



EXPECTANTLY

in love

JESSA YORK

UN-EXPECTANTLY IN LOVE

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*This is dedicated to ALL of my Newsletter Readers. I wrote
this for you. Your weekly encouragement means
EVERYTHING to me. I hope you've enjoyed Dominic &
Sloane's story as much as I have.*

Just think what a dull world it would be if everyone
was sensible.

Lucy Maud Montgomery

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Also by Jessa York

Dominic

The gigantic, golden, numbers four and zero bobbed and weaved mockingly as they floated in the light breeze coming through the open balcony door.

Even at five o'clock in the morning, the usual sound of people conversing and joking as they walked home stole in and wrapped itself around me. Cars drove past my building—sometimes engines roaring and radios blasting.

Hazy light filtered in through my large windows, reminding me that I hadn't yet slept. My party had been over for hours—more indication that I was getting old. Cami had tried to weasel an offer for a sleepover out of me.

I just wasn't in the mood.

Another tick for the 'getting old' box.

Forty.

Jesus.

I'd always imagined what life would be like at forty.

And it sure wasn't this.

My brownstone was fully reno'd and upgraded with the very best that money could buy. My successful career was

reaching a pinnacle—or at least I hoped it was.

Still, here I sat.

Alone.

In this beautiful house. A house that should be filled with a gorgeous wife and a few precocious children by now.

What the actual hell was my problem?

I was a goddamn catch. Six foot one, a body that showed my six day a week workout schedule, and hair that guys half my age would kill for.

Not to mention the money. Which I had more of than you could ever spend in one lifetime. Or two or three. Or several hundred.

Now that was both a blessing and a curse.

Money like mine—old money—made people act differently around you. As soon as they smelled that sweet scent of wealth on you, everyone wanted a piece.

I'd had more women than I could count. You'd think with the sheer volume alone that one would have stuck out as a keeper.

Nope.

It seemed the longer I'd be with someone, the more reasons I'd find to hate them.

And let's not even talk about the hair in the drain.

Was there anything worse than that?

At least when I was alone, I never had to deal with plugged up, hairy pipes.

The only problem I'd have to deal with was a cold bed.

It was a rotten catch twenty-two.

Unfortunately, I'd have to see past the plugged pipes if I ever wanted to fill this house with kids. Or deal with a cold bed and an empty house.

And I did want kids. I'd always wanted a family.

Jeremy, in his infinite wisdom, had offered me this gem of advice last night, "Dom, you're still a young guy. Men twice your age can still have babies. Look how old some famous guys are when they start a family."

Images of me—gray-haired and wrinkled—in a 1950's smoking jacket shot into my head. Me, a twenty something wife, and our three young kids.

The thought of that made even my stomach queasy. No way was that my dream—to shuffle up, oxygen tank in tow, to my kid's little league games—at the ripe old age of one-foot-in-the-grave.

The only light in my house came from the laptop sitting beside me on the couch. My bestie, Ronnie—short for Veronica, had googled a website.

I laughed at the thought of it.

Pitter patter 4U dot com.

It was a premier site for rich assholes like me to match with potential babymakers.

Well, you didn't have to be rich. But their fees were astronomical, so that alone weeded out a lot. Their background digging thinned it out even more. At least that was what Ronnie said.

From some of the questions on the form, I had to agree.

They guaranteed a match or your money back.

I sighed and took a long sip of my drink.

The thing about my old money was that it was old family money. Family who'd have an actual shit fit if I married someone who wasn't genuine. Someone who only wanted me for my money.

My family's money.

If there was one thing I would never put in jeopardy, it was the hard work and dedication it had taken my grandparents to build up and grow everything they had.

Well, except for that one time I almost did exactly that.

But that was in the past and I tried my best not to think about it.

A knock sounded at the door. There was only one person who it could be at this time of the night. Or morning.

I stood, my knees cracking from sitting so long. Running my fingers through my hair, I sighed and strode to the front door.

“Happy Birthday, old man,” my best friend said as she shoved a hot cup of coffee at me and walked right in like she owned the place.

I chuckled at her verbiage. “Yeah, yeah, before you know it, you'll be here, too,” I said, following her into my living room.

“Pfft, not for twelve years,” she said, taking a sip of her coffee at the same time I did.

Immediately, we both winced and traded cups. “Would it kill you to put a little sugar in it?” I frowned at her while I

took a large, burning mouthful of my sweetened coffee. Much better.

“It won’t kill me, but it *will* kill this fabulous ass,” she said, turning around to wiggle for me.

Ronnie was correct—her ass was fantastic. However, for some reason, I’d never seen her that way. As more than a friend. And I was pretty sure she’d never been into me. We’d connected on a different level entirely, which had been all kinds of weird for me.

Normally, if there was a woman as beautiful as Ronnie around, I’d see her as a potential—well, more than a friend.

But right from the start, we’d acted more like siblings than anything else. She’d been a bright light at the law firm. Someone to joke around with who wasn’t out to stab me in the back and try to one up me.

“How’d you know I was awake?” I asked, sitting back down in the same spot on the couch I’d been in for hours.

She sashayed in and sat across from me. “Because I saw your balcony doors open with those gorgeous silk drapes of mine fluttering in the wind.” Ronnie sighed and petted the arm of the white couch beside her. “They go so well with this furniture, don’t you think?”

“They’re mine now, kid,” I answered back with a shake of my head. Ronnie’s stint as a lawyer hadn’t lasted long. Her true passion had always been fashion and decorating. I’d encouraged her to leave the firm and pursue her dreams. And she hadn’t looked back.

“I know, I know. At least I get to visit them often,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes as she smiled innocently. “What are you doing up? I was sure you’d be dead asleep by now.”

Every morning, without fail, Ronnie walked to the coffee shop down the street for her morning fix. If she saw my lights on, quite often she'd bring me a cup, too. It was likely one of the top ten reasons I loved the fact she lived only a few doors down.

"Couldn't sleep," I answered, my voice sounding hoarse from too much talking last night and not enough sleep.

Her eyes narrowed on me as I sat and nursed my coffee. Before I knew it, she had bolted over beside me and grabbed my laptop from the couch. "Oh, my gosh," she said, her eyes wide and her mouth in the shape of a large O. "You're actually considering it, aren't you?"

Ah, crap. I'd left my laptop open.

"I was just—"

"You really do want to have a baby, don't you? I'm going to be an aunty?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders as her eyes got watery.

"Give it back," I said, making a feeble attempt to reach for my computer.

"No, no, no," she muttered, pushing my hand away. Her eyes were glued to the form I'd filled out as she scrolled down the screen. "Honestly, when I left a few hours ago I didn't think you'd actually take this seriously. But your answers are—great. Wow, Dom, I'm actually—speechless." Ronnie gazed up at me, blinking her wet eyes.

"I don't think you're quite grasping the meaning of speechless," I quipped at her with a smirk.

She ignored me and shot me a shaky smile. "You really want to be a dad? I think this is awesome," she said, setting the

laptop down on the overpriced coffee table she'd picked out. Then her arms were around me, squeezing tight.

I returned her hug, but said, "Ronnie, I haven't done anything. I was just sitting here feeling sorry for myself. I probably won't even send it in."

A loud gasp sounded from her. She pushed away from me. "You have to. Dommy, this will be perfect. Look," she said, holding her arms out in front of us, "I have goose bumps. I really think this is something you should do."

"Well, that makes one of us."

"It won't hurt to at least try, right?" she added with a lopsided grin.

I sighed and sank back into the couch as I ran my fingers through my hair. "I'm just not sure."

"What are you waiting for? Some kind of sign?" She giggled, nodding at the laptop on the coffee table.

Ronnie was right. *What the hell was I waiting for? Some sort of divine intervention to prove to me that this was the road I should take?* I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could get a word out, a gust of wind blew in through the balcony doors. It toppled over a few potted plants and swept out the huge balloons as it retreated back to where it came from.

Our eyes met and Ronnie said, "Holy cow." Before I could stop her, she leaned forward and hit 'send'.

Sloane

“...**B**ut if Mommy doesn’t do this, then you might never have a little brother or sister,” I explained as best I could to my tiny charge.

As per usual, he didn’t respond.

It wasn’t surprising as we didn’t even speak the same language.

“Or do you like our little family how it is?”

Again, there was no answer. He just stared forward, ignoring me completely.

“Fine, but you’re not getting one more mealworm until you at least give me a hint about what your opinion is,” I said, lifting my chin and shaking my head. “And don’t think I’m going to give in, either.”

Still nothing. I sighed and stroked Iggy’s long, green back.

I felt a furry paw on my foot, and I smiled. “Well, hello, my little hoppy,” I said, leaning down to pick up my furry, white visitor. She always let me scoop her up without much fuss. “What do you think, Luna? Would you like a baby brother or sister?”

Her white fur tickled my nose while I kissed her head. I placed her on my chest and she crawled up and butted her tiny head under my chin for snuggles. “Aww, my baby needed hugs,” I said, petting her soft, silky ears.

Although sweet, none of my fur, feather, or scale babies would be able to help me with the decision I needed to make.

Pitter Patter 4U dot com flashed from the screen in front of me. It was the premiere website to find your perfect babymaking match. I’d just spent three solid hours carefully filling out each question. The last thing I needed was to be paired up with some creep.

And seeing as one of the questions was, ‘Methods willing to use?’ and one of the options was, ‘Natural’—yikes, no thanks.

With someone you didn’t even know?

Blah. Not in a million years.

Not in a billion years.

The only sticking point was the cost. Good grief was it ever prohibitive. But, I guess that was one way to weed out the creeps.

Well, the poor creeps.

The rich creeps would still be there.

I’d always been a fairly good judge of character.

Well—mostly.

When I wasn’t lying to myself and trying to fix the unfixable.

I felt fairly certain I’d be able to separate the decent prospects from the not so decent prospects.

Just as soon as I could see their photos. Which I wasn't allowed to do until I submitted my form.

I mean, worse come to worse, I could always back out, right? If I met a few of the men and they turned out to be self-absorbed, misogynistic duds—I still had the ability to disappear back into the hustle and bustle of the city.

But, if it worked out and I actually found someone normal-ish to procreate with, then—wow. I could be sitting here with a newborn in another nine or ten months.

A huge smile crossed my face.

At twenty-eight I wasn't exactly too old to have a baby.

I also wasn't exactly young anymore.

By the time I got pregnant and had the baby, I'd be twenty-nine.

Which was almost thirty.

Thirty.

Now that was old.

Yeah, women had babies into their forties. Often with the help of a ton of fertility treatments.

I didn't want that.

And even if I met the man of my dreams tomorrow—we'd still have to date for a year or two, get engaged, get married, have some time for 'just us married bliss' before we started trying for a family.

The years—not to mention the effort—ticked away mercilessly in my brain. Under ideal circumstances, left to fate, I wouldn't have a baby for another—four years. Uhg.

I'd had a big, bad case of baby fever for at least three years now. Looking around the virtual zoo in my apartment, anyone could see that.

I loved to mother things. Whether it was a ridiculous bearded dragon who mostly ignored me or a—the sound of a muffled snort interrupted my train of thought. As I gazed down at the floor beside me, I saw a yellow blouse grunting and shaking along.

“Oh, Lily, what have you done now?” I said, bending down to set Luna on the floor before attempting to rescue Lily. “Come here piggie, let Mommy save you,” I said, wrestling her snout out of the armhole of one of my cutest boho blouses.

“Shut up, shut up,” a familiar voice blasted as he swooped over top of us.

“Freddie, that’s not very nice,” I said, ducking out of his way. Sometimes he enjoyed swiping at my hair as he flew over top. “Lily’s stuck. Again. It’s not her fault.” I finally got the piggie free and hugged her close.

She was a nervous little thing and often needed consoling and reassurance. Which I was glad to give.

“Shut up, shut up,” Freddie squawked again, louder this time. He sat on the window ledge by the balcony doors.

“It’s too late, Fred. I’m not letting you outside in the dark. You’ll have to wait until the morning.” I always worried whenever I let him go outside. But a bright, white cockatoo flying around in the dark of night made me even more apprehensive.

Lily finally settled in my lap as Iggy, and I stared at the laptop screen.

Should I, or shouldn't I?

The send button on the screen practically jumped out at me.

Right now, I was equally as nervous as Lily was.

Pressing the enter key on my own seemed like an impossible task. “Iggy, if you hit the enter key for me, I’ll get you a mealworm. How’s that sound, buddy?”

Again, he ignored me like the stuck-up creature he was.

Across the room, Freddie had picked up one of my paintbrushes and was running it between his beak like an old-fashioned typewriter. Once he was at the end of it, he flipped it over and chewed it back the other way. He really was a nut. But I loved him. Just like I loved each one of my adopted crew in his or her own way.

They all had their own, unique personalities.

I chewed my lip in much the same manner as Freddie gnawed my paintbrush.

What should I do?

I just needed a celestial sign that this was in fact the right thing to do. Something—anything—to tell me that joining this website would lead to good and not bad.

Freddie jumped off the top of my easel and flew toward me. He really was a thing of beauty. I loved watching his wings as he zoomed around the room.

This time he was much higher as he passed by, nearly at the ceiling.

Before I knew what was happening, the paintbrush slipped from his beak and dropped quickly down, down, down—to my keyboard—hitting the enter key quite succinctly.

A loud whooshing sound came from the computer as the screen changed. The words, ‘Thank you for your submission. We will review it and get back to you within twenty-four hours,’ popped up on the screen.

“Oh, boy,” I whispered to myself, my heart nearly stopping in my chest. It felt like I’d suddenly broken out with a heck of a fever. Even my palms were sweating.

“Good boy, good boy,” Freddie tried to copy me while he continued circling overhead.

“I guess we’ll see about that, Fred.”

Dominic

“How about her? She’s got great bone structure. I’d kill to have cheeks and a jaw like that.” Ronnie sighed as she continued scrolling through the list of applicants.

I’d been accepted into Pitter Patter 4U’s database. So the easy part was done.

Early this morning, they’d sent a link to my list of ‘matches’ for—as Ronnie says—my potential baby mama. That was what we were currently doing. Trolling for baby mamas.

This whole thing seemed insane and—wrong.

On so many levels.

“Okay, what’s going on with you? You should be more excited about this than I am.” Ronnie huffed and sank back into the couch beside me, crossing her arms on her chest.

I gazed over at her and shook my head. “It’s fine, keep going,” I said, motioning toward the laptop with my fingers.

“Exactly my point. Your match shouldn’t be fine. You need to find someone extraordinary.”

I took a deep breath. “This isn’t exactly what I had in mind when I envisioned starting a family. I need a moment to—warm up to the idea.”

“Warm up? Why? It’s not like you actually have to—you know—make the baby,” she said, turning her head and looking me up and down. “How exactly does all this work, anyway? IVF?”

As I cleared my throat, I sat forward on the couch and shifted the laptop in my direction. “Well, there are many different ways, actually.”

Her eyebrows creased for a moment before her face registered straight out astonishment. “*Actually,*” she said, moving the laptop in front of her, “there aren’t *that* many different ways.”

Thirty seconds of clicking later, my application was up on the screen. “Holy cow,” Ronnie gasped then shot a look over at me. “I skimmed over this part before. Are you serious? You’d actually consider doing this ‘naturally’?” The poor woman’s jaw nearly hit the floor.

“It’s not like we’ve never had one-night stands before, right? I mean, this would basically be the same thing—but with more of a purpose behind it.”

Eyes wide, she said, “Holy cow. In one way this totally repulses me.”

She didn’t say anything else for a long minute. “And in another?” I asked, squinting my eyes at her, wanting to hear the rest.

Inhaling deeply, she shook herself out of wherever she’d been. “In another way, I find this extremely hot.”

That made me burst out laughing. I couldn't stop the hearty chuckle that emerged.

"I'm serious," she said, giggling as she shoved at my arm.

"Not everyone will choose that option, I'm sure. There's IVF and artificial insemination as well. Making a baby naturally is just one way," I told her.

"Wow, what if your baby mama match turns into a love match?" Ronnie said, her voice breathy and her eyes watery.

I put my arm around her shoulders. "Ronnie, that would be a completely different website. You really need to stop reading those romance novels."

She snaked her arm around my back and squeezed me. "Never. It's the only place you can find true romance."

Once again, I stole the laptop and started scrolling. So many intelligent, accomplished women. Lawyers, doctors, stockbrokers. All apparently in the same conundrum, I was.

We'd spent our time focusing on careers and getting ahead instead of creating a family.

A lot of these women were touching forty or just over it.

This website was likely their last-ditch hope.

Ten minutes later and I was ready to call it a bust. "How am I supposed to pick just one?"

Ronnie laughed as she stood up. "You devil, you. I've never done this before, but I guess you'll know when she pops up?"

"Grab me a water, will you?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the screen. To be honest, although I'd easily scrolled

through dozens of women—and they were all different in their own way—they soon began to meld into one large clump.

No one stuck out as a prime candidate.

Just when I was ready to toss a coin, my finger immediately stopped scrolling. A pair of sparking, blue eyes stared back at me, causing my heart to pound in my chest. Her skin was flawless, and the beautiful, little smirk on her lips made me want to know what her secret joke was.

“Whoa, I think you just found your baby mama,” Ronnie said, handing me a tall glass of water. I reached for it and thanked her. The ice clinked as I took a huge gulp. The whole time I kept my gaze on the blonde.

“She’s gorgeous, but she looks young,” I said, continuing to take in her picture.

“What has age got to do with this?” Ronnie asked, sliding in close beside me, then opening up the woman’s profile.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “Why would a young woman go on a site like this? She can’t be more than twenty-one,” I said, feeling more than a bit dejected.

“Hmm, it says she’s twenty-eight.”

I leaned forward. “That can’t be right,” I said, reading the exact same thing. *Twenty-eight?*

“I know lucky women like that who won the genetic jackpot before they were even born. Makes me secretly hate them.” Ronnie angled closer to the computer. “Pick her. Even if it’s just so she can show me how she gets those fabulous beach waves in her hair like that. Mine never turn out that good.”

“So, you want me to choose a baby mama based on a hairdo you like?”

She scowled at me. “How old are you? It’s a hairstyle—and it’s impossible to get it that natural looking.”

“Right, so that’s what I base my selection on? Her hair?”

“She—” Ronnie said, then called the woman by name, “Sloane—has great hair and killer genetics that most girls would kill for. I think you could do worse. Sheesh, and I love her style. That pairing of an Aztec print, slouchy duster with tie-up suede boots that match her belt—is sheer simplistic perfection.”

Ronnie was staring at her—Sloane—more closely than I was. She was right though, her outfit was cool. If that’s what Ronnie meant. I still wasn’t a hundred percent certain. “You like her outfit?”

“It’s not so much an outfit as a—story. You don’t go into a store and buy all that at once. She probably picked up the belt and necklace at thrift shops. And that sweater looks like a vacation find.”

I chuckled and teased her, “You left out her jeans and underwear.”

“The jeans are high end, Dom. Pure class. Hundreds of dollars for those. That’s what melds the whole outfit together and makes it ironic. She’s pure class but makes it look interesting by putting her own spin on things.”

We both sat in silence, reading over her profile. “Oh, no wonder, she’s an artist,” Ronnie tsked and threw her hands up in the air. “Now this all makes sense. The woman has an eye.”

“It also says she loves animals. You know what that’s code for?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I give up?”

“Her house probably looks like Noah’s Arc,” I said, letting out a loud sigh.

Ronnie laughed and poked me in the arm. “I think you’re reading too much into her words.”

“I get paid big bucks to read into people’s words.”

She shrugged. “Who cares if she’s got a few cats? She’s beautiful. And Dommy?” she asked, fully turned to me now. “My bet’s on her underwear being pure silk. Ready to take a gamble?” Ronnie asked with a hint of excitement in her voice.

Her finger hovered over the ‘enter’ key.

“Maybe we should think about this for a while,” I said, grabbing her hand away from the keyboard.

A loud huff came from Ronnie. “Fine, old man. But don’t think about it too long,” she said, standing up and getting ready to leave. “Or some hot, younger guy will come along and share his sperm with her instead.”

I couldn’t help but laugh and shake my head. “You’re a pig.”

“You love it,” she said, messing up my hair. “Seriously. You know I’ve got great taste. Can’t deny that.”

“Maybe you should call her and ask if she wants to make a baby with you?” I jabbed back at her.

“Very funny. I’ll leave you two alone for now. I’m not kidding, though. If you don’t click soon, someone else will.”

Sloane

“...**A**nd I have a house in England as well,” my prospective baby daddy droned on and on for the umpteenth consecutive minute about the many properties all over the world that he owned.

Gosh, rich people could be so pompous.

That was one of the top misgivings I had when I joined this site. I wanted my future baby daddy to be employed, yes. But sometimes when people had too much money, it turned them into self-righteous, power hungry, dullards.

This was my tenth meeting this week with a ‘match’. And so far, they’d all been cookie cutters of this guy. All he wanted to talk about was how much he earned this quarter and that he hoped to increase it by at least seven percent during the next quarter.

Uhg.

My head was pounding from his voice and this whole stupid situation.

Ten meetups and ten suppers at ten of the top ten restaurants New York had to provide.

Which was great.

Well, the food was.

They all got ten big stars for that.

What they didn't get were any points for originality.

“Just think, Sienna, with your looks and my brains, our kid would be perfect,” he said, leaning over the table to grab my hand. “What do you say we sign that contract right away, then we can get this whole process started?”

The entire two hours, he'd called me, Sienna, Sierra, or Serena.

What he didn't once call me—even after I corrected him—was Sloane.

His touch felt like ice spreading through me, and I shivered from the thought of what was going through his mind. When his thumb started tracing circles on my hand, I quickly pulled it away.

“Blaine, I'd like to thank you for meeting with me tonight. We certainly have a lot to think about,” I said, setting my stiff, white napkin on the table. It was definitely time to leave.

After I rose to my feet, he said, “I'm paying, Sienna. I'd like to finish this discussion. Now sit back down so we can keep doing just that.” His tone was beyond condescending and I was beyond trying to keep a modicum of patience for him.

“Actually, Blaine, I paid for the meal when I got up a half hour ago.” I'd been doing that all week and I was going to have to sell a load of vases this coming month to even my bank account back out again.

But it was worth it for exactly this reason. Some guys paid for supper not because they were being a gentleman, but in

order to have the upper hand.

I was bound and determined not to give that away. There was no way I wanted to feel like I owed a man my time. That was mine.

And I'd wasted enough of it with this idiot.

"I wish you luck with your search, but this isn't going to work out for me." I forced out a fake smile—my upbringing had taught me that much—then I turned and began walking away.

"What a bitch," I heard Blaine mumble under his breath but still loud enough for me to hear. Actually, it was probably loud enough for most of the patrons surrounding us to hear.

And that pissed me off.

This whole week pissed me off.

In fact, this whole situation pissed me off.

What was I even thinking? Joining a website to find someone to have a baby with? That was so wrong on so many levels.

I'd had it.

I was done.

So done, in fact, that I walked back over to our table and decided to fill Blaine the idiot in. Stopping a foot away from him, I dug in. "I'm a bitch because I sat here for two hours while you not only continually called me by the wrong name, but you talked only about yourself?" I asked perhaps a few decibels louder than I should have.

"I'm a bitch because I paid for supper, therefore depriving you of your big man moment to prove how macho you are?"

Then I leaned in, only a few inches from his face. “Then I guess, by your definition, I am a bitch, Blaine,” I spat out. “You know what else I am? I’m a young, intelligent, good-looking woman. Do you also know what else I am? Far too good for you—*Blaine*,” I whined out his name to match the giant baby he was being.

Was it immature?

Absolutely.

Did it feel good?

No.

It felt darn well fantastic.

I turned around on my heel and bolted out of the restaurant as quickly as I could.

Hot, stinging tears threatened behind my eyes. I was an emotional person. That emotion came in handy when I was creating works of art.

However, that emotion was a pain in the ass when I wanted to stick up for myself and not end up crying like a toddler.

Several deep breaths and a few blocks later, I found myself wandering into Central Park. It was a busy place just now. Everyone was out at the first signs of spring on the horizon. Tonight was one of those odd evenings that was warmer than it should be for this time of year.

Too early for flowers to be blooming or the grass to turn those pretty shades of green. Despite the noises of the cars and the people, it was peaceful to me.

Oddly enough, I’d always found the sounds of the city to be comforting. As though it somehow surrounded me in its embrace.

Right now, I needed that comfort.

Millions of people living here, yet I'd never felt so alone.

I'd put too much faith in that stupid app. Why I thought something like that would work for me, I didn't know.

As I sat down on a bench, I felt my chin begin to quiver.

Gosh, I was such a baby.

Baby.

This was never going to happen for me.

I watched happy, young families walk past. Babies in strollers. Babies in carriers strapped to their mothers and fathers.

All of them looking the picture of domestic bliss.

A few tears escaped before I could wipe them away.

My phone lit up with a notification.

I'd been 'matched' with someone new.

I groaned out loud.

Should I even bother checking? Chances were, it was just more of the same. Some self-absorbed dufus ready to brag about how wonderful he was.

"Mommy, I love you," a sweet little girl yelled as she jogged alongside her parents. Her mother stopped and smiled down at the tiny child. The girl giggled as her father's hands swooped under her arms and lifted her tiny body up in the air.

"What about me?" her father asked as he grinned.

"Love you, Daddy," she shrieked when he started tickling her ribs.

I sat there smiling like a fool at people I didn't even know.

That was what I wanted.

Was it really too much to ask?

My shoulders slumped as I glared down at the notification on my phone.

Just then, an older lady came to sit beside me.

“Do you mind if I take a load off, dear,” she said with a loud sigh as she sat beside me on the bench. “These old bones can barely keep up with my grandkids anymore.”

“Go ahead, nobody else is sitting there,” I said, giving her a smile. She seemed fairly winded and more than happy to sit.

“Which ones are yours?” I asked scanning nearby to make my best guess.

“Those hooligans over there,” she said, her voice a bit wobbly as she still struggled for breath. I followed the direction of where her finger was pointing and saw three young redheaded children running around.

“They look like they keep you busy,” I said laughing as the youngest redhead nearly let go of the leash she was hanging onto. The black dog on the other end was having a good time yanking her along as they walked.

The old woman laughed as she turned to me. “Oh, you could say that. I was trying to give their parents a break, but it looks like I am the one who needs a break now.” She chuckled to herself holding her stomach tight.

The older of the three children helped grab the leash and the dog just in time.

“Do you have any kids?” she asked, her light blue eyes sparkling.

A short stabbing feeling got me right in the stomach. Even still, I smiled at my new friend. “No, not yet.”

She nodded her head and looked back at her grandchildren. “You’re still young. But take my advice—don’t leave it too long. I didn’t start until later. Heed my warning.” One of her hands rubbed at her knee.

I let out a sudden laugh. “Not all of that’s under my control, unfortunately.”

Her head snapped back to me as her eyes took me in more carefully now. “Pretty young girl like you?” She shook her head. “I don’t believe it. You just need to put yourself out there more. Like I tell my youngest daughter, ‘The man of your dreams is unlikely to come crashing through your living room television.’”

We both chuckled at her words as I wondered if perhaps he’d come crashing through a baby-making app? Then I sighed, knowing that this particular app was specifically for making babies—not relationships.

The dog started barking and my new friend reluctantly stood. “Guess that’s my signal to leave.” Her eyes landed on me one last time. “Keep an open mind. New blessings can’t be given unless you’re ready to receive them. Don’t give up. Good luck, my dear.”

I smiled as she walked swiftly away.

‘Don’t give up’, echoed through my mind as my phone pinged again.

‘Congratulations, you’ve been matched!’ displayed on my phone, tempting me to click on it.

Was I willing to do this again?

I sighed as curiosity got the better of me. A few swipes on my phone and I opened up the app. “Yowza,” I muttered under my breath. This man was hot.

Blue eyes that captivated me instantly. His skin was tanned like he’d just gotten back from somewhere warm. Dark, thick hair that was just long enough for my fingers to run through.

And that smile.

It nearly melted my panties right here on the cool bench. I shifted around and crossed my legs to stifle the warmth I felt stirring.

What grabbed my attention the most was the small, leather looking necklace he wore. Not many men could pull that off.

And it wasn’t as though he needed anything to make him appear hotter.

The man had it in spades.

I nearly held my breath as I began to read his profile, expecting it to reveal some kind of horrible information that would turn me off.

And there it was...lawyer.

Code word for—works twenty-four seven, married to his job.

Huh.

On second thought, if he was married to his job then he wouldn’t have much time to devote to a child. *Right?* Hmm, so if we did match, and he didn’t turn out to be a complete idiot troll—then our kid would have half his gorgeous genetics and he’d only have time to occasionally drop by for a quick hello.

I skimmed the rest of his profile and hope started to bloom inside of me.

Yes, he was a lawyer, but he didn't specify which firm or spout off all the awards he'd collected since the age of three. This was the portion of the form where we were encouraged to brag about ourselves, so some inclusion of his accolades would make sense.

As I scrolled, there really were none. It was more a continuation of his interests.

Hiking, horse riding, reading, and sports—to name a few.

Just thinking of him in the sun—all sweaty with a ball glove on his hand—yum. Now that was something I could definitely get into.

I was no slouch in the athletic department either. This definitely made his profile more interesting than the others.

Good health. Good family history as well.

All around, life was passing me by. Literally. I stared again at the many happy families jostling past. The empty, desolate, trees would soon be filled with bright green leaves and blossoms. You could see the promise inside of them.

The hope.

This time, tears brimmed my eyes for another reason altogether.

For the first time in a long while, a feeling of optimism overtook me. A tiny seed of faith and expectation planted in my mind.

Thoughts of me pushing a baby stroller out in this very park next year at this time floated around, making me smile.

No, there wouldn't be a man at my side to look adoringly down at our chubby creation. Well, not in the traditional sense anyway.

But there would be someone there to be a fatherly role model at least. Even if he didn't show up often, at least there would be someone other than me who'd be responsible for the new life.

And pushing a baby carriage alone wouldn't be so bad.

In fact, my smile grew as my finger lowered toward the screen and clicked, 'accept'.

Almost immediately, my phone buzzed in my hand.

It was the in-app calling system. Once you were matched with someone and you accepted, the site allowed you to contact each other through the app.

That way, you didn't need to give out any personal information until you spoke and met and felt comfortable doing so.

Or in my case so far, never.

Dominic's handsome profile picture filled my screen, and I felt my heart leap with anticipation. Those blue eyes pierced mine, making me shiver.

I chewed my lip and hesitated briefly before I answered, "Hello?"

"Decided to answer?" a deep, throaty voice filled my ear, sending tingles through my body.

A small giggle bubbled out of me. "You just surprised me, that's all. I'd barely clicked 'accept' before the phone rang."

A short silence followed. “I’m sorry if I’m coming on too strong. My grandfather taught me to always go after whatever I want.” His voice left off with a loud sigh. “I’ve never—done anything like this before. You’ll have to forgive me.”

His apologies were too cute. And they seemed sincere.

“Nothing to forgive. And unfortunately, I *have* done this before.”

“Oh, I see. You have other, um, children?”

I let out another laugh, louder this time. “No, I meant I’ve met with quite a few prospects from the site already.”

“And, that was unfortunate?” he asked, more than a hint of curiosity in his voice.

“It was for me.” I exhaled, resting my elbow on the back of the bench and leaning my head on my hand.

He rasped out the most beautiful sounding chuckle I’d ever heard. It was husky and low and it wrapped itself around me like an angora blanket. “How so?”

Again I sighed. “So many ways.”

“Tell me one?” he asked—and the way he asked it, I would have told him anything.

“Are you sitting down?”

“I am. Give it to me straight, Sloane.” His tone was genuine, yet playful and it set me at ease instantly.

“First of all, I’ve had ten meetings. Ten. And each one of those ten men have taken me to the most expensive restaurants. They all wear their custom-made suits and watches that cost more than most people’s cars.”

He cleared his throat. “Go on,” he encouraged me, and I could hear ice clanking around in a glass on his end. Something made me very curious about what he was drinking.

“What’s in your glass?”

“Uhn-uh, finish your story first. Watches that cost more than most cars—”

His response surprised me, but I did what he asked anyway. “I—have a feeling that I’m not making the best of first impressions, Dominic. It’s not that I—” I stopped and cleared my throat, trying my best not to come across as too preachy.

“Money is necessary. Money is nice. But sometimes when people have too much of it—well, it has a tendency to turn them into—”

“Pompous, self-serving, bastards?” Dominic finished my sentence for me.

I laughed softly. “In a way. Not everyone. Not even most. But Heaven help me if I haven’t met nearly a dozen of New York’s most conceited males. It’s just been a really bad week.” I watched the families in the park walk and play.

Football and frisbees galore.

Smiling faces and loud, happy, laughter.

“I’m sorry, you caught me at a bad time. I’m not normally this negative.”

“Sloane, if this—works out—we’ll have to communicate our feelings effectively.” Honest to goodness, his throaty, low voice was doing a number on me. And his kind, accepting tone squeezed at my heart, making me feel a bit lighter than I had been.

I sat up and shook off the ‘woe is me’ vibe I had going on. Then I said, “True. So now you need to communicate to me what you’ve got in your glass.”

Dominic chuckled and I heard ice clink together again. “Whiskey on ice.”

Something warmed low in my belly as I thought about that handsome man sitting back in a comfy chair, sipping on a glass of whiskey. “Is that your drink of choice?”

“It is. What’s yours?”

“Meh, I don’t really drink. When I go out, I might get a wine or something.” And other than a bottle of champagne I kept in my fridge, I didn’t think there was any other kind of alcohol in the house.

There was a small pause before he spoke again, “Do you have a problem with booze, Sloane?”

Gosh, I loved how my name slid off his tongue like he’d been saying it his whole life. “No, no, not at all,” I told him, and it was the truth. Mostly. The one problem I did have with alcohol was that it went straight to my—lower regions.

Subsequently, that meant at certain times in the past I’d made less than stellar choices because of it.

Which was also a large reason I only cracked open the champagne to celebrate when I finished a large piece.

“There’s no alcoholism in my family.” That was likely what he wanted to know. “It’s just not something I partake in often. I keep up a fairly healthy lifestyle.” And not getting involved with jerks was definitely at the top of that healthy lifestyle plan. So when I was out on the town, I liked to have my wits about me.

“I do, too. For the most part.”

He took another sip of his drink, then said, “Talking with you is easy. I’ve enjoyed our conversation. Would you like to meet?”

Dominic

Christ, she was even more beautiful in person.

Her wavy locks hung where they may over her bare shoulders. She gazed over at me from where she was currently crouched down, petting some kind of mutt.

When she smiled at me, I swear to God my heart stopped.

When she looked up at the dog's owner and gave him the same smile, I wanted to punch the jerk.

Sloane quickly stood and did the cutest little finger wave to the dog before grinning and laughing at the man.

Yeah, I was going to kill the bastard.

After she walked away from them, she fumbled around in her purse for a second, taking out some kind of wipe for her hands.

I couldn't wait any longer, and who knew when another man with a dog might pass by. Striding up to where she stood, I said, "Sloane?"

She finished wiping her hands, then said, "Sorry, I didn't want to meet you with dog on my hands." Her voice was just

as melodious as it had been on the phone. The kind of voice I could listen to for hours.

