



*This One Time At
Christmas*

KRYS STRONG

THIS ONE TIME AT CHRISTMAS

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Blurb

You get lemons; you make lemonade, right? That was my plan when I packed everything I owned and headed for a new life in New York City. And then it went to hell.

First, my belongings didn't survive the move, and everything I touched seemed to break. My new job wouldn't be so bad if my coworkers wanted anything to do with me. And my boss? He hates me.

I was ready to quit, throw in the towel, and make my way back to Houston. But then I got an invitation I couldn't refuse. An all-expenses-paid weekend in the Hamptons. The only catch... I have to pretend to be the girlfriend of my boss's best friend at a Christmas Eve wedding.

What could possibly go wrong?

INFORMATION

Trigger and Content Warnings

This book may contain some scenes that are not suitable for all audiences. Please review the list below before proceeding.

Alcohol - Sexual Kinks - Sexually Explicit Scenes

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Overcoming the Beta

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CHAPTER 1

THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING

Rosemary

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, the truck was involved in an accident and all my belongings were destroyed?” I say into my phone, trying to remain calm.

This has been the move from hell. Nothing has gone right since I arrived at George Bush Intercontinental. First, they delayed my flight three times in the span of twelve hours before being cancelled completely. After standing in a two-hour line, they booked me on the first flight out the next morning through another airline. Instead of my original non-stop flight, I now had a four-hour layover in Atlanta.

They were nice enough to give me a meal ticket, a water bottle with their logo, and booked me into a hotel room for the night. However, since it was nearing mid-night all the airport concessions were closed and hotel transportation stopped running at ten p.m.

Completely emotionally and physically drained, I contemplated taking a car service; all I wanted was a hot shower and warm bed. But with my flight being at five-fifteen in the morning, I thought it best I stay overnight in the airport. *How bad could it be?* I had the puffer jacket my parents gave me at my going away party to keep me warm. Mom couldn't stand the idea of me being cold. As tired as I was, I was afraid I'd oversleep and miss my flight. Ten out of ten would not recommend camping at the airport.

The next morning, I boarded the full flight. At five-fifteen we pushed away from the gate and headed to the runway. Where it was discovered that the brakes were smoking. After spending an hour on the tarmac, they brought us back to the terminal for repairs. At five p.m. and two flight changes later, I was finally in the air with two drink vouchers in hand.

Arriving in New York just before nine p.m., I took a car service to my new building. Walking into my new apartment, it surprised me to see it completely bare except for a cot, blanket, towel, and note from the super.

Rose,

It's late. Shit never showed. Taking the Mrs. to dinner for her birthday. She said to leave you this stuff.

Bill

“I understand accidents happen, but why did I have to track you down? The wreck happened two days ago. Why not call me then?” I pause, listening to the monotone customer service representative on the other line. “Sir, I’m not trying to be difficult.” I raise my voice before taking a deep breath and regaining my composure. “My clothes, furniture, shoes, everything was on that truck. I start a new job on Monday. What am I supposed to do?” I pace the floor in my empty apartment, my mind racing a mile a minute. “It’s three-thirty in the afternoon on a Sunday.” I look at my watch. “Had someone properly notified me, I could have made arrangements.” I listen while he reads off some jargon that I’m sure he’s reading from a script. “Fine, I will wait to hear from

your manager tomorrow.” I reply before disconnecting the call.

“Shit!” I shout in frustration, tossing my phone on the cot.

Running my fingers through my greasy hair, a single thought comes to mind; I should have stayed in Houston. *Did I make a mistake?* I had a good job with friends and family close by. But after ending my eight-year relationship with Dean, I needed a fresh start. Everything in my life has been so calculated. I wouldn't do a thing without making a spreadsheet weighing my risks versus rewards. So, I did the most irrational thing I could think of, gave my landlord and my boss a sixty-day notice, and started looking for work as an accountant in New York City.

After a month with no luck, I was a nervous wreck. Not wanting to accept defeat just yet, I expanded my search. That's when I found the posting for a personal assistant to an owner of a commercial real estate investment firm on the upper east side of Manhattan. I laughed when I submitted my resume. I have a BS in accounting and have worked for the same company since I graduated from college thirteen years ago.

To my surprise, an email awaited me the next morning from the owner's wife. She was going to be in Houston on business and wanted to meet with me. We met at a swanky restaurant in midtown, where she hired me on the spot. The salary she offered was thirty thousand more than my current. I was on cloud nine until I started apartment shopping. Talk about sticker shock. Manhattan is expensive. My new apartment is a

quarter the size of my old one and is four hundred percent higher in rent.

Three weeks later, I'm standing in an empty apartment with a cot in the middle and a puffer jacket for a blanket. The only bit of clothing I have is my jacket/blanket, two pairs of jeans, yoga pants, and three tee-shirts. *What am I going to do?* I can't show up to my new job in jeans and calling off is simply out of the question. Panic-stricken, I knock the airline's water bottle off the counter, grabbing my purse and key before running out the door. I hope I can find a clothing store nearby, and quick.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEW HIRE

Liam

“SHIT, YOU’RE HERE EARLY.” I look up from my coffee to my boss and best friend.

“Don’t get me started.” Joseph grumbles, walking into the small kitchenette. “Fucking coffee me.”

“Woah. Someone is in one hell of a mood today. Rough night?” I snicker, pouring him a cup of coffee.

“No... yes. Couldn’t sleep for shit. Marissa hired me a new assistant, and she starts today.” He grabs the cup and takes a swig. “Get this. She has a BS in accounting and has never been a personal assistant before. She’s an accountant for crying out loud.” He grits his teeth and groans.

“Marissa hired her?” I laugh, “she’s either eighty or ugly.” I say, looking down, trying to hide how funny I think this is.

Marissa was Joseph’s assistant before she became his wife two months ago. Since the wedding, she has quit working here, which was to be expected. Like me, Joseph comes from old family money. The men are expected to work while the wives are expected to be socialites who like to spend their husband’s money. One of many reasons I’m still single.

Marissa was an aspiring actress and waitress before landing the job here. If I’m being honest, Joseph hired her because she has a smoking hot body and a face that’s easy on the eyes. Their hot and steamy office affair started quick. Two years and two break-ups later, she has a five-carat diamond ring on her

left hand and a newly remodeled twenty-million-dollar penthouse in the sky. Let's not forget about the million-dollar wedding in the Hamptons. She's spending his money faster than he can make it.

"Exactly. Marissa seems to think I sleep with all my assistants. She claims that hiring someone with a degree in accounting will only be beneficial to the company. I call bullshit. She needs to stop with the jealousy shit." He huffs out before taking another drink from his cup.

"For the last time, I'm not jealous, but I'll be damned if I let some hot woman rock my cradle. Good morning, Liam." Marissa says, walking around the corner straight to the coffeepot.

"Shit." Joseph chokes on his coffee. "I'm going to start making you wear a bell." He narrows his eyes at her.

"Shouldn't be talking shit about your wife. Eck. Why do you still have this archaic machine? It brews the worst cup of coffee." She says, pouring herself a cup.

"Good thing you no longer work here, now isn't it darling?" Joseph grinds his teeth. "Speaking of, why are you here?"

"Do you ever listen? I'm meeting the Christmas decorators here at eleven." She puts her hand on her hip, tilting her head.

"It's a quarter to nine. Your new hire is late." He finishes his cup, putting it on the counter.

"No, you're early. I told her to be here at ten, since that's the normal time you roll in." She takes a drink then scrunches her

face, looking at her cup.

“Our days start at eight a.m., you know this, Marissa.” He reaches for the coffeepot.

“Maybe for everyone else, but not you, dear husband. Did you expect her to come in on her first day and sit at her desk twiddling her thumbs, waiting for you?” She huffs.

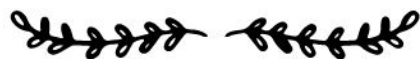
“Two months.” I laugh into my coffee cup.

“That reminds me, darling, don’t you have a friend or two for Liam? Someone who likes to blow money and is dying to marry a rich lawyer and real estate investor.” Joseph says with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Oooo, I...” Marissa says before I stop her.

“I’m good. Thank you, but no thanks. I have my cat, that’s all I need.” I say before quickly walking away from the newlyweds.

Every time I’m around them, I get a dose of marriage anti-venom. Can’t wait to witness the hell that awaits him when she gives him a child.



After walking a file to accounting, I take a stroll down the hall to grab a cup of liquid joy. Of course, the pot is empty. I swear I’m the only one in this joint that brews coffee. Standing in the small kitchenette waiting for the world’s slowest coffee pot to finish brewing, I spot a brunette in the lobby area talking with the receptionist. She’s wearing an oversized puffer coat,

something we don't see until it snows. Her hair is pulled back into a low ponytail, a couple of waves of hair frame her face. They must bother her because she keeps brushing them behind her ears. Then sighs in frustration. She doesn't seem to wear makeup or if she is, it's very little. Her brown eyes hide behind large, black-framed glasses. The glasses almost swallow her face whole.

I look at my watch, ten till ten. This must be the girl Marissa hired as Joseph's new assistant. She doesn't look like she's from around here. But for the life of me, I can't figure out why Marissa would think she's ugly. She's not. She's cute... plain, but cute.

CHAPTER 3

THE FIRST WEEK

Rosemary

“UM, EXCUSE ME.” I bend down and whisper to the receptionist, pushing a stray strand of hair from my face.

She looks at me, then holds one finger up. I stand up straight and glance around. She is looking at her computer screen and moving her mouse around. Sighing loudly, she turns her attention to me.

“Yes, may I help you?” She narrows her eyes, looking me up and down.

“I’m here to see Marissa Barlowe.” I say, clutching my bag so hard I can feel my nails digging into the palm of my hand. Her gaze is making me nervous and more uncomfortable than I already am.

“Do you have an appointment?” She snaps, raising her eyebrows.

“Yes, ten o’clock.” I push my hair behind my ear and exhale. I’m trying real hard to maintain my composure, but I’m not liking the vibe I’m getting from her.

“Name?” She snaps.

“What?” I tilt my head.

“Your. Name.” She drags out the word name in a mocking tone while exaggerating her lip movement.

“Rosemary Anderson.” I take a deep breath and push my shoulders back.



Ten minutes until eight, I punch my code into the office building. Flipping on the lights as I make my way to my desk in front of Joseph's office. I put my stuff in my drawer, then hang my jacket up. Everyone here is wearing lightweight coats and thinks it's funny that I'm bundled up. I haven't quite thawed out since I've been here.

I walk into the boss's office, turning his lights on, followed by the computer. Next, it's time to get the coffee started. He won't be here for another couple of hours, but I'll make at least two more pots. While the coffee brews, I check my emails. Just as I have done every day for the past week.

My job here is easy. He says he appreciates my organizational skills, but I don't think he likes me much. There's a constant scowl on his face, and he's always so broody. I don't think I've heard him speak in a normal voice. He's always groaning or grumbling under his breath.

Fifteen until ten, I make my way to the kitchenette to brew a fresh pot of coffee. It should be ready just as Joseph walks through the door.

"Good morning, Rosemary." Liam greets me as I walk in.

He is our attorney here at the firm. I have had little interaction with him. Most of the women here trip over themselves to get his attention, especially Poppy, the receptionist. As a matter of fact, if she sees me talking with him, she will insert herself between us in a heartbeat.

“Good morning. How are you?” I smile politely.

“Every day I’m not six feet under is a blessing. There’s enough for one cup, you take it.” He holds the pot up.

“I’ll take it.” Right on schedule, Poppy enters and inserts herself between us.

“Poppy can have it. I’m making a fresh pot, anyway.” I smile and empty the coffee filter into the trash, trying to ignore the damn heifer behind me.

“Oh my gosh Liam, it has been so much fun hanging out with you after hours at the Midnight Lounge. Such a cool place. So glad you suggested it.” She elongates the word it, like she does at the end of every sentence.

“Um. I don’t remember suggesting it, but okay.” Liam says, exhaling. “Poppy, I think the phone is ringing.”

“It’s okay, the voicemail will get it.” She is quick to dismiss the phone. “So, Liam. Do you have a date for the company Christmas party next week?” Poppy asks slurping her coffee.

The gross desperation coming off Poppy is both sad and hilarious to me. I don’t blame her. Liam is gorgeous. Six feet tall, lean and muscular, sandy brown hair, hazel eyes, sun kissed skin, and sharp jawline. He’s so well-groomed and looks like he walked off a magazine cover. I wouldn’t be surprised if he gets a weekly manicure and pedicure.

“Nope, going stag. Like I do every year.” Liam replies with a sigh.

“Me too.” Her voice goes up two octaves.

“Good for you. Excuse me.” I feel him push past her, putting his hand against my lower back.

I freeze, lightly gasping at his touch. The way he touches me is different. It’s not creepy or anything, just different. I’m sure he only did it, so I wouldn’t accidentally back into him while he was trying to escape Poppy. He stands still for a second or two, his hand still on my lower back, just above my ass.

“Rosemary, can you please bring me a cup? I have a conference call I need to get to, and I can’t wait any longer.” Liam’s tone is softer than normal, and he speaks just above a whisper.

His hand is still on my back. Poppy is rambling behind me, but neither of us acknowledges her. I swear his breathing slows as he awaits my reply.

“Of course.” I softly say, turning my head to look at him over my shoulder.

Rather than making eye contact, I fix my eyes to the ground. All the sudden I’m having a strange feeling that makes me shy. Almost like having butterflies in my belly. I like the way his hand feels on my back. With him being this close, I can smell his cologne. I’ve never been close enough to smell it before. It’s wonderful. *Is this a moment we are having?*

“Thank you.” He says, patting my shoulder with his free hand. His other hand is still firmly planted on my lower back.

He hurries away, taking his amazing smell and warm hand with him. Oddly, I’m a little sad and disappointed that he’s

gone. I can see why all the ladies go gaga over Liam. *What is wrong with me?* I think to myself before another feeling settles in. *Foolish.* I'm foolish for thinking too much about him putting his hand on me. There is nothing there above being colleagues in the same firm. Why would there be any sort of moment between us? Liam is a magnificent creation who can literally have any woman of his choosing. *Why would he pick a troll like me?*

"Coffee done yet?" Becky from accounting says walking into the kitchenette.

"Nope. Starting the pot now." I push the brew button and smile at Becky.

Suddenly, there is a loud pop sound, followed by several bright bursts of lights and a sizzling sound. Poppy screams while Becky's mouth is wide open, a shocked expression on her face. In horror, I turn and see the coffee pot is on fire. *Shit.* Poppy continues to scream so loudly I'm having a hard time thinking. Before I can react, I see an arm reach in and unplug the machine. Then, with a business magazine, he smacks the small flames until they are gone. To my shock, it's Joseph. *I'm in so much trouble.*

"What the hell happened?" He growls.

"I... I..." I try to speak, but I'm so nervous I can't form words.

"The new girl broke the coffee pot. It's all Rosemary's fault." Poppy says as tears fill my eyes.

Of course, Poppy is quick to throw me under the bus. I'm not too sure why she hates me like she does. Maybe she is mad because she saw Liam and me talking, or maybe because he put his hand on my back, or maybe because he asked me to bring him a cup, or maybe it's just my face she hates. Who knows? Yes, the coffee pot broke while I was using it, but I did nothing to break it. And I have no problem replacing it. But damn.

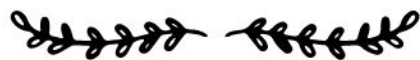
"This true, Rosemary?" Joseph snaps.

"Yes." I choke back the tears. "Please don't fire me. I'll replace it." I look at his angry face.

"Don't be silly." He grumbles. "Listen." He pulls his wallet out. "Liam and I have a conference call. Go to the coffee shop down the street and get us both a cup. Biggest ones they have." He hands me money. "When you come back, just walk into my office. Don't knock, just walk in. Understand?" He snaps in his broody way.

"Yes." I reply, nodding my head.

"Grab yourself something with the change. I'll deal with this shit later. Poppy, get this thing out of my building." He waves at the coffeepot, then walks away.



After almost setting the office on fire this morning, I decide a soak in the tub is in order. On the way home, I stop and grab a bottle of wine. I need it after the day I've had. Bill sent me a text earlier that a bunch of boxes arrived for me today, that he

put them in my apartment. After checking my tracking, I realize that it's the cookware and dishes I ordered earlier this week. I may not have any furniture yet, but at least I'll have the things I need to cook myself a meal. Eating out every day is getting expensive.

On the way up to my apartment, I stop at the mailboxes. Nothing. I sigh. This life I am leading here in New York is lonely.

"Hello beautiful." I hear a high-pitched voice say behind me.

Turning around, I come face to face with a beautiful pink-haired drag queen in a pink mini-dress with feathers at the bottom. The dress looks like it's pink mirror mosaic art on black fabric. She stands well over six-feet tall in her platform high heels. Her hair alone has to be a foot tall. I smile because she is over the top fabulous, with exaggerated pink toned makeup.

"By the look on your face, I can tell you don't recognize me. Let me introduce myself. My name is Sue Nami." She is larger than life, waving her hands around as she speaks. "You know me better as," she leans down, "Greg. Your neighbor." She says in a very masculine voice.

"Greg?" I gasp and laugh.

"No, no, no. Like this, I am Sue Nami. Pronouns she/her." She winks.

"You are more fabulous than words can describe." I can't stop smiling.

“Why thank you, beautiful.” Sue bobs her head and shakes her hips.

“Where are you off to?” I ask, still taking her in.

“I have a show tonight at The Back Door. I perform there three nights a week and during the bottomless mimosas brunch on Sundays.” She shimmies as she speaks.

“How fun.” I squeal.

“Honey, come with me tonight. You’ll have so much fun. I’ll introduce you to all the queens.” She loops her arm into mine.

“I don’t know. It’s been a long week. I have to wash and put up all my new dishes and stuff.” I look down.

“Do it tomorrow. Tomorrow is Saturday, you’re off. Please.” She pouts, pushing her bottom lip out.

“I have to grocery shop and get some more clothes.” I bite my bottom lip and continue looking at the floor.

“Tell you what. I’ll come by around eleven and help you wash and put everything up. Then we’ll hit up some clothing stores and finish the day at the grocery store. Then we will come back to your place, put everything away. And then you can cook me dinner for all my hard work.” She giggles.

“Well...” I look up at her.

“What do you say?” Sue looks at me with a smile on her face.

“I have nothing to wear.” I look at my clothes.

“Not an issue. You’re about the same size as my BFF, Roxy. We’ll just swing by her place real quick.” She shakes my arm.

“What the hell? Why not?” I say, throwing my head back laughing.

CHAPTER 4

YOUR INNER GANSTA

Liam

“WHAT CAN I GET you?” The bartender asks.

“Brooklyn Brewery’s newest IPA.” I reply.

I lean against the bar, looking around. This place is called The Back Door. They’re known to have an eclectic crowd with their drag and burlesque shows. It’s quiet in here tonight, but that is to be expected on a Thursday. I’m trying this place out since Poppy discovered my hangout spot. That woman gets on my last nerve. I’m not sure why Joseph keeps her around. She’s a horrible receptionist.

I’ve been frequenting the Midnight Lounge ever since Joseph and I opened the firm ten years ago. It’s a damn shame that it’s now Poppy’s go-to spot. I’ll miss the place. When I find out who told her, I’ll probably punch them. Joseph usually meets me for drinks on Thursday, but tonight he has some art gallery opening that Marissa is dragging him to. He tried to convince me to go as well, saying it would be good for business. I told him he’s the face of the firm and I’m just the attorney. He wasn’t happy with that response. Many don’t know that I’m his silent business partner, owning twenty-five percent of the firm. And I like it that way.

I was working in my stepfather’s law firm when Joseph pitched me the idea of going into commercial real estate. I had been dabbling in real estate investing already. He was tired of working under his father’s thumb at his real estate development firm and wanted to make a name for himself. He

just didn't have the money to do so. Borrowing what he could from his trust fund, he asked to borrow the rest from me.

Ten years later, business is booming, and we both have paid our trusts back in full. Life is good. Well, for me, anyway. Joseph is struggling since saying those two ominous little words, *'I do.'* I probably shouldn't laugh because his life could be mine if my mother had her way. She says if I don't hurry and change my marital status, I'll end up a creepy old man.

I like my life the way it is. I'm not bound to anyone, and the women in my life know it. That's how I plan on keeping it. But with my little sister's wedding in two weeks, my mother has been pressuring me even more about settling down and having children.

"Here ya go. Want me to start a tab?" The bartender asks, tapping my arm with the beer bottle.

"That'd be great." I tip my bottle to him and take a long swig. "Aaaahhh." I let out a powerful exhale, "good shit." I say, looking at the bottle.

I continue looking around. I remember coming to this bar when I was in college. It was a dump back then, but they had the best fries. It changed hands five or so years ago, and the new owners really cleaned the joint up. There's a small stage where three pool tables used to sit. Dance floor where a storage area was. The place looks and feels cleaner. I wonder how their fries are.

Taking another slow sip of my beer, I think about work the past couple of weeks. It's been insanely busy, making me feel

like I can't catch my breath. Then today we found out someone out bid us on two big contracts. It sucks, but in the long run won't hurt the firm. Joseph's ego is another story. It's turned him into a cesspool of crankiness. He's been an asshole for the past two weeks. I've never seen him so pissy for so long. It makes me think there's more going on at home than he is saying. Poor Rosemary. She's getting the shit end of the stick putting up with him for so many hours of the day.

Rosemary... there's just something about her that piques my interest. Last week when I touched her back, I swear we had a moment. Even with Poppy squawking in the background. I had a physical reaction to touching her, something I've never experienced before. She's different from most women I've met. Quiet, reserved, sweet, and kind. She's very intelligent. Why she took a job as a PA I'll never understand. Her look screams innocent, but something tells me she's not as innocent as she appears. *Did we have a moment, or was it just my imagination?*

Since that moment in the kitchenette, I have been thinking about her. Making up little excuses just to be around her. I'm curious about her in a way I've never been about anyone else. She doesn't even look twice at me. Which is something I'm not used to. Women flock to me. Not Rosemary. She's kind to me and is ready to assist me when I need it, but that is it.

Oh shit, I am becoming the creepy old man my mom warned me about.

Glancing at the other end of the bar, I see a woman sitting quietly by herself. She's looking down into her glass, sniffing. Wait, is she crying? Looking up, she waves at the bartender, catching his attention, then points to her glass.

Rosemary?

It is her. As if by some chance I manifested her, just by thinking about her. I want to go to her, find out what is wrong. Wrap her in my arms until the tears stop. *Wait... I want to what with her?* Whatever moment I thought we had was obviously a one-way street, but I can't just let her sit there crying... alone. *Can I?*

I think for a moment or two. What if that was my little sister sitting there crying? Wouldn't I want someone she knew to comfort her? I let out an exasperated sigh and move towards her. This is a mistake; I can feel it. As the bartender puts her drink in front of her, I motion to him with my bottle.

"And another one of these, please. Add them both to my tab."

I say, then turn my attention to Rosemary.

Her face is red and puffy, and her eyes are bloodshot. She quickly sniffles back the tears before turning away from me.

"Hey, hey, are you okay?" I speak softly, sitting next to her.

"Rosemary. Please talk to me. What's wrong?" I put my hand on her shoulder.

Damn, there's that reaction I had the last time I touched her. There's a churning in my gut, my heart races, and my breathing speeds up. *What is happening?* I can't help it, with

my fingertips, I rub her shoulder. Fuck, I hate seeing her like this. I want to beat the shit out of whoever hurt her. I want to hold her. *Why does she have this effect on me?*

“I’m fine.” She whispers without looking at me.

“Rosemary, you’re clearly not fine. Please tell me what happened. Let me help you.” I tug her shoulder, trying to coax her into looking at me.

“You can’t help me. I’m a freaking mess.” She huffs, then looks at me.

“You’re not a mess. What happened?” I look deep into her almond-shaped brown eyes.

Damn, I never noticed it before, but she has the most beautiful eyes. I want to brush the hair out of her face, but I stop myself. Staring into her eyes, I get lost. Images flash in my mind of the life we could have together. And for the first time, I’m not hating the idea of settling down with one woman. I put my beer down and lean closer to her, rubbing her forearm with my other hand. My breath hitches when I hear a light gasp escape her mouth. That wasn’t my imagination. *Does she feel the same as me?*

“Since I moved here, nothing has gone right.” She snuffles. “They lost all my belongings in the move.” She blows her nose.

“I’m sure they’ll show up. Moving companies can move slow sometimes.” I reply.

“No, you don’t understand. The truck was involved in an awful wreck. Everything is gone. Joseph hates me.” She says, wiping the tears rolling down her cheek.

“He does not. Trust me. He’s just under a lot of pressure right now. Business and home.” I say, moving closer to her.

Damn, she smells good.

“Last week I broke the coffeepot... well, it broke while I was using it. I almost caught the office on fire. Poppy told Joseph it was my fault. I replaced the coffeepot with a new one during my lunch.” She hiccups the last words.

“Wait. *You* replaced the coffeepot?” I tilt my head, furrowing my brow.

“Yes. So, he wouldn’t fire me.” She sniffles, then takes a drink.

“Rosemary,” I sigh. “He wasn’t going to fire you. That coffeepot was ten years old. It was a cheap piece of crap when we bought it. It had been on its last leg for months. I’m surprised it lasted as long as it did.” I say with a smile. “After our conference called ended, I left for the day. When I got in the next morning with the new machine in hand. The kind that makes coffee and espresso. The one Marissa and the women of the office had been begging for. It surprised me to see the new pot there full of coffee. I thought Joseph was being a dick and bought a new one to spite his wife. The new machine is still in my office.” I say taking a drink of my beer and scooting back on my stool.

I hate removing my hands from her. It almost pains me. But when I saw her look down at my hand on her arm while I spoke, I thought it best. Any moments I think we are sharing is all in my head. Let's face it, I am being a creepy old man. *Damn my mother's words.*

"Then today... I broke the copier. It was all flashing lights and error messages. Again, Poppy was right there, telling everyone it was my fault. Marissa yelled at me, then sent me home for the day." Tears roll down her cheek again. "When I got home, I priced out replacement machines. I can't afford forty grand. It will wipe my savings out." She says, sniffing.

I did not know any of that had gone down today. Joseph and I left the office at noon to check on a couple of projects we have going on.

"So, I wrote this up." She hands me a folded piece of paper.

My eyes nearly pop out of my head when I read the header. *'Letter of Resignation.'*

"I'll give it to Joseph in the morning. Two weeks should be plenty of time for him to find a replacement. Hell, Poppy has told me plenty of times she could do my job with her eyes closed." She wipes her tears.

"Rosemary. You don't have to replace anything. I'm sorry, Marissa yelled at you. She had no right." I pause and sigh before taking another drink.

Hearing that Poppy and Marissa were so cruel to her today infuriates me. Marissa used to be sweet, but since becoming

Mrs. Barlowe, I've noticed a shift in her personality. She should be careful; I know the terms of her prenup since I helped draft it. I want to punch somebody for hurting Rosemary like this. But I don't punch women... my little sister does, though.

"That machine is a rental with a service agreement. All Poppy has to do is call it in and a service tech will be out the next day. Marissa and Poppy both know this. That machine breaks at least once a quarter." I gently say to her in the most soothing voice I can. "What was Marissa doing there, anyway?"

"Her and Poppy were working on something for some art gallery opening tonight." She takes a drink, then waves the bartender down.

Hearing that Poppy was helping Marissa, I can't help but to wonder how many missed calls we had today. Communication may be a reason for losing the bids like we did.

"Oh." She takes a drink, then looks at me. "They made it seem like... I don't know." She snuffles.

"Joseph hasn't seen this yet, right?" I hold her resignation in my hand.

"No. I called my old boss. They already filled my position. What am I going to do? I've never been unemployed before." She says with her mouth turned down.

Her face is so sad it breaks my heart. I'm tempted to call my sister now.

“And I already bought a dress for the company holiday party on Saturday. My friend Sue helped me pick it out. Her and Roxy were going to give me a makeover. Now, I have to pack what little belongings I have and ship them to my parents’ place.” Her tears roll again.

“You’re not going anywhere.” I rip the paper into pieces. “Joseph never saw this and neither did I. I won’t let you quit. Believe it or not, Joseph needs you. You’re good for the firm. Let Sue and Roxy give you that makeover and bring them with you to the holiday party. The more the merrier.” My voice is firm but compassionate.

Damn it, I can hear my mother’s voice telling me not to be so creepy.

“You know I can just print another one of those out? It’s already saved on my laptop.” She squints her eyes at me.

I pause, searching for the perfect words to say to her, but before I can, a seven-foot-tall pink haired drag queen approaches us.

“Rosemary.” She says. “Beautiful, what is going on?” She lifts Rosemary’s face to look up at her. “Is this creep bothering you?” She glares at me.

“No, Sue.” Rosemary snuffles. “He’s the lawyer for the company I work for.”

So, this must be makeover Sue.

“What?” Sue shouts, glaring at me. “You listen to me, buddy. That fucking machine was a piece of shit to start with and I’ll

be damned if I'm going to stand by and let you bully my little Rosemary into paying for something that wasn't her fault to begin with. As a matter of fact," she takes her clip-on earrings out, placing them on the bar. Leaning into me with a snarl on her lips and in a deep masculine voice she says, "how about I just beat your fucking ass right here for even trying?"

I don't know if I've ever been more terrified in my life, as I am right now. There's something about this seven-foot-tall pink haired drag queen standing in front of me that is intimidating. I'm not some joke, either. I've been in a bar fight or two. Granted, it's been fifteen years or so, but I've been known to throw down with the best of them. Although, now at forty, I'm known to throw my back out, putting my socks on.

