners. “Thank you, all, for bringing the lovely desserts.”

“Aye,” Grant adds. “They were all delicious.” And he did try them all. He's a massive guy with an appetite to match, but

he also has manners.

“It was nice to meet you, Grant,” Mrs. Hall says sheepishly as they make their exit. “I hope we’ll see more of you around here.” And she adds a wink for good measure.

He chuckles as the door closes behind them.

“Well,” I say to Grant and Gabi, “looks like we have a lot of wine to drink.”

The tension eases as all three of us settle back in the living room. Grant has an arm around me, and I gladly snuggle into his warmth.

“What’s up, Gab?” I finally ask.

“I have some exciting news!”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve gotten calls and emails from four different people this afternoon, wanting me to put them in touch with my graphic designer.”

“Oh wow! The awards ceremony was just today. That’s amazing.”

“I’m not surprised one bit,” Grant says, looking down at me.

Staring back into his eyes, I see some emotion hiding there.

Gabi clears her throat.

“I’m not surprised either. But do you want me to give them your contact info?”

“Of course!” I say without hesitation. “This is exactly what I’ve been hoping for. More name recognition. And now that people realize there’s a designer behind your ads, I can see myself really taking off. No more weird graphic design commissions from Fiverr. I can do more of the work that I love.”

“Ok, great,” Gabi says with an easy smile. “So, you guys want to tell me what you’ve been up to this afternoon?”

There's a wicked gleam in her eye.

"Behave," I say. Grant shifts uncomfortably beside me. "What do you have planned for this week?" I ask her, trying to deflect.

She relents. "I think I'm going to head down to Little Rock one day this week. I hear there's a little café going out of business that's having a sale on all their fixtures. Plus you know I love the restaurant supply store there."

"That will be fun," I say. And I mean it. I love shopping with Gabi. She comes up with the craziest ideas for how to use different furniture and decorative stuff. And it always comes out fabulous.

"Want to come with?"

"Heck yeah."

"I was thinking of heading down to Little Rock, too," Grant adds.

"Oh really?" I turn to look at him again.

"Aye. I want to visit the Clinton Presidential Library."

My eyebrows furrow. "...Why? I mean, I like Clinton. But a Presidential Library? I can't imagine too much of interest there."

"You'll think it odd," he says, hesitating.

"Oh come on Grant, tell us," Gabi urges.

"Well, I really love cars."

"Uh-huh. Are there a lot of cars down there?"

"No, just one. You see, Bill Clinton is something of a cultural curiosity back home."

"Why's that?" Gabi asks.

"I guess everyone was surprised at how the Monica Lewinsky thing went down. There were books written, commentary on the dialogues of politics around the world. I mean, I was just a kid, but I remember hearing Clinton's name regularly in conversation."

“Weird,” Gabi says.

“So why the Presidential Library?” I ask again.

“There’s a car there I want to see. One of the presidential limos that Cadillac made for Clinton. And it just so happened to have rolled off the factory line on my birthdate – February 20, 1993. That’s all.” He shrugs, but then continues. “It brings together the fascination with Clinton, my interest in cars, my birthday, and my visit to Arkansas.”

Gabi looks confused.

“I think it’s neat,” I say. “Can I go with you?”

I’m rewarded with a wide smile. “Aye.”

“It’s a date then,” Gabi says, jumping up and clapping her hands. “We’re all going to Little Rock on... Tuesday?”

Grant and I both nod at her words, but we’re still staring into one another’s faces.

“Ok, I’ll see myself out,” she says.

“Bye Gabs. Lock the door please.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” she calls as she closes the front door behind her.

Chapter 11

The Truth Will Set You Free

Grant

She's interested in me. She didn't laugh at me. She's so fucking gorgeous.

"I need you back in bed," I murmur as I nuzzle behind her ear.

"Let's go to mine this time," she whispers.

I stand up with her, cradling her in my arms.

"Don't hurt yourself," she says.

"Liona. Sweets. I'll carry you around this world with me, and it will never hurt. Because you make me feel so good. So cherished."

Her lips crash into mine, the kisses insistent. Demanding more from me. And when I lay her down on her bed and try to rest my head between her thighs, she demands still more.

"No, Grant. Make love to me."

My heart skips a beat. Is this more... is it something I can give? Is it something I want to give?

"What do you mean? I thought that's what I was doing?" I'm being intentionally obtuse.

"I don't mean orgasms, Grant. I mean put your feelings into it."

The feelings are overwhelming. "I... I don't know—"

Her lips cut me off. Take me out of my head. Let me just feel everything.

She tastes of chocolate and shiraz. Her tongue tangling with mine, I can't control my hands. They want to run over every inch of her body. Feel the velvety smooth of her skin, claim every piece as mine. My erection throbs between us as her hips grind against mine.

“Make love to me?” she asks again, pulling back from our kiss.

And I know just what she means and just what I want. I give a small nod and rest my head against hers. She leans over to her nightstand drawer to grab a condom, but she pulls it away as I reach for it.

“Let me,” she whispers into the dark.

I nod again.

This time, it’s all I can do to contain myself. I feel my balls tightening even as she rolls the rubber down my cock.

“I don’t know how long I can last,” I warn her.

“Don’t worry about it. Don’t think. Just feel.” Her murmurs urge me on as she lies back on the bed.

Oh, how I feel. Her pussy is warm and waiting for me as I line myself up at her entrance. Moving so slowly, circling my hips, I take her as I can, stretching her wide for me. My lips find her nipples again, and I’m rewarded by the feeling of more moisture helping me slide in. When I finally sink myself in to the hilt, a shudder runs through me.

“Are you cold?” she asks.

Shaking my head no, I say the only thing I can. “Perfect. Everything is perfect.”

Her nipples harden beneath me, and I take that as my cue to pick up the pace.

Lost in the sensation of her body gripping mine, of my hands running down the sides of her torso, of the warmth spreading through my body. “Open your eyes, Liona,” I whisper.

And I see it. I see her soul. The depths behind her eyes. Know instantly that she’s a good person. That she could be *the* person. It scares me, but it also comforts me. Staring into those eyes, I feel the power welling up in my body. Feel it surging through every part of me. Feel her body clamp impossibly tight on mine as something primal comes to the fore. And I

roar. Like the clan warriors before me. Like a lion claiming its territory. Like a man in love.

Liona

Holy hell.

The man roared my name.

All the bones have left my body. I'm just a quivering mass of pleasure, throbbing with love.

He's snoring before I regain motor control. But when I finally do, I climb out of bed for yet another shower. Deliciously sore and uncomfortably sweaty, the water beating down on me seems to cleanse deep down to my soul, and I'm lost in my thoughts.

This man. This massive teddy bear of a man. He came into my life looking for Easter dinner, and now my name is like a prayer on his lips.

"Liona," I hear again in my mind.

"Liona?" Oh. Maybe it's not in my mind.

"Grant?"

"Aye. Is there room in there for me?"

I open the shower curtain to see him rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and looking for all the world like my own Scottish warrior.

"As long as you can keep your sword at half-mast," I say with a grin. "I'm too sore for more."

"No promises," he says, "but I'll give you a rest."

He climbs in behind me and rubs his hands down my back.

"Mmmm."

"Aye." He rests his head on top of mine.

Under the warmth of the water, we explore each other's bodies again, soaping up as we go. He washes each delicate part of me, and I feel so loved.

When I step out into the fluffy towel of his waiting arms, I feel safe. Like nothing I've felt for the last decade.

When we snuggle back under the covers, I feel ready to tell him everything. To lay bare my soul.

What is this?

And when he asks about Griffin, I tell him.

"It was a drunk driver," I begin.

Soft, comforting noises rumble from his chest behind me.