Sticking out my hand, I smiled. “Not a problem. I like dogs.” I just didn’t like the way she looked at its owner.

Her hand found mine, and I swear I felt a zing of electricity flow up my arm to the rest of my body. I couldn’t stop myself from staring at her mouth. Those full lips of hers were quite distracting. The way her top lip dipped in the middle stole my attention. I’d never seen more beautiful lips than hers before.

“Nice to meet you, Dominic.” Yeah, this was going to be a problem. Hearing her say my name over the phone was one thing. Hearing her say it in person was something completely different. That word traveled straight to my dick, making me think of how fantastic it would sound tumbling out of those lips as I—

“Are you okay?” she asked, squeezing my hand harder with hers. “You look a bit flushed?”

I took a deep breath and talked myself down. This wasn’t a date we were on. All that would do was complicate the hell out of this situation.

“I’m great, Sloane. This is my first—meetup. While I think it’s a good thing you haven’t run screaming from me, yet—I have to admit I’m not sure exactly how to act.”

Her hand was still in mine, and I took the opportunity to completely engulf it with my other hand as well.

Her smile grew bigger and impossibly even more beautiful. “You act like yourself. Please? And for the record, I’ve only run screaming from one meetup. The other nine I acted completely civilized. I promise.”

I chuckled and she laughed.

Again, my heart stopped as I listened and watched her head fall back as the most alluring laughter poured out of that lovely mouth of hers.

Damn.

At that moment, I realized I wanted to do whatever it took—and often—to hear that sound again. “I’ll try my best not to scare you away.”

Her free hand grasped my arm, and I realized I was still holding her hand hostage. “Honestly, Dominic. Just be you.”

With that, I let her go. Feeling her hands on me as she said my name was a bit much. The last thing I needed to do was lean down and try to kiss her.

Which was exactly what I wanted to do right this second.

“Shall we?” I said, motioning my hand for us to start walking. Sloane nodded, and we settled into a slow pace.

“It’s nice being outside, not having to rush around because of the cold.”

I agreed. “Spring has definitely sprung,” I said, feeling more self-conscious than I ever remembered feeling before in my life. What a stupid thing to say. Inwardly, I berated myself for not coming up with something witty or interesting to dazzle her with.

“You’re a lawyer?”

“Yeah.”

She smirked up, her eyes questioning. “Can you expand on that, counselor?”

Christ, she was cute. “Not at this time.”

That made her laugh again. Which consequently made my dick hard again.

Christ.

“I’m serious, what kind of law do you practice?”

She wanted to know more, so I gave in. “The kind where I have to think of creative ways to get idiots out of even more idiotic situations.” Possibly the last thing I wanted to do right now was discuss the boring ass work I did for a living. Sloane kept looking at me, and I knew she wanted to know more.

“Corporate law.”

Her head nodded as those beautiful lips flattened. “You don’t like your job?”

I sighed, looking out at the park in front of us. The trees were still without leaves, but that would soon change. Give it a couple of weeks and blooms of all kinds would start.

More people were out walking and playing and enjoying the warmer evenings. “Uh, that’s a good question. I’m good—no, I’m great at my job.” And I was. That’s why they paid me the big bucks. “I think over the years, it gets perhaps more—difficult to deal with the same kinds of cases, over and over again.”

“So why don’t you switch and practice something different?”

The look of innocence on her face hit me straight in the gut. Her belief that it would be that simple to give up my career and start with a different practice after all this time, nearly broke my heart. Like it would be that simple to throw out everything I’d done in the last fifteen years.

“It’s not quite as easy as you’d think. I’ve been with this firm for a long time. I’ll be up for partner soon.”

Her eyebrows raised. “Wow, that’s a big honor. Right?”

“Yeah, it is. Anyway, tell me about what you do?” I spotted a few food trucks up ahead where we could stop.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Not much, really. I’m an artist.”

I bumped her gently with my arm. “Can you expand on that?”

The smile she gave me made me grin back at her like a fool. “I sculpt. I paint. And if I’m lucky, someone buys what I make.”

A breeze brought with it the smell of various fried foods. “How about you show me pictures of your work while we eat?”

Sloane

GOSH, he really was dreamy.

I snickered to myself as I took another bite of my noodles and fried rice.

“What’s so funny?” Dominic asked, his arm stretching out along the back of the bench we sat on.

I shook my head while feeling the distinct heat of embarrassment rise up my neck. “Nothing,” I said, wiping my mouth for any possible stray remnants of my supper.

He set his Lo mein down and twisted his body toward me. “Look, Sloane, if this is going to work between us, we need to

have honesty. And I don't mean the kind where you tell little white lies to spare the other's feelings."

I looked up into his bright, blue eyes, liking how that felt far too much.

"What we're doing defies convention. So really, none of those rules apply. I don't want you to feel awkward or embarrassed to say anything that's on your mind." His hand briefly touched my knee and my lower belly clenched. "What were you laughing at?"

He removed his hand and I gazed down at the mostly brown grass before peering back up at him. "I was thinking that you're a good-looking man—a good-looking *employed* man. I wondered how you of all people would have difficulty finding someone to have your baby."

Oh, my gosh, that sounded even worse than I'd thought. I mean, in my head it sounded awful, but saying it out loud more than confirmed it.

His eyes narrowed on me for a second before he burst out in loud laughter. Which again made my lower belly clench—even harder this time—as I stared at his manly neck.

"I could say the very same thing about you, Sloane." As his eyes trailed over my face, then down my body, I swear I felt his gaze like a physical, delicious, touch of his fingertips.

"I don't think so," I said, going back to digging into my takeout box. I grasped a particularly large piece of broccoli.

"You have to know you're beautiful."

Attempting to change the subject, I said, "My noodles and rice are fantastic. How's yours?" I pointed my chopsticks at him, the broccoli dangling from the end.

Dominic grinned at me. “Sloane, no bullshitting. You know you’re an exceptionally pretty woman. So again, I could say the exact same thing about you. Why haven’t you settled down with anyone?”

“I asked you first.”

“Fair enough.” He sat up straighter and moved a little closer. “I’ve had relationships, obviously. I’ll think everything is going well. In my mind, we know each other, and we want the same things.” His eyes looked out at the park as he paused for a moment.

“And then something happens. A switch goes off. And it’s like I wake up one morning and she’s—changed. Different. Overnight some alien has come in and removed her brain and personality and replaced it with—” He struggled for a correct word, likely looking for one that wouldn’t offend.

I decided to help him out. “A dragon lady’s?”

He exhaled and nodded. “Exactly. And then I feel like I can finally see things clearly. Which makes me wonder why the hell I couldn’t before.”

I did the only thing I could do and nodded.

“Your turn. What’s a gorgeous, creative woman like yourself doing on a babymaking app?” His eyes seemed so caring and warm. I imagined him speaking in that calm voice to a child and my heart melted.

“Do you have a few hours?” I said with a sarcastic laugh.

His face didn’t change. “Yes.”

Oh man, that hit me right in the gut.

No hesitation.

No constipated, uncomfortableness as he looked at his watch.

Just a quick, concise answer.

“Let me cut it down a bit for you,” I said and smiled over at him as I set my takeout box down. “I’ve never had much luck with relationships. But the last guy I was with—well, we dated for a long time.” I looked out at a group of men and boys seeming to congregate in the open grass near us. They were carrying bats and gloves.

“What I thought was a long time, anyway,” I said, turning to Dominic slightly. “As things went on—he seemed more distant. But I thought it was my imagination.”

“Why did you think that?”

“Because that’s what he told me. Over and over again, each and every time I’d ask him if something was wrong. Dozens of times—maybe more.” I gazed back over at the baseball game that was forming. “Yeah, more.”

This next part would take some creative wording, so I thought about it for a minute. “‘Sloane, it’s all in your head,’ and ‘Sloane, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m just busy.’”

“But he wasn’t busy?”

“Oh, he was busy all right. With my best friend.”

I heard his sudden, sharp inhale. “Christ, I’m sorry.”

My shoulders shrugged and I glanced back at him. “Thanks, it wasn’t fun.”

“How did you find out?”

A forced laugh burst out of me. “Seeing her riding him on my sofa was a big clue.”

His eyes instantly widened. “*Nooo*,” he said, his hand finding my shoulder and squeezing. “That’s awful.”

“Not for them. They got married shortly afterward. Of course, the fact that she was already pregnant might have had something to do with that.”

Dominic’s head fell forward and his hands covered his face. “You have *got* to be kidding me?” he groaned loudly, making me laugh despite myself.

“The real kicker was that he and I were supposedly ‘trying’. Maybe he just got confused about which one of us he was supposed to impregnate.”

He peered at me through his fingers as he moaned again, “It just keeps getting worse.”

“Tell me about it.” I sighed, seeing some kind of commotion going on with the baseball players. “So, that’s my story. It happened a while ago. And no, I’m not still stuck on my ex. And I’m not trying to get back at them for what they did to me.”

“I’m a natural nurturer and I’ve always wanted kids. I know I’ll make a great mother. I guess I’m just not a natural girlfriend or wife.” I let out a self-deprecating laugh. “When I heard about this app—it sort of fixed the glitch I seem to have in my life.”

I looked up at him. “I can afford to raise a child, I’m more than able to take time off afterward, and I don’t have to keep track of where his or her father is.”

Dominic shook his head and sighed loudly. “I’m so damn sorry that happened to you, Sloane. And I’m even more sorry I asked. That was a lot to share with someone you hardly know. But I appreciate you being honest with me.”

My stomach twisted at his words. “It’s embarrassing. Not usually something I open with.”

He laughed, and again I had the sudden urge to touch that thick, manly neck of his.

“Hey, mister,” a small voice interrupted our conversation. Our heads turned to the tiny, striped shirt-wearing boy standing in front of us—ball glove in hand.

“Well hello there,” Dominic said with a big smile. “What can we do for you?”

“We need one more on our team. Can you play with us?” The boy’s big brown eyes resembled a puppy’s.

“Uh,” Dominic said, looking from him to me and back again. “I’m with a—friend right now.”

“Please? Just for a half hour? We need the practice before our first game tomorrow.”

I whispered over to Dominic, “Go ahead if you want?”

Dominic’s eyes met mine for a long moment before he turned to the boy. “Who are you playing tomorrow?” Dominic asked as he rose up to his feet.

“Only the best team in our division,” the boy said, sounding and looking equally downtrodden. He really seemed sweet, I wanted to give him a big squishy hug.

“Says who?” Dominic asked as he set his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Says everyone?” The boy looked up at Dominic and squinted.

Dominic patted the boy on the back. “I bet they’re saying the same thing about you guys.”

The boy smiled a huge smile and Dominic returned it. "I'll be back," Dominic said as his head swiveled back to me. I nodded and couldn't help but grin.

I closed the boxes on our food and threw away the garbage. Then I made my way over to where the impromptu practice/game was currently happening.

The boy was right.

They definitely needed help.

Yikes.

Not that I was an expert on baseball, but I had most of the rules down pat.

And most of these boys did not.

If it weren't so darn cute, it would be sad. It really was impossible not to giggle at some of their antics.

A group of women sat off to the side. I'd glanced at them a few times while I stood and watched the boys. They were likely the moms. Currently, some of them were waving their hands and arms at me.

At least I thought they were calling me. I took a quick peek over my shoulder and saw no one. A loud whistle and a, "Come over here, girl," was shouted next.

Looked like I was being summoned.

I made my way over, wishing like heck they would have just left me to stand by myself. *What was I supposed to talk about with them?*

"Your man is fine," one of them said when I was close.

"You can say that again. You guys got kids who can join the team? Because I would not mind watching games if your

husband were helping to coach,” another mom said, making the other moms laugh.

“Tiara, when do you even come to the games now as it is?”

There was more laughter and agreement. “If *he* were coaching, I’d come. Baseball is boring. You can’t expect me to show up every time,” Tiara said, shaking her head.

“Oh, he’s not my husband,” I cut in, trying to save poor Tiara from her audience.

“Boyfriend?”

I took in a deep breath, knowing I’d have to tread cautiously. “Actually, we just met.”

Several shocked gasps later, one of the moms said, “Good job, Tiara, your kid interrupted their first date.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that?” Tiara said in an annoyed voice. “Sorry, girl,” she said to me and offered her hand. “I’m Tiara.”

“It’s fine, really. Not like we had anything planned anyway,” I said, reassuringly as I shook her hand that I wasn’t mad. Then she introduced the rest of the moms who all looked at me with sympathetic gazes.

“Where’d y’all meet?” Tiara asked, her eyes narrowing on me as though she were suspicious.

“Uh, you know, around,” I answered back, hoping this would be the shortest baseball practice in history.

Tiara stepped back and nodded. “Hmm, first date and it’s in a public park? I’m guessin’ you found him on one of them dating apps.” She rubbed her chin as she sized me up.

“Yeah, you caught me,” I said with a smirk. It wasn’t a lie, really. That was where we found each other—just not for dating.

“Wow, there are no guys who look like that on any of the apps I’m on,” Susan said, looking a bit deflated. “Which one did you use?”

Uh oh, I hadn’t expected this to be a quiz. That was why I abhorred lying. Once you told one lie, it was a steady fall into a hole you had to keep on digging.

“Like she’s gonna tell you where to find her man?” Tiara spoke up, therefore saving my behind. Then she whispered to me, “Susan’s addicted to those dating apps. Watch your back. She’s got shared custody and the weeks that Odin’s at his dad’s place, watch out. It’s one big party.” Her eyebrows raised in an all-knowing fashion.

After that interesting introduction, the chatter changed to talking about the boys and the game. No matter how much I tried to observe what the boys were doing, my eyes kept going straight to Dominic. He looked so at ease out there with the kids. You could tell they instantly liked him and respected him.

They listened to him and looked up at him like he was a god. Gosh, it was seriously adorable.

Every once in a while, I’d hear one of my new ‘friends’ comment about how hot Dominic was.

I had to agree, of course. Not that I said anything.

But what made him even hotter was watching how fantastic he was with the kids.

One little guy in particular just could not lock down which way to run. Watching him made my heart nearly burst. I

wanted to help him in the worst way, but man, was it cute.

Finally, one of the coaches sauntered up to our group. “Anyone want to give little Andie a hand? He’s having a heck of a time out there.”

None of my new friends said a word. Instead, they pretended to be extremely busy picking lint off their pants and examining their fingernails.

I raised my hand. “I can help him.”

Dominic

“**W**hat was she like?” Ronnie asked as she sipped on her coffee.

I lifted my collar and slid my tie around. “Uh, she was beautiful. Down to earth. Funny.”

Ronnie handed over the coffee she’d brought for me. God, I loved it when my BFF brought me my morning fix. I decided to abandon my tie for caffeine.

“Good. So, when does the babymaking stuff start?” Ronnie grinned and sat down on a chair in the living room.

“We didn’t discuss that. I think this is the ‘*getting to know you to make sure you’re not an axe murderer*’ phase,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee. “Besides, there are way more guys on the app than women. There’s no guarantee that she’d pick me.”

Ronnie let out a low laugh as she drank. “Then you’ll need to up your game. What did you guys do?”

I had the time, so I sat down and put my feet up. “We met at the park, ate from one of the food trucks—then played baseball.”

She frowned at me and lowered her cup. “Come again?”

“I had Lo mein noodles.”

“Skip to the baseball, wiseass.” Ronnie rolled her eyes at me.

“This kid came up to us and asked me to join their practice game,” I told her matter-of-factly, like it was no big deal.

Her hand grasped her chest. “Be still my heart!” Christ, Ronnie was dramatic at times. “You played ball in front of your new girl?” Her voice was breathless and exaggerated.

I rolled my eyes before I shut them. “She’s not my girl.”

Ronnie leaned forward. “Oh, she will be now that she’s seen you play ball. You are a studly beast out there. I told you what all the wives said at your law firm’s game last year...” Her eyebrows raised knowingly.

“Ronnie—”

“Dude, I’m surprised some of them didn’t actually try to bounce a quarter off your behind. They were relentless.”

I rebutted with, “Most of them regularly spike their water bottles.”

She held her index finger up and pointed it at me. “I will give you that. However, watching guys play baseball is hot.”

My eyes stared directly at her. “It was a kids’ league, Ronnie.”

Her head fell back for a moment, then she leveled her gaze at me. “Coaching little league? Ten times hotter.”

I sat back in my chair and took another sip, enjoying the bold, sweet flavor. “They did ask me back. I told them I’d think about it. I don’t really think I have time to fit in coaching

a bunch of kids.” And I really didn’t. More times than not I worked until after dark—and was up with the birds.

“Dommy, mark my words. This will get you points with your baby-mama. Volunteering to help a kids’ team will definitely up your standings with her.”

My shoulders shrugged all on their own. “They asked her, too. We’ve got one little guy who was having a hard time with direction. So, Sloane stepped up and was his helper. It was pretty damn cute.” That was underplaying it. A lot. Watching Sloane show little Andie where to run and when was hilarious at times.

Not to mention heartwarming.

The poor kid just did not have a clue.

But the whole time she interacted with him, she never let on that he was more of a liability than an asset.

Quite the contrary.

She made it fun for him—in her own perky, encouraging way.

“This is fantastic!” Ronnie shouted with a giant smile across her face. “You two work together on the team—get to know each other—boom! A baby shows up in nine months.”

Just then, my phone rang.

It was Sloane calling from the PitterPatter4U app.

I peered at the time and double checked that it was indeed as early as I thought it was.

Yep, it was.

I stood up and cleared my throat before I answered. “Hi Sloane,” I said into the phone while watching Ronnie clap her

hands silently and bounce on the couch.

“Sorry I’m calling so early, but I remembered you saying you’re an early riser, too,” she said, her voice sounding—cheerful.

I grinned to myself and answered her back, “You remembered correctly. What’s up?”

There was a quick pause before she continued. “The coach emailed us. Did you see it?”

I frowned and said, “Uh, I haven’t checked yet today.” And I hadn’t. Normally, I went through my emails on my way to work.

“I wanted to catch you before you left. I’m sure your days are busy, and I didn’t want to answer him back without speaking to you first,” she said, her voice hesitant.

“What does the email say?” I asked, curious about what she was talking about.

“He wants to know if we’ll help coach the team. I don’t know what to say. I mean, you and I just met, and this process is already awkward enough—I didn’t want to make it worse by forcing you to coach on the same team as me. I mean, I’d like to help them out. But if you’d rather do it and not have me there, I completely understand—” Her voice had quickly turned into nervous rambling, making me laugh at her expense. “Oh gosh, I sound like a fool. You have to stop me when I get on a tangent like that.”

I laughed louder while I walked toward the window. “Not a chance, I find it extremely entertaining.”

She sighed loudly, then said, “For real. You need to stop me. Anyway, now that I’ve displayed one of my worst habits, what do you think about the team?”

I watched a man walking his dog across the street and remembered how cute Sloane had been with that dog in the park. “I’d love to help coach. And if you want to as well, then I think you should. It’ll be fun—no matter what happens with the rest of our lives. We’re both adults, correct?”

She responded immediately, “I try my best most days.”

That made me chuckle. “Then I say we should be able to handle whatever the future brings.”

I thought the longer pause she gave me was adorable. “You’re sure?”

The constant grin I had on my face grew ten sizes. “I’m sure.”

“You have a lot more faith in humankind than I do, I think.”

I shook my head. “Not hardly.”

This time, she laughed out loud, and I breathed in that lovely sound like a balm to my soul. “All right, I’ll email the coach back. It was fun. Well, I thought it was fun, anyway. Poor Andie might think differently after having me help him.”

I ran my hand through my hair and thought about how kind and helpful she’d been to the kid. “You did a great job with that kid, don’t sell yourself short.”

“He was pretty cute. Clueless, but cute.”

There was a short silence before she spoke again, “So, as for us? For our—situation, I mean. Well, I don’t know about you, but, well—”

I cut her off, “Sloane, just say it. We’re being truthful with each other, right? Be blunt, say what you want to say.”

“I thought our first meeting went well. Really well.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and said, “Yeah, I agree.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. So, what do you think we should do next?”

I took a deep breath. “Umm, I don’t know. What were you thinking?” I asked, completely unsure of what to suggest.

“Maybe—we should see each other’s places? I mean, it might be helpful to see where we’re intending on raising a child—if we had one.”

I nodded my head, contemplating what she’d said. “Yeah, good idea.”

“Unless you can think of something better?”

I shrugged, unable to think of another suggestion. “To be quite honest with you, Sloane,” I said, turning around and seeing Ronnie there, on my couch. She was bouncing on her bottom, her arms pumping in the air. I’d completely forgotten she was even here. “I hadn’t thought much about what was—next. Conducting home visits seems like the next logical step.”

I rolled my eyes at Ronnie but that only seemed to encourage her ridiculous behavior.

“Do you want to come over here after the game? Or we can go to your place first if you like?” she suggested, her voice sounding a bit nervous. And for some reason—I liked that.

“Your place sounds great,” I said, suddenly feeling the most eager I ever had to visit someone’s house before.

“Okay, then. It’s a date. Oh crap, I mean it’s not a date, date. You know what—”

I let out a chuckle, because it was impossible not to. Her fumbling and backtracking were too damn cute. “Sloane, I get you. I’ll see you at the game, I’ve got to get to work.”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry for keeping you.”

I interjected so she’d quit with her apologies, “Sweetheart, don’t be sorry. Thank you for calling. See you tonight.”

We said goodbye and the second I hung up, Ronnie was on my ass.

“Dude, you were *totally* just flirting with your baby mama,” she said, picking her cup back up from the coffee table.

I took a sip of my coffee. “No, I wasn’t. In fact, I’m taking great pains *not* to.”

“And I’m just saying—you’re flirting,” she said in a dry, monotonous voice.

I shook my head before I guzzled a nice, long mouthful.

“You called her, ‘sweetheart’ *and* you laughed seductively.”

Damn, she was right about me calling her that. “I laughed. I did not, however, do it *seductively*.”

“Uh huh,” Ronnie said, crossing her legs and sitting back on my couch in an all-knowing manner. “All your lawyeriness isn’t going to get you out of this. You know I never fall for that. I heard what I heard, Mr. Lawyer Man. And you can’t change my mind.”

The woman spoke the truth and that was likely the reason she was my best friend. Both on the truth part as well as the fact she never fell for my lawyeriness.

“She was being all—cute and awkward. The ‘sweetheart’ just popped out. Also due to her cute awkwardness, I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. You would have done the exact same thing if you’d heard her,” I said, beginning to chuckle again as I remembered what Sloane had said.

“Can I just say one more thing?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Can I stop you?”

She smiled and said, “Nope.”

“Then proceed,” I said sarcastically as I sat on one of the stools at my kitchen island.

“I’m unbelievably excited to be a fly on the wall during this process.” The smile that formed on her face both intrigued me and scared me in equal measure. “Now, let’s go pick out what you’re going to wear for your first night of coaching, shall we?”

Dominic

“P oor Andie,” Sloane said while she wiped her forehead with the back of her arm. I watched as she tilted her head back and drank from her water bottle. For some reason, my eyes were transfixed on her pink, plump lips.

“You handled him perfectly. I’m fairly certain he thought he was the superstar of the game,” I said, tearing my eyes from her face for a moment so I could pack up my stuff.

The sound of her laughter rang in my ears, giving me a warm sensation all over.

Christ, I loved that sweet, melodious laugh of hers.

“Ah, the male ego is so easily convinced,” she said, shutting her water bottle and tossing it into her backpack.

A buzzing phone caught my ear, and I reached into my pocket. Nope, wasn’t me.

“Hi, how’s it going?” I heard Sloane say beside me. “Oh, no, I can be there as soon as possible.”

From the look on her face, something was wrong. I slung the shoulder strap over my arm and reached for her backpack. After I snapped it shut, I added it to my arm.

“Are you sure? Hmm, okay, I’ll text you back and let you know. Thanks, Mabel,” she said with a small smile on her face.

After she tapped her screen off, she looked at me and said, “I’m afraid one of the new foster kittens isn’t well. My friend agreed to babysit tonight for me during the game—that was her on the phone.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you need to head back?” I asked, feeling more than a little disappointed at the prospect of not being able to visit her place tonight.

She bit her lip and shook her head. “Nah, Mabel said she’s got it under control. But bringing in someone new might scare her when she’s already down. The poor, little fluffball has been having some difficulty adjusting. I mean, we could go to your apartment instead? Or just call it a night and reschedule?”

The thought of having her in my townhouse made my heart speed up. I gazed into her hopeful eyes and said, “Yeah, we can go back to my place if you want.”

A beautiful smile tipped up the corners of her lips. “Okay, great. Let me text Mabel.” As she texted, we started to walk. When we came to the street, Sloane put her phone away and peered over to our right.

One of the ball families were piling into a very expensive limo.

“Wow, can you imagine having *that* much money?” she said in a low voice. “I bet they own one of those expensive townhouses in the Upper East Side.” Her eyebrows raised up and down. Then her shoulders bounced a few times. “I wonder if it’s even possible to bring up a well-balanced child in that kind of environment nowadays?”

Shit.

I lived in the Upper East Side.

In a very expensive home as a matter of fact.

My driver was also waiting on the curb—waving at me.

From Sloane's tone, it was pretty easy to surmise this would not please her one bit. Before her phone call, I'd been about to tell her we could take my car to her place. She just lived in the West Village, which wasn't all that far from me.

But now, I was up the creek.

Without a driver, apparently.

Instead of answering her question, I asked her one. "I'm hungry. What do you say we grab some food before we get on the train?"

"Umm," Sloane looked around and checked her phone one more time, "yeah, sure. I could eat."

I felt sweat dripping down my neck and it had nothing to do with running around coaching the kids. At least now I had some time to stall and figure out what the heck to do.

All the wealth-hater vibes flowed off of Sloane when we'd watched that ball family leave with their driver. If she had even one idea of how rich I was—this whole babymaking thing might come to a quick halt.

A mature adult would take Sloane into a restaurant, sit her down, and level with her. Explain to her where the bulk of my money had come from and assure her I knew I would be a great parent.

I more than anyone didn't want my child to be raised like a poor little rich kid. I appreciated the value of hard work.

Still, I weighed the possible risk of losing out on this opportunity with Sloane.

To have found someone so—perfect, on the first attempt at this app was incredible. Granted, I hardly knew her. And I hadn't seen her place yet.

But the comfortable way we were together, seemed—unusual.

Parenting with a partner would be an eighteen year venture. I needed to choose wisely. And so far, Sloane gave off some great vibes.

I could be wrong.

This all might go completely awry.

As for right now, I wasn't willing to risk losing what might be a great partnership—simply due to the fact that I had money.

To me, there were bigger reasons *not* to make a baby with someone.

Being weeded out because I was wealthy seemed ridiculous.

“Italian okay?” I asked, nodding toward a small restaurant across the street. I'd spotted the red and green sign right away.

Sloane nodded and said, “I love Italian.” I was suddenly fascinated with the tiny, wispy hairs around her face as they blew in the light breeze. Part of me wanted to reach out and move them away with the tips of my fingers.

“Then let's go,” I said, grasping her hand as I stepped off the curb. The moment I touched her, a warm sensation ran up my arm.

She laughed lightly and held on. “I can cross the street on my own now.”

I gazed down at her smiling face and grinned back. “Sorry, reflex,” I said, attempting to explain away my behavior. Even still, I pulled her behind me as we hurried across the street.

Once we stepped onto the sidewalk, I reluctantly let her go.

I opened the door for Sloane, smelling a fresh, citrusy scent as she walked past me. My head may have bent closer to her hair as my nose inhaled deeply.

Definitely some kind of fresh, orange shampoo or perfume—that was instantly replaced by the aroma of garlic and spices.

Sloane inhaled deeply. “Oh, yummo. I wasn’t even hungry until right this second.”

“It does smell delicious,” I said as I peered down at her—rather unsure if I was talking about her or the restaurant.

“For two?” the server asked, grabbing two menus off the front desk.

“Please,” I answered, then touched my hand to Sloane’s lower back to usher her in front of me. She gave me a curious glance over her shoulder before following the server. I had to admit I felt a small thrill at just that tiny bit of contact.

Once we were seated and looking through our menus, I started getting even more nervous. *Where the hell was I going to take her?*

My place was still off the table.

If Sloane wasn’t into the rich lifestyle, she would not be thrilled with the location, cost, or luxury of where I lived.

No, I needed to take her somewhere else. But where?

Then, like a beacon of light on a dark night, my phone buzzed with a message. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw Ronnie's name on the screen.

A minuscule amount of hope filled my mind.

"Sloane, I'm sorry, but I really need to take this. Do you mind?" I asked her as I slid to the end of the booth.

Her head tilted slightly to the side as she said, "Not at all go ahead."

I stood and smiled over at her, then hurriedly walked out the door. Ronnie's phone rang twice before she picked up. "Hey, you back from your date yet?"

"It's not a date, Ronnie. Look, I don't have much time. I'm in trouble," I said, raking my hand through my hair as I paced beside the store.

After a few seconds of silence, she said, "You slept with her already and you need me to fake call you with an emergency?"

"Christ, no," I muttered into the phone, my eyes rolling back.

"You're going to sleep with her and you want me to call you in ten minutes with a fake emergency?"

I let out a huffing sound, "Very funny. It's a long story, but Sloane doesn't think you can raise a well-rounded kid in a wealthy environment. We can't go to her place tonight, so we're going to mine."

Another few seconds of silence before Ronnie erupted in a fit of laughter. "But—but—but—you're *loaded!*"

“I know that. You know that. But Sloane does not know that,” I said in an annoyed tone. “And if I want to remain a candidate for—you know what, then I need another place to take her.”

“Hmm, where are you now?”

“Brooklyn, the game just finished.”

“Right, I remember the field you’re at. I can send your driver the directions to a place I just got hired to decorate. It’s not too far from there, actually.”

I felt like a load had just been taken off my shoulders. “I can’t let Sloane know that I have a driver. And what if the owners are there when we show up?”

“Oh, I guess having a driver would out you, wouldn’t it.” She laughed loudly in my ear. “Just one owner and he’s my client’s son. *And*, he just happens to be out of the country during the remodel, so you’re in no danger of him being there.”

After I got all the details from Ronnie, I inhaled a big, deep breath and strode back into the restaurant. Sloane was quietly paging through the menu when I sat back down. “Sorry about that,” I said as I settled back into the booth.

Her eyes gazed up at me and she smiled. “No problem. I’m sure with your line of work this happens frequently.”

I picked up the cloth napkin and spread it on my lap. She’d assumed it was a work call and I was going along with that. But I also needed to make sure I tread carefully.

“It happens, but not frequently. I’m lucky enough to leave the office at the office most of the time. Occasionally, I’ll get a client who’s just more—needy than others.”

She let out a small laugh. “I can believe that.”

I cleared my throat and searched quickly through the menu. “What are you having?” I asked as my eyes skimmed the plastic pages. To be honest, I was so uptight about lying to Sloane, that my stomach was tied up in knots. Therefore, the last thing I wanted to do right now was eat.

“The stuffed shells look good,” Sloane said, pointing to her choice on the menu. She was right, it looked delicious.

And, since I didn’t have the bandwidth right now to make any more decisions, I said, “Sold.” Then I raised my hand to get the server’s attention.



OUR SUPPER HAD BEEN FILLED with comfortable small talk, mostly about the team and the parents. Sloane described some of the pieces she was working on, and it all sounded crazy interesting.

“I can’t wait to see your work in person,” I said while the server took away our plates and set the bill down on the table. Both of our hands reached for the tiny piece of paper, but I was quicker. “Let me,” I said to her. In no world would I let her pay.

Her eyes grabbed a hold of mine but I couldn’t read what was behind them. Until she said, “Can we go halves?”

I grinned and shook my head as I grabbed my wallet. “No, I’ve got it. I’m the one who dragged you here in the first place.” My hand hovered over my exclusive credit card, then I thought better of it. I didn’t want Sloane to know that I owned an ‘invitation only’ high limit card.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Dominic. But I’d feel more comfortable if I paid my own way.” Then Sloane slid some cash toward me. It had been a while since anyone had refused my offer to pay for anything.

As in—never.

And while I sat here thinking, I honestly couldn’t remember even one time that someone had done that. It gave me a strange—yet warm, feeling inside. “If you insist,” I said, then pulled out the meager cash I owed from my own wallet and set it on top of hers. I stood and grabbed our bags. “Shall we?”

Sloane

Either Dominic was nervous, or he had some kind of memory disorder.

Getting on the train with him was like guiding one of my small-town friends through the whole ordeal.

And then when it came time to turn in the direction of his apartment, he'd gone the wrong way for a while before realizing it.

I thought it was cute—how flustered he was.

I mean, to be honest, I'd spent two days doing a deep clean on my place. Not that it needed it, but I wanted everything to be perfect for when Dominic visited.

It felt like I was going on a job interview.

But that potential employer was coming over to your house, instead of you going to their office.

And instead of a job, I was trying to convince someone that my eggs were worthy of mixing with his—well, you know.

So, I understood Dominic's anxiousness completely.

If the tables were turned, I'd be just as jittery.

But I don't think I'd forget how to get to my place.

At any rate, we'd gotten into the building okay, but for some reason, he was now having trouble with the code to get into his apartment. I decided to leave him be for a few minutes and I moseyed over to the window at the other end of the hallway.

I ran my finger over the peeling, white paint and smiled.

My windows had looked like this when I'd first moved in. It took me forever to sand and repaint every one of them.

At first, it had seemed like such a great idea. By the time I was halfway done, I wanted to pack up and move to California.

Now, I loved my windows. It had definitely been worth the frustration.

"Sloane? It's working now," Dominic called to me, and I spun around to see him holding his door open.

"Great," I said, and hurried back to where he stood. I slid inside and the smell of paint assaulted my nose.

Dark, black paint apparently.

It was way too gloomy for this small space.

Dark colors on walls made the overall size of a place shrink exponentially.

But there were tricks and ways to gain back some of what you lost by adding in bright pictures and furniture.

Which it seemed Dominic had already thought of.

Kind of.

"Oh, these are—interesting," I said as I bit my lip and entered the living room. There were a few large pictures on the

floor, leaning against the walls.

Unless I was mistaken, the portraits were of different—saints. “These frames are beautiful.” My fingers grazed the gold, curly, engraved frames. “Where did you get them?”

The saints featured inside were a little—long-faced and sad.

Okay, more than a little.

All right, they looked downright miserable.

“Umm, you know, I’m not really certain at the moment. I’d have to ask my designer,” he said, touching the top of the small breakfast island that separated the living room and kitchen.

He frowned and immediately dusted off his hand.

I nodded and said, “They’d look amazing. Did you pick them out?”

His eyes focused on the paintings, and they seemed to flare a bit. “Ye—you know, I can’t remember if Ronnie chose them or if I did.”

I turned back to the pictures one more time.

They were definitely a bold choice.

Everything in here was.

Which surprised me a lot.

Dominic seemed so—nice and—middle of the road.

And this apartment definitely wasn’t.

Dark black walls.

Large portraits of saints.

And was that—“Is that a rosary?” I walked over to the jumbled mess on the floor. The beads weren’t actual beads but rough, sawed-off slices of a branch or small tree. It really was beautiful. The cross was made of two sticks, bound together by a dark piece of leather or material.

