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ALEXANDRIA BELLEFLEUR

Written in the Stars

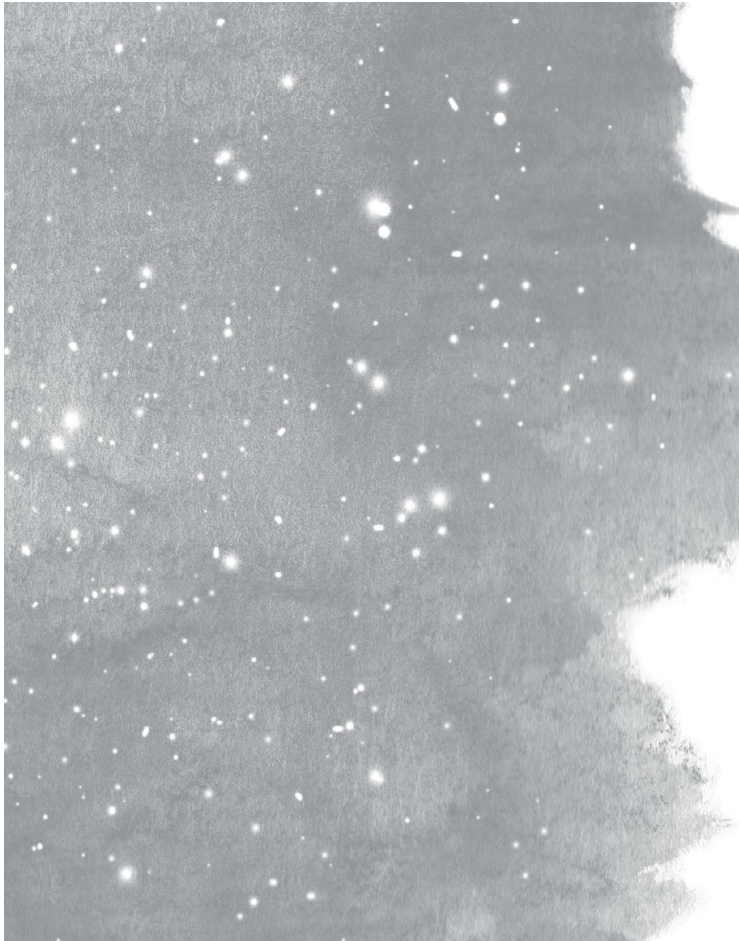
IS THIS RELATIONSHIP FAKE OR
IS IT TRUE LOVE . . .

A
NOVEL



“I was hooked from the very first page!”

—CHRISTINA LAUREN, NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR



*Written
in the
Stars*

A NOVEL

ALEXANDRIA BELLEFLEUR



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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Praise for Written in the Stars

Copyright
About the Publisher

Chapter One

There was only so much chafing a girl could handle, and Elle Jones had reached her limit. Dodging strollers in front of Macy's splashy holiday window displays and hustling to make it to the restaurant on time had caused the creep of her lace to quicken until her brand-spankin'-new underwear functioned more like a belt than the boy shorts they were. She could practically taste her spring-fresh laundry detergent.

Tugging through her dress had been futile. Shimmying certainly hadn't done shit. Neither had casually leaning against the crosswalk pole and . . . gyrating? There was some hip action, but less *trying to grind this pole to bring home the bacon* and more *bear in the woods with an insidious itch*. Shoving her hand up her skirt had been a last resort, one with the unintended consequence of making it look like she was getting frisky with herself in front of Starbucks. The streets of Seattle had seen stranger things, but apparently not the dude leering from the passenger window of the mud-splattered Prius.

It was all because she'd chosen to wear *this* underwear, *new* underwear, *sexier* underwear than anything else wadded up in her dresser drawer. Not that she was *expecting* Brendon's sister to see her underwear, but what if the date went well?

What if? Wasn't that the million-dollar question, the spark of hope that kept her coming back for more time and time—*and time*—again? The butterflies in her stomach were a balm, each flutter of their wings soothing the sting of all those previous rejections and brush-offs until she could barely remember what it felt like when her phone didn't ring. When the spark just wasn't there.

First-date jitters? No, this feeling was *magic*, like glitter rushing through

her veins. Maybe this dinner would go well. Maybe they'd hit it off. Maybe there would be a second date and a third and a fourth and—maybe this would be it, her last first date. Boom. End game. *A lifetime* of butterflies.

Wedgie-free, Elle stopped in front of the restaurant and breathed deep. Sweat darkened the powder blue cotton of her dress as she swiped her palms against her skirt, drying off her hands before reaching for the silver handle. She tugged and . . . the glass door barely budged, opening a fraction of an inch.

This restaurant was four-little-dollar-signs expensive, which begged the question: Were rich people seriously doing enough manual labor to have the muscle mass required to pry open these doors? Or were they ripped thanks to the personal trainers and private Pilates lessons they could afford? Elle pulled harder. Was there an access code? A buzzer she needed to press? Was she supposed to wave her credit card—with its admittedly dismal limit—in front of the door?

A hand with perfectly polished nails in the most boring shade of blush fluttered in front of her face through the glass. She straightened and—oh sweet Saturn. No wonder this place was so popular, prices and impossible doors be damned. With long, copper-colored curls and even longer legs, the hostess was the sort of unfairly gorgeous that graced the covers of magazines, pretty to the point it made her eyes hurt. Of course, it didn't help that the glass reflected Elle's own slightly blurry face. Her dishwater-blond bangs had separated and her liner had smudged around her eyes, making her look less smoky-eye sexy and more sweaty raccoon. Talk about a smack to the self-esteem.

"You're supposed to push." The hostess's brown eyes darted down to the handle.

Elle pressed her palm to the glass. Featherlight, the door glided open smooth as butter. Despite the cool November air, her cheeks prickled with heat. Great going. At least her gaffe was only witnessed by herself and the hostess and not Brendon's sister. Now *that* would've been a difficult impression to come back from.

"Thanks. They should really consider putting up a sign. Or, you know, not putting a handle on a push door." She laughed and—okay, so it wasn't *funny*, but the hostess could've done the decent thing and pretended. Elle wasn't even asking for an enthusiastic chuckle, just the kind of under-your-breath puff of laughter that was polite because Elle *totally* had a point.

But no. The hostess gave her a tight smile, eyes scanning Elle's face before she glanced down at her phone and sighed.

So far, the service sucked.

Rather than push her luck and make a bigger fool out of herself in front of the gorgeous hostess who'd rather futz around on her phone than do her job, Elle scanned the restaurant for someone who could be related to Brendon.

He hadn't said much about his sister. Upon overhearing Elle discuss the perils of dating not only as a woman, but a woman who liked other women, Brendon had gotten this adorable, wide-eyed, puppy-dog look of excitement and said, *You're gay? So's my sister, Darcy*. Bisexual, but yeah, Elle was all ears. His smile had gone crooked, dimples deepening as his eyes sparkled with mischief. *You know what? I think you two would really hit it off.*

And who was she to say no when she'd been ranting to Margot about her shoddy luck in the love department? Saying no would've been silly.

All Brendon had told her was that Darcy would meet her at Wild Ginger at seven o'clock and, not to worry, he'd take care of their reservations. Maybe she was waiting at the bar. There was a petite blonde sipping a pink martini and chatting with the bartender. It could be her, but Brendon was tall and had broad shoulders. Perhaps it was the—

"Excuse me."

She spun, facing the hostess who was no longer staring at her phone but instead looking at Elle, brows raised expectantly. "Uh-huh?"