"I was 16, a sophomore in high school, and he was a senior — big man on campus, played third base for our high school baseball team. He went out after the State championship in Dallas to celebrate. Our parents knew where he was going, knew he would make safe choices. Gave him money to celebrate with his friends. And they did, late into the night. They went from restaurant to arcade to who knows where. And when it was time to head back to the team hotel, they made sure they were comfortable with the Uber driver, weren't putting themselves in an unsafe situation."

His hands gently rub my arms as I continue.

"But you can't control other drivers. You can't account for how someone might behave after they find their wife of 7 years cheating. After they get overserved in the dive bar down the street. So Griffin, and three of his teammates and best friends, weren't in control. Not when the Suburban broadsided them. Not when the car rolled over down the bank alongside the road. Not when the championship trophy became a projectile that stabbed Griffin in the abdomen. Or when he, and their Uber driver, all died that night."

"It's been a decade, but I still re-live it most every night. The terror of a police officer coming to the door of our hotel room at 2 a.m. Of telling us what happened. And of hearing my mom wail — like a primal wail so full of anguish it caused everyone within earshot to cry as well."

I pause, only dimly aware of the tears streaming down my face.

Grant gently rolls me in his arms so I'm facing him. The pads of his thumbs wipe away the tears. The anguish on his face too clear, so I close my eyes again. He hugs me. Just holds me, letting me know there is goodness and safety to be had in this world. When I finally pull back a bit, my voice has returned.

"That's why I struggle with my relationship with my parents so much. There was no question in my mind that I had to return home after college so I could be with them. So they would know I was safe. But they're so... clingy. So controlling."

"So afraid of losing you too," he says, pulling me close again.

"I know. But I don't know if I can live the rest of my life like this. Don't know if I can be under their thumbs and still succeed."

A deep sigh escapes me.

"I guess I can't solve it all today."

"I guess not," he agrees. "Thank you for telling me."

I smile into his chest. "Good night, Grant."

"Good night, Liona."

He's still there when I wake up. Still wrapped around me.

"Good morning, sweets."

A goofy smile comes over me.

"Good morning."

"What does your day hold?" he asks.

"Work. I want to follow up on those requests that Gabi got. I need to check on the status of a bid that I put in last week for some new work. I'm doing some design work for Tess—I'd like to get a first draft of that done today too."

“Sounds like a busy day.”

“Kind of. But I love it.”

“That’s good. I don’t understand why people would spend 20 years in careers they don’t even like that much.”

“Do you enjoy your work?”

“I enjoy doing it, sure. And it serves an important purpose—it helps fund my travel, and I help my family make sure the business remains viable. But it’s not my reason for being. It’s my sisters who have the passion for the whisky. I just help them run the numbers.”

“Is it something you have to be home for?”

“Nah. I do it while I’m traveling too. I can’t exactly take a year off from the family business to go travel Arkansas.”

“Makes sense.”

Grant sprinkles a few kisses down my neck and shoulders, and I can feel he’s up for another round.

“I need to get moving, Grant.”

“Me too,” he says, continuing his assault of kisses.

“Rain check for tonight?”

“It’s a date,” he promises.

We once again fall into that comfortable rhythm—moving in sync as we shower and brush teeth. Throwing together a quick breakfast of coffee, toast, and fruit. Talking about the mundane. How our lives operate. And the kiss he leaves me with – a long, deep kiss reminding me just what he can do with his tongue—requires a change of panties.

I don’t even notice the headline of the paper he tossed on the table.

Chapter 12

Shut Up and Drive

Grant

I spend my morning doing some number-crunching and catching up on business emails with folks back home. Things are good at the distillery. But my mind constantly wanders back to Liona.

After deciding I should cook for her tonight, I spend the afternoon searching out recipes and picking up all the necessary supplies. Gabi even lets me into Liona's apartment early so I can start working on dinner.

"When did I hire a personal chef?" Liona asks as she walks into the kitchen that evening. She gives me a quick kiss, adding, "This is a nice surprise."

"I figured you have to eat. And I did promise you a date tonight."

"Well, it smells delicious, and I'm happy you're here." Her arms snake around my waist as I continue my work at the stove.

"Why don't you go change, and then come back to talk to me while I finish this up?"

"Yes, sir," she says with a mock salute before she heads into her bedroom.

Ten minutes later, I'm staring at this beautiful creature. She's sitting across the kitchen island from me, watching me put the final touches on the fish.

"Glass of wine?" I offer.

"Sure."

I turn to open the bottle of white I chilled, and I'm glad I did. Because I don't think I could have schooled my face at the next.

"You've made yourself right at home. Why don't you just move in for the next two weeks?"

What? That's a joke, right?

I busy myself pouring the wine. After I'm sure I've regained my composure, I turn back around. "Liona, I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

"Well why not?"

"I don't want to mislead you. Don't want you to get the wrong idea about what this might be."

I also don't want to risk my own heart.

"Grant, I still know exactly what this is. It's a short-term deal. You're packing up and moving on. But since I plan to extract all the orgasms I can before you leave, I just thought it would be more convenient to have you living here. I'm not some lovesick puppy."

Her eyes tell a different story.

I don't want this to turn into a fight, though, so I casually dismiss the topic.

"Ok. I misunderstood. Let me talk to my host and see if I can terminate the housing contract early." I give her a smile, but it doesn't quite reach my eyes.

"Great!"

"Ready to eat now?"

"Definitely. I'm starving."

We sit down for a simple dinner of broiled fish, roasted potatoes, and green beans.

"This is delicious," she croons.

"Aye, it's tasty. It might be tastin' better because of the company though." I smile at her across the table. Her cheeks are flushed pink from the wine, and she's been telling me all about the potential client calls she had throughout the day.

"Sounds like your business is really growing. As well it should. You're supremely talented, Liona."

And with her business growing here in Jasper Mill, I know what it means for our future. There is none. Her off-

handed comment about me moving in was just that. An off-handed comment. I'll be on my way, and she'll be deepening her roots here. I'd do well to remember it.

"Ready for dessert? We still have large portions of six desserts left from our company last night," I remind her.

"Oh my gosh, I'm stuffed. Maybe a little later."

"Sounds good. Why don't you go relax on the couch? I'll put up these leftovers and clean up a bit."

"I should offer to help..."

"No need."

"Ok good, because I really just want to flop on the couch."

It doesn't take me long to clean up and join her on the couch.

"Do you want to watch something on tv?" she asks.

"Sure. Anything except *Outlander*, please."

"Awww. I love Jamie!"

"I know. But I can't tell you how many times I've been forced to watch it."

"You pick something then," she says as she hands me the remote.

"I will always choose *Eureka* reruns."

"Fine with me." She snuggles into the curve of my arm as Sheriff Jack Carter appears on the screen.

By the end of the episode, Liona is snoring softly, and the day's events have caught up with me too. I turn off the telly, then pick her up and carry her into her bedroom.

After getting undressed and then tucking in behind her in the bed, I realize how intimate this is. I've only known her a week. It's like we've been together for months. There's a closeness that I haven't felt... well, ever, with a woman.

And once again, I find myself asking what I'm going to do about it?

Liona

This is becoming a habit – waking up in Grant’s arms. I can’t get too used to it though. He’s made it very clear that he’s out of here by the end of the month. So I’ll just keep taking it for what it is.

“Hey,” I whisper to him as I roll over.

“Hey yourself,” he says as he opens his eyes.

“Gabi is going to be here in about an hour. We should get up.”

“Aye, we should.” He pulls me closer to him and closes his eyes again.

“Come on, you big softy, hit the shower.” I poke him in the chest, prompting a smile from him.

“Right right,” he says as he untangles our limbs and climbs out of bed. “You coming?”