I stand up, because I've never backed down from a challenge and this time won't be any different. The thought crosses my mind about getting my ass kicked, and under normal circumstances I'd be fine losing. My ego would only be bruised for a minute or two. Hell, I've had women flock to my side to take care of me after a fight. Would it be the same if I lost a fight to Sue? Do I really want to be known as the guy who lost a fight to a pink-haired drag queen in six-inch platform heels and a miniskirt? Then there's my rule on hitting women. We're in some sort of gray area here, and this is a time I can't call my little sister. Sue would decimate her.

"Sue, no! Wait, you have it wrong." Rosemary screams, pushing herself between Sue and me. "Liam isn't doing anything wrong. He just came over to talk to me."

“Oh yeah? About what?” Sue’s eyes are glued on me as she mouths the words, ‘I’m going to beat your ass.’

“What’s your concern?” I growl.

At a boy, show her how tough you are.

“Stop it, both of you.” Rosemary pushes us apart hard. “Damn it.” She snaps. “He was talking me out of moving back to Houston.” She snuffles, sitting back down.

“What?” Sue is quick to her side.

Are they a couple?

“I ripped up her letter of resignation.” I take a seat and point at the pile of paper.

“What?” Sue speaks in her high-pitched tone. She gasps with her mouth wide open. Looking between Rosemary and me.

“Why, beautiful?”

“I’ve had the worst luck since I’ve moved here. Nothing has gone right.” Rosemary rests her head on Sue’s chest.

Yup, they’re a couple. *Damn it.*

“No beautiful. You have me, and Frankie, and Roxy, and Ty. We’re like a little dysfunctional family.” She holds Rosemary’s head to her chest.

Now I’m just confused.

“I know, but...” Rosemary speaks, but is stopped by Sue.

“No buts, you. Look at me, Rosemary.” Sue pulls away, lifting Rosemary’s face up. “So, you’ve had a little string of bad luck. My mom would say it’s the universe’s way of testing you. To

see if you're worthy of the most wonderful thing it has coming your way. You don't want to tempt fate by hastily heading back to Houston, now do you?" They stare into each other's eyes.

"No." Rosemary whispers.

"Damn right you don't." Sue kisses Rosemary's head.

It's a tender moment between the two of them. A ping of jealousy strikes my chest at the sight. I'm feeling like a third wheel.

"What's going on?" I turn to see a woman with curly shoulder length green hair ask.

"It's all good Roxy. Rosemary is just having a bad day." Sue replies without taking her eyes off Rosemary. "Now, I'm going to allow you to continue your little pity party until I count to ten, then you're done. Understand?"

Rosemary simply nods. Sue releases Rosemary's face, pushes her shoulders back, holding her hands in front of her. There's a maternal look about her. She counts, slowly breathing in and out.

"One... two... three..." Sue continues.

I watch Rosemary. She looks like she is having some sort of mental dialog with herself. An internal battle, almost. Slowly she calms down, wiping the last tear from her cheek as Sue says ten.

"Now it's time to remember the bad bitch you are and show the world your inner gansta." Sue smiles, snapping the last

word.

“Thank you. You always make me feel better.” Rosemary coos.

“Baby, you ready?” A tall, slender man approaches Sue, putting his hand on her lower back.

“Yes, we are.” Sue kisses his cheek.

Part of me is relieved that Sue and Rosemary are not a couple.

“Who’s this?” The man looks at me.

“Oh, this is um...” Sue snaps her fingers.

“Liam. I work with Rosemary.” I offer him my hand.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Frankie, this one’s husband.” He gooses Sue’s sides.

“Stop it.” She giggles, blocking his hands with her elbows.

“This is Roxy and the fine gentleman coming up behind her is her partner, Ty.” She smiles between us all.

“Nice to meet the gang.” I smile and nod.

“Sorry about threatening to kick your ass.” Sue shifts her hips.

“It’s all good. Glad to see Rosemary already has a support system in place.” I drink the last of my beer, then flag the bartender down. “Can I get a burger and fries to go, then close out my tab, please?”

“You’re leaving?” Rosemary looks at me with her beautiful brown eyes.

“Yeah, I can’t stay out too late. Stella gets pissy if she’s not fed on time.” I smile and nod.

CHAPTER 5

I DON'T HATE YOU

Rosemary

SEVEN-FIFTY I PUNCH MY code to get into the office building, wondering what fresh hell awaits me today. I reach to flip the light switch, but the lights are on. All of them. The smell of coffee is wafting through the air. *Did Joseph come in early to fire me before anyone gets here?* My stomach is in knots as I walk down the hall to my desk. His lights are on. *Great.* Walking up to my desk, I peek into his office. His head is down, reading something.

“Rosemary.” He calls.

My stomach does somersaults. This is it. I’ve never been fired before, so I guess there’s a first time for everything.

“Come in and close the door.” He instructs without looking up.

I slowly make my way to his desk. Part of me wants to just get it over with, while the other part wants to fight for my job. Either way, this walk to his desk feels like twenty miles through mud.

“Have a seat, please.” He takes his readers off, taking a sip from his mug.

He inhales and exhales deeply, then looks at me. Right now, I’m glad I missed breakfast. I feel like I’m going to hurl.

“It has been brought to my attention that we had an issue with the copier yesterday.” He leans back in his chair.

“Yes.” I nod my head.

“And Marissa yelled at you over it... Poppy too?” He narrows his eyes.

“Yes.” I whisper.

“Did anyone call for service?” He crosses his arms.

“Not to my knowledge. Marissa sent me home for the day.” I gulp.

“Hmmm, I see.” He inhales then leans on his desk.

“Did you replace the coffeepot?” His lips are pursed.

“I did.” I reply.

“Why?” He tilts his head.

“It broke while I was using it. I thought it best to replace it.” I look down, playing with a button on my jacket.

“Because you thought I’d fire you?” He asks.

“Yes.” I fight the tears.

“Shit.” He lets out an exasperated sigh. “Rosemary, I’m not going to fire you. Never planned on it.” He leans back, running his fingers through his hair. “Listen, I know I’ve been a dick since you’ve been here. Truth is. I didn’t want a new assistant. I wanted Marissa to stay in that role, working beside me. She ran the ad, then hired you behind my back. I did not know about you until Becky came to me with your new hire paperwork. By then it was too late.” He takes a drink from his cup. “Between you and me, you’re a great assistant. Overqualified, but great.”

Hearing him say he will not fire me, I let out the breath I was holding. My heart is still racing.

“I hope you know; I would never expect an employee to replace something simply because it broke while they were using it. Becky came to me and explained that you simply pushed the button and the coffeepot exploded. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if Marissa sabotaged the damn thing. She hated it so much.” He takes another sip. “She was right. It made an awful cup of coffee. That’s something else we won’t be telling her.” He raises his eyebrows at me.

This is the first time in two weeks he is not acting broody or growling at me when he talks. He’s being... pleasant. *Did Liam talk with him?*

“As far as my wife is concerned, you work for me. Not her. She doesn’t work here either, and had no right sending you home yesterday. I have taken care of her regarding you and this office. For future references, I need you to get a list of our vendors and service agreements from Becky. I will deal with Poppy about yesterday, but from this point out, she will report to you rather than to me. You will have the right to replace her as well. Understand?” He finishes his coffee. “I’m keeping the coffeepot you bought for a backup here in the office. Liam says he’ll have a new one sent to your apartment this afternoon.” He looks in his cup, then sets it on his desk.

So, Liam talked with him.

“I hope this clears things up between us. For the record, I don’t hate you. I will try to be less of an ass going forward.

Are we good?" He looks at his cup.

"Yes. We're good. Thank you. Would you like me to fill that up for you?" I ask looking between him and his cup.

"That would be great." He puts his readers on looking at his computer. "And one more thing." He says as I reach for his cup. "Liam says you have no furniture. They destroyed everything during the move."

"Yes." I nod.

"Has the moving company made it right yet?" He looks at me.

"No. I'm getting the runaround." I shake my head.

"That's unacceptable. Forward the moving company's name and everything Liam will need. Let them deal with him. He's great at getting resolutions." He pulls a business card from his desk and hands it to me. "Call Amy. She is a designer we work with on staging things for market. Amy has a warehouse full of furniture. Get with her. I'm sure she'll want to come by and see your apartment and take measurements. Let her help you, but ultimately pick out what you like and charge it to our company account. Nothing cheap looking. You deserve to have a beautiful apartment to go home to every night." Joseph says, looking at me.

Is that a... smile? He's smiling at me? He has teeth. Now I'm wondering if I slipped in the shower this morning, hit my head, and am lying there dead. Naked... one of my worst fears. This has to be a dream or something. I look at the card,

then back to him and smile. This may be one of the sweetest things an employer has ever done for me.

“Thank you. I will repay the firm when the moving company settles up with me.” I push my shoulders back.

“No need, but if you want to send me a gift, I’m a bourbon man.” He chuckles, then turns to his computer.

CHAPTER 6

I OWE YOU LUNCH

Rosemary

I SIT AT THE only table in the kitchenette, quietly eating my sandwich and checking social media. It's how I'm keeping up with friends and family back home. Scrolling, I see that Raylynn Thompson and Bobby Robicheaux were engaged over the weekend. It's a cute picture of the two of them and her Maltese, Fefe, dressed in matching holiday sweaters.

Raylynn and I worked with each other for five years. She is an analyst for the company I used to work for. She and Bobby started dating right about the time she joined the company, and he was all she could talk about. She was obsessed with him to say the least. She had a plan to be married within a year and to be pregnant with their first child before their one-year anniversary. Raylynn even had a list of baby names she carried in her purse.

Looking at the photo, Raylynn is all smiles. Bobby looks like he might get sick. Looking through the comments, there is mention of checking the background before posting a picture. I enlarge the photo. On the table behind them, to the far left, sits a small white box with purple lettering. Pregnancy in big bold letters. Now I understand why Bobby looks sick.

'Congrats on the engagement and the... box.' I comment with a giggle.

I guess the white picket fence dreams are about to come true for one of them.

She couldn't figure out why after being with Dean for eight years, engaged for four, I'd walk away from him and our relationship. Most people can't. We seemed to be the perfect pair, with the perfect relationship. Both of us are critical thinkers with careers we love. I mean, who wouldn't want to say their fiancé is a rocket scientist? I don't think in eight years we ever had one argument. He had his place; I had mine, and three times a week we'd share a bed. Everything was so methodical, thought out, and planned.

With everything being so planned out, our relationship lacked passion. We loved each other. I still love him, if I am being honest. It was something my grandmother said to me before she passed from cancer a year ago.

'A life without passion is a slow way to freeze to death.'

There was something that she saw in my perfect relationship with the rocket scientist. Or rather something that was lacking. She told me stories of her mother, who I'm named after, Rosemary Rossiter. She was a wild child back in her day. Never doing what was expected of a woman in her time. Always marching to the beat of her own drum. She moved to New York when she was eighteen and had an array of jobs. Everything from a baby nurse, factory worker, secretary, and bookkeeper. She even told the story of being arrested after smashing up a saloon in protest against the public sale of alcohol.

There was an ongoing joke about her in the family, how she'd change jobs and men when she changed her underwear. But

Rosemary didn't care who said what about her. She lived her life as she saw put.

She was forty when she met my great-grandfather, Fredrick. They were married three months later and settled down on a small farm in Kansas. When he asked her for a child, the doctors protested, saying her age would be a huge issue. She told the doctors to shut their mouths, that no one told her what to do or how to live her life. Then she told her husband she would only tolerate being pregnant once and to make it count. Eleven months later, she gave birth to a son and daughter. Seems my great-grandfather knew how to follow orders where she was concerned.

I never met either of them, but the stories I've heard about her over the years have fascinated me. She died three years before I was born at the age of one hundred. What I would give to spend a day with her. My grandmother's words and the stories about my great-grandmother inspired a change in me. Do something big and bold. Go against the grain and learn how to march to the beat of my own drum.

"You do know that the ham goes on the sandwich, and chips go on the side. Right?" I look up to see Liam with his brows furrowed and head tilted at me.

"Haha. Yes, I know." I cover my mouth as I speak.

"Why?" He shakes his head.

"When I was a freshman in high school, I saw my math teacher, Mrs. Wilcox, eating lunch. Iceberg lettuce with mustard on white bread. She told me she grew up very poor.

When food was scarce, her mother would make them this sandwich to keep them from going to bed on an empty stomach. This sandwich was nostalgic to her, something she'd eat when she missed her mother. Mrs. Wilcox told me the simple sandwich was good and not to knock it until tried it. I made my own when I got home from school that day, and she was right, it was good. When my mom caught me eating it, she about hit the ceiling. *'We can afford ham,'* she'd say. So to make her happy, I'd eat the ham on the side." I chuckle, looking at the pile of deli ham. "Still do after all these years. Guess some things never change. I added the potato chips in college. Don't knock it until you try it." I hold up the other half of my sandwich for him.

Liam looks inquisitively at it for a moment, then takes the sandwich. He nods at me, then takes a huge bite. Nodding his head in approval before licking a bit of yellow mustard from the corner of his mouth.

"Not bad. Weird, but not bad." He says looking at me.

As I put my sandwich to my lips, he drops his half of the sandwich on my paper plate, then takes mine from my hands. I look at him in shock. Then I scowl at him when he dumps everything into the trash.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I cross my arms.

"I'm hungry." He replies.

"Normally, when you're hungry, you don't throw food into the trash." I cock my mouth to the side.

“No, but this gives me a reason to go down the street to the deli.” He smiles.

“What about my lunch?” I hold my hands up with my palms raised to the ceiling.

“That gives you a reason to follow me. Seems I owe you a lunch now.” He turns and walks away.



After getting our food to go, Liam and I head to the park to eat.

“Are you sure about eating outside?” I look around.

“Yes, it’s a beautiful day. The sun is shining, birds are chirping. What more could you ask for?” He takes a deep breath, looking around.

“Warmer weather. It’s cold.” I reply.

“It’s seventy-two degrees. Perfect weather.” He tilts his head.

“You forget, I’m from southeast Texas. Seventy-two degrees is cold to me.” I laugh, looking down.

“There’s a spot in the sun right there.” He points and walks.

“Is this good?”

“Perfect.” I smile. “It’s actually a little warm with my jacket on. Hold this.” I hand him my food and drink before taking my jacket off and putting it on the ground. “Now we have something to sit on.” I smile, slipping my shoes off taking a seat. “Room for one more.” I pat the spot next to me.

Without hesitation, he kicks his shoes off and joins me. There is something about him I can't quite put my finger on. Something about the way he looks at me when I talk. Like he is absorbing every little detail. We talk about everything under the sun. I learn so much about him. He is the oldest of three, his childhood, and even his college years. I also learned that he and Joseph have been friends since they were little kids; that their families are close. He doesn't have many memories that Joseph is not a part of.

"Dad gum it!" After looking at my watch, I say through my teeth. "I was supposed to be back thirty minutes ago." I hastily bag up all our trash. Liam lets out a roar of laughter.

"What's so funny?" I look at him.

"Your accent." He's still laughing.

"What accent? I don't have an accent." I scrunch my face at him.

"Oh, okay then." He clears his throat, still chuckling under his breath. "Don't worry about it. You're out with one of the bosses. Shhh, don't tell anyone. I like to keep it a secret, but I figured being Joseph's PA, you'll find out soon enough. I also told him I was taking you to lunch. Although, he probably wouldn't approve of a picnic in the park. He's bougie that way." He wiggles his eyebrows at me, making me giggle.

"You're one of the bosses?" I ask, tilting my head at him.

"Yup, I own a small percentage of the company. I have from the very beginning. He would like everyone to know. I like our

arrangement the way it is. Otherwise, I'd have to go to fancy dinners and gallery openings with stuck up people." He slips on his shoes, then stands before offering me a hand.

"Thank you." I say after he helps me up.

There are those butterflies again. Every time we touch, I get the same warm feeling.

"And thank you for talking to Joseph for me." I look at him.

"You're welcome. It was no problem. I had to. He was driving me insane how moody he has been lately. I felt bad for you working so close to him. Me, I can go into my office and shut the door. I like you, you're genuinely a nice person. You don't deserve the shit he was dishing out."

'I like you.' What is that supposed to mean? Stop it, Rosemary. You know better. He's just being nice.



Walking back into the office, I'm the most comfortable and relax I have been since moving here. There's nothing that can bring my mood down today. Not even the eye daggers Poppy is throwing at me. I almost didn't notice them... *almost*.

I stop in my tracks when I see Marissa walking out of the kitchenette, followed by a young blonde. *What is Marissa doing here? Revenge?* I don't know who the blonde is, but she could be a supermodel. Marissa smiles when we make eye contact, lifting her coffee cup at me. I smile politely back at her, not too sure if she is being genuine or not. Liam walks

past me towards the women. The super model lets out a squeal when she spots him.

“Ahhh, Liam.” She leaps into his arms. “I’m so happy to see you.”

Her arms are wrapped around his neck tight. Then I spot it. The enormous engagement ring on her finger, and my heart sinks. Whatever I thought *could* be going on was just figments of my imagination. Damn, that rock has to be at least four carats. He has great taste in jewelry. Suddenly, jealousy hits me. Now I know what could sour my mood today. That was the gut check I needed. I knew he was just being nice. There’s no way that he could be interested in someone like me. Feeling defeated, I slink past them and head to my desk.

“Rosemary, where are you going? There’s someone I’d like to introduce you to.” Liam says behind me.

I take a deep breath, reeling in my emotions. My mama would be upset if I wasn’t pleasant to the boss’ future wife. Pushing my shoulders back, I lift my head and plaster the biggest smile across my face before spinning around to them. Confidently, I walk right up to the supermodel and extend my hand to her.

“You must be Stella. I’ve heard great things about you.” I boldly state shaking her hand.

Her smile fades to a frown, then her mouth slightly opens. She tilts her head, and with confusion written on her face, she looks at Liam.

“Liam? Why did she call me by your cat’s name?” She asks, looking at him.

I look at Liam, who is looking at me with the same shocked expression on his face. My belly churns and my heart races at seeing his face. Then he holds his breath and looks at the ground. I’m not too sure what is going on, but I’m hoping for a fire alarm or the apocalypse right about now. Then I hear him snort before he looks back up with a smile on his face.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to laugh. This is my sister, Missy. Stella is my cat.” He says through laughter.

“Tell me you talk about your cat way too much, without telling me you talk about your cat way too much. Liam will go first.” Joseph roars with laughter, walking from behind me.

“Oh, my gosh. My apologies. I didn’t realize Stella was a cat.” I gasp.

Damn, it suddenly got boiling hot in here. Smooth, Rosemary. Real freaking smooth. *Can I just die now?*

“It’s okay, simple mistake. Stella doesn’t know she’s a cat either.” Missy smiles, patting my arm. “It’s nice meeting you. I like your accent.”

“What accent? She doesn’t have an accent.” Liam laughs again.

CHAPTER 7

COMPANY HOLIDAY PARTY

Liam

I BOARD THE ONE hundred forty-seven-foot luxury yacht for our company holiday party. It suddenly strikes me that the days of simple little parties catered by local restaurants are over. We're now playing in the big leagues.

"Liam," Joseph calls from the large bar. "What do you think?"

"This is nice." I say, looking around.

"Three decks with open bars on each. The lower two are enclosed and the top deck is completely open with custom lighting. They will serve dinner on the second deck. After dinner, the DJ will open the dance floor with a custom light show." Joseph rattles off like a proud father or something.

"Bourbon on the rocks." I say to the bartender, then turn my attention to Joseph. "How many people were on the invite list?"

"Two hundred and twenty-five." He says, handing me my drink.

"Seriously? I don't think I know that many people." I laugh.

"All business associates. Cheers. We made it, buddy. Welcome to the good life." We clink our glasses together and drink. "So, what do you think about Rosemary?"

I just about choke on my drink.

"What?" I cough. "Why would you ask me that?" I ask, looking at him.

“Because you had lunch with her.” He laughs. “Relax, bro.” He looks me up and down.

“She’s sweet and smart, but you knew that already. Middle child, upper middle-class family, her father’s a deacon in the church. Engaged once, but they broke it off amicably. Her new best friend after moving here is a seven-foot-tall pink haired drag queen named Sue Nami.” I casually reply, trying not to look him in the eyes.

“Hmmm, you got all that from a single lunch.” I can feel him studying my face and body language.

“No, I met Sue when she threatened to kick my ass for being a creeper. The rest was from lunch.” I take a drink.

Right now I feel like I’m in the hot seat, like he has caught me doing something I shouldn’t. *Why do I feel this way?* There is nothing going on between Rosemary and me. We are colleagues and that is it. Do I have a physical reaction when I touch her? Yes. Can I see a future with her? Yes. Does she feel the same towards me? Not a chance.

“Anything you care to share?” He looks at me.

“Nope.” I take a deep breath.

“Nothing going on?” He shifts from one leg to another.

I side eye him and see a smirk on his face.

“Nothing.” I glare at him, then take a drink.

“Interesting... very interesting indeed. Then this won’t do a damn thing for you.” He chuckles, grabbing my chin and

turning my head towards the door.

I gasp when I spot her. She's wearing a low cut, short, burgundy velvet wrap dress, and black stiletto heels. The dress accentuates every curve she has. And she has curves for days. Plump breast, delicious hips. *Damn.*

I've never noticed her body before. Her normal clothes are loose fitting, her hair is always pulled back into a low ponytail, and her giant black-framed glasses cover her face. I'm having another physical reaction to her tonight, only this time it's making my pants tighter. I'm not the only one who notices her, either. All eyes are on her.

She stands close to the entrance, glancing around the room with a smile on her face. She takes a glass of champagne from a server. Her long hair is in soft waves and bounces as she moves. With her glasses gone, I can see her face. She has always been cute to me, but now that I see her, she is breathtakingly beautiful. I wonder if she knows just how stunning she is.

"Rosemary? Oh my god, look at you." Becky squeals, making her way to her.

The two of them embrace and chat for a moment or two before Becky guides her to some lounges where a group of people sit.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I thought." Joseph chuckles. "There's something about those Texas girls, isn't there?" He pats my chest.

"What?" I snap my head to him.

“Haha, nothing.” He leans back against the bar, taking a long slow sip of his drink. “Looks like I’ll be in the market for a new PA soon.” He chuckles under his breath.

I can’t take my eyes off her. She looks like she is enjoying herself talking with the group of people. All smiles and laughing. Every male server has circled the group she is with like sharks. All their glasses are full, and they’ve been offered the same hors d’oeuvres at least ten times. Can’t really blame the servers. I wonder if Rosemary smells as good as she looks.

Ryan Goldstein makes his way to her. Slimy bastard. I see him get her attention, introducing himself, I’m sure.

‘Hello there, sexy. My name is Ryan and I’m the king of the cheapest made glass on the east coast. What’s your name?’

‘Oh, hi Ryan, my name is Rosemary and I’m saving myself for the super sexy Liam. You can go away now. Your breath smells.’

That’s how I imagine the conversation goes.

“Yo bro, what’s with the face?” Joseph laughs, handing me another drink. “You’re looking like a jealous ex-boyfriend or something.” He laughs.

“What? No, I’m not.” I snap.

“Defensive.” He grins as I glare at him. “Okay, okay. Nothing to see here. I won’t say another word.” He laughs.

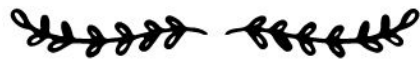
Joseph is probably the only person on earth who knows me as well as I know myself. He obviously sensed something when I called him after leaving the bar Thursday night. Maybe

because I've never asserted myself into the daily operations of the office. Or maybe it's the way I say her name. *Rosemary*. It rolls nicely off my tongue. Or maybe it was because I told him about taking her to lunch, then brought her back forty-five minutes late.

"Is it that noticeable?" I lean back on the bar, looking at him.

"What? The way you're staring at her like a schoolboy with a crush? Or how you look like you're about to rip Ryan's head off? Nah, not noticeable at all." He says through laughter.

"Shit." I growl and finish my drink.



I spent the rest of the night watching Rosemary from afar and dodging Poppy. Rosemary has been constantly surrounded by people. She laughed and danced the night away. I'm not too sure why I'm shy around her all the sudden. Like I didn't spend almost two hours with her yesterday. All night I've felt that familiar churning in my gut when I look at her. I swear my heart is going to beat right out of my chest.

"Ahhh, shit!" I shout and jump when I see Poppy at my side.

"Where the hell did you come from?" I snap.

"I've been here for five minutes trying to get your attention." Poppy says with a frown on her face.

"What do you want?" I ask with a huff.

"Want to dance?" Poppy tilts her head back and smiles.

"No." I reply with a snort.

“Why?” She crosses her arms.

“Listen, you’re a nice kid and all. And since you don’t take hints very well, I’m going to bluntly spell it out for you.” I lean into her. “The answer will always be no. I’m not into you. Never was and never will be. I changed my after work hang out spot to avoid you. I avoid you in the office and I have spent the vast majority of the night avoiding you here. So, whatever little fantasy you have in your head, let it go. It’s never happening.” I state, then straighten back up.

Poppy’s face grows angrier by the second. Her fists are balled at her side. She looks like she is ready for a fight.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I have to hit the head.” I walk away before she starts any drama.



Because of Poppy, I have lost sight of Rosemary. Ryan Goldstein as well. I check the second deck, no signs of either of them. Ascending the third deck’s stairs, I’m not too sure what to expect. The two of them locked tight in an embrace? I might just jump overboard if that was the case.

Stepping on to the third deck, it’s quiet up here, just the sound of the fountain and piano music playing through the speakers. The glow of the purple lights makes everything feel peaceful. I glance and see a few couples stealing a quiet moment for a kiss. Then I spot her sitting alone on a lounge, quietly looking at her phone. Her champagne glass looks like it could use a refill. I head to the bar and order us both a drink.

My nerves are shot walking up to her. *Why the hell am I nervous?* She looks up from her phone and smiles at me. I swear her smile can light up any room.

“Good evening. Room for one more?” I ask wiggling the champagne in front of her.

“Well, since you came bearing gifts.” She smiles, reaching for the flute.

I sit next to her on the lounge, and suddenly I’m at a loss for words. Shit, this has never happened before. She places her phone in her purse and looks at me, giving me her undivided attention. And here I am, being awkward as hell.

“Nice night.” I say before quickly taking a sip of my drink.

Nice night? Smooth Liam, real fucking smooth. Might as well talk about the damn weather while you’re at it.

“It is.” She replies, looking at the moon in the sky.

“How is it warm?” I look at her.

“Heater.” She points to the tall lamp post looking thing next to her.

“Are you having fun tonight?” I ask.

“It’s been a lot of fun getting to know my coworkers outside the office, as well as some of the vendors. You?” She smiles, taking a sip.

“It’s been okay. Spent most of the night ducking and dodging someone.” I raise my eyebrows and take a drink.

“Oh hey, Poppy.” She says, looking past me.

I cough, choking on my drink. This can't be happening. Last time I saw Poppy, she looked like she was ready to fight. I turn slowly, looking over my shoulder. No one. I turn back to Rosemary, who is laughing hysterically.

"Oh my gosh, you should see your face right now. Priceless." She says through laughter.

"Why you little..." I goose her side. "I'll get you back." I laugh.

So... Rosemary is a prankster.

"I'm sorry. I figured that's who you were talking about and couldn't help myself." She giggles.

"So, if you were having such a good time, then why are you up here... alone?" I ask, leaning into her.

"I needed a break from the people, and I was updating my socials so Sue and Roxy can see." She laughs, taking a sip.

"What's your excuse?"

Should I tell her I came up here looking for her? That I wanted to have some time alone with her. Maybe I should just kiss her instead.

"Same." I raise my eyebrows at her. "I wanted to tell you that you look really nice tonight. I like your hair down; you should wear it like that more often." I take a deep breath and hope she doesn't think I'm being creepy.

"Thank you. You don't think this dress is a bit much? Sue picked it out." She sits up straight, pushing her breast out.

“Um...” I clear my throat, “no.” My voice squeaks out. “It looks... you look amazing tonight.” I swallow the lump that is forming in my throat.

“Thank you.” She leans back and smiles. “You know, we match.” She points between us.

I look down and realize that she is right. We’re both wearing maroon. I chuckle, then look back at her.

“You look very nice, too.” She smiles.

“Speaking of Sue, where is she? I figured you’d bring her.” I ask.

“She has a show tonight. I’ll be meeting up with her and Roxy after this. We should take a selfie together. Show everyone that we are twinning.” She smiles, pulling out her phone.

“Okay.” I slide close to her.

She tucks herself under my arm. My heart races at having her this close to me. I place my hand on her side, just above her hip, and try my hardest to control my breathing. *Damn, she smells good.* She pulls in tight to my body.

“You’ll have to hold the phone since you’re taller.” She hands me her phone.

I look down at her smiling face, and the urge to kiss her is strong. Before I can, she looks at the phone in my hand. She snuggles into me, placing her hand on my chest. It’s amazing how well she fits into my body.

“Okay, say cheese.” I snap a few pictures so she can choose her favorite before handing her phone back to her.

She slides away and I immediately want to pull her back in, but I don’t. I can sense the feelings are not mutual. That is something I’m going to have to learn to deal with, I guess.

“So,” I clear my throat, “plans for Christmas?” I take a drink.

“No. Just going to hang out in my apartment.” She looks through the pictures.

“That doesn’t sound like fun.” I flag down a server.

“No. I was supposed to go to Cabo with my parents, my brother and his wife, and... Dean.” She looks up at me.

“Oh.” I scrunch my face, then turn my attention to the server.

“Two more, please.”

“Yeah, he kept his ticket and called me yesterday, asking if I was going to use mine. He’s taking his new girlfriend and wanted to see if I’d sell my ticket to him. I was apprehensive about going on a couple’s trip, not being a part of a couple. Definitely not going now that I know he’s going with his new flame.” She shrugs. “You? Do you have big plans?” She takes her drink from the server.