God, pretty people made her stupid.

The hostess cleared her throat. "Are you meeting someone?"

At least now she wouldn't have to do the awkward thing and approach every lone woman in the joint. "Yeah, I am. Last name on the reservation should be Lowell."

Enviably full lips pursed as the woman's eyes narrowed minutely. "Elle?"

Hold on. "No, Darcy. Unless Brendon put my name on the reservation? With her last name? That's a little presumptuous, but okay." She snorted. "I've been on plenty of first dates and I've never had one go *that* well if you catch my drift."

"No, I mean *you* are Elle," the hostess spoke slowly. "*I* am Darcy."

Elle's heart thudded, skipping over one beat and quickening on the next. "Darcy . . . is you? You are Darcy?" So . . . not the hostess.

She nodded.

Of course this was Brendon's sister. This was just Elle's luck, and now

that she knew, the resemblance was quite obvious. They were both tall and slender and unfairly attractive. Granted, Brendon's hair was darker, but it was definitely red, and they both had freckles. So many freckles it was like Darcy's skin was a peachy-cream sky covered in pale brown stars begging to be mapped out, connected into constellations. They spilled over her jaw and dotted her throat, disappearing under the collar of her green swing dress, leaving their path to Elle's *vivid* imagination.

Her toes curled, face flushing when Darcy's eyes dipped, mirroring her own unapologetic perusal. She bit back a grin. Maybe it was a good thing she'd worn this underwear after all.

"You're late."

Oof. Or not. "I am, and I'm really sorry about that. But there was—"

Darcy held up a hand, forcing Elle to swallow her excuse. "It's fine. I've had a long day and I already settled my tab at the bar." She pointed over Elle's shoulder toward the door. "I was calling a Lyft."

"What? No." She was late, yeah, but only by a few minutes. Okay, fifteen, but that wasn't her fault. "I really am sorry. I wanted to text you, but my phone died and it was like mommy roller derby in front of Macy's. And let me tell you, those women are vicious with their strollers when there are sales at stake. *Vicious*. I swear to God, you'd think it was Black Friday. Can you believe they've already got Christmas decorations up? I've still got cobwebs and Jon Bone Jovi hanging in my apartment." Her face flamed at Darcy's puzzled frown. "He's, um, my apartment skeleton. We thought it'd be *humerus*. Because . . . anyway." She squared her shoulders and gave Darcy her most heartfelt smile. "I've been looking forward to tonight ever since your brother mentioned he thought we might hit it off. Let me buy you another drink?"

She held her breath as Darcy deliberated, fingers pressed to the space between her brows as if she was staving off a headache.

After an excruciating moment of silence where Elle struggled not to squirm, Darcy dropped her hand and offered a ghost of a smile. "One drink."

Once more with feeling. Elle bit the inside of her cheek and smiled. Beggars couldn't be choosers. Lack of enthusiasm aside, this was good. Promising. There was still a chance to make this right. She could do this. She could *totally* rally.

Darcy's shoes, a pair of towering red-soled pumps, click-clacked with every perfectly paced step across the restaurant. Elle followed, fluffing her

fringe with her fingers, quick and inconspicuous. Her first impression might've been lackluster, but that meant the only direction things could go was up.

“What are you drinking?” Elle plucked the drink menu off the table and — Oh sweet Saturn. Her wallet curled up into the fetal position.

“The Francois Carillon Chardonnay.” Darcy flagged down a waiter with a twist of her wrist.

The Francois . . . Elle brought the menu closer to her face and nearly choked. Fifty-six dollars for a *glass* of wine? That couldn't be right. It had to be a typo, a misplaced decimal, maybe some trick of the candlelight playing off the gold gilded font. She double-checked to make sure she hadn't confused the price of a glass for a bottle, maybe a case, and . . . nope.

“What can I get you?” the waiter asked, and when Darcy finished relaying her order, he turned to Elle. “And you, miss?”

“Erm.” She scanned the page, struggling not to cringe. Didn't this place believe in happy hour? Or hell, *happiness*? Making your rent? Shoot, her rent. That was due on Monday. “The Domaine De Pellehaut Merlot Blend?”

Not only did she butcher the pronunciation, she *hated* merlot. But nine dollars was plenty more palatable than *fifty-six*.

The waiter nodded and disappeared.

Salvage this date. A seemingly simple goal, only, all her wonderful, sparkling witticisms caught in her throat like a swallowed wad of gum when Darcy just *stared* at her. Candlelight transformed Darcy's light brown eyes into butterscotch and when Darcy glanced down at her phone, the light danced off the darkest, thickest lashes Elle had ever seen and—

“What mascara do you use?” Elle blurted.

Darcy flipped her phone over, screen side down, and looked up, brows furrowing as she met Elle's eyes. “My mascara? YSL.”

“They're really pretty. Your eyes, I mean.”

The crests of Darcy's cheeks turned an alluring shade of pink. “Thank you?”

Elle bit her lip and smoothed the napkin on her lap, smothering her grin at having taken Darcy by surprise. Only when she was no longer in danger of beaming like a loon did she lift her eyes and . . . Darcy was back to staring across the table, only this time there was something more than polite interest in her gaze.

For a moment, Elle couldn't breathe. All she could do was watch as

Darcy's blush deepened, pink cheeks turning crimson.

The smooth column of Darcy's throat jerked as she swallowed. Her tongue darted out to wet her full bottom lip, drawing Elle's eye to a crescent-shaped freckle at her lip line, and dear God, she hadn't had anything to drink yet and already she was dizzy, though that might've had something to do with how her lungs refused to cooperate.

Magnetic. Elle couldn't look away because this was champagne bubbles on her tongue, the first plunge into a swimming pool on a scorcher of a day, that moment right before the bass drops in a killer song. Sparks, chemistry, whatever it was, this was the sort of *it's there or it's not* connection she'd been chasing.

Before she could find her voice, the waiter returned, tray in hand. First, he filled Darcy's glass from a miniature carafe, then poured a splash of red into Elle's. He waited, clearing his throat gently.

Was she seriously supposed to . . . sniff it? Sample it? And say what? God, just last week she and Margot had finished off a box of Franzia rosé. She'd guzzled the dregs from the wine bladder while Margot squeezed the bag. Elle's tastes weren't exactly what she'd call discerning.

She took a whiff, sipped, and hummed thoughtfully. Yuck. "Yep. That is definitely merlot. Thanks."

The waiter's lips twitched as he filled her glass with the rest of the wine. "I'll be back to take your order shortly."

Elle tucked her hair behind her ear, finger snagging on her hoop. Darcy's blush had mostly dissipated, but she gulped her wine, eyes looking everywhere but at Elle. That was fine; Darcy wouldn't be acting that way unless the moment had affected her, too.

"Brendon mentioned you work in . . . insurance? Is that right?"

Darcy swallowed and dipped her chin. "I'm an actuary."

"That sounds . . . interesting?"

Darcy actually chuckled. "I know, it sounds astonishingly dull, doesn't it?"

Leaning back in her chair, Elle grinned. "I'm not sure I even know what an actuary does."

"I help to establish accurate and fair pricing for insurance premiums by analyzing variables and trends in historical data. It's calculus, mostly." Darcy shrugged and set her wineglass on the table. "I enjoy it."

The word *calculus* gave Elle a violent flashback to undergrad. Math was

not something that usually got her hot under the collar, even if she was decent at it. But if Darcy wanted to spend the evening discussing differentials and limits, Elle would happily listen to the smooth cadence of Darcy's voice.