“Not this morning. I’ll go make coffee, and then hop in after you get out. I want to be ready when Gabs gets here.”

“Your loss,” he says with a smirk.

“It definitely is. And I fell asleep on you last night too. I’ll make it up to you tonight.” I blow him a kiss as I head to the kitchen.

It’s a rush to get ready before Gabi arrives. I just barely have time to turn the blow dryer on my hair for a minute, when Grant’s legs appear in front of my upturned head.

“What’s up?” I ask after turning off the dryer.

“Gabi’s here.”

“Three minutes, Gabs!” I call into the kitchen. Grant gets a peck on the lips before I flip my head upside down and resume the drying.

Grant and Gabi are deep in conversation when I finally make it to the kitchen, but stop when I enter. “Ready to go?” Gabi asks.

“Yep. Got my coffee right here, and I’m good to go.”

We all head out to Gabi’s car.

“Uh-uh,” she says.

“What?” I ask, as Grant holds open the door to the back seat for me.

“I’m not driving you two lovebirds like some freakin’ taxi. Get your butt up front, Lee.”

Grant pulls me into a passionate kiss before he lets me move to the front door. “There’s more of that waiting for you back here,” he says with a wicked grin for Gabi’s benefit.

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“At least I get to be DJ,” I say as I climb in the front seat.

“You know what I’m thinking,” Gabi says. “Badass women all the way!”

I key up our favorite playlist and, as Sara Bareilles urges us to be “Brave,” we settle in for the drive to Little Rock.

“Where are we headed first?” Grant asks.

“If you don’t mind, let’s hit the going-out-of-business sale first. See if I can find anything of use there,” Gabi says.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Are you coming to the Clinton Library with us too?” I ask Gabi.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, we can’t very well shag each other in the back of the presidential limousine,” Grant says, “so of course you’re welcome.”

“Grant!” I turn around to face him. “What’s gotten into you today?” I haven’t seen him be so... vulgar before. I mean, sure, I love when he talks dirty to me in the bedroom, but his public persona has been that of a gentleman in every way.

He shrugs his shoulders and turns to look out the window. “Sorry, sweets. Sorry, Gabi. Just in a mood this morning.”

“No worries. Honestly, I was worried Liona might be in a mood this morning,” Gabi says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Because of the headline.”

“What headline?”

“You mean you haven’t seen it?” Gabi turns to look at me.

“Eyes on the road, Gabs. And no. Seen what?”

She takes a deep breath in and blows it out through pursed lips.

“I wasn’t planning on having to be the one to tell you.”

“Spit it out already.”

“There was an article in The Daily Mill – a glorified gossip piece, really – reporting on the Top-of-the-Town Awards, and wondering if the Liona I mentioned could be you.”

“What?” The high-pitched screech coming out of me hurts even my ears.

“Don’t worry, Liona. Just some tabloid speculation,” Grant says, trying to soothe me.

“The problem is that Liona is not exactly a common name.” And Gabi is right about that. The flame of my anger turns towards her.

“So why did you have to say my name onstage?!” I demand.

“I was just trying to help you out, Lee.”

“Aye, calm down Liona. There’s nothing can be done about it now. Gabi’s your best friend. You know she was just trying to help.”

“And who are you in this situation?” My anger has targeted him now too. “Just some guy hanging around for a good time?”

“Lee!” Gabi says.

“Just... I can’t... nobody talk to me.” I turn up the radio and stare out the window, the tears welling in my eyes.

The rest of the ride to Little Rock is silent. Liona’s shopping trip shorter than usual. And when we pull up to the Clinton Presidential Library, I make a decision to protect myself.

“I’m going to stay in the car,” I announce.

“Erm...,” Grant fumbles for his words. “No problem. See you in a bit I guess.”

Gabi doesn’t let me off so easily.

“Lee, what are you doing? You like him. Why won’t you go do this with him?” she asks. Grant is already walking towards the entrance without a glance back in my direction.

“I’m protecting my heart, Gabi. I do like him. Probably too much. And he’s leaving soon, and it can’t be anything more than this fling. So I don’t need to hear any more about his childhood, his love of cars, his family in Scotland, or whatever. You can go with him. Look at the limo. Then let’s get back to Jasper. I have some damage control to do.”

With potential clients? Or with Grant?

Grant

“Wait up!” I hear Gabi call from behind me.

I slow my pace and turn to give her a tight smile as she catches up.

“Didn’t think you were interested in this,” I say.

“Eh. Anything new interests me at least a little bit. Plus, I wanted to talk to you about Liona.”

A snort escapes. “I figured.”

“Listen, she’s a good person. She’s been through a lot though.”

“She told me about Griffin.”

“I’m glad. That helps. But you also don’t know what her last relationship did to her. Johnny made her think he loved her, when all he really wanted was her money. He enjoyed himself, that’s for sure. And then he dumped her when she started having more serious feelings for him. It’s gotta be making her skittish about you. Worried that her feelings are... too much.”

“Hang on. We’ve been nothing but open about this. She knows I’m leaving here in 10 days, and that’s the end of it. And I would *never* use her for her money. I don’t even care about material things—”

She holds her hands up to cut me off.

“Listen, Grant, this is not a conversation I need to have with you. I’m just trying to explain what might be going on in Liona’s head.”

“It was just supposed to be one date.”

“Her brain knows that. But I’m not sure if her heart got the memo.”

I don’t think mine did either.

Chapter 13

One More Night

Liona

“So did you get to see the limo?”

“Aye.”

Our ride back to Jasper was silent. Now that Gabi has dropped us off and left, I decide I can talk to Grant again.

“Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“It’s a car. It was fine.”

I give him a small smile.

“Er, should we talk?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I busy myself cleaning up the few dishes left from our quick breakfast this morning.

“What do you want to talk about?”

“About why you’re so upset. Mebbe about why I was acting the fool this morning?”

“So talk.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I look at him expectantly.

“Ok... I guess I’ll go first. I was feeling extraneous. Like I’m just here to give you orgasms. And Gabi knows that’s all I’m good for too.”

“Well, aren’t you? Aren’t you just here for the sex?”

“Ouch.”

“Look, you’ve made it clear. I’ve made it clear. This cannot be a thing.” I gesture between us.

“Right.”

Another moment of silence passes between us.

“So... why are you so upset today?” he asks.

Rolling my eyes, I let out another big sigh.

“The paper, Grant. People know I was in Punning and did work for a Punning business.”

“Well, the paper didn’t say that.”

“It’s a small town. People know.”

“And why is it such a big deal?”

“Come on. You’ve been around long enough to understand the feud between Jasper Mill and Punning.”

“Aye. But if people really like your work and want to hire you, it shouldn’t matter. Your work speaks for itself.”

“I hope you’re right, Grant. But life has been so full of ups and downs this week. So much drama on several different fronts. It just... I’m just overwhelmed.” I make my way into the living room and sag onto the couch.

He follows. “I think you’re being a bit dramatic about it, Liona.”

“Dramatic? I’m too dramatic because I’m worried about my business – my whole livelihood – failing? Who the hell do you think you are?”

He doesn’t know me. Doesn’t know my life. Doesn’t know my struggles.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, you didn’t mean it like that. But you know what? Not all of us work in the family business. Not all of us can live like a trust-fund nomad, roaming foreign countries on a whim, focused on going to see a fucking limousine used by an American president when you were just a kid.”

He raises his eyebrows at me.

“I thought you were different,” he says.

“I guess not. Good thing this isn’t a relationship. Bye, Grant.”

He turns on his heel and leaves without another word.

Me: I kicked him to the curb.

Gabi: What? WHY?

Me: It's better this way.

And if my Tuesday weren't bad enough already, I get a phone call from Tony Capsigo.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Is this Liona, who did the design work for The Nosh Pit?"