“Missy is getting married on Christmas Eve. So, I have three days of non-stop family stuff, plus a wedding.” I grit my teeth.

“It won’t be that bad. How was dress shopping with your mom today?” She asks, taking a sip.

“I should have known when I saw Missy she was up to no good, leaping into my arms the way she did. Mom has a Missy approved mother of the bride dress. Complete in the color champagne.” I lift my glass.

“Awww, you’re such a good son and brother.” She coos.

“Missy owes me big time, and she knows it.” I laugh.

CHAPTER 8

GIFTS AND ESCORTS

Rosemary

“WHAT ON EARTH IS all the noise over here? Sounds like a herd of elephants are going to come through that wall.” Greg stands in my doorway with his arms crossed.

“What? No, Sue today?” I look up at him from the area rug I’m trying to place.

“No. Just plain ol’ Greg today. It takes me forever to get ready to be her, and some days I just need to take it easy.” He saunters into my apartment.

“Where’s Frankie?” I re-position the rug for the hundredth time.

“He was called into the station today. One of the weekend engineers called in sick. No, put it back and leave it.” He states, wrinkling his nose at me.

“You sure?” I look from the rug to him.

“Honey, you’re doubting a gay man when it comes to interior decorating?” He gasps with his hand over his chest. “Put it back and let the nice moving men put the furniture down so they can get home. It’s Sunday, for crying out loud.” He snaps his fingers, then walks into the kitchen. “Where is this coffeemaker lawyer boy had sent... oh my gawd.” He stops in his tracks and gasps.

“What?” I rush to him.

“Is this it?” He points to the sleek black square machine on my counter.

“Yes. It’s so fancy. I’ve never owned anything like this before.” I laugh.

“Honey. This is the crème de la crème of coffee makers.” He looks over the machine. “Built-in grinder, adjustable frothier, brews espresso, and coffee.” He looks at me with his mouth open.

“Don’t forget iced coffee.” I giggle, looking at his face. “Yes, it’s much nicer than the one he got for the office.”

“I bet it is. This Italian machine is like a grand.” He rubs the coffee maker.

“Seriously?” I tilt my head.

“Seriously.” He puts his hands on his hips. “Is this the note that came with it?” He points.

“Yes.” I reply.

“Hmmm,” he says, picking up the note. He reads it silently with a smile on his face, then clears his throat and reads it out loud.

Rosemary,

This is not just to replace the coffeepot you bought for the office, but also as a housewarming gift from me. I hope you enjoy each and every cup you drink. And remember, you deserve all the finer things life has to offer.

Liam

“What?” I ask, looking at Greg’s grin.

“What, she asks. I’ll tell you what. Lawyer boy has a thing for you.” Greg points at me. “Where are your cups?”

“No, he doesn’t. Cabinet to the right of the sink.” I reply, scrunching my face.

“Okay, let’s recap, shall we? He was comforting you in the bar when I walked up and was willing to fight me. He set things straight with your boss, who then put his wife in check. Then gave you an apartment full of furniture.” He speaks over the coffee grinder. “And let’s not forget the cozy little picnic in the park. He went out of his way to introduce you to his sister. Then last night he just so happened to find you on the third deck, brought you champagne and then proceeded to chat it up with you until the yacht docked. Did I miss anything?” He froths his milk.

“No, but he’s just being nice. He’s treating me more like a charity case than anything.” I put my hands on my hips.

“Oh, honey, you can’t be that naïve.” He sips his cappuccino. “Damn, this is good.”

“I’m not naïve. Look, another housewarming gift.” I show him the two large gift bags, then read him the note.

Rosemary,

Please accept my sincerest apology for mistreating you the other day. I’m so glad you are here and a part of my husband’s firm.

Marissa Barlowe

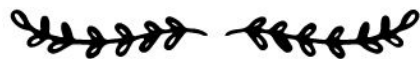
“Well, she was out of line and oh my gawd.” He shouts. “Turkish cotton towels. This is luxury at its finest.” He looks through the bag. “Bath sheets, washcloths, towels, and hand towels.” He rubs a towel on his face. “Must be nice working for the super-rich.” He rolls his eyes.

“They’re just towels.” I laugh.

“These bath sheets are like two hundred bucks a pop, and you have a set of four... of everything.” He puts everything back into the bag. “Lawyer boy has some pull with the firm and with Joseph.”

“He owns like twenty-five percent.” I reply, then turn my attention to the movers bringing in the kitchen table.

“Honey, if you don’t make a move on lawyer boy, I’m divorcing Frankie, and making my own move.” He raises his eyebrows, taking a sip of his cappuccino, then smacks his lips at me. “Okay?”



Liam

“Hey, did you get the signatures on the...” Joseph stops mid-sentence when I jump in my chair and abruptly close my laptop before resting my chin on my knuckles. “What are you... did I catch you at a bad time?” He stands at the edge of my desk.

“No, no.” I clear my throat. “All is good. Johnson contract, umm.” I root around on my desk. “Right here.” I quickly hand him the file.

“You’re sweating.” He narrows his eyebrows, staring me down.

“Yeah, it’s a little warm in here. I should have known better than to wear a sweater in the office.” I nervously laugh.

“Are you watching porn?” He glares at me.

“What? No!” I shout, looking at my open door.

“Because,” he looks over his shoulder, “it’s okay with me if you are. I mean, I do from time to time, but you must shut the door first.” He says, leaning into me.

“You do what?” I scoff before standing.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, I walk to the door, poking my head in the hallway. Looking for anyone who may have heard this conversation. All clear. I close the door and walk back to my desk. Sitting in my chair, I rub my forehead.

“I’m going to forget what you just told me you do behind your closed office door. I wasn’t looking at porn. It’s much more complicated than that.” I shake my head.

“What were you looking at?” Joseph sits in the chair across from me.

I sit and stare at him for a moment, debating if I should tell him or not. A part of me could use his advice, the other part of me is dying of embarrassment for stooping to this level. I open the laptop and spin it towards him.

“Escort service!” He shouts.

“Shhhh.” I wave my arms sharply in the air. Glaring at him with my teeth bared.

“Escort service,” he whispers.

I cover my face with my hands in both anger and embarrassment.

“Yes, Einstein.” I snap, looking at him.

“Since when do you need to hire a prostitute?” He leans closer, looking at the website.

“Escort, not prostitute. Since Mother gave me an ultimatum.” I run my hands through my hair.

“What? I’m not following.” Joseph tilts his head.

“Mother paid me a visit first thing yesterday morning. She informed me I would escort Sarah Bernard to Missy’s wedding.” I shake my head.

“Sarah Bernard? Seriously? Miss smells like cigarettes and spits when she talks?” He pushes his head back, wrinkling his nose, corners of his slightly opened mouth turned down, pushing his tongue forward in disgust.

“Precisely. Mother made me take her to our eighth-grade formal. Do you remember what happened after that?” I look at him.

“She told everyone she was your girlfriend and stalked you for two years.” He looks at me.

We continue to stare at each other. Both stone faced. My hands are shaking at the thought of being anywhere near Sarah Bernard. I grab a tissue and wipe my forehead; my deodorant is working overtime today.

Suddenly, Joseph bursts into a fit of laughter. He falls back in his chair, turning from side to side, holding his stomach with his hands. I suck my teeth, watching his feet kick the air. His laughter grows louder and louder.

“Let me know when you’re finished.” I roll my eyes.

“I’m sorry, man. Shit.” He wipes the tears from his eyes.

“I hope you piss yourself.” I shake my head, biting my lips together so I don’t start laughing too.

“Okay, okay. I see where the problem lies.” He says through laughter. “But why an escort?”

“It was Missy’s idea. I met her for dinner last night. When she was done dry heaving at the idea of Sarah Bernard being in her

wedding pictures, she helped with ideas.” I lean back in my chair.

“Missy told you to hire a prostitute?” He tilts his head.

“Escort. That’s all she would be doing.” I snap. “I told Mother I was dating someone.”

“You what?” He chuckles.

“When she pressed me, I told her it’s a new long-distance romance. And that’s why I can’t escort Sarah Bernard. Mother said bring my new girlfriend or Sarah would be my date.” I rub my temples. “This is the best idea Missy and I could come up with.”

“Shit. I see the conundrum. I’d probably fake my death to get out of taking Sarah Bernard anywhere. Okay, so let’s pick one of these women out.” He leans on my desk, looking at the website.

“Fifty-thousand dollars for four nights.” I cover my face and shake my head.

“That’s pretty much what my wife costs me.” He shrugs and shakes his head.

“Don’t you think they’re all a little too perfect? Mother and the women of sixth avenue will see right through them.” I turn the laptop and scroll through the pictures.

“Maybe... maybe not. You’re running out of time and options.” He looks at the pictures.

“Fuck, I know.” I roll my head around.

“Faking your own death doesn’t sound so bad after all, does it?” He chuckles.



I work in my office quietly for the next few hours. Frustrated at the smallest tasks and not being able to comprehend things I am reading. It took me ten minutes to read the same sentence repeatedly for me to understand it. Normally I can easily decipher a couple of paragraphs in that same time. This damn business of my forced date to Missy’s wedding is distracting me.

The thought of paying an escort seems wrong to me on so many levels. Why the hell did I tell my mother that I was in a long-distance relationship? Why didn’t I simply say I have a date and bring one of the women I have on standby? Who wouldn’t want to accompany me to my sister’s upscale wedding? Am I that afraid of commitment that I can’t even commit to a long weekend?

“Hey.” Rosemary lightly knocks on my open office door.

“Hey, come in.” I smile and wave her in.

“Joseph asked me to bring you back your file after I made copies for him.” She hands me the file. “I just made a fresh pot, and I hadn’t seen you all morning. I figured you were hard at work and could use a dose of caffeine.” She places the cup on my desk.

“Thank you. That was so thoughtful of you.” I take a big sip of the hot coffee.

The coffee feels good going down my throat and into the pits of my guts. Warming me from the inside out. I can almost feel the caffeine permeate through me. I look up at her smiling face. She wore her hair down today. I love the way her soft waves bounce freely around her face. Her face... I can see her entire face.

“No glasses today?” I take another long, slow sip.

“No.” She laughs. “My contact order finally got here.”

“Hmmm, I see. No pun intended.” I laugh. “Oh, before I forget.” I grab the file labeled Rosemary and hand it to her. “You’ll have your claims check by Friday.”

“Ten-thousand dollars.” She squeals.

Her body stiffens, and her eyes are wide as she reads the contents of the file.

“I don’t think I spent that much to begin with.” She pulls the file tight to her chest. “Thank you.” Her voice is shaky and soft. “You don’t know how much it means to me. And thank you for the coffeemaker. It’s magnificent. You’ve gone above and beyond to make me feel welcome.”

Her reaction is so heartfelt and pure. Watching her, I’m reminded that good people do exist. I see so many people who use and abuse people just to work their way up the social ladder. If you are not connected to the correct people, you’re tossed aside. Not Rosemary. She treats everyone with the same amount of respect and puts others above her.

For example, when she went to Amy's warehouse to pick out furniture, she insisted on picking furniture from the used section. After making her selections, Amy called Joseph and let him know. He then told Amy to only send new furniture and furnishings, but to make sure everything was out of boxes and unwrapped.

Then at the sandwich shop, she took a moment to speak with an elderly man sitting on a bench outside. She asked him how his day was, and genuinely listened to him as he spoke. Most people, including myself, would just walk past him, never giving him a second glance or thought. She is just as beautiful on the inside as she is outside.

"You're very welcome, Rosemary." I whisper with a smile.

"Thank you, again. I should get back to my desk." She smiles and walks out of my office.

Watching her walk away, my chest tightens. Images once again flash in my mind of a future together. Suddenly, it hits me. She is the reason I told my mother I was in a long-distance relationship. In the heat of the moment, I couldn't see myself going to Missy's wedding with anyone but her.

But why Rosemary? Why am I so infatuated with her? It's apparent that she only sees me as a friend and colleague. Maybe I am so afraid of settling down I want a woman who doesn't want me. That's got to be it. For me and this wedding, Rosemary is the logical and safe choice. *Right?*

"Rosemary." I call her from my office door.

She turns and looks at me as I jog to catch up.

“I’m hungry.” I state, nodding my head.

“Um... okay.” She tilts her head and stammers. “You want the other half of my sandwich?” She points towards the kitchenette.

“What?” I look and think. “No.” I laugh. “Do you like sushi?” I say, tilting my head, because even I know that nothing I’m saying makes any sense.

“Yes, I like sushi.” She cautiously replies.

“There’s this new place I’ve been wanting to try, and I hate eating alone in restaurants.” I put my hands on my hips.

Is it getting hot in here?

“Why not take Joseph? It’s Monday, don’t y’all normally do lunch together on Monday?” She narrows her eyes at me.

“Joseph hates sushi.” I tilt my mouth and nod.

“Really? I saw him eating some the other day.” She crosses her arms.

“Hmmm.” Shit, she has caught me in a lie. Think fast, Liam.

“That’s weird. He has always told me how much he hates it.” I say, knowing I’m digging a deeper hole. “Listen, lunch is on me. Grab your purse and I’ll tell Joseph, okay?” I push my shoulders back and say with authority.

She stands silent for a moment, studying my face. I stand there bobbing my head back and forth, looking like a big goofy idiot.

“Okay, she shrugs.” Turning to head for her desk.

Okay? She said okay. I want to jump in the air and celebrate like I won some grand prize.

“Excuse me.” Becky says, passing me.

CHAPTER 9

INDECENT PROPOSAL

Rosemary

WE SIT AT A table rather than the sushi bar. The restaurant is beautiful with modern décor. My favorite are the exotic orchids surrounding us. The entire ride over here in Liam's little sports car is quiet. Uncomfortably quiet. When I make small talk, he answers with a yes or no, or something very simple like that. Why did he invite me to lunch?

At the restaurant, he seems uneasy, looking around the room frequently. Is he embarrassed to be seen with me, rather than his normal super model looking women he's seen with?

"Liam, it's so good to see you." A red-headed woman says, rubbing his shoulder.

I quietly sip my hot tea and look away, eyeing a spot at the sushi bar that is open.

"Gwen, nice to see you, too. This is my friend, Rosemary." He says.

I slowly look over and see them both looking my way. The red-head has a huge smile going across her face. Liam looks relaxed, almost proud to introduce me. If he is trying to make this woman jealous, I'm probably not the one that will do the trick. She is gorgeous.

"Rosemary, this is Gwen, Missy's best friend and maid of honor." He says, looking between the two.

"And it looks like I won't need to catch the bouquet." She holds her left hand out, showing off her enormous engagement

ring.

“It’s nice to meet you, Gwen. Congratulations on the engagement.” I reply with a smile.

“Thank you, it only took four years.” She exhales.

“I’m glad to see the hockey player finally came to his senses.”

Liam replies with a smile.

“Well, it was nice seeing you. I’ve got to run; mom is giving me *the* look. Nice meeting you Rosemary. Take care if I don’t see you before the wedding.” She looks between the two of us.

She walks away, and Liam shuts down again. Why is he acting so odd?

“She was nice.” I simply state, taking a sip of my tea.

“Yup.” He replies.

Back to the one-word replies.

“Liam, what’s going on? You’ve been acting weird since we left the office.” I look him straight in his eyes.

“I’m fine. Everything is fine. We should order our food now.”

He waves a server over to us.

“No. Suddenly I’m not hungry.” I huff.

“What?” He tilts his head.

“Look, you gave me the silent treatment all the way over here. Then you’ve been looking around the room, like you’re afraid that someone will see you with the ugly duckling or something. What gives?” I look up at the server, who is staring at me.

“Looks like we need another moment.” Liam politely says. He waits until she leaves our table before turning his attention to me. “Look, I just think that what I need to talk to you about will go over better with full stomachs. That’s all.” He gulps.

“What?” I wrinkle my nose. “Am I being fired or something?”

“What? No. You have to stop thinking like that.” He rubs his forehead.

There is a dread in the air, like something bad is about to go down. Almost like a breakup. Why do I feel like he is about to break up with me? That’s not even possible. We’re not even a couple.

“Then what? You tell me now, or I get up and walk out. You have ten seconds to start talking. One... two...” I count before he interrupts me.

“Okay fine.” He huffs. “First, this has nothing to do with business... this is personal.” He sharply exhales. “And it’s embarrassing, okay?”

“Okay, I’m listening.” I narrow my eyes at him, trying to control my pounding heart.

“You know my sister, Missy, is getting married in two weeks.” He slowly says.

“Yes.” I reply.

“I was given an ultimatum by my mother to bring a date, or one would be assigned to me.” He looks around again. “The woman she has picked out is, um... awful. She likes to talk uncomfortably close to your face.” He squints his eyes.

“That doesn’t sound awful.” I wrinkle my nose at him.

I’m seeing him in a different light. I thought he was sweet, but he seems to be as shallow as everyone else I have met recently.

“When she talks, she spits like a camel. You have to constantly duck and dodge her words.” He moves his head from side to side. “She smells like an ashtray; her breath is the worst. She tries to cover up the cigarette odor with loads of perfume, but it doesn’t help.” He gulps. “The worst part, she stalked me for two years after our last forced date. You top all that off with the fact that she is just another spoiled rich girl who treats everyone like they’re beneath her. I’ve seen her go off on a barista because her latte wasn’t hot enough.” He finishes and takes a drink of his water.

“Oh.” I reply, looking down.

Did I misjudge his character, after all?

“She doesn’t sound pleasant at all.” I look back up at him. His eyes and face are soft. “But what does that have to do with me?”

“I told my mother that I was in a long-distance relationship and couldn’t escort Sarah to the wedding. That it’d be disrespectful to my new girlfriend.” He clears his throat.

“Sounds like problem solved, then.” I take a sip of my tea.

“Haha.” He nervously laughs, reaching over and refilling my cup. “That’s where you’re wrong. You don’t know my mother.” His hands shake. “She said either I bring a date, or

one will be assigned to me. That's where you come in." He sits back and exhales.

"Me?" I point to myself. "How do I come into all of this?" I pick up my cup.

"I was hoping you would go with me... as my girlfriend." He slowly says, as I take a sip of tea.

"What?" I cover my mouth to keep the tea from escaping as I cough.

The restaurant falls silent as people watch me choke on my tea and air. A couple of servers rush to my side, ready to give me first aid.

"I'm fine, I'm fine." I cover my mouth with my napkins and take a deep breath. "Must have had a bone in it." I nervously laugh.

The servers are stone faced looking in my cup.

"I'm just kidding." I sniffle. "Obviously, there are no bones in my tea." I look between the servers and Liam. "It's just a saying where I'm from." I nervously laugh.

"Looks like we need a new pot of tea. Hold the bones this time." Liam laughs.

I wipe my mouth and nose while looking at Liam's face. He seems more relaxed now that he's laid everything on the table. Me, I just look like a dork who can't drink tea without choking on it.

"Are you okay?" He softly asks.

“I’m fine.” I clear my throat. “Why me? Why not someone you know?”

“I panicked and told Mother it was a long-distance relationship. If I bring someone she knows, she’ll know I was lying all along, and she will not hesitate to call me out on it in front of everyone. I don’t want to give her any reason to put a dark spot on Missy’s big day. Listen, I know this is a lot that I am asking, but I’m willing to do anything, including faking my death to avoid Sarah Bernard. I can’t miss Missy’s wedding; she would kill me for sure.” He exhales, sitting back in his chair.

“That’s another problem... Missy. I have already met her. She knows we work together.” I gulp. “Not to mention, Gwen has now met me as well.”

“Missy and I are thick as thieves have been since she was born, more so after she punched my fiancée in the nose after she caught her cheating on me. Missy will have my back. She’ll also do whatever it takes not to have Sarah in her wedding photos. As far as Gwen, happy coincident that worked in my favor.” He has a sly smile on his face.

I lean back in my chair and think back. It hits me he brought me here today with the sole purpose of asking me to go to his sister’s wedding. It now makes so much sense the way he introduced me to Gwen as his friend, rather than his coworker. He wasn’t being standoffish or afraid to be seen with me. He was nervous. It’s all making sense now.

“Missy would be okay with this... you bringing a fake girlfriend to her wedding?” I rest my elbows on the table.

“It was kind of her idea to begin with.” He sighs.

Why do I get the sense that there’s more to the story?

“She suggested you bring me?” I tilt my head and point to myself.

“No. She suggested I used an escort service.” He leans in and whispers.

“What?” I say a little louder than I intend. “She suggested you hire a prostitute?” I whisper, looking around.

“No, an escort. And I was fine with that idea. Even began looking into a service.” He states.

I lean back and put my hands on my chest as I try to get a grip on what he is saying. This seems to get crazier and crazier by the second.

“You did?” I gasp.

“Yes, but quickly realized that my mother and her friends would see straight through that real quick. Hell, some of the men in attendance may have used their services in the past.” He leans on the table.

“They what?” I squeak.

This is an entirely different world than I’m used to. No one I know has ever used an escort for anything. *Or have they?*

“Listen,” he sharply exhales, taking my hand in his. “I’m asking you because you are kind, honest, and sweet.” He

hesitates. “Please, as a friend?”

“Can I think about it?” I ask as he squeezes my hand.



“He gave you a list?” Greg prepares us both a cappuccino. “I’m going to need this to read that.” He snaps his head to the printed list on my coffee table.

“There’s also an itinerary.” I look at the paper in my hand.

“That’s to be expected for the wedding party and close family.” He hands my cappuccino and takes a seat next to me.

He takes long and slow sips of his well-crafted coffee masterpiece. Inhaling and exhaling slowing as if he is mentally preparing himself for battle. He smacks his lips and looks at me.

“Mmmm. You see how the quality of the bean makes all the difference in the world?” He looks at his cup. “Okay, let’s see what the little Bridezilla expects you to wear.”

He looks at the list, nodding his head at first at each line. Then wrinkles his face, taking an exasperated sigh as he rolls his eyes. He continues reading, then groans and rolls his entire head.

“Designer is preferred; however, I know it’s short notice, so any label will do.” He looks up at me, smacking his jaws. “Absolutely no thrift shopping.” He gasps with his hand on his chest. “I feel attacked. I adore thrift shopping.” He continues reading. “Female guest are prohibited... *prohibited.*” He says,

looking at me, shaking his head. “From wearing red, gold, white to the ceremony or reception. Significant others or plus one of the wedding party shall wear a matching color. Red for females and gold for males. Oh, my gawd.” He rolls his eyes.

“Okay, let’s look at this itinerary. Informal immediate family dinner, blah, blah, blah. Wednesday six p.m. sharp. No jeans. Casual family meeting dinner, Thursday seven p.m. Casual business attire.” He sticks his tongue out and groans. “This is exhausting, but wait, there is more. Friday rehearsal, seven p.m., followed by the rehearsal dinner. Casual business attire. Wedding Saturday at three p.m. Please see the dress code attachment.” He throws the papers up in the air and dramatically falls back on the sofa with one hand on his chest, the other on his head. “And here I thought gay weddings are exhausting. I can’t believe they expect you to buy...” I hold up Liam’s black card, stopping Greg mid-sentence. “Is that lawyer boy’s card?”

“Yes.” I nod my head.

“What’s your limit?” He breathes heavily with excitement.

“Fifty thousand. He said I could buy whatever I needed, clothes, shoes, makeup, luggage, accessories, anything.” I calmly state, looking at the card.

“Fifty... five zero thousand dollars?” Greg says, gasping and wheezing.

“Yes.” I giggle. “It’s what he would have paid for an escort.”

“Fifty thousand for four nights with a rich man in the Hamptons, and no sex required? Honey, we are in the wrong business.” He rolls his eyes and pretends to flip his hair back.

“Girl, do you know how many women would drop to their knees to get a chance at a fifty-thousand-dollar shopping spree?” He stands and walks towards my room.

“Where are you going?” I sit up.

“To throw all your clothes out. I’m going to turn you into a goddess. And then we’ll shop.” He walks into my room.

“We?” I follow him.

CHAPTER 10

OFFICE GOSSIPS

Liam

“HALF PAST SEVEN AND you’re already hard at work.” Joseph says walking into my office with coffee in hand.

“You stopped for coffee? You know we have a perfectly good machine here in the office.” I smirk looking at him from my laptop.

“Says the guy with a to-go cup with his name written on it next to him. You want this or not?” He holds the cup just out of reach.

“Of course, I want it. Why are you here so early?” I say as he sets the cup down.

“I only have two full days before you whisk my PA off for an extended weekend in the Hamptons.” He sits down with a smirk on his face. “That, and I have a few things to go over with you as well.”

“Yeah, I was finalizing the paperwork. I just have a few loose ends to tie up here.” I grab the coffee.

“So you think you and Rosemary can pull this off?” He leans back in his chair.

“Simple enough, right? I gave her the lists from Missy and my credit card.” I take a sip.

“Your credit card?” He chuckles.

“I was prepared to pay an escort fifty grand. I figured Rosemary deserves a fifty-thousand-dollar shopping spree for

having to deal with my family for four days. Plus, you and I both know she'll spend around half of that." I turn to my laptop.

"I doubt she spends five thousand. She is very frugal, unlike my wife... or any woman I know, really." He laughs under his breath.

"Her friend Sue was going to go shopping with her." I check my credit card account. "Just under thirty-two thousand."

"You still came out on top in my book." He takes a sip of his coffee.

"Let's hope she doesn't go running and screaming back to Texas. You know how my mother can be." We both laugh.

We continue our impromptu meeting, discussing different projects and proposals, amongst other business related things. Suddenly, the smell of coffee permeates the air. Rosemary must be in. Looking at my watch, I see it's a few minutes before eight. She's so punctual... my family is going to drive her crazy with their tardiness.

"Joseph?" Rosemary stands in the doorway of my office, squinting her eyes at him. She looks at her watch then back to him, shaking her head. "I thought I was really late for a minute." She looks from Joseph to me.

When our eyes meet, I'm completely lost. She looks absolutely stunning. Her hair is down, her brown waves cascading around her face. Her pouty lips look so soft and inviting. She is wearing a plaid pencil skirt that sits just below

the knee, a white high neck long sleeve blouse, and strappy black heels. My office is silent, my mouth is open as I take her in. I wonder if she knows how gorgeous she is.

“Good morning.” Joseph manages to squeak out. “You look Rosemary today.”

“Good morning.” She giggles. “Thank you, I think you look Joseph today too.”

The sounds of her giggles snap me out of my trance. Which is good. I don't want to look as dumb as Joseph sounds.

“Good morning, Rosemary. Can I help you?” I clear my throat, putting my cup to my mouth before I say something dumb.

Joseph is still staring at her. *Asshole.*

“I just wanted to give this back to you.” She walks up to my desk, my credit card in her hand. “And say thank you again. I'm all packed and ready to go. Sue had me pack for almost two weeks, because you never know. That's exactly what she said to me.” She laughs with her hand extended.

“I was wondering if you could run and grab Missy some sort of scented candle from the both of us. Just a little something for the immediate family dinner.” I casually say.

“Yes, of course. I can do that today.” He says with her hand still extended out.

“Use that card. Maybe hang on to it in case you forgot anything.” I smile and drink the last of my coffee.

“Okay, sure.” She turns to walk away.

Both Joseph and I can't help but stare at her perfectly plump ass.

"Oh," I jump as she turns around. "Fresh coffee in the kitchenette." She smiles, then walks away.

Joseph slowly turns to me with his mouth wide open. He stares at me for a moment, then shakes his head.

"Holy shit, man. If I wasn't married, I'd be all over that. Good luck this weekend. You're going to need it." He laughs, then walks out of my office.



Another day in the office and another outfit for Rosemary. Today she is wearing a high-waisted, knee-length brown leather skirt, brown heels, and long sleeve flowy blouse that is tied into a cute little bow at her neck. Like a present. Her blouse is just this side of sheer.

I know from my credit card statement that she went to a couple of lingerie stores. Is she wearing something she bought underneath? What does it look like? White... lacey. I wonder what would happen if I untied that little bow. Would it reveal the gift underneath? Or maybe just enough of her neck that I could pepper kisses all over, then slowly unbutton the blouse exposing her plump...

"Liam?" Becky says, snapping me out of my daydream.

Shit, I hope she doesn't notice the bulge in my pants.

"Yes." I reply.

“I need your signature, please.” She says, walking into my office.

“Of course, just set them there and I’ll take care of them soon.” I point to the inbox on my credenza.

“I’d prefer to get your signature now, since you are leaving early tomorrow. I don’t want you to forget.” She walks to my desk.

I scoot my chair as close as I can to my desk, trying to conceal the bulge in my pants.

“I understand.” With a smile on my face, I take the papers from her hand and briefly read over the document.

“Boy, that Rosemary sure is looking good lately.” She says, swaying back and forth.

I freeze momentarily at her words, wondering where she is going with this.

“Does she? I hadn’t noticed.” I shrug my shoulders without looking at her.

“Funny you didn’t notice. Everyone has. Just a few minutes ago, Marissa smacked Joseph in the back of the head because he was staring.” She laughs.

“Did she now? I would have paid to see that.” I laugh.

“Yeah. Funny how you and Rosemary are both leaving early tomorrow, too.” She narrows her eyes at me.

Ah, I see what this is now. A fishing expedition. I guess the office gossips made a couple of observations then sent Becky

in here to gather intel. I wonder if they tried gathering information from Rosemary and failed. Should I throw a little gas on the flame?

“Is that it, Becky?” I hand her the document back.

“Yes.” Her shoulders slump forward, disappointment on her face. “Thank you.” She whispers before leaving, making me laugh to myself.



“Are you ready?” I ask Rosemary, walking up to her desk.

“Yes, I’m shutting my computer down now.” She says with a smile.

I glance around the office; all eyes are on us. Becky is circling us like a great white shark stalking its prey.

“Liam.” Joseph calls from his desk.

“Yeah.” I stick my head in his office.

“Glad I caught you before you left. Come in. I have something for you.” He lifts a gift bag from behind his desk.