"That's what's important." Elle crossed her legs beneath the table, her ankle brushing Darcy's briefly. "Life's too short to waste on something you don't enjoy. It's the best of both worlds when what you love also pays your bills."

Darcy smiled and a teensy dimple formed beside her mouth like a parenthesis for that special freckle. "What do you do?"

"Oh, Brendon didn't say?" For being the brains behind a *dating* app, Brendon was missing a few of the critical points of matchmaking. "I'm an astrologer. Margot—that's my roommate—and I, we're the voices behind Oh My Stars."

Darcy cocked her head, copper curls spilling over her shoulder.

"You know, the horoscope Twitter and Instagram account? We have a book coming out in six months, too."

Darcy shook her head. "I don't really do Twitter. Or Instagram. Social media at all for that matter."

Who didn't do social media? It was one thing to steer clear of Facebook, which had been infiltrated by older relatives, sure, but Twitter? Instagram?

"Well, we tweet advice interspersed with the occasional meme and joke. OTP wants us to consult on adding a birth chart element to the match system. It would allow users to evaluate compatibility, not only based on the fun elements OTP's already known for like their BuzzFeed-style personality quizzes and favorite ships and whatnot, but also the most pertinent planetary positions at the time of your birth." She pointed to Darcy's cell. "If you let me borrow your phone, I can pull up your chart really quick. All I need is your date, time, and location of birth."

Darcy's lips twitched. "I'm good."

"Do you not know your time of birth? Because most of the planets are slow moving enough that—well, I couldn't tell you about your ascendant or your houses, and your Moon could potentially be tricky, but we could still look at a few factors." Unless—oh crap, had she overstepped? Elle was so used to doing readings, not only for a living, but also analyzing the birth charts of friends and family, that asking was second nature. "If that's too personal, I completely understand."

Darcy plucked her glass by the stem and swirled her wine. "Sorry, I don't

really believe in that stuff.”

Elle frowned. “*Stuff?*”

Teeth sunk into her lower lip, Darcy looked like she was trying not to laugh. “The supposed link between astronomical phenomena and human behavior. Blaming your personality on the planets sounds a bit like a cop-out.”

She’d heard this argument before. “It’s not about *blaming* your personality on the planets; it’s about understanding yourself and becoming aware of why you might be prone to certain behaviors and patterns. What people choose to do with that knowledge is up to them.”

Darcy took a delicate swig of wine and set her glass aside. “Agree to disagree.”

Elle bit the inside of her cheek. That was fine. She believed in it, and her five hundred *thousand* Twitter followers believed in it, too.

It was a bit of a bummer that she and Darcy weren’t on the same page, but it was one topic. Granted, it was a topic near and dear to her heart, but it wasn’t as if they came down on opposite ends of the political spectrum. She wouldn’t press the issue . . . not on the first date. “At any rate, Margot and I are super excited to be a part of, *hopefully*, helping people find their soul mates.”

Darcy snorted and not in that *I agree, or God, you’re so funny* kind of way. It was a sardonic little puff, condescending when paired with the roll of her eyes. “You sound like my brother.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“It’s a romantic notion.” Darcy dropped her eyes, her expression shuttering.

Elle frowned. “And *that’s* a bad thing?”

“It’s silly. Soul mates. Your *one true pairing*.” Darcy shook her head like it was ridiculous.

The butterflies quit fluttering, Elle’s stomach souring, though that might’ve been the wine. What was Darcy even doing on this date if she wasn’t looking for love, or at least the *chance* of love?

“I think it’s nice,” Elle argued. “If you don’t believe in love, what’s left to believe in?”

Darcy’s tongue poked against the inside of her cheek. “Sweet in theory, but a bit starry-eyed, don’t you think?”

Was that a dig *and* a quip about her profession? “I’d rather be starry-eyed

than jaded.”

Reaching for her wine, Elle’s fingers skimmed the stem, her grip slipping. The glass teetered, tottered, swaying back and tipping forward. Her stomach rioted, mimicking the motion. In slo-mo, the red wine sloshed over the rim of the glass as the whole thing tumbled, merlot soaking into the linen tablecloth and splashing across the table, splattering Darcy’s dress.

“Oh fuck.” Elle scrambled for a napkin and stood, knees knocking into the table and—

Fifty-six dollars of wine toppled right over into Darcy’s lap.

Elle froze, white cloth napkin poised to—what? Blot? Fuck, she’d better start waving it in surrender.

“I am so sorry.” Heat crept up her throat, making her uncomfortably warm.

“It’s—it’s fine.” Darcy shoved her chair back, legs squealing against the wood. The wine not soaked into her dress dribbled down her legs when she stood. “Excuse me.”

Darcy shuffled off toward the back of the restaurant, where there was a sign pointing to the restroom.

Elle’s pulse lurched in her throat and her eyes went damp as she set the now-empty glasses to rights. Fuck her life. She had *not* meant for that to happen. She wasn’t usually clumsy, nowhere close, but Darcy had put her on the defensive.

Astrology was one thing—granted, an important thing—but not believing in *love*? How in the hell was she related to adorkable Brendon, *creator* of OTP? Brendon who rambled about Harry Potter and spoke with his hands and made “May the 4th Be With You” an official companywide holiday. Brendon who, in her two in-person meetings with OTP Inc., several lunches, and countless DMs, had displayed more verve for life in his pinkie than Darcy possessed in her whole, admittedly gorgeous, body. Elle had felt sparks, she absolutely had, but had Darcy? Apparently not if she could so easily scoff at the idea of true love.

Elle stuck her hand in the air and flagged down the waiter.

He frowned at the table. “Let me grab something to clean this up.”

“Just . . . could you . . . I’m ready to leave.” She handed him her card, forcing her fingers to release the plastic when he tugged.

One swipe of her Visa later, he returned, handing her the receipt folded around her card. Good. She didn’t want to look at the bill right now, anyway.

“Have a nice night.”

Nice night, her butt. That ship had sailed and sunk and was now nothing but wreckage on the bottom of the ocean.

Time to cut her losses. As soon as Darcy came back, Elle would make her exit.

She crossed her legs and tried to ignore the twinge in her bladder. What was taking Darcy so long? Maybe she would hit the restroom first. If she ran into Darcy, she could kill two birds with one stone, making her good-bye brief before more damage could be done. Literally.

Decided, Elle stood and tossed her napkin on the table before heading to the restroom.

“—didn’t even want to go on this date in the first place and now my dress is ruined, Annie.”

Darcy faced the end of the hall, her back to Elle. Phone pressed to her ear, she paced slowly in front of the door to the ladies’, one spindly stiletto placed perfectly in front of the toe of her other foot as if she were walking on a balance beam as she held her phone to her ear.

Elle’s legs locked, trapped in the evolutionarily stupid choice between fight and flight. *Freeze.*

Darcy gave a dry laugh. “I don’t see how that’s relevant but, yes, she’s pretty. I’m sure she’s *loads* of fun, too. She’s also a mess.”

All she wanted to do was pee, but Darcy was *right there*, right in front of the restroom, blocking the hall, *roasting* her to this Annie person.

“What am I going to tell Brendon?” Darcy asked. “The truth, that we’re total opposites. And I’m putting my foot down. This was the last date he’s *ever* setting me up on.”

Elle pressed her lips together and swallowed past the lump in her throat.

On second thought, she could hold it.