"This is she."

"Liona, I'm Tony Capsigo, chair of the Punning Chamber of Commerce. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news..."

"Bad news?"

"Yes. Well, um... it was revealed that you live in Jasper Mill..."

"Mmmm-hmmm." I'm not going to make this easy on him.

"And well, the Chamber of Commerce has unfortunately decided that it must rescind the award bestowed on your work as part the Unicorn Day festivities."

"Why?" Say it, Tony.

"Because you... it's... Jasper Mill."

"Right. Bye Tony. Good luck with your Holidate."

I end the call before he can respond.

Me: And now I've lost the Top of the Town Award.

Gabi: What? They can't do that!

Me: They just did. I'm so over this day.

Gabi: Let me come back over.

Me: No. I'm getting in bed.

As soon as my head hits the pillow, I fall asleep.

I wake on Wednesday morning to the sound of my phone ringing.

“Hello?” I answer groggily.

“Mornin’, Liona.”

It’s Grant.

“Good morning.”

“I want to apologize for... well, for everything that happened yesterday.”

“I’m sorry too, Grant. I’m just under a lot of pressure right now with work.”

“Aye, I know. Would you want to try again? Spend another day together?”

Oh, how I want to. But this. This has become a distraction. Grant is steering my focus away from what I need to be focused on right now: work, reputation, making sure I can pay my bills. He’s going to be gone soon enough anyway.

“I really don’t think that’s a great idea, Grant.”

“Dinner?”

“Grant—”

“Lunch?”

“I don’t have time this week.”

“Not even for a cup of coffee?”

“Not even for a cup of coffee. I have a lot of damage control to do.”

“From that article?”

“That, and the fact that Punning took away the award.”

“Bloody hell. Why would they do that?”

“Because I live in Jasper Mill.” *Sigh.*

“What a fuckin’ backwards little town. Or two towns. Why does it matter where someone lives? If they really want to award the best design work for a Punning business, it’s The

Nosh Pit. And you're the woman behind it. These pricks can't get their heads out of their asses."

I smile a sad smile, but he can't see it.

"I appreciate your support, Grant. And to an extent, I agree with you. But this is what I've been trying to tell you and Gabi all along. It doesn't matter if it's logical or rational. The fact is that there's a century-old feud between the towns, and it affects every aspect of our daily lives, in ways both large and small. Some design work by me isn't going to change all that."

"If you say so, sweets."

"Yeah."

My mind is full of all the things I wish I could say to him. How this past week has been the best week of my dating life in... ever. How much his unwavering support means to me. How much I want him to abandon his nomadic life and stay here with me in Jasper Mill. But it's not meant to be. He's not looking for love, or even a permanent residence. And I'm not looking to get my heart broken again.

"So you really can't even make time for a coffee with me?" he asks again.

"I really can't. Thanks for everything, Grant."

Grant

I'll be damned if I'm going to let her just blow me off like that. Good thing I got Gabi's number.

Me: Liona is trying to be done with me.

Gabi: I heard.

Me: WTF?

Gabi: She's afraid of getting hurt.

Me: I just wanted to grab a coffee with her.

Gabi: You didn't hear it from me, but she goes to It's a Grind – the coffee shop in Jasper – every morning at

10:30.

Me: Thanks Gabi.

I hope I can help Liona see – the world doesn't have to be black and white. No, this isn't going to be a long-term relationship. But yes, we enjoy each other's company.

We've experienced some fun and amazing things together in such a short time. Why throw it away when there is still time left? We can still spend time together, we can still have amazing sex, and when I'm gone, we'll both be happy for the experiences we had together.

Sure, I'll miss her. I'll probably have moments of sadness over what could have been. But settling down with a woman in Jasper Mill is not where I see myself. That doesn't mean I won't have anything further to do with that woman in Jasper Mill.

After all, it's the accumulation of every moment in our lives that makes us who we are. Not everything we do has to be purpose-driven, and not every relationship has to be headed towards marriage.

Stop and smell the bloody roses, ya know?

Chapter 14

Chain of Fools

Liona

Walking away from Grant sucks. But it's for the best.

This dumpster fire of a business needs all the attention I can give it.

When I got to the office this morning, I had Annie waiting for me to start on the month's bookkeeping – my least favorite task. And I opened my email to find a gem from the chain restaurant.

Dear Ms. Earle –

Thank you for submitting your bid to provide graphic design services to our forthcoming restaurant in Jasper County, Arkansas. We had many excellent submissions from a variety of firms, and the choice was difficult.

Unfortunately, we have chosen to move forward with a different design firm at this time. Thank you for your interest in our company.

A form letter if I've ever seen one. Except it wasn't, because there was a P.S.

P.S. We were dismayed that a quick Google search of your name revealed some bizarre media coverage about an award that you received, but then had taken away. We recommend hiring a P.R. firm to help with maintaining a professional image.

Fucking Punning.

“Okay, Annie, let's look at these books. See how much ramen I'll be eating for dinner next month.”

“You're so funny, Liona.” Annie swats at my arm and giggles.

“Not on purpose,” I say with a grim smile.

Money isn't quite as bad as I make it out to be. I worry about it a lot, though. My goal is to be in a financial situation where I don't have to worry about it. Where I can buy myself a new office chair or plan a vacation without worrying about how I will pay the credit card bills that go with them. I thought there would be enough work in Jasper and the surrounding areas to reach that goal, but now I'm not so sure. If I'm black-balled by everyone in Punning, and I'm losing work from outsiders because of the stupid town feud, it probably isn't viable.

Sigh.

"Show me where you input this month's receipts?" Annie interrupts my catastrophizing.

"So I made this new Excel spreadsheet..."

The morning went by quickly. The new spreadsheet kept us busy for a while, and then Annie taught me a new way to organize and categorize my expenses. I even missed my daily visit to It's a Grind for coffee.

It's too late in the day for coffee now, but I do need to eat lunch. On a whim, I decide to head down to the riverbank for a couple hours. I'll take the laptop too, and hopefully get some more done on Tess's design.

After digging an old blanket out of the back of my car, I spread out by the river. A kilt would be awfully convenient right now. Maybe the Scots have something there. But I don't need the Scotsman to go with the kilt, so my blanket will do just fine.

Another beautiful spring day has descended on Jasper Mill, and the riverbank has a fair number of visitors. I finish my lunch and then lie back on the blanket to rest for a few minutes before getting back to work.

The sounds and scents remind me of my picnic with Grant just last week. He was so thoughtful and romantic and kind and supportive. *Sigh.*

No time to get melancholy over him right now. I only wanted it to be a single date. There's no way he'll hang around Jasper Mill for any length of time. And I can't leave home, my business, to gallivant around the world with him. At least he gave me a reference point for what I should look for in a man.

In some cruel twist of fate, my thoughts of Grant don't summon him to the riverbank. No, instead of him, it's Johnny B. who comes strutting down the walking path and stops beside my picnic blanket.

"Hey Lee-Lee." He can't even be bothered to raise his sunglasses to look me in the eyes.

"Hi Johnny."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"I'm trying to get some work done, if you don't mind."

"I shoulda guessed. You're always glued to that computer, playing your coloring games or whatever."

Coloring games? What an ass.

"Right. So if you don't mind..."

Not only does he not take the hint, he decides to bring up my current issues with the graphic design business.

"Saw those articles about you in The Daily Mill."

"Uh-huh."

I'm not even trying to look at him anymore. His stupid chiseled jaw and floppy blond hair. I just need to focus on my work and he'll leave.

But no. Crouching down beside me, he leans in and says, "I miss you, Lee."

Ew.

"Don't you miss me?" he asks, reaching out to touch my face. But before he can do it, I jump up from the blanket.

"Not cool, Johnny. You dumped me. You can't waltz back in here like nothing happened."