I loved the look of the raw wood connected by a large, golden, looped chain.

“No, no, just a really convincing replica,” he said as he cleared his throat. I turned my head to him for a second and saw how uncomfortable he seemed.

I stood and looked at him, and I couldn’t help but smile. “I’m sorry for the twenty questions. I didn’t know you were renovating. I’m an artist, so all of this is directly up my alley.”

Dominic’s arms stilled at his side as a small half-smirk formed on his lips. “It’s fine, really. I wasn’t expecting guests tonight—” he swept his arm to the side, “as you can see.”

I gazed around the rooms that were obviously not ready for company. The paint looked dry, but probably not cured enough to hang pictures on. “You should have told me you were in the middle of painting. We could have done this another night.”

His head shook, but that grin stayed. “It’s not a problem. From the looks of everything, it may be quite some time before it’s done.”

We both shared a nervous laugh and then I decided to take a quick trip to the washroom.

I couldn’t put a finger on what specifically the odd tension was between us—but whatever it was, I needed a break. “Do you mind if I use your washroom?” I asked, looking around for a door.

Incidentally, Dominic was doing the same thing.

Then he walked up to a set of white French doors that were closer to the kitchen. I followed him through, assuming his bedroom was in this room. “Bathroom!” he said with more enthusiasm than I’d expected.

He pointed as he strode around a small, twin-sized bed—complete with a small, white blanket and the flattest pillow I’d ever seen—toward the other side of the room. After Dominic switched on the light, he stepped out of the way and said, “I’ll be in the living room. Or the kitchen.”

I stopped myself from laughing—just barely. “I’ll find you, don’t worry.” I smiled at him as I passed by and shut the door behind me.

The bathroom was *really* under construction.

Underneath my feet sat bare, plain plywood screwed to the floor. I knew that contractors called this, “subfloor” because I walked around on my own plywood floor for weeks. It had taken forever until what I’d ordered arrived and the workers had time to install it.

Walking around on an icky subfloor really sucked. But the beautiful floors I have now were definitely worth the wait.

His sink was gone, and the plumbing had been capped off. He must be waiting for the flooring to be installed before getting the new sink put in.

Luckily, there was still a toilet.

The spot where a shower or tub would logically sit, laid empty except for more pipes and a drain. Yikes, poor Dominic. He really was in reno hell.

After I was finished, I noticed a spot in the wall that housed what looked like a recessed medicine cabinet. I may have spent a minute or two peering into it.

Sinus medications. More sinus medications. Ear drops. Eye drops. And more sinus medications.

That all seemed weird because I'd spoken to Dominic several times and been around him a few times now. And I'd never noticed any signs of a drippy or congested nose. "Huh, how strange," I said to myself before I opened the door.

I noticed that Dominic had closed the French doors, so I took a few steps toward his bed.

My head twisted to the side, and I tried my best to imagine how the heck Dominic even fit in this bed. I mean, his feet must hang off by like a foot.

At least.

The blanket on top looked—thin.

I felt sorry for him and made a mental note to buy him a decent comforter for Christmas or his birthday or something.

My eyes shot to a small, modest bookshelf in the corner. I was curious about what kind of books Dominic was into. Before I hurried over to look, I listened quietly for a minute.

It was quiet, so I took the risk and ran over to the bookshelf.

The first book I picked out was titled, "Chastity and You: How to Refrain and Why."

Umm, okay.

What?

I slid that one back onto the shelf and chose another.

"Making Celibacy Cool Again: 10 Simple Steps."

My mind scrambled.

Was Dominic—chaste?

I crouched down and quickly peered at all of the books.

Yep.

Dominic was definitely into a—calmer, less rigorous way of life than most people.

A clanging noise sounded from outside the French doors, and it made me simultaneously jump and nearly throw the book in my hand.

With my heart pounding like crazy inside my chest, I shoved the book back in its place, stood up, and caught my breath. I took a few, deep, cleansing breaths and headed toward the doors.

My mind was swimming with questions and conflicting ideas I'd had about Dominic. And I needed some time alone to process everything.

Instead of showing my confusion, I placed my fingers on the handles and pushed them down. That was when I saw Dominic opening and closing the cabinets in the kitchen like a crazy person on a mission.

“Looking for something?” I asked as I sauntered up to the tiny breakfast counter. It looked new, and when I swiped my finger across it, there was a thick layer of dust. Probably from the drywall prep they'd likely done before painting.

“Sorry, everything's in such disarray, let me wipe that for you,” he said, turning back to the kitchen cabinets and walking around in a full circle as he rubbed the back of his neck.

I smiled at his helplessness. “It's fine, really. Don't worry about it.”

His eyes met mine and I couldn't tell what was behind them. But something inside of me really wanted to know. I had so many questions that I didn't feel comfortable asking at the moment.

Like why he lied on his application on pitterpatter4U.com.

Now was definitely not the time to address any of that.

I'd go home, get my head together, and then think of how exactly to approach Dominic.

I walked around him and washed my hands in the sink—glad it worked, unlike the bathroom sink which was completely missing.

He sighed a couple of times and seemed at a loss for words.

Finally, I spoke up, "I should get going anyway. It's going to take a while to get back to my place. And honestly, I'm anxious to check on the kitten. I feel guilty for leaving my friend with a sick animal for too long."

His eyes settled on my face. "I can certainly understand that."

He grabbed his keys and insisted on walking me back to the train.

On our way, the conversation was a bit stilted. So, I blathered on about the art project I had up for tomorrow.

When we finally arrived at the train, things felt slightly more relaxed between us. Even though my mind was still racing.

Before the doors slid open, he said, "Look, Sloane—I'm sorry about tonight. I wasn't prepared for company."

I smiled up at him and said, “Don’t worry about it. Renovations suck, I understand.”

Then he nodded slightly and watched as I stepped on board and zipped away.

Dominic

“**A**ren’t you going to let me in?” the beautiful woman on my steps asked as I stood menacingly in the doorway.

“If I were still speaking to you, I probably would invite you in,” I answered her back dryly.

Ronnie rolled her eyes. “What is your problem now?” Her shoulders bounced up and down even with two coffees in her hands. “You should be holding me a parade today for saving your ass last night,” she said sourly as she gave me a small body-check to get out of the way.

I moved over and let her in. “We see things differently, I think,” I said, shutting the door and locking it.

I followed her into my living room where she turned and handed me a coffee. “You’re speaking in code. What are you talking about?”

“Speaking of codes,” I said, grabbing the coffee, “thanks for giving me the wrong one.”

She rolled her eyes again before sitting down on my couch. “Do you know how many projects I have on the go right now?” After a quick sip of her coffee, she added, “It’s amazing

I remember anything at all. Besides, I eventually found the right code.”

I shook my head and sat down on a chair. “Eventually,” I said in a near whisper, then a bit louder, I said, “*Eventually?* After *five* minutes of me awkwardly trying to use the wrong code?”

Ronnie shrugged and continued drinking. “I’m sure it all worked out.” When I didn’t answer, her eyes got round, and her jaw opened slightly. “It did all work out, right?”

“Ronnie, my friend. You sent me into an apartment—or more like a dungeon, with black walls—”

“Midnight Shark,” she interrupted me before I could finish.

Taking a deep breath, I finished, “And what kind of portraits were those? Saints?”

She screwed her face up as though she didn’t understand why I’d be the slightest bit annoyed. “Those paintings are gorgeous. That just shows your lack of taste. My client is—religious. He loves them.”

My eyes closed and I took an extra second to collect my thoughts. “What do you think Sloane thought when I couldn’t figure out the code to my own apartment?”

Ronnie tsk’d at me and set down her coffee on the table. “I got mixed up. I’m sorry, good grief, I’m only human and you didn’t exactly give me much notice.”

We drank our coffee in silence for the next few minutes. I could practically see the wheels turning in Ronnie’s head and it was driving me crazy. So, when she finally spoke, I was relieved. “You could tell her you’re experimenting with dark colors in your forties.”

I let out a loud sigh. “Yeah, let’s add on another lie to the big doozies I told her last night.” My eyes wandered toward the window where a group of birds flew by. “I can’t believe I got myself into this ridiculous mess instead of just being straight up with her about everything.”

“Was it really that bad?”

“Worse. I turned the wrong way after we got off the train. And I didn’t even know where the bathroom was in the apartment.” I let my head fall to the back of the couch. “She probably thinks I’m an idiot. Should I call her and confess?”

Ronnie set her coffee down on the table and started laughing.

Not just laughing—but doubled over, tears falling down her cheeks, unable to breathe kind of laughter.

I just sat there, staring at her as I drank my coffee. “I’m glad you think it’s so funny because trust me, it was horrifying.”

When she finally calmed herself down and used a tissue to wipe under her eyes she said, “I’m sorry, but you’re always so calm, cool, and collected. The thought of you struggling is—” then she broke out in another gale of giggles.

“She probably thinks I’m insane for not even knowing where my own bathroom is.”

More laughter.

“Okay, okay, enough,” I said, shaking my head as I sighed out loud at her. “Tell me, what I should do next? If you can stop laughing long enough, that is.”

“I’m stopping, I’m stopping,” she said, waving her hands in front of her face, fanning herself while she took deep

breaths. “Call her and take her temperature.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, and frowned at her, not knowing what in the world she was talking about.

She scooted herself forward and said, “Look, give her a call on the way to work. Listen to how she sounds and what she says—and how she says it.”

“Well, you cleared that right up,” I said dryly as I rolled my eyes slightly.

She took another sip of her coffee and in a rather sarcastic tone she said, “You’re welcome.”



“Hi,” Sloane said, answering her phone.

“Hi,” I replied, clearing my throat and hoping inspiration would hit me soon. I had absolutely no idea what I should say. But reaching out seemed like the right thing to do.

There was an awkward silence for a while before we both spoke at once, then insisted the other go first. “No, you go ahead,” I said, steeling myself for what might come out of her mouth.

“I was going to thank you again for taking me to your place on such short notice. I still feel bad about imposing on you during a reno.”

Relief flooded through me at her words, and I answered back quickly before thinking, “I’m sorry it was such a mess. I should have warned you.” And there I’d done it. I was fifty-fifty on whether or not to lay it on the line and tell her where I actually lived—in a big, expensive as hell, brownstone in one of the best neighborhoods in New York.

And not in the tiny, dark apartment that I showed her last night.

We didn't know each other very well and admitting to such a thing this early in the game might turn her off completely. So, I guess I was going to continue with this stupid lie.

"It wasn't a mess, it's just in the middle of a reno. But I think it says a lot about you as a person that you didn't think twice about taking me to your apartment."

Her tone sounded grateful and positive.

Which in turn made me feel even more relieved, yet umpteen times more guilty for how I'd deceived her last night. Here she was praising me for something I absolutely did not deserve to be commended for.

"How's your new kitten doing?" I asked, trying to change the subject, but also curious about how her pet was feeling.

She let out a breath. "Good, really good. Whatever it was, it didn't last long. In fact, if you want to come by tonight, it works for me."

I spun my chair around to look out the large windows behind me. I loved seeing the New York skyline and watching the busy traffic of the cars and people below. The vast number of buildings and their various shapes and sizes never ceased to amaze me.

"Tonight works. What time and do you want me to bring anything?"

Sloane

“**W**hy are you blushing? And what’s with the dreamy look on your face?” Mabel asked me as she scooped up the new, tiny kitty into her hands. She held the baby kitten close to her face, then kissed her soft, white fur.

I slid my phone onto the counter. “Pfft, I am not blushing,” I said, feeling my cheeks heat even more.

“Uh huh, who was that?”

“Dominic.”

Her eyes shot directly to mine, and a slow smile began to cross her face. “Dominic again? Hmm...” she hummed, “he must’ve had a good time on your date last night.”

I shook my head as I got out my sketching supplies from the large armoire in the living room. “You know it wasn’t a date.”

“Sloane, come on!” she bellowed, and I twisted my head toward her. “He took you out for supper, tried to pay for that supper, then escorted you back to his place. That sounds like a

date to me.” Mabel’s eyebrows raised up and down while she stared at me with a smirk on her face.

I turned my back to her and shut the doors of the armoire. My arms now full of art supplies, I headed to the island in the kitchen. “You know full well it wasn’t. Seeing each other’s homes is just the next step in this—process,” I said, letting out a louder sigh than I’d anticipated.

The frustration I’d been feeling since last night had confused me more than a bit. Discovering what was on Dominic’s bookshelves had shocked me, but I didn’t fully understand why.

I mean, yes, he’d apparently lied on his application.

Why he bothered to do that, I didn’t know.

After I dumped my sketch pad and charcoal sticks down, I settled onto my stool. I chose a well-used stick and opened up my pad to a blank page. Then I took a long, cleansing breath before letting the charcoal do its work.

“And what was his place like? You haven’t said?” Mabel asked. I glanced up briefly and saw her set the kitty down on her blanket and then pick up an insistent Lily piggie.

She was right about that, I had put off her many questions last night under the guise of being tired. I’d thanked her for babysitting, and after we’d talked about how the kitty was feeling—Mabel left shortly after.

“It was—a place. Small, but nice. He’s in the middle of renovations. So, it was a bit cluttered,” I said, my eyes barely able to keep up as my hand flicked around the page. Occasionally, I’d use my fingers to smear and smudge as I went.

“Did you have time to snoop?” Mabel asked, making my head snap to her immediately.

Our eyes met and we both smiled, then instantaneously started laughing.

My friend knew me too well.

“Maybe...” I said with a smirk on my face as I glanced back down at my sketch. I used my eraser to create some highlights on the picture.

“And?” Mabel shouted, apparently out of patience with me.

I peered up at her for a second before going back to my work. “Well, he seems to have some sinus allergy issues.”

“Eww, you never mentioned he’s sneezy and snotty.” Her voice was high-pitched and rather disgusted.

A small laugh escaped my lips. “He’s not.”

“Hmm, so the meds work for him?”

I shrugged and answered quickly, “I guess so.”

She was quiet for a while, and I managed somehow to forget that I wasn’t alone until she spoke again, “That can’t be all you found? Is he really that boring?”

I looked up at her and set my charcoal down on the page. “I did manage to find an entire book collection about the joys of being celibate.”

That was it.

Mabel set the tiny piggie down and laughed so hard I worried she might not be able to breathe. “You—you—have got to be kidding me?” Her face was a bright shade of red as she kept on laughing.

I shook my head.

“What—I mean—are you sure?” she asked, picking the piggie back up again while clearing her throat.

“They were definitely books on celibacy. Dozens and dozens of them,” I clarified, and picked a thinner piece of charcoal up to use. I needed it to make some sharper lines.

“Okay, so—you think he’s celibate?”

I gazed up at her and shrugged. “I’m not sure why he’d have so many books on the subject if he wasn’t.”

Her eyes widened and she sat down on the couch. “Ohh, I see. Did you have any—clues that he might be?” she asked, her voice much softer now—almost empathetic.

“No, because he didn’t check off that box on the form.”

“Huh,” she said, then stood and began walking toward me. “What do you mean?”

I took a deep breath and went back to my drawing. “On the app form, it asks you different ways you’d be willing to—make a baby. And he checked off—naturally.”

Her eyes widened and she bit her lip. “Oh, yeah, you told me that already. And now I’m not sure why I feel so disappointed. But I do. Maybe you should talk to him about this? Find out what his deal is?”

A loud puff came out of my mouth, but I continued concentrating as the white page turned several shades of black and gray. “No, there’s nothing to talk about. If this works out between us, we just wouldn’t be making a baby the old-fashioned way anyway.”

Mabel hesitated for a minute, then she asked, “What else was in his apartment?”

I thought about that and said, “Let’s see, there were three huge, portraits of saints in his living room. Oh, and a ginormous rosary made from like an entire tree.”

Her mouth formed a perfect O. “I see. So,” she swallowed and took a deep breath, “is he religious?”

I looked off to the side and then back to Mabel. “I guess? I really don’t know him that well. He wasn’t like quoting scripture during the baseball game or anything, if that’s what you mean.”

She nodded slowly. “Right, but he’s got rosaries, portraits of saints, and multiple books on celibacy.”

Mabel’s eyes held mine and just then it—clicked. “You think he wants to be a priest?”

Her lips kind of screwed up and her shoulders bounced. “I mean, from what you’re telling me—yeah.”

I frowned at her and sighed. “What the heck would a wannabe priest be doing on a baby-making app?”

Mabel’s eyes gazed up to the ceiling before landing back on mine. “Maybe he wants to have kids before he commits himself?”

I blew out a long breath. “Is that even allowed?”

She shook her head. “Heck if I know.”

We didn’t talk for a while, so I continued sketching.

And thinking.

Trying to make sense of all the jumbled information that rattled inside my brain.

Finally, Mabel spoke up, “Sloaney, I’m super sorry. I really hoped that maybe—he’d be your love match, ya know?”

My head tilted and I squinted my eyes as I added a few additional darker accents to the page. “This isn’t a dating app, sweetie. We all know the deal when we sign up. It’s to make and raise a baby together. That’s it.”

I smiled down at the image I’d created—feeling an odd mixture of happiness and sadness all at the same time.

“Mmm hmm, is that why you’re drawing a picture of him?” Mabel asked from behind me. “That is him, right?”

I nodded, placing my charcoal back into the box. “Yeah, that’s Dominic.”

“He’s H-O-T, hot, Sloane. You like him, don’t you?” Her voice and her tone were full of compassion—but I wasn’t sure why.

“Uh, I like him as a person.”

She shook her head slowly and set down the pig. “No, I mean as in you *like* him.”

“Pfft, of course not. I told you, this isn’t a dating app.” I frowned and thought about how crazy it was for Mabel to say such a thing. Especially since it wasn’t remotely close to the truth.

Yes, I liked Dominic in a friend way. Not in a romantic way.

Her hands landed on my shoulders, and I looked up into her watery eyes. “Sloaney-baloney, you only draw guys that you have the hots for.”

I opened my mouth, ready to protest, but she cut me off before I could get a word out, “I’ve known you since we were kids. You can’t lie to me.” Then she hugged me. Hard.

“*Oooff*,” I said as she squished me close. “I’m not lying. I don’t have the hots for him.” Even as I said that, something inside my chest squeezed—and it wasn’t because of Mabel.

“Liar,” she whispered into my ear, “I have the hots for him and all I’ve seen is your sketch.” She exhaled loudly and said, “Oh, Sloaney.”

Dominic

Her building was close, so it didn't take long to get there.

I had my driver drop me off a block away—there was no way I wanted to take a chance on Sloane seeing me with a chauffeur.

Especially after I botched last night's meet and greet so horribly.

A loud sigh escaped my mouth as I strode up to the doors. The white and gray brick on the exterior of her building had darker flecks inside of it and I immediately thought Ronnie would approve. I pressed the button for Sloane's apartment and waited a minute.

Nothing.

I pressed it two more times until she finally answered in a rushed, hurried tone, "Hi!"

"It's Dominic," I said into the speaker below the row of buttons.

"Come on up, I just got out of the shower. I'll leave the door open for you," she said, her voice trailing off at the end. A loud buzzing sound followed, unlocking the door.

I moved up the steps, the whole time trying my best not to imagine Sloane all wet—wrapped in a skimpy, fluffy towel. I let out a groan and kept marching upward.

When I reached the third floor, I turned and quickly found her door.

Setting one hand on the doorknob, I knocked with the other as I gently pushed on the dark, wood. “Hello?” I said, clearing my throat and stepping inside. I shut the door behind me then out of the corner of my eye, I saw something fly toward my head.

“What the—” I said, ducking down when a flash of white swooped at my head.

A loud squawk followed by bird chatter ensued. “Hello! Hello!” an extremely loud cockatoo said as he landed on the back of a chair.

I stood up and straightened myself. “Umm, hello to you, too?” I said, slowly stepping closer to the bird. He immediately began preening his long feathers.

“Oh, Freddie! Stop scaring my friends, will you?” I heard Sloane say in the distance.

My head turned directly to her—and my knees nearly gave out.

She stood in front of a tall door. Her hair was wrapped in a towel.

And incidentally, so was her body.

A fluffy, pink—probably very soft—towel.

It covered what it needed to cover, but it also showed her more than generous cleavage.

And her beautiful, long legs.

“Hello! Hello!” the bird known as Freddie squawked back in a much higher pitch than before.

Sloane widened her stance and pointed her finger at the offending bird. “Don’t you give me grief, mister. Be nice, do you hear me?” she asked her feathered friend before her head swung toward me. “He gets moody at this time of night, I’m sorry. I’ll be out in a minute,” Sloane said before spinning around and disappearing back to where she’d emerged.

Freddie kept quiet after that big display, choosing to listen to his owner for now.

I couldn’t say for certain or not, but I felt like he was staring at me and plotting another fly by at my head. Even still, I decided to take advantage of Sloane being gone, and explore her space.

I could have said snoop, but that was such an undignified word.

Turning my back on a homicidal cockatoo seemed like the wrong thing to do. But I did it anyway.

The first thing I nearly bumped into was an octagonal pen that appeared to house the kitten she’d been talking about the other night. He—or she, no longer seemed ill. In fact, it was currently playing quite cutely with a toy mouse.

I really wanted to pick the fluffy creature up, but I decided to wait for Sloane.

I wandered around, gazing at the many works of art hanging on the walls. I assumed most—if not all, were hers. If I was correct, it meant that Sloane was a hugely talented artist.

Some pictures looked bright and happy, like the one I stood in front of now. Big flowers, purple and pink that kind of bled into each other so you didn't quite know where one started and the other began.

The next picture was of the New York skyline.

Again, it was kind of abstract.

Kind of not.

The buildings were dark, but still almost shimmering in the distance. She'd used a series of different hues of blue and black for the night sky.

I'd seen many interpretations of the New York skyline in my life, but this one had to take the cake. I was surprised she still had it and not sold it to some lucky individual.

Next, I walked up to a shelf containing many different pieces of pottery. One more spectacular than the next.

A large vase caught my eye. Its triangular shape and jagged stars carved into it were interesting and so unique I couldn't help but run my fingertips over the rough, textured exterior.

The piece de resistance by far had to be the eye-stopping sculpture near the back of the room. It was made from some kind of glossy, deep blue material with green veins marbling through it.

Truly, this was magnificent.

Whoever the woman was that had modeled for her had been a curvy goddess.

There was no head on the statue, which was a crying shame.

I felt like I very much wanted to know who she was.

Her breasts were large and perfectly shaped, right down to her nipples. And her ass was absolutely a thing of beauty.

I peered around the apartment, making sure I was definitely alone.

Unless the noisy bird told on me, I could get away with it.

So, I did it.

I put my hands on the statue's ass. The cool marble felt soothing on my skin. I'd never admit it, but I might have rubbed the poor, frozen statue, just to see how she'd feel in the palms of my hands.

The answer was—fantastic.

Then, I went one step further and slid them around to the statue's generous bust. Yeah, double D's for sure.

“She likes it if you buy her supper first,” I heard Sloane say from behind me.

Oh, Christ, I'd been caught.

I removed my hands quickly from my apparent date. “Where does she prefer to eat?” I asked as I spun around to face Sloane. She had a wide, beautiful smile on her face. “Or I suppose the bigger question is, how does she eat?”

She laughed, tossing her long hair behind her shoulders. “Well, from the size of those thighs and booty, I'd say she figures it out.” Her tone was sarcastic and down-putting.

My eyes opened wide, and I vehemently disagreed with her as I turned back around and stared at the magnificent statue in front of me. Every one of those curves called to me. So much so, I found it difficult to keep my eyes off of it.

“Umm, from my point of view, her thighs and booty—and everything else—are goddamn fantastic,” I said, swallowing audibly. Christ, those breasts alone would make men weep.

I heard a small giggle, then I felt a light touch on my arm. “Why don’t you have a seat? I’ll start supper, if that’s okay?”

I spun around to her, and said, “Oh, you don’t have to feed me. But if you’re hungry I can order something in?”

It was still early—well, for me it was. Barely five o’clock in the afternoon. Normally, I didn’t eat until closer to seven.

“I’ll make a quick stir fry. Sit and relax, it won’t take me long. Then she turned and headed toward the kitchen.

After I finally tore my eyes from the perfect marble figure in front of me, I moseyed over to the couch near the far window. As I moved to sit down, a loud yell sounded from the kitchen, “No, no, not on there!”

I froze instantly and shot my vision to Sloane. She had one hand on her mouth and one over her heart. I frowned and stood back up, taking a closer look at the couch. “Oh, for Pete’s sake,” I said, peering down at the cushion I nearly sat on.

A green, bearded dragon stared back.

“Uh, actually, it’s Iggy,” I heard Sloane say in a slightly calmer voice.

“Hello, Iggy,” I said just as he decided to start climbing up the back of the couch cushion.

“He loves sitting near the window by the lamp, so he’s kind of claimed that couch for himself.” Sloane explained. And sure enough, I then realized that was likely why she had a large, gray blanket covering the couch—to keep it safe from crawling dragons.

I nodded and said, “I wanted a bearded dragon when I was a kid, but my parents wouldn’t let me.”

“Yeah, mine weren’t big on pets, either,” she said, sounding a bit dejected. “I would have killed for even just one measly goldfish.”

I left Iggy to find his afternoon heat lamp. “Is that why you foster now?” I asked, making my way to where she was currently chopping something on the butcher block topped island.

She gazed up at me and gave me a beautiful smile that I felt right in my chest. “Good guess, Sherlock,” she said, going back to what I now saw was an assortment of veggies.

“Yes, my powers of deduction are strong. It must be from all those years at college,” I joked with her as I grabbed the soap and proceeded to wash my hands after I folded up my sleeves.

“Did you go here?”

I nodded, then chose a knife from the block on the counter. “Yeah, I love this city. Never thought once about going anywhere else,” I said, stealing away the carrots she had sitting beside her. “How about you?” I asked, already knowing she had a degree, just not from where.

“Yep, here, too. And ditto on the not wanting to leave. I mean, I wanted to leave my parents’ house—which I did as soon as my grandma died and left me this place.” Ah, that explained it. I’d been curious about how an artist could afford a place in this building by herself. The fact that she’d inherited it made more sense now.

I wasn’t sure what she earned a year, but it couldn’t be enough to pay for all this space.

“I’m sorry about your grandma. Were you close?”

She glanced over briefly and kept chopping, as did I. “Thanks. Yeah, she was pretty much my favorite person in my family.”

I julienned the carrots in no time, then reached for the broccoli. “Families can be interesting,” was all I said, not particularly wanting to discuss that part of my life. I did however feel bad that the person she liked the most was gone.

“You can say that again,” she said with a loud sigh. “Thanks for helping. You have mad chopping skills.”

Her veggies were cut more uniformly than mine, but I did an okay job. “Stir fries are a specialty of mine,” I said, telling her the truth. “They’re quick and—”

She cut me off before I could finish, “You have leftovers for days.”

I laughed and looked at her. “Exactly. When you’re cooking for one, leftovers are key.”

We chopped in companionable silence for the next while until her bird started saying, “Go out! Go out!” in his loud, squawk.

Finally, Sloane had enough. “Fine, but not for too long. It’ll be dark in a few hours and then you’ll be a sitting duck,” she said in a huff as she stormed off to the window that Freddie was pecking his beak against.

While she stretched up to open the lock on the window, my eyes looked at the statue of the woman.

Then back to Sloane in her yoga pants and well-filled-out tight tank top.

Then back to the statue.

Then back to Sloane.

Oh, Christ.

I was a huge moron.

My head dropped forward, and I leaned onto the counter.

How exactly was I going to dig myself out of this awkward situation?

“Go, but be safe!” Sloane yelled as Freddie squawked excitedly back at her. I gazed up to watch him glide out the window while his mommy stayed behind and shook her head. “That bird is crazy,” she muttered to herself on her way back to the kitchen.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her body as she moved. She really was a knockout.

Then it hit me that I’d had my grimy hands all over her breasts and behind.

I mean—not in the literal sense, but still. That statue was her. I’d bet my balls on it.

And I’d felt up all the good parts.

And gotten caught red-handed.

“What’s wrong?” Sloane asked when she got to the kitchen sink and began washing her hands. My eyes traveled down to her curvy behind. I was certain the real thing would feel much better than the hard statue.

And the statue had felt pretty damn fantastic.

“I need to apologize.” I blurted out, turning to her as I leaned against the cupboard. She dried her hands with a colorful towel and peered at me quizzically.

“For what?”

I gazed in the direction of her twin and jerked my head. “For that. It just hit me that it’s you. Right?” I asked, raising my eyebrows and feeling like a complete jerk.

Her mouth opened slightly as a light blush rose up to her cheeks. “You figured it out, did you?” she said, unable to control the smile that spread across her face. “That’s very observant of you.”

She moseyed back to her veggies and continued chopping. I watched her for a moment, waiting to see if she had anything else to say.

When it was clear she had nothing more to add, I spoke up, “I am sorry. It’s a beautiful statue, Sloane. I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you—it—like that.” Oh man, I sounded like a complete dork.

“I didn’t feel a thing, I promise.” She laughed and smirked at me. “Don’t worry about it. I’m flattered, really. Besides, I’m the one with a naked woman in my living room. Not you. I mean, of course, you wouldn’t have one in yours.”

It was my turn to feel a hot flush rise up my neck now. “I don’t think Ronnie has plans to add any naked women to my living room.”

She nodded and shrugged. “I kind of guessed that,” she said in an almost all-knowing kind of tone that set my teeth on edge. Because of my job, I was finely tuned to not only what people said—but also how they said it.

“Why would you guess that?” I asked, perhaps a little more forward than I should have been. But I wanted her to explain what she meant.

Her knife slowed down before she stopped completely and looked at me. “Just that—you know—you’re not the kind of—

umm—guy who'd have naked women in his living room.” She shrugged then turned her back on me and meandered to the fridge.

“What kind of guy am I exactly?” I asked, and this time I used a voice I reserved for tough meetings or the courtroom.

She bent into the open fridge, and yes, my eyes shot directly to her ass.

Again.

After she straightened up, she said, “Are we really having our first fight about whether or not you'd have naked statues in your living room?” Her face was pinker now and her eyes stared straight into mine.

“If you want to have naked women in your living room, you're allowed. I just don't think they'd go well with your—” she stammered for a second before finishing her sentence, “decor. But I'm not your designer. You'll have to ask her, I suppose.”

She marched back to her spot and continued chopping.

Great. Now I'd really offended her.

Again.

I decided to turn around and keep at my task.

Neither of us said anything for a long while.

There was nothing I hated more than an awkward silence.

I kept thinking of something to say to smooth things over, but nothing came to mind.

Finally, Sloane spoke up, “Do you want naked women in your living room?”

I chuckled and said, “I’d like to assert my Fifth Amendment rights.”

She snorted and peered over at me. “That’s fine. You’re allowed to have naked women in your living room if you want. And it’s also okay if you don’t. Do you get what I mean?” she asked, her voice lower when she asked the question.

“I’m not entirely sure I understand, but I’m more than willing to forget we ever had this stupid conversation. What do you say? Can we drop it?” I asked, hopeful she was willing to take on another less controversial topic.

“Deal,” she said, shooting a cute grin over at me.

A knock at the door sounded. Then a louder pounding noise, like someone was using their fists.

“Hang on!” Sloane shouted, snagging a towel off the counter to wipe her hands with as she hurried to the door. There was more pounding before she got there. “Hold your horses!” she yelled, opening the door.

Oh wow.

Not horses.

But a—pig?

A beautiful brunette had rushed in carrying—if I wasn’t mistaken—a tiny, pink pig. “I’m sorry for interrupting you,” the brunette said, handing the squealing mammal to Sloane. “I’ve been trying to study for my exam tomorrow and she keeps crying for you.”

“Why are you giving your auntie Mabel such a hard time?” Sloane held up the piggie in front of her face, talking baby talk

as he grunted back his response. “It’s fine, Mabel. Come in and meet Dominic.”

I set my knife down and found a towel to wipe my hands on.

Mabel smiled and strode toward me. “Hi, Dominic. It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said holding out her hand.

I took it in mine and said, “Nice to meet you, too. It looks like you had your hands full?” I commented, nodding toward the pig.

“Lily can be a needy girl sometimes and nobody will do except her mommy,” she said, smiling up at me. She spun back around to Sloane. “Is it okay if I bring the others down now? I mean—since Lily is back anyway, it would be nice to have a quiet apartment to study in.”

“Yeah, yeah, bring the other troublemakers back,” Sloane said, snuggling up the now happy pig. “Hush, hush, you little momma’s girl.” She soothed and petted Lily.

Mabel was back in no time with her hands full. “Here you go,” she said, placing a white bunny on the floor, then two more kittens. “Have a nice evening!” And off she ran out the door.

The fluffiest bunny I’d ever seen hopped up to my feet and began sniffing with her/his pink nose.

“That’s just Luna, don’t mind her,” Sloane said as she somehow magically scooped the two kittens up with one hand. Then she deposited them both into the gated, playpen area.

“Can I pick her up?” I asked, hunching down to pet the ball of fur. She was incredibly soft.

“Of course. Watch out, though. She’s a snuggler,” Sloane called over her shoulder. I watched her sway to the fridge, still holding the pig.

I carefully picked up the bunny. She gave me no complaint at all. “Hi there,” I said, looking into her dark, brown eyes. Her nose kept sniffing and wiggling, making me chuckle.

I’d seriously never seen anything cuter.

When I held her next to my chest, she immediately started climbing up to my neck. I scrambled a bit, making sure she didn’t fall. And then she did just what Sloane had said—Luna cuddled right into my neck.

She was warm and snuggly, and kept trying to dig deeper into me. “You really are a lovey thing, aren’t you?” I said, petting her.

“One carrot, and you’ll leave Mommy alone to finish supper,” Sloane said from the kitchen as the refrigerator door shut. The pig grunted back her answer. “No more. Now off you go, you big baby.”

Sloane sighed as she walked to the sink and washed her hands.

“Why was Mabel babysitting? Are any of the animals sick?” I asked, making my way back to the kitchen.

She dried her hands and peered over at me. “Umm, I didn’t want to—overwhelm you too much on your first visit.”

I leaned my chin closer to Luna. “What do you mean?” I asked, not understanding.

“Well,” she said, setting her hands on the counter and leaning on them, “this,” her head nodded to the side, “is a lot for some people. I just wanted to slowly introduce you to the

rest of my—uh, family.” Sloane had the sweetest, guiltiest smile on her face.

“You were scared of what I’d think?” I asked, raising my eyebrows—completely taken aback by her statement. The one thing I didn’t take Sloane for was being self-conscious.

She nodded and said, “It can be a lot to take in all at once.” Her voice was quiet, still sounding unsure of my reaction.

“I think it’s great that you have a crazy house. It looks like a ton of work to look after everyone. But obviously, you do it well.” Luna nudged into my neck again and I held her tighter.

Sloane laughed, letting her eyes fall on the snuggly bunny. “They occasionally allow me to work, yes. You can put her down whenever you want. She loves attention, but she won’t whine like Lily.”

Then Sloane turned around and went back to making supper.

There wasn’t much left to do, so, I kept holding Luna. “I’ve never held a rabbit before. It seems odd that someone my age hasn’t.”