* * *

The air in the apartment was sticky with humidity and honeysuckle sweet. Thin wisps of steam floated out from beneath the bathroom door, filling the hall as Stevie Nicks’s rasping voice flooded into the living room.

Elle flipped the lock and fell to her knees beside where Jon Bone Jovi hung from a double-knotted strand of monofilament tacked into the drywall. She crawled across the room, face-planting into the sofa with a groan. The

blue afghan draped against the cushions smelled faintly like patchouli, and the little gold coins affixed to the fringes were cool against her cheek as she burrowed deeper, rubbing her nose into the well-loved fabric. Home sweet home.

The scent of honeysuckle grew stronger, more pungent as the whirl of the fan cut off, the bathroom door opened, steam spilling out like sweet smoke as the music cut off midverse.

Margot padded into the living room, leopard-print robe knotted around her waist and a towel wrapped around her head. Her footsteps faltered, her dark brown eyes turning into saucers behind her thick, black-rimmed glasses. Her mouth opened before she paused, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. “How’d it go?”

“You know the public restrooms down by the market?” Elle kicked her shoes across the room, wincing when they left a dusty brown smudge against the baseboard by the breakfast nook slash Oh My Stars headquarters. Whoops.

“The one with doors so short you’re forced to make awkward eye contact with the person in the next stall over?” Margot crossed the room and crouched beside her.

Elle nodded. “I lost my underwear inside.”

Margot’s jet-black brows rocketed to her hairline, disappearing into her turby-towel. “Explain, because my mind is going to some funky, debauched places.”

“Gross, no. I had to pee.” Her underwear—those impractical but pretty boy shorts—had been an unfortunate casualty, touching the grimy floor when she had squatted. “My underwear slipped and landed in a puddle of”—she wrinkled her nose—“something sticky.”

There would be no coming back from that, the memory of them falling past her ankles onto the tile impossible to scrub away.

Margot’s face screwed up, twisting in disgust. “The pair you just bought? The ones with the little bows on the side?”

“Yeah.”

“Those were cute.”

“Just not meant to be, I guess.” Elle sniffed hard and buried her toes in the thick shag pile of the carpet. “They chafed like a bitch, anyway.”

Margot’s mouth opened only to shut, her lips tucking between her teeth. She cleared her throat. “I’m getting the sense your date didn’t go well?”

A weak, watery laugh spilled from between Elle's lips, but she wasn't going to cry. No way, no how. Darcy Lowell did not deserve her tears. "What possibly gave you that idea?"

Without saying anything, Margot grabbed her hand and laced their fingers together, squeezing until the ache in Elle's joints surpassed the pressure in her chest.

"I've never met someone so gorgeous and yet so condescending in my life." Elle swallowed before her voice did something pathetic like crack. "Worst part was, I could've sworn we had . . . *something*. I felt a spark, you know?" She sighed, shoulders slumping. "Not that it matters. I didn't stand a chance, no matter the chemistry."

There were opposites and then there were *opposites*. Darcy didn't believe in astrology or soul mates and—what was it she had called her? A mess? Pretty, too, but a mess nonetheless. And fun. She couldn't forget that part.

This is fun, but . . .

You're so fun, Elle, but . . .

I had fun with you, but . . .

If Elle had a dollar for every time someone had used the word *fun* to reject her, she'd—no, it'd still suck no matter how many dollars she had.

Not that there was anything inherently wrong with being fun—Elle *wanted* to be fun. But to be reduced to a good time was something else.

Couldn't she be fun *and* more? Couldn't a relationship? For that matter, shouldn't it?

Margot clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Fuck her, then. It's her loss, babe."

"You always say that."

"I always mean it."

Elle snorted. *Sure*. There were only so many times Margot could use that excuse before it lost its charm. Tonight, it rang hollow.

"You know what you need?" Margot grunted softly as she rolled to her knees and stood, plucking green carpet lint off her bare skin. "Tequila."

Margot made the best margaritas, tangy tequila-y perfection with a cheery rainbow salted rim. As much as Elle wanted to say yes, she couldn't. "I have to get up early. Breakfast with my mom tomorrow, remember?"

Waking up at the butt-crack of dawn and hauling herself over to the Eastside for their monthly mother-daughter breakfast was difficult enough without the added hangover.

Margot's lips twisted. "I'm guessing you still haven't told her about the deal with OTP?"

Elle snagged the bowl of dry cereal she'd left on the table this morning and sorted the minimarshmallows from the boring bits, placing them into groups of rainbows, moons, and balloons. She shrugged, avoiding Margot's hawklike stare.

"Elle." Margot pursed her lips.

Elle poured a handful of rainbow marshmallows into her mouth and munched. "The timing hasn't been right."

"I know the book deal announcement didn't go the way you'd hoped, but that doesn't mean your family won't be excited about this." Margot's grin was almost convincing, but it didn't quite reach the corners of her eyes. "Come on. This deal is *big*. If your family can't see that . . ."

Margot was right that the deal with OTP, the coolest dating app ever—for nerds, by nerds—was a BFD. The passion-project side hustle Margot and Elle had been working themselves to the bone over for years was about to become a full-time venture.

Elle should've been bursting at the seams to scream her good news at anyone who'd listen, but if history was anything to go by, telling Mom could go one of two ways. She would either have a million questions about what an *OTP* was and whether Elle had someone reliable checking over her contract and was she sure she didn't want to just get a nice, *normal* job with a steady paycheck and retirement benefits? Or she would smile blandly, her eyes glazing over as soon as Elle mentioned the words *dating app* and *astrological compatibility*. Then Mom would respond with *that's nice, Elle*.

She'd managed to earn a *that's really great, honey* when she'd told her family about the book deal. Only, her older sister, Jane, had followed with her own happy news that after a year of IVF, she and her husband were expecting twins. Obviously a bigger deal than Elle's news, but she was pretty sure her family had forgotten all about her book in the hubbub of Jane's announcement.

Playing second fiddle to her older sibling's achievements was the story of her life, but that didn't mean she was keen on suffering through another instance of hoping her family would *finally* take an interest in her life beyond polite tolerance of her *eccentricities*.

I'm sure she's loads of fun, too. She's also a mess.

Not just her family.

So what if Elle took her advice from the stars instead of the self-help section? Conventional was boring, but why was it impossible to find someone who liked the beat of her drum as much as she did?

Margot waved a hand in front of Elle's face. "Earth to Elle."

Elle forced a smile. "Sorry. I just had a bad night. It churned up some less than awesome feelings."

"Buck up, Buttercup." Margot stole one of Elle's marshmallow balloons. "Forget about Brendon's sister. She wasn't right for you, so just shake it off. You'll have better luck next time, okay?"

Elle opened her mouth but as soon her lips parted, a hazy, damp film clouded her vision. She had to swallow before she could speak. "How many more *next times* are there going to be, Mar? How many more first dates am I going to have to go on? How many times am I going to get my hopes up? I know I shouldn't . . . give up, but is it awful that I kind of want to . . . take a step back?"

Margot's dark eyes widened, probably because Elle was the optimist in their duo. She'd been called Pollyannaish a time or two, and whatever, she didn't care if people thought she was naively optimistic, but—maybe she *was* delusional. Maybe the beat of her own drum was best danced to alone.

"I think . . . I think you should do what feels right." Margot gave a definitive nod. "If you're feeling burned out and you want to take a hiatus from the dating scene? I say go for it. Your perfect person is out there somewhere, completely oblivious to the fact that their dream girl is sitting on the floor of her apartment right now, chowing down on Lucky Charms, commando. They can wait."