“I made a mistake, Lee. I realize now that what we had was different. Better.”

It just took a few more one-night stands to remind him.

“Don’t you miss me, Lee? Miss the fun? Aren’t you bored just doing work all the time?”

“Do you really think I have no life outside of work without you, Johnny?”

He gives me that lopsided smirk. The come-hither look that got me in trouble in the first place.

“I think your life was a whole lot more fun with me in it.”

“Well,” I say as I pack up my picnic. “Thanks for sharing your opinion, Johnny. I’m going back to work.”

“See what I mean? All work, no play. Let me take you out tonight, Lee. We’ll grab some grub at that dive bar you like. And then we’ll Netflix and chill.”

“Enough with the ‘Lee.’ My name is Liona,” I say, adding in just enough of Grant’s brogue to make it sound exotic, “and I will not be Netflix-and-chilling with you again.”

“Be that way,” he calls after me as I stomp back to the car.

“What an ass,” Gabi says. I’ve just relayed the Johnny shenanigans to her. We’re sitting on my little balcony, drinking margaritas and having a belated Taco Tuesday.

“I can’t believe he thinks I like that dive bar on the outskirts of town. We only went there because he likes to drive his bike too fast, and he knows that road is cop-free.” I take another sip. “Oh, and they would overserve him too. He liked that a lot when I was buying.”

“And somehow everything he likes, he just foists onto you.”

“Yeah.”

“Not like a boyfriend who would, say, go all over town talking to different shopkeepers and finding out what your favorite foods were so he could put together an amazing picnic for your first date.”

“Don’t start in on that, Gabi.”

“I can’t help it, Lee. I saw how happy Grant made you. I saw how he took the time to figure out what you really like, and how he wanted to share those experiences with you. I saw how you wanted the same from him. I mean, I know you ended up not going into the Clinton Library, but you actually wanted to, right? You wanted to know more about him?”

“I guess.”

“And come on – a guy who just met you who was willing to put on the ass-half of a unicorn costume and nearly sweat to death inside of it. Johnny B. would never do something like that.”

“You’re right. But Gabs, you know the deal. The Holidate was for just one event. Even if it weren’t for that app, this could never work. Grant is headed who-knows-where in a little over a week, and I can’t leave Jasper Mill.”

“Why can’t you?”

“My business.”

“Really? Is there anything you do on a daily basis that you have to be in Jasper for?”

Dammit. I hate when she out-logics me.

“Maybe not. But I can’t leave my parents.”

“Have you ever talked to them about it?”

“No. Why would I? I can’t risk breaking their hearts all over again, like when Griffin died.”

“Liona. Moving out of town is not the same as dying.”

“Okay! Enough. It’s not happening with Grant, period.”

She puts her hands up in surrender. “Okay. I just think you have a chance to be happy with him.”

“I’m pretty happy with my tacos and margarita right now.”

“Me too.”

We spend the rest of the evening drinking too much and watching *Vampire Diaries*. No hot Scots to remind me of Grant.

“Why the hell did I drink so much?” I grumble through cottonmouth the next morning. I’m lying only half-on the couch, and Gabi is lying on top of my left arm in the floor.

“Because tequila,” she grunts.

I roll off the couch and climb over Gabi to stumble to my bathroom.

“I’m getting in the shower,” I yell.

Ouch. Not so loud.

A very long, very hot shower and a very long, very thorough teeth-brushing have me feeling almost human again when I head out to the kitchen. Gabi is sitting on the couch in the bathrobe from the guest room, her wet hair wrapped in a towel.

“I made coffee,” she offers.

“Thanks.”

“It’s awful,” she says.

I’ll just set that mug back down on the counter.

“What do you have going on today?” I ask her.

“Nothing until I go the restaurant at 11.”

“Put some clothes on. We gotta go see Kyra.”

“Heard.”

Twenty minutes later, we stumble through the front door of Jasper Mill’s coffee shop, It’s a Grind.

“Good morning, ladies,” Kyra – the owner – calls out.

“Shhh,” Gabi responds.

With a knowing smile, Kyra says, “Two hair-of-the-dog coffees coming right up.”

I don’t know what Kyra puts in those things. Something tells me I don’t want to know. But pretty soon, Gabi and I can carry on a normal conversation again.

“Hey, I forgot to tell you this before we got wasted, but I found out you can appeal Punning’s decision to take the award away from you.”

“For real? That’s so weird.”

“So much about Punning is so weird.”

“True.” We both giggle, but our laughs are drowned out by the roar of a motorcycle.

And who should walk in a minute later, but Johnny B. himself. Looking like sex on a stick this morning, carrying a bouquet of lilies, and prowling his way towards me.

“Morning, babe,” he says, planting a kiss on my head and offering the bouquet to me.

“Johnny, what the hell are you doing?” I ask.

“Bringing flowers to my one true love. Can’t a guy be romantic and shit?”

“You know what would be even more romantic?”

“What’s that, babe?”

“If you remembered that I’m fucking ALLERGIC TO LILIES.” I grab the bouquet from him, quickly walk to the front door he left open, and toss the flowers into the closest trash can.

When I walk back inside, I can see that Gabi is busy lecturing Johnny. Her index finger is wagging in his direction, and he’s growing increasingly restless.

“Kyra, can you make me a ginger tea, please?” I ask at the counter.

“No problem, Liona. Are the lilies going to bother you?”

“Nah, I’ll be fine. The smell of them just nauseates me.”

Returning back to our table a few minutes later, I see that Johnny still hasn’t left.

“I’m sorry, Liona,” he says.

“Thanks.”

“I remembered there was something about lilies. But I didn’t remember if you really liked ‘em or really hated ‘em,” he says sheepishly.

“It’s okay. No harm done.”

I give him a polite smile. He takes it as an invitation for more.

Before I realize what’s happening, he grabs my cup and puts it on the table, takes me in his arms, and dips me into a passionate kiss.

I mean, I don’t hate it. Johnny’s a damn fine kisser. But holy shit – can he not understand that I’m done with him?

As I raise my hand to push him away, I hear a familiar brogue by my head.

“So this is why you’re done with me already? Figures.” He chuckles mirthlessly.

I’m finally successful in getting Johnny off me so I can stand upright.

“Grant. Good morning. This is Johnny.”

Ever the gentleman, Grant offers his hand to Johnny.

“Nice to meet you, mate. Take good care of this one. She’s something special.”

Johnny preens like a goddamn rooster. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“Liona, Gabi, good day.”

And he’s gone.

“Dammit, Johnny.”

“What?”

“No more. We’re done. Over. Finito.”

“Aww, don’t be like that Lee.”

“Out!” I shriek.

Everyone in the café turns to stare at me as I turn Johnny in the direction of the door.

“That was quite a show,” Gabi says.

“The show’s over.”

Chapter 15

Try Again

Liona

“Text me after the lunch rush is over,” I call to Gabi as we leave the Grind that morning. “Tell me about the appeal thing.”

“Okay!” Gabi is running to her car so she won’t be late for lunch service.

The mural on the side of the Grind stops me in my tracks, not for the first time. It’s well done, sure. But it’s kind of weird. It was even weirder when Wes asked practically everyone in town to paint part of it. I shrug it off and head to the office.

No new email messages. No new inquiries from potential clients.

On the bright side, maybe I can get Tess’s logo done today.

Lost in my thoughts, I spend the next few hours in a manic-creative mode. Do you know how many ways you can incorporate images of baked goods into a fun logo? And how many fonts you need to try to find the perfect one that matches a steaming loaf of bread? A lot.

I’m finally interrupted by the *ding* of an incoming text message.

Gabi: Hey. I only have a minute. But there’s a form on the Punning Chamber of Commerce website, and it explains the whole process.