“No, not strange at all. Until I started fostering, I hadn’t even seen a domestic bunny before,” she said, dumping the veggies into a large wok. The steam rose up and her apartment was immediately filled with a wonderful, garlicky aroma.

My stomach started grumbling.

The way Sloane was handling the wok, you could tell she’d used it often.

And besides, I was enjoying playing with Luna.

Well, I wasn’t exactly playing with her as much as snuggling.

The bunny was warm and fuzzy. I loved the feel of her soft fur on my neck—and how every so often she tried to dig in closer.

I sat down on the couch—not Iggy’s—and leaned back on a pillow.

Lily oinked her way over to me, still happily chewing on her carrot. She poked my leg with her wet nose and it made me laugh.

“Are you jealous that I’m spending time with your sister?” I asked the tiny pig as I scooped her up and set her in my lap. Lily answered back with shorter snorts before she collapsed and let out a loud sigh.

The stress of my day was instantly gone.

In fact, I couldn’t even remember one thing that had happened today.

I closed my eyes, allowing the heat from the animals to soothe me.

The faint noises from the kitchen were comforting. It was nice to know someone else was in the apartment looking after what needed to be done.

While I just sat here and held the babies.

Sloane

Even with his mouth open and a faint snore emanating from the depths of his lungs—he was still the hottest guy I’d ever laid eyes on.

The fact that he was currently holding two of my babies ratcheted that hotness level to ‘Unfathomable’.

Supper had been ready for ten minutes, but I decided to let the three of them sleep for a while.

Luna and Lily likely didn’t need the extra Z’s, but Dominic probably did.

The stir fry would keep. I’d placed the lid on it and set the stove on low.

I slid my phone out of my pocket and took a picture of the three of them.

My heart nearly burst, but I didn’t really understand why.

But that was okay.

Feelings are feelings, and it was never wrong to have them.

I sat in the gold, velvet chair my grandma had left me and watched them for a few minutes.

Then inspiration struck, and I jumped up to grab my pastels.

When I sat down with my big sketch pad, I started drawing the sight in front of me.

I was generous and made sure to close Dominic's snoring mouth in the picture.

The protective way he held Luna and kept his hand on Lily warmed something inside of me that I thought was gone.

My head started to feel a bit dizzy—and I didn't think it had anything to do with not eating.

Dominic and Lily snored in unison, and it made me smile so wide I thought my face would crack.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there for—time always stood still whenever I was creating and “in the zone.” One of the benefits of being absolutely and fully immersed in my craft. I loved how time stood still as my hand shaded and drew the varying soft and hard lines of my sleeping subjects.

Drawing with pastels always felt like I was using lipstick on the page. The satisfying sensation it gave me as the stick slid effortlessly across the paper was divine. I blended the periwinkle of Lily's collar with the pinkish hue of her body.

I admired Dominic's forearms a little more than I should have—he'd rolled his sleeves up before starting to help me with supper. The only thing better than his forearms were his biceps.

Granted, I'd only seen half of them.

And only during baseball practice or games.

The T-shirt he wore then provided ample arm porn for me—and the baseball moms. I heard more than I wanted to as

they gossiped and admired their favorite assistant coach.

Not that I could blame them.

I felt a sudden blush travel up my neck as I thought about sketching Dominic without a shirt on.

He was definitely fit.

Like gym on the weekdays kind of fit.

I'd use either charcoal or graphite to accentuate the hard lines of the undoubtable muscles hiding underneath his shirt.

He would be a pleasure to draw.

What I wouldn't give for a sneak peek under his shirt right now.

"What the—" I heard someone shout and my blue pastel went sailing across the room out of pure fright. I bolted out of my chair, sending my sketch pad flying to the floor.

"Luna, you little stinker!" I exclaimed, diving for the furry, white bunny on Dominic's shoulder. A trail of liquid streamed down his shirt. I scooped her up and carried her quickly to the pen. "Now, stay in there and think about what you've done, little missy," I admonished the completely oblivious fluffball.

When I turned around, Dominic had set Lily on the floor and was in the process of undoing his buttons in rapid fashion.

"Oh crap, let me get you a towel," I said, looking around in a panic for something to use.

He chuckled as he spoke in a calm voice, "It's fine, I'll go clean up. Where's your washing machine?" He finished with the last button—making his shirt gape open—revealing the chest I'd just been dirty daydreaming about.

And it was far better in person than in my imagination.

As I suspected, Dominic obviously worked out.

His abs spoke of many crunches and planks.

Dominic pulled his shirt off—revealing the arms I’d imagined in my head.

Those were also far better in person.

“Sloane? Washing machine?” Dominic asked again, shaking me out of my staring contest with his chest, abs, and arms.

I was pretty sure I was winning, though.

I looked around like this was my first time in my apartment—not Dominic’s.

“Um, in the bathroom,” I said, feeling all kinds of flustered. I pointed him in the right direction and watched as he strode across the room.

“Oh, man, he’s hot,” I whispered to myself under my breath as he shut the door behind him.

Looking up toward the heavens, I asked for strength to get through the rest of the night—without looking like a complete fool.

“Is there anything else you want me to throw in? I hate putting one thing in the washer,” Dominic said, making me spin around to where he stood at the bathroom door—he’d opened it and I hadn’t even noticed.

He was wiping his shoulder and chest with one of my pink washcloths. His tanned skin glistened where he washed himself.

“Sloane? Did you hear me?” he asked, halting his movements and waiting for my answer.

Once again, I had to come up for air from my bare-chested, Dominic stupor. “Oh, yeah, sorry. Um, I think there’s a basket of whites on the floor?” I said, turning back around and walking quickly into the kitchen.

Now, I felt even more flustered. Not only because of how he looked—but because he didn’t want to waste water. There wasn’t much I hated more than wasting anything, so this got me right in the feels.

“I’ll look,” he said, then I heard the door close again.

I leaned on the counter and took a few deep breaths, trying to compose myself. When I finally got my head on straight, I washed my hands and dished out our supper onto the awaiting plates.

It had stayed hot even during Dominic and the animals’ naps.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door opened. “I put it on perma-press, is that okay?” he asked, emerging again with his bare, fantastic, muscular chest.

“That’s perfect, thank you. And I apologize again for Luna’s accident. That doesn’t usually happen,” I said, averting my eyes to where the naughty bunny lay sleeping in her pen—completely unaware of the havoc she’d caused. “Come and eat.”

He sat down and I avoided looking at him for as long as possible. “It’s fine, they’re animals. That’s going to happen sometimes,” he said, his voice sounding deeper than usual.

“Luna’s litter trained. I rarely have a problem with her,” I said, stabbing my fork into a large piece of broccoli.

“Sloane.”

“Mm, hmm?” I answered, still not looking up at him.

“Sloane.”

My eyes shot up, taking in his perfect, Adonis-like chest in front of me. “Yes?”

He stared at me and smiled a gorgeous, panty-melting grin. “It’s okay, really. I had a nice nap with her and Lily. It’s just a shirt, no harm done.” His voice and his eyes were captivating and soothing, I found myself feeling dizzy—and glad I was sitting down.

Dominic was a handsome guy.

But take off his shirt and place him a couple of feet away from me?

Yikes.

Hotness overload.

“Am I making you uncomfortable? I can get my jacket,” he said, moving like he was going to stand up.

I beat him to the punch, though.

I stood and said, “No, no, no, I think I have a spare shirt somewhere for you.” Then I raced off like an idiot to my bedroom.

After I shut the door behind me, I leaned against it and took a few deep breaths.

A half-naked Dominic was hard to take.

The quiet of my room was a blessing. I needed a few minutes away from his sexy, man chest.

Unfortunately, the quiet didn’t last long.

A loud knocking sounded directly against my back, and I jumped away from it like it was on fire. “Agh!” I screamed, holding my hand to my chest. When Mabel opened up the door, my head fell to my chest. “Oh, my gosh, you gave me a heart attack,” I whisper-yelled, motioning with my hands for her to close the door.

“Umm, why are you hiding in here when you’ve got all that hot out there?” she asked quizzically, stepping further into the room.

I collapsed to the bed and threw my arm over my face. “That’s exactly the reason I’m in here,” I said, shaking my head back and forth.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, coming to sit beside me.

I peeked at her from under my arm. “It’s too much to take.”

She frowned at me. “Again, what are you talking about? And how did you get him to take off his shirt? I thought he was celibate?”

“He is celibate, that’s the issue. And he’s sans shirt because Luna had a whoopsie on it.” I explained as I sat up and leaned back on my hands.

Her eyes shut as she nodded her head. “Oh, Luna was trying to be your matchmaker.” She giggled, and I couldn’t help but laugh along.

“No, she was being a bunny. And I’m in here hiding from Dominic’s Greek god torso while looking for a shirt for him to wear.”

She burst out laughing even more now. “I have a feeling none of your boho blouses will fit.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, reaching underneath my pillow and pulling out a shirt. “This will work just fine.”

Mabel yanked it out of my grasp and surged off the bed. “Is this—is this—oh, my gosh, it’s—”

“Don’t say his name! You’re not allowed to say his name!” I yelled at her as I covered my ears with my hands and shut my eyes.

“Fine,” she said, pulling on my arm. “Does this belong to, ‘He-who-shall-not-be-named’?” She opened the T-shirt up to take a closer look. “Oh, crap, girl,” she said looking up at me with nothing but pity in her eyes. “It’s totally his.”

I stood up and grabbed it away. “So what? It’s just a shirt that I like to sleep in.”

She wrenched it out of my hands and ran toward the window. “You swore to me that all of his crap was gone from here! We saged the crap out of your apartment and workspace. I can’t believe you lied to me.”

Mabel was right.

We’d burned sage in here until my eyes had watered, trying to rid the bad vibes from everywhere—he’d—been. But I had secretly kept one shirt.

“I washed it,” I said, squinting my eyes and shoving my hands on my hips.

She frowned at me, then quick as a wink—opened my bedroom window. “We did all that cleansing, but you still kept this,” she shook the offending blue T-shirt in her hand, “in your house. You re-contaminated your environment.”

Then she stuck her hand—and the T-shirt—out the window.

“No, stop!” I whisper-yelled, holding my hands up as I walked slowly toward her. “I need it,” I said, keeping eye contact.

“You’re not strong enough to get rid of it. I have to do it for you, now,” she said, matter of fact. The T-shirt blew in the breeze, and I swallowed hard.

“Look, I need it,” I said, getting closer to her, “just for tonight, okay?” I said in as calm a voice as possible, hoping she wouldn’t make any quick moves.

She shook her head and let out a big huff. “Listen to yourself, Sloaney. You’re a freaking addict. And I’m here to help. This,” she said, shaking the shirt more vigorously this time, “is the reason your Root Chakra is blocked, and you can’t hold a new relationship. If only I’d have known sooner.”

Mabel looked at me like I was pathetic, and it made me roll my eyes. “I’m not blocked anywhere. Give me the shirt—just for tonight. And then you can burn it or tar and feather it—or whatever. I really don’t care. But I need it now, please.” I begged her, holding my hands together.

“One more night will only postpone the inevitable, my friend.” She tilted her head and pursed her lips.

“Yes, but it will also stop me from jumping that man out there in my living room,” I whispered and pointed at my door, trying to get my point across.

Her eyebrows raised and her mouth opened slightly. “You —”

“I have a crush on him,” I said as I watched her smile an ear-to-ear grin at me. “So what? It means nothing. He’s nice, and handsome—and he fell asleep on my couch with Luna on

his chest and Lily in his lap,” I blurted out, not even knowing what I was saying.

To my relief, she pulled her hand—and the shirt back inside. “Aww, poor Sloaney,” she said in her baby voice. “Did you tell him how you feel?”

Now it was my turn to frown at her. “Why the heck would I do that?” I threw my hands up in the air.

“You should be honest with him.”

My shoulders slouched forward. “Why? So that things can feel awkward? No, thanks. He’s a great potential father, and I’m not going to lose him because I—accidentally—developed a crush on the poor man. It’s not his fault he’s so kind and—hot.”

Mabel’s voice lowered and she said, “You know, I found this book in my grandma’s bookcase. It was about a priest—well, a wannabe priest. And anyway—stuff happens,” her eyebrows waggled, “if you know what I mean.”

I did know what she meant. “He gave up the priesthood for the heroine?”

Her face froze in place and her mouth opened and closed like a codfish gasping for air. “I mean—technically, no. But it could happen.”

I shook my head. “Mabel, Dominic and I aren’t going to have a romantic, happily ever after like in your book.”

She bit the corner of her lip. “I mean—technically, this book didn’t *exactly* have a happy ending. But that doesn’t mean you and Dominic can’t.”

Mabel.

The forever optimist.

Even when faced with a celibate, wannabe priest—she insists on weaving a perfect, romantic ending for me. “You’re impossible. Now, throw me back my shirt.”

Mabel let out a loud giggle then chucked the T-shirt at me. “Fine,” she said, holding up her index finger at me, “one more night, but that’s it. And then we sage the heck out of your spaces again.”

I caught the shirt and gave it a sniff.

It seemed to pass the smell test—I’d just washed it a couple of days ago. And I always shower before bed, so it should be relatively clean.

Not like I had any other options at the moment.

It was this shirt—or nothing.

Just Dominic’s bare, gleaming, perfect man chest.

“Fine. You can burn this, too, if you want.” I shook the shirt in the air. “I just need it to get me through until his shirt is washed and dried. Like an hour or two at the most.”

She gazed at me skeptically with her mouth pursed. “Fine. And then it’s all mine.”

“Yes, mom,” I spouted off condescendingly as I shook my head. Mabel hated it whenever I played the “mom” card, and I knew it. That was why I did it.

“Hey, that’s not fair. I’m not being your mom, I’m simply informing you of how horribly you screwed up your Karma,” she said, hands on her hips and looking defensive.

I let out a small laugh. “Sweetie, I think that ship sailed a long darn time ago. Now tell me what you came over for?”

Mabel wouldn't have interrupted my supper "meeting" with Dominic unless it was because of the animals—which she already had done—or some other emergency.

"I locked myself out. I went for study food and forgot my key." Her hands slipped off her hips and a sheepish look replaced the annoyed one.

I frowned at her for a second. "The extra keys are on the hook beside the door," I said with a tip of my head, telling her something she already knew.

This was hardly the first time Mabel had locked herself out.

It wasn't even the first time this week.

"I know, I know," she said quietly, with a guilty edge to her voice. "But when I saw Dominic without his shirt on—and he said you were in the bedroom," a huge smile formed on her lips, "Well, I was hoping—something—had happened." Her eyebrows bounced up and down.

"Oh, Mabel," I said as I strode up to her, "my sweet, romance-loving friend." I gave her a quick hug and she returned it.

She let out a cute sigh. "I can't help it. You deserve someone awesome."

"You read too many romance novels," I stated the truth that we both knew.

Her arms pushed away from me slightly. "There's no such thing as reading too many romance novels."

"You're right," I said as I gave her a smile, "keep reading and believing in happy endings." I stopped myself from adding, "For as long as you can."

Saying that to someone like Mabel would be like telling a four-year-old there was no Santa or Easter Bunny.

We all needed something positive to cling to.

Hope that there was a Prince Charming out there for each of us.

I already knew there was no such person.

I'd learned that the hard way.

After I let go of her, we sauntered out of my room.

Mabel waved her goodbyes to us—and the animals—and took off back to her place.

“Here, I found something that might fit,” I said and tossed the T-shirt to Dominic.

He caught it with ease and held it out in front of himself. His brows knit together as he read out loud, “Pothead?”

There was a giant pot of coffee in the middle of the shirt.

I shrugged and tried to laugh it off. “Yeah, stupid, I know. But that’s all I’ve got aside from tank tops and fluffy blouses.”

He stood up and put the shirt on.

And let me tell you—it was darn, crying shame.

Like, a crime against nature.

Covering up that perfectly sculpted man chest should definitely be illegal.

It had been many moons since I'd had anyone in my bed.

Quite honestly, it hadn't been much of an issue.

Until now.

Being around Dominic had awoken—well—some kind of beast.

A hormone beast.

I suddenly felt even more flushed than before. I sat back down at the table and picked up my fork. “I hope it fits—” I said, looking up as Dominic pulled the hem of the T-shirt over his abs.

The whole point of giving him the shirt was for him to cover up and look less hot.

Instead, the opposite occurred.

Dominic’s biceps nearly exploded out of thin, almost see-through material. He wasn’t built like a roid-head or anything. But those arms of his were making me swoon.

Thank goodness I was sitting down.

The shirt stretched across his chest, threatening to burst the seams—holding on with just a thread and a prayer.

“Oh, boy,” I muttered as my mouth began to water.

“Yeah, it’s a little tight,” Dominic said before he sat down again. “Is this yours?” he asked, looking down at his chest.

“No, it’s—” I started but then corrected myself, “it was my ex’s.”

His eyes squinted at me. “So, your ex is the pothead?” His voice held a bit of concern in it.

I smiled over at him and gave him some reassurance. “Yeah, it was kind of a play on words. He liked pot and I love coffee,” I said, pointing to my huge, far too expensive, espresso machine in the kitchen. “Aside from a time or two in

high school, I never—partook. But my ex never gave up the habit.”

He nodded at me and I felt like his eyes were trying to pull more information from me. “Can I ask you a question?”

I chewed a piece of broccoli and swallowed it while I nodded.

Dominic cleared his throat. “He hurt you, right?”

I couldn’t help the laugh that burst out of me at that enormous understatement. “You could say that.”

His eyes narrowed. “Then why would you keep his shirt? If it were me, I’d probably burn the stupid thing.”

My stomach clenched and more than a hint of embarrassment ran through me at his question. “I—I don’t really know. I meant to get rid of it a long time ago. I’m not sure why I held onto it.”

“Are you still in love with him?” he asked, his voice low and careful. His body was still.

I laughed louder this time and sat back against my chair. “No, not one bit. Trust me. You don’t even have to return it. Just throw it out when you get home.”

I could tell from the look on his face that he didn’t believe one word I’d said. “Look, I didn’t keep anything else that belonged to him. I gave him that for Christmas one year—and it was a good memory, I guess. Please, don’t read anything else into it.” I let my hand drift across the table and overtop of his.

He shocked me when his hand grabbed mine and held it securely. “I understand bad breakups. If this is all too much for you, I completely get it.”

The feel of my tiny hand engulfed in his large, manly hand was absolutely divine. And the sweet, endearing look on his face made my heart break. “I dealt with the breakup a long time ago. I’m good. If I wasn’t ready to move on with the next part of my life, I wouldn’t have signed up to the app.”

When he let my hand go, I almost whined. “I had to ask,” he said, digging back into his supper and dropping the subject completely.

Or so I thought.

“He must’ve been a small guy, though?” Dominic said right before he curled his arm up, flexing for me.

I bit my bottom lip and held in a loud groan at the sight. “He wasn’t the biggest guy around, no.” I somehow managed to peel my eyes off his muscles and finish my supper.

Dominic

Watching her run around after the kids on the team—laughing and having fun—had quickly become a new kind of torture for me.

After my visit last night, I ended up going home in that stupid T-shirt she'd given me.

Both of us forgot about my shirt in the washing machine.

Well, truth be told—I'd remembered.

It wasn't like I wanted to wear it.

But I'd noticed Sloane's eyes continually shooting toward my arms.

I had great fucking arms.

And they looked even better in the mini T-shirt Sloane had given me to wear.

The one that smelled exactly like Sloane—close up.

The shirt that I may have sniffed an unhealthy number of times—then grudgingly thrown in the washer late last night.

Two things surprised me about this.

Okay, three.

First, the fact that Sloane had even kept one memento from the guy who'd broken her heart.

That was seriously—not right.

Secondly, the obvious fact that her ex was a tiny guy. In my mind, I'd imagined some huge, handsome, hunk of a guy who couldn't keep it in his pants.

When apparently, he was just a small guy who couldn't keep it in his pants.

Anyway, thirdly, thinking of any guy actually wearing that shirt out in public—well, he just had to be a special kind of douche.

On my short, three block jaunt to my awaiting driver—I couldn't have Sloane seeing me jump into my car—at least a dozen guys asked to high-five me with a, “Bro, yeah.”

I was no “pothead” as the shirt proclaimed.

But they didn't know that.

And fourthly—yeah, I just realized there was a fourth—I didn't understand why I'd thoroughly enjoyed Sloane's eyes on my muscles.

I could nearly feel her hands touching me, caressing my skin.

Yeah, I liked that far too much.

That was a very, very bad thing.

If I started to have feelings for Sloane—other than “potential mother of my unborn child” feelings—I could screw this up for both of us.

And I definitely didn't want to do that.

Sloane's place was a kid's dream come true.

All of her foster animals loved her, and it didn't take long to see how every fiber of her being was maternal. She mothered her temporary animals as though they were her forever children.

Doting, but also correcting them when they were naughty.

The ideal mother.

Born to be a mother.

I was mostly certain I wanted things to work out with Sloane even before my visit to her place.

But afterward—yeah, after seeing how she lived and how she treated her pets—I *knew* I needed things to work out with her.

All I had to do was try my best not to screw up before the deal was made.

Sloane came jogging up to me, her backpack bouncing on her shoulder as she hurried. The natural smile on her flushed face made me grin.

Even after dealing with a bunch of rowdy kids, she was still happy and cheerful. “They are totally not prepared for the game tomorrow,” she said breathlessly as she caught up to me.

I chuckled and nodded. “You are right about that.”

She laughed and shrugged off her backpack. “The funny thing is,” she said, opening the zipper, “I don't think the kids will even notice. But I have a feeling the parents will.”

Her hand quickly slipped inside and pulled out my shirt that I'd washed at her place. “Here, before I forget.”

I took it and remembered I'd brought hers as well. After I dug it out of my bag, I threw it to her.

She gazed at it in her hands, and the smile suddenly fell off her face.

Then she surprised the shit out of me.

Sloane crumpled the shirt in her hands, walked over to the nearest trash can, and dropped it in.

When she turned around, her face didn't hold a look of sadness or remorse like I'd been expecting.

Nope.

Her face was smiling larger than it ever had before.

And I swear, she practically floated over to me. If her feet touched the ground, I'd be damn surprised.

"I'm hungry. Wanna go eat?" she asked excitedly, her eyes happy and clear.

What I wanted to do was lean over and take those beautiful, pink lips with mine.

God, she was cute.

"Yeah, same place?" I asked, hoping she'd agree. Just thinking about that Italian restaurant made me suddenly smell garlic.

"Sounds good to me."



THEY SAT us down at a small table. The place was bustling, but not so noisy that we couldn't talk and still be heard.

We were looking over our menus, but my attention was elsewhere. I'd decided it was time.

Time to ask the question.

I set my menu down again so I could wipe my hands on my shorts. I was more nervous now than when I'd taken the bar exam.

Sloane was talking animatedly about some of the kids.

But I couldn't concentrate.

I'd made up my mind.

It was time.

Time to ask.

It was going to feel awkward—however, it would feel that way no matter when it was brought up.

And it was the entire reason we were doing this, after all.

She shouldn't be surprised or anything.

Should she?

Was it too soon?

Should I wait another week? Or two?

A month?

When I finally couldn't take the suspense anymore, I blurted out, "Sloane, I-I want to make a baby with you."

Her mouth fell open as she stopped talking, and her eyes slid beside me and up.

"Okay, I'll come back. You sound busy," our server said before she cautiously backed away.

Oh, Christ.

My timing was impeccable.

I covered my face with my hands as I leaned onto the table.

How embarrassing.

I'd just announced to Sloane—and the waitress—that I wanted to make a baby.

I could hear Sloane's beautiful giggle, but I felt too mortified to look at her again. "I'm just going to leave now," I said, my voice sounding muffled through my hands.

She laughed louder now.

A set of long, graceful fingers pulled on my hands. "You are not."

I allowed her to move my hands down to the table—but she didn't take hers away. Instead, she did something that surprised me.

Her fingers slid around mine, and tightened. The sweet smile she gave me hit me right in the center of my chest. "I want to make a baby with you, too."

I felt the weight of a three hundred pound boulder lift from my shoulders. My eyebrows raised as I cautiously asked, "You do? Are you sure?"

"Am I one hundred percent sure?" Her head tilted in the cutest way, making me want to lean over the table and kiss that adorable grin off her face.

"No," she said, and I stopped breathing. "But," her hands squeezed mine, "I don't think anyone is ever perfectly sure about this kind of thing."

I started breathing again, and nodded at her, agreeing completely with what she was saying.

Having and raising a child together was a huge deal.

An incredible, life changing event.

“The only thing I want—” she took a deep breath, “the only thing I need from you is honesty. I think if we can give each other that—well, this will work out just fine.”

I agreed full-heartedly, and I told her so, “I can give you that, Sloane. I promise.” And I knew I could absolutely give her honesty. “We’re going to make great babymaking partners. I know it.” Everyone else in the restaurant disappeared. It was like only Sloane and I existed.

“I think—I think it’s more of a feeling. You know?” Her eyes squinted at me, and her nose crinkled up.

Christ, she was cute.

“Yeah, I know,” I answered, feeling my hands hold hers even tighter now. “I have more than a feeling that you’ll make a great mother, though. I know it.”

Her glassy eyes gazed at me. “Thanks, Dominic. I think —” she said, then corrected herself, “I know—you’ll make a great father. And I’m excited I finally found someone who’s not a lying dick to make a baby with.”

“I see you’re still busy—” the server said, ducking back out of our conversation. Neither of us had even noticed her approach the table again.

Sloane and I looked at her, then at each other.

Then we both burst into laughter.

Sloane

“Can’t we both use the same lawyer?” I asked as we took the train down to the doctor’s office. We were packed in like sardines—which would have normally been gross and made me want to punch someone.

But whenever we’d sway, or someone had to push by—I’d inevitably get shoved into Dominic’s body. He’d kept an arm around me after the last jerkface had motored on through, nearly toppling me onto the older woman behind me.

Well, first he’d call the jerkface something a lot more severe—then he’d exchanged spots with me, so any new on boarders would have to pass by him first.

I was a feminist and all that.

But holy cow, his act of chivalry made my darn knees weak.

He gazed down at me with a curious look on his face. “You need your own lawyer.”

“I don’t see why? And maybe if we share one, they’ll give us a deal?”

He tossed his head back and let out a throaty laugh. “Oh, I’m sure they would. But no, you need to have your own. It’s always best to have someone in your corner that you can trust.”

“I trust you,” I said, staring at him as the train came to a stop and I teetered into him more than I needed to. He smelled so good—all spicy manliness.

I really couldn’t help it.

His arm convulsed around me. “Do you know how many times a day I hear that from people? Not that they trust me—which, I mean, of course, they do. But that they started out whatever business venture completely trusting the other party involved? The one that eventually kicked them around.”

I frowned at him, feeling sorry for the job Dominic had to do every day. It must be really crappy to work with angry people all day long.

I’d never be able to handle it.

“Are you going to kick me around?”

He chuckled again, his strong body vibrating against mine. “I’m not. You need to protect yourself, Sloane. And I don’t want you coming to me nine months down the line saying I tried to take advantage of the fact that I’m a lawyer.”

That kind of stung.

“Do you really think I’d do that?” I asked him incredulously while I glared at him.

He let out a long sigh. “No, all I’m saying is that I see the results of how well-intentioned agreements go south. Every day, the same thing. And I don’t want that for us.”

“I don’t want that for us, either,” I said, suddenly feeling sulkier than ever. He was the professional in this case, though.

“You’re far too trusting.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” I muttered, having instant flashbacks of times when I was indeed far too trusting. Like with—

Forget it.

I wasn’t going there.

Not today.

We were on our way to the doctor to find out the next step in our babymaking journey.

Dominic had wanted to go right to the legal aspect of our deal—of course. While I couldn’t wait to talk to the doctor.

So, we compromised, and I made a doctor’s appointment.

Okay, it wasn’t exactly a compromise.

But what could I say? I was excited.

Anyway, Dominic was the professional in this case, though. I suppose it might be wise to listen to him and take his advice. “Fine, I’ll get my own lawyer. Any suggestions?”

He smiled down at me. “Yeah, I can point you in the right direction.”

His smile was contagious, and I couldn’t help but grin right back up at him.

Not too long later, we found ourselves face to face with the fertility doctor.

I’d had a quick ‘once over’ with a nurse practitioner, getting some blood tests and an initial check up done.

Dominic had gone to a different room for his.

Now, we were sitting across from the doctor.

“Sloane, your results look great,” she said, looking at me over the top of her glasses. “And once we can collect a semen sample from you, Dominic—and don’t be embarrassed, many men aren’t able to perform in our offices—we might have a better understanding of why you’ve been unable to conceive so far.”

I was no prude.

But hearing her discuss Dominic and his failure to perform—and oh, my gosh—semen sample—I felt my cheeks heat.

If I could have dug a hole, climbed in, buried myself, and forgotten all about why we were here in the first place, I gladly would have.

Instead, I sat there, at a loss for words.

Dominic cleared his throat before he spoke, “This is not your typical relationship, Dr. Diaz. Sloane, and I aren’t together romantically, however, we’ve decided to have a baby and raise it together.”

Her jaw circled, opened, then made a clicking sound. “Okay, I see. And how long approximately have you been trying to conceive?”

“Like a day,” I blurted out, wanting to save Dominic from any more embarrassment.

Dr. Diaz frowned and tipped her head to the side. “One day?”

I shook my head and giggled stupidly. “No, I mean we just decided to make a baby, like yesterday. Or the day before?” I

tried to remember. My brain had gotten foggy with all the excitement.

“Like Dominic said, we aren’t together romantically. I’ve never even seen him naked,” I laughed nervously, “well, I’ve seen him half-naked, but that doesn’t really count.”

I realized how stupid I sounded, but I was helpless to stop the verbal diarrhea exiting my mouth. “Oh, that sounded bad —” I snickered and snorted, “It was his top half. Just his chest.”

I set one hand at my waist and one above my head. “Like, here to here. But that’s it. Just his man chest—so, no—you know, funny business or anything. My bunny peed on his shirt, and he had to take it off.”

Yeah, the oversharing train had left the station.

And I knew it.

I tried to end it.

“Of course, you have to wash a shirt after that. And he doesn’t keep clothes at my house. I tracked a shirt down for him, but it took me a hot minute. Well, okay, it didn’t really. It was my ex’s shirt that I still slept in every night. That’s probably not the healthiest of activities, right?” I asked her, but Dr. Diaz remained motionless, staring at me.

“Wearing his shirt to bed, I mean. Not the bunny pee. Not that animal urine is healthy.” I laughed, sounding like a machine gun.

“I realize that. I was referring to me wearing my ex’s shirt. But, that’s all figured out now. Don’t worry,” I reassured her, pushing my hands out into the air. “The shirt is in the trash. So, we’re all good.”

Finally, I shut up.

My cheeks were flaming, and I was praying I'd somehow just melt into this comfy chair so no one could see me.

Dr. Diaz removed her glasses, and looked at me with a cautious expression on her face. "I'm going to recommend therapy." She turned her face toward Dominic. "For you both."

Dominic

“**M**aybe let me do the talking this time?” I leaned over and whispered in Sloane’s ear so no one else in the elevator would hear.

She glared up at me, as she’d done every time I’d brought up her major doctor visit foible.

It still made me laugh when I thought about her trying to explain our situation to the doctor.

“Very funny,” she muttered back to me with a completely unamused expression on her face.

“I just think our chances with this doctor might improve without you discussing bunny urine, or my bare man chest.”

She thwacked me in the arm, and shook her head. “I’ll try my best.”

That only made me crack up even more. “I could take this shirt off, if it makes you more comfortable?” I teased, grabbing the hem of my T-shirt.

Sloane grasped my hands, and halted my efforts. “Would you stop?” she shrieked in a high voice.

She was so close now, that I could smell the flowery scent on her hair. The feel of her soft, warm hands on mine—and her breasts as they pressed against me in this small, cramped elevator—made me feel less than friendly.

She gazed up at me—our bodies and faces near—my eyes looked from her eyes to her plump, pink lips, and back—and her eyes focused directly on my mouth.

There was a moment.

A minuscule, fleeting moment when I thought she might rise up on her toes and kiss me.

Or I might bend my head a few more inches until my lips touched hers.

It was there—and gone when the elevator pinged, and we had to file out. I set my hand on her lower back, guiding her.

“I think it’s around this corner,” I said, reluctantly removing my hand. We walked in silence until the right door popped up. “Dr. Houston,” I said, raising my eyebrows as I began to open the door.

Sloane’s hand landed in the middle of my chest. “So, I can’t mention bunny pee or your fantastic man chest? Anything else?” Her playful voice made me smile, but the heat of her touch traveled through my body, causing immediate, swelling in my pants.

Damn.

I wanted to kiss her.

The way she was looking at me right now, I’d put big money on the fact that she wanted the same thing.

“Excuse me,” a nasally voice called beside us, completely breaking the moment.

A woman in a bright pink dress, and large baby belly stood, waiting to get by.

“I’m sorry,” I said, scooting Sloane the rest of the way through with me. We walked up to the desk, and checked in.

The last few weeks with her had been incredibly fun. It took time to get an appointment with another fertility doctor.

And like Sloane said, “That sucked big hairy donkey balls.”

But what didn’t suck big hairy donkey balls, was meeting Sloane at the ball field and coaching the kids. Sometimes, we’d go for a long walk after. Other times, I’d take us out to eat.

One Saturday, she even convinced me to go baby furniture shopping. She couldn’t decide on a crib—but there was time for that.

She had me over a couple of times a week for supper. Each time, she cooked, and I’d start helping. Then after a few minutes, I’d get distracted by the animals.

Sloane didn’t seem to mind.

And I think the animals had almost as much fun as I did.

Just being around Sloane—no matter what we were doing—was delightful. I could feel our special bond growing each time we were together.

So, yeah, waiting for this appointment had been difficult.

But spending time with Sloane had been exactly what we needed.

The waiting room was pretty full.

There weren't enough chairs available, so we had to sit separately.

Before I'd even settled, my phone pinged. I peered down at it in my hand. It was a message from Sloane.

"I've never seen so many pregnant women in one place before. This is kind of freaking me out. Doesn't this freak you out?"

I gazed up to find her staring straight at me, indeed looking a bit nervous. I chuckled, and messaged her back. "No, it doesn't."

"Why?" she sent right back.

"Because, I'm hoping it's contagious."

Sloane let out a tiny squeak of a laugh. "I don't think that's how this whole thing works. Did you miss that day in fifth grade health class?"

"Nope, I paid close attention. Trust me." After Sloane read what I'd sent, she looked over at me, and gave me the sweetest smile that warmed something cold in my chest.

I hoped our kid lucked out, and had her smile.

Our names were called shortly after. I followed Sloane, who followed the nurse.

She weighed Sloane, and noted her height.

Then we shuffled into an examining room.

Sloane hopped up on the table, and the nurse took her blood pressure, temperature, and all those fun things.

"The doctor will be in shortly," the nurse said, shutting the door behind her.

“Okay, those women were huge!” Sloane said, her eyes wide, looking slightly frightened.

I frowned at her, and said, “They weren’t huge, they’re pregnant.”

Her eyebrows rose to dangerous heights. “Their stomachs were enormous.” Sloane grabbed the small pillow on the examining table, and stuck it under her shirt, against her belly. “Can you imagine me being this big?” she said, her voice full of amazement.