Elle tried to smile, but couldn't quite pull it off, not when the sting of rejection was so fresh. Not when she'd had such high hopes and had, for just a moment, felt a connection, the kind that couldn't be faked.

Maybe Margot was right. Maybe her perfect person was out there, but one thing was certain.

It wasn't Darcy.

Chapter Two

—and that’s when I said to my grandson, ‘Johnathon, you’re too talented to be working yourself to the bone for that chef. You should start your own restaurant.’ And you know what? He did. Owns three food trucks. A real entrepreneur. Can you believe it?”

Mrs. Clarence’s knobby, arthritic fingers trembled around the strap of her reusable grocery bag. Darcy had already snagged two of Mrs. Clarence’s bags on the way into the elevator, but she went ahead and reached for the third, accepting a pat on the arm when her neighbor let her shoulder the weight of all three.

“That’s nice, Mrs. Clarence.” She tried not to wince when the strap of the heaviest bag bit into the thin skin of her inner elbow. “You must be very proud.”

The older woman sighed. “Oh, I am. Now if only he could find a girl, a *nice* girl.” Her shrewd eyes roved over Darcy from her head down to her feet. “Say, you’re not seeing anyone, are you, Darcy dear?”

She gave Mrs. Clarence what hopefully came across as an appropriately apologetic smile instead of a grimace. “Sorry. Work has me busy.”

Her elderly neighbor tutted, lips pursing in disapproval, *silent* disapproval. If only it were that easy to put her brother off.

Saved by the bell, the elevator dinged, spitting them out on the ninth floor. Mercifully, Mrs. Clarence was in apartment 901, the unit closest to the elevators.

Darcy lugged the bags the brief distance to the doorway, arms trembling under their weight as Mrs. Clarence took her time unlocking her door before ushering Darcy inside. She unloaded the bags into the kitchen, setting them down on the dining table beside Mrs. Clarence’s Persian longhair, Princess. “You want me to unpack these?”

Stroking the purring cat between the ears, the older woman shook her head. “No, no. Just leave them here. I always appreciate your help, Darcy. You’re a peach.”

With a wave, Darcy departed down the hall, unlocking the door to her own apartment. As soon as she stepped inside, she placed her keys in the wooden bowl on the entry table and slumped against the door.

What a night.

Her favorite dress—vintage Oscar de la Renta that had once belonged to her late grandmother—was possibly ruined, the stomach-churning headache that had taken up residence smack between her eyes in the afternoon had only gotten worse as the day progressed, and for all that she loved Brendon, wrapping her hands around his neck and strangling him until his eyes bulged sounded like a fantastic idea right about now.

What had he been thinking? *Had* he been thinking? An astrologer? So what if Elle had been *unbelievably* pretty? They had nothing in common save for their mutual inability to keep their eyes off each other. Which could’ve been promising had Elle not been looking for her *soul mate*.

Darcy rolled her eyes.

She should’ve never agreed to Brendon’s matchmaking in the first place, but he’d been so earnest and eager to see her get back up on the horse when she’d been ready to put the damn thing out to pasture. Saying yes had been easier than explaining why not . . . especially when Brendon had mentioned the reservation was at a restaurant she’d been dying to try ever since seeing the chef featured on Food Network. And so she’d reluctantly agreed. One date, a drink, some amazing food, and a bit of surface-level chitchat. She’d have *put herself out there* and Brendon would be appeased. What was the worst that could happen?

Come on, Darcy. You’ll really like Clarissa.

Susanna’s absolutely your type.

I think you’ll hit it off with Veronica. I swear.

Really, Darce. I think Arden might be the one.

He hadn’t stopped at just one date. Oh, no. One date had snowballed into weekly setups—*how* in God’s name did he know so many single queer women?—and after three months of blind dates Darcy had officially reached her limit. Honestly, she’d reached her limit last month, but when she’d fessed up and told Brendon she didn’t have the time or desire to pursue a serious relationship and he could cool it, he’d balked. *A few lackluster dates and*

you're throwing in the towel? Come on, she's perfect.

No one was perfect.

Next time, she wasn't going to cave, wasn't going to simply roll her eyes and agree to some date just to get Brendon off her back. Not even if he pouted and played the baby brother card. Darcy was putting her foot down. She'd had enough of him projecting his own romantic notions of true love onto her. She wasn't looking for *the one*. Not anymore.

After stripping off her wine-soaked dress and setting it aside for dry cleaning—maybe they could work a miracle on the silk—Darcy stood in the kitchen, stomach rumbling.

Her eyes darted to the cabinet rather than the refrigerator. After a day like today, the peanut butter was *calling* to her.

Jar cradled in the crook of her elbow and bag of chocolate chips in one hand, a spoon in the other, Darcy curled up on the couch, leather groaning softly beneath her weight. At last. As soon as she fired up the DVR, she'd be in *Whisper Cove*, catching up on the antics of Nikolai and Gwendolyn, Carlos and Yvette, and the whole sordid Price family who had more skeletons in their collective closet than she had shoes.

Friday nights with her DVR, catching up on the week's episodes of *Whisper Cove*, were sacred. Sacred and *secret*. It was a silly show, ridiculous that she even enjoyed it, but it was called a guilty pleasure for a reason.

Three episodes in, Nikolai and Gwendolyn were about to kiss, a culmination of months of tension and chemistry sprinkled with tender moments. The distance between their faces shrunk as Nikolai reached out, thumb stroking the delicate curve of her cheek. Darcy's breath quickened as she inched closer to the edge of the cushion, bag of chocolate chips clenched in her fist. This was it, the moment—

A loud bang filled her apartment and her chocolate chips flew into the air as she jumped from the couch, heart hammering jackrabbit-fast against her sternum.

Someone was at the door.

Jesus. She rolled her eyes at her dramatics. It was only a knock, but she'd been swept up in the moment, oblivious to anything else. Ridiculous.

Tiptoeing over spilled chocolate chips, Darcy crossed toward the door, footsteps faltering at another thunderous rap of knuckles against wood.

“Darcy, open up.”

Her eyes shut, her pulse slowing.

Brendon.

Her eyes snapped open.

Brendon.

Scrambling backward, she shut off the TV and then shoved the remote between the couch cushions, hiding the evidence of her date with the DVR. He banged against the door again, this time harder. For god's sake. She blew out her breath. "Coming!"

As soon as the door was open, Brendon shouldered his way past, eyes wide, frazzled, gaze bouncing around the living room before finally landing on her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes?" Aside from the near cardiac arrest.

Brendon shut his eyes and pressed a hand to his chest like *he* was the one who'd been panicked. "I called you *four* times, Darce."

She lifted a shoulder. "Sorry. My phone was on silent."

For a reason. Brendon loved dissecting her dates like some sort of postgame interview. Tonight, she'd wanted to skip that. She didn't want to talk about it, definitely not what she did or didn't feel.

The furrow between his brows deepened as his gaze slipped down, noticing her pajamas. "Darcy."

"What?" She spun on her heel and returned to the living room, bending low to pick up her spilled chocolate chips before they wound up ground into her nice white carpet.

Brendon collapsed into the armchair, long legs splaying in front of him as he pinned her with a stare that knotted her stomach. "What was wrong with Elle?" He barely paused, didn't give her a chance to enumerate all their many, varied differences. "She's sweet, she's hilarious, she's—she's *fun*, Darcy. And God knows you could use some fun in your life."