Me: Ok thanks.

Gabi: From what I’ve been able to figure out, the appeal process stems from some disagreement between two Council members over religious matters back in the 1930s.

Me: So weird.

Gabi: Yep. But hopefully it means we can get your award back!

Gabi: Gotta go. Love you, bye!

Filled with new hope by the possibility of getting my award reinstated, I turn my manic energy towards the appeals process for the rest of the afternoon. I need to submit evidence of the creation of my design work, along with a 5,000-word essay about why the award should be reinstated. Five thousand words is an awful lot to say about a Unicorn Day award. But I settle in and get started.

Grant

I am so done with Arkansas.

Although I hadn't planned to leave town for another week, I decide that it's time to move on. I saw the one thing of interest to me in the state. I explored a ton of land in Jasper County. I learned about the weird little feud between Punning and Jasper Mill. I attended a freakin' Unicorn Day banquet.

And I met Liona.

Thoughts of her are too uncomfortable, so I busy myself packing my belongings into the truck. I was fibbing when I told Liona that I needed to check with my host about leaving early. Dude doesn't care when I leave. Next stop? San Diego.

If you didn't know, it's a long-ass drive from Arkansas to California. I tend to forget how big the U.S. is compared to back home, until I actually drive it. The whole of Scotland is about the size of South Carolina. Driving cross-country here is a much larger endeavor.

One bad thing about driving long distances alone is that you can't turn off your brain. No matter how much I try to listen to music or take in the scenery, my mind keeps returning to Liona.

I make it all the way to Fort Worth before I just can't do it anymore. Deciding to stop for the night, I use the Hotel Tonight app on my phone to find a place to crash.

Nice. This one is within walking distance of a good restaurant.

It's booked and I'm beat. I decide that a nap is in order before dinner.

Waking up an hour later, I'm groggy and starving. That restaurant nearby sounds good. In an effort to wake myself up, I decide to wear my kilt. The breeze on my bits should get me moving.

Café Bleu wasn't ready for me in my kilt.

The hostess – she tells me her name is Brandy – is fairly gobsmacked when I walk in the door. She keeps looking up at me, probably marveling at how tall I am. When she covers her mouth with her hand, I can tell she's talking to someone on the headset.

“It will be just a moment while we get your table ready,” she says to me. “What was your name?”

“Grant. Grant MacLeod.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. MacLeod.” Shit – I'm only 29. What's with this “Sir” stuff?

The next few minutes can only be described as a parade of servers through the lobby area. Apparently Brandy told everyone they needed to come check out the big Scot. I remain standing for their amusement.

“Your kilt is awesome,” one of the young women tells me.

I nod my head. “Thank ye.” I'm ratcheting up the brogue for this too. If I'm going to be the subject of gossip and serial gawking, then at least I can have a little fun with it.

After all of the women, and some of the men, have made excuses to traipse through the lobby, Brandy finally relents. “Your table is ready, Mr. MacLeod.”

Immediately after I'm seated, a server comes over. “Good evening, welcome to Café Bleu. My name is Claire.”

“Evenin’ Claire.” I nod my head and offer her a smile.

“What can I get you to drink?”

“Whisky, please. Any single-malt will do.”

“You got it. And any appetizer to start with?”

“I’ve only jus’ sat down, Claire. Don’t even know what’s on the menu.” Another smile in her direction.

“Oh. Right.” Color rises to her cheeks.

“Nah, dinna be embarrassed, lass. Why don’t you tell me what you recommend?”

“Oh!” She scratches her head, looking like she has to think really hard about this one. “Well, there’s this dish – I don’t even remember what it’s called – with like dates and nuts. Maybe some bacon?”

Ach.

It’s Liona’s favorite, from our picnic. So much for getting her off my mind. “Sounds fantastic. I’ll have that.”

And so the dinner goes. Claire suggests dishes and I eat them.

As I’m finishing up, she approaches the table nervously. “Grant?”

“Aye?”

“Would you, uh, want to get coffee sometime?”

“I’m flattered, lass. But I’m just passing through. I’m back on the road tomorrow morning.”

She sighs.

“It figures. All the good ones leave.”

Yeah, well, sometimes the good ones walk in on their girl in the arms of a biker dude. And that means it’s time to go.

“Thanks for your help tonight, Claire. Was a lovely meal.”

That earns me a dazzling smile, and I head back to my hotel, content that I at least gave some folks a story to tell

tonight.

It's a grueling day of driving, but I make it all the way to Tucson the next night.

As I'm making my way to another crash pad, I drive past a place called the Unicorn Sports Lounge.

"Christ," I say out loud to no one.

It's like the universe doesn't want me to forget Liona. As if I could. She haunted my dreams last night. As I dreamt, I saw every curve of her exquisite body. Tasted her skin. Smelled her shampoo. Felt her lips on mine. Heard her scream my name in ecstasy.

Why can't I get her out of my head?

I hit Del Mar in time for sunset the next day, and find myself staring out on the crashing waves.

A feeling of melancholy has settled over me, a stark contrast to the beautiful sights before me.

There are beaches in Scotland. Hell, there's even a beach on Lake Taylor in Arkansas.

What makes a beach special is not where it is, or how impressive the waves are as they crash into the shore. No, what makes a beach – or a riverbank – special is who you get to experience it with.

Laying back on the sand, I let out a long-repressed sigh.

A photographer who happens to be passing by stops at the sound. He's a middle-aged guy, gray hair, attractive, obviously keeps himself in shape. Evie and Char would probably call him a silver fox.

"You all right?" he asks in an accented voice.

"Aye, thanks mate."

"Your sigh – it sounds like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders."

“Nothing so heavy as that. I just went and fell in love.”

“Ahhh. Well, this should be cause for celebration, not sighing.”

I smirk.

“You’re right.”

“Can I take a couple pictures while we talk?”

“Eh? Sure.” I’m used to people gawking at me everywhere. A few pictures are nothing new.

“So why is love not a good thing, my friend?”

Snap.

“Love, in itself, is a good thing. No question there.”

“But?”

Snap, snap, snap.

“But it’s complicated. She lives in a small town in Arkansas. I travel the world.”

“What do you do for work?”

“Accounting.”

“While you travel?”

“Aye.”

“A job you could do anywhere?”

Snap, snap.

“Well, I guess.”

He returns his camera to its resting place around his neck.

“You know what you need to do, friend.” He wanders off without another word.

Me: Hey Gabi.

Gabi: What’s up?

Me: I need your help.

Chapter 16

Fever for You

Liona

“Fuck,” I groan as I roll over to hit snooze on the alarm. This is not the way I wanted to start the week. I feel like I’m coming down with something, with a low-grade fever and aches all over. And I have my hearing with the Punning Chamber of Commerce today.

It surprised me how fast they set the hearing. I just submitted my appeal on Thursday evening. I’m assuming this will just be a rubber-stamp denial of the appeal. But I’m going to try my best anyway. See if I can’t make some headway with our ridiculous small-town politics.

Thinking back over all that has happened in the last couple of weeks, I can hardly believe it. Win award. Fight with parents. Meet Grant. Receive award. Amazing sex. Lose award. Fight with Grant. Johnny returns. Grant leaves. There are some themes running through there, I think. I’m just too tired to figure them out right now.

But as I stand under the spray of the hot shower, one thing hits me like a ton of bricks. It isn’t the “stuff” – the food, the cars, the awards – that I remember most. It’s the time I spent with Grant. The way he made me feel (amazing). The way he looked at me (like I was the center of the universe). The way he made me believe in myself (and I still do). Like with his support, I could tackle anything that might come my way.

It was a feeling I didn’t get from Johnny, didn’t get from my parents, don’t get from Gabi. And that’s no reflection on them. It’s me. It’s what I need.