“What is this?” I ask with a smile on my face.

Joseph and I don’t normally exchange Christmas gifts, so this is a pleasant surprise.

“Now I know it’s last minute, so I had to go to two different stores to find those.” He says as I peek through the tissue paper.

Condoms.

You've got to be kidding me. I look up from the bag to him with a clenched jaw.

“Sorry buddy, but that was the biggest box I could find. So, I bought you two. Gosh, I hope that's enough. Now, Marissa and I will be there for the rehearsal dinner, so if you two get too tangled and need more.” He exaggerates a wink. “Let me know, and I'll pick up more on my way up.” He slaps my arm and smiles.

“Ass.” I say as I walk away.

“Hey man, you never know.” He says behind me. “Go make me proud.” He shouts as I shut his door behind me.



Rosemary

After leaving the office, we went to my apartment to pick up my bags and to give Greg my spare key. I wouldn't want him away from his favorite coffeemaker for too long. Liam went upstairs with me, and without hesitation, carried down my two large luggage cases. Then we grabbed a sandwich before heading over to his apartment.

Let's just say Liam and I have very different lifestyles. You can fit my entire apartment in his home office. You can see the city for miles from his private roof top terrace. He told me he moved in a couple of weeks before I started with the firm. That he sold his penthouse and bought this apartment instead.

We drive through the upper-class neighborhood full of beautiful homes tucked away behind mature trees on large lots. It's quiet and peaceful; nothing like the hustle and bustle of the city. In a way, it reminds me of home.

"We're here Stella." Liam announces, looking in his rearview mirror at the cat carrier in the backseat.

We pull into the gravel driveway and park in front of the colonial revival home with shingle siding. It's beautiful with the natural landscaping. Everything has a very woodland feel to it.

"Wow. It's beautiful." I step out of the SUV, looking at the brown home with white trim. "You rented this for the weekend, like you did the SUV?" I look at him.

“Neither are rentals.” He smiles, opening the driver’s side back door. “Let me get her situated in the screened porch, then I’ll grab our things.” He looks at me with the cat carrier in hand.

“She really travels well.” I smile.

“She should. I found her over there when she was a kitten.” He points to bushes beside the house. It was the first time seeing the place in person. She’s been with me ever since.” He turns and walks away.

I watch him walk into the house and then I walk to the back of the SUV. The gravel driveway is a little hard to maneuver in heels than the concrete of the city. Opening the back door, I notice my things dominate the area. Which is funny to me, since I’ve always been a low maintenance type of girl. Hair in a low ponytail, little foundation powder, chap stick, and I was good to go. But there was something about watching Greg transform into Sue that resonated with me. The with each stroke of his makeup brush, the more Sue’s personality would shine through. It was almost like this magic shield would go up, allowing this over-the-top personality to come to life.

The same thing happened to me when he and Roxy gave me the makeover for the holiday party for work. I loved how I felt and how everyone wanted to be around me. For once in my life, I was seen... really seen, and not just some inanimate object in the room’s corner.

I grab the first large bag and pull. It’s a struggle, but I manage. *Damn, it’s heavy. Liam made it look easy.* Wanting something

a little lighter, I take out the smaller bag containing makeup, skincare, hair care, and accessories. I set it on the ground next to me, then pull on my other large bag. This one is heavier than the last. I pull, stepping back. The heel of my shoe sinks in the gravel and I lose my balance.

Trying to keep from falling on my ass, I step to the side. *Mistake... huge mistake.* I trip over the smaller bag and I'm going down fast. I look about as graceful as a newborn baby gazelle. My hand is still clasping the large bag's handle, so I'll probably be crushed to death by clothes.

Before I hit the ground, I feel a powerful pair of arms wrap around my waist.

"Woah. I got you." He says as he pulls me tight against his chest.

I let go of the luggage handle just as both my feet slip out from under me. Wrapping both my arms around one of his, I close my eyes and scream.

"Oh, my gosh!" I shout.

"You're okay." He whispers in my ear. "You're safe."

I open my eyes, still holding on to his arm tight. I let out a sigh of relief that I didn't bust my ass on the gravel driveway.

"Thank you." I whisper back.

He's still holding me close. His arms and chest are toned and muscular. Something I suspected, but now know for a fact. The way he is holding me. I feel so safe, as if I know he won't let anything bad happen to me. His face is so close to my neck,

I can feel the warmth of his breath. The musk of his cologne fills my nose, transporting me to a different dimension.

“Didn’t I tell you I’d get our things?” His voice is deeper than normal, sending a shockwave down my spine.

“I was trying to be helpful.” I snicker, still holding his arm.

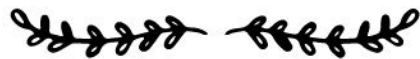
“Oh yeah? And where’d that land you?” He chuckles.

“Almost on my ass.” I laugh. “Thank you for saving me.” I look up at him.

He smiles, looking deep into my eyes. We are lost in each other. He looks at my mouth, licking his lips. His breathing becomes shallow. He leans in but stops.

“You’re welcome.” He replies. “If you want to be helpful, grab the garment bag hanging in the back seat and this small tote.” He releases me, then grabs my two large bags, rolling them to the house.

What happened? I thought there was a genuine moment between us. Then it was gone, like a switch went off in his head or something.



“This is the master suite, and your room for the weekend.” He says, rolling my bags next to the bed.

“What? No, I’m not taking your room.” I tilt my head, looking at him.

“I insist.” He smiles.

“Where will you stay?” I gulp.

“Upstairs in one of the other bedrooms. There are four up there to choose from.” He laughs.

“Are you sure?” I shift my weight from one foot to the other.

“Absolutely. The bathroom is that door right there,” he looks and points, “and the closet is just off the bathroom. Pretty self-explanatory.” He looks back at me. “Housekeeping has already come through, put fresh sheets on the beds, fresh towels in the bathroom. If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you. You’ve been so kind and generous.” I sigh and smile.

“We’ll talk about it after you meet my family.” With wide eyes and a crooked mouth, he shakes his head, making me laugh.

“They can’t be that bad.” I laugh.

“My mother was the inspiration for Cruella.” With lifted eyebrows, he nods his head. “You freshen up. We’ll leave in fifteen for my parents’ place.” He turns, walking out of the room.

CHAPTER 11

OUT OF MY LEAGUE

Liam

THE RIDE OVER TO my parents' estate is quiet. Rosemary seems uneasy. She watches out her window with her head against the headrest. She looks beautiful sitting there in her mocha-colored sweater dress. It's long sleeved with a turtleneck but has this cut out, exposing a hint of her plump breasts. But that's not the sexiest part of the dress. It's form fitting and accentuates her curves perfectly. But that's still not the sexiest part. The length of the dress is mid-calf but has a slit to the middle of her thigh. Her exposed thigh is driving me crazy.

My hand would look perfect resting on her thigh. I fight the urge to touch her, just like I fought the urge to kiss her earlier. Damn, I wish I could get a better read on her. I'm used to women throwing themselves at me, making their intentions very well known. Rosemary is not that way. I've felt that we've had these moments, but she looks away as if she is disinterested. Having her in my arms earlier felt amazing, and I didn't want to let her go. When I leaned in to kiss her, she tensed up... so I backed off. I didn't want to, but we have a long weekend ahead of ourselves and I don't want her to feel uncomfortable. My mother will do a good job at that, as it is.

She gasps as we pull into the driveway of my parents' estate. A grand Georgian estate they had built when I was fifteen. It's a beautiful home with a mixture of brick and shingle siding, large windows and a large grand entrance. I didn't always

appreciate the architectural style. When I was a senior in high school, I ended an argument with my mother by saying, ‘at least I didn’t build a giant rectangle with windows.’ I don’t think she ever got over me saying that. It was the first real investment my parents made after his law firm won a huge settlement for a client.

“Wow. This is your parents’ *place*?” Rosemary looks around with the twinkle of excitement in her eyes. Her mouth is wide open as she takes everything in.

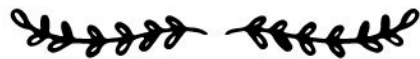
“What did you expect?” I laugh.

“Not this.” She gasps. “This place is huge.”

“It’s around ten thousand square feet.” I chuckle.

She sits quietly for a moment. Her eyes and mouth twitch.

“That’s like fifteen of my apartments.” She finally says.



Rosemary

When Liam mentioned going to his parents' place, I assumed we were going to a home like his and not New England's version of the Taj Mahal. I have never been to a home with its own parking lot before. Just like his home, it's tucked behind mature trees and privacy shrubs. Even though there are vendors rushing around setting up for Missy's wedding, you can see how perfectly landscaped the lawn is.

Liam opens the mahogany wood door to a grand entrance straight out of a magazine. The curvy double staircase with the mahogany handrail and a large elegant crystal chandelier between the two takes my breath away. Under the chandelier is a tall and slim Christmas tree with white twinkling lights, while Christmas music plays softly in the background. I swear this has to be a movie set.

I haven't made it past the foyer, and I'm blown away by how elegant and sophisticated it all looks. I stand still, taking it all in when I feel Liam's hand in the small of my back. He guides me to a closet where he hangs our jackets and tucks my purse away.

"Ready?" He leans in and asks.

"Liam, I'm way out of my league here." I look at him with wide eyes.

"Don't be silly, just be yourself." He smiles.

"What if I say something stupid?" I look around.

“What if *I* say something stupid?” He asks with a smile.

“Don’t be silly. This is your family.” I reply.

“Precisely. This is immediate family, parents, siblings, and grandparents. Think of it as a chance for the two families to meet outside the craziness of the wedding. Besides, I’m sure my brother Silas will beat us all at being the first to say something stupid.” He winks.

“If it’s just immediate family, why the dress code?” I look at him.

“Silas.” Liam nods his head. “He is the reason for much of the dress code. I wouldn’t be surprised if Missy doesn’t have stand by clothes for him.” He laughs.

“Then why did my list request designer clothes?” I sigh.

“I asked Missy to make you a list that would quiet my mother and her friends. Are you upset about that?” His brows are furrowed.

“No.” I huff.

“Do you not like the clothes you bought?” He leans closer to me.

“I do, but I can’t pretend to be something that I’m not.” I shift from one foot to another.

“I’m not asking you to be. Rosemary, I like you. I wouldn’t have invited you if I didn’t. My family will like you too. Just be yourself.” He rubs both my arms. “Breathe. I will be right beside you all night long, okay?” He whispers.

“Okay.” I gulp and exhale.

CHAPTER 12

INTRODUCTIONS

Liam

WALKING TOWARDS THE LIVING room and the voices of my family, I reach down, grabbing Rosemary's hand. She immediately stiffens and holds her breath.

"Relax." I lean down and whisper in her ear. My free hand cupping her jaw. "We're a couple, remember?"

She gulps and nods, then relaxes. I would be lying if I said that I'm only holding her hand for the sake of looking like a couple. The truth is, I enjoy touching her. If I had my way, my hands would explore every inch of her delicious body.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?" I pull back and look into her eyes.

She smiles, then looks down and giggles. When she looks back up, her cheeks look a little pinker than before. I think I might have embarrassed her. It's adorable.

"Thank you." She replies.

"There's that smile." I rub my thumb on her jaw. "Ready?"

I know I'm taking the touching a bit far, but I can't help myself. There is something about her I crave. Something inside me tells me to keep touching her, that maybe she'll soon feel the way I do.

"Ready." She takes a deep breath.

Walking into the living room hand in hand, we are greeted by polite smiles.

“Missy’s fiancé’s name is Scott. He is the tall one on Missy’s right. He’s an architect.” I whisper in her ear.

Spotting my mother staring at us wide eyed, I kiss Rosemary’s cheek.

“There he is.” Missy rushes to us as she spots my mother moving in.

“Hey little sister.” I let go of Rosemary’s hand and embrace her.

“Mother has already asked if you hired your date for my wedding.” Missy whispers in my ear.

Well, shit. This sets the tone for the entire weekend, now that Mother suspects some sort of funny business. How she pegged Missy as being a part of it, I’ll never know. But since Missy could walk, it’s been her and me against the world.

“Rosemary.” Missy pulls her into a quick embrace, with Mother breathing over her shoulder. “So good to see you again.”

“Again?” I hear my mother snap. “Liam, I thought you said you’re in a long-distance relationship.” She glares at me.

Here we go.

“Good evening, Mother.” I say with my head held high. “I would like to introduce you to Rosemary... my... girlfriend.”

Mother’s head snaps to Rosemary. She looks her up and down. Her jaw is clenched, with a pompous scowl on her face.

“Hello.” Rosemary extends her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Ugh, that accent. Where are you from, child?” Mother doesn’t take Rosemary’s hand.

Mother’s rudeness is already wearing thin on my nerves.

“Texas.” Rosemary replies sighing.

“What accent, Mother? I don’t hear one.” Missy giggles, winking at Rosemary.

“How is it you two have already met?” Mother looks between Rosemary and Missy.

“It was a chance meeting really, Mother. I went to the firm with Marissa, just as Rosemary and Liam were getting back in from lunch.” Missy replies with a huff.

“And why am I just now hearing about this?” Mother’s voice is firm, and her tone is accusatory.

“Mother, you’re overreacting in front of my new family.” Missy says with a forced smile and through gritted teeth. Her smile almost looks like she is baring her teeth as a warning to Mother. “It was a ten-minute conversation; I hardly saw it worth mentioning.”

“Hmmm,” Mother looks between each of us like she did when we were younger.

I’m sure her Spidey senses are sounding the alarms in her head. I don’t bring women home to meet my family, not since my failed engagement. That was the last *real* relationship I was in, and that was fifteen years ago. After that hurt and embarrassment, I swore off relationships all together. Never committing to one woman and never seen at social events with

a date. So, bringing Rosemary here is completely out of the norm.

“Liam.” Luckily, my stepfather, Peter, interrupts. “Dee, let the boy be. He just arrived with his beautiful date. Rosemary, is it?” He looks from Mother to her. Rosemary smiles and nods. “Welcome to our home. Please make yourself comfortable.” He says with his usual kind smile.

“Thank you. You have a lovely home.” Rosemary returns the smile, then looks down at the gift bag in her hands. “Oh, I almost forgot.” She looks at me. “This is for you, Missy. Just a little something from...” She pauses.

“From the both of us.” I finish Rosemary’s sentence and place my hand in the small of her back.”

It fits perfectly there.

“Oooo, a present. I love presents.” Missy giggles taking the bag. She roots through the tissue paper. “Candle. How did you know I love candles?” She smiles at Rosemary.

“A little birdie told me.” Rosemary presses into my body.

“Relax.” Missy reads the label. “Mandarin and mint. Hmmm.” She opens the lid. “Mmmm.” She closes her eyes, inhaling the scent. “I love it. Thank you.”

“Mrs. Pierce?” The chef says, standing next to Mother.

“Yes.” She snaps at him.

“Dinner is ready to be served.” He replies with a polite smile on his face.

“Thank you.” She says quickly, looking back at Rosemary.

Once again, she looks Rosemary up and down. Her lips are pursed and pressed down. She looks down at Rosemary while her nose remains high in the air. How she manages that I will never know. Mother’s arrogance is on full display tonight; I’m assuming it will be here all weekend. *Great.* As cold as she can be, she wasn’t always like that.

I remember a time when Mother was fun. She’d serve us kids cake for breakfast on our birthdays. Take us to amusement parks, movies, bowling, you name it; we did it. That all stopped when I was fourteen. As his law firm became increasingly successful, so did Mother’s status amongst the socialites, and that old money blood kicked in. People tolerate her behavior because being able to call her a friend and having her stamp of approval is important when climbing the social ladder. Which is not important to me at all.

Mother side glances my stepfather and he quickly moves to make the announcement. *It would be unbecoming of her to raise her voice.*

CHAPTER 13

IMMEDIATE FAMILY DINNER

Rosemary

AFTER PETER ANNOUNCES DINNER, we make our way to the formal dining room. As Liam promised, he is tight to my side. He was right about his mother. She is something else. I'm not too sure if it's me or if she treats everyone this way, but there's this holier than thou attitude that is unnerving. I've never met anyone like that before in my life. Peter seems like a sweet man, but I imagine he must have a ruthless streak. You don't have a super-successful law practice by being kind all the time. Missy is so down to earth and really seems to have her brother's back. She loops her arm into mine, pulling me to her.

"Stay close." She whispers in my ear as we take our seat at the table.

This table seats forty. I've never seen such a massive table in my life. Well, maybe in a restaurant, but never in a private home.

"Missy, you and Scott should sit near the head of the table. Liam, I'd like you and Rosemary closer to me as well." Dee states.

She sits at one end of the massive table while her husband sits at the other.

"Mother, this was supposed to be an informal dinner with just immediate family. We don't need to be so proper." Missy replies, opening her napkin.

“Dee, darling. Since the children have already chosen their seats in the middle of the table, perhaps we should sit opposite them.” Peter says, standing behind his chair.

“Don’t be silly.” She scoffs and unfolds her napkin, then places it in her lap.

“You’re doing great.” Liam wraps his arm around my shoulder, then kisses my temple.

I’m not hating the affection he is showing me, even though it’s just for show. Dean never showed me this much public affection in the eight years we were together. He was always against it, saying he didn’t want to be one of *those* couples. I thought I was too, but oddly enough; I’m enjoying Liam’s touch and his peck kisses.

“Missy, where’s Silas?” Liam asks, leaning across me.

“Your brother is doing important work in Thailand.” Dee says from the head of the table.

“Yes, such important work.” Missy giggles. “Saving one Patpong worker at a time.” She buries her head in Scott’s arm and laughs.

“I don’t know what is so funny.” Dee snaps. “This Patpong sounds like there’s so much to do there.”

I look at Liam as he looks at his plate, biting his lips. Is he trying not to laugh? Missy is on the other side of me, giggling into Scott’s arm. Peter looks at the two of them with his mouth cocked to the side.

“Liam?” I whisper. “What’s so funny?”

“Patpong is one of Thailand’s notorious red-light districts.” He whispers in my ear.

I lean back, narrowing my eyes looking at his face. Waiting for him to say he’s kidding, that this is how he and Missy tease their brother. But that moment never comes. The way he is looking at me; eyebrows raised, lips curled up, and nodding his head, tells me he’s serious. I scrunch my face and shake my head, causing him to chuckle.

“What are you saying?” Dee snaps.

“Private conversation, Mother.” Liam says without breaking eye contact with me.

“It’s rude to have private conversations at the dinner table.” She huffs.

“Relax, Mother. Liam just told us a little joke.” Missy says, looking at Dee.

“I did?” Liam asks.

“Oh, goody. I love jokes.” She says, clapping her hands.

“Don’t you dare.” Liam says, side eyeing Missy.

“Why do breasts have nipples?” Missy looks between Liam and Dee.

“Without them, they’d be pointless.” An elderly man from across the table replies, letting out a booming laugh and slapping the table.

His laugh is so loud and sudden, Dee jumps, grabbing her chest.

“My joke was only in response to Missy’s.” Liam looks at Dee. “What did one butt cheek say to the other?” Dee’s face is scrunched, and her mouth is turned down. She looks like she ate something rotten. “Together, we can stop this shit.” Liam says, getting another booming laugh from the elderly man.

His laughter is contagious, and soon most of the table is laughing with him, including me. His booming laugh soon turns to a gasping laugh with snorts.

“Grandpa, you better be careful, or you’ll pass out.” Scott says through laughter.

“Liam, this is highly inappropriate for the dinner table, and Missy... very un-lady like.” Dee snaps her teeth, sticking her nose high in the air, sipping on her martini.

“Dee, you’ve been falling victim to these two’s antics for years. You’d think by now you’d learn.” Peter says, lightly chuckling.

“Mother is highly protective of the golden child. Liam was mistake one, and I was mistake two. Silas was planned.” Missy says, hiding her mouth with her hand from Dee’s view.

“Good evening, everyone.” The chef says, standing next to Dee. He waits for everyone to quiet down before continuing.

“My name is Chef Rob Galloway, and it has been an honor to prepare tonight’s meal for you and congratulations to the happy couple. Tonight’s dinner will be comprised of five courses. At the start of each course, I will announce the dishes and give a brief description. Our first course is soup. Crab bisque. It is a delightfully creamy soup topped with fresh

crabmeat and parsley. They will begin serving you now. Enjoy.” The chef says with a smile, then leaves.

Immediately, a bowl of soup appears in front of me. It’s beautiful. The orange-colored creamy soup is served in a simple white bowl. Once everyone is served, I take Liam’s lead. As I reach for my spoon, I soon realize that I’m out of my element. There are two spoons in front of me. *What the hell?* Not only that, there is a large and small fork to the right of my plate charger. Just above the forks is a smaller plate with a butter knife on it. To the right of the small plate is a spoon and fork. Next to that is a glass of water and an empty wine glass. Just below that is another knife and spoon. Why so many forks and spoons? Mama would have a fit having to wash so many utensils. At home, for large gatherings like this, we used paper plates and plastic forks.

“White or red, miss?” A server asks from behind me.

I hesitate for a moment, not quite able to grasp what I’m being asked. My mind is still trying to figure out the utensil situation.

“We’ll both take white.” Liam states, then pats my thigh, which sends a shockwave through my body.

I can hear small chatter and laughter around the table. I’m mostly quiet, simply absorbing all of this. It feels so alien to me. I can feel Dee’s gaze on me. She is like a lion stalking its prey, waiting to pounce.

“Our next course will be *pâté de foie gras*.” My head snaps to chef Rob as he announces.

Wait... what did he say? As he speaks, they replace our empty bowls with a small white plate with a piece of toasted bread with something smeared on it. I look at Missy, then to Liam, who both seem pleased with their plates. I'm not too sure.

"Tonight, our foie gras is served on top of toasted sourdough bread and topped with pickled red onions. Enjoy." Chef Rob says before hurrying away.

I continue looking at the plate in front of me as others eat. Leaning down slightly, I try to smell this foie gras without bringing too much attention to myself.

"What is this?" I quietly ask Liam.

"Do you want the short or long answer?" He looks at me.

"Short, please." I reply with a gulp.

"Duck liver." He takes a drink of his wine.

"What? Seriously?" I look from him to my plate.

"You don't have to eat it if you don't want to." He smiles.

"Is there a problem with your plate, Rose?" Dee says loudly. Her ring clanking against her wineglass as she picks it up, drawing more attention to me.

"No, not at all." I reply with a gulp and a polite smile.

"Have you never had foie gras before?" Dee asks with a smirk.

"No, ma'am, not that I'm aware of." I reply.

"Ma'am?" Dee scoffs, putting her hand on her chest looking around the table.

“I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong?” I look between her and Liam.

“I know exactly what ma’am implies here.” She snaps.

“I’m sorry... I don’t follow.” I narrow my eyes and tilt my head.

“Mother, please.” Liam snaps, putting his hand on my thigh.

His hand moves from on top of my dress to the bare skin under the slit of the dress. Not that I’m hating it, it’s just confusing to me. I know we agreed to act like a couple in front of the others, but literally no one can see where his hand is right now.

Is this his way of telling me shit is about to get bad?

“My apologies. I really meant nothing by it. Where I’m from saying ma’am and sir is engrained in us from the time we can speak. Not addressing someone by sir or ma’am is considered rude, and as a kid could have resulted in a backhand.” I look at Dee while Liam gently squeezes my thigh.

“Seriously? A backhand?” Missy gasps.

“Yes. My parents are not like that. With them it would have resulted in a firm talking to. But I have seen it happen to my friends.” I explain, looking around the table.

“Wow, I had no idea. I had a sorority sister who always addressed others as ma’am and sir. Now I understand why. Thank you for explaining and helping us understand better.” Missy says with a smile.

“You’re welcome.” I reply.

Wanting to test the waters a bit, I place my hand on Liam's thigh. He tenses for a moment, inhaling sharply. *Crap, I've made a mistake.* Just before I remove my hand, his body relaxes, leaning into me slightly. *Is this a moment or my imagination again?*

“However, if I reply with a ‘*bless your heart,*’ I’m being condescending.” I look at Dee with a smile before taking a drink of my wine.

Dee glares at me for a moment, her mouth puckered, eyes narrowed. Her glare is harsh. I believe she is trying to intimidate me like she does everyone else.

The chatter at the table picks up, and soon her attention is elsewhere. I avoid the smashed-up duck liver on my plate like the plague. Finally, after what seems like hours, I spot the chef making his way next to Dee. *Thank goodness.*

“Our next course will be a warm arugula salad.” Chef Rob speaks as they replace our duck liver with a salad.

This looks normal and more my speed.

“Arugula tossed with warm pancetta, caramelized red onions. It is topped with pine nuts and shaved parmesan and dressed with a balsamic reduction. Enjoy.” He says before taking his leave.

This is probably the smallest salad I’ve ever seen. It looks amazing... much better than the foie gras. Taking my first bite leaves me wanting more, but unfortunately there’s two... maybe three bites left on my plate.

“Rose?” I hear Dee’s condescending voice.

“Rosemary,” I say before taking another bite and without looking at her.

“Excuse me?” She scoffs.

“My name is Rosemary.” I wipe my mouth, looking at her.

“Not Rose, not Mary, but Rosemary.” I pick up my wineglass.

Liam pats my thigh, side eyeing me with a crooked grin on his face. *He’s enjoying this.* My mama taught me manners and normally I don’t challenge someone in their home, however, the one thing I can’t stand is when someone tries to shorten my name. I like my name just the way it is.

“I’m my great-grandmother’s namesake, whom I never met. She was an amazing woman who marched to the beat of her own drum, moving to New York when she was only eighteen in a time when women didn’t have many rights. I’m honored to be named after her.” I take a sip of my wine.

“Tell us more about you.” Dee says, clearing her throat. She looks shaken. *Am I the only one who’s ever challenged her?*

“Mother, is this really necessary?” Liam sighs. “This weekend is all about Missy and Scott.”

“Liam, we’re amongst family.” Dee gestures her hand in a circular motion in front of her. “I’m naturally curious about the woman who has captured my oldest son’s heart. That’s all.” She smiles, looking around the table.

“It’s okay,” I pat Liam’s leg, looking at him. “What would you like to know?” I smile at Dee.

Bring it lady.

“Well... were you're from, education, family, what do you do for fun... so forth?” She takes a drink.

I think for a moment before I speak. She'll be able to spot a lie or untruth, so I'll need to be honest without revealing too much.

“I'm from Texas, Houston specifically. Born and raised upper middle class. I have a brother, both parents are still married. Mom is a high school math teacher and dad owns a successful accounting firm. I was engaged, never married, no children, and I have a BS in accounting. In my spare time, I love to read and cook. That's the cliff notes version of my life.” I finish and take my last bite of salad.

“You're an accountant.” She laughs. “You don't look like any accountants I know.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I tilt my head.

“Mother just called you pretty.” Missy says tapping my arm.

“Oh,” I chuckle to myself. “I assure you, I'm a giant nerd wrapped up in a nice package.” I look at Liam.

“You're living in Houston... how much longer do you think you two can maintain a long-distance relationship?” Dee asks, cocking her jaw to the side.

“Mother...” Liam speaks, but I put my hand on his forearm, stopping him.

“Honestly speaking. I was considering a move here before meeting Liam. Getting to know him is making my decision easier.” I smile, looking at him.

“How did you meet?” Dee asks.

“Sandwich shop by the office.” Liam says without taking his eyes off me. “Something about her drew me right in.” We smile at each other.

Is this a moment? Because it feels like one.

“Awww, how sweet.” Missy says.

“You said you were engaged. What happened?” Dee sighs.

“I ended it. Love was there, but we lacked passion. I couldn’t see a life without passion.” I exhale.

“Here, here.” Scott’s grandfather says, lifting his glass.

The table erupts with chatter as others chime in. My answers seem to satisfy Dee’s curiosity for now. For the rest of the dinner, her focus seems to be everywhere but me, which is good. But I have a feeling she’s just getting started.

They serve the next two courses with the chef announcing each one. The main entrée is lamb chops served over mashed potatoes and two pieces of asparagus in the shape of an X with a pan reduction sauce. Beautiful presentation for meat and potatoes. The last course is a chocolate raspberry mousse. Which I have no complaints about. The food was delicious, and mostly, dinner was fun. Once Dee understood that I’m not like the others. That I don’t have to bow down and kiss the ground she walks on.

CHAPTER 14

RUDE AWAKENING

Liam

DRIVING BACK HOME, ROSEMARY is quiet. She's leaned back in her seat, looking out her window. I haven't touched her since we left the family dinner, and all I want to do is find that sweet spot on her thigh. That soft area of skin where my hand fit so well. During dinner I got carried away with touching her. I couldn't help myself. Once I started, I couldn't stop. Then she did something unexpected and touched my thigh. What did that mean? Is she reciprocating the feelings or was she just going with the flow?

I should ask her.

Tell her how I feel and see if she feels the same. But if I do and she doesn't share the same feelings that could make the rest of the weekend awkward, or worse... she could leave. I don't want either of those two things. It's best to just keep doing what we're doing... for now.

"You okay over there?" I ask, looking at her.

"Great. I like Missy. You were right about your mom." She laughs.

"Can't say I didn't warn you." I chuckle.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" She looks at me.

"Of course." I inhale, preparing for a hard conversation.

"Peter. He's your stepfather?" She asks.

“Yes.” I nod my head, relieved she didn’t ask about my feelings.

“Missy was right when she said I was mistake one. Mother was fresh out of high school. A group of them visited Australia for the summer before starting college in the fall. That’s where she met my father. He was a bad boy surfer, and she was a naïve eighteen-year-old. They had a summer romance that ended when she came back to the states. A couple of months later, she found out she was pregnant. When she called him to let him know, a woman answered the phone... his wife. She met Peter when I was two and they married when I was three. He adopted me, so we share the same last name. He has always treated me like one of his own... he’s only father I know. Mother’s the one who plays favorites.” I laugh, pulling into the driveway.