The scoff bubbled up before she could stop it. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"It means what it sounds like." Brendon spread his arms wide, gesturing around them. "For one, it looks like West Elm and the Container Store had a baby and that baby vomited all over your apartment. *Neatly* vomited, because heaven forbid there be a *mess*."

That was a shitty non sequitur. "I like my apartment clean. I'm failing to see how my preference for organization somehow correlates with my ability to have fun."

"Look." Brendon ran his fingers through his hair, tugging hard at the

ends. He was in desperate need of a haircut. “I love you. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t waste my breath. God, Darcy, you’re not even trying to have a life here in Seattle. All you do is stare at spreadsheets and numbers all day, you come home, you stare at spreadsheets some more, you eat out of color-coordinated Tupperware. And how could I forget?” He gestured to the TV. “You’re invested in other people’s *scripted* lives.”

No. Heat crept up the back of her neck and wrapped around her throat. She needed to sit down. “Excuse me?”

Brendon’s lips twitched. “You thought I didn’t know about your thing for daytime soaps? Come on. I’m a lot of things, but oblivious isn’t one of them.”

“It’s not a *thing*.” A thing would be writing *Days of Our Lives* fanfiction and she hadn’t done that since college.

“What, did you think I’d judge you? Me? I’m the king of nerdy obsessions. Proud of it, mind you.”

Darcy bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling. “The king, huh? Awfully pretentious to crown yourself, isn’t it?”

Not that it wasn’t true, or that she wasn’t proud. He was her baby brother. Gone were the days of shuttling him and his friends to summer STEM camp. Regardless of her feelings on love and dating apps, Brendon had turned his passion into an empire before he’d turned twenty-five. Of course, she was proud.

“Eh, I think the whole *nerd* bit balances it out.” His self-effacing chuckle trailed off, his smile dropping. “Seriously, Darce, don’t feed me that line about not being interested in a relationship. I’d respect that—I really would, I swear—if it weren’t obviously a load of crap.”

She opened her mouth to refute that, but he kept going.

“You sure as hell were interested in a serious relationship two years ago when you were *engaged*.”

Her heart stuttered. “Don’t go there.”

“You refuse to talk about it, so maybe we need to go there.” The way he winced *screamed* pity and she hated that. Hated it so much it made her stomach ache. “Not everyone’s like Natasha.”

Swallowing suddenly required effort. “I said, don’t go there.”

Brendon shook his head, jaw hard and expression fierce. “You’re my sister, and you’re also one of the greatest people I know, and you’re . . . you’re amazing, Darce. You’ve got so much to offer and there’s someone out

there for you, the *right* person for you. I know there is. I just . . . I don't want you to wind up alone and miserable because you're scared of getting your heart broken again."

Darcy blinked fast and crossed her arms, staring past Brendon at the iridescent oyster shell wall art over his shoulder.

Last she checked, she couldn't get her heart broken if she never put it on the line. That didn't make her scared, that made her realistic. Was she terrified of getting hit by a bus? No, but that didn't mean she had any intention of stepping out into traffic.

Brendon might've been a romantic idealist, and if that made him happy, great. More power to him. But she knew the truth. Life was not a fairy tale and she was not the exception.

Darcy's heart threw itself against her sternum as she gritted her teeth, pasting on the smile she'd perfected since . . . *since*. "I'm not scared. Don't be ridiculous."

Brendon cut his eyes, head tilting, studying her, so obviously appraising her for chinks in her armor. The muscles in her face twitched, smile wavering. *Shit*.

His answering smile was an infuriating mix of smug and sympathetic. "See, I think the reason you don't want to go on these dates is because you know, one of these days you're going to meet someone who makes you want to take that risk, and that terrifies you."

For some asinine reason that was entirely beyond comprehension, Elle's pretty heart-shaped face flashed through Darcy's mind. Her neck broke out into a damp sweat, her hair sticking to her clammy skin.

"I *said* I'm not scared." Her voice just had to go and crack. Salvaging what remained of her dignity, she cleared her throat and fixed him with a stern glare. "Or if I am, it's because I'm worried about your listening comprehension. Is your hearing okay?"

"Sure, Darce, whatever you say." Brendon rolled his eyes.

"I'm glad we understand each other."

"So if you're not afraid—"

"And I'm *not*."

Brendon lifted his hands. "Then you won't have a problem with me signing us both up for speed dating next Saturday over in Kirkland. Eight o'clock. Goes for two hours, there's a nice break in the middle. Tapas, wine, mixing, mingling. You know, *fun*."

“I can’t.” Her tongue traced the contours of her upper teeth. “I have . . . I have plans. I have, um . . .” *Saturday*. “My FSA study group is meeting that night.”

It wasn’t even a lie. She was one exam away from becoming a Fellow of the Society of Actuaries, the highest designation awarded by the SOA. Back in April, when she’d interviewed for the job with Devereaux and Horton Mutual Life, Mr. Stevens had made it clear she was guaranteed a promotion to a management role as soon as she passed this tenth and final exam.

So no, Brendon was wrong. It wasn’t a matter of fear, it was about making a logical decision, one that centered her priorities. She refused to be like their mother, getting so wrapped up in a relationship that she lost herself in it, forgetting about everything else that mattered—her work, her passions, even her children. Yes, Darcy was over Natasha, but who was to say she’d be able to get over the next heartbreak, that something inside her wouldn’t fracture irreparably? Better not to tempt fate than take that risk.

He cocked his head. “No worries. There’s another speed-dating event on Tuesday. You know, for all the people who can’t make it on Saturday because they have *plans*.”

Darcy set her hands on her hips. “Jesus, Brendon. Will you lay off already? Quit pressuring me to do things I don’t want, okay?”

Brendon pressed his lips together and stared, eyes going wide as his jaw slid forward and back. She quickly looked away, having no interest in being on the receiving end of his stupid puppy-dog stare.

“You make it sound like I’m asking you to get a root canal.” Brendon huffed and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “You’ve been in Seattle for six months and you have no friends, Darcy.”

She cut her eyes. “I have friends, thank you very much.” When all he did was stare blankly from the armchair, she insisted, “There’s Annie—”

“Who lives across the country.”

“And . . . and my coworkers. My FSA study group.”

Brendon arched a brow. “Your *FSA study group*. Yeah, you guys sound really close.”

She sniffed. “We *are*. There’s Amanda and Lin and . . . and . . . M- . . . Mariel?”

“Was that a question?”

What a smartass. Darcy glared.

Brendon didn’t even smirk. He just looked at her with pity and that was a

million times worse than all his cajoling. “I know what happened in Philadelphia fucked you up—”

“It did *not*.”

“Fucked you *over*,” Brendon amended. “But you’ve got to let people in, Darcy. You’ve got to learn to trust people again. Put yourself out there, make some friends, meet *someone*. Please, Darce. Do it for me.”

Do it for me. Fuck. He made it all sound so simple when it was anything but.

“Fine, Brendon. I’ll work on it, okay?”

“You’ll go to speed dating with me?” he pressed.

That wasn’t what she meant, but Brendon wasn’t going to stop until her calendar was full of cooking classes and book clubs and dates. So. Many. Dates. He’d keep setting her up until she was happily paired off.

Wait.

That was it.

Brendon wasn’t going to stop until she was seeing someone, until he *thought* she was seeing someone.

“I can’t. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to get your hopes up, but I’m seeing someone.” There. She’d bought herself some time.

Except he frowned. “But you went out tonight. With Elle.”

Elle. Damn it.

Unless . . . no. With a little finesse, she could absolutely work this angle.