I need Grant.

I need Grant.

But right now, I need to finish showering and get ready for my hearing over in Punning.

When I arrive at the Punning Chamber of Commerce, I'm surprised to see a packed parking lot. They must have some event going on.

I make my way to Room 151, where the hearing is supposed to be.

"Am I in the right place?" I ask the clerk sitting just inside the door. "For an appeal hearing?"

"Yes ma'am," she responds.

Do I look old enough to be a ma'am? I must really need more sleep.

"Okay, thank you."

I make my way into the room and find a seat on the edge of the room. As I get settled in, I finally start looking around a bit. And I see people I know. People from Jasper. Before I can register it all, Gabi comes rushing over to me and the gavel bangs for the hearing to start.

It's Tony Capsigo again. That guy is like a bad penny – showing up every time I have Punning drama going on in my life.

"Let's call this meeting to order. We're here for a special meeting of the Punning Chamber of Commerce, to hear the appeal lodged by Ms. Liona Earle regarding our National Unicorn Day Top-of-the-Town Awards this year."

"This whole meeting is just about me?" I whisper to Gabi.

"Yes," she responds with a smile.

"Ms. Earle," Tony calls out, "are you ready to proceed?"

It's reminiscent of being called to the principal's office. I stand up, unsure what I'm supposed to do.

"Um. Yes?"

"The floor is yours," he says.

Panic strikes, and I look down at Gabi with a plea in my eyes.

“I got this,” she says, rising before I say anything.

“Mr. Capsigo, my name is Gabi Carrera. I own The Nosh Pit here in Punning, the business whose marketing won the award at issue. I will be speaking on behalf of Ms. Earle.”

“That’s acceptable. Both of you, please approach the podium, so everyone can hear.”

As we walk to the front of the room, I get a chance to identify some of the observers. Wes Herrington. Kyra. Mama and Daddy?! What in the world are all of these people doing here?

“Thank you, Mr. Capsigo,” Gabi says. “As I mentioned, I am the owner of The Nosh Pit here in Punning. Ms. Earle designed the marketing materials that I submitted for the Top-of-the-Town awards. The materials that won the award at the National Unicorn Day luncheon a week ago. Ms. Earle was present at that luncheon, though she was of course in costume.”

“Shortly after the award was bestowed, Ms. Earle received a call. A call from you, sir, informing her that the award was being withdrawn. When Ms. Earle asked for an explanation, you indicated that it was withdrawn simply because Ms. Earle resides in Jasper Mill. It is from that decision that we appeal.”

Did Gabi go to law school while I wasn’t looking? She sounds like she’s presenting a closing argument or something.

“Yes, we received Ms. Earle’s written appeal,” Tony acknowledges.

“As I think you can see from the audience here today,” Gabi says as she gestures widely across the room, “this issue is of significant interest to residents of both Jasper Mill and Punning. In fact, the tensions between the two towns have been high for well over 100 years, since the Gold Rush in this part of the country.”

“You are correct, Ms. Carrera.”

“And here’s where I had to get a history lesson,” Gabi says. “I’m guessing that a lot of the people in this room don’t know how the town feud started – just that they’ve always been taught to dislike the other town. So I’d like to share the story.”

At this point, Gabi launches into a detailed account of the Gold Rush in Arkansas, the location of various mining claims, and enough minute details that I start tuning out. She must read the room to be doing the same because pretty quickly, she changes tactics.

“You know what? Let me skip all these details. You can read the history books for yourselves if you want to. What it comes down to is this. Settlers in both Jasper Mill and in Punning were looking for gold. Some of the settlers in Punning lied about what they found in their claims, in order to deter people from moving in on their finds. The settlers in Jasper Mill got mad, thinking that the folks in Punning were trying to keep all the riches for themselves. And that, friends, is where this town rivalry came from. A century-old dispute over money. Over material possessions.”

“Thank you for the history lesson, Ms. Carrera,” Tony says. “But what about this appeal?”

“The towns’ history *is* the heart of this appeal, sir. The award given to my business and to Liona as the graphic designer was withdrawn only because she lives in Jasper Mill. And I just have to question the fundamental logic behind all of this.”

“Let me ask,” Gabi says as she turns to address the crowd. “Who in this room has ever felt like the towns’ dispute during the Gold Rush has ever affected their daily life?”

A few shuffles, but no one raises their hand. Gabi continues.

“And who in this room has a friend that lives in the other town, but you’re afraid to tell anyone about it?”

There’s an uncomfortable moment where no one moves. But then – of all people – Daddy stands up and raises his hand.

“My fishing buddy Dave lives here in Punning. We have to go fishing practically in the middle of the night so no one sees us together.”

That sets off a chain reaction. Person after person stands up and explains that their friend or cousin or doctor lives in the other town, and that they secretly visit them.

“Do you see?” Gabi asks, turning back to face the Chamber of Commerce board. “All of these people are hiding. Living their lives in secret because of this town feud. But they’ve all realized that their friendships, their families, their health and well-being, are more important than any material possessions or any century-old feud. But the towns continue to live in the Wild West. And with the award at issue here today, those outdated attitudes are threatening Ms. Earle’s very livelihood.”

From the back of the room, a familiar Scottish brogue joins the conversation.

“If I may, Mr. Capsigo,” Grant says as he approaches the podium.

“Please, Mr. MacLeod.” How does Tony know Grant’s name? I guess they’ve already met.

“Thank you, sir. Ms. Earle here is my friend. I attended the Unicorn Day banquet with her. I have gotten to know her, her work ethic, and her approach to life. I daresay I’ve seen her live according to the idea that the intangible – our relationships, our morals, our love for fellow humans – is more important than money or any other material possessions. And I think Punning could send a powerful message to both communities by restoring this well-deserved award to Ms. Earle.”

He pauses and smiles down at me.

“A message that we can change. We have the power to make different choices. And that it’s time for Jasper Mill and Punning to put these feuds behind them. To join together and approach the 21st century together, and figure out how to make Jasper County thrive in a new global economy.”

At least I think that's what he says. I'm more carried away by the sound of his impassioned speech, his lilting cadence, and the obvious emotion behind his words.

Gabi grabs the microphone from Grant. "And that is our presentation, Mr. Capsigo." She and Grant link their arms through mine – one on each side – and we all sit down together.

"Sometimes you have to know when to sit down and shut up," Gabi whispers to both of us. "I couldn't have done any better myself." She smiles at Grant and then hugs me.

"The board will recess for 15 minutes," Tony announces. "Please return at that time for our decision."

I turn to face Grant. "What are you doing here?"

"Supporting you."

"But why?"

"Well sweets, I've been thinking. I can work from anywhere. And while I do love to travel, I love being with you more. So if that means I travel less, but you get to come with me when I do, I think that's a damn fair tradeoff." He looks at me with a question in his eyes.

"I see."

"I drove all night to get here," he says. "When Gabi told me the hearing was today—"

"You did what?" I turn to face Gabi.

"He's good for you, Liona. I don't want you to mess this up."

Grant's hand caresses my upper arm and he turns me gently back to face him. "I knew I wanted to be here to support you," he finishes.

"Well the thing is, Grant... I've been doing some thinking of my own. I realized that I can do design work from most anywhere too. And that my world is richer, my life is better, when you're next to me. I was thinking maybe I could join you on the road." I stare up into his eyes, hopeful.

“It sounds like either way, you guys are going to be together a lot more,” Gabi says.

Grant’s lips touch mine, and I know I’m home. I’ve found my person. And no matter where we roam together, we’ll be just fine.

Someone clears their throat beside me, interrupting the kiss.

“Liona,” Daddy says. I turn to face him.