“Hello, I’m—” a woman I assumed was the doctor said. She stopped dead in her tracks, and laughed loudly. “Well, I see I’m not needed here after all.”

Sloane’s cheeks turned pinker than I’d ever seen as she slowly removed the pillow from under her shirt. The sheepish grin on her face made me laugh.

“No, it’s just a pillow. We were hoping for a human,” Sloane replied, which only made the doctor laugh harder as she sat down on a small, roll around stool.

“Let’s see what we can do about that.” She smiled at us. “I’m Dr. Houston.” We all exchanged pleasantries, before she got down to work.

Staring at the file in her hand, the doctor asked Sloane a few things regarding her cycles, and general health. “All your tests came back great. I don’t anticipate any issues regarding your ability to conceive. However, with IVF, there’s never any guarantee, of course.”

Then she launched into the fertility plan.

To be quite honest, it seemed like a maze of medications, shots, exams, and ultrasounds. I found it difficult to keep up.

The doctor stopped for a minute. “I know this must all seem overwhelming right now. That’s what my team and I are here for. We’ll guide you through this every step of the way.”

Sloane still seemed more than a little apprehensive. She bit her lip, and asked, “Okay, so—what’s the first step?”

Dr. Houston smiled at both of us. “Sloane, you’re young. We’ve got time on your side. If you want to try a few cycles of intrauterine insemination, I think that would be a great place to begin.”

“That’s what I read about, too. I’d be more comfortable starting with that,” Sloane said to the doctor, then she gazed over to me. “What do you think?”

Sloane’s tone was quieter—almost bashful.

I enjoyed seeing this side of her.

“Whatever you want to do is fine with me,” I said, trying my best to be supportive.

She gave me a cute smile before the doctor started to speak again.

“All right, then. It’s settled,” Dr. Houston stood as she scratched away on a clipboard. She handed me a piece of paper, and said, “Before Sloane can do her part—we need you to do yours.”

It was an information sheet on semen sample collection.

Not much tripped me up.

Over the years, because of my work, I’d become fairly adept at handling whatever was thrown at me.

But, this, in office, semen collection thing was doing a number on my head.

My brain—just to clarify.

The previous attempt in the last doctor's office hadn't been—successful.

“If you could give us a sample before you leave, we'll get our lab techs on it, pronto,” Dr. Houston said, then she shook our hands.

After she left, Sloane looked over at me. “I'll um, wait for you in the—you know—uh, waiting room.” Her cheeks were red, and the awkwardness between us was growing.

As it would until I actually finished—what I needed to do.

I nodded, and folded the paper in my hand. “Sounds good, I'll meet you there after—”

“Yes!” Sloane nearly shouted as she rose to her feet. “After you do your—” she struggled for her next words, “thing, I mean you know, not your thing, thing, but your—nevermind. Um, I'll go wait for you.”

She turned around, then nervously pulled out a white, plastic bag from her purse. “Oh, I almost forgot,” she said, spinning back to me. “I bought these for you. Just in case you needed some—you know, uh, help.”

Sloane dumped the bag, and its contents into my hand. After that, she ran out of the office like it was on fire.

I frowned, wondering what she could have given me. When I opened up the bag, my eyes froze open in shock.

She'd bought me naughty magazines.

A lot of them.

As I rummaged through the collection, I stumbled upon a men's magazine.

I mean, a magazine with all men.

None of them wore clothing of any kind.

Why would she give me a magazine like that?

And not just one.

Several.

Did she buy those for herself, and forget to take them out?

I looked further through the stack and saw that she'd included an equal number of magazines with women in them.

Very, very naked women.

Those might be helpful.

It would be a waste not to at least glance at them.

Right?

After I was—done, I handed the jar over to the nurse.

Then it was my turn to run out of there like it was on fire.

Sloane was in the hallway, scrolling on her phone.

Our eyes met, and I swear I felt myself blush for possibly the first time in my life.

“Hi,” she said with a sheepish smile. “How’d you do? Or, you know, I mean—were you—” She shook her head, looking more than flustered. “Did you—”

Christ, I loved her adorable awkwardness. Her cheeks were flushed to a beautiful pink. “All systems were a go,” I said as I gave her a quick wink.

“Oh, you mean you were able to—uh, I mean last time when we came to the doctor, you couldn’t umm—”

“Come?” I cut her off before she talked herself into the ground anymore.

Her eyes widened as she bit her bottom lip, and nodded. “Yeah.”

I laughed, and handed her the bag of magazines. “It must’ve been your choice of literature.”

Sloane’s eyebrows nearly hit her hairline. She took the bag, and said, “Oh! Were they helpful?”

“Yes, very inspirational, thank you.”

“Good,” she said, her shoulders sagging with what I’d bet was relief. “I wasn’t sure what kind to, uh, you know,” she said, leaving her mouth open without saying anything further.

I set my hand on Sloane’s back, encouraging her forward. “Apparently, you knew exactly what would work.” We strolled down the hall to the elevators in slightly stilted silence.

“You can,” she said, holding out the bag of naughty magazines to me, “keep them—for later—or whatever. If you want.”

I pushed the button for the elevator, and smiled.

Big.

“It’s okay, really. They did the trick.”

The doors swished open, and I guided her inside. She frowned up at me with her lips pursed tightly together. “No, really. I mean, it’s not like I’m going to have a use for them anyway. You should just keep them.”

She tried to push the bag into my hand. I lifted both of my hands, and said, “I’m good. I saw, I came, I conquered. Mission accomplished.”

Her eyes drifted down to my fly, and I nearly cracked up laughing.

Sloane realized she'd been caught—and squeezed her eyes shut. Luckily the doors opened again. “You take them home. Some of those magazines are pretty hot—you might want to check them out later,” I said, nudging her in the arm as we exited the elevator.

“Are they?” she asked, looking at me with her nose crinkled up. God, she was so cute when she did that.

I stared at her, unsure of what to say next. “I’m sure you’d find one to your liking.” I teased her again, hoping we could drop this topic.

“Oh, any suggestions?” She smirked up at me.

“Not particularly.”

Then, she shrugged her shoulders, tied the handles on the plastic bag, and promptly dumped it into the next garbage can we walked by.

Sloane

“**G**ood grief,” Mabel said as she peeked over my shoulder. “Are you going to take all that stuff?”

My stomach twisted, and churned the more I read about all of these medications. “If we want to make a baby, I guess I’ll have to,” I said, my voice sounding almost undecided to my own ears.

But, Dominic, and I had decided we’d do this.

We were going to make a baby together.

And, in order to do just that—I was going to be putting all of this—stuff in my body.

“Do you even know what all of that is? I can’t pronounce half of it.” Mabel was not lying.

The product information sheets lay around me like wrapping paper on Christmas morning.

Mabel picked up a few, and sat down beside me on the couch. “Whoa, look at all the possible side effects on this

one,” she said, reading off some of the more scary, possible reactions.

“Stop!” I cried, throwing my hands up in the air.

Right at that moment, Freddie took the opportunity to swoop down. He snatched the paper right out of my hand as he mimicked me. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

Mabel burst out laughing. “Maybe take that as a sign?”

I let out a long sigh. “Oh, Freddie. What am I going to do with you?” I watched while he landed on his perch by the window. He still hadn’t let go of the paper in his hooked beak.

Mabel set her hand on my arm. “I mean, I can see you taking this stuff if you’ve already tried—everything else. But, you haven’t.”

I knew what she was saying—because the same thoughts were running through my head.

The decision to start on this fertility road really was daunting. For the most part, I carefully watched what I ate, and drank. I tried to live as “clean” a life as possible.

I hated to take anything for a simple headache.

And now, I had a mountain of meds before me that I couldn’t even pronounce.

“This is the only way I can make a baby with Dominic, though,” I said in a semi defeated voice.

Back at the doctor’s office, we’d had a moment or two when I thought he was going to lean down, and kiss me.

Which was silly.

Because he didn’t think of me like that—he couldn’t think of me like that.

But, I'd also realized something—I thought of him like that.

I'd really, really, really wanted Dominic to bend down, and kiss the life right out of me.

I knew that would never happen.

And somehow, for some reason, it made me incredibly sad.

Mabel slid her hand off my arm, and sat further back, curling her legs underneath her. “You deserve the best, Sloane. Don't forget that, okay? I know this is the path you've chosen to take—and I respect your decision. But, I'm your friend. I know what a fabulous person you are—and how much you have to offer someone.”

I smiled at her, and said, “You're too nice, Mabel. But, I made a commitment to go through with this—and I'm going to do it. I promised Dominic. And for real, any kid that has him as a father is pretty darn lucky.”

“Lucky! Lucky! Lucky!” Freddie screeched as he continued to chew the drug product paper that he stole from me.

“That bird—” Mabel said with a grin.

“I know, I know.”

Dominic

I TOSSED the keys down on my kitchen island and threw my jacket over the stool.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get rid of this nagging, unfamiliar feeling.

Guilt.

I took off my tie and tossed it on my coat. Next, I undid the first few buttons on my shirt.

Damn.

My chest still felt tight.

Just like it had ever since Sloane, and I left the pharmacy.

She had to do so much to prepare.

All I had to do was look at a dirty magazine, and open a lid.

I'd offered to help with whatever she needed—but, in typical Sloane fashion, she told me she'd handle it.

Which only added to my guilt.

Here she was, doing all of the heavy lifting—and all I had to do was sit around, and wait.

Wait for Sloane to take the medications, and proceed with the fertilization.

Wait for Sloane to find out how rich I really was. Because, one day she would. Then she'd hate me—just like she hated other rich people.

And wait for Sloane to find out I didn't live in that tiny, one bedroom apartment. That I'd lied to her in the hopes she'd choose me to be the father of her baby.

And lastly, wait for Sloane to find out that I was in love with her.

Because I absolutely was.

Christ.

I suppose most men would be thrilled to be in love with the future mother of their child.

But, most men didn't find the future mother of their child on a babymaking app.

And, most men didn't lie to the future mother of their child about so many things.

Things that might change her mind about having a child with me at all.

And yeah, it was too soon to admit that I had—feelings for Sloane. I knew that.

But I also knew exactly what I felt.

What I felt when I was around her.

And what I felt when I wasn't.

Whenever I was in her company—whether it was at a baseball game or at a doctor's office—I never wanted to leave.

And when we finally did part ways, everything inside of me missed her.

I was forty years old—and I'd never felt like this before.

I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, and tried to swallow past the choking guilt that currently sat in my dry throat.

Being in the profession I was in—this emotion was not something I made room for in my life.

I did what I had to do so my clients won.

Whether they should or not—and, Christ, I'd represented so many idiots who should never have won their cases.

Right now, I felt the collective weight of every white-collared crook I'd ever taken on as a client.

The guilt I'd let in over what I'd done to Sloane, seemed to have opened a virtual dam that I'd used to hold back every feeling of guilt.

A dam that I'd relied on for decades.

She'd poked holes in it over the weeks I'd known her.

Enough holes, that it finally burst.

A knock at the door took my attention away from my self-flagellation, and I strode over to answer it.

"Hi," Ronnie said as she handed me a coffee, and strode right by me. "I've got to meet a client in an hour, so I grabbed you a coffee, too."

Her cheerful voice made my stomach hurt.

How could someone be happy when my entire world was crumbling around me?

It was after seven at night, but I took a swig of my coffee anyway.

Unfortunately, it only made my stomach churn even more.

"How did the big doctor's visit go? You didn't message me like you said you would," she said, sitting herself down on my couch, and crossing her legs.

I took a deep breath, and opened my mouth.

And said nothing.

For the first time in my life—I couldn't find the words.

Ronnie was my best friend.

If anyone would understand what I was feeling right now, she would.

Then maybe she could explain it to me.

“Whoa,” Ronnie said as she gazed at me over the top of her cup. “If you’ve been rendered speechless, either it’s really good—or really bad.”

Again, I searched for the right word to start with, but there didn’t seem to be one.

“Did something happen?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

I leaned against the kitchen island. “Yeah, something happened.”

“Well? What is it?”

“I love her,” I said over the giant lump in my throat.

Ronnie lowered her cup. “What?”

“I’m in love with Sloane,” I said, feeling like a hundred butterflies just escaped into my stomach.

Ronnie set her cup on the coffee table. “I know, I heard you. I just wanted you to say it again. You look like you’re about to faint.”

I narrowed my eyes at her and shook my head. “I appreciate your understanding,” I said dryly, then I took a drink.

And then, I thought it could use something stronger in it, so I headed to my liquor cabinet.

“I’m sorry.” She sighed. “I’ve never seen you like this, and I want to enjoy it as much as possible.”

I set my cup on top of the cabinet while I unscrewed the cap on the whiskey. I poured a generous measure, and closed it up.

“Oh, boy,” Ronnie said, twisting her head, and staring at me. “It’s that bad, is it?”

“It’s worse than bad,” I said as I lifted my coffee to my lips. I welcomed the burn while I drank.

Ronnie rolled her eyes at me. “You really can be dramatic. I’ve known for ages that you’re in love with Sloane. Only an idiot wouldn’t have caught onto that.”

My eyes narrowed on her. “I can’t be in love with her. Don’t you understand? I’m going to completely mess everything up.”

“You really are dumb for your age, aren’t you? This doesn’t mess anything up. It’s a great thing. All you need to do is tell her.”

“Are you crazy?” I breathed out, then added more whiskey to my coffee.

Another eye roll later, she said, “You have to tell her.”

“Right, so should I invite Sloane over here? And then she can figure out even sooner that I lied to her?” I asked, feeling stuck between a rock, and a hard place.

Ronnie waved me off. “Oh, please. She’s not going to care where you live.”

My stomach twisted at her remark—because, yeah, Sloane would care. Once she got an eyeful of my over-the-top, expensive as hell house, she’d think differently about me.

And not just because of the money.

Also because I'd lied to her about it.

From day one, she'd made it abundantly clear how much she hated liars. I knew that, and still, I took her to that small, one bedroom apartment instead of here.

“She'll care, trust me.”

I just had to hope she'd also forgive me when she found out.

Sloane

Well, today was the big day.

I'd hardly slept a wink.

My nerves had nerves.

My phone beeped with a message, and I frowned. Nobody messaged me this early for anything.

Mabel: Open your door!

I sighed as I texted her back.

Me: No, I'm sleeping. Go back to bed.

Mabel: You just answered me! Open the door, now...or I'll start banging on it.

"Gah!" I yelled to no one. Even though I was awake, I wasn't exactly in the mood for visitors.

Knowing full well that Mabel would make good on her threat, I stomped to the door, and let her in.

I had to blink twice.

In her hands, she carried a huge, chocolate cake.

With what must be an entire box—or two, of long, flaming candles on top.

“Happy insemination day, to you,” Mabel began singing as I gasped. “Happy insemination day, to you,” she moseyed right in, and turned around, “Happy insemination day, dear Sloaney.” She gave me an ear to ear grin, “Happy insemination day, to you!”

Mabel made sure to drag out the last word in dramatic fashion.

I couldn't help but crack up.

My friend was crazy.

When she was finally finished, I asked her, “Are you feeling well?”

“Blow out the candles before the smoke detectors go off,” she squealed, but not as loudly as Lily.

My little piggie was awake, and apparently raring to go.

I shook my head, and filled my lungs. I knew full well that my friend was not going to give up. With as much gusto as I could muster at seven o'clock in the morning, I blew all the candles out.

Except one.

“Oh, yay! One for good luck,” Mabel said while she scurried toward the island.

I shut the door, and started walking toward her. “Are you feeling all right?” I asked with a yawn. The lack of sleep was going to be killer today of all days.

“Am I all right?” she asked like I had a screw loose or something. “You're going to make a baby today. I'm so

excited for you.”

Mabel grabbed a large knife out of the kitchen drawer. “I was up late making your favorite cake. Hopefully, the baby likes it, too,” she said with a giggle.

I couldn’t help but smile right back at her. “There’s no baby, yet. All I get today is Dominic’s—stuff. And then, we’ll see.”

She smiled at me, then cut into the cake. “I’ve seen that man. I’m betting his ‘stuff’ works on contact. You’ll be pregnant before you leave the doctor’s office.”

I rolled my eyes, and hurried to the cupboard. I grabbed out a couple of gorgeous, clay plates I’d just made.

They were an orangey, peach color, mixed with long lines of light, mint green. After I set them on the island, Mabel spotted them right away.

“Oh, those turned out awesome,” she said, a thick piece of cake balancing on the knife, and teetering against her fingers. “I hate to mess it up with all this chocolate.”

“I made them to use,” I said, grateful for such a kind friend. I scooped up one plate, and placed it underneath the knife. “Drop it, lady,” I said in my best imitation of a TV show cop.

Mabel’s grinned, and she did finally dump the cake on the plate. I yanked out a couple of small forks, then used one to dig into the deliciousness.

“Oh, my gosh,” I mumbled over my mouthful of cake. “This is so yum.” I continued to chew, swallow, shove more cake in, and repeat.

She did the same thing.

It didn't matter what time of the day, or night it was. Chocolate cake with ganache icing always tasted great.

And Mabel made the best out of any I'd ever had.

"I was thinking—" Mabel's voice wandered as a dreamy look grew on her face, "do you think Dominic will want to have another baby after this one? Like, before he enters the Seminary?"

It took me three tries to swallow down the rich chocolate icing. "I need coffee," I said, and she nodded. I stood and started my coffee machine.

It didn't take long for hot coffee to spurt out of the nozzle into the cups I'd made to match the new plates. They were big, chunky cups with large handles.

"You look nervous," Mabel said to me before she shoveled in another forkful. Her eyes focused on my face, and I knew there was no sense in trying to hide my feelings from her.

"That's because I am," I told her as I stirred sugar into our cups.

"But why?"

I gazed up at her, and said, "I'm nervous it won't work. And then Dominic will go off, and find some other woman to ___"

"Inseminate?" Mabel said, but with her mouth full, it sounded more like, 'inseminate.'

"Umm, yeah. I'm sure it wouldn't take him long to find someone else," I said, and handed Mabel her coffee.

She momentarily set her plate down, and grabbed the cup from me. "Okay, first of all," she said, examining the outside of the cup, "this cup is adorable. Well done, my friend."

Then, she took a sip. “Mm, nothing goes better with morning cake, than morning coffee. Okay, secondly, Dominic seems more than into this whole process. Why are you worrying about that?”

I shrugged, and decided to keep the rest of my concerns to myself. Mabel didn’t need to know all the details.

“I don’t know. Just nerves, I guess.”

She bit her bottom lip, and gave me the once-over with her eyes. “You’re still happy about this, though. Right? Or, are you having second thoughts?”

I shook my head, and placed my cup on the counter. “No, no, not at all. I mean, yes, I’m excited. No, I’m not having second thoughts.”

She sipped more of her coffee, then said, “Because, you’re allowed to have those. Second thoughts, I mean.”

I took a deep breath, and picked up my coffee. “I’m not. I just really, really hope it works.”

She smiled at me. “Me too. I can’t wait to watch you get all fat, and grouchy.”

I swatted her with the back of my hand as I rolled my eyes. “Jerk.”

Then we both erupted into giggles.

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. I stopped laughing, and frowned. “Who the heck could that be this early in the morning? You’re the only one who bothers me at this hour.”

I quickly evaded her revenge swat, and hurried to answer the door. “I’m too fast for you,” I called back to Mabel as I peeked through the peephole.

“What the heck?” I whispered to no one but me when I saw who was out there.

Dominic stood directly outside my door. I opened it, and said, “Hi.”

His eyes scanned me from head to toe—making me suddenly feel more than a little self conscious.

I should have run back to my room for a robe.

My thin, tight, tank top, and skimpy shorts were a little more revealing than what I normally wore in front of him.

He cleared his throat, and said, “Hi, sorry for showing up so early. I wanted to catch you before you left.”

Dominic handed me a green smoothie. “I thought we could go to the doctor together?”

“Oh, um, yeah,” I said, feeling kind of surprised to see him. “Just give me a minute to get ready?”

His eyes dropped down to my tight, tank top. It seemed to me like he lingered there a little longer than he should have—especially for a wannabe priest.

But, that was probably just my imagination.

When his eyes met mine, he said, “I’ll wait.”

I let him in, and shut the door as I watched him walk by me. His subtle, spicy cologne wafted up my nose, and I swear I swooned a little.

I may have also watched his tight butt, in those well-fitting jeans he wore.

No suit today.

Just casual jeans, and a light gray, Henley shirt that didn’t give him quite enough room for his biceps.

Again, I might have swooned. Then I thought about what a shame to cover all that up with a priest's robe.

His hair looked like the ends weren't dry yet. Part of me wanted to slide my fingers into it—just to be sure.

He strode right up to Mabel, and the two of them shared their hellos.

“What does this say?” Dominic asked with a hint of curiosity in his tone. He squinted at the top of the cake.

Oh crap.

I pushed away from the door, and shouted, “Nothing!” Then I shoved my way in front of him, nearly spilling the smoothie he'd just given me.

Quick as a wink, I picked up the knife, and smudged the words that were left on the chocolate icing.

Well, they weren't really words, so much as incriminating letters. “Happy Insem—” and then, “Day” were all that remained.

It wouldn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the rest.

Dominic cleared his throat, and I thought I saw his lips tip up in a half-smirk.

“Care for a piece? I made it myself,” Mabel said over a mouthful of said cake.

“I can't think of anything else I'd rather have for breakfast,” Dominic said with a shrug. “But, if there's coffee, I'll have that, too.”

Mabel nodded, and pointed her fork at him. “You got it.”

I smiled at her, then turned to Dominic. “I'm going to get ready. It won't take me long.” Then—green smoothie in hand

—I hurried to my bedroom, and shut the door behind me.

I leaned against my closed door, and let my head sag forward.

Good grief.

Dominic just showed up in sexy-as-heck-jeans, and a hot shirt that outlined his manly arms.

And, he smelled like a delicious hunk of male.

Gosh, maybe I really was ovulating, because the thoughts that were running through my head right now were only of the babymaking variety.

I felt a hot flush run through me as I thought about Dominic and I making a baby the regular way.

With no doctors, or test tubes, or Insemination Day cakes.

Or priestly predicaments.

Tingles started—well, tingling—in certain places. I held the cold smoothie to my forehead in hopes that it would cool me down.

Unfortunately, the cool drink wasn't helping at all.

I sighed, and pushed away from the door.

“Hmm, what exactly does one wear to an insemination appointment?” I said to myself in the empty room.

It looked beautiful out, so I decided on a dress, and strappy sandals.

Then, I decided to add a few beach waves to my hair, just to give it some pizzazz.

A touch of makeup later, and I was ready.

I felt the butterflies in my stomach start up again, and I took a few deep breaths.

My hand slid down to my belly.

My flat belly.

My belly that would hopefully grow bigger, and bigger over the next nine months.

I turned to the side, observing my form. Then, I grabbed one of the throw pillows off my bed, and stuffed it under my dress.

Wow.

I touched my fake stomach with both hands, cradled, and rubbed it as I stared at myself in the full-length mirror.

Double wow.

Would I ever be that big?

I imagined how different it would feel, to walk around with a huge, baby-filled belly like this.

Would I feel his, or her movements inside of me?

It seemed like such a crazy thing—yet such a natural thing.

Something I'd always wanted to do.

And, even though this wasn't exactly under the perfect circumstances—it wasn't the worst, either.

Dominic would make a great father.

Any kid in the universe should be so lucky.

Even still, I felt a tiny niggle of doubt in the back of my mind.

Was I doing the right thing for me?

Was I doing the right thing for a baby?

I let out a long breath, and rubbed my pillow belly.

“That’s a great look on you,” I heard, and nearly jumped right out of my skin.

I swung my head toward my door, and shrieked when I saw Dominic standing there—staring at me with a pillow up my dress.

“Oh, whoops,” I said, and immediately reached underneath my dress.

I grabbed a corner of the pillow, and whipped it out.

I didn’t think about where to throw it—I just threw it.

My eyes followed the rogue pillow as it sailed over my bed, and directly into my bedside lamp.

I gasped as it crashed to the floor.

“Oh, no,” I said, covering my mouth with my hand.

Before I took one step, Dominic was already there, picking up the lamp. He twisted it around, and announced, “It’s okay. I don’t think it’s broken.”

He kept examining it, and I felt a heated blush creep up my neck to my cheeks. That was the second time he’d seen me with a pillow stuffed up my shirt.

When Dominic turned his gaze toward me, I said, “Thanks, you surprised me.”

He chuckled, and set the lamp down on my table. “I see that. You didn’t answer when I knocked, so I let myself in.”

“Oh,” I said, and frowned to myself. I must’ve been so absorbed in my fake pillow-baby-belly that I tuned everything

else out. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you,” I said, and bit down on my lower lip.

Dominic set his hands on his hips and looked me over. Then, he strode over to the door, and shut it.

“Come here,” he said as he sat down on the edge of my bed. “Sit with me for a minute.”

I slowly wandered over, and sat beside him.

Gosh, he really was handsome.

I mean, obviously, he was.

I knew that before.

But, this morning—for some reason, he just seemed—extra.

Extra casual.

Extra cool.

Extra hot.

He could totally do commercials for the jeans he was wearing.

Heck, I’d buy them, and they wouldn’t even fit me.

If I had Dominic’s jeans, though—I’d frame them.

They really were a mastery of design.

Crisp, hard lines, mixed with smooth slopes, and contours.

The smell of his spicy, manly cologne was also doing a number on me—as it always did.

Gosh, I could sniff him all day.

He flipped his hand over—palm up—and offered it to me.

Oh, boy.

I bit my lip, and plunked my hand in his.

Immediately, he closed his hand over mine—our fingers intertwined.

A sudden, hot, zinging feeling ran up my arm, then through my entire body.

Just from him holding my hand.

“Today’s a big day,” he said, his voice deep, and thoughtful. His thumb started tracing circles on my skin—which gave me goose bumps.

I nodded, and smiled at him. “It’s a really big day.”

“We might make a baby today,” he said as the most handsome smile I’d ever seen before spread across his face.

He really took my breath away.

I swallowed over the dry lump in my throat, and said, “We might make a baby today.”

Dominic’s hand squeezed mine.

Tight.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked, and the caring tone of his voice wrapped around me like a fuzzy, warm blanket.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, sounding more confident than I actually was.

He nodded, then turned more fully to me. “I just wanted to thank you. And tell you how wonderful, and brave I think you are.”

My mind raced with what he might have meant by that.

“What do you mean?” I asked, tilting my head as my eyes traced over his features.

I'd looked at him so closely—so many times—that I bet I could draw him by memory.

From his thick, dark, hair—with a slight wave to it, down his perfect forehead to his gorgeous, blue eyes, and straight, almost royal, nose.

His chin was strong, and matched his defined cheekbones.

But, his lips looked soft.

I bet he was a great kisser.

With all that strength behind those lips—how could he not be?

“Well, you’ve had to do all the shots, and preparation. And then you’ll have nine months of carrying a child—” he stopped talking for a moment, and let his eyes scan my face, “all I had to do was give a—donation. I just really admire everything that you’re doing.”

I felt a small flush creep up my neck, to my cheeks.

I squeezed his hand, and gave him a smile. “Thanks, but we’re doing this together, right?” I raised my eyebrows, and grinned wider.

“I mean it’s not like I can do this without your, umm,” I said, feeling my cheeks get hotter, “donation.”

He smirked and placed his other hand over mine. “This takes teamwork,” he said as his eyes scanned over my face, “but, you’re definitely doing the lion’s share of work in this instance.”

We were quiet for a minute, until Dominic cleared his throat. “Are you—” he took a deep breath, “sure about this? All of this? It’s a lot, Sloane. I completely understand if you

want to back out.” His voice was so deep, and so quiet—and so sincere—my heart nearly burst.

“I don’t want to back out,” I told him, then swallowed over my dry throat.

“I’d understand if you did. I don’t want you to feel—locked in. If you have any reservations, I want you to tell me.”

Gosh, this man.

Why was he so nice?

I shook my head. “I’m good,” I said, and then something occurred to me.

Maybe he was having second thoughts?

I slid my hand from his. “Have you changed your mind?” I asked, my voice rising on the last few words.

A wave of disappointment washed over me.

Maybe he was hoping I’d back out of this whole thing?

Was that why he was being so nice?

Didn’t Dominic want to make a baby with me anymore?

He let out a chuckle. “I haven’t changed my mind. You—” he said, looking me over, head to toe, then hesitating for a second—as if he were struggling for the right words, “Sloane, I want nothing more than to make a baby with you, right now.”

His eyes gazed deep, down to my soul when he said that—and I swear, my panties might have melted off.

I really needed to put some space between the two of us.

Before I accidentally, on purpose, found my lips on his.

And that would not be difficult to do.

He was sitting so close, our legs were touching, and whatever cologne he had on might as well be called, *Eau de Babymaker*.

I had to remind myself several times that Dominic wasn't looking for a relationship.

Because right here—right now—part of me really, really wished he was.

Some parts even more than others.

Before I made an even bigger fool out of myself, I stood, and faced him. “All right, then. Let's get going. Dr. Houston's office awaits.”

Sloane

“Hi, sorry, I’m late. Thanks for waiting,” Dr. Houston said as she rushed into the room, and washed her hands.

“The world of fertility doesn’t always run on time,” she said, drying her hands, and getting ready to glove up.

The butterflies in my stomach had butterflies in *their* stomachs—which made the wait a whole lot harder.

“It’s not a problem at all, Dr. Houston. We’ve both taken the morning off,” Dominic said in a cordial tone.

He seemed so calm, cool, and collected—as usual.

Sheesh, I wished I could be more like Dominic.

Instead, my heart was racing like crazy. And, I’m pretty sure I’d sweat through the gown they’d given me to wear an hour ago.

Even the palms of my hands and soles of my feet were perspiring.

I was a wreck.

But, not Dominic.

Even through our wait, he'd always had a topic close at hand to talk about.

It helped a bit to keep my mind busy, but I was still a nervous wreck.

“Okay, let’s see what your ovaries are doing, shall we?” Dr. Houston said as she moved the ultrasound machine around, and started to scan me.

“Hmm,” she said, leaning in closer to the screen. “Hmm.”

Those didn’t sound like good “hmms” to me.

Oh, boy.

I looked up at Dominic, and he smiled his handsome grin back down at me.

“You okay?” he whispered, taking my hand firmly in his.

At first, I thought it was a sweet thing to do, and I swear he made me dizzy.

Then, reality kicked in.

I tried to pull my hand away, but he wouldn’t let me.

“What are you doing?” he questioned me, grasping my hand even tighter.

I gave up, and whisper-yelled, “My hand probably feels like a wet fish. Give it back.”

Dominic smiled and he refused to let go. “It feels just fine,” he said, bringing the back of my hand up to his mouth.

He kissed it and said, “Well, okay, it does feel a little like a wet fish. But, a good one, like a salmon. Not a Hagfish or anything.”

I gasped, and yanked harder on my hand. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? And how do you know so much about fish?”

His smile grew. “Sloane, it’s a compliment. Ben from the ball team told me last week that Hagfish were the slimiest fish in the world.”

Ben was a walking encyclopedia on all things that flew, walked, crawled, slithered, or swam.

He and I got along pretty well.

He always insisted on seeing pictures of my pets—then classifying them as we went.

It was pretty cute.

“You two are quite the charmers,” I said, and turned my head to the screen.

Dr. Houston was still looking at it closely, and saying, “Hmm,” every so often.

A few minutes later, she shut everything down.

Dr. Houston sat on the stool and cleared her throat as she turned to us. “Sloane, you haven’t been taking your fertility medications, have you?”

Dominic

Houston, we have a problem.

Sloane's face turned a ghostly shade of white while she bit her bottom lip in the cutest—guiltiest way.

“Uhh, not really,” Sloane answered the doctor nervously.

Incidentally, her hand got even sweatier.

Much closer to Hagfish territory now.

Dr. Houston nodded, and closed her eyes briefly. “Okay, then. We can still try the insemination today, but I have to be honest with you,” she said, taking extra time to look at both of us, “without fertility drugs, the chance of success will diminish.”

Sloane tried to pull her hand out of mine.

Despite it being a slippery mess, I managed to hang on.

“Thank you, Dr. Houston. Would you mind giving us a moment?” I asked, and she nodded to us before leaving.

After the door shut, I pulled gently on Sloane's hand. “You weren't taking the meds?” I asked in a low, quiet voice.

Sloane shook her head. “No,” she answered, but still wouldn’t look at me.

“Why didn’t you mention it before?”

She let out a loud sigh, and finally gazed over at me. “I don’t know, I guess I just hoped my ovaries would spontaneously do what the doctor wanted them to.” The guilty way Sloane was looking at me made me feel bad.

She hadn’t done anything wrong.

I kept holding her hand.

Finally, she said, “You’re not mad?” Her voice sounded so cautious, it broke my heart.

I shook my head, and kissed the back of her hot, sweaty hand. “I’m not mad at all,” I said truthfully as she stared at me, and frowned.

“Why not?” she asked, the line between her eyebrows deepening.

I smiled at her. “Sloane, this needs to feel right to both of us. If one of us is having reservations—that’s okay.”

The line between her eyebrows disappeared, and her mouth dropped open slightly.

“That’s why I showed up at your place and asked how you were feeling.”

She sat up and looked at me. “I’m not having reservations about making a baby with you.”

I grinned, and said, “You are, Sloane. And that’s fine. If it doesn’t feel right, it doesn’t feel right.”

She squeezed my hand, and said, “It feels right. I just—” she gazed down at the floor for a second before lifting her eyes

back to mine. “I just felt weird, stabbing myself with needles, and taking all those medications—”

I cut her off, “I get it, Sloane. Don’t worry.”

She shook her head, and had the cutest, worried look on her pretty face. “But that’s the only way we can—make a baby.”

Visions of all the other—more fun ways to make a baby with Sloane began playing on a lovely, long loop in my head.

Yeah.

Some really fantastic ways.

I stood, and looked directly in her eyes. My hands grazed the outside of her thighs as I leaned into her.

“There are other—” I peered down at her, and I swear to Christ, even in an ugly, blue hospital gown, she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

And by far the most loving and caring person I’d met.

The way she looked after her foster animals, and the fun, affectionate way she dealt with the kids’ ball team—and man, just being around her, and in her presence, was all consuming to me.

When I wasn’t with her—I was thinking about her, and counting down the hours until I’d see her again.

And, when I was with her—I never wanted to leave.

She had talent that I could only dream of. And she’d made a career out of what she loved to do.

Very few people in the world could say that.

She moved back slightly. “There are other what?”

Fuck it.

I had to tell her.

It felt like a balloon inside of me was about to burst.

So, I did it.

“There are other ways we can make a baby,” I choked out over my desert-dry throat.

She looked up at me in confusion. “The doctor said our chances aren’t that great without the drugs.”

I sighed, and then I put it out there—right out there. “We could try—naturally. If you wanted to go that direction, I mean.”

Shit.

I silently berated myself for chickening out.

I needed to tell her how I felt.

Sloane smiled—but it was a sad, pathetic kind of grin. “It’s okay, I don’t want you to do anything that would make you—uncomfortable.”

I frowned, wondering what in the world she meant.