“Right.” Darcy nodded. “Elle. Maybe *seeing someone* is a bit premature, but she’s . . . she’s really something. She’s pretty.”

The furrow of Brendon’s brow deepened, forehead wrinkling as he puzzled over what she wasn’t saying. After a moment, his face cleared, his eyes doubling in size. “Hold the phone. You and *Elle*?”

She would *not* roll her eyes. “Me and Elle.”

“You two hit it off?” he pressed.

Darcy bit her lip and stared hard at the jar of peanut butter on the coffee table as she considered the question, and her answer, carefully.

Scary thing was, they *had* hit it off. Not at first with Elle’s tardiness, but there’d been a spark. For a moment. Until their *many* differences—and different desires—had become apparent. “Elle’s not like anyone I’ve ever met. That’s for sure.”

Brendon laughed, drawing her focus back to his face. He grinned like it was the best news he’d heard all day, and for a moment her stomach panged,

guilt corroding her insides. “You’re seriously smitten, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m—” Denial was instinctive, but she was supposed to be selling it. “We’re obviously total opposites, but there’s . . . something there. Potential.”

“And here I thought with you being home early and already in pajamas that your date hadn’t gone well.” Brendon’s crooked grin was sheepish, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Well, you know what happens when you assume.” Darcy smiled, softening the gibe.

Brendon shrugged as if to concede the point and hunched forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Tell me about it. Tonight.”

To Brendon, every moment was a meet-cute waiting to happen, each first date he went on captured in his memory in case he found *the one* and needed to tell his future children about the night their mom and dad met.

She needed to sell it. Hard. Lucky for her, personality clashes and restaurant disasters were the stuff meet-cutes were made of.

“It’s actually a funny story.”

Brendon shook his head. “Don’t leave me in suspense. I’m dying over here.”

“Settle down.” If her pause was overly long, it was only because she was gathering her thoughts. And okay, fine, she was milking it, but only a little. “I won’t lie—at first, we got off on the wrong foot. Elle was late and you know I’m a stickler for punctuality.”

He rolled his eyes.

“She offered to buy me a drink and she told me about her job, which she’s *extremely* enthusiastic about. Even though I don’t believe in astrology, that sort of passion is attractive.”

Brendon waggled his brows.

“*Stop.*” She laughed.

“Sorry.” Brendon grinned. “Didn’t mean to interrupt. Keep going.”

“Okay, let’s see . . . we had wine.” She smirked, not because what had happened was *funny* but because she couldn’t wait for Brendon’s reaction. “Or we would have, had she not spilled it all over me.”

His eyes widened. “Get out.”

“Eh.” With a shrug, Darcy waved it off. “I’m sure my dry cleaner can work a miracle on the stain.”

Fingers crossed.

“Details, Darce. Come on. Tell me about the *sparks.*” Brendon gestured

for her to keep talking with an impatient wave of his hand.

“She said I have pretty eyes.” Darcy hadn’t meant to whisper, but it wound up being a more honest confession than she’d intended.

Her eyes were brown. Nothing was wrong with them, but no one ever complimented her eyes. They went for the obvious attributes—her hair, her legs, her breasts if they were being bold. But her eyes?

Ridiculous. If anyone had nice eyes it was Elle. Big and blue, so blue it was like staring off into the Puget Sound at midnight on a full moon.

“You’re blushing.”

She was *not*. Except, when she brought her hands to her cheeks, her face was hot, feverish beneath her fingertips. She cleared her throat. No, there’d be no more getting lost in Elle’s eyes. Capsizing, more like.

“I don’t like to kiss and tell.”

Brendon’s eyes went huge and round, his jaw dropping and it was only then she realized what she’d said, how it could be construed, *misconstrued*. Only . . . wasn’t that the point? Make him believe there’d been sparks, enough chemistry to put him off her trail?

There *had* been sparks. Just none that she had any intention of acting on. Sparks either fizzled, or they caught fire and burned you. Badly. No, thank you.

Obfuscation wasn’t *quite* the same as lying. Brendon could believe what he wanted. *Technically* she’d only embellished.

“When are you seeing her again?”

“I’m really busy this week.” Brendon’s face fell, so she hurried to add, “But I’m going to text her. We’ll play it by ear.”

Not that she enjoyed stretching the truth, especially not to Brendon, but it was sort of brilliant. Play it by ear, text when she could. If he asked, she’d make up an excuse about being busy, push it off, buy herself a little more time. She might even text Elle for real, just a quick thank-you for picking up the tab. That would be the polite thing to do, especially since she hadn’t had the chance to thank her at the restaurant. By the time she’d made it back from the restroom, Elle had already left. A fact that should not have stung, and yet, for some inexplicable reason, had. Damp silk tickling the skin of her stomach, Darcy had frozen in front of the empty table. The sight of Elle’s pink lip print on her empty wineglass but no Elle had felt like pressing on a bruise Darcy hadn’t realized was there until she agitated it. Unsettled, Darcy had booked it out of the restaurant, wanting to put as much distance between

herself and that feeling as possible.

The plan was perfect . . . as long as Brendon didn't actually *say* anything to Elle.

"Look." Darcy sat straighter, staring him down, or *up* as it was. He might've been taller, but she was his big sister and he'd be ill advised to forget. "No meddling, all right? Don't *say* anything to her. I don't want you messing this up."

"Me? Meddle?" Brendon held a hand up to his chest as if affronted.

"Brendon."

He rolled his eyes. "Geez, Darce, chill. I'm not going to say anything. It was honestly a stroke of luck that I overheard her talking about how difficult dating is. *Was*, I guess."

He shot her the world's most god-awful wink, both eyes closing. He'd have her married off within the year if he had his way.

"I mean it." She pinned him with a stare. "I've got this. Thank you, but you've done enough, okay?"

He shook his head. "You really like her, don't you?"

It didn't matter if she liked Elle. Chances were, they'd never see each other again. But if Darcy played her cards right, she could keep Brendon off her back—perhaps not indefinitely, but at least long enough to avoid several weeks of pointless speed dating.

Chapter Three

What Brunch Food Are You Based on Your Zodiac?

Aries—Spicy Chorizo Hash

Taurus—Monte Cristo Sandwich

Gemini—Chicken and Waffles

Cancer—Steel Cut Irish Oatmeal

Leo—Strawberries and Cream Stuffed French Toast

Virgo—Spinach and Egg White Omelet with Whole Wheat Toast

Libra—2 Pancakes x 2 Eggs x 2 Slices of Bacon

Scorpio—Bottomless Bloody Mary

Sagittarius—Belgian Liege Waffles

Capricorn—Acai Chia Pudding Smoothie Bowl

Aquarius—Baked Egg Danish with Kimchi and Bacon

Pisces—Giant Cinnamon Roll

Elle. *Elle.*”

Elle tore her eyes from the *notes* app on her phone. Across the table, Mom stared at her, dark brows raised expectantly. Pen poised over a notepad, their waiter smiled tightly.

“Oh, shoot, sorry.” Elle tossed her phone on the seat beside her and scooped the laminated menu off the table, scanning it quickly. Everything sounded delicious and the smells wafting from the kitchen weren’t helping her make up her mind. Fresh brewed coffee. Maple syrup drizzled over banana nut pancakes. Sticky cinnamon rolls fresh out of the oven. *Bacon*. Oh man, bacon. She wanted it all, *right now*, her stomach unleashing a vicious grumble of agreement. She licked her lips. Hunger transformed Elle into an instant-gratification seeking Veruca Salt, albeit hopefully less bitchy. “Um, I’ll have the cinnamon sugar crepes with raspberry jam and— Ooh, do you have whipped cream?”