“We want you to know that we support you, too. I now see how I’ve treated you differently since Griffin died. But your mother and I want you to be happy, want you to succeed. If that means we won’t see you for Sunday dinner every week, well, we’re going to have to accept it. Neither we, nor you, can control every aspect of life.”

I look from him to Mama. She nods her head, tears in her eyes.

Reaching my arms around both of them at the same time, I begin crying. “Thank you. Thank you for letting me live.”

Everyone is still hugging and crying and kissing and laughing, in various combinations, when Tony Capsigo bangs his gavel to resume the meeting.

“If everyone could please take their seat,” he says into a microphone.

It takes another minute of jostling and shuffling, but we’re finally all seated, and the room is quiet.

“We’re back on the record for this special meeting of the Punning Chamber of Commerce,” he announces. He sounds more formal than he did before.

“Ms. Earle,” he says in my direction. “Your design work for The Nosh Pit was outstanding. Truly. It’s everything we hope to see from our town’s businesses as we lean into the punny nature of our tourism industry.”

Uh-oh. Do I sense a “but” coming?

“But merit is not the sole basis for our Top-of-the-Town awards.”

Crap.

“We also consider the spirit of the work. Whether the award that we are presenting is in the best interest of our town overall. Whether we think it can be used to our collective economic advantage.”

Here it comes.

“And, after considering all of these factors, the board has decided to restore the award to you.”

Record scratch.

What?

“We believe that by openly presenting a Unicorn Day Top-of-the-Town award to a resident of Jasper Mill, we can begin to heal the rift between our towns. And we agree with Mr. MacLeod, who I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know over the last couple of weeks while he stayed in Punning. The residents of Jasper County would be better served by coming together as one to market ourselves as a vacation destination. Mr. MacLeod has walked me through some sample financials, and I believe this is a goal that we can begin achieving in the very near future.”

What the what? Grant has been talking to Tony? About economics?

“To that end, Ms. Earle—”

Me?

“In addition to restoring this award, we would like to ask you to sit on our new Jasper County Tourism Board. Mr. Herrington and his family, here in the audience, will also be joining, and we’ll have key leaders from Punning as well.”

I stand up. “I...”

I glance at Mama and Daddy. They smile. Turning to Gabi, she is smiling too. Grant reaches up and grabs my hand. Looking down at him, I see not only a smile, but the love

shining through his eyes. He gives me a nod, then stands up beside me.

Turning back to the board, I confidently answer, “Yes. I would be honored.”

Chapter 17

Mannequin

Liona

Me and Grant, Mama and Daddy, Wes and his fiancé Phoebe, Tony, and Gabi all head to The Nosh Pit for lunch.

It's an odd mix, to be sure, but we have a great time.

Tony explains what the new tourism board is going to look like. Gabi feeds us all way too much food. Wes and Phoebe explain how the Herrington family is going to help, and how the high schools can support the towns' reconciliation. Grant and I can't keep our hands off each other.

Nothing indecent, I swear.

Just constant touches, kisses, caresses. I feel a wave of relief when we can finally leave the restaurant and head back to my place. I want to be alone with him.

And this time it is indecent.

After another round of earth-shattering orgasms, we're lying in my bed, talking about the logistics of our future together.

"Do you think we could be ready to hit the road together in a month?" I ask.

"Aye. We can leave whenever you like. I have no plans I can't change."

"How can you be so laid back? Like, doesn't it drive you crazy to have to change all your plans for me?"

"Nope."

"What if something goes wrong? What if one of your hotel reservations gets cancelled? What if your truck breaks down?"

"Liona."

Oh, how I love the sound of my name on his lips. I'll never get tired of it.

“There *will* be problems. It’s unavoidable. But I don’t spend all my time worrying about them. I take things as they come, and try to stay focused on enjoying the present moment, wherever that may be.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Sure you can. It will take practice. But it’s all part of the same change you’re trying to make. To stop controlling every little aspect of your life. Because in the end, you can’t control it. And if you spend your life worrying about what you can or can’t control, you’ll miss out on some of the most spectacular moments in between.”

“Okay, okay.” I reach up to kiss his lips. “I’ll try.”

“Good girl.”

“I’m taking this week off work.”

“Um, okay,” he says, hesitating. “But why?”

“Number one, because I think I’m developing a praise kink, and I plan to spend a large chunk of time in bed with you just to hear you say ‘good girl’ more often.”

A deep belly laugh comes from Grant. “That’s acceptable to me.”

“And number two, I know I can’t control *everything*, but I do need to have a few things planned. Can we spend the week making some plans? Deciding where to go, and how the logistics might look? I’m excited, but I also need some details to work with.”

“Sure, we can do that. I should probably also let my family know about my change of plans. Mebbe introduce you over video chat?”

Warmth flows through my body. It’s love. The feeling of love coursing through my veins. “I can’t wait,” is all I can muster at the moment.

I snuggle back into his arms and we drift to sleep, imagining all that is to come.

Grant

Three weeks later, we're on the road. It didn't take Liona as long as she thought it would to move to a mobile business platform. She does almost all of her work on the phone and the computer anyway. She explained to her current clients that they would be meeting by videoconference most of the time. No one minds.

We're heading back to San Diego. I only spent one night there, and Liona has never been. We aren't sure how long we'll spend there, but we found a short-term rental that's a block away from the beach and has a high-quality Wifi connection.

Liona gave up the lease on her office space, but she's still keeping her townhouse in Jasper.

"It's like home base for me," she explained. "I'm not ready to sell or donate all of my worldly possessions and live out of the back of your truck, but I am ready to be on the road with less. And Gabi promised to send me anything I realize I can't live without."

We're taking the drive much slower than I did before. No longer in a hurry to run away from Jasper, I'm happy exploring all the little towns and sights that spark our interest. I mean, did you know there's a Stonehenge replica in Odessa, Texas? There's no way we could pass up that one.

Now we're headed up to a place near Tucson to visit Liona's friend Lainie. We just got back on the road after switching drivers, and Liona found a P!nk station on the satellite radio. She relaxes into the seat with a sigh.

"Checked your email lately?" I ask.

"Nope. I was too busy driving."

"Just wondering if you heard back from that sailing place out at Catalina."

"Let me check."

As she pulls out her phone, I glance over at her. She looks so relaxed, so comfortable. I can't help but smile.

"Nothing from Catalina, but I did get an email from Tony. It seems that his brother wants to hire me to do some design work for The Flour Shoppe."

"Oooh. How is Tess going to feel about that?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, everyone is supportive of healing the rift in general. But the Mauro thing might be too personal for Tess still. I'll talk to her before I respond to Tony."

"Good plan."

The road opens before us, and I adjust my sunglasses. The sun beats down on the dashboard, and the landscape of reds and tans spreads out in front of us. It's a beautiful sight, a beautiful day, a beautiful life.

"Oh hey, did I mention that my buddy Liam might be visiting Jasper soon?" I ask Liona.

"That's kind of a crazy coincidence," she says.

"I mean, yes and no. Maybe the universe was just waiting to bring us together somehow."

"Maybe." She looks at me skeptically.

"Think about it. My love of cars. The European fascination with Clinton. My best bud in a band with someone from Jasper Mill. Somehow, we were going to end up together."

"It's a pretty thought," she says with an indulgent smile at me. "But I don't need to worry about how it all came to be."

That's my girl. You can't control everything – or maybe much of anything. Control is largely an illusion, and it's one we all get too invested in. People change, life changes, the world changes. All we can do is do the next right thing.

"Let's enjoy today for what it is," she says, echoing my own thoughts.

"Aye."

THE END

Did you enjoy your trip to Jasper Mill? Want to read about Tess finding her happily ever after? (After dealing with Mauro Capsigo, of course.) Pre-order *Right Tool for the Job* on Amazon!