“How would making a baby with you the old-fashioned way make me uncomfortable?” I asked, not understanding her at all. The only thing uncomfortable on me right now—were my pants.

She gently set her hands on my forearms.

All that did was inflame me even more. Every cell in my body was on high alert—ready to pounce at any moment.

“I know you’re—you’re celibate,” she said with a sigh.

My jaw dropped open, and I tilted my head slightly. “I’m celibate?”

She shook her head and said, “It’s okay, I guess this just wasn’t meant to be.”

When she said that, something inside of me snapped.

Completely.

I stepped between her legs, so we were torso to torso. Her soft breasts pressed to my chest—her plump lips only inches from mine. “Who told you I’m celibate?”

“Dominic, I saw the bookshelf in your bedroom,” she whispered as her gaze traveled from my mouth to my eyes.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, still not understanding what she was talking about. Sloane was speaking in code—and I didn’t have the key.

“I know I shouldn’t have snooped. I mean it was one thing to look in your medicine cabinet,” her hand covered her mouth, “by the way, those sinus meds are really doing the trick. Good for you.”

I frowned and interrupted her, “Sloane, I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

She sighed loudly and looked up at the ceiling. “On your bookshelf—there were dozens of books about celibacy. I mean, if you’re wanting to enter the priesthood—or something. I understand.” She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth as a guilty look crossed her face. “Or, if you just have a feeling that you should live a celibate life for other reasons—that’s cool, too.”

Then it hit me.

I shut my eyes, remembering when I'd taken her to that apartment—that wasn't mine.

What a stupid idea that had been.

She was talking about books—on a bookshelf that wasn't mine.

Oh, Christ.

I opened my eyes and smiled widely down at her. "I'll explain later—but, Sloane, those are not my books. And that wasn't my bookshelf."

I moved in closer and placed one hand on the small of her back, and one on the back of her head.

My lips were near hers. "I'm not celibate and I sure don't have any kind of commitment to celibacy. Not even close. Especially around," I moved a tiny bit more, "you."

One more fraction of an inch, and our lips finally—finally—touched.

I let out a groan.

She felt so good in my arms.

Her sweet, soft body against me.

Her perfect, pink lips moving with mine.

I ran the tip of my tongue along her bottom lip, and she immediately opened.

And—wow.

It was like the biggest static shock of all time. As soon as our tongues touched, I felt the fire inside of me grow.

Her hands slid up my arms, and to the back of my neck. "I've wanted to kiss you for so long now," I muttered against

her lips, feeling myself losing control more, and more by the second.

She nodded, and mumbled almost incoherently, “Me too, especially when you wear jeans.”

That made me laugh—but not enough to stop kissing her. “Then I’ll have to only wear jeans from now on.”

She pushed away from me slightly, and said, “I want to kiss you when you wear suits, too.”

I completely closed the space between us, and took her lips in a deeper, intense kiss.

This kiss was more of a question.

And, if that kiss could talk, it would have asked, “Do you want to go further?”

It didn’t take Sloane’s kiss long to respond.

If her kiss could talk, it would have said, “Ohh, yeah.”

I wasn’t sure if she laid down—or if it was me pushing her back.

Either way, somehow, I ended up on top of Sloane, and we were in the middle of the most erotic make out session I think I’d ever been in.

Suddenly, she gasped into my mouth, and whispered, “I’m not wearing any underwear.”

The swelling inside my pants got much worse. Of course, she wouldn’t be wearing any underwear. That would be counterproductive to the procedure she was here for.

“Unfortunately, I still am,” I said as a huge grin covered her face.

Luckily, Sloane was a team player, and her fingers quickly found the button of my jeans.

After she popped it open, her fingers grazed down the front of my pants.

I groaned loudly into her mouth as she felt my hard length on her way back up.

“Uh, excuse me?” someone yelled from the direction of the door, but I didn’t care one bit. “This is not *that* kind of insemination room!”

Reason eventually returned to us, and after a series of profuse apologies—we were promptly escorted out of Dr. Houston’s office.

For good.

“I’m sorry,” I said once we were out on the sidewalk. Security just said their abrupt goodbyes, and now we were on our own.

Sloane’s cheeks were still a bright pink, and from her expression—it looked as though she’d much rather crawl under a large rock than speak to me right now.

“I’m sorry, too. I don’t know what possessed me,” she said, sounding extremely embarrassed. “Oh, well, it’s not the first time I’ve been banned from someplace.”

I grabbed her hand as we walked. “You have a habit of making out with men in doctor’s offices, do you?”

Her cheeks darkened, and she rolled her eyes at me. “No, I took Lily into the grocery store once—let’s just say it didn’t end well.”

My entire body shook with laughter while I imagined what exactly that little pig—and her owner—had gotten up to in a

grocery store.

“It wasn’t pretty,” she added with an exaggerated shiver.

Then we both cracked up.

I pulled her over to the side, out of the busy pedestrian traffic of the sidewalk.

“I’m sorry we got caught,” I said before I leaned down and gently touched my lips to hers. “I’m not sorry for kissing you.”

Sloane gazed up at me with starry eyes. “Yeah, ditto. But,” she said, her eyes looking out to the street for a moment.

When our eyes met again, she said, “I’m still confused. What happened to your vow of chastity?”

Dammit.

This had weighed on me since the night I took her to the fake apartment.

I never should have done that.

I knew better than to start off any kind of relationship with a lie.

From the very beginning, I should have leveled with her.

The very real possibility of rejection had been too daunting.

Still, I should have manned up.

Forty years old, and I couldn’t get my act together.

“I have to show you something,” I said, brushing the hair away from her face.

As my eyes took in her pure, trusting beauty—my stomach twisted, and I let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Will you go for a drive with me?”

Sloane

He seemed almost—worried.

For some reason.

I couldn't think of why.

We'd just shared a heck of a makeout session. And he was equally as into it as I was.

Which I couldn't exactly wrap my mind around, yet.

How I'd gotten things so—wrong, I didn't know.

Anyway, now Dominic was taking me for a ride somewhere, but he wouldn't disclose exactly where.

A car—with a driver—came to pick us up. The driver called Dominic, sir, and everything.

I'd asked him if it was a car service from his work—but he didn't answer.

He did hold my hand the entire time, though. And that was pretty cute.

I wanted to kiss him again, but he was more than distracted.

Honestly, so was I.

My brain was spinning with what might be next for the two of us.

Or three of us.

But up in the doctor's office—Dominic appeared to be full steam ahead to at least practice baby-making.

The natural way, that is.

To be honest, I was *this close* to jumping on his lap right now and continuing where we left off.

And the only thing that stopped me was my confusion.

Confusion at where exactly Dominic's vow of chastity had gone.

Confusion at our makeout session.

And the fact he'd stated he'd wanted to kiss me for a while.

As far as I knew, that was not very priestly behavior.

I gazed over to see him looking out the window and nervously tapping his fingers on his thigh to a non-existent beat.

His uptight, high-strung energy troubled my heart. I wished there was something I could do or say to help.

He held his shoulders in a tense, unmoving way, which only made me more anxious.

The car finally stopped in front of a beautiful brownstone. Inside and out. But I'd bet the exterior on this property was the

original.

The curved arches over the many windows looked original to me. Lots of homes in this area had been gutted and completely renovated.

A stately, trimmed tree sat off to the right. And a beautiful vine trailed up the handrail.

“Thanks, I’ll message you in a while,” Dominic said to the driver. He nodded to Dominic.

After Dominic slid out, I followed directly behind. He was still grasping my hand in his.

“This way.”

He started toward the steps that led to large, black, double doors with a clear glass window on top.

He unlocked the door, then said, “After you.”

A little hesitantly, I stepped inside.

Wow, the smell of money in this place pretty much whacked you right in the face. If anyone knew about that—it was me.

My eyes swept from the shiny, black piano to the white fireplace with a large mirror above it.

The couches were a soft white.

Definitely a designer’s touch.

An expensive one.

“Walk through,” Dominic said with his hand on the small of my back. I did what he asked, and wandered over the gorgeous—what looked like original hardwood—flooring.

Next, was the kitchen. Black cabinets and bright white countertops. A huge, white, farmhouse kitchen sink.

A big, rectangular kitchen table made of distressed wood sat off to the far side.

I let my fingers graze the cool, smooth top of the oversized island beside me.

Dominic cleared his throat. “Come, I want to show you the upstairs.”

I turned and looked into his eyes—or I tried to. He quickly shifted his gaze and guided me in front of him.

We walked back through the living room to the front door where the stairs were.

I held onto the dark black banister and headed up the stairs.

I loved the red carpet runner on the steps. It accented so well with the white and black of the room.

Once in the hallway, he said, “To the end.”

I didn’t get more than a quick peek into the other rooms.

“This is the main bedroom on this level. The full main bedroom is the entire third floor above us, though,” he said, then pointed with his hand to the right, “but I want you to see what’s through there.”

The bedroom wasn’t large. A modest queen-sized bed filled a good portion of it.

As I moved further into the room, I saw another, smaller room through a beautifully arched doorway, with the cutest, sliding pocket doors.

A nursery.

Simple, yet elegant.

That was the only way to describe the room.

I entered the tiny room and saw a plain crib against the wall.

The best part of the room by far had to be the gray wallpaper. Variations of lighter and darker gray bunnies hopped all around.

It made me smile.

The crib had three stuffed bunnies inside—two white, one a light green.

“Do you like it?” Dominic finally spoke into the still silence.

“What’s not to like?” I asked as I walked over to the changing table.

A few blankets sat on the open shelves, but not much else. “It’s a beautiful home.”

He nodded cautiously. “My friend decorated it. I know next to nothing about design, so I gave her free reign on everything. This is my favorite room, though.”

I knew it was his home. I just didn’t want to accept that fact until he actually said it.

And now—he’d said it.

A huge sinking feeling ran through me, and I held onto the side of the changing table for support.

“The apartment you took me to before—” I started, but he finished.

“Just a place my friend is redoing for her client.”

I nodded, and took a deep breath. “And you lied because?”

His eyes scanned my face like he was unsure before he answered. “Because one day after baseball practice, you intimated your dislike of rich people.”

I frowned slightly at him, not fully understanding what he was saying.

“When one of the families got picked up by their driver?”

Oh, right.

I remembered that day.

“And you wondered if it was even possible to bring up a well-rounded kid in a privileged environment.”

Yeah, I’d said that.

Or something close to it, anyway.

And for good reason.

“You said they probably lived in the upper East side,” he gave me a sad smile. “Which is exactly where I live. And, I just happen to be rich. My family has old money, Sloane. And lots of it.”

This time my stomach sank.

Of course, I’d assumed Dominic made good money at his job. But, not once had he mentioned his family had money.

And not once had he mentioned where he actually lived.

“I see. So, you lied to me?” I felt my heart speed up.

He lied to me.

The one thing I valued above all else was honesty.

The one thing I *needed* above all else was honesty.

He let out a long sigh. “I panicked. I’m sorry. I was scared to let you know where I really lived.”

I took another deep breath. “So, you lied.”

He clenched his jaw and swallowed. “Yes.”

I nodded, took one more look around the pretty room, and said, “I’d like to go home, now. I can call a cab.”

His eyes held mine for a long, painful moment—I could see clouds swirling behind them.

“Sloane,” he said in a gruff, hoarse voice, “don’t do this. Hear me out at least, please?” He took a step toward me, but I shook my head and stepped around him.

“The one thing I asked you for was honesty.” My voice cracked as a burning set up behind my eyes.

I made it to the doorway when I felt a strong grip on my arm. When I stopped, I turned my head and was greeted by Dominic’s stormy glare.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a loud, croaking manner. “I wanted to tell you right away—but then—I was scared you’d call this off. And I could tell even back then that what we had—” his eyes dropped to my lips then back to my eyes, “was special. I wanted to protect it—protect us.”

My eyebrows raised and my mouth dropped open. I could feel my heart beating so fast I had to gasp for air. “And you thought lying was the answer?” I pulled my arm out of his hold. “The only thing I asked you for was the truth.” I lowered my voice and squinted my eyes. “The only thing.”

I needed to get out of here.

Now.

My vision narrowed and I hurried down the stairs—Dominic following me the entire time, trying to convince me to stay and talk with him.

There was nothing left to say.

Nothing he could do to explain away his actions.

He lied to me.

Out and out lied.

I reached the front door and seized the doorknob with my hand. The door opened an inch—then it was forced shut.

My eyes shot to a large hand now in my field of view. A large, strong, handsome hand that had only moments ago been holding mine.

“Let me go,” I whispered, unable to even turn back around to look at him. Because I knew if I did—I just might cave.

I shut my eyes tight.

Yeah, I’d definitely cave.

And then I’d spend the rest of my life regretting my actions.

I wouldn’t do that again.

I couldn’t do that again.

I’d learned my lesson a long time ago—and I definitely didn’t need a repeat.

I’d promised myself.

All those years ago—I’d promised myself—no more liars.

Never again.

“Sloane, please. Don’t do this to us.” The intensity in his voice made me waver slightly. But, I’d already made my mind

up.

I turned my head just enough to face him. “You’re the one who did this to us. Not me. Let me out. I want to leave.”

Seeing the cloudy devastation in his glassy eyes made my heart hurt.

Still, he removed his hand from the door. “I’ll get my driver to take you home.”

I shook my head and refused. “No, I’ll find a cab.”

Then, I opened the door and flew down the steps as quickly as I could.

On the sidewalk and completely out of breath, I turned my head around frantically for a cab.

Nothing.

So, I hurried down the sidewalk and tried to concentrate on not crying.

The only problem with telling yourself not to cry, is that it only makes it worse.

Which meant I got roughly half a block away before the tears started.

I couldn’t remember when I’d been this disappointed in someone.

Actually—that was a lie.

I remembered all too well the last time someone—or someones—had disappointed me like this.

I wiped the back of my hand across my wet cheeks.

The person I was most disappointed in right now—was me.

Dominic

After the third knock, I heard the key push into the lock and turn.

“Dommy salami, are you home?” I heard my friend call from the front door.

It took most of my energy to respond. “In here.”

I heard the click-clack of her heels walking toward where I sat at the table.

“Is there a reason you’re sitting in the dark?” Ronnie enquired before she pulled out a chair and joined me.

“Yep,” I answered and tipped back the rest of my drink. The whiskey burned the back of my throat as it slid down.

“Is there a reason that you’re drinking alone in the dark?”

“Yep.”

She pulled the glass out of my hand and poured herself a drink.

After she tossed it back, she returned the glass. “Do you want to expand on that?” she asked with a hiss as she

swallowed.

“Not really.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Truth be told, I was glad she showed up.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone? I’ve been texting and calling you. How did the insemination go?”

I poured myself another drink. “It didn’t.”

“What? Why?”

I explained how Sloane hadn’t taken the required fertility regime, and why.

“Ohh, I’m sorry. What did you guys do after the doc talked to you?”

I sipped my drink. “As soon as the doctor left, we made out like teenagers.”

Even in the dark, I could tell Ronnie’s jaw fell open. “What? Oh, my gosh! That’s fantastic news!” she squealed in delight.

“You’d think so.”

Ronnie leaned forward. “How was having a makeout sesh with Sloane a bad thing?”

I set my glass on the table and sighed.

“I brought her here.” I nodded my head. “Showed her my house.” I peered at Ronnie. “My *real* house.”

Her eyes widened and realization flittered across her face.

“Oh.”

I nodded. “Yeah, oh.”

“How’d she take the news?” Ronnie leaned on her elbow.

“About this good.” I poured the whiskey into my glass until it was full. Then I expanded on how exactly things went. And how Sloane was now officially done with me.

Ronnie bit her lip. “I’m sorry. Shoot, I shouldn’t have sent you to that apartment. How about if I talk to her? I’ll blame it on me?”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t your fault. I asked you for help—and you gave it. It was my decision, not yours.”

She sat back in the chair. “But—but she’s obviously into you. I bet she’d listen to me.”

Again, I shook my head. “She detests liars. And I definitely lied to her.”

Ronnie slapped her hands against the table. “But, it was for a good reason.”

I sighed and took another healthy swallow of my drink. “I shouldn’t have lied.”

Ronnie gasped and set her hand on my arm, “You are an awesome human. Seriously, let me talk to her. I bet I can change her mind.”

I inhaled a deep breath. “She only asked me for one thing, Ronnie.” I tipped my glass back and emptied it. “Honesty. And I fucked it up.”

Sloane

I’D HEARD the knocking on my door. But, for some reason, my legs failed to move.

Finally, the knocking stopped.

A minute later, I heard, “What the heck’s going on? I’ve been messaging you the whole freaking day?” Mabel stood in my bedroom doorway.

All I could muster up to say to her was, “Sorry, the phone was too heavy to pick up.”

And that was the absolute truth.

After I stormed out of Dominic’s pricey pad, I came right back home—got into my pajamas—and crawled into bed.

I’d had enough of the world.

Enough of handsome, kind, funny, smart men who lied.

Enough of a world where I couldn’t find one—just one—person to walk through life with.

I mean, come on.

In New York alone, there were millions of humans strolling around at this very minute.

How in the heck could I not find one partner in the maze of people out there?

Mabel hurried to my bed and launched herself onto it. “Spill, lady. Tell me what happened?”

My body bounced with the force of her landing. I moved over and gave her some room.

Then—I spilled.

Then I cried.

Then I cried some more.

Then, she jumped out of bed and said, “I’ll be right back.”

In the blink of an eye, she was back with her arms full.

First, she set Lily down.

Lily in a tri-colored, pink tutu.

The little piggy immediately waddled her way over to me. “Hi, my baby,” I said and scooped her up into my arms. “I’m sorry,” I kissed her soft ears, “Mommy’s ignoring you today.”

She responded by nudging into my arm and making herself at home. Several muffled snorts later, she was fast asleep.

Next, Mabel let go of Luna. The fuzzy white bunny quickly came over to join her sister.

But Luna loved shoving her sweet, little bunny nose into the crook of my neck. So, I rolled to my back and let her snuggle right in.

I had a brief memory of when she’d done the same exact thing to Dominic—and how he’d fallen asleep not long afterward.

Gosh, they were cute together.

And Lily had napped on his lap.

Pain stabbed at my heart again, and I felt a new set of tears begin.

“Aww, honey, I’m so sorry. You guys need to talk,” Mabel said and scooted over to carefully hug me—being mindful of my babies. “I’m sure you can work this out.”

I shook my head. “There’s no sense in it.” I wiped under my eyes and took a deep, calming breath.

Incidentally, it didn’t work.

“Come on, give him a call. Let him explain why he did what he did.” Mabel tried her best to convince me to call

Dominic. She meant well. I knew that. But it really was a lost cause.

“I can’t do that. All I asked him for was honesty.” And now that he’d broken his word—I was done.

Luna burrowed tighter into my neck, and I welcomed the warm, smooth feel of her fur against my skin.

Mabel looked at me with the saddest eyes. “Come on—give him a chance,” she urged.

I blinked my swollen, gritty eyes. “I can’t, Mabel. You know why.”

And she did.

My friend was one of the few people in the world who knew the truth about—why honesty was so darn important to me.

It meant everything.

And for Dominic to break his word—well, that meant everything, too.

It meant he couldn’t be trusted.

I hugged my babies tighter, feeling grateful to have them to hold onto right now.

Mabel sighed defeatedly. “I know, Sloaney. I know.”

Then, she sat with me while I cried until there were no tears left to fall.

Sloane

Mabel was actually the best person in the world.

She'd looked after me—and the animals all day.

All I did was nap in between scrolling social media and watching mindless crap on my phone.

Anything to numb my brain from thinking about what happened this morning.

I moved Lily and Luna over a bit so I could turn on my side.

They didn't make so much as a twitch or a grunt while I got them settled.

A notification popped up on my phone.

It was for the pitterpatter4U app.

“Haven't seen you in a while? Have you found your perfect babymaking match?” it displayed on the screen.

I shouldn't click it.

I should just delete the whole darn app and pretend I'd never joined in the first place.

Forget about it.

Move on and try to erase everything that had happened because of this stupid app.

Instead—I clicked on the baby icon.

Why?

I didn't know.

It asked the same question that had popped up in the notification. "Have you found your perfect babymaking match?"

I had to click yes or no to continue through to the rest of the app.

I clicked no, and it made my stomach hurt to think how freaking close I'd gotten to clicking yes. And then this morning—everything changed.

The app exploded with pink and blue confetti. "Welcome back! Let us help you find your perfect babymaking match. Simply reactivate your profile by clicking here."

A sense of dread flowed over me at the thought of beginning this process all over again. Gosh, that was truly the last thing in the world I wanted to do right now.

Something occurred to me.

If I was getting this notification—I bet Dominic received it as well.

Would he be trying again?

Getting back into the babymaking game?

I wouldn't be able to tell unless I made my profile active again. I'd paused it when Dominic and I had agreed to travel down the babymaking path together.

I had no interest in deciding what to do right now.

My feelings were too raw, and I needed time.

Time to mull over what the heck I'd been thinking—going on an app to find a baby daddy. *I mean really—how crazy was that?*

How crazy was it to think that I'd actually find someone—through an app—to make a baby with?

Gosh, I felt like such an idiot.

Even though I had no desire whatsoever to delve back into the babymaking world—I stared at the screen on my phone for way too long.

My brain was starting to make up different scenarios.

Was Dominic on the babymaking site trolling for new baby mommas?

Had he ever left?

Maybe he'd stayed on it to keep his options open.

Something deep inside of me needed to know.

So, I clicked the un-pause button.

A new notification popped up on the screen.

Even more pink and blue confetti exploded as the message, “Welcome back! You are now available to find your perfect babymaking match.”

Oh, boy.

Holy crap.

That was a freaking shock.

Lily snorted and nudged further into me at the noise.

“Since I’m back in—I might as well check out his profile, right?” I asked my furry, white friend, and my pink, snorty friend—both of whom were currently sleeping.

I didn’t wait for them to answer. Instead, I started searching for Dominic’s profile.

After several searches, and miles upon miles of scrolling—I found no trace of him.

I dropped my phone on the bed, slumped back into my pillows, and breathed an odd sigh of relief.

Luna snuggled into my neck. I petted her soft ears and kissed her snoozy face.

While I was relieved not to find Dominic’s profile, I knew he’d likely put it back up on that site eventually.

And when he did—he’d probably get a bunch of women wanting to match with him.

Who wouldn’t?

A great-looking, rich lawyer in New York was a hot commodity. Add in the fact he was funny and kind—yeah, he’d find someone.

And fast.

Meanwhile, I’d already been around the block on this app. And I didn’t like anyone I’d met.

Except for Dominic.

Mr. Lying Liar Pants.

Why did he have to be so darn perfect in every other way?

“What I should do is delete that stupid app, right, Luna?” I rubbed my cheek against her soft, warm fur.

An odd pinging sound filled the room. It took me a minute to figure out where it was coming from.

Finally, I picked up my phone and looked at the screen.

“Congratulations! You have a potential match!” it said on the notification.

“What the heck?” I swiped on the screen to see a very handsome profile picture.

He didn’t have the dark hair with a subtle wave in it that Dominic had.

No, this guy had sandy blond hair and a boy-next-door smile.

He was athletic and worked as a teacher at an elementary school.

So, he obviously liked kids enough to work with them every day. Plus, he’d have summers and holidays off to spend with a child of his own.

Before Dominic, this was the kind of dream profile I would have jumped at in a second.

But now?

I’d been burned so many times, my desire to meet any more potential babymaking matches was nil.

“It’s a shame, though, Luna,” I said to the bunny, “this guy’s pretty cute.”

“Who’s cute?” Mabel said from the door.

I looked up to see her carrying two plates with enormous pieces of chocolate cake on them.

“Just this guy on pitterpatter4U. He’s a schoolteacher.” I held up my phone to show her.

Mabel walked up to the bed and set the plates on my side table.

She surprised me by grabbing the phone out of my hand. “Let me—”

A loud popping sound exploded from the phone.

I recognized it.

I’d heard it when I’d accepted Dominic’s match request.

I lay there in total shock, unable to feel my extremities.

“Mabel, what did you do?”

Sloane

I wiped my sweaty palms on my skirt.

Good grief.

What the heck was I even doing here?

How I let Mabel talk me into this, I'd never know.

After she'd accidentally accepted Cody's match for me on my phone—she then launched into a diatribe on how I needed to get back out there and find a new baby-making partner.

I'd tried explaining to her that I needed more than five minutes to get over the last failed attempt.

She refused to listen to me.

Instead, she hijacked my phone and made dinner arrangements with Cody.

Of course, he thought it was me who'd accepted his match—as well as his dinner suggestion.

Our meeting wasn't supposed to take place for three days. And at the time, three days felt like eons away. Like, it might not even come.

But, it did.

And I tried about a million times to gather the courage to message him and cancel.

Finally, twelve hours before our scheduled dinner—I called him.

I'd spent that entire day at my pottery wheel, chilling out. Working with clay always had that effect on me.

I channeled my anger and sadness and created a whole new design for a set of vases. They were big and bold and daring.

I'd decided on using red on one half of the vases and blue on the other.

I saw myself as the red half—passionate and angry. And Dominic as the blue—always so calm, cool and collected.

“Gah,” I said to myself as I squeezed my clammy hands together. *How could Dominic always remain so relaxed and stoic?*

Even when we were fighting, he really never lost his cool.

If he were here right now, he'd be casually drinking whiskey, without a care in the world.

Instead, here I was sweating myself out of this dress.

I tried to calm myself down by thinking about painting the vases tomorrow.

I was curious how the red and blue would combine in the middle and what shade of purple it would make.

To me, the purple would represent the baby we hadn't made.

The baby that Dominic and I would never have.

The tiny life I'd been daydreaming about for so long now.

Suddenly, I noticed a tall man swagger into the restaurant. Sandy blond hair, and steel blue eyes that matched his button-up shirt.

He smiled at the hostess, and she pretty much swooned in place.

I'd bet my pottery wheel that was Cody.

When I'd called him to cancel—the second he'd answered, my heart thumped a little harder.

“Hey, little lady, how're ya doin'?” he'd asked immediately in a southern accent that made my toes curl.

I was a sucker for any kind of accent—but his was exceptionally sexy.

His words rolled out and around me like a big hug.

It was weird.

And oddly comforting.

Sure enough, the tall, devastatingly handsome man swaggered over to my table.

When his eyes caught mine, he smiled an incredibly big grin. “Please say you're Sloane.” His voice sounded exactly like it had on the phone.

I laughed and smiled right back. “I am. Hello, Cody, it's nice to meet you.”

I stuck out my hand and he took it instantly. But, instead of just shaking it—he pulled on it until I was standing directly in front of him.

“Girl, you are like a breath of fresh air, let me tell you.” Then he gave me a big hug.

It kind of shocked me.

No, it more than shocked me.

I wasn't offered a hug by strangers very often.

Like never.

I didn't really know how to react. So—I hugged him back.
“You're too kind, Cody.”

His arms squeezed me a little tighter. “I'm just bein' truthful.” He pushed away slightly and looked down at me. “I've been on fifteen of these app meetings—and let me tell you—” his eyes looked me up and down, “not one of them has come close to your beauty.”

I shook my head and giggled. Wow. I actually giggled.

It had been days since I'd laughed.

“I'm pretty sure you're exaggerating, but I know what you mean about the meetings. I could fill a book on how awful some of them have been.”

He let me go, then set his hand on the top of my chair. “Then, Sloane,” he said, pulling my chair out for me, “we definitely have something in common.”

I laughed again and sat down as Cody helped me.

After he was seated we looked at each other for a minute in awkward silence.

“I tend to come on a bit strong. I'm sorry if I scared you. I get it from my mama. She was a beauty queen down in Texas, and I swear she acts like it was just yesterday that she won. Walks around town smiling and hugging people she's never met.”

That made me laugh even harder. Gosh, it felt good. “It sounds like she’s well loved.”

He quirked his head to the side. “In her own mind, maybe.”

We settled into comfortable talk after that. Dancing around the real reason we were here.

I brought up the weather.

He brought up how he’d recently moved into a home and all that entailed.

So, basically, we spoke about everything but the topic at hand.

Our server came and we gave him our orders. Then we talked about food likes and dislikes until Cody cleared his throat and spoke to me in a low voice. “It feels—weird, right? To be meeting someone over a babymaking app? It took me weeks to finally give in and sign up. But, man,” he shook his head, “it’s nearly impossible to meet anyone here who’s ready to settle down, let alone start a family.”

I nodded in agreement and he continued speaking in his calm voice, “In a city of millions, you’d think we’d have better odds.”

I laughed out loud at how well he seemed to understand. “That is exactly how I feel. And, my clock has been ticking for years. At least you men have a wider window of fertility.”

He shrugged and nodded. “Yeah, but I’ve always wanted kids, and quite frankly, I’m sick of waiting.”

I sat forward and said, “I know. Me too. I’ve always wanted to be a mother. But the whole relationship thing never seems to work out for me.”

He sat back and narrowed his eyes at me. “You have me slightly frightened. Unless you sleep with dead chickens under your bed, I don’t know why someone hasn’t snatched you up, yet.”

I laughed again. “I’m not quite that crazy.”

Just then I heard a voice that I hadn’t heard in days. I gazed over Cody’s shoulder to see—Dominic staring directly at me.

Oh, crap.

I set my hands on the table and braced myself. “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost,” Cody asked gently. He reached his hand over and covered one of mine.

“Umm,” was all I could get out as I watched Dominic getting closer and closer to our table.

He had the stormiest of expressions on his face that kind of made me want to flee the restaurant immediately.

And, I probably would have done exactly that if I could feel my legs.

Which I couldn’t.

“Oh, boy,” I whispered out loud to no one. My heart sank and I had this indescribable sense of doom blanket over me.

“What’s wrong?” Cody asked in a concerned voice. His hand squeezed mine harder, but it didn’t even really register seeing as apparently all of my extremities were numb.

It all felt like everything was happening in slow motion.

Until Dominic stood beside our table. “Sloane,” he said, staring down at me. Then at Cody.

And then his eyes shot directly to our hands on the middle of the table.

I tried to move my hand out from under Cody's, but I was seriously frozen in place.

"Dominic," I somehow managed to answer back.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asked, his eyes now back on mine, and looking way, way, way stormier than before.

"Umm, it's not really a good time. Why don't you call me later in the week?" I suggested, hoping like heck that he'd turn around and leave.

Dominic cocked his head to the side and said, "If you'd unblock me, maybe you'd know I've been trying to call."

Oops.

That was true.

I had blocked him. I couldn't bear seeing his name pop up on my screen anymore. It made me too sad.

"There's really nothing left to say, Dominic."

His gaze narrowed on me, and my heart started beating even faster. "We have a lot to talk about, Sloane. Give me one minute of your time, please." The insistence in his voice got to me and made me want to give in.

And gosh, he was hot in his suit. His handsome face looked freshly shaven.

When he'd kissed me in the doctor's office, his face had been so soft. No stubble at all.

I remembered touching his cheeks as he'd kissed the crap out of me, stealing my breath.

He took a deep breath and said, “One minute, come on. You owe me that much.”

My eyebrows nearly hit my hairline. “I owe it to you?” I shook my head and felt my heart start racing. “I don’t owe you anything.”

And good grief—that was the truth. After all of his lies and everything he’d put me through—the last thing I felt towards Dominic was indebted.

Dominic’s face changed from stormy to downright, out and out angry.

“Great, so we’ll have a chat right here,” he said, glaring over at Cody, “in front of your—friend.”

Oh, he wouldn’t.

Would he?

“Great,” I replied haughtily, mostly because I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Or do.

I was stuck between a big, angry lawyer and the potential father of my child.

“Great,” he barked back, and I had to admit—my head was about to explode from just his tone alone.

Not to be outdone, I inhaled a deep breath. “Yeah, great!”

Apparently done with saying great, he said, “Why did you block me? I called and texted so many times.”

I frowned and narrowed my gaze at him. “Um, maybe because you lied to me?”

He stepped closer to me and tapped his finger on the table. “I told you the reason why I did that. I was scared of losing

you.”

His eyes dug right into my heart and tried to set up shop.

But, I’d been here before. I knew how this song and dance ended.

“A lie’s a lie, Dominic. The bottom line is—I can’t trust you.”

He looked up at the ceiling for a second, then back down at me. “You can trust me. You know that. I was there for all the important shit.”

Cody cleared his throat and said, “I’d appreciate it if you could keep a handle on your language in front of the lady.” Cody nodded at me.

Dominic’s head swung toward Cody and he gave him what could only be described as a death glare.

“Who the hell are you?” Dominic spat out as he set his hands on his hips.

“From what I’m hearing of this conversation, that is none of your business. Now, if you’d be so kind as to leave, we have dinner plans.”

Once again, Dominic’s face changed. This time he was livid. “Maybe you should shut up and mind your own business.”

Before this escalated, I jumped out of my seat. “You’re making a scene.” I grabbed Dominic’s arm and pulled. “At least lower your voice.”

His head turned back to me and then his eyes lowered to where my hands touched his arm. He stared at me with something in his eyes that I couldn’t identify.

But, whatever it was—I couldn't take my eyes off him.

“You need to leave, Dominic. Please,” I begged him, wanting this stupid fiasco to end.

Of course, a ridiculous part of me also wanted him to take me in his arms and crush his strong, determined lips down on mine—and kiss the crap out of me until sometime next week.

“I'm asking for five minutes.” His eyes held mine and I was powerless. “Sloane, come on.”

I straightened my spine and prepared for whatever he was going to throw at me.

I guess this is what you got when you used a babymaking app.

“Make it quick,” I said and made a point of pulling my phone out of my pocket. “I'm timing you.”

Of course, that's when pitterpatter4U decided to send me a notification.

And that notification blazed across the screen so brightly that it could be seen for miles around.

I widened my eyes and gasped as I read the message. “Congratulations! You've got a match waiting for you on your page. Log in for more details.”

It was clearly labeled, so there was no way to explain it away. Dominic was in full view of my screen.

When I peered up at him, his eyes were stuck to my phone.

Sheesh.

I was such an idiot.

Why did I bring out my phone? It could be safely hidden away in my purse right now—away from Dominic's eyes.

“Are you kidding me?” Dominic asked in a low, hushed voice—his eyes still glued to my phone.

The butterflies in my stomach ramped up and were currently sword-fighting each other.

Dominic’s gaze shot back directly to mine. “Are you kidding me? Please, tell me they sent that in error.”

My feet froze on the floor, and my mouth froze open. Unable to speak or move, I just stood there like an idiot.

“Sloane,” he said, his voice holding more than a hint of warning, “tell me you didn’t jump back on that app the second you left my house.”

Gosh.

The hurt in his eyes and on his face—it freaking crushed me. I felt a painful ache take up residence around my heart. “I didn’t go back on it right away—”

His face changed in an instant—from hurt to ticked off.

“You did it. I—” He shook his head like he couldn’t believe what I’d done. And honestly, I didn’t blame him. I couldn’t really believe I’d done that either.

I mean, I only went on to check if he was there—but still, I could have deleted my account.

“Fuck me.” He instantly looked over at Cody. “Is that where you met him?” Dominic jerked his head.