“How was Missy mistake two?” Rosemary asks before stepping out of the SUV.

I step out of the SUV and wait for her to round the front before I continue.

“Silas was born three months after I turned five.” I say as we walk towards the front door.

“Every detail of Silas’ conception and birth was planned by Mother. He was her wanted child and treated as such. After Silas was born, Mother was done with babies. Peter wanted one more. They went round after round, and ultimately, she convinced Peter to have a vasectomy. It took her four years to wear him down, but like with everyone else, she always gets

her way. When she found out she was pregnant two months after his procedure, she was devastated. He was confused.” I laugh, opening the door for Rosemary.

“It almost led to a divorce. He accused her of an affair, and she accused him of tricking her into another child. Mother was able to prove she had been faithful, and Peter’s doctor confirmed he had a vasectomy. Did you know vasectomies can fail? It’s rare, only two in a thousand, but it happens. Peter calls Missy his miracle baby and Mother refers to her as mistake number two.” I laugh as we walk into the kitchen.

“That’s sad she refers to you both that way.” Rosemary scrunches her face and shakes her head.

Reaching into the refrigerator, I grab two bottles of water, handing her one.

“Most of the time, Mother says it jokingly. Missy and I have had wonderful lives. The best education money can buy. Large trust funds from both Mother and Peter. We really can’t complain.” I open my water and take a sip.

“Still.” Rosemary opens her water. “Complete opposite of my mom. I just couldn’t see life any other way.” She takes a sip, staring off into the distance.

“Mother wasn’t always like this. She was fun when we were younger.” I say, thinking back.

“Really? What happened?” Rosemary takes her heels off.

Suddenly, I realize just how short she is. Normally I go for women much taller, but there is something about her being

pint-sized that is adorable.

“I don’t know. She changed as she climbed the social ladder.”
I scoff and take another sip of my water.

“I never want to be like that.” She sighs.

“No? Do you want kids?” I lean on the counter, looking at her.

“Hmmm, I don’t know. Honestly, I never thought about wanting them. Only thought I had to have them, because that’s what was expected. Get married, have the house with the white picket fence, two kids, and a dog. That’s what I thought making it was.” She shrugs then bends over, picking Stella up.

“Maybe I’ll just get a couple of these and call it a day.” Stella rubs her face on Rosemary’s, causing her to giggle. “What about you?” She smiles, looking from Stella to me.

“Do you know Stella allows no one but me to pick her up?” I stand there staring at the interaction between the two with a smile on my face.

Obviously, Rosemary has Stella’s approval.

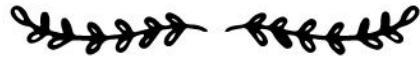
“Until recently, I didn’t want kids or any of that.” I stop myself before I say too much.

“What changed?” She tilts her head, still petting Stella.

I stare into her eyes. I want to grab her, pull her into my body and tell her my perspective has changed because of her. That I have seen flashes of a beautiful future with her. One where we are both happy and madly in love.

“My perspective.” I exhale and drink the last of my water.

“Hmmm, I hope you find what you are looking for.” She whispers. “It’s late and I’m tired. Goodnight.” She smiles before walking away.



I sit in front of a fire with a whiskey in my hand. It’s another sleepless night for me. Like so many, I’ve grown accustomed to. I watch the flames dance around in the fireplace. The red, orange, and blue colors of the fire are mesmerizing. I sit quietly, watching the flames and sipping my whiskey until my eyelids feel heavy. At last, I might get some sleep after all. I chug the last bit of my drink, then I catch movement from the corner of my eye.

Turning my head, I see Rosemary stepping into the soft flickering glow of the fire’s light. Her robe is open, revealing her tight tank top and shorts. The soft waves of her hair cascade around her face. She’s so beautiful.

“Did I wake you?” I ask sitting up.

“No, I couldn’t sleep.” She says, walking to me.

“Me either.” I look at her standing inches from me.

“Liam, I’m tired of playing games.” She says, straddling my lap. “I know you want me.” She wraps her arms around my neck. “I want you too.” She looks me in the eyes.

Those four little words are what I’ve been wanting and waiting to hear since meeting her. I push her robe open wide and look at her amazing body. My hands massage her hips. She gasps

as my hands grab her ass and squeeze. She bites her bottom lip. Her eyes beg for me to take her. I reach up with one hand and push the hair out of her face. Taking a moment to look into her eyes, I rub her cheek and jaw. She puts her hand on mine, kissing my palm without breaking eye contact. I can't take it anymore and pull her to me.

Our lips crash into each other. Her lips are soft and are as sweet as candy. She grinds her pussy into my stiff cock. The more I kiss her, the more ravenous I become. Our kiss is passionate and hungry. We pull at each other's clothes, both wanting to feel our naked flesh pressed against the other. I push her robe over her shoulders and kiss her neck.

"Mmmm, Liam. Feels so good." She moans.

The way she says my name is driving me crazy. I want to hear her say it again and again until she is screaming it. I take her lips again, this time rougher than the last. I bite her bottom lip. She gasps, opening her mouth wider and I invade. Seizing the opportunity to explore every inch of her mouth. Her tongue submits to mine as they dance.

I feel her tugging at my shirt. Breaking the kiss, I quickly pull my t-shirt over my head. She smiles and bites her bottom lip while her hands explore my chest and abs. Her fingers trace along the grooves of my muscles as she admires my hard work in the gym.

"Mmmm." She purrs.

I push her robe completely off, then take her lips again. With each kiss, her lips get sweeter and my cock gets harder. I pull

away from her again, lifting her tank top over her head.

“Perfect.” I say, looking at her plump breasts.

I take her breasts in my hands and massage them. She moans and grinds harder into me. I feel her dampness growing. Her nipples are hard. One at a time, I capture them with my mouth. Sucking, licking, and gently nibbling on them. She throws her head back, moaning my name. I love the way her skin taste, making me want to taste more of her.

I flip her on her back, positioning myself on top of her. She giggles at my sudden movement, but soon lust takes over, and her moans return. Reaching between her legs, I feel her excitement.

“Mmmm, so wet for me already, aren't you, baby?” I say into her lips.

“Mmmm hmmm.” She replies.

In one swift move, I remove her shorts. She's not wearing panties. I run my finger along her entrance, dipping it in and out of her. I lick her slickness off my finger.

“Mmmm, so good.” I look at her.

I spread her legs wide, then capture her perfectly pink pussy with my mouth. Her moans get louder as I lick and suck. Completely devouring her. I wrap my arms around her legs, and with my hands, I grip her hips in place. She grabs my hair, holding my face tight to her. Her moans fill the air; her body shakes.

“Oh my god, I'm coming.” She screams.

I suck on her clit as she comes without letting up. Her body trembles. She tries to push me away, but I want her to orgasm again. I need to feel her explode again. It doesn't take long before she throws her head back, fisting the couch under her. Her body convulses as the powerful orgasm rips through her body.

I release my hold on her clit as she relaxes.

"Please, I need you inside me." She begs.

I pull my sweats off, my dick springs forward. Eager to be buried deep inside her. Our lips crash again as I line up with her entrance.'

"Wait." She says, pulling away. "What is that sound?"

"What?" I ask. My brain is not registering what she is saying.

I push.

"What is that noise?" She asks again, looking around.

"I don't hear anything." My tip is just inside her folds.

"That noise." She huffs.

Then I hear the noise too. It sounds like scratching and clawing. Where is it coming from? It sounds like something is scratching on wood.

I open my eyes. It's just before daybreak. The sounds of clawing are louder now. It doesn't take me long to realize I'm in one of my rooms. *Shit.* Frustrated, I sit up and look around, looking for the source of the noise. My dick is still hard. *Fucking dream.* After a few second scan of the room, I see

Stella's arm and paw reaching under the door. Damn cat interrupted the best dream I've had in a long time.

CHAPTER 15

I SMELL TROUBLE

Rosemary

WAKING UP, MY PANTIES are soaking wet. I must have had one hell of a dream last night. Wish I could remember it. Looking at my phone, I see it's a quarter after seven in the morning. Which is late for me, considering I'm up at five thirty every morning for work. Although I wish I could sleep just a little longer on my off days.

Stepping under the hot shower revitalizes my senses and wakes me up. I think back to last night's dinner with Liam's family. The way he looked at me, touched me, whispered into my ear. The way he makes me feel alive inside. With just a simple touch, he makes my body tingle in a way I've never experienced before. I would love more, but I'm sure it's a one-way street where he is concerned.

I keep thinking of the way he smells. So incredibly delicious. The more I think of him, the more my core throbs. I reach between my legs; my button is so sensitive. I close my eyes and images of him flash through my mind. His face smiling seductively at me. He leans down kissing me; his body pressed into mine.

I need a release.

Removing the handheld showerhead from its base, I prop my leg on the seat in the shower and position it between my legs. I adjust the water pressure and temperature. The beads of water massage my core and button perfectly. I breathe heavier, trying

to be as quiet as I can. He can't know what I'm doing in his shower.

I massage my breasts and pinch my nipples, heightening my arousal. A light moan escapes my lips as images of him on top of me fill my head. My nails running up and down his back as he bites my nipples. He thrusts in and out with precision, filling and stretching me perfectly. My hips buck against the rhythm of the water. I gasp as the pressure within me builds.

I can feel my orgasm so close. My core pulsates. I moan and pinch my nipple hard as my climax hits. Wave after wave of pure pleasure washes over me. My body trembles each time my core convulses. My legs threaten to give out under me. I feel the rush of my warm fluid before it's washed away by the water.

Breathing heavy I return the showerhead to its base and lower my leg from the seat. My button is so sensitive, causing me to jump when I close my legs. I can't believe simply thinking about him turns me on so much. I give myself a moment to recover before finishing my shower.

Not knowing what Liam might have planned today, I throw on a pair of jeans, a long sleeve V-neck t-shirt, and knee-high boots. Casual and comfy. I toss my hair around and apply some light makeup.

Stepping out of my room, I'm hit with the smell of bacon and coffee. Liam must be up. I hope he didn't hear me in the shower earlier. Walking through the living room, I can hear him in the kitchen talking to Stella and her answering him with

sweet meows. I've never known a man with a cat before, but the two of them are so cute together.

"Good morning." I say, walking into the kitchen.

"Good morning." Liam replies with a smile.

Damn, he looks sexy. He's dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt. I've never seen him dressed so casually. His t-shirt is form fitting and from here I can see his lean, muscular physique. I swear my heart skipped ten beats watching him cooking over the stove.

"Sit. Let me grab your coffee." He wipes his hands on a dish towel before tossing it over his shoulder.

I take a seat on a barstool at the counter, watching him move around the kitchen effortlessly. Piano music playing in the background. He looks relaxed and happy.

"We have the same machine." I say, pointing to the square coffeemaker.

"We do. It's my favorite. I have one in my apartment in the city as well." He laughs. "When I find something that works, I stick with it. How do you take your coffee?" He looks from my cup to me.

"Two creams and two sugars." I reply.

"I was thinking. Since there's nothing on the itinerary until this evening," he sets my coffee in front of me, "I can give you a tour around. Maybe do a little shopping. I'm sure you need to pick up something for Sue for babysitting your coffeemaker while you're gone." He chuckles. "There's this great little

casual seafood restaurant we can go to for lunch.” He turns back to the bacon on the stove.

“Sounds fun.” I reply, taking a sip of my coffee. “Mmmm, thank you. This is exactly what I needed.” I take another big sip.

“Did you sleep well?” He removes the bacon from the pan.

“Very well, thank you. Your bed is very comfortable.” I pause after the last words leave my mouth.

Such a cringe thing for me to say. He freezes for a moment, then plates up the food. Hopefully, I didn’t make him feel too awkward.

“Here you go.” He spins around to me with the perfectly made plate in his hands.

Waffle topped with butter and sliced strawberries and two crisp pieces of bacon.

“Looks delicious.” I look at it as he places it in front of me.

“Warm maple syrup is right here.” He points to a bottle to my right. “Eat up.” He says before sitting down with his own plate.

“I can’t believe you cook.” I take a bite of waffle. “Mmmm, and you’re good at it.”

“Thank you.” He takes a sip of coffee. “From about the age of twelve, we had a live-in housekeeper that cooked all our meals. Maria... she was wonderful. She insisted us kids help her in the kitchen. Mother was opposed. Peter thought it was a

great idea. Maria would say in her thick Russian accent, ‘Liam, there is nothing sexier than a man who knows how to cook for his woman.’ At twelve I didn’t understand, but as I’ve gotten older, Maria’s advice was spot on.” He smiles, taking a large bite of waffle.

We eat our breakfast and chat. He really is the complete package. Smart, funny, can cook, great career. No wonder women all over the city are trying to lock him down. Just like Missy, he is down to earth. It’s hard to believe he comes from old world money, as he calls it. He seems genuinely interested in me, asking me questions... getting to know me. It almost feels like the start of a beautiful romance.

“You cooked; I’ll clean.” I say, taking our plates to the sink.

“No way, you’re my guest.” He follows with our cups.

“Don’t be silly, I’ve got it.” I put our plates in the sink and spin to him.

With a teasing smile on my face, I snatch the cups from his hands by their handles. As the cups slip from his grip, he falls forward. Catching himself by placing each hand on the counter to the left and right of my hips. I’m trapped between his body and the counter. The smell of his cologne is intoxicating, causing me to lose focus. My brain is suddenly mush and all I want is to feel his body on mine.

“Whoopsie.” I giggle, looking between him and the two cups in my hands.

“When you want something, you make it happen, don’t you?”
He laughs. “If you insist on cleaning, let me help you by placing these in the sink.” He takes the cups from my hand, gently placing them in the sink just behind me, inching closer. “It’s all yours now.” He rests his hands on either side of me.

We stand staring into each other’s eyes. My heart races and it feels like time stops. His chest heaves up and down with each shallow breath. The heat from his body summons me closer as his warm breath teases my skin. His smile fades slightly; he looks like he wants to say something.

“Red alert. Red alert.” Missy rushes into the kitchen. “Oh.” She says wide eyed, looking at the two of us.

I swear I hear Liam growl, but he doesn’t pull away.

“How did you get in, Missy?” He glares at her.

“I used my code to unlock the door.” She looks between the two of us.

“You should probably learn to knock.” Liam snaps.

“No time for that. She is coming.” Missy exhales.

“Who?” Liam narrows his eyes at her.

“Liam.” Dee calls from the front of the house.

“Mother.” Missy says, looking from us to the hall.

“Oh.” Dee stops in her tracks when she sees the two of us at the sink. Her eyes darting between Liam and me.

At least we look like an actual couple who just got caught in a compromising position.

“Mother.” Liam states. “Can I help you?”

She continues to stare at us. The way her facial expression changes, she appears to be having an internal conversation.

“Mother?” Liam pulls away, crossing his arms.

“Ah, yes. We’re here for Rosemary, not you.” Dee cocks her mouth to the side with a slight grin.

I smell trouble.

“I’m sorry, Mother, but Rosemary and I have plans this afternoon.” Liam shifts from one foot to another.

“Plans?” She interlocks her fingers in front of her. “Do them tomorrow. We’re having a girls’ day, and Rosemary simply has to come. Mani Pedi, and lunch on me. Then we’ll do a little pre-wedding shopping. I even convinced your cousin Tina to join us. Who knows when the last time her feet have had anything done to them? Hopefully, I’ll connivence her to wear a dress and not a suit to the wedding.” Dee finishes with a smile on her face.

“Mother, you can’t just...” Liam says before I stop him by putting my hand on his chest.

I’m a big girl, more than capable of taking care of myself and handling women like Dee when I need to. Liam doesn’t need to argue with his mother because of me.

“It’s okay, I can use a Mani Pedi. I forgot to get one before we left the city.” I say with a smile.

I look him deep in his eyes, letting him know I will be fine. My hand is still on his chest. I can feel his heart beating and I swear it feels like it is speeding up as he leans into me.

“Are you sure?” He asks softly.

“Yes. We’ll do our stuff tomorrow.” I smile and pat his chest.

“Fine.” He grumbles before reaching into his back pocket, pulling his wallet out. “Take this.” He offers me his black credit card, again.

I swear, I’ve had that card more than he has in the past week.

“I don’t need that.” I smile and push his hand away.

“I know you don’t, but you’re my guest and I want to take care of you. I insist.” He pushes the card to me.

“Um, If she doesn’t want it, I’ll be glad to take it.” Missy says with her hand out.

“Fine. Only because you insist.” I take the card with a smile.

CHAPTER 16

LIGHTENING ROUND

Rosemary

THERE'S FIFTEEN OF US in total, in a convoy of three large SUVs. I'm in the SUV with Dee, her best friend Esther, Missy, and Tina. Missy introduced me to the other women, who all seem to be Dee's friends. I feel like I'm in the lion's den.

Missy, Tina, and I make small talk during our drive to town. I learn Missy is thirty, and five years younger than me. Missy and Scott dated in college, but they parted ways shortly before graduation, when he took a position in California. He moved back three years ago when his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.

They rekindled their romance a year and a half later, and six months ago, when his mother found out she was cancer free, he proposed. Hearing Missy tell their story is so sweet and romantic. The way he loves her and the little things he does. For example, he brings her coffee in bed every morning and rubs her tired feet every night before bed. In a way, it makes me jealous, but also something to strive for in my next relationship.

In the nail salon, they split us into two groups. Half of us will get our pedicures first, then we'll switch and get our manicures. Then we'll head to a back room in the salon where we will get neck and upper back massages. Of course, I'm in the group with Dee.

As the hot water soothes my feet and the massaging jets of the foot soak relax me, I hear a conversation from a few chairs

down.

“I can’t believe Liam is dating.” Esther says, sitting on the other side of Dee. “It’s been ten years, right?” She asks.

“Fifteen, but who’s counting?” Dee laughs.

“Rosemarie?” Ruth, another of Dee’s friends, calls.

“Rosemary.” Dee corrects then side eyes me.

She’s playing awfully nice.

“That’s what I said.” Ruth replies.

“No, it’s not.” Dee laughs.

“What did I say then?” Ruth asks.

“Rosemarie.” Dee answers, closing her eyes as the massage chair purrs to life.

“No, I’m certain I said Rosemary.” She huffs. “Rosemary.” Ruth enunciates Mary, causing Missy to giggle.

“Yes, ma... Ruth.” I stop myself short of saying ma’am. Don’t need to anger another New Yorker.

“You’re from Texas. How on earth did you meet Liam?” She leans forward, looking at me.

I hesitate for a moment, pretending to concentrate on the color chart in my hands. Honestly, I can’t remember what Liam told his mother. Did he say coffee or sandwich shop? Crap, I’m drawing a blank.

“Can I have this color?” I show the technician the color. “Um, it was a sandwich shop by his office.” I confidently state,

although I'm flipping out on the inside.

"Which one?" Pam, another friend of Dee's.

"Does that matter?" Esther snickers.

"No, I was just curious." Pam replies. "Surely you didn't come all the way from Texas for a sandwich." She leans forward, looking at me.

"No." I laugh. "I was interviewing for a job."

"Oh? What do you do?" Ruth asks.

"I have a degree in accounting." I reply, looking at her with a smile.

"What university did you attend?" Esther asks without looking at me.

"U of H." I reply.

"My Liam graduated top of his class at Harvard." Dee says, taking a glass of wine being offered to her.

"Oh... he didn't tell me that." I tilt my head.

"Have you been to his apartment?" Esther asks.

"That's a silly question, Esther." Dee laughs.

"I don't know. You said their relationship was new." Esther takes a sip of her wine.

"I have. Stella is quite fond of me. She lets me carry her around and everything." I smile, looking at Missy.

"Seriously?" Missy asks. "She still hisses at me."

“Seriously.” I laugh. “He has a beautiful apartment. Much bigger than the ones I have looked at. My understanding is that he moved in a couple of weeks before meeting me.”

“What sorority?” Pam asks.

“Sorry?” I look at her, confused.

“What sorority... in college?” Pam asks.

I see what’s going on. Dee is having her friends do her dirty work. They’re tag teaming me with questions like the lightning round on a game show.

“I didn’t pledge.” I reply, waiting for the next question.

“Did you get the job?” Pam asks.

“I turned it down. The vibe wasn’t right.” I reply, looking at Pam.

She is the epitome of a trophy wife. She’s in her early forties, but I’m sure her husband is much older. Huge wedding ring, big fake boobs, bleach blonde hair, and not an ounce of fat on her. She has probably never worked a day in her life and has relied on her looks to get her by. Although she appears to be simpleminded, I have a feeling she may be smarter than she lets others believe.

“Oh. So now what?” Pam asks.

“Waiting for Liam to make you his wife?” Esther’s tone is snarky.

Ah ha, there it is. Dee thinks I’m some sort of gold digger.

“Not at all. Esther, I’m not waiting for any *man* to take care of me. That would be silly. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself. Although I have a great career in Houston, I felt like a change of scenery was in order after ending my engagement.” I snap and exhale.

I’m flustered at the thought of anyone thinking that I’m looking for anything but love.

Wait... what?

This is all pretend. I’m not looking for anything. Just helping a colleague out for the weekend by pretending to be his out-of-state girlfriend. Just my super-hot and successful colleague that I wouldn’t mind having his hands all over my body

Stop it, Rosemary. He doesn’t like you like that; you’ll only end up hurt.

After snapping at Esther, the lightening round of questions stop. Finding some rich man to take care of you may be normal in their world, but it’s not in mine. I was raised to take care of myself, to be independent. I can’t believe how upset and offended I felt when I thought my integrity was being questioned.

After my pedicure, Dee and the others get their manicure. I quietly slip into the back room for my neck massage. Trying to distance myself from Dee and her friends. I contemplate faking a headache and calling Liam to come pick me up. But then that means that Dee and her cronies win. Just like the mean girls in high school and college. I can’t let them keep winning, so I’ll stick it out.

After my neck massage, I grab a seat at an empty station, waiting for a nail tech.

“This seat taken?” Tina sits down next to me.

“Nope.” I reply with a polite smile.

I’m cautious. Tina has been very quiet this entire time. I’m not too sure if Dee has sent her in for more information or not.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” She laughs.

“Why’s that?” I tilt my head, looking at her.

“Normally it’s me in the hot seat.” She laughs again.

Tina is slim built with short black hair. Her hair is faded and long on top, aligning more with a man’s haircut rather than a woman’s. She’s wearing blue jeans, a white tee-shirt, and a black jacket. Her sneakers are spotless and look to be name brand. She appears to be very masculine, or butch, as Greg would say.

“Why’s that?” I ask as my technician sits down.

“Look at me.” She flips the collar of her jacket. “I’m in law enforcement, I carry a gun, I love sports, I drive a jacked-up truck, I hunt, and I insist on dressing comfortably. I don’t fit in with Aunt Dee and her clique.” She chuckles. “Just clear.” She instructs her technician. “To top it off, they all think I’m lying,” she leans in and whispers, “about my sexuality.” She laughs.

“About your... what?” I squint my eyes and look at her.

Is Dee and her cronies homophobic? That is something I will not tolerate.

“I’m straight. Like straight, straight.” She chuckles. “I don’t even have bi fantasies like most women.”

I sit quietly for a moment, thinking about what she is telling me, then burst into laughter.

“I’m sorry.” I say through laughter. “You had me fooled.”

“I know, I know.” She laughs. “I’m as butch as they come and fool most people. I mean, I even walk like a dude. It’s the cop in me. Want to know the kicker? My boyfriend is femme presenting.”

I burst into laughter again, snorting.

“I look like a teenage boy, and he wears eyeliner and paints his nails. We make the perfect gay couple.” She points at herself and chuckles.

“Oh, my gosh. I don’t mean to laugh.” I wipe a tear from my eye.

“I don’t blame you. It’s freaking hysterical, and you looked like you could use a laugh and friendly face.” She smiles.

“Thank you.” I reply, still keeping my guard up.

“No problem. Can I ask you a question?” She looks at me and I nod. “Are you really an accountant?”

“Yes.” I chuckle under my breath. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Because you don’t look like my CPA, Chuck. He wears glasses, brown polyester slacks, striped shirt, and brown tie. He looks like a high school math teacher from the eighties. You look like a sorority sister or something.” She tilts her head.

“I recently had a makeover by my neighbor Greg, who performs drag under the name Sue Nami. Greg is married to Frankie, who is straight presenting.” I chuckle. “Greg taught me how to do my hair, makeup, and styled my entire wardrobe. Sue taught me how to walk in heels. He had help from Roxie, a female burlesque performer.” I laugh.

“Ya know, oddly enough, that all makes perfect sense.” Tina laughs. “They all sound very New York and nothing like what I’d expect from Texas.” She raises an eyebrow at me.

“I recently moved here. Liam is not ready to let his mother know yet.” I sigh.

“You can understand why, right?” She nods raising her eyebrows.

“Yes.” I sigh. “Dee is your aunt?”

“Yes... by marriage. She’s married to my mom’s older brother. We were not born with golden forks in our mouths like Aunt Dee and her family. My uncle worked hard building his business. He was pretty successful when they met, but from my understanding, she helped him grow his business to what it is today. They are the ultimate power couple.” She laughs.

“So, she is like this with everyone?” I look at her.

“Basically.” She shrugs. “I’m glad Missy is trying to shield you from her and the clique.” She looks from me to her nails.

For some reason, I trust Tina. She seems genuine. Honestly, I don’t feel like she’s given me a reason to doubt her intentions. I also don’t feel like she is spying for Dee. It seems like she understands what it’s like being grilled by Dee’s cronies. She seems like good people, and she can protect me with her law enforcement and gun training.

Just before the technician applies my red nail polish, I hear my text notification.

“Oh, one second, please.” I tell the technician before pulling my phone out of my purse. “Speaking of the devil.” I laugh, looking from my phone to Tina.

Liam: Hey, how’s it going?

Me: It’s fine.

Liam: Really?

Me: Eh... nothing I can’t handle.

Liam: That’s good... I think. I’m going to go play ball with Scott and a few other guys. Be back soon. I’ll have my phone on me if you need me.

Me: Sounds good. Have fun.

“He’s going to go play ball with Scott and the guys.” I put my phone away and lay my hands flat for the technician.

“He’s what?” Missy screeches. “Like hell they are. Last time they played ball, Scott got so drunk he slept in the yard all

night. I'm calling him now." She says, stomping off.

"What she doesn't know is that I'm the reason he got so drunk. Boy can't play for shit, and every time he missed the basket, I made him take a shot." She bites her lips together, trying not to laugh.

Tina and I look at each other and burst into laughter. I like her.

CHAPTER 17

CHAOS IN THE BAKERY

Rosemary

AFTER OUR MANICURES AND pedicures, we head to a restaurant in a cozy little inn. At first, I thought we were going to someone's house. Turns out this two-hundred- and fifty-year-old inn was originally built as someone's home in the late sixteen hundreds. I love the classic white colonial style inn with its white picket fence and perfectly maintained woodland landscape.

Lunch was delicious. Dee insisted I try their surf and turf, which is what they're known for. I was afraid eating something so filling for lunch would put me to sleep. It didn't. Probably because we walked to several shops nearby. My favorite was this little coffee shop. They actually roast their own beans in-house. I picked up a couple of different blends to take home for Greg to try. He's such a coffee snob. I hope he doesn't think my choices are lame.

Then we head to the bakery that is working on Missy's wedding cake. Walking inside, it's not what I expected when I think of bakeries. There are no delicious baked goodies for sale on display. Everything is stainless steel and cold. If it didn't smell like sweet heaven in here, you'd have no idea this is a bakery at all. While we wait for the owner of the bakery, children's laughter can be heard in another room.

"Is there a daycare next door?" I ask looking at a bakery employee.

“No. Every Thursday, we have classes here. Today we are joined by a local fifth grade class. They’re decorating superhero cakes.” She replies with a smile.

“That sounds like fun.” I nod my head.

“Next time you’re up here, we’ll have to take the class. I’m sure that would tickle Liam’s sweet tooth perfectly.” Dee says, looking at her nails.

Liam has a sweet tooth?

“Sounds fun.” I grit my teeth and smile.

Tina and the other ladies choose to head to a bakery down the street that has delicious cupcakes. I stay behind with Missy and Dee. After all, we’re basically fake family. While they talk with the owner about Missy’s cake, I sit at a table snacking on cake samples and looking through their portfolio. Each cake is more beautiful than the last.

“Thank you for calling me, Mary Jo. I like your idea on the changes. It’s going to be beautiful.” Missy says as they walk out of the back room where cakes are baked and decorated.

“You’re welcome, honey.” Mary Jo replies before Missy hugs her.

I assume with Missy’s level of comfort around the baker; she has been making cakes for the family for years.

“Mary Jo, your eye for detail is amazing. What would we do without you?” Dee coos and rubs the baker’s shoulder.

Dee's voice is soft and... dare I say sweet. This is the first time I've seen Dee treat any staff or vendor so kindly. She must really like her cakes.

"Come back here, you big dummy!" A laughing red-headed boy runs around the corner being chased by a blonde boy.

The red-headed boy is carrying a blue and red cake with black webbing and a Spiderman action hero on top.

"That's mine!" Shouts the blonde boy.

"Not anymore, you diaper baby." The red head shouts through laughter.

"Boys!" A woman in her fifties runs in behind them.

"Mrs. Williams, please control your students." Mary Jo shouts.

The boys run around the room and in between tables, with their teacher and Mary Jo on their heels. Dee grabs Missy, pulling her tight and squealing as the boys narrowly miss them.

"Your breath smells like dog poop." The red-headed boy hurls his insult over his shoulder.

I duck as they run past me, icing sliding off the cake onto the floor.

"Give me back my cake!" The blonde boy shouts.

"No way, stinky feet." The red-headed boy taunts.

They continue running around the room as three more kids join the chase. It's mass hysteria in the bakery.