I set my hands on my hips and answered back, “Leave Cody out of this.”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed on me. “Cody?” His voice raised. “Cody?” he said louder this time. “Nobody’s actually named Cody!” he leaned in and yelled.

It made me jump, and I retaliated right back. “Really? Because Cody’s name is definitely Cody. So, I guess you’re wrong.”

Dominic took another step closer to me. “It’s a stupid name.”

My jaw dropped open. “It is not.” I crossed my arms and glared at him.

“It is.”

“No, it’s not!” Now, I was the one yelling in the middle of a crowded restaurant.

Oh, my gosh.

“How could you do this?” Dominic shook his head. “How could you go back on that stupid app so soon after—” he raised his hands in the air and seemed to struggle for words, “us?”

Now, my blood was boiling. “Because I want to have a baby, Dominic. And there is no—” I took a deep breath, because it hurt to say, “us.”

“Bullshit.”

We stared at each other like we were in some kind of stand-off. “Fine,” I said, feeling more than a little ticked off at his reaction. “But we’re over. I’ve moved on.”

Dominic’s eyes flared and he stepped forward so we were nearly toe to toe. “Really? That was fast—considering it’s only been three days since we nearly slept together in the doctor’s office.”

My jaw fell to the floor, and I gasped loudly, “We did not!”

He leaned in closely and sneered. “I was lying on top of you,” he inhaled loudly, “and you didn’t have any panties on. Oh, and your hands were on my belt buckle. Let’s face it, Sloane, if that nurse hadn’t walked in when she did, you might be pregnant with my baby right now.”

My legs went totally numb, and I felt like I might just tip right over any second.

When my brain finally caught up with my body—I blinked and shook my head.

“I can’t believe you just said that.” I looked him straight in the eyes and didn’t move.

His face turned from angry to intense as he pointed his finger at me. “Do not,” he said in a lowered voice, “do not stand there and pretend that meant nothing to you. I felt you kissing me back. You were completely into it—into us.”

A voice to my left caught my attention. “Excuse me,” the server said before he cleared his throat, “Would you be so kind as to take this conversation outside?”

I gazed around the restaurant and saw dozens of eyes stuck on us. Good grief. I looked over at our table—only to see it empty with a few bills set in the middle of the white tablecloth.

Cody left.

Why wouldn’t he, though?

I mean anyone with the tiniest bit of sense would look at this trainwreck and get out while they still could.

I let out a sigh and turned to the server. “I’m very sorry.” Then I grabbed my purse and hustled out of there like it was on fire.

“Sloane, would you wait up?” I heard Dominic calling me. It didn’t stop me, though.

What did surprise me was how much I wanted to turn around and run into Dominic’s arms.

It was stupid.

I was being a stupid girl.

I already knew how this song and dance ended.

I’d promised myself that I wouldn’t get involved with another liar.

I could not do that again.

Ever.

If I let Dominic back in—I’d just be setting myself up for another fall.

A fall that no one would be there to catch me from.

Just like last time.

Nope, I couldn’t do that to myself.

Not again.

I hit the elevator button and luckily the doors swished open immediately. I ran in and quickly hit the button to close the doors.

Suddenly, a large arm shot between the doors before they could shut. “Thanks for holding the elevator,” Dominic said as the doors opened for him, and he stepped in.

Dominic stared down at me. His hand moved to the panel of buttons and he hit the red, stop one.

I gasped and tried to pull his arm away. “What are you doing?” I asked in shock at his actions. The alarm began to

sound and instinctively my hand darted out to push the offending button.

Except that Dominic got there first and stopped my progress.

“You’re going to listen to me, Sloane. All I asked for was five minutes.”

His grip on my arm was unrelenting. I didn’t want to give in, but I did.

I glared up at him. “And you decided that kidnapping me in an elevator would be a good way to get my attention.”

He stepped toward me, still holding onto my arm. I backed up until my back hit the wall and I couldn’t move anymore.

“Whatever it takes,” he said in a grumbly voice. His eyes raced over my face, leaving me feeling helpless—like he could tell exactly what I was thinking.

I didn’t want him to know how much being near him affected me.

I didn’t want him to know how much I wanted him to lean down and take my lips with his.

I didn’t want him to know how much he’d broken my heart—and how much I wanted to forget all about it.

How much I wanted to go back to his house and fall into his arms—then into his bed.

How much I wanted to start a family with this man—

“I miss you so much,” he said, letting his fingers trail up my arm, over my shoulder, then passed the curve of my neck and into my hair. “I can’t stop thinking about you,” he

whispered against my lips. The feel of his warm breath on my skin drove me crazy.

“Dominic,” I said as my mind clouded over. I could smell his spicy, manly scent—and I was desperately trying to remember why kissing him was a horrible idea.

Because right now, I very much want to wrap my fingers behind his neck and pull his head to mine.

Which was exactly what I did. I rose up on my tiptoes and closed the few inches that separated us.

Dominic’s arms circled around me and pulled me tight into his body.

I gave him a hard, bruising kiss as my eyes fluttered closed. His moan filled my mouth and made me melt right into him. His hair was so soft between my fingers—such a stark contrast from his strong exterior.

His tongue found mine and so help me—I was lost.

Lost in sensation.

Lost in his arms.

Lost in Dominic.

His hands slid down to my behind and before I knew it, he lifted me up. He pushed me against the wall and I gasped. I could feel his hardness against—me, and it shot a thrill of desire through my entire body.

“I want you, Sloane,” he took our kiss deeper and completely stole any oxygen left in my lungs, “I need you.” His gruff voice was tinged with lust.

I felt so faint that I was grateful he was holding me. If he set me down, I knew I wouldn’t be able to rely on my legs to

hold me up.

Dominic kissed me like I'd never been kissed before—with so much passion and longing—it was like he wanted to devour me right here in the elevator.

He pulled me further into his body, making his excitement even more apparent.

It felt like my panties were going to catch fire any second now.

“Come home with me,” he muttered against my lips, “let me show you how much I missed you.”

Oh, my gosh.

His words and his raspy voice were really doing a number on my resolve.

“Dominic,” was all I could will myself to whisper out. I felt my willpower leaving me more and more by the second.

My legs wrapped around his waist and his hands clutched my behind even tighter. He had me caged against the side of the elevator, and his hands traveled up my sides, dangerously close to my breasts.

Part of me—a big part of me—wanted him to take a detour and touch me there. Instead, he kept moving up to my neck, then to the sides of my face.

He halted our kiss as he cupped my face. His eyes found mine and he smiled. “I’m falling in love with you, Sloane.” Dominic kissed my lips gently then moved back slightly. “Seeing how passionate you are with everything in your life—Christ,” he shook his head, “and you have more talent than anyone I’ve ever met. And you use it to do what you love.”

His lips found mine again and he kissed me softly. “I’ve never met anyone like you. Everything you do, everything you touch—turns into magic.”

I felt my eyes begin to well up and my throat got dry. His kind words rendered me speechless.

“I need you in my life, Sloane. The last few days have been pure hell without you. Thinking that I’d never see you again. Or,” he leaned in closer, “kiss you again.”

And, stupid me—I let him.

Again.

I’d kissed my share of men and let me tell you—never have I ever been kissed like this. It felt like pure electricity zinging through my veins each time his lips touched mine.

He cradled my head in his hands as he continued kissing me. Dominic moved me exactly where he wanted me with each kiss—with each touch of his tongue.

And I met him every time he explored inside my mouth and teased me for more.

Gosh, between his kisses and his heartfelt confessions—I never wanted this to stop.

“Come home with me,” he whispered against my lips. I felt myself completely melt into him, now.

Being in Dominic’s arms—having him kiss me and touch me like he was—it would be so easy to do whatever he was asking.

Mostly because I wanted to do exactly what he was asking.

I wanted to go home with him.

I wanted to continue what we'd started—okay, what I'd started—here in this elevator.

I wanted to jump into his car, then into his bed.

And we could figure out all the other things later.

Things like why he lied to me. And how I'd get over that.

Suddenly, the butterflies in my stomach stopped flying around.

And that fluttery feeling was quickly replaced with a twisty, gnarling dread.

Dominic had lied to me.

I'd thought I knew exactly who he was.

I thought I could trust him.

I'd been more than ready to make a baby with this man—in more ways than one.

He was right—if that nurse hadn't interrupted us, I very well might be pregnant right now.

Pregnant with a liar's baby.

Dominic was the kind of person I'd been trying to avoid having a baby with—in fact, that was the entire reason I'd decided to go on the stupid babymaking app in the first place.

So I wouldn't be stuck raising a kid with a lying lie face for the next eighteen years.

I'd come too close to doing that in the past. Luckily, nature had been kind—even when humans hadn't.

Just as my thoughts turned sour, there was a loud screeching sound beside us.

We turned our heads to see three firefighters at the now open elevator doors.

“They’re okay!” one of them yelled as she looked directly at me and winked.

“Oh, my gosh,” I mumbled as I pushed my hands on Dominic’s chest. “Let me down,” I ordered him and unhooked my bare legs from around his waist.

I felt his body shake slightly and it pulled me out of my mortification just long enough to gaze at him.

He was laughing.

“This is not funny,” I said, pushing my dress back down over my legs.

Dominic helped me and shielded my body from the onlookers. “It’s pretty funny.” His voice sounded jovial and he didn’t look even one bit ashamed.

I didn’t agree. “It is not.” I straightened the straps on my shoulders. “You shouldn’t have kissed me in here.”

Now, he was laughing out loud. “You kissed me.” He trapped my chin between his thumb and index finger. “And I’m glad you did.”

Then his lips lowered to mine and he gave me a sweet, gentle kiss.

“Would you stop?” I asked, shoving his chest. He didn’t move an inch. All he did was stare at me.

“Where’d you go?” He quit laughing and his voice was tinged with concern and—annoyance.

“I’m right here,” I nodded my head toward the door, “and so are fifty of our closest friends.”

He turned his head back to look and we both stared at the firefighters and the large gathering of onlookers behind them.

Dominic grabbed my hand tightly with his and cleared his throat. “Thank you for opening the doors. We thought we’d be stuck in here for a while.” He straightened his tie.

The firefighter who’d winked at me answered back immediately, “We see that. Looks like you two were trying to repopulate the earth.”

I wasn’t sure if I could get any more embarrassed than I already was—but yes, it turned out I could.

Laughter from the bystanders filtered inside the tiny elevator and I felt my cheeks get hot.

Dominic thanked the firefighters again and then they let him through.

He pulled me along behind him as we trampled through the gawkers.

I mean, I couldn’t blame them for being curious—heck, they were probably worried that someone was stuck and scared in the elevators.

It wasn’t like they could know it was only two people making out.

Somehow, he found the stairwell and opened the door for me. I hurried through but Dominic wouldn’t let go of my hand—no matter how hard I tried to pull it out of his grasp.

“Let go,” I said and tried to pull away.

He shook his head and backed me up against cold, hard brick wall.

I turned my head and looked down the stairs.

So close, yet so far.

“Sloane,” he said my name even though I was right in front of him.

Reluctantly, I peered up at him. “What?” I said in an annoyed, haughty tone—which was pretty much exactly how I felt at the moment.

His eyes held mine as if he wanted to stare straight into my soul. “I asked you where you went.”

I rolled my eyes and tried to push him away. His big body wouldn’t budge. “I’m right here.”

He swallowed and shook his head again. “No, you’re not. Back in the elevator,” he jerked his head, “you were right there with me.” His eyes trailed over my face. “And then you disappeared.”

I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh. When I opened them again, I said, “Look, I need to go. I shouldn’t have—” I let my eyes drop to his chest, “done what I did in the elevator. I don’t know what came over me.” My eyes found his. “It doesn’t change anything, Dominic.”

He took a deep breath and I watched as his face turned even more serious.

“Bullshit. You still have feelings for me. What just happened in the elevator proved that.”

I could feel his chest move faster under my hands. He stepped in closer to me, caging my body tightly against the wall. He smelled so good and the warmth from his body felt so incredibly nice next to mine.

Gosh, it would be so easy to just give in.

But every time I thought about doing exactly that, it felt like I was suddenly walking barefoot across hot coals.

“Dominic, I can’t do this.” This time I shoved harder against his chest.

He stepped back, giving me a few feet of space. “Why won’t you at least try? I apologized—” he ran his hand through his hair and shut his eyes tight, “for being stupid.” He looked directly at me. “I don’t know what else I can do.”

I felt tears behind my eyes and knew I had to get out of here.

Quick.

“There’s nothing you can do, Dominic.” Then I reached for the handrail and stepped down the stairwell.

I didn’t get very far when I heard him call down to me, “Your ex hurt you.”

I stopped dead in my tracks and gasped. It felt like someone had gut punched me.

I gazed up the stairs at him but didn’t say a word.

He stared at me and said, “He lied to you. About something big.”

He’d completely taken my breath away.

“I’m not him, Sloane.” His voice was low and controlled—unlike how I felt right now. “I would never hurt you like he did.”

I managed the impossible and took a deep breath. “You already did.” My stomach twisted in a nasty, horrible way.

Dominic blinked and shook his head slowly. “I hurt you—I get that. I know I messed up. I was an idiot.” His face had

softened, much like his voice. “You know I’m not your ex—in your heart, you know that. Come home with me. We can talk. You can tell me all about what happened.”

His words traveled down the stairwell and wrapped around me like a warm hug.

My grip on the handrail tightened. “And are you going to tell me all about the woman who hurt you, too?” My voice sounded snippier than I’d intended.

He crossed his arms. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His tone instantly turned defensive.

I huffed out a hollow laugh. “Right, a handsome, successful lawyer like you just goes on a babymaking app to save time.”

His eyes narrowed on me and he frowned.

“Someone hurt you, too, Dominic. Are we going to have story time about how you got screwed over, too?”

His eyebrows rose and his mouth opened—but he didn’t speak.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. You’re so perfect.”

He leaned on the handrail beside him. “Stop turning this around to me. You’re way off base—you—you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The tears behind my eyes threatened and I knew I had to get out of there. “Face it,” I said and took in a deep breath, “we’re both pretty messed up. I mean, who goes on an app to make a baby?”

He didn’t say a word—just stared at me.

“This is not the way to start a family,” I said in a hushed tone before I quickly turned around and started back down the stairs.

Half of me expected to hear his footsteps following behind me.

The other half of me wanted to hear his footsteps following behind me.

Not that I had one clue what I’d do if he actually did.

When I finally hurried outside—I suddenly knew he wasn’t coming after me this time.

And that realization hit me like a ton of bricks.

Dominic

Six months later...

“COULD THIS BE ANY MORE PRETENTIOUS?” I asked Ronnie as I finished my first glass of champagne. I intended on having more.

Many more.

I’d need it to get through this event.

Ronnie giggled and grabbed two more glasses of bubbly from a passing server. “Who cares? There’s free champagne.” She grinned and handed me a glass.

“Nothing at these events is ever free, my friend. Just wait and see. After supper, they’ll either ask for a check or your soul.”

Ronnie snorted and started choking on her champagne. I carefully patted her back, but she seemed to be just fine.

“And which would you rather give up?” She giggled before taking another sip.

Either she was swaying or I was.

“At this point, I can’t say I really care,” I answered her truthfully. The last six months had probably been the most difficult time in my life.

I’d gotten through it.

Barely.

Sloane had ripped out my heart and stomped on it.

I did what I could to pick it up, dust it off, and stuff it back inside my aching chest—but I still felt a gaping void.

Every day.

I missed her smile.

I missed hearing her sweet, lyrical voice.

I missed seeing her gorgeous, curvy body.

And I missed spending time with her.

Incidentally, I also missed every one of her goofy animals.

So much so, that I caved and bought myself a dog. Sunny loved me unconditionally. I couldn’t wait to get home to her every day. She was still in her puppy phase, but I really wanted to get her a sister or brother to play with.

Having two puppies in my house at one time might kill me, though. Maybe in six months or a year.

We’ll see.

“Aww, poor Dommy Salami,” Ronnie slurred and grabbed onto my arm. “You need to get back on that babymaking app, pronto.”

I wrapped my arm around my sloshed friend. “You need a cup of strong coffee.”

She snorted again and laughed right out loud. “No, you just need more champagne.”

I shrugged.

Maybe she was right.

There wasn't much else to do at these big, showy events anyway. The orchestra played softly in the background and the servers waltzed around with silver platters filled with hors d'oeuvres and champagne.

I couldn't leave until supper had been served—my grandmother had already threatened me.

I gazed at my watch.

Still plenty of time for champagne.

“It's one minute after the last time you looked at it.” Ronnie slipped her hand over my watch.

“One minute closer to leaving time,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. “You haven't been out in months. Can't you at least try to have fun?”

I didn't answer her because I wasn't sure I even knew how to have fun anymore.

With people, that is.

I had plenty of fun with Sunny every day.

“I mean look at all the gorgeous women here, tonight,” she said, pointing her glass in front of her and slopping some of her champagne over the side of the tall, skinny glass. At least it didn't drip on her gown.

Or my tux.

“You can’t tell me you don’t find any of them attractive?”

Well, now that was the truth. There were plenty of beautiful women here.

But none of them were Sloane.

Or were they?

As my eyes scanned the huge ballroom, I suddenly stopped and stared at one woman in particular who seemed far too familiar.

She wouldn’t be here, though.

She couldn’t be here.

This event was only for the hoity-toity.

No.

This event was only for the hoitiest of all the toity.

If you didn’t have money—mostly old money—flowing through your veins, you’d never get an invite to an event like this.

Yeah, it was all for charity. Just like every year.

Charity being the operative word.

I’d spoken to my grandmother time and time again about raising money for some “real” charities—and not the ridiculous ones she always opted for.

If I had to cut one more check to the son of a billionaire—I’d likely lose it.

Not that their ventures were always bad so much as dumb and a complete waste of time. And they sure as hell didn’t need my money.

There were real people out there with real problems—who needed help right away. And that was exactly what I'd attempted to explain to her months ago.

Unfortunately, from the shocked look on her face at the time—it didn't seem to sink in too far.

The woman who resembled Sloane turned to the side slightly. I still couldn't get a good view of her face, though.

Christ.

I really was losing my mind.

Ever since that last day we saw each other in the stairwell—I'd been seeing Sloane everywhere.

Of course, it was never really her. But every time I turned around I thought I saw her.

But this was definitely not the kind of place she'd ever turn up. No, Sloane had voiced her severe dislike for the privileged sect of society.

“Oh, she's super pretty. You should go talk to her,” Ronnie said as she grabbed onto my arm. The champagne on her breath traveled up my nostrils and moved back slightly.

“Okay, but let's get you some coffee first.” I signaled one of the servers and asked for a cup to be sent to our table.

Just as I suggested to Ronnie that we head back there, someone announced it was time to be seated.

“Aww, just when you were about to make your moves on that hot chick.” Ronnie pouted and held onto me.

I chuckled at her and pulled her forward. “Yes, life is cruel.”

When we arrived back at our table, I held the chair out for Ronnie and made sure she sat down. A server came by with a full tray of champagne and she reached both hands up and snagged two glasses.

I quickly slipped one of them away from her. “Hand the other one over, too.” I motioned toward her glass.

She shook her head and took a healthy sip. “Nope, if I have to be here, I need all the help I can get.” Then she tipped the glass and swallowed the rest.

More people arrived at our table, so I stood and greeted them. Once they sat down, I turned to the empty chair beside me.

Maybe I’d luck out and nobody would sit there.

The couple across from us started discussing their child. She wanted to go call the babysitter, but he was encouraging her to stay. Everyone at the table were unwilling participants in their discussion.

“What do you think, Sloane? Should I call the sitter?” the woman looked over in my direction. I was confused until I realized her eyes were staring above my head. Then I was confused because I’d sworn she’d said, “Sloane.” I must’ve heard wrong.

“Do whatever you want,” I heard a voice behind me say.

A voice I knew.

A voice I’d been hearing in my dreams for the last six months.

“Because we all know you will anyway,” I heard the woman behind me say under her breath.

“What did you say?” the woman across the table from me asked.

When I turned around, sure enough—I saw Sloane.

Christ, she was beautiful. Her hair was in a fancy updo with a few blonde tendrils hanging down.

The strapless, red ballgown she wore hugged her waist before it flared out into a beautiful, flowing skirt.

“I said, maybe it’s a good idea anyway.” Sloane peered over at the woman—who I was just now realizing—resembled Sloane.

She wasn’t nearly as pretty as Sloane, though. Where Sloane had that natural, warm, soft, feminine beauty, the other woman had hard edges and fillers.

I stood up immediately and pulled out the chair beside me. Sloane looked at me and seemed rather startled. “Dominic?”

I smiled and said, “It looks like we’re table partners for the evening.”

She gazed from me to the chair and then back again. Finally, she accepted the chair and sat down.

“Oh, my God, is that your Sloane?” Ronnie said in a drunken, whispered yell. I pushed in Sloane’s chair as I glared at Ronnie.

“Thank you,” Sloane said in a low voice, her head turned slightly to me.

I smiled a genuine grin at her. “You’re welcome.”

Before either of us could say another word, the woman across from us said in a snooty voice, “What do you mean, his Sloane?”

Sloane's jaw fell open and she appeared at a loss for words.

I cleared my throat and answered for her, "We volunteered for a kid's baseball team together."

Sloane straightened up and said, "Dominic, this is my sister, Sissy, and her husband, Pete."

Her sister.

That explained the resemblance.

"We already did introductions, Sloane. When you were out socializing with the Lewis boy," her sister answered back snidely.

I lowered my voice so only Sloane could hear it. "Sloane and Sissy?"

She smirked and sighed. "Our parents drink."

That cracked me up, so I started laughing. Then so did Sloane. The entire table stared at us, but I didn't care. It felt good to talk to Sloane—and laugh with Sloane—again.

"How long do we have to stay?" Pete asked his wife.

Sissy didn't take that question very well. She turned to Pete with disgust in her eyes. "When you're an heiress to the largest cereal company in the world, you have an obligation to show up to certain events." Then she shot a glance over at her sister. "Unless you're Sloane Alexander. In which case you don't have to attend anything—except your pottery wheel."

Wow.

There was a whole lot there to unpack.

Sloane's sister was a real piece of work.

I shrugged. “If you ask me,” I said straight to Sissy, “Sloane’s pottery wheel is a whole lot more important than this event.”

Sloane’s head turned to me.

Sissy’s head almost exploded. “It’s a good thing I didn’t ask you, then.”

Sloane’s head practically spun back to her sister. “Honestly, Sissy? How old are you? Dominic was only trying to be kind.”

Pete turned white as a ghost and grabbed his wife’s hand. “It’s okay, honey. I’m sorry I asked. We’ll stay for as long as you want.”

Sissy glared at her husband. “No wonder you two dated for so long. Neither one of you has an ounce of family responsibility between you.”

There was a moment of silence at the table while that sank in.

“Wait,” Ronnie said in an exaggerated, drunk, slurry tone, as she practically hunched over the table, “are you saying that your husband dated Sloane?”

At first, I glared at Ronnie, wondering why she’d say such a ridiculous thing.

However, once I saw the guilty look Pete was displaying on his face—I turned to Sloane—who had the exact same expression on her face.

What the hell?

Sissy straightened her spine and spoke up, “They were together for years.” She picked up her glass of champagne and took a long sip. “Until they realized they weren’t a good fit.”

Sloane sighed quietly and muttered, “Yeah, because he was fitting himself in you.”

My head snapped back to Sloane. “What did you say?” I asked her in a low voice.

“What did you just say?” Sissy asked in a ticked off, disgruntled tone.

Sloane stared back at her sister. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

Ronnie started drunk laughing. “Oh, my gosh, I totally heard her!” She snorted loudly and smacked the palm of her hand on the table. The plates and silverware all jumped.

“She said, ‘Yeah, because he was fitting himself in you.’” Then Ronnie laughed so hard, her face ended up in her plate.

“Would you tone it down a bit?” I asked my friend, nudging her with my hand.

Ronnie’s entire body shook like she’d just heard the most hilarious thing on Earth.

“Ronnie, I’m serious,” I said, leaning over slightly and urging her to calm down.

“You, you—” Ronnie kept laughing hysterically, “didn’t tell me she was so funny.”

I turned to look at Sloane and got ready to apologize for my drunk friend. But she had her eyes stuck on her sister.

“You always were vulgar, weren’t you?” Sissy said to Sloane with not a small amount of disdain in her voice.

Sloane’s shoulders rose as she inhaled deeply. “I’m vulgar?” Sloane asked her sibling. “I,” she shook her head,

“am the one who’s vulgar? Really?” She cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes at her sister.

“You sleep with my boyfriend—behind my back—and get pregnant—also behind my back—” She shot her hand out and pointed her finger at Sissy, “when you knew very well, I was trying to get pregnant,” she took in another deep breath, her chest filling with air, “you freaking knew.”

Beside me, Ronnie gasped audibly but I didn’t move.

My guts were churning hearing what Sloane had gone through.

Actually, it made me physically ill to think about Sloane’s sister betraying her in this way.

A boyfriend was one thing.

A sister—something completely different.

I remembered Sloane telling me that she’d caught her ex and her BFF—in the act. She must’ve meant her sister but been too embarrassed to say anything.

Oof.

That had to have hurt.

Your boyfriend and your sister making a baby together. Instead of you and your boyfriend making a baby together.

Sissy’s face scrunched up like she’d just bitten into a lemon. “How were you supposed to get pregnant when you weren’t even sleeping together?”

This time, everyone at the table gasped.

Sloane’s chair screeched against the floor as she stood up.

“Uh, oh,” I heard Ronnie say—quietly this time.

Sloane narrowed her eyes at her sister and bent forward. “For your information,” her finger tapped on the table, “we slept together up until the day I kicked him out.”

Sissy’s jaw dropped and you could tell that Sloane had shocked her.

The entire banquet room was quiet now and I knew I had to do something to diffuse this situation. I stood and put my arm around Sloane’s waist. “Come for a walk with me,” I whispered into her ear.

Her head swiveled toward me, and she frowned. “No, thanks.”

My grip tightened on her body. “Oh, I insist.” Before she knew what was happening, I found her hand and pulled her alongside me.

“What are you doing?” she muttered to me with a fake smile on her face.

I returned the smile, only mine wasn’t fake. “Saving you from yourself.”

Her fake smile fell slightly. “I don’t need saving.”

I raised my eyebrows and disagreed, “Oh, you do. Trust me.”

She tried to shake my hand off, but I wouldn’t allow her to. I refused to let her continue fighting with her sister.

“Stop it,” I whispered to her sharply and squeezed her hand. “Give me five minutes,” I said and stared at her sternly. “Five minutes and then you can run back in here and mud wrestle your sister for all I care.”

Sloane tsk’d at me. “We weren’t mud wrestling.”

I quickened our pace, wanting us out of sight as soon as possible. “No, you’re right. Mud wrestling would have been much more subtle.”

After that, she quit arguing and walked with me silently. It was a relief, to say the least.

Once we stepped out of the ballroom, I gazed around for a private place to talk. I spotted the coatroom off to the side. “This way,” I said to Sloane and pulled her along behind me.

The coatroom looked deserted—thank goodness. My hand reached around the wooden gate and found the latch. I opened it and walked us through it.

Row after row of coats greeted us. It seemed like as good a place as any to hide. I moved us into a more secluded section by the side wall.

“I need to get back to the table.” Her eyes landed on mine, and she gave me a serious look.

“You need a timeout.”

Her head fell back for a second and she groaned. When she straightened, she said, “It was fine, we were just—”

I cut her off, “Making a spectacle of yourselves.”

Sloane’s hand moved to her hip. “My sister and I have issues.”

I let out a deep breath and rubbed my hand on my face. “That’s putting it mildly.”

She gave me a short shrug but didn’t say a thing.

“I’m sorry about—” I waved my hand out to the side, “your sister and your ex, and the baby.” I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Christ, they’re all a bunch of dicks.”

She nodded. “Except for the baby. She’s pretty cute. And really too young to know anything.”

I chuckled and set my hands on her shoulders. “Right, babies don’t choose their parents.”

The way she smiled at me gave me an intensely warm feeling in my chest. “Sloane?”

She tilted her head a bit. “What?”

“I’m sorry your sister and your ex fucked you over.”

Her eyes got glassy, and she bounced her shoulders up and down. “Thanks, but I’m over it.”

That was debatable but now was not the time to discuss those idiots. No, finally getting Sloane to myself after all these months was a gift. I wasn’t about to blow my chance to speak to her.

I calmed my nerves and thought about what to say. I didn’t have much time, so every word needed to count.

“I miss you,” was all I could think of to say.

She opened her mouth and breathed in like she was going to speak—but then closed her lips tight as she looked at me. Her eyes gazed down the floor and back up at me. “We met through a babymaking app, Dominic,” she inhaled a deep breath, “we were doomed from the start.”

Her words hurt, I couldn’t deny that. Actually, they hit like a ton of bricks. Still, I only had a short time. I had to punch back with everything I had.

“I still want to make a baby with you, Sloane.”

A burst of air left her mouth and she said, “Dominic, I—”

There was no way I was going to let her finish that sentence. “Tell me you don’t miss me.”

She opened her mouth again—but nothing came out.

Thank God.

I slid my hands over her soft shoulders and down her arms until I grabbed her hands. “I love you, Sloane,” I pulled her closer, “and I still want to make a baby with you.”

Suddenly, we were interrupted. “Um, just sayin’—” someone popped out between the coat racks and coughed, “I’d totally make babies with this dude if I had the chance.” The teenage girl was holding a large jar with the word “TIPS” in bold letters in one hand, and what looked like a pen in her other.

Except when she stuck the pen between her lips and inhaled—I realized it wasn’t a pen at all. She exhaled a large puff of smoke and coughed again. “I mean, he’s really hot. It’s not like it would be a chore or anything.” My eyes slid to the large badge on her shirt that said, “Coat Check Assistant.”

Sloane turned a bright shade of scarlet while I chuckled. “Thank you,” I smiled at the coat check girl, “you just earned yourself an even bigger tip.” My hands dropped from Sloane’s shoulders, and I reached for my wallet.

After I pulled out a large bill, I walked over to the coat check girl and stuffed the bill into her jar. “If you could give us twenty minutes alone, I’d be grateful.”

Her eyes widened and she smiled back at me. “Awesome.” Before I could respond, she turned around and took off.

“We should get back inside,” Sloane said with a sigh.

I spun around and stepped in front of her. “You have money.”

She bit down on her lip in such a cute way it nearly made me laugh.

“You and your sister are heirs to the largest cereal company in the world.”

Her eyes looked off to the side for a moment. “My family has money.”

I stepped closer to her. “But you have an aversion to rich people.”

Her eyes found mine and she nodded. “I do.”

I smirked at her and held her eyes. “But you have money. So, you can’t be mad at me for having money when you have it too.”

Now she chewed on her lip and her hands began to fidget. “My family has money. And you lied to me, Dominic. That was the biggest reason I was mad at you.”

One more step and I was toe to toe with her. She had to lift her chin to see me. “I only lied because I thought you’d call everything off if you knew I had money—which is something you can’t be mad about, because you’re rich, too.”

Her shoulders slumped and she had a defeated air about her as she stared at me.

I decided to go in for the kill. “I’m sorry for lying to you. I’ve said that a hundred times. But you can’t blame me for my family—when you come from money, too.”

Her hands stopped fidgeting, so I took them into mine and held on. “We had something good. You know that. Give me another chance.” My eyes scanned her face. “Please?”

Her eyes didn't leave mine.

"That's not a—" she started to say before getting interrupted again.

"Excuse me, excuse me," a voice droned on and on behind us as a bell rang incessantly.

We both swiveled our heads around to see an older woman in an enormous fur coat. Her painted-on eyebrows shot up even higher on her large forehead. "Excuse me, excuse me," she said even more forcefully. "Do you two work here or not?"

Wow.

The uppity tone of her voice sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

I let go of Sloane and strode toward the crusty customer. "I suppose we do. How can I help you?" I looked around for the coat check girl, but she was nowhere to be found.

Even though I'd stepped up to the counter, the woman continued to ring the bell. It made me want to rip it out of her hand and—

"Hi, sorry for the mix-up," Sloane suddenly appeared beside me and somehow managed to slide the bell away from the woman.

"Mix-up? There was no mix-up. You were simply not doing your jobs. I have a mind to report this to your manager." Just when I thought her nose couldn't get any higher—she lifted it even more.

Good grief.

Now she was officially ticking me off. I felt my blood pressure begin to rise as I set my hands on the counter between

us and leaned forward. “Well, if there’s nothing we can do for you, then feel free to—”

Right then, Sloane somehow inserted herself between me and the counter.

Not that I minded.

Having her this close made me completely forget the annoying woman in front of us.

“We’ll be happy to help you out,” Sloane said in a cheery voice.

I frowned down at her, but she gave me a big smile that seemed fairly fake to me.

“We don’t want to get anyone in trouble, now, do we?” she said with her eyebrows raised.

Meh.

I guess she had a point. I didn’t want any complaints that might get mixed up and blamed on the coat check girl.

“Fine,” I muttered and reluctantly gave Sloane some space.

“What can I help you with?” Sloane asked the woman.

The woman huffed and replied in a nasally voice as she carefully removed her huge, fur coat, “Take good care of this.”

Sloane immediately retracted her hands and gasped, “Is that—” she backed tight into me, “real fur?” Sloane’s voice held more than a tinge of horror in it.

The woman smiled slyly. “Yes, one hundred percent, real chinchilla,” she said with boastful pride. “My husband gave it to me for my birthday.”

The woman tried to hand it over to Sloane, but Sloane quietly shrieked, “Oh, my gosh!” Her arms flew back, and she

held onto my jacket.

“I know, it’s gorgeous, isn’t it?” the woman spouted off, completely oblivious to Sloane’s reaction.

“How could you—” Sloane began but I butted in.

“It’s truly the most beautiful coat I’ve ever seen.” I moved Sloane out of the way and grabbed the fluffy, furry coat. “We’ll take great care of it for you.”

I whisked the coat away to the back and hung it up. I turned around to see I wasn’t alone.

“You ran off quickly,” Sloane said with a quirk of her head.

I snickered at her. “I couldn’t risk you grabbing a bottle of ketchup and attacking that woman’s coat.”

She kept walking toward me. “I wouldn’t spray the coat. But I might spray her.”

I nodded and chuckled as I set my hands on my hips. “You have no idea how clearly I can imagine you doing that.”

Sloane shrugged. “She’d deserve it. Just think of how many cute, fuzzy animals had to—”

I reached out for her hands and pulled her close. “Don’t think about that.” I let my fingers drift across the side of her face. God, she was beautiful.

Her eyes shined back at me. “Come home with me. We can leave right now and go talk—” My hand sifted into her soft, golden locks.

Her mouth parted slightly, and I watched—transfixed—as she licked her lips. “We have to stay,” she said in the most unconvincingly way.

I shook my head and stepped closer. “No, we don’t. We have to go talk about what’s next for us.” My thumb stroked up and down her cheek.

“What do you mean, what’s next for us?” she questioned me, and I smiled.

“First,” I said, pulling her closer, “you’re going to forgive me. And then,” I leaned my head down, “we’re going to make a baby.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth gaped open. “I don’t want to go on fertility treatments.”