“Guard that door. Do not let them into the back room.” Mary Jo instructs her staff.

The boys make their way around the room for the fourth time. They intertwine between the tables. Just as they get ready to pass me, I contemplate how I can stop them without ruining the cake. It looks good. The blonde boy worked hard on it. I’d hate to see the red-headed terror destroy it. Just as they’re right beside me, a little girl comes out of nowhere tackling the red-headed boy.

“Ha! I got you!” She shouts as the cake flies through the air.

Time slows down, like something that you’d see in a movie. Everything is in slow motion.

“Nooooo!” Shouts are heard around the room. The voices are distorted, deep, and drawn out.

“My cake.” The blonde boy shouts as he runs for the cake, attempting to grab it in midair.

Right about now, I’m wishing I had gone with the other ladies to get the most fabulous cupcakes, rather than staying here with my fake boyfriend’s mother and sister. Hell, at this point I’m wishing I was back in my tiny apartment baking cookies with Greg and Frankie, while Greg schools me on the perfect cappuccino. It starts with the bean; you know.

Scratch that, right now I wish I was back in Houston with Dean having boring scheduled sex. Better yet, I wish I was in my mama’s kitchen making desserts for our Christmas Eve dinner. Anything but this.

The cake slowly inches closer to my face, with the two boys and girl close behind. I hear Dee scream and gasp. Collision with the cake in five... four... three...

“I got it.” The blonde boy shouts as he leaps for the cake.

This is going to hurt... two... and be messy... one... impact. Screams.

The cake hits the side of my face, then slides down my body, just as the blonde boy slams into me, squishing the cake between us.

The red-headed demon hits the ground with the little girl on top of him. The little wuss immediately cries for his mommy. I’ve never been so satisfied with hearing a child cry in pain as I am right now. He started this whole mess. Don’t judge me. I’m covered in cake because of him.

“Sorry lady.” The blonde boy says, looking up at my shocked face.

I gasp, holding back my tears.

“Get. Your. Hand. Out. Of. My. Shirt.” I slowly breathe out.

I wipe the cake out of my eye and off my face. I’m covered in blue and red icing and white cake. It’s smeared in my hair, all over my clothes. It’d be easier to say where I’m not covered in cake.



After getting as much cake and icing off me, we arrive back at Liam’s. Needless to say, my mood is shot. I wonder how many

washes it's going to take to get the cake out of my hair. Missy follows me to the front door.

"You okay?" She asks.

"Yes... no. He hasn't replied to my text, and he's not answering his phone." I let out an exasperated sigh, looking at Missy.

"He's probably not back yet. Are you sure he didn't text you the front door code?" She looks at me with concern in her eyes.

"No. He probably forgot. His SUV is here." I point.

"Scott probably picked him up. The guys probably had to drag him out of the house." She smiles. "I'll just punch in my code. No biggie." She leans over the keypad.

"Wait. I can't let you do that. That's a breach of trust between you and him." I say, holding her shoulder.

"What? Girl please, all your stuff is in there. Do you know how pissed he'd be if I didn't let you in?" She waves her hand in the air, then punches in her four-digit code. "Done. See you tonight, right?" She looks at me.

"We're not having duck liver again, are we?" I give her a half-hearted smile.

"No. Tonight we dine on escargot... snails." She looks at me and wiggles her eyebrows.

I scrunch my face and frown.

“Just kidding. Tonight is prime rib. Scott’s favorite.” She clasps her hands under her chin.

“You seem like you’re really in love. What’s it like?” I look down and sigh.

“It’s like a million butterflies in your belly. My skin tingles when he touches me, and hearing his name gives me goosebumps. I can’t imagine my life without him. Why do you ask?” She lifts my face up by my chin.

“Just curious. I was wondering if I made a mistake not marrying Dean.” I sniffle.

“And what does your gut say?” She rubs my arm.

“He didn’t give me goosebumps.” I reply.

“Your someone special is still out there. It might not seem like it right now. Maybe you already know each other, and both of you are in denial about your feelings. Don’t worry, you’ll find each other.” She sighs. “Open yourself up and allow your heart to accept what is right in front of you.” She smiles. “Go get cleaned up and take a nap. That’s what I’m planning on doing before Scott gets back.” She walks away.

“Thank you!” I shout.

She looks back with a smile.

Walking into the house, I call for Liam. It’s quiet. Missy must be right. Scott must have picked him up, because he’s not here. I walk to the kitchen; he finished the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. It’s spotless. Stella rubs against my legs.

“Sorry, girl, I can’t pick you up. Don’t want to get cake and icing on you.” I rub her behind the ear.

I reach into the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water then head to my room. I toss my purse on the bed and open the water. Putting the bottle to my lips, I think I hear water running. I take a sip and listen carefully. Yes, that’s definitely water running, but where? I follow the sound, leading me straight to the bathroom. Sounds like the shower. Oh, my goodness, did I leave the shower on? The door is slightly cracked, so I push it open and am hit with steam. I don’t remember leaving the shower on... maybe a pipe broke. Liam is going to be so mad. I step into the bathroom and walk towards the shower, stopping dead in my tracks when I see...

CHAPTER 18

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Liam

****ONE HOUR EARLIER****

“Rosemary? You here?” I shout, walking through the door.

Silence. I walk through the living room, past the kitchen and into the study.

“Rosemary?” I repeat.

Silence. She must still be out with Mother and Missy. I don’t think they’ll be much longer.

“Burr,” I say, looking at Stella soundly sleeping on her pillow. “Comfy?” I look at her. “It’s a little chilly for me, which means Rosemary is going to be freezing. Better get a fire started.” I say to Stella, noticing how she lifted her head when I said Rosemary’s name. “Yeah, same girl... same.” I pet her head, then add wood to the fireplace.

After starting the fire, I head upstairs straight for the shower. I stink. Reaching in, I turn the hot water knob in the shower. Nothing. No water or anything.

“What the hell?” I turn the cold water knob, again nothing. “Seriously, this can’t be happening.” I huff, then turn both knobs off.

Thinking it’s an issue with the shower, I test the sink. Nothing. I walk to the other two upstairs bathrooms and test the faucets and showers. Nothing.

“Come on. I do not want to stay at Mother’s the rest of the time we are here.” I groan.

I quickly head downstairs and test the water in the kitchen. Not a problem. I go to the guest bathroom and check the faucet. Works as it should. Thank goodness, this is just an upstairs issue.

Placing a call to the plumber, I’m surprised he is available to come out this afternoon. I really expected him to tell me he wouldn’t be available until after the holidays. This is going to cost me a pretty penny, but worth it. With him scheduled to be here in less than three hours and Rosemary due any moment, I decide to jump in the shower in the master suite. I run upstairs grabbing my gray sweats, brief, and a tee, before making a rush for the master bathroom.

Walking into the door, I stop when I see she has a panty and bra set laying out on the bed, next to her silky blue nightie. I love the color blue and I bet she looks hot as hell in it.

Stop staring!

I snap out of my trance and walk into the bathroom. She’ll be home any minute, and I don’t want her to feel like I’m invading her space.

Standing under the hot water eases my tense muscles. I didn’t think having Rosemary here would be so hard. But why? This morning, having her so close felt right. It was perfect. She didn’t seem to fight to get away, either. Her smiling face looking up at me. Her perfume teasing my nose. Why does she affect me like no other woman has?

I should just tell her. Get it over with. Just pull the band aid off quick. If I don't, I might explode. But if I do, she might leave. How would I explain it to everyone?

As the water washes over me, images of Rosemary in her little blue nightie flash in my mind. Visions from my dream flood in. Her skin was so silky smooth. The way she moaned when I went down on her. How soft and sweet her lips were. As I think about her, my cock stiffens. It wants her so badly. I clear my mind of her, hoping it will go down, but I swear it gets harder.

Damn, I need a release.

I stroke my shaft. Goosebumps form. I continue sliding my hand up and down. Closing my eyes, I see Rosemary's face. She's on her knees in front of me, licking her lips.

"Mmmm," she moans before taking me in her mouth.

I stroke harder and faster. My hips thrust, meeting the rhythm of my hand.

"Mmmm, yes, baby." I whisper.

My body feels hot as I think about her mouth wrapped around my dick. I shorten my strokes.

"Baby, I'm about to come." I breathe out.

With my free hand, I brace myself against the cold tile and continue to stroke myself harder. My muscles tense, my toes curl, and I grunt as I explode onto the shower wall. I keep pumping as I come.

“Rosemary.” I whisper as I squeeze the last bit from the head.

I open my eyes and hear a crash, then a loud thud.

“Shit!” Rosemary exclaims as she runs out of the bathroom.

Shit.

What did she see? I detach the shower head and clean the wall off, making sure I wash every bit of my cum down the drain. Stepping out of the shower, I see a water bottle on the ground. That must have been the crash. I towel off and get dressed before heading out of the bathroom.

Walking out of the master suite, I head to the kitchen, which is where I find her. She’s sitting quietly on a bar stool at the kitchen island. Her eyes snap to me when she sees me. She gulps. Shit, she saw me jerking off in the shower.

“Um,” she gulps, “I’m making tea. Want some?” She stands and walks to the stove.

“Rosemary... I...” I pause, not knowing what to say.

“No big deal. It’s your house.” She says, grabbing a mug from the cabinet.

So, she wants to pretend nothing happened. It’s probably for the best.

“Something is wrong with the water upstairs... I just wanted to grab a quick shower before the plumber got here.” I gulp. “I wasn’t trying to encroach on you.”

“No worries.” She forces a smile.

“What happened to you?” I ask noticing something smeared on her clothes and in her hair.

“Cake fight between two boys. It ended with me covered in cake after a girl tackled one boy to the ground.” She smiles and shakes her head.

“Mother had nothing to do with this?” I breathe out.

“No, nothing at all. Her and Missy just tried to stay out of the way. It was chaos. She insisted the boys’ parents pay for the dry cleaning and the school would hear from her husband.” She pours hot water on top of her tea bag.

“That wasn’t an idle threat. The school will hear from Peter’s firm first thing Tuesday morning.” I reply.

“I’m going to go shower, then lay down for a nap before I have to get ready for tonight. They’re serving prime rib.” She smiles, then walks away.

Damn. We went from friendly to awkward real fast.



Tonight is the meeting of the families. This is where all the extended family will meet and become acquainted with one another. Because Mother is expecting so many children, she thought it best to set up a heated tent outside to minimize any damage that rowdy kids can cause. I’m sure after today’s mishap at the bakery, it’s a decision she is happy with.

Rosemary is being her normal, sweet self. She is at my side just as she was last night but seems to be more confident than

before. Mother greeted her with open arms when we arrived. Something that is out of the ordinary for her. Tina is clinging right to our side, which is fine with me. She is my favorite cousin. Justin, her boyfriend, will be here in the morning.

“So I hear you’re wearing a suit to the wedding.” I look at Tina.

“Yes. Aunt Dee is still hoping that by some miracle, I’ll show up in a dress. Not a chance.” Tina takes a sip of her beer. “I told her I would make it more feminine. So, I’m wearing a purple sequin tube top under my open front blazer.” She nods before taking another sip.

“Sounds hot.” Rosemary says looking at Tina.

She hasn’t looked at me much tonight, not like she normally does. I hear Mother clink a glass with a fork and Peter clear his voice.

“On behalf of my beautiful wife, Dee, we’d like to welcome each of you to our home. I know many of you traveled from afar to be here with us as we celebrate our little princess and her prince charming.” Peter eloquently states.

“Yes, it took her long enough. By the time I was thirty, I had three children and my tubes tied.” Mother laughs.

I look at Missy, who exhales with a frown on her face. It’s a “*joke*” Mother has repeated time and time again to the both of us. I know Missy is tired of hearing it, just like me. Then I look at Rosemary. Her shoulders are slumped as she looks at the ground. I can’t help but to wonder if it’s the same “*joke*”

she has heard from her family. It's definitely not a funny one. I put my hand in the small of her back, hoping that it will offer her some comfort. Her body goes stiff, and she sharply inhales. Damn it. That's not exactly the way you want someone to react when you're trying to comfort them.

"As we welcome Scott into our family, we welcome each of you as well. Now if you'd please take your seats, dinner is ready to be served and I can't wait. Scott, I understand you requested this menu. He's a true meat and potato man, and a man after my own heart. After dinner, Dee has some fun activities for us to do as one big family. Let's eat." Peter finishes.

With my hand still in the small of her back, I guide her to the table. I pull a chair out for her and Tina before taking my seat next to Rosemary.

"Are you okay?" I lean into her.

"Yes, fine." She replies with a polite smile.

"It doesn't feel like everything is fine." I whisper.

"It is." She gulps.

I don't press her any further and we continue our perfect charade as a happy couple. Meanwhile, we're just walking on eggshells around each other; trying not to break them.

We start dinner with soup and salad, which is normal for Mother. As far back as I can remember, we've always eaten soup and salad with dinner... even pizza night. We are served

prime rib on our plates, while they serve the sides family style at each table.

After dinner, Mother has a series of get to know you type games. This has been a pleasant evening but exhausting at the same time. When it's my turn to get married, I hope my bride is willing to run away and say I do on a private beach somewhere.

Wait? *When it's my turn?*

What the hell was that? I don't want to get married; I've made it my life's mission to avoid women who had marriage on their minds.

I glance at Rosemary. She's laughing at the game being played in front of her. Something churns inside me when I look at her. Tugging at my heart, telling me there may be more to life than random hookups and meaningless sex.

The drive home is quiet. Rosemary has her head resting against her headrest, staring out the window. I hate how awkward things are between us now. Why can't we just go back to the way things were this morning? Long before she caught me beating my meat. That was so stupid of me. I knew she was due home any minute. Why couldn't I suppress the urge like a normal person? I'm a forty-year-old man, not a thirteen-year-old boy.

Pulling into the driveway, the need to talk to her intensifies. I need to tell her how I feel once and for all. If she leaves, she leaves. I'll deal with the aftermath and Mother, but she needs

to know. I put my hand on her arm as she reaches for the doorknob.

“Wait,” I say as she turns to look at me. “We need to talk.” I whisper.

“About?” She looks at my hand.

“Earlier today... the shower.” I gulp.

“No, we don’t.” She sighs.

“Rosemary, what did you see when you walked into the bathroom?” I lean to her.

“You in the shower.” She replies. Her chest heaving up and down.

“That’s it?” I look into her eyes.

“Yes.” She nods.

I don’t push any further, and for some reason, I can’t muster the strength to tell her how I feel. Looking into her face, her eyes beg me to drop the subject. Her cheeks turn red as if she is embarrassed. My palms are sweaty, and my throat is completely dry. You’d think this is the first time I’ve ever talked with a woman.

“Okay. It’s late. Let’s go in.” I say and exit the SUV.

CHAPTER 19

I DON'T WANT TO TALK

Rosemary

WHAT THE HELL IS wrong with you, Rosemary? He is practically begging you to tell him what you saw and how it made you feel. This is your chance to find out if he is feeling the same as you or not. I walk behind him, scolding myself. When he touched my lower back tonight, my body vibrated, and it felt like a million butterflies in my belly. I couldn't get Missy's words out of my head when she described how it felt being in love.

As bad as I want to know how he feels, I don't. I don't want to get my heart broken. It's that simple. I'm afraid of a broken heart, and that is holding me back. As he pushes his code in, unlocking the door, I think of my grandmother's stories about her mom Rosemary. How she was the bravest woman. She took life by the horns and lived to her fullest. We step through the door.

"My name." I whisper. Half hoping, he didn't hear me.

"What?" He closes the door behind us.

"You said my name as you... um... when you... finished." I gulp and look down.

"So, you caught me." He stands directly in front of me.

"Yes." I whisper and nod.

"I'm sorry you caught me like that. It wasn't my intention." He steps closer. "How did it make you feel?"

I shrug my shoulders and shake my head, not knowing how to answer that question. Do I tell him I stood in the kitchen with my thighs closed tight because seeing him stroke himself, then saying my name when he came, made my core throb? That I finally had to sit on my aching girl parts just so they'd settle down, only to have him walk in wearing gray sweats and a fitted white tee-shirt? Which didn't help the ache.

“What is it you want?” He steps closer.

You, I want you.

Do I tell him? I stare at him; there's so much I want to say. My mouth is dry and my heart races. What if he rejects me? I want to tell him, I really do, but I'm afraid to. There's so much fear churning inside me.

“Rosemary, please talk to me.” Liam pleads.

“I don't want to talk.” I put my hand on his chest and slowly breathe out.

He looks at my hand, then back at me, then back at my hand. His breathing becomes heavy as he steps closer. He grabs my hand, bringing it to his lips.

“No?” He kisses my palm. “Then what do you want to do?” He kisses my palm again.

I gasp and bite my lip while he kisses my palm a third time.

“Do you want me to kiss you?” He looks deep into my eyes and rubs my bottom lip with his thumb.

His chest heaves up and down with each breath. His face looks serious, but there is a hunger in his eyes as he looks me up and down. The desire in his eyes causes a dampness in my panties. I want him like no other. Although I've never had a one-night stand, I would settle for that right now, just to ease the ache between my legs.

“Yes.” I whisper through heavy breath.

Before I can say another word or even take a breath, Liam's lips crash into mine. One hand grasping my jaw, the other wrapped around my waist, pulling me tight to him. Soon my back hits the wall. There is a needy eagerness as we explore the other's mouth. The searing white-hot passion of the kiss burns through my body and straight to my core.

My coat hits the floor as our tongues tangle and dance with one another. Soon his coat and blazer follow. I moan as his lips kiss my neck and his teeth nip my skin. He presses his body so hard into me I think I may go through the wall. I can feel his hard member against my leg, grinding into me as he moans.

I fumble with the buttons on his shirt, desperate to feel his skin on mine. His hands find their way under my dress. He massages my hips and squeezes my ass. His hands are so close to my core, making it throb for his touch even more. He pulls away from my lips as he lifts my dress over my head, tossing it to the ground.

Staring at me, he licks his lips and pants. He brushes my lace bra and panties with the back of his hand. I try to hide my

body from his hungry eyes, but he grabs my hands, holding them above my head.

“Never hide your beautiful body from me.” He growls, gliding his tongue up and down my neck. “You are so fucking perfect.” He whispers into my ear.

I throw my head back, moaning at his touch... his words... him. He plunges his tongue deep into my mouth and grinds his body into mine. I can feel his desperation for me, almost like he has a hunger that only I can satisfy. He releases my hands and I push his shirt off his shoulders. Feeling me tug at the hem of his undershirt, he pulls away, jerking it over his head in one fluid movement.

I wrap my arms tight around him, pulling him close. Goosebumps form where our skin touches and the surrounding air is electric. He kisses down my chest as he unclasps my bra.

“Mmmm.” He moans, slipping my bra off, looking at my bare breasts. “You bring out the beast in me. Do you know that?” He takes my lips again, running his hands back down to my ass.

I wrap my legs around his waist as he lifts me. Never breaking our passionate kiss. I hold on tight, my fingers playing in his hair. He carries me to the bedroom in an inferno of anticipation and excitement. I giggle when he tosses me on the bed. His hungry eyes take me in as he removes his belt with a single pull. Lust has completely taken control of both our minds.

He grunts in approval, climbing onto the bed and in between my thighs. He extends my legs up, slipping my shoes off, before kissing up and down each leg, then resting them against his chest. I lift my hips so he can slip my panties off. Smelling them before tossing them to the floor. Maintaining perfect eye contact with me. He unbuttons and unzips his pants, then spreads my legs.

Looking at my lady parts with a smile on his face. He licks his lips as if he has won a grand prize and I am his treasure. His mouth invades my core with force and vigor. I moan and run my fingers through his hair. His mouth devours me like I am his last meal, while his tongue flicks and teases my button. I gasp as my hips buck wildly into his mouth, begging for more friction. He wraps his hands around my hips, pressing them firmly on the bed, letting me know he is in control. Full control. I can't catch my breath as I quickly ascend higher and higher. My body trembles and my legs shake as my mind spins out of control.

“Oh, my god!” I scream, throwing my head back.

Lost in the abyss of my climax, my moans get louder and louder as I fist the bed under me. Encouraged, Liam sucks on my button, which only intensifies my orgasm into a second, more powerful one.

He finally releases his hold on me, allowing me to catch my breath. Without leaving his position between my thighs, he rummages through the drawer on the nightstand, producing a condom. He slips his pants and briefs down to his knees,

ripping the condom package with his teeth. I sit up, taking the condom from him. Looking at him with passion in my eyes, I slide it down his magnificent shaft.

“Yes, baby.” He moans as my hands unroll it on him.

Pushing me back down, he lifts my hips and thrust in with a single push. He pauses as we both gasp. My body is buzzing. It has never felt so good before. He thrusts in and out. His strokes are short and fast. He takes my lips again. The world melts away. It feels like we’re in another dimension... a different realm, somewhere far away from here.

“Fuck, Rosemary. You feel so good.” He moans into my ear.

Lifting my hips higher, he thrusts faster. I’m on the cusp of another climax. I kiss and nibble his neck and chest. Enjoying the taste of his flesh and the feeling of having him inside me.

“You see what you do to me?” He groans into my neck. “You bring out my beast. Fuck, baby, I’m going to come.”

As if on que my body shakes and my core pulsates around him. His muscles tense as he grunts his release, not slowing down for a second. He takes my lips as we explode in unison. Our minds lost somewhere in the inferno of our pleasurable high.

He stops as we both come down from our bliss. My core is so sensitive, the slightest movement feels like it could trigger another orgasm. We lay still, holding on to one another, still connected. Our hearts are racing in unison and we both try to control our breathing.

“Damn, you are so amazing.” He brushes the hair from my face.

CHAPTER 20

YOU SLUT

Liam

A SINGLE RAY OF sunshine peeks through the blinds, waking me from one of the best sleeps I have ever had in my life. Rosemary is tucked snugly in my arms, her back resting against my chest. I brush away a stray piece of hair that is tickling my nose. My naked body molded so perfectly around hers, fitting so perfectly together. What I'd give to wake up like this every morning for the rest of my life.

I move my hand and feel soft fur. Lifting my head, I look over Rosemary's shoulder and see Stella curled up against her belly.

"Traitor." I whisper.

Stella replies with very soft open mouth prey meows. It's as if she is warning me not to wake Rosemary. I laugh to myself as *my* cat curls back up, closing her eyes. Traitor indeed. Slipping out of bed, I head to the downstairs bathroom to take care of my morning ritual. After last night, I feel like I'm on cloud nine. Nothing is going to spoil my mood today. In the kitchen I make Rosemary a cup of coffee, rushing upstairs to slip on some sweats as her coffee brews.

Putting the final touches on her coffee, I see her walk into the kitchen carrying Stella, wearing her little blue nightie with a serious case of bedhead. Still sexy as hell.

"Morning," she yawns, putting Stella on the ground.

"Good morning. What are you doing out of bed?" I cross my arms and look at her.

“You weren’t there, and I thought for a minute last night was just a dream. A wildly vivid dream.” She walks over to me.

“It wasn’t.” I smile.

“Liam?” She stands in front of me. Her tone feels ominous.

“What was last night?”

I pause for a minute, trying to fully grasp what she is asking me.

“What was it for you? A one-night stand or... or... something else?” She takes a deep breath.

“I would like more.” I gulp, hoping she wants more, too.

A silent moment goes by, then the corner of her mouth turns up. Transferring her pouty lips to a smile. *This has got to be a good sign. Right?*

“I would like that too.” She replies with a sigh and a smile.

I breathe a sigh of relief and wrap my arms around her waist.

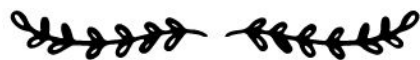
“Come here.” I pull her close. “Rosemary, you caught my attention the first day you walked into the office. There was something about you... something that drew me in, made me want to get to know you better. Having you here with me without being able to touch you, to be with you, almost did me in. Then last night... no woman has ever made me feel like you did. Look, I made you coffee, to bring to you in bed. I’ve never done anything remotely close to that.” I kiss her forehead.

“You were going to bring me coffee in bed? Why?” She smiles, looking up at me.

“Because that’s the way you deserve to be woken up every morning. Baby, you deserve so much more than that. And that’s what you’ll get if you allow me.” I kiss her nose.

She wraps her arms around me, resting her head on my chest.

“You are too perfect.” She whispers.



We spent the day together, as a couple... an actual couple. Holding hands and sneaking kisses. I showed her around, taking her to the beach, then shopping, and finally to my favorite little seafood spot. It’s just a step above a dive, but it’s clean and the food is good. The day was so perfect, almost like one of those chick flick movies. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

We’re now at Mother’s, under the tent where Missy and Scott’s wedding will be held. As we practice walking in, and where we’ll stand for the umpteenth time, I can’t help but to steal glances of my Rosemary. She sits directly under one of the outdoor heaters, sipping wine and playing with her phone. She smiles as she types a message before catching me staring at her. I wonder if she is talking to Sue, filling her in on all the juicy details of our new romance.

“Liam!” Mother shouts.

“Huh?” I snap my head to her.

Rosemary giggles.

“Focus please.” She claps her hands together.

“This is the last time, people. I promise.” The wedding coordinator shouts.

It was not the last time. We ran through it again four more times afterwards. I’m thinking the wedding coordinator is drunk on power or something. The nonsense finally ended when Scott’s grandfather declared his stomach thinks his throat was cut.

Scott’s parents brought in a world-renowned sushi chef for the rehearsal dinner. Through dinner, Rosemary teased Sue and Roxy by sending them pictures of her food in a group chat, as well as a selfie of the two of us. We are both lost in our own little world, oblivious to our surroundings.

“I’m going to hit the head. Want me to bring you another wine?” I wrap my arm around Rosemary.

“No, I’m good. Water would be nice.” She replies with a smile.

“Coming right up, baby.” I kiss her forehead, then make my way to the bathroom in the laundry room.

Walking out of the bathroom, Missy steps in front of me, punching me in the upper arm.

“Ouch. Shit, Missy, what the hell?” I rub my shoulder, scowling at her.

“You slut.” She punches my other shoulder.

“I like Rosemary. I see us being really good friends. You keep thinking with your dick and you’re going to ruin it for me.” She looks below my belt.

Afraid she’s going to punch or knee me; I bring my knee up and block myself with my hands.

“Cool it.” I snap. “Me and my dick aren’t going to ruin anything for you and your girl gang.” I flick her forehead, just like I’ve done since she was a kid.

“Ouch.” She covers her forehead. “She’s not like the other women you slut around with. You can’t use her, then toss her aside.” She flicks my chin.

“Shit,” I rub my chin. “Why are you always so damn brutal?” I flick her head again.

“Ouch,” she growls.

“And I know she’s not like the others. She’s special. I’ve thought that since day one.” I push her shoulder.

“If you know that, why’d you sleep with her?” She stomps my foot.

“Damn it, Missy!” I exclaim. “Damn, I think you’ve put on weight.” I gyrate my head and flick her forehead.

“That’s it, you asshat!” She growls, slapping at me.

I slap her hand down, and immediately her other hand attempts to slap me. Before she makes contact, I slap her hand away. Standing just outside our parents’ laundry room, we continue

our slap fight like two small children. Actually, she's slapping and I am just blocking her hands away from my face.

"Ow, Liam, that's starting to hurt." She says, baring her teeth at me.

"Then stop." I reply.

"Never. You're going to learn a lesson today." She snarls.

"Ow, your damn ring got me!" I groan.

"Good. I hope it makes you bleed, you big dummy head." She huffs.

"Big dummy head? What are you, five?" I slap her hand harder.

The sounds of our slaps fill the air.

"Oh, good grief." Mother says, stopping her foot. "What the hell is going on here?"

Missy and I stop, turning to Mother and at the same time give her a rundown of what happened. Both of us trying to talk over the other, both trying to explain our innocence.

"Stop it." She snaps. "You," she points at Missy, "get back to your fiancé. You," she points at me, "get back to your girlfriend. The both of you need to stop acting like children and start acting like adults." She puts her martini glass to her lips. "Damn, I need another drink. There is not enough gin to deal with the two of you. Shoo." She waves her hand, dismissing us like she did when we were younger, then walks away.

“Missy,” I grab her hands. “Listen to me. I like Rosemary more than anyone else in the past. This thing between her and I... I’m not too sure what it is just yet. But I can assure you it’s not a fling.” I look her in the face, hoping my point got through her thick skull.

“Really?” She looks at me.

“Really.” I nod my head.

“Oh my gosh, Liam.” She brings her hands to her chest. “Do you know what this means? You’re not the man whore I thought you were.” She tilts her head and smiles.

CHAPTER 21

HOT COCO AND PAJAMAS

Liam

I STROKE THE FIRE in the den, waiting for Rosemary to finish her shower. As we were leaving the rehearsal dinner, Mother gave me my annual Christmas Eve pajama set, just as she had done every year for as long as I can remember. She gave it to me early because of the insanity around the wedding she thought she'd forget. It's the only gift she gives us kids anymore, saying we're too hard to buy for.

Instead, she "adopts" two needy families with young children and gifts them a wonderful Christmas. She also makes sure any adult members of the house receive a gift or two, along with a fully cooked Christmas dinner and a pantry full of food. This is something she started ten years ago and is something I wholeheartedly stand behind. Mother claims she's not a fan of small children, but her actions speak louder than words.

As a family, we spend Christmas together starting Christmas Eve, where we receive our pajama sets. We order pizza and watch all the Christmas classics. Christmas dinner is the only meal Mother cooks anymore. She has no staff on Christmas Eve or day, so all the cooking and cleaning is up to us. I wonder how that will change now that Missy is getting married and will have to spend time with Scott's family as well.

When Rosemary saw the red plaid pajama set, she couldn't help but to giggle. After I explained everything to her, she said she sees Mother in a different light. But promises she wouldn't

tell anyone that Mother has a soft side. She asked if we could have hot coco in front of the fireplace and asked me to wear the bottoms that she had plans for the top.

I set everything up for us. Two mugs of hot coco, whipped cream in a can, marshmallows, and candy canes. What has gotten into me? All the sudden I'm Mr. Hallmark movie guy. I chuckle to myself at the thought. For some reason, I feel nervous. It's the anticipation. Anticipation of seeing her, touching her, kissing her... it is growing by the second.

"Hey." Rosemary says, walking into the den.

I turn and look at her. Damn. She's wearing the plaid pajama top. It's completely opened, exposing her tiny red panties and hints of her beautiful breasts. Her skin glows and her hair is in waves cascading around her face. She looks like an angel the way the light shines behind her. Instantly, my cock rises to the occasion.

"Hey." I gulp, staring at her. "Coco is ready. I even have toppings." I point to the tray on the coffee table.

"Awesome." She says, walking towards the couch.

I replace the fire poker and move to the couch, sitting down on the edge. Waiting for her to sit next to me. Ready to serve her. Instead of sitting next to me, she kneels next to my leg, resting her hand on my thigh. Looking up at me with her big almond-shaped eyes and a smile on her face.

"How would you like your coco topped?" She asks.

I've never thought being asked how I want my coco topped could sound so sexy, but here we are. Looking at her, my breath is completely taken away. My mouth is dry and for some reason, I can't form words.

"Whipped cream." I finally say.

"Great choice." She takes the can and swirls the cream on top.

She hands me the mug and repeats the step with her mug. Replacing the whipped cream on the tray, she licks the excess cream on her thumb with a giggle. She climbs on the couch, snuggling into me.

"I have to say, I've never seen red plaid look so sexy before." I kiss her soft lips.

"I can say the same thing." She rests her head on my shoulder, looking up at me.

Her eyes get to me every time.

"How does all this work... with work?" She asks with a frown on her face.

"There are no policies against office romances. Joseph and Marissa are good examples of that." I take a sip of my coco.

"Okay, but what if people gossip?" She takes a sip, getting whipped cream on her nose.

"Let them talk. You'll just have to control your urge and not grab my ass during work hours." I laugh and wipe the cream from her nose. "We'll be professional. When we hit the office doors, you are Joseph's PA and I'm his attorney. But as soon

as we're outside those doors, we are simply boyfriend and girlfriend, and you can begin grabbing my ass again." I chuckle.

"Girlfriend?" She lifts her head, narrowing her eyes at me. "I don't remember you asking me to be your girlfriend." She giggles.

"But I did." I tilt my head.

"What? You did not. I would have remembered it." She scrunches her nose at me.

"I asked you to be my fake girlfriend. You said yes. After I made you come three times, I figured we could drop the fake part." I kiss her lips. "But you're right. We need to make this official. Rosemary, I like you a lot... a lot, a lot. I want to be exclusive with you. Will you be my girlfriend?"

"Yes." She giggles.

"I'm glad we have that settled." I kiss her lips then take a large gulp of my coco. "Oh, and I should probably warn you that Missy is going to recruit you into her girl gang." I laugh.

"That sounds fun. I like her. Tina too." She sips her coco.

"Tina is my favorite cousin. She plays ball like no other. It was a bummer she was with you all yesterday and not with us guys. She loves tormenting Scott." I laugh.

We continue talking and laughing in front of the roaring fire. I'm getting to know her on an entirely different level. Her ex-fiancé was her one and only lover. Nothing was spontaneous,

sex was scheduled on the calendar right next to teeth cleanings and other monotonous tasks.

We talk about our families; her growing up in Texas. Helping her mom grade papers and helping her dad at his accounting firm. She originally wanted to follow in her mom's footsteps and become a high school math teacher. That all ended when she was in her last week of being a student teacher, just before her graduation. She was in the school her mom works in when a fight broke out between five male students. She was caught in the middle of the horrific fight. Fearful for her life and realizing that fights come with the territory. She realized teaching may not be for her after all.

With her high GPA, she was quickly recruited from college at one of Houston's most prestigious accounting firms, where she remained until she took the job as Joseph's PA and moved here. She also told me stories about her great-grandmother, how brave and unconventional she was. That's how Rosemary found the courage and strength to start a new life here and tell me how she feels about me. I must admit, the tales of her great-grandmother helped me tell her I can see a future with her... kids and all. She wasn't opposed to it and said this is the perfect house for a couple of kids and a dog.

It's all so crazy. Two months ago, I was contemplating a vasectomy. I've never seen kids as part of my life. Even when I was engaged the first time, neither of us wanted kids. Now I'm sitting here wondering if Rosemary would like to name our son Liam Jr.

I'm not too sure how long we've been talking, but the fire has died down and my cup is empty.

"Done?" I ask, looking at the cup in her hands.

"Yes." She replies with a smile.

"Would you like some more?" I take her cup.

"I'm good." She shakes her head.

I put our cups on the tray and pick up the can of whipped cream.

"Ya know," I look at her. "I was hoping to have some dessert tonight." I shake the can.

"Oh, yeah?" She smirks. "What kind?"

I open the pajama top and expose her breasts. They have been teasing me all night, poking through, begging to be kissed and caressed.

"I'll start with this." I swirl a small amount of cream on a nipple.

She gasps and giggles as the cool cream hits her flesh. With a smile, I massage her breast and kiss her sweet lips. I kiss down to her neck, taking my time licking and nibbling her tender skin. She moans, running her nails up and down my back. I make my way to her chest and watch as the goosebumps form in anticipation of where I will touch her next.

Kissing her perfect round mounds brings me so much pleasure. They're so incredibly soft and delicate in my hand. I swirl my tongue around the cream, then take her nipple into

my mouth. She moans, running her fingers through my hair as I slurp and suck every bit of cream off her.

My lips find hers and crash into an intense, passionate kiss. Savoring the taste of her mouth while exploring every inch with my tongue. She rubs my rock-hard dick through my pajama pants; moaning into my mouth.

I swirl whipped cream on her other nipple and lick it clean. She bites my shoulder and plays with my hair. Whispering my name under her breath. I love the way it sounds coming from her mouth. Crashing my lips back into hers for another intense kiss. Our lips are locked together, our tongues stroke and play. Almost as if they are dancing the tango, seducing the other with each glide.

My hand slips under her panties, rubbing circles around her clit. Her moans become louder as my fingers slip inside her slickness. She is so wet and ready for me. She pushes me back and pulls away. I'm confused at the sudden loss of her warm body, then I see the grin on her face and the whipped cream can in her hand. She slips down to her knees between my thighs.

"I think it's time for dessert for me, too." She wiggles her eyebrows and bites her bottom lip. "I saw how excited you got earlier when I was on my knees next to you. Can't help but to wonder how excited you'd get with me in front of you... between your thighs."

I like where this is going. She tugs on my pajama bottoms; I lift my hips and she quickly drops them to my ankles before

sliding them from my body. My cock springs forward, ready and waiting for her.

“Mmmm.” She moans, licking her lips.

She swirls whipped cream on my tip before tossing the can to the side. With her tongue, she spreads the cream down my shaft. I can't take my eyes off her. She is so sexy. She glances up with a smile, holding my throbbing cock in one hand while she licks the cream off me. Taking the head in her mouth, she sucks and slurps, swallowing the cream down with soft moans. Her head bobs up and down on my shaft; her tongue teasing me so perfectly. I hold her hair back and watch her. She is enjoying pleasuring me. The sounds coming from her mouth are enough to send me right over the edge.

“Baby,” I pull out of her mouth before I explode. “Ride me.” I command.

With a seductive grin, she rises, shedding the pajama top. She looks into my eyes and licks her lips. Running her hands along her body, her fingers catch her panties, pushing them off her hips straight to the ground.

“Like what you see?” She coos.

“You have no idea how much you've turned me on.” I reply, reaching for her.

She straddles my lap, guiding my shaft to her entrance with a single hand. Slowly, she slides onto me. Her pussy is so tight and wet. I know not using protection is careless, but damn. Being connected with her, flesh on flesh, with nothing

between us, feels like heaven. It feels like we are truly one. She is in control. Her tits bounce wildly as she rides me. She moves her hips from side to side while I massage her ass and hips and suck her magnificent tits. Her juices run out of her to the couch below me.

Climbing off my lap, with a single finger, she tells me to follow her. Grabbing the arm of the couch, she pokes that pretty ass of hers high in the air. Her pink pussy glistening and calling to me. Without hesitation, I enter her with a single thrust. Pulling out almost completely, I slam back into her. She moans loudly as our skin slaps together on contact. I repeat it again and again.

“Oh, yes, Liam.” She moans.

I continue withdrawing and slamming back into her, each time her core pulsates. It almost feels like it’s trying to draw me in deeper. I’m getting close, so is she. Picking up the pace and shortening my strokes, I reach around, rubbing her clit. She contracts more around me; her legs shake.

“Oh, my... I’m... going to come.” She peeks back at me.

“Come for me like a good girl.” I say without stopping.

Her body shakes violently, her moans turn to screams.

“Liam!” She shouts. Her body tenses and her core pulsates around me.

I can feel my explosion rising to the surface, but I don’t stop. I want Rosemary’s climax to last as long as it can. Fighting a losing battle, I withdraw just as the first drops of cum shoots

from me. I continue to stroke myself, painting her ass with my hot fluid. My head spins. I grab the couch for leverage. There is so much on her and more continues to pour from me. My vision blurs as I squeeze the last drop out.

Catching my breath, I look at my magnificent creation spread across her ass and lower back. Her arms and legs give out and she crashes to the couch, looking back, cooing and giggling at the mess I am. I am a mess. She made me like this.

“Hang tight, be right back.” I slap her thigh and jump from the couch, heading to the guest bathroom.

I return with a warm, damp towel. Wiping her clean, leaving no traces of me behind. I pull her onto my lap. She yawns and rests her head on my chest.

“Let’s go to bed, baby.” I kiss her forehead and stand, carrying her to our room. “Come on, Stella.” I call.

Stella replies with a meow and is quickly on my heels.

CHAPTER 22

SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Rosemary

SO MUCH HAS CHANGED in four days. Four days ago, I was Liam's fake girlfriend. Now I'm his real girlfriend. We both came to the Hamptons single, but we'll be leaving as partners. There's still so much to learn about the other, but we have the rest of our lives to do that.

I never knew what passion was until Liam walked into my life. And sex... I didn't realize what I was missing. I love the way he makes me feel alive. The sun seems to shine brighter, the winter air smells fresh and clean, and the surrounding colors are so much more vivid than before.

Is this what it feels like to be in love?

"I'll be fine. Go." I say as Liam kisses my neck again.

"Are you sure? The last time I left you with them, you came home covered in cake." He grumbles and pouts.

"If I recall, it all worked out for the better." I wiggle my eyebrows at him.

"Oh, good gawd." Dee says rounding the corner. "At least I didn't catch you in a slap fight with your sister... again." She stomps her foot and rolls her eyes.

"Mother." Liam stoically states.

"Hi Dee." I say with a giggle.

"Okay, break it up. The guys just pulled up and are waiting for you. And you," she points at me, "hurry upstairs and get in a

makeup chair before the artists are tired and do a half-hearted job. Shoo, shoo.” She waves her hands.

“Here are the keys to the SUV. I save your personalized door code in your phone, and my phone will be on all day. Feel free to send me nudes.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Oh, good gr...” Dee starts, but Peter interrupts.

“Why don’t you ever send me nudes?” He asks Dee.

Liam and I laugh while she slaps his ass as she walks away.

“She still likes me.” He winks before chasing after her.

“I want you to go and have fun... well, as much fun as you can have playing golf.” I laugh. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be here. Come find me before the wedding. I want to see you in your tux.” I wrap my arms around him.

We lose each other in a sweet but lingering kiss. The chaos of the wedding day melts, and for a slight moment in time, it’s just him and I.



I’ve been with Missy and her girl gang since nine a.m. They’ve all been... nice. It’s weird, because these women all look like they were sorority sisters in college. The exact kind of women that I’d avoid and who pretty much didn’t acknowledge my existence. But here I am rubbing elbows and drinking mimosas with them.

Getting to know them better, we all don’t seem so different after all. Most of the women here all have careers except for a

couple who are stay at home moms. They're all very curious about me and Liam. Seems he had a reputation as a one-night stand man. He would let women know up front his terms and rarely ever bedded the same woman twice. One rule: stay away from Missy's friends.

"So, he actually asked you to be his girlfriend?" Gwen asks with her hand on her chest.

"Yes." I reply as the final touch of makeup goes on my face.

"And he used the word... *exclusive*?" She looks around the room.

"Yes." I giggle and look at myself in the mirror.

"Wow, I just find it astonishing that Mr. I will never settle down with one woman is... settling down with a woman." She squints her eyes at me, tilting her head. "Don't get me wrong... I'm happy for you both." She looks away.

"But?" I turn and look at her.

"I just hope he doesn't go back to his Casanova ways. That's all." Gwen gulps.

"Gwen!" Missy snaps.

"I'm sorry... I shouldn't..." Gwen speaks, but I interrupt her.

"It's okay, Gwen. I've thought about that." I sigh. "This, between me and Liam, is nothing I've ever felt before. He says the same thing. I would be stupid not to take a chance and see where this goes." I sigh and force a smile.

I may put on a brave face, but honestly, I'm terrified. What if I'm not enough? What if he changes his mind and decides that one woman simply won't do it for him? This is where my daddy would look at me and in his infinite wisdom, he'd say, "Rosemary, if ifs and buts were candy and nuts, we'd all have a merry Christmas." Yes, the unknowns are so scary, but not knowing if we have a bright future together is even scarier.

"Ladies, you all look beautiful. Three hours before show time." The wedding coordinator announces walking into the room, followed by the photographer and team. "Now it's time we get some candid shots of the bride and bridal party before they get dressed." The coordinator claps her hands.

I sit quietly in the corner watching the photographer and his two assistants as they place and pose Missy and her girl gang for the "candid" shots. It's organized chaos at its finest. I imagine for a moment that I'm standing in Missy's place. Do I want something so extravagant, or do I want something on a private beach somewhere? Goodness, would my mama ever forgive me for running off and getting married? I laugh in my head at the silly thoughts of getting married. I haven't even been in an official relationship for twenty-four hours.

A notification from my social media interrupts that thought. I open the app and see that Liam has tagged me in a post. I gasp and almost drop my phone when I see it is a relationship status update.

Liam Pierce and Rosemary Anderson in a relationship since December twenty-third.

The congratulations and comments pour in so fast I'm having a hard time keeping up. I can't believe Liam made the announcement first. With Dean, I was always the one posting pictures of us. He wouldn't share anything about us unless I begged him to. Last year he asked me not to tag him in anymore post and to un-tag him in the previous ones. He said it clogged up his photo album and his cool pictures were not on top and that I was simply trying to mark my territory. His words hurt and broke my heart. It took me all night to erase seven years of memories.

"Rosemary?" Missy looks at me. "Can you come put this necklace on for me?"

"Oh... um..." I can't form words with everyone's eyes on me.

"I want to make sure you're in some of these pictures." She says with a smile.

"Are you sure?" I tilt my head and scrunch my face.

"Yes. You're important to my brother, therefor important to me." She smiles. "Now chop, chop. We have a schedule to maintain." She laughs.

We take many pictures of me putting the necklace on her. Dee explained during the photo shoot it has been in the family for six generations and every bride has worn it on her wedding day. The necklace is beautiful, it's gold with an emerald heart-shaped pendant.

"Rosemary, your phone notifications are driving me insane." Dee smacks her lips.

“Sorry, Liam tagged me in a post.” I walk to my phone.

“On social media?” She asks.

“Yes.” I put my phone on silent.

My parents have seen the post and are sending text messages.

“What kind of post?” Missy asks.

“He updated his relationship status.” I can feel my face get warm, just thinking about him.

“He what?” Gwen gasps.

Missy pulls me in for a tight squeeze.

“Okay ladies, now that the bridal party is dressed, it’s time to get the bride in her dress.” The wedding coordinator claps her hands.

I return to my chair in the corner and look through my text messages. Mama is upset she had to find out this way. Daddy wants to know if he hunts. My brother tells me that Dean is upset and fighting with his girlfriend. My brother’s wife sends her congratulations and says Liam is hot.

I can’t believe that Dean is staying in the house we rented with my family for the trip to Mexico. Like why? Why wouldn’t he rent a hotel room to take his new girlfriend to? Is he that cheap? I feel sorry for her. She is being forced to stay in a house with her boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend’s family. If she has a brain, she’ll dump him as soon as they land back in Texas.

“Oh, my god!” Missy shouts. “What the hell was that ripping sound?”

I look up and see panic on everyone's face. Especially the photographer's assistant. She stands frozen and on the verge of tears.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know." She sniffles back the tears.

"Get. Off." Missy says through gritted teeth.

Missy's hands are balled into fists at her sides. She is furious. The frightened assistant steps off the train of Missy's wedding dress. Gasps and sighs erupt around the room at the first sight of the damage. They ripped away the lace from the satin fabric, leaving a four-inch hole in the center of the dress. It is in a place that can't be concealed and is very noticeable.

"What? How bad is it?" Missy frantically asks. Silence.

"Someone please answer me." Her voice is trembling.

"Mother!" She shouts.

"She stepped out. I'll go get her." Gwen says before racing out the door.

The silence in the room is deafening. It's so quiet you can hear a pin drop. Missy stands still, shaking, fighting back the tears. I can't believe no one is comforting her. They all look like they're in shock or something. With a gulp, I slowly stand and make my way to her. I don't know what I'm going to say or do, but I can't leave her standing there... alone.

"Hey." I wrap my arm around her shoulder.

"It's bad, isn't it?" She sniffles.

"It's not *that* bad. There is a four-inch hole, but it's where the lace is separated from the satin fabric. Anyone who knows a

little about sewing could fix it right up.” I say slowly.

“Oh, no.” She cries.

“Tissue.” I say to the closest person to me.

“There, there.” I rub her arm. “No crying. You don’t want to ruin your makeup.” I dab the tears from her face with a tissue.

“I don’t know anyone that can sew.” Her voice trembles.

“Oh my gawd!” Dee shouts from the door.

“Yes, you do.” I say in a soft and soothing voice.

“You know how?” Missy asks.

“I know enough to fix this.” I smile and wipe her tears. “Dee, do you have a sewing kit?” I look at her.

“A what?” Dee replies.

“Anyone have a traveling sewing kit?” I look around the room.

Once again, the room falls silent. I look at each member of the bridal party. They shake their heads. I look at the photographer, again nothing. Finally, hoping against all odds, I look at the wedding coordinator. She shakes her head no.

“Really? You don’t have one either? Shouldn’t you have an emergency kit of some kind?” I snap in frustration.

“None of us sew. If something needs to be repaired, we take it to a seamstress.” Dee gulps looking at me.

“We have two hours before the wedding. I doubt you’ll be able to have this professionally repaired in that amount of time.” I huff. “Luckily for Missy, my mama made sure that my brother

and I learned how to fix a hem.” I grab my purse and phone. “Even luckier, Daddy, taught me never to travel without an emergency kit, which includes a small travel sewing kit. I’ll be right back.” I pat Missy’s arm. “Everything is going to be just fine. I shouldn’t be longer than forty minutes. Then I’ll get you fixed up.” I look at her, then head for the door.

I don’t understand how in a room of twenty people, not a single person knows how to sew or have a sewing kit. Everyone I know back home has some sort of knowledge of sewing. Even my daddy can fix his hem if needed. I don’t care how much money you have or what your social status is, everyone should know basic life skills. Frustrated, I turn, looking at everyone in the room.

“I strongly suggest each of you learn how to sew a simple straight line, along with other basic life skills. They may save your life one day.” I snap then storm away.

CHAPTER 23

NEEDLE AND THREAD

Rosemary

WALKING INTO LIAM'S HOUSE, I head straight for the bedroom. Walking in, I see the bed, neatly made. I smile, remembering how he woke me up this morning. His head buried between my thighs, devouring me, making sure my day started right. Afterwards serving me coffee in bed.

Passing the bed, I go to the closet; his clothes now hang next to mine. I go straight to the bag containing my travel emergency kit. It's a little red bag with a cross on it. My parents bought it for me to keep in my car. Every year my daddy checks it, making sure everything is good and still in date. As many times as I've told him I can check it on my own, he still insists. Realizing that's his way of caring for me, I stopped fighting it a couple of years back.

Opening the bag, I look past the over-the-counter medicine, the bandages, scissors, tweezers, gloves, and other things in the medical part of the kit. And in the back pocket I find my little white sewing kit, still wrapped in plastic. It's never been opened. I peek inside and see white thread. *Perfect*. I start to leave with just the sewing kit but decide against it. If any other minor inconvenience happens, I can't be sure they'll be prepared. Replacing the sewing kit, I zip the bag up and leave the bedroom.

Shutting the door behind me, I hear the television in the den. I find it odd, because Liam should be getting ready at Joseph's

with the other guys after golf. Maybe he changed his mind and came here instead.

Walking past the kitchen, I blush looking at the counter. Where I was bent over just a few hours ago, while he ravaged me from behind.

“Ohhh, fuck yes.” I hear a woman say as I get closer to the den.

Is he watching porn? The thought makes me giggle. Rounding the corner, I see two people on the couch. It doesn't take long before I realized they're both naked. His back is to me. They're kissing while she rides him. The same spot we were in last night. I stop dead in my tracks. Bile rises in my throat.

How could he?

They stop kissing, and the woman sees me.

Poppy.

Looking directly at me, she bounces harder on him.

“You feel so fucking good.” She moans, giving me a wicked grin.

I drop my emergency kit and gasp.

“Who's there?” He says, turning to look at me.

“Sorry.” I say through heavy breath before grabbing my bag and running out of the house.

Jumping into the SUV, I slam my hand on the steering wheel. It's been less than twenty-four hours and he's already screwing another woman. Poppy of all women. Why her? I guess she

finally got her wish. She can have him. I grab my phone and text Greg through tears.

Me: Please come get me. I need to leave now.

Greg: What's going on?

Me: Caught him with Poppy.

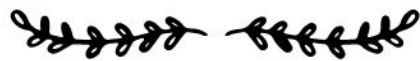
Greg: What? Like in the act?

Me: Yes. Please come.

Greg: Roxy and I are on our way, beautiful. I just finished my makeup.

Me: Meet me at Liam's parents. I'll pin it for you.

I close my phone and drive back to Missy.



Wiping my tears before I get out of the SUV; I don't want anyone seeing me like this. I don't want to hear Gwen's snide comments about him being a Casanova either. I choke back my hurt feelings and anger before walking back into Dee's house.

Missy is waiting for me. As much as I want to just run, I can't just leave her in limbo. I wasn't raised that way. She deserves to have a flawless day, despite her brother being a complete asshole.

"I'm back." I say sniffing back tears.

"Are you okay?" Missy asks.

“Fine. Just out of breath from that quick trip.” I smile and put my purse down.

I sit on the floor and break out my sewing kit. My phone rings. I look and see it’s him, so I dismiss the call. With every ounce of concentration in my body, I open the kit and thread the needle. As I make the first stitch, I look up at Missy’s face.

“I’m not a talented seamstress by any means.” I breathe out.

“It’s okay. I’m just thankful for you.” She gulps and whispers.

For twenty minutes, I carefully stitch the hole in the dress. Just like my mama showed me years ago, I use a blind stitch to keep the thread as hidden as possible. My hands shake, probably from everyone staring over my shoulder. But more so, probably from just having my heart shattered into a million pieces.

Why does this hurt so bad? I shouldn’t be so heartbroken over a relationship that is less than twenty-four hours old.

I don’t understand how or why he’d do this to me. He just tagged me in a post, changing his relationship status. Claiming me as his own. Then I catch him screwing Poppy... an hour later. It’s mind baffling to me. Were they together when he did that? Was there even golf today? Did he think he wouldn’t get caught since I was occupied with his sister?

My phone has rung at least ten times. He knows I know. I guess he wants to beg and plead for my forgiveness. Cheating is something I can’t just move past, something I won’t forgive again. Dean cheated on me early in our relationship. I took

him back after he promised it wouldn't happen again. I never caught him again in the eight years we were together, but that's not saying I didn't have my suspicions from time to time. Crap like that lives in the back of your mind forever. My phone rings again.

"Liam has been calling non-stop. Would you like me to answer it for you?" Dee asks as I tie the knot on my thread.

"No. I'll meet up with him in a minute." I cut the thread and don't look at Dee. "All done." I replace the needle and thread in the little kit.

Returning my sewing kit to its proper place in my emergency kit, I get up and walk away. Allowing the others to look at my handy work.

"Wow." Gwen gasps.

"Good as new. Rosemary, you did a beautiful job." Dee looks at me.

"Thank you." I gulp. Knowing this will be the last time she and I talk.

"Rosemary," Missy rushes to me with tears in her eyes. "Thank you so much." She pulls me into a hug. "I don't know what I would have done without you." She squeezes me tight.

This part hurts the most. I can't believe how fast I've grown attached to Liam's family. Knowing that I will never speak to them again or be a part of Missy's girl gang is painful. I fight the tears that are threatening to leave my eyes and the lump

forming in my throat. I need to get out of here before I break down or worse... run into Liam.

What would I say to him, or how would I react? I can't promise I'd be very nice at all. Missy doesn't need that, not today of all days. My phone rings again.

"I better go meet up with Liam." I smile and walk away.

CHAPTER 24

LITTLE GIRL VS SUE NAMI

Liam

“I CAN’T GET A hold of Rosemary.” I toss my phone down.

“There was some kind of clothing malfunction and she’s been working on that.” Adam, Scott’s brother, and best man states.

“There’s your answer. She’s busy.” Joseph pats my back.

“Fellas,” the coordinator walks in, clapping her hands. “It’s time. Single file, just like we rehearsed.”

“Well, that’s my que to go find Marissa and take my seat.” Joseph says with a smile.

“We were supposed to meet up before the wedding. I have a small gift for her.” I dial her number one last time.

“You didn’t buy her a ring already, did you?” Joseph laughs.

“No. I had a key to my apartment made for her this afternoon.” I hang up and sigh when she doesn’t answer again.

I don’t know why, but I have a bad feeling that something is wrong. My gut is churning, and I feel like I might get sick.

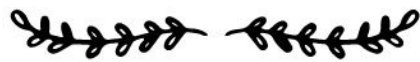
“Basically, the same thing. Welcome to the club.” He pats me on the back and laughs.

“Liam.” The coordinator calls out.

“I’m sure she’s already taken her seat. I’ll find her and have her sit with us. Give her gift to her at the reception. She’ll love it the same.” Joseph says before walking away.

Silencing my phone, I put it in my pocket as I get in line before the coordinator yells at me again.

Where are you, Rosemary? Why aren't you picking up your phone?



The ceremony was beautiful and perfect. Watching Peter walk Missy down the aisle with pride on his face was my favorite part of the ceremony. Second only to Scott crying as he laid eyes on her for the first time. His reaction was everything I could want as a big brother. I know he'll take care of her and treat her like the queen she is.

I wonder if that's how I'd react to seeing Rosemary walking down the aisle to me. We've only known each other a short time, but already I can't envision a life without her. During the ceremony, I scanned the crowd but didn't see her. Now I'm walking through everyone trying to find Rosemary.

"Liam, pictures." Peter puts his arm around me. "The quicker we get this over with, the quicker we can get liquored up." He laughs, leading us to the wedding party.

We spend the next hour taking pictures. Pose after pose. It's exhausting. I'm growing more impatient by the second. I haven't seen Rosemary at all. She should have found her way over here by now.

"Rosemary?" Missy calls. "Where's Rosemary? I want her in the family photo." She looks at me.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “Haven’t seen her since I left her here with you.” I reply, noticing Missy’s eyes grow wide.

Feeling a tap on my shoulder, I turn around. The next thing I see is a flash of pink, a fist hitting my left cheek, and finally the floor.

Everyone gasps.

“You motherfucker.” A deep male voice growls. “I never should have trusted you with my beautiful Rosemary. She is too good for your worthless ass.”

“Oh, hell no!” Missy shouts, running past me.

I pick myself up off the ground, holding my left cheek. Missy is in a standoff with a seven-foot-tall drag queen in stiletto heels.

Sue Nami. Great. Now I’ll forever be known as the guy who got my bell rung by a seven-foot-tall pink hair drag queen in stilettos. But wait... what is she doing here?

“Sue... Missy, both of you stop.” I command, but they’re locked in a heated stare.

“You okay, Liam.” Missy asks without looking at me.

“Yes, I’m fine. We have a terrible misunderstanding. This is Sue and that is Roxy. They’re Rosemary’s best friends.” I reply putting my hand on her shoulder.

Under normal circumstances, I would come back swinging. But I know if I do, I will never find out why Sue and Roxy are here and where Rosemary is. Rosemary is my only concern. I

don't give a shit if I look like I'm cowering down. All I want is calm because I have questions that need to be answered.

"I don't care. Nobody, and I mean nobody, is going to sucker punch my brother and get away with it. Besides, I'm not afraid of a hot pink drag queen, Liam." She snarls.

"Awww, what's the matter? Lawyer boy, have to have a little girl fight his battles for him?" Sue says in a mocking tone.

"Little girl?" Missy growls.

"Awww shit, here we go." Silas says, laughing.

I snap my head towards the sound of my brother's voice. This is the first time I've seen Silas since I've been here. Why do I have a gut feeling that he's behind Rosemary's disappearance?

Returning my attention to the situation at hand. One of Missy's triggers is being called a little girl. It's how Silas and I would get Missy fighting mad when we were younger. Growing up with two older brothers, Missy is a wild child. She's not afraid of getting muddy, messing up her makeup, or getting in a fistfight. I've seen when Missy gets mad and have witnessed her in a fight. It's not pretty.