My other hand moved up to her face and I traced her lips with my thumb. “You and I don’t need test tubes, Sloane. We’ve got more than enough chemistry between us to make a baby the old-fashioned way.”

She sighed so sweetly. “Dominic,” was all she said before I bent down far enough so our lips were almost touching.

“Tell me you forgive me for being a dumbass,” I whispered gently against her lips.

She gave me a beautiful grin. “I forgive you for being a dumbass.”

That was all I needed to hear. One more inch and I’d be able to taste her.

It might as well have been a mile, though.

Because right at that second the stupid, stupid bell started ringing again.

Sloane set her hands on my chest. “Someone must need their coat checked.”

The hunger inside of me took over. “They can hang up their own damn coats.”

I tried to touch my lips to hers, but she pulled away. “We’re going to get the coat check girl in trouble.”

My shoulders slumped and so did my head. “I don’t care.”

She laughed lightly and stepped away. “Yes, you do.” Her hand slipped inside of mine. “Let’s go, partner,” she said with a glint in her eye. “We’ve got coats to check.”

Sloane

I wasn't sure how many coats we checked—but my arms were freaking sore.

The coat check girl took full advantage of Dominic's offer and left us there to fend for ourselves.

Of course, Dominic took full advantage as well—pulling me into the depths of the coats for a sweet—and a not so sweet—makeout session or two. Which I fully participated in.

I couldn't help it.

He looked so handsome in his tux—and he smelled better than I remembered.

And the way he stared at me—oh, my gosh—it made my knees weak.

And the fact that he didn't freak out when he found out I was an heiress—well, that helped out, too. I didn't want to keep that secret from him, but it seemed like anytime someone in my life found out I was in line to inherit—a lot—it changed the way they acted toward me.

No longer was I Sloane, the eccentric artist and over the top animal lover—I was Sloane Alexander, cereal heiress extraordinaire.

Inevitably, the requests for money, loans, or invites to stupid galas like these would start. And then our friendship, or relationship would never be the same again.

No, once some people got stung by the money bug they changed immediately.

I couldn't count how many friends I'd lost over the years because of it. They just got—weird.

After years of that, I decided to stop telling people who I really was. Not divulging my true identity. I mean, I felt bad about lying by omission—but the alternative was worse.

And Dominic hadn't snapped at me or anything. He didn't seem mad at all.

No, the only thing in Dominic's eyes was—me.

I could tell—actually, I could feel how much he'd missed me. Every time he looked at me, I felt this overwhelming—desire from him.

And for him.

Because I'd missed him, too.

Like a lot.

Like every day.

So many times, I'd picked up my phone to call him.

And so many times—I'd chickened out.

I'd been too hard on him.

He was right—I was carrying the trash from my last relationship into whatever he and I were starting.

I treated Dominic as though he were Pete.

And Dominic was no Pete. I knew that for sure.

Having them sitting at the same table only confirmed that in a big, huge way.

Dominic was a man. With commitments and integrity.

And a job.

Pete was—well, he was a loser.

What the heck had I ever seen in him?

Gosh, compared to Dominic—I mean—there was no comparison. Dominic and Pete weren't even in the same universe.

“Ready?” Dominic asked and grasped my hand tighter.

I stared up at him and shook my head. “No.”

Dominic chuckled and said, “Don't worry,” he lowered his voice and gently brushed the tips of his fingers against the side of my face, “I'll protect you.”

Even though his tone was sweet and teasing—I still felt the weight of his words.

And I believed him.

I really did.

At that moment, I knew Dominic would protect me against anything.

Especially my sister and my ex.

I gazed into his eyes and nearly swooned. My vision became cloudy, but I blinked away my tears. “I know.”

He gave me a half-smirk before leaning down and gently touching his lips to mine. “It’s about time.”

Then he led me back to the table. Strangely, I didn’t feel that horrible lump in my gut anymore. My sister was staring at us, and once she caught sight of our hands—Dominic holding mine—the scowl that crossed her face was nearly laughable.

“You’re here an hour and you’ve already found someone to hook up with?” she said with a snarl that matched her expression.

Dominic’s hand twitched over mine. He cleared his throat and pulled a chair out for me. “For your information,” he helped me sit and push my chair in, “Sissy, I’m in love with your sister.”

My heart fluttered at his words. Thankfully, I was already sitting down, or my knees might not have held me up. I gazed up at him and my mouth went dry.

Gosh, he was handsome. Tall, dark, and handsome—and kind and generous. And funny.

I sighed to myself for a moment, remembering how he’d fallen asleep holding Lily and Luna.

If he treated my pets that way—just think how he’d treat our baby.

Sissy snorted into her champagne glass. “I see, so you two did a lot more than just coach a baseball team. Or was that just some kind of metaphor for her jumping your bones?”

My sister was a real piece of work.

Always had been.

I felt like sailing across the table and—

Dominic cleared his throat again. “Sissy, I know you’re Sloane’s sister. However, I won’t stand for you talking about her that way.”

Sissy’s eyebrows nearly shot right off her face. “Then feel free to sit.”

Now it was Ronnie’s turn to snort. Only her snorting was way louder and way drunker. I half expected bubbles to float out of her mouth.

“Get it? Because you’re standing.” Ronnie giggled.

And giggled.

And giggled.

Oh, boy.

Dominic wasn’t bothered by his friend’s comments at all. Instead, he kept staring down my sister.

“You disrespect Sloane, you disrespect me. Are you going to stop? Otherwise, we’ll be leaving.”

Oh.

My.

Heart.

No one—except my grandmother—ever stood up for me against my family. And here Dominic was—having spent only minutes in Sissy’s company—and he was ready to throw down for me.

Sissy rolled her eyes and sat back in her chair. “Good grief, you’re a sensitive Sally, aren’t you?”

Dominic shifted his weight and said, “You haven’t answered my question, yet, Sissy.” His tone had deepened and

the way he was staring at my sister made me want to launch myself into his arms.

Dominic was all business. From the expression on his face down to his body language and his words—he'd let Sissy know he wasn't taking the crap she was shoveling out.

Sissy's eyes narrowed and her expression became blank.

“Good evening everyone,” a voice from the stage called out. My gaze slid toward the organizer of this fundraising event.

“Before we eat, I'd like to make an announcement,” she said with a huge, glamorous grin. A sparkly tiara sat on her white, coiffed hair.

The hundreds of rhinestones on her blue ball gown shined brightly in the stage lighting.

“I'd like to call my grandson, Dominic, and Sloane Alexander to the stage, please.” Her white-gloved hand motioned toward us.

Her grandson.

Dominic was her grandson.

I swiveled around slightly and looked up at him. “What did she just say?”

He smiled down at me. “My grandmother asked us up on stage. Shall we?” he said and offered his hand to me.

I frowned at him, still not understanding what he was talking about. “But—but why?”

He shrugged as I slipped my hand into his. “It could be anything. One thing you'll learn about my grandmother is—”

he helped me get to my feet, “you do what she asks. Or there’s hell to pay.”

He had a smirk on his face, so I didn’t take his words too seriously. Still, my stomach began twisting with nerves. Even though I had no idea what I was nervous about.

Dominic wrapped my hand through his arm and guided me to the stage. “I’m serious, what the heck is this all about?” I said with a smile on my face. All eyes in the ballroom were on us and I didn’t want to make a scene.

Okay, I didn’t want to make a bigger scene than the ones I’d already made.

“I told you,” Dominic said, glancing over at me briefly, “I don’t know.”

I sighed and pulled a bit on his arm. “Come on, you have to at least have an idea.”

He shook his head, and his smile grew. “I’m not kidding. With my grandmother—” he carefully helped me up the few stairs, “you just never know.”

Mildly scared and majorly anxious, I followed Dominic’s lead.

Once we stood beside his grandmother, she said, “Ah, such beautiful young people. Don’t you think?”

The room began clapping and that made me feel even more uncomfortable.

Once the applause settled down, she spoke again, “This year, my grandson had a long talk with me about—changing up the charities we normally give to.” She cleared her throat and continued, “As you know, our committee asked for ideas on where to distribute your hard-earned money.”

I inhaled sharply and Dominic covered my hand with his and squeezed.

“As some of you know, my grandson has taken a rather large leap in his career. Now, I have to admit—” she cleared her throat and spoke a little closer to the microphone, “at first, we may have had a conversation,”

Dominic cut in, “Or twelve,” and everyone laughed.

His grandmother smiled at him and nodded. “Or twelve. At any rate, he eventually talked me around. The Child Advocacy Center might not be my first choice for him,” Dominic let me go and slid his arm around his grandmother’s back, “but he’s always had the biggest heart. So, it should come as no surprise that he’d end up defending our most vulnerable citizens.”

Whoa.

That was a lot.

Did Dominic really leave his high-power job?

I mean, I knew he didn’t exactly love his job—he’d shared that with me more than once. But he’d been up for partner.

Wow.

Dominic’s grandmother announced that a good portion of tonight’s funds would go toward helping the advocacy center.

Dominic’s eyes got all watery.

His grandmother’s eyes got all watery.

And darn it if mine didn’t as well. They hugged and even over the applause I could hear her telling him how proud she was to have a grandson like him.

I wiped under my eyes and took as many deep breaths as I could without getting too lightheaded.

I didn't want to start ugly-crying up here on stage. But honestly, these two were so cute.

After Dominic accepted the check from his grandmother, he came back to stand with me. His arm slid behind my back and I felt myself leaning into him.

"You gave up your partnership?" I asked, looking up at him as he gazed down at me.

"I did," was all he gave me. But the look on his face said it all.

Yeah, he'd given up something that he'd been striving toward for decades.

And yeah, he was happy about it. Because what he was doing now made him happy.

"Why?" I asked, wanting to hear him put it all into words for me.

His hand gripped me tight on my waist. "Because of you, Sloane." His eyes scanned my face. "Because every morning, you get up excited for the day. You live your passion every single minute. And you make a difference in the world."

I bit my lip and shook my head. "I don't think I make a difference." I frowned at him. "It's not like anyone needs an emergency vase or sculpture or anything."

Dominic's body shook beside mine. "You make the world a more beautiful place. And you take in animals that nobody else wants. Then you nurse them back to health and try to find them a forever home."

I shrugged and smiled up at him. "Well, I have a lot of lifers, too. I mean, at this point nobody in their right mind would take Freddie off my hands. Even if I paid them."

Dominic chuckled and pulled me tighter to him. “Somehow, I think Freddie would find his way back to you.”

I considered that for a second and then agreed, “You’re probably right.”

Dominic’s grandmother began speaking again. And I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Sloane Alexander had an unusual request for funds. Her plea hit many of us, animal lovers, right in the heart. Let me tell you.” She peered over at me and grinned.

My heart started beating faster.

“Most of us on the board were not informed until now that fostering and rehoming animals were in need of considerable financial assistance.”

She cleared her throat and continued, “And that the generous souls, such as Ms. Alexander, often take on significant costs for veterinarian bills, food, and grooming needs.”

Oh, my gosh.

Was she going to—

“So, we’d like to present a check to The Little House in the City Animal Shelter, on behalf of Ms. Alexander.”

Once again, the audience clapped.

And once again a few tears escaped. Dominic’s grandmother handed me the check and then she hugged the crap out of me.

“Thank you so much, I don’t know what to say,” I wheezed out as she squeezed me hard.

“I have a feeling I’ll be seeing you around at family dinners. So, you and I can chat then.”

I couldn’t speak—and not just because she had squeezed the last bit of air out of my lungs. But because of what she’d inferred.

That I’d be at family dinners from now on.

“She’s turning blue,” Dominic said as he came to my rescue.

“Sorry, she’s a hugger,” he whispered into my ear and unhooked his grandmother’s fingers from my back.

“I was just trying to hang onto her for you,” she said and poked Dominic in the arm.

He spoke to her, but when he did, he looked at me the whole time, “Thanks, I’m going to do a better job of that from now on.”

Oh, my heart.

After that, Dominic grabbed my hand and lead me off the stage.

“Well, that was a surprise,” I said and held onto Dominic’s arm almost as tightly as I held onto the huge check in my hand.

“It was. I’m just glad she and the other board members finally came to their senses,” he said in a low voice to me so no one else could hear him. “They needed to quit giving money to stupid crap.”

I swallowed back a giggle and smiled at him instead. “It was very generous of them. This money,” I held out the check, “will go a long way for the foundation.”

Dominic nodded then gestured with his head toward the table. "I know it will. And it's a worthy cause." He pulled my chair out and helped me sit.

Dominic was such a gentleman it made my stomach all gooey inside.

"Really, Sloane?" my sister spoke up the instant I was seated. "Are you really going to take all that money for your stupid animals?"

I opened my mouth to speak back to her, but before I could get a word out, Dominic was there to defend me.

Again.

"Sissy, you don't know me well. But I can assure you that I mean what I say. If you continue to talk this way to Sloane, we're going to leave."

He stood by my side, his hand on the back of my chair.

Gosh.

He was so freaking swoony.

"I was speaking to my sister," Sissy waved her hand at Dominic like she was dismissing him, "not you."

A drunken snort sounded to my right. My head quickly turned to see Ronnie's head on the table and her hand slapping her empty plate. "Oh, my gosh," Ronnie squealed, "she did not just say that to you!"

Dominic didn't say anything to Ronnie, but he sure said something to Sissy.

"No, I'm speaking to you. And I've warned you several times, now. Are you finished attacking Sloane? Or should we leave?"

Sissy's jaw dropped and her back straightened. "I can talk to my sister however I want."

Dominic clenched his jaw and swallowed. "No, you have spoken to however you want. And I'm telling you," he leaned a hand on the table, "that stops, now."

In all the years I'd known her, not once had I seen Sissy's face quite like—that. It was all crunched up and angry—like it was about to crack. She glared right at me and said, "I can't believe you'd let this Neanderthal talk to your own sister like this. I mean, you've never had a classy bone in your body, but even this surprises me."

Dominic tugged on my hand. "And—" he said, pulling me to standing, "we are out of here."

At first, I wanted to argue and say that's just how Sissy was.

A hag.

Always had been.

Always would be.

But Dominic's reaction to Sissy's treatment of me—well, it made me think. Yeah, it made me think about how many years my sister had been acting like this toward me.

And if Dominic was ready to yank me out here, away from her—maybe I should go.

"Ronnie, we're leaving," he said to his friend. He placed his hand on her shoulder and shook it gently. "Come on, let's go."

Ronnie sat up and instantly grasped the table. "Why are you all spinning?"

Dominic let go of my hand. “Sorry, I have to grab her,” he whispered to me under his breath. “Let’s go, honey,” he pulled her up, “the party’s over.”

Ronnie’s head twisted around. “Nah, it’s just starting. And they haven’t even fed us yet. After what we paid for our tickets, I demand to be fed!” Ronnie’s voice was loud and a little cringy.

“Shh,” Dominic said and slipped his arm around her back, “we’re going to eat right now.”

Ronnie seemed fine with that and she stumbled out beside Dominic.

I carried her purse along with mine and awkwardly smiled as we weaved through the maze of tables.

Gosh.

How embarrassing.

We got out to the lobby and Dominic pushed the elevator button. “I have to get her home,” he said, obviously struggling to keep her standing, “come with us. She only lives a few doors down.”

The elevator doors slid open and we all shuffled in.

I shrugged and pressed the button for the main level. “I don’t know,” I said and bit my lip for a second, “maybe you should just deal with her tonight. We can talk tomorrow.”

His shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes for a second. “No,” he opened his eyes and narrowed them right on me, “you’re going to come home with us. I’ll sober Ronnie up,” he nodded to his friend, “and then we can—talk.”

It didn’t take long to go down one floor. I didn’t even have a chance to answer before the elevator pinged and we were

moving out onto the main level.

“Sloane, please, come with us.” Dominic’s eyes bore into mine.

“Yeah, girl,” Ronnie hiccupped and burped, “Oh, sorry.” She covered her mouth too late. “Let’s keep this party going.” Her hand feebly pumped up into the air before her legs nearly gave out.

Dominic sighed and held her up. “My driver’s right outside.” He jerked his chin toward the large, glass doors.

I shook my head and looked at the floor. “Deal with your friend, she needs you.” I gazed back at him. “And anyway, I’m not even,” I lowered my voice, “ovulating.”

The expression on his face fell and was replaced with a look of disappointment. “I see.” He cleared his throat and it seemed to stir Ronnie awake.

“Oh,” she said, suddenly looking less—intoxicated. “Where are we going?” she asked and frowned as she looked from Dominic to me and back again.

“Party’s over, Ronnie. We’re going home.” Dominic stared at me for a few seconds before he turned around with Ronnie and disappeared out the glass doors.

Dominic

If I'd been asleep, the knocking would have woken me up.

Honestly.

Ronnie was right.

I needed to invest in some kind of security feature so I could see the front door on my phone like she did.

I'd been tossing and turning for two hours now, and still—sleep refused to find me.

The way Sloane and I left things had my guts in a constant roll.

I thought I'd gotten through to her.

I thought we were on the same wavelength.

Finally.

But in the end, her excuse for not coming over was that—she wasn't ovulating.

I didn't give two shits if she was ovulating or not. All I wanted was her curvy, gorgeous ass in my bed.

Next to me.

How many times had I told her I loved her?

And she never—not once—said it back.

Fuck, that stung.

Jesus.

That was not the reason I'd asked her over.

How the hell could she not understand that?

Another light knock.

Shit.

I'd have to go check it out before whoever was at the door woke up Sunny.

She slept in the back mudroom. Her crate was outfitted with a fluffy, pink bed, her blanket with the lamas on it, and her favorite toy—which just happened to be a stuffed giraffe.

It was quiet back there—especially when I shut the door.

And yes, I felt a little guilty for leaving her in the crate all night long. However, the dog trainer assured me that this was best for her and for me.

Another knock on the door.

Christ.

Whatever wackjob was knocking at my door in the middle of the night was not giving up.

My neighbor two doors down had a couple of teens. They often had parties when their parents left for Europe or Asia—or wherever. They left their kids alone—except for housekeepers, drivers, and chefs, of course. But no one was there for the kids.

I couldn't blame the kids for taking full advantage of their freedom. But I didn't enjoy being disturbed because of it.

I hated having to get up and explain to some twenty-something kid that he'd gotten the wrong address.

Again.

I jumped out of bed and grumbled, "Stupid kids," as I rubbed the back of my head.

My feet hurried down the stairs in hopes whoever was at the door hadn't woken up the dog.

I listened for a second, but didn't hear her barking. Thank goodness.

I swung the door open. "You've got the wrong—" I started and then immediately stopped in my tracks.

"Hi," Sloane said with a wave. She was still wearing that fantastic ballgown she'd had on earlier. Her hair and makeup looked the same, as well.

She must not have been home yet.

What the hell?

"I thought you went home?" I asked with a confused sigh and rubbed the back of my head again.

"I decided to come over. If the invitation still stands?" she asked almost hesitantly as she bit her lip.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply.

Sloane.

At my door.

In the middle of the night.

I opened my eyes and focused on her. “I thought you said you weren’t ovulating?”

She cast her eyes downward, raking my body as she went. It was then I remembered I was standing here in only my boxer briefs.

And nothing else.

Almost shyly, she peered back up at me under her long lashes. “I’m not.”

Sloane.

At my door.

In the middle of the night.

Even though she wasn’t ovulating.

If it wasn’t a growl—it was pretty fuckin’ close.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. Before I even had the door closed, my mouth slammed down tight onto hers.

She attempted to speak but I didn’t want to hear it.

All I wanted to do was kiss the living shit out of her.

Her tongue danced perfectly with mine—in an equal battle of give and take.

My arms closed around her torso, and I pulled her in tight. She sighed as she relaxed in my arms.

And that was when I knew.

I just knew.

She wanted me.

And for more than just my DNA.

Her hands found my chest and then slid up to my face. She touched my rough, five o'clock shadow as we continued kissing. The feel of her fingers caressing me was quickly driving me mad.

I let my hands travel up her back until my fingers found her soft, bare skin.

“Dominic,” she said when I finally took my mouth off hers. We both gasped for air, but I didn't let her go.

“What?”

Her eyes looked at me with a dazed expression and it made me smile.

“I've been driving around for hours,” she said, still out of breath, “and I had to speak to you. I had to tell you something.”

My eyes scanned her face. “You can tell me later,” I said and leaned down to take her lips with mine again.

She moved back slightly. “No, it can't wait.”

I strongly disagreed.

I shook my head and stared down at her pink, puffy lips. “Trust me, it can wait.” And I closed my eyes and—kissed her cheek.

She'd turned her head to the side. “No, it can't,” she insisted, so I backed off.

“Okay, what's so important that you have to interrupt a great makeout session?” I asked with more than a tinge of annoyance in my tone.

Her chin tipped up and she parted her swollen lips to speak. “Dominic,” she said in a whispered voice.

My hands cupped her beautiful face. “What?” I asked, looking into those sparkling, blue eyes of hers.

“I love you,” the words I’d been waiting to hear from her—finally floated out of her delectable mouth.

I let out a long sigh and felt my mouth crack into a huge smile. “I know.”

Her head tilted. “You know?” she asked as though she didn’t believe me.

I smiled wider and nodded. “Yeah, I already knew. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

She gave me the most beautiful smile. “I love you, Dominic. And I want to make a baby with you—” a faint blush rose up to her cheeks, “if you still want to, that is.”

She did not have to ask twice. I lowered my lips to hers and answered that question the only way I knew how.

Her body practically melted into mine.

After a few more minutes, the need and ache in me had increased to such a level that—well, it was *time*. “How about we take this upstairs?” I suggested as I slowed down and gave her a few short, sweet kisses.

She grinned and nodded. “Okay.”

I grabbed her hand and walked her to the stairs, but her dress kept getting in the way. It was long and poofy, and I ended up stepping on it by accident.

“Damn, sorry,” I said and tried to move out of the way. Her dress took up a bunch of room, though.

“It’s not you, it’s this stupid dress.” She turned around and started reaching her fingers for the zipper at the back. Once I

saw what she was doing—I gently moved her hands out of the way.

“Let me help,” I said before I slowly began unzipping her out of the dress. I let my fingers graze down her soft skin.

As soon as it was open, Sloane pushed the dress over her curvy hips.

The dress pooled to the floor by her feet in a flouncy poof. Sloane stepped out of it and stepped up onto the first stair.

She spun around slowly as I watched her nearly naked body with rapt attention.

I remembered the first day I visited her apartment and spotted the nude, marble statue in her living room.

And now I could absolutely verify that it was definitely molded after Sloane’s body.

“That’s better,” she said as she turned all the way around.

My eyes wouldn’t—couldn’t—leave her body. “Christ, you are beautiful.” I set my hands on her hips and admired the perfect work of art standing before me.

“Are you just going to stare the whole time?” she asked in a teasing, sexy tone.

I nodded, still not looking at her eyes. “Probably.”

She laughed—which in turn made her full breasts bounce. Her hands pulled mine up her hips—and then further—until my hands were covering her heavy, round, fabulous breasts. “Touching might be more fun than staring.”

My eyebrows raised and I nodded. “You’re right about that.”

As I played with her breasts, Sloane nodded in agreement. “Totally.”

I finally gazed right into her eyes and kissed her one more time. She moaned and leaned into me.

God, she felt wonderful. “If we don’t go upstairs now—” I moved my head back, “I may have an unfortunate incident right here on the stairs,” I told her and briefly kissed her lips.

She smiled and squinted her eyes. “Right here on the stairs?” Her hands trailed down my chest. My stomach muscles contracted as her fingers coasted further down—and then way further down.

At first, her fingertips grazed over my hardness.

And then she stroked me firmly over my boxer briefs. “Oh, boy,” she said with a breathy sigh, “I think you’re right.”

I cocked my head to the side and grinned. “Upstairs,” I lightly kissed her lips, “now.”

Thank God, she listened and spun around immediately. As soon as she turned, I followed.

It was a cruel torture, watching her curvy ass sway directly in front of me. I had to adjust myself and take a few deep breaths.

“Which room?” she asked when we got to the second level.

Not wanting to wait ten extra seconds by going up one more flight of stairs, I said, “Straight ahead.” I guided her forward into the main bedroom. The light in the nursery was on—I must’ve forgotten to turn it off—and it glowed into the dark bedroom.

“I can turn it off if you want?” I asked and set my hands on her warm shoulders.

She shivered slightly and turned around. Her hands slipped around my torso, and she hugged me. “No, it’s nice.” She gazed up at me with the sweetest look on her face. “And with any luck,” she rose up on her tiptoes, “we’ll be filling that crib in nine months.”

The largest smile ever crossed my lips, and I cupped her face with my hands. “Sounds like a good plan to me.”

Sloane

THE BACK of my legs hit the bed and Dominic reached down and threw the duvet over.

He so, so gently lowered us to the bed.

I felt his hardness against my belly, and it made me clench deep down below.

He kissed me with sweet, peppering kisses—interspersed with long, deep, delicious ones that completely took my breath away.

He kissed down my neck—then down further—and then—down further.

I gasped and grabbed onto his head, “You just do your part, I’m fine.”

He smiled up at me, his fingers hooked into the sides of my panties. “That’s not how this works,” he said, dragging off my panties. He tossed them into the air, and I watched them

float to the ground. Before I knew it, his lips were on my thigh—and then—straight to the very heat of me.

“Dominic,” I breathed out as his mouth touched me exactly where I needed it. “You don’t have to do that.”

He stopped for a brief moment, and gazed up at me with half-lidded, sexy eyes. “I want to. Besides, that’s not very good teamwork,” he said, then dived back to his work.

And boy, did he take his job seriously.

My fingers weaved their way into his hair, unaware that I was holding him to me tightly. All I knew was that I absolutely loved what he was doing. I closed my eyes and gave myself over to the beautiful sensations he was creating between my legs.

Dominic was a man of many talents.

I was learning that right now.

Just as stars were beginning to shine behind my eyes—he stopped. I opened my heavy eyelids just in time to see him hovering over me. “Not without me,” he said with a wet smile on his face.

Suddenly, he was—there.

“Are you ready?” he asked, gently nudging me.

I nodded and set my hands on his back.

His strong, muscular back.

We breathed out loudly and moaned together as he slid inside and started a slow, leisurely pace.

It was beautiful.

So beautiful that I felt tears burning behind my eyes.

For so, so, so long, I'd been daydreaming about this moment.

I thought the time would never come where Dominic would be over me, in me, surrounding me with a warm, sweet, lover's embrace.

"Are you okay?" Dominic asked, stopping what he was doing. His fingers grazed the side of my face, touching me delicately and carefully. The look of concern in his expression warmed my heart.

I inhaled and rubbed his back. "I'm great."

His head tilted and he frowned slightly. "Then what are the tears for?"

I wiped under my eyes and smiled. "It's just—" I sniffled, "I've been dreaming about this for so long." More tears replaced the ones I'd dried. "I never thought we'd get," I whisked away the new batch of tears, "here."

Dominic re-started his movements, and I was glad for it. "I knew we'd get here one day."

I let my hands wander to his chest and I felt the light spattering of hair there. "You did?"

His pace quickened. "Absolutely," he said, and from the confident look in his eye, I knew he was telling me the truth. And the fact that he had so much faith in me—in us—made me extra swoony for him.

He leaned on his arms and increased his speed—exponentially. My eyes shut and I sighed, letting my fingers dig into his back.

And before I knew it—the stars were back.

And unless I was mistaken—Dominic saw the same stars.

I let it take over me as I cried out.

Dominic's body stilled and he grunted into my neck. "I love you, Sloane. So, much."

His words floated around the room, and I smiled. I opened my eyes and looked into the most handsome face I'd ever seen. "I love you, too."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

or

Is that a happily ever after or what???

Dominic

Three years later...

Nine months and three days after the night of the ball—the night Sloane and I reunited and, finally, well, you know—Samuel Dominic and Eliza Mae were born. They were—each—over five pounds of screaming, crying, snuggly, bundles of joy.

And our lives haven't been the same, since.

Thank goodness.

They were everything we'd hoped for.

And so much more.

The love Sloane and I shared only multiplied because of them.

Our lives were filled with wild, busy days.

And quiet, thoughtful days.

Every day with Sloane Alexander was different.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

“Eliza, how many times have I told you that clay doesn't belong in hair?” Sloane patiently asked our golden-haired daughter.

Eliza shrugged in the cutest way possible. “Eight?”

I pressed my lips together so as not to laugh. Sloane always gave me the evil eye whenever I laughed at the kids doing something wrong.

I couldn't help it, though.

It was impossible not to.

“Yes, and eight times should be enough. Now we're going to have to throw you in the tub after.” Sloane looked over at Eliza.

Eliza hadn't taken her mother's words to heart. Instead, she pumped her hands up in the air and cheered, “Yay! Bathtime!” Then she jumped off her chair and darted toward the bathroom.

With Sunny in close pursuit.

Bathtime just happened to be one of the words Sunny knew by heart.

Just like bedtime.

Because she slept in our bed every night.

Once Sloane met Sunny—it was instant love.

And once Sunny met Sloane—she'd found her person.

Sunny still liked me, I knew that. But the love she had for Sloane was on a different level. I was okay with that. Mostly because I understood Sunny's point of view.

After all—I'd fallen for Sloane just as quickly as Sunny had.

"Mommy, wook at mine," Sam said proudly. His tiny hands were caked full of red clay.

Sloane left her creation and strode over to see his. "Wow, I can see the wings here," she pointed out something on the blob on the table, "and the beak is here," her finger touched another part.

Sam's face screwed up and he said, "It's a baseball bat."

I wasn't sure what age artistic talent showed up—but so far, from what I could tell, neither twin had any. But that didn't seem to discourage their mother.

And the twins loved nothing more than to paint and sculpt and join in with whatever mess their mother was making that day.

And their mother loved it even more.

A loud bark sounded from the bathroom along with a boom. "Mom," Eliza yelled in her typical long, drawn-out call, "Sunny spilled the soaps!"

Sloane sighed and hollered back, "Which soap?"

The dog barked again. "All of dem!"

I really had to bite my tongue.

My wife looked over at me. "Can you go deal with that, please? Why do they always call me when there's a mess?"

I had to chuckle at that one. “Because your reactions are funnier than mine,” I told her as I stood up and wandered to the bathroom.

There I found Sunny in the bathtub—with Eliza—and all the soaps.

Eliza had been correct.

“Sunny maded a mess.” Eliza grinned her mother’s smile up at me.

I nodded and the dog barked. “I see that. But the question is—” which one of you do I bathe first?”

Sunny gave me her signature shrug. “How about boff of us?” An even bigger smile spread across her lips.

The dog barked at me again and she started digging on the bottom of the tub, mixing all the spilled soaps together.

Yikes.

I rolled up my sleeves and started the water.

The bath went well.

Until it didn’t.

Sunny decided halfway through that she was done. Unfortunately, I didn’t get the memo. When she bailed on us and bounded out of tub—there was no stopping her.

Yikes.

After my hastily-made negotiations with the three-year-old, I’d forgotten to close the bathroom door.

“What did you do?” Sloane’s voice shouted from the other room.

Eliza's eyes went wide but all she said was, "That was fun."

I laughed and answered her back honestly, "It was."

"Maybe next time I can have a biff wiff Woonna and Wily?" My daughter came up with a plan.

I shrugged back at her. "I don't see why not. Luna and Lily need baths, too, right?"

My daughter giggled her sweet, funny, slightly devious, laugh and said, "Just don't tell Mommy."

I nodded. "Deal."



LATER THAT NIGHT, when we were in bed, I pulled out my phone and typed in something.

Earlier, when she was busy re-bathing Sunny, I'd re-uploaded a certain app to my wife's phone.

An app that hadn't been on my wife's phone for years.

After I pressed send, I immediately heard Sloane's phone ping. I waited for her to comment, but nothing came.

Finally, I turned around in bed. Sunny groaned and complained about being disturbed. "Did you just get a message? I heard your phone." I placed my hand on my wife's shoulder and rubbed my way down.

"Mm hmm," was all she said.

I cleared my throat. "Don't you think you should answer?" I suggested rather impatiently.

She shrugged. "I'm exploring my options."

I frowned and reached around for her phone.

Of course.

Only *my* wife would have dozens of offers in the few hours since I'd uploaded the app to her phone.

"I see," I squinted my eyes, "anyone good?"

She nodded. "Yeah, there's a pro-wrestler and a chef."

I sighed. "Anyone—" I cleared my throat, "else?"

Sloane turned around and grinned. "Who would you choose? It's pretty hard to narrow it down."

I scrolled down the page. "Well, making a baby with someone is serious business. You have to make sure you pick wisely."

Her lips pursed in the cute, funny way that I loved. "You're right. Maybe I should study their bios."

I nodded, "Right," I handed her back the phone, "or, you could go with someone you already know. Someone reliable."

Her head tilted to the side and she looked up at the ceiling. "I could do that," she said, dropping her eyes back to mine, "but look at how many requests I've gotten." She scrolled down to the bottom of the page.

Braggart.

Incidentally, I hadn't received one offer since I made my account live again.

"Sloane," I said without blinking.

She smiled an innocent grin. "What?"

"Would you make your choice already?"

She looked back at her phone and began scrolling again. “All right, all right, but you’re putting me under so much pressure here.”

I let my hand wander under the blanket until I found my wife’s round, perfect behind. Sloane squeaked and Sunny huffed, then jumped off the bed—clearly ticked at her humans.

I pulled Sloane closer.

My phone pinged.

When I picked it up, I saw, “Congratulations! You have a match!” I quickly went in and deleted the app from my phone. Then, I pulled my wife’s phone out of her grip and deleted it from hers as well.

I wasn’t about to take any chances.

After that, I tossed both phones on the nightstand.

We wouldn’t be needing them again tonight.

I moved closer and kissed Sloane’s lips. “Good choice.”

Her hands took their time gliding up my chest and to the back of my neck. “I agree.”

She opened for me, and I kissed her deeper. “You sure you’re ready for more?”

Sloane’s lips broke out into a large, gorgeous smile. “Why not? I think the first two turned out exceptionally well. And this app was good luck for us last time.”

I kissed her cheek and down to her neck. “I have to agree.”

And then we started making baby number three.

Incidentally, nine months and three days later, Willow Grace was born.

And we all lived happily ever after.

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A HUGE Ginormous THANK YOU to all of my readers who read along with me while I wrote this every week—FOREVER—in my newsletter.

I don't know how the heck you all stuck with me until the end—but, we did it! Can you believe this? Finally, Sloane & Dominic in their own real, honest to goodness, book!

You guys ROCK!!

Carla Kay VanZandt, HOW do you always have EXACTLY the right words I need to hear? I do not know what I'd do without you, lady. Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU!!

Last, but not least—thank you to my hubby. You listened to me EVERY week say, “OMG, I have to write my newsletter story!” And then I'd laugh my guts out telling you what kind of zany stuff Sloane & Dominic were up to that particular week. THANK YOU for listening. And for teasing me when I was late...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessa lives in a very non-descript, unassuming town filled with the best kind of people. Most days, she can be found in the stands of various soccer fields, cheering on her Youngest, or discussing books with her Oldest (who is an English Honors student).

At night, if she's not up burning the midnight oil, Jessa enjoys snuggling up to her real-life chef hubby and watching his latest pick for a cheesy romance movie. He always chooses the best ones (after he cooks supper, of course).



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