When she was fifteen, she dragged my fiancée out of an upscale eatery when she caught her with another man. When Missy was done with her, she had two black eyes and a broken nose. It cost Peter fifty grand to keep my ex from pressing charges against her.

I put my arm in front of Missy, trying to stop her.

“Look at me, the little girl has me trembling in my boots.” Sue mocks, laughing.

“Sue, please. That doesn’t help. What about Rosemary?” I look at her.

“Call me little girl one more time, you walking crayon.” Missy says through gritted teeth.

“Little girl.” Sue enunciates each word then pushes Missy’s shoulder with a single finger.

Before Sue takes a breath, Missy’s foot comes up, hitting her directly in the groin. Making a thud sound. Anyone with a dick grunts and crosses their legs, feeling the sympathy pain. It’s a full contact hard hit. Sue doubles over, then hits the ground hard. She grunts and groans in pain, rolling on the ground.

“Get up you pussy.” Missy mocks.

I pull Missy back before she’s able to kick Sue again.

“Scott.” I look at him. “Little help?”

Scott and Adam rush forward. They drag a fighting mad Missy away.

“Stop it, I’m not done. Put me down Scott.” She thrashes, trying to free herself. “I’m going to fuck that drag queen up for ruining my day.” She growls and thrashes some more.

“That’s enough, Melissa Marie.” Peter’s voice booms, stopping her.

“Hey.” I get down to Sue’s level. “I tried to warn you about my sister. Let me help you up.”

“Get your hands off me.” She stands up. “Rosemary, it’s time to go.” She calls out, looking around. “Where’s Rosemary, you cheating bastard?” Sue looks at me.

“Cheating bastard?” I narrow my eyes at her. “What the hell are you talking about?” I stare at her with my hands on my hips.

“Don’t play coy with me, mister. She caught you and Poppy red handed on the couch in your den.” Sue pokes my shoulder.

“Poppy?” Missy shrieks.

“What are you talking about?” I shake my head at the ludicrous accusation being tossed my way.

And with Poppy, of all people.

“I’ve been with the guys all day, except for ten minutes when Adam and I went into a hardware store.” I look directly at Sue.

“I don’t believe you. All cheaters lie.” Sue adjusts her dress.

“I don’t care if you believe me or not. The truth is the truth. I have multiple eyewitnesses to corroborate my story.” I exhale.

“Where’s Rosemary?”

“Do you always sound like a lawyer?” Sue snaps her lips.

“Where’s Rosemary?” I calmly ask.

“You didn’t go back to your place at all today?” Sue crosses her arms, glaring at me.

“Not at all.” I nod.

“Then who was shagging the receptionist?” Sue asks.

“Silas! Want to answer this question?” I look at him as he attempts to slip away.

“We hooked up two days ago. She picked me up from the airport and we... um...” He laughs, rubbing the back of his neck. “We’ve been tangled at her place.”

Silas and Poppy have had this very casual ongoing thing for years. Once I heard Poppy’s name, I knew he was the culprit. Poppy and Missy were once friends. That all ended when Poppy slept with Missy’s boyfriend in college. It happened during the fall semester break. Missy has always believed that it was Poppy’s way of getting even with Silas for dumping her. Poppy is the reason I came up with the rule that Missy’s friends are off limits.

“What the hell, Silas. You were too busy getting ass from a known gold-digger to come to our family meals and my rehearsal? Why come at all, you jerk?” Missy snaps.

“What were you doing in my house?” I crossed my arms and glare at him.

“I think that’s already been established.” He laughs. “Liam... man seriously?” Silas puffs his chest and chuckles under his breath.

I continue to stare at him with a clenched jaw. My anger growing by the second.

“Okay man.” He walks towards me. “I can’t believe you want me to explain myself, and in front of all these people.” He scoffs.

I don't budge and keep staring at him. Damn straight, I want him to explain himself. His entire life, he has gotten away with everything. He's never been held accountable for anything. That ends today. He is the cause for this mess, and he will take ownership of it. One way or another.

"Things got a little... touchy feely in the car on the way up here. We wanted a little privacy. I knew you'd be off with the boys. So, Poppy and I went to your place to... blow off a little steam. No harm, no foul, right?" He laughs, shrugging his shoulders.

I'm so pissed right now, I'm shaking. Everything was going great with Rosemary, and now, because of Silas, I may lose her forever.

"You're a real douche canoe, aren't you?" Sue wrinkles her face, looking Silas up and down.

"What the fuck are you supposed to be?" Silas looks at Sue with disgust on his face. "Ya know, Halloween was two months ago." He scoffs

Sue gasps and puts her hand on her chest. I see the hurt in her eyes and the pain on her face. I'm sure she has heard garbage like this spewed for years. She doesn't deserve it. I glance at Silas; he has a smug smile on his face. He looks as if he is proud of himself. I look back at Sue. The sadness in her eyes fills me with rage. The rage starts in the pit of my gut and works its way up, boiling just below the surface. Silas laughs.

I snap at the sound of his laughter. How dare he insult Sue? How dare he break into my house? How dare he fuck some

woman on my couch? How dare he cause problems between me and Rosemary? Memories flood in. Over the years, Missy and I caught so much shit for stuff he did. He stood by and watched with the same stupid smile on his face while Missy and I took his punishments, after he convinced Mother it was us and not him. As the thoughts and memories consume my mind, I feel my body move on its own.

It feels like time has slowed down, and I am watching a movie or something. I pull my arm back, then release it. Blood splatters from his nose as my fist makes contact. His head snaps back as he hits the ground.

Mother screams, others gasp, and Missy laughs.

Time returns to normal; chaos surrounds me. But I'm not done with this weasel. I grab him by his collar, lifting him off the ground, slamming him into the nearest wall.

"Listen here, you little shit, and listen well. I'm so done with your bullshit I could scream. Don't you ever go into one of my homes again without my permission. Do you understand me?"

I slam him against the wall. "That is my house, bought with my hard-earned money. It doesn't belong to you or the trust. Unlike you, I work... fucking hard to better my life rather than merely surviving off my trust fund." I slam him into the wall.

"Because of your little stunt, I may have lost the best thing that has ever happened to me. If I lose her because of you, I will make your life a living hell. Do you understand me?" I slam him into the wall, trying to drive my point through his thick

skull. “And you owe me a new couch, you piece of shit.” I drop him.

I shake as I stand over him, contemplating what to do to him next. The rage races through my body. My heart is pounding, I’m breathing heavily, and every muscle in my body is tense.

“Hey.” Sue wraps me up in her arms. “He’s not worth it.” She pulls me away from him.

I look up at her face, tears in my eyes. She looks back at me with sympathy. Silas just treated her like shit, and she’s showing him compassion by not letting me finish what I started.

“Let’s go find Rosemary.” She says, patting my back.

Sue guides me away, while Roxy follows.

“How dare you assault your brother like that.” Mother snaps, racing past me to be at Silas’ side.

I stop dead in my tracks, looking at Missy. She stands motionless, but the look on her face begs me to say what’s on my mind.

“Of course, you race to his side, Mother.” I scoff. “We all know he’s the favorite child... the one you really wanted. The one that would tie you to an up-and-coming star in his field. And the man who could sustain your lifestyle so your trust fund wouldn’t have to. I’m sorry, Mother, that you had a summer fling with a married Australian surfer. Sorry that I was ever born, tarnishing your squeaky-clean reputation. Just like Missy is sorry, the vasectomy didn’t work. You made Missy

and I feel like shit over the years for being born.” I shout with a trembling voice.

I can’t believe I’m speaking to Mother like this, but once I started... I can’t stop. This is what forty years of pent-up frustration looks like. I just wish it wasn’t happening at Missy’s wedding,

“I suppose I owe you a big thank you, Mother. Because of the way you treated me, I’ve worked really hard to be successful. Missy and I both have. But you’ve never even recognized it, have you? You’re just too focused on the golden child to see it. Let me fill you in on your golden child and his work in Thailand. Your college dropout is living off his trust fund. He has no intention of paying it back. Want to know why he lives in Thailand? Because US dollars go a long way over there. He’s fed you bullshit lines about doing charitable work in Patpong. Allow me to explain to you what everyone else knows. Patpong is one of Thailand’s most famous red-light districts. That’s right, your golden child is nothing more than a playboy who pays women for sex.” I blurt out. “Want to know something else, Mother? Silas is going to be the creepy wrinkled up old bachelor. Not me. He’ll come complete with an eighteen-year-old on his arm, thick gold chain around his neck, floral Hawaiian shirt, and receding hairline. Ya know, the creepy old guy starter kit.” I sharply exhale.

Mother gasps and shock spreads across her face. Am I proud of the way I’m speaking to her? Not really, but now that I’ve said what has needed to be said, I feel a weight lifted off my shoulders. It’s almost freeing.

“Missy, I’m sorry for ruining your day. Don’t worry, I won’t be back. Call me when you calm down.” I say while walking away.

CHAPTER 25

TRASH AND CONFESSIONS

LIAM

I walk through the crowd, most just witnessing all the drama that just exploded. They're silent, with shocked expressions on their faces. Part of me wants to go back and apologize to Mother... to everyone. The other part knows better. Peter needs a wake-up call when it comes to Silas. Once he runs through his trust fund, and he will, Silas will expect them to support him. Mother won't hesitate, but Peter has worked too hard to have some jackass who's never worked a day in his life squander his money away.

"This is me." Sue hits the key fob, unlocking the little blue Mini Cooper in front of us.

"This is you? How the hell do you fit?" I put my hands on my hips and tilt my head.

"What are you talking about? This is the Mini Cooper S Countryman. It's the largest they make." She slides in the

driver's seat, her hair touching the roof. "See, plenty of room. Get in." She smirks.

"Yeah, looks roomy." I sarcastically reply, opening the rear door.

"Don't you move." Missy shouts from behind me.

Shit.

I turn, fully expecting to be punched for a second time today. Facing Missy, she has tears in her eyes. Her hands firmly placed on her hips, Scott standing behind her.

"Listen here, mister." She pokes my chest. "Hurry and find my future sister-in-law and get your asses back here. All of you." She looks past me to Sue and Roxy. "Don't make me stop this wedding to come find you all. You understand me?" She pokes my chest again, then pulls me into a hug. "You have always been my saving grace, Liam. And the best big brother a girl could ask for. I love you." She pulls away and gulps. "Now hurry back before the swelling in Silas' nose goes down. We have a family picture to take." She laughs. "I want to remember the day he finally got what he deserves."



Rosemary is still not answering her phone, it's going straight to voicemail. She's turned it off, or the battery is dead... probably from me calling and texting her so much. Luckily, she's in my SUV and I can track its location.

"She's at my place." I look up from my phone.

“You have a tracking device on your cars?” Sue looks in the rearview mirror at me.

“Yes, and security cameras in my homes. Take the next left.” I look out the windshield.

“Are you one of those paranoid people?” Sue smacks her lips.

“No... not really. Just something I grew up with and I don’t see the harm in it. Plus, I get insurance discounts. Next right.” I brace myself as Sue makes the sharp turn.

“Is your sister always that scary?” She asks.

“No. I’ve seen her worse. Want to slow down? I’m sliding all over the place back here.” I say, gripping the seat in front of me.

Fifteen nauseous minutes later, we pull up in front of my house. Rosemary sits on her bag on the front step. She smiles when she sees Sue and Roxy, but as soon as I step out of the car, her smile turns into a frown.

“What is he doing here?” She snaps at Sue.

“He has something he wants to say to you.” Sue calmly replies.

“What could he possibly have to say to justify his actions today?” Rosemary stomps her foot.

“Um, I’m right here. There’s no need to talk about me like I don’t exist.” I say, walking to Rosemary.

She throws my keys at me as she passes, dragging her bag behind her.

“Sue, can you help, please?” She asks in a huff.

“Wait.” I grab her arm, spinning her to me.

“Let go.” She demands.

“Not until you hear me out.” I gulp.

I’ve never seen Rosemary so angry before. Behind the anger is sadness. Her eyes are bloodshot, and her makeup is smeared. She’s been crying.

“Baby, listen...” I cup her face between my hands.

She drops her bag’s handle and shoves me with both hands.

“Don’t you baby me.” She says through tears. “You betrayed my trust today... with Poppy, of all people. I can’t believe I fell for you... hook, line, and sinker. I’m so stupid!” She shouts.

“Shut up, Rosemary!” Roxy shouts. “Listen to what the man has to say before the scary woman in white comes looking for us.”

“You speak?” I narrow my eyes at her.

“Of course, she speaks. Why would you think otherwise?” Sue shrugs her shoulders.

“I’ve never heard her speak, that’s all.” I reply.

“Of course, you have. I talk all the time.” Roxy replies.

“What the hell is going on?” Rosemary’s eyes dart between us.

“Rosemary.” I hold her hands. “What you saw earlier wasn’t me.”

She pushes me back, then walks away. I grab her arm, stopping her. Spinning her to me, she is so angry. I need to find a way of making her hear me through her rage.

“Try not to use the lines from the cheater’s handbook.” Sue rolls her eyes.

Holding Rosemary’s arms, I push her up against the wall, pinning her hands above her head, and pressing my body into hers.

“Listen to me, please. If you still don’t believe me when I’m done, you can go, and I won’t bother you anymore.” I stare into her eyes. “My brother Silas was here with Poppy... not me. I didn’t know he was coming here. He knew the house would be empty, and he took advantage of that. Just like so many other things. My entire family has their own codes to get in, but that ends today. You and I will have the only codes and keys to get in from now on.” I say through heavy breath.

Her face softens some.

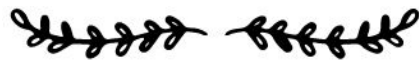
“Baby, I would never do anything to betray your trust or hurt you. Please understand that. Remember when I told you my perspective had changed? It was you, you’re the reason my perspective has changed. I want a future with you... kids, white picket fence, all of it.” I kiss her forehead.

“It’s all true, beautiful. He was with the guys all day today except when he went into a hardware store with Adam.” Sue sniffles behind me.

I release Rosemary's hands and reach into my front pocket, pulling out a key.

"I had this made for you." I place it in her hand and close it. "It's a key to my apartment in the city. You're free to come and go anytime you like without calling first. I already gave security your name as an occupant. Baby, I want my lips to be the last thing you taste every night, and my face the first thing you see every morning." I capture her pouty lips.

I kiss her sweetly, wiping the tears rolling down her face. She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me tight. My head spins, feeling her warm body against mine. I hold her tight, never wanting to let her go. She fits perfectly in my arms, like we were made for each other.



Rosemary

We break our kiss when the DJ stops the music.

After putting my things back into the house, we rushed back to the reception. I was met by Tina, who rushed me upstairs to have my makeup freshened up. She fills me in on everything that went down here. How frantic Liam was when he couldn't find me. The fight: Sue punched Liam, then Missy kicked Sue below the belt, then Liam punched Silas just before he told his mother off.

I'm glad Liam cared enough to come looking for me. He could have just waited and went on with the reception, but he didn't. I was so hurt and crushed when I saw Silas and Poppy having

sex... thinking it was Liam. She wanted me to think it was her and Liam, but why? Does she get her jollies off by hurting people?

Liam wants to spend New Year's with my family in Texas, and that means the world to me.

"Where are my single ladies at? Time for the bouquet toss. Come on ladies, on the dance floor." The DJ announces.

"Good luck." Liam winks before leaving me on the dance floor.

There has to be twenty-five ladies on the dance floor with me, circling like sharks around prey. I just want out of here. I've seen videos, and I know this can turn into a catfight real quick.

"It's coming for you, Rosemary." Missy points the bouquet at me and laughs.

"Ready. Let's countdown." The DJ says nodding at Missy. "Five... four... three... two... Hey do you know when the cake will be served?" He and Missy laugh at his tease.

The surrounding ladies are foaming at the mouth as they hiss and boo.

"Okay, okay. We'll do it for real this time." The DJ says. "Five... four... three... two... one."

I see the bouquet fly to the left of me. *Phew*. The ladies rush to the left, diving for it. When the commotion settles down, Tina emerges with the bouquet in hand.

“Awww, looks like we know who our next bride will be.” The DJ says.

“Woo hoo! Looking at you, Justin.” Tina shouts waving the bouquet above her head.

“Congratulations, cuz.” She hugs Tina.

“Awww, I was really hoping you’d catch it, Rosemary.” Missy pulls me into a tight hug.

“You were?” I ask, squeezing her back.

“I think you’d make a perfect sister-in-law.” She pulls back, looking at me. “Looks like someone wants to talk to you.” She spins me around.

“Hi, baby.” Liam says, wrapping his arms around my waist pulling me into him. “Today I thought I lost you for good, and it nearly drove me crazy. I’m in love with you Rosemary... I know we’re moving fast. It’s all crazy to me, but I don’t want to wait a second longer than I have to.” He slips down to one knee, holding both my hands.

I gasp.

“Rosemary, I don’t want to be your boyfriend any longer. I want more. I want to build a life with you. Will you please do me the honor of being my wife. Marry me, please?” He says, gulping.

The crowd is so silent I can hear my heart pounding. This is insane. We’ve only known each other for a short amount of time. Can this work... him and I? I fight the tears as thoughts

race through my head. What's even crazier than him asking me to marry him in front of his entire family is my answer.

"Yes." I squeak out as tears roll down my face.

Falling to my knees, I wrap him in my arms and kiss him. To be honest, I can't see spending my life with anyone else. He makes me feel so special and alive. When I'm with him, I feel like the only woman in the room. He makes my skin tingle and my stomach flutter. Something I've never felt before. I'm so crazy in love with him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, she said yes." The DJ announces as the crowd cheers wildly.

"Before I forget." Liam places a white gold pearl and diamond cocktail ring on my left hand. "We'll get you a proper ring next week."

"How?" I gasp, looking at the vintage piece.

"It belonged to Peter's grandmother. She passed when I was a teen. I always loved this ring, so she left it to me. When you were upstairs, I asked Peter for it... told him I found *the* one. Missy overheard us and demanded I ask you today. She said it would make her day extra special." He presses his forehead to mine.

"Oh, my gosh, Liam... Rosemary." Poppy waves making her way through the crowd.

About halfway to us, she is hit by a large trashcan being pushed by Roxy. Poppy loses her balance and stumbles. She loses a shoe and her long wig flies off her head. Sue shoves

her back towards the trashcan, where she lands ass first in food leftovers.

“I’ll be right back; I’ve got to take the trash out.” Roxy smiles.

“Wait. Don’t want to forget this.” Sue picks Poppy’s shoe off the ground. “This is not a Louboutin!” Sue shouts and laughs.

“This is just red spray paint on cheap shoes.” She laughs hysterically. “Get her out of here.” She tosses Poppy’s shoe into the can as Roxy rolls past headed right for the exit.

“It will be a day I will never forget.” I whisper into his lips.

“It’s time to party!” Sue shouts.

Soon the dance floor is filled as the DJ plays, *I’m Good by Bebe Rexha and David Guetta*. Everyone dances to the upbeat music. Smiles and laughter mixed with the lights moving to the beat of the music set the mood. As normal, Sue is the life of the party. She is surrounded with people waiting for their chance to dance with her. Everyone’s movements on the dance floor looks fluid. Arms waving in the air, people showing off their dance skills for the other. Scott’s grandfather even gets in on the dance floor action.

Liam guides me off the dance floor, finding a private corner.

“You’ve made me the happiest man in the world.” He looks deep into my eyes, rubbing my jaw with his thumbs.

“Likewise, my prince charming.” I say, wrapping my arms around him.

Our mouths crash together, and the world melts away. Our kiss is slow and sweet. I feel the love between us as we claim each

other's lips. In his arms, I know I'll always be safe and loved, and right now there's no other place I'd rather be.

"Son." Dee says from behind Liam.

Liam breaks our kiss with a growl.

"Mother." He lets out an exasperated sigh.

Rolling his eyes, he turns to her. There's sadness on her face. She looks like she has been crying. He wraps his arm around me.

"I just wanted to say congratulations to you both. Dolores' ring looks perfect on your hand." She smiles, looking between us.

"Thank you." Liam stoically states.

"Son," she gulps. "I know I haven't been the perfect mother to you and Missy. And I know I've said some awful things to you and Missy over the years. Things a mother should never say to her children. I can't take them back, but I wanted to apologize for it." She sniffles tears back.

"Peter has brought it to my attention many times, and I... um." She gulps. "Do you remember the summer you spent with Peter's parents and Dolores? It was twelve years before Dolores passed. That was the summer I was pregnant with Silas. Silas was a surprise pregnancy, just like you and Missy. Despite what you may think he wasn't planned... none of you were. I was very ill and was placed on bed rest for the last four months of my pregnancy. Then, when Silas was born, he was sick. He spent most of his childhood sick. By the time he was

four, I was exhausted. I was afraid of getting pregnant again and having to deal with another sick child. Then Missy bounced into the world. She came out of the womb much like you, ready to take life on.” Her bottom lip quivers as she speaks.

“I didn’t mean to make you and Missy feel like you didn’t matter, because you both do. I just didn’t need to protect you like Silas. My overbearing protective ways didn’t do him any favors. Peter has warned me over the last few years... that Silas was bleeding his trust fund dry. He said he wouldn’t support him after that. I’m so sorry son, please forgive me.” Tears roll down her face.

Liam hugs his mother as she sobs. He holds her tight, allowing her tears to soak his tux jacket. I watch the two of them with tears in my eyes. She’s not so bad after all. She’s just an imperfect human, like the rest of us. Missy joins them, wrapping her arms around them both. Silas and Peter join in as well. It’s a beautiful moment between the man I’m in love with and his family. This is the perfect ending to a chaotic day.

The End

CHAPTER 26

BONUS

Rosemary

****ONE YEAR TWO MONTHS Later****

I stir in my sleep, moaning in ecstasy. My core tingles in delight. I open my eyes and see the sun's rays peeking through the blinds. My hips buck, licking and sucking sounds fill the air, while the smell of coffee teases my nose.

Must be Saturday.

I reach down and run my fingers through Liam's hair.

"Mmmm, yes." I moan.

He is devouring my core, just like he does every Saturday. My body vibrates at his touch. He slips two fingers inside, curling them to rub my pleasure zone. His mouth so hot and wet. It's my favorite way to wake up. I grab his hair and hold his face tight to me, grinding hard into him.

"Yes. I'm so close." I moan.

His mouth captures my button. His fingers thrust in and out rapidly while he sucks. My body shakes as the orgasm rips through it.

"Liam!" I scream.

My body tenses up, my toes curl, and my head spins. I'm breathless while my legs shake.

"Good morning, baby." Liam looks up at me, still between my thighs.

Sitting up he reaches for my coffee.

“No, sir. You’re not done.” I pull him down.

“We don’t have time. The caterers are setting up now.” He laughs as I slip and sweats down.

“I’m the bride and what I say goes.” I lick my juices from his lips.

“Yes, ma’am.” He thrusts in.

Burying himself deep inside me, he kisses my neck. I hold him tight as he thrusts harder and harder.

“You love it when my cock is deep, don’t you? He nibbles on my ear.

I run my nails down his back and moan his name. My body constantly craves his touch, and I’m insatiable when it comes to him. Not only do I love the way he stretches and fills me, but I love feeling connected with him. When our bodies are intertwined it feels like we are levitating. Like we have ascended to our own private cloud in the heavens. Nothing in the world matters except for the two of us.

“Baby, I’m going to come.” He takes a nipple into his mouth.

“Mmmm. Yes.” I moan.

“Do you want me to come inside you?” He switches nipples.

“Yes, please.” I reply.

“You want me to come deep,” he lifts my hips, “to make a baby?” He asks thrusting harder.

Goosebumps form at his words. His voice is deep and sultry, making my body purr and beg for more.

“I want to make a baby with you. Tell me you want to do the same.” His chest vibrates with each word.

My core pulses, attempting to pull him deeper. Hearing him say he wants to make a baby with me is such a turn on, that my juices overflow.

“Mmmm. Beg me to breed you the day before our wedding.” He licks and sucks my neck.

My mind is lost as my head spins. Not able to form words, I moan.

“You have to say it if you want it. I need you to beg me to breed you.” He growls, plunging deeper.

“Pl... please. I want you to come inside me.” I moan.

I’m teetering on the edge. The thoughts of making a life with him make my core more sensitive than it already is.

“Please, I need you.” I throw my head back as my body stiffens.

The orgasm rips through me like a tornado, leaving me breathless. Pushing deep he grunts with each pulse of his member, filling me to the brim. Our bodies are in rhythm, vibrating and pulsing in unison. My core quickly drinks up every drop he gives.

“You always take it like such a good girl.” He kisses my forehead.

I giggle and blush at his words. It doesn't matter how many times I hear him call me his good girl, it still gives me butterflies and goosebumps. And I hope that never changes.



Liam

“Hello everyone. In case we haven’t met yet, my name is Liam Pierce aka the groom. Rosemary and I would like to welcome you to our home away from home, here in New Braunfels Texas. With the wedding tomorrow evening, you’re probably wondering where the itinerary is. The simple answer, there is none. This crawfish boil is the only pre-wedding event. Rosemary and I wanted to run away and get married on a private beach somewhere, and after our mothers stopped screaming at us, we realized how bad of an idea that was.” I pause while the crowd laughs.

“We wanted to keep everything as simple as possible. This is the combined family dinners, rehearsal, and rehearsal dinner. Did I miss anything?” I look at Rosemary.

“No. I think you summed it up nicely. So, make sure you mingle around and get to know your new family members. And like my daddy always says, our family is a lot like a pecan pie. We may be a little nutty, but we’re awfully sweet.” Rosemary smiles looking at me as the crowd laughs.

We take a seat at our table while the Cajun caterer takes over, explaining what a crawfish is and how to eat them. I watch my family and northern friends listen intently as Rosemary’s Texas family and friends sit idly by looking bored.

“When are you going to rehearse?” Mother looks at me.

“We’re not. Rosemary doesn’t have bridesmaids and I don’t have groomsman. I’m going to stand in front next to the pastor, then Rosemary and her dad are going to walk to me. Easy peasy.” I smile at Mother then take a drink of my beer.

“Sounds simple enough.” She nods her head.

Over the past year, Mother has worked hard to be a better person. She’s easier to get along with and no longer makes people cry on a daily basis. What can I say, she’s a work in progress.

Rosemary is still working as Joseph’s PA. Luckily for him, she plans to continue in that role for the foreseeable future. I’m still just the firm’s attorney, and plan on keeping it that way.

Poppy is working for a textile company. Her and Silas are now married and have a beautiful baby girl. They live in a small two-bedroom apartment while he works full time in the mailroom at Peter’s law firm. As a housewarming gift, I had the couch they conceived their daughter on delivered... gross stain and all.

“Okay, Ms. Dee, I brought you some mud bugs.” Sue says putting a cardboard tray in front of her.

“I could have gotten my own.” Mother says looking at the crawfish in front of her.

“Glove?” Ellen, Rosemary’s mom offers her.

“Do I need it?” She takes the gloves slowly.

“It will help save your manicure.” Ellen says with a smile.

“Are you going to use gloves?” Mother looks at Ellen.

“No.” Ellen laughs.

“Pfftt... I’m not going to use them either.” Mother tosses the gloves on the table. “What’s this?” She points.

“Mother, they’re spicy. You should use the gloves. And that is the pork and venison sausage Rosemary’s dad had made from the deer I shot.” I crack open a crawfish.

“You’re becoming one of those renaissance men, aren’t you?” Mother says, picking up a crawfish. “They look like little lobsters.”

“Yes, they do.” I say as I pop another in my mouth.

“Liam, this sausage is phenomenal.” Peter sits down next to Mother. “David says he’ll take me hunting with you both, next time you go.” His voice is full of excitement, like a child at Christmas.

Mother looks inquisitively at the crawfish, then slowly breaks it in half.

“Eww.” She squints her eyes.

“Pretend it is pâté de foie gras.” Rosemary says laughing.

After five minutes, Mother finally separates the meat from the tail.

“Success.” She shouts before popping it into her mouth.

“Mother, I’ve eaten ten in the time it’s taken you to peel one.” I laugh taking a bite of red potato.

“Ahhh. It’s hot.” She shouts while panting with her mouth open. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did.” I look at her and laugh. “I said they were spicy.”

In the time Rosemary and I have been together, we have spent a lot of time in Texas, and I have grown to love the food and lifestyle. It is so different than New York. In all honesty, I’ve grown to love her entire family, her parents are wonderful people. When they retired last summer and moved here, Rosemary and I bought a home here as well.

“Why so hot?” Mother fans her mouth.

“These aren’t hot, they’re mild.” Ellen says adding more seasoning to her tray of crawfish.

“Give me that.” Mother snatches the beer from my hand.

“No, Dee. Don’t drink that...” Rosemary says as Mother takes a huge swig of beer.

“Ahhh!” She shouts. “That didn’t help at all.” Mother wipes her tongue with a napkin.

“It will make it worse.” Rosemary finishes her sentence then looks at me.

Mother looks at me with tears in her eyes and drool dripping down her chin.

“Here, Aunt Dee.” Tina hands her a glass of milk.

Mother snatches it from her hand and proceeds to drink the entire glass in a single breath. Breathless and sweating,

Mother's eyes dart around the table. She gulps watching everyone eating their crawfish, potatoes, corn, and sausage.

"Not bad." She snuffles and picks up another crawfish.

"Mother, what are you doing?" I look at her with my mouth open.

"Eating more." She replies cracking the crawfish in half.

"We'll make a Texan out of her yet." Ellen laughs.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Born in Thailand, Krys currently lives in Texas . She has been an aspiring writer for years who finally took the plunge and publish her first book. She loves all things romance with paranormal and fantasy as her favorite. Krys loves to write books that take you on an emotional ride and are plot driven.

In her spare time, she enjoys spending time outdoors exploring the Texas Hill Country, tending to her gardens, chickens, and cuddling with her rescue pup.