The waiter nodded and scribbled down the order. “Sure.”

“Elle.” Mom pursed her lips, the *elevens* between her eyebrows deepening.

“Scratch the whipped cream?” She grinned, eyes darting between Mom who looked torn between amusement and exasperation, and the waiter who’d begun tapping the end of his pen against his pad.

“You’re going to be in a carb coma all day, honey.”

“Which is *why* I was ordering whipped cream. Dairy equals protein.”

Mom rolled her eyes and reached for her green tea latte.

Elle shrugged at the waiter. “I’ll have a side of scrambled eggs, too, please.”

The waiter nodded and hurried off to the back of the crowded restaurant.

“How’s Margot?”

“Good. She’s been moderating this fic fest for rare pairs in one of her Harry Potter fanfiction groups and there were triple the number of entries than anticipated, but her new foray into rock-climbing seems to be helping with her stress. And her belay instructor is super cute, so.” Elle grabbed her peppermint mocha and blew on it. “Yeah, she’s good.”

Tongue poking the inside of her cheek, Mom nodded slowly. “I understood most of that.”

Elle sniffed theatrically and wiped away a fake tear. “I’m so proud.”

“Cute.” Mom took a sip of her latte before setting it aside. “It’s funny that you mentioned rock-climbing, actually.”

“Is it?”

“Lydia’s boyfriend, Marcus, is an avid rock-climber. Loves hiking, too. He’s gotten your sister into it.”

“Lydia goes *hiking*? Our Lydia?” The idea of her sister in a pair of hiking boots was too much for Elle to wrap her head around. Lydia who refused to admit she sweated, instead referring to perspiration as *glistening*. Not that Elle was inclined to hit the gym, but come on. “Wait, back up. Lydia has a new boyfriend? Since when?”

When Mom’s brows did the forehead equivalent of a shrug, Elle was in trouble. “Marcus isn’t *new*. If you hadn’t missed the past three family dinners, maybe you’d be up to speed.”

Elle’s molars clacked together. She’d heard similar iterations of the same chastisement on the phone. “I’ve been super swamped with—” The deal with OTP, but Mom didn’t know that and Elle wasn’t sure she was ready to broach that subject on the heels of hearing about Lydia’s new—to her—boyfriend.

“Life. I’ve been super swamped with life. Adulting. Bills, taxes, existential doom. You never told me it was such a drag.”

Mom studied Elle, an inscrutable expression on her face. “How about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Elle took a leisurely sip of her coffee and licked the lingering chocolate sauce from her bottom lip. “I see lots of people, Mom. I’m seeing you right now.”

“Yes, dear, you’re a smartass, I’m well aware.” Mom set her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her laced hands. “That’s not what I asked.”

“Ouch. You need at least one of your kids to keep you on your toes and no one else is stepping up to the plate. I’m taking one for the team.”

“How selfless of you.” She smiled. “Now answer the question.”

Elle sighed. “Yes. I go on dates. Loads of them. You know this.”

“Dates. But nothing serious.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Elle muttered.

“Your father has a new manager working under him who is—”

“Mom, *Mom*.” She dropped her head back against the booth and groaned.

If Mom finished that sentence, Elle would wind up saying yes—she never said no, not when there was a chance *this* date would be *the* date—even though the last person her parents had set her up with had worn khaki cargo shorts and spiffy Adidas dad-sneakers. He’d rambled about CSS and JavaScript, scoffed at her taste in movies, and his breath had smelled like pepperoni. They hadn’t eaten anything with pepperoni. Her parents weren’t *entirely* clueless in love seeing as they’d celebrated their thirty-fifth anniversary last June, but when it came to setting her up, they weren’t exactly batting a thousand. Granted, neither was she.

“Craig is perfectly nice, Elle. I met him the other day when I brought your father lunch. He’s bright and his desk is pristine.” Mom leaned in. “He owns a handheld vacuum cleaner for keyboard crumbs and he keeps a photo of his mother beside his monitor. Adorable.”

Elle cringed. Hard pass. “Thanks, but I think I’ll take my chances on a dating app.”

“At least tell me you’re using the *good* ones. What’s it called, *coffee and muffin*?” She shook her head, her perfectly highlighted bob swishing against the pearl studs in her ears. “*Fumble*?”

Elle covered her snort with a cough into her fist. “Yes, Mom. I’ve tried the *Cupid* one, too.”

“Good, that’s—” Her eyes narrowed, lips pulling to the side. “You’re making fun of me.”

“Just a little.” Elle held up a hand, thumb and index finger almost touching. “Speaking of dating apps—”

Mom sighed. “Elle, you know I just want you to be happy”—Elle held her breath waiting for the inevitable but—“but sometimes I can’t help but think you make life harder for yourself than it needs to be.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mom tilted her head to the side. “You could’ve finished grad school and *easily* gotten a job with—”

“Mom.” Elle held up a hand, stomach already twisting at the way Mom’s voice went strained. “How many times do we have to go over this?”

“Fine. You’re right. That’s in the past.” Mom shrugged softly. “But look at how many people your father and I have set you up with because *you* said you wanted something serious. And you didn’t like *any* of them?” She tsked. “I’m not claiming to be an expert, but I start to wonder if you’re afraid of success when it seems like you’re constantly setting yourself up for failure, honey.”

Ouch.

Elle chewed on the inside of her cheek. Love, like all things, had come so easy for her older siblings. Jane and Daniel hadn’t even been looking for love when they’d met Gabe and Mike. It was just like school. Elle had gotten good grades, yeah, but she’d had to work her butt off for them. Jane and Daniel had barely needed to study to get straight As.

Then again, Elle wasn’t looking for easy. Elle wanted *right*. Would it have been nice if some of her dreams had been easier to achieve? Obviously, but she wished her family would understand that just because her path to success wasn’t a straight line, and just because her definition of success was a little different, she wasn’t automatically a failure.

“Look, I’m—”

Above the door, the bell chimed as someone darted inside to escape the downpour. Elle did a double take, recognizing the messy auburn hair and freckles—

“Shoot.” Elle slumped in the booth. Her butt made an obnoxious noise against the leather as she slipped low, knees knocking into Mom’s beneath the table.

“What in the world are you doing?” Mom stared at Elle as if she’d

sprouted a second head.

Of all the breakfast joints in the greater Seattle area, Brendon Lowell just had to wander into Gilbert's at the same time she was grabbing brunch with her mother.

Elle liked Brendon. They were well on their way to becoming good friends. Any other day of the week, she'd have waved him over. Just not today, not when she was with Mom and *definitely* not after her disaster of a date with his sister. A date Elle never would've agreed to had she had even the slightest inkling it would've gone *that* wrong. Things with Brendon were bound to be awkward now, and all she could hope was that he would be decent enough to not let it affect their working relationship. The last thing Elle needed was for the shitty state of her love life to sour her career when years of her and Margot's hard work were finally paying off . . .

Peering past Mom's confused face, Elle spotted Brendon chatting with the host. Brendon clapped the man on the shoulder and walked toward the pastry case. Hallelujah, he must've been getting his order to go.

"Honey, what's gotten into you?" The corners of her eyes crinkled with concern.

Elle shook her head and gripped the edge of the table, heaving herself to sitting. "Nothing. Nothing, I'm just—"

It stood to reason that if she believed in *good* luck, and she absolutely did, there was also such a thing as *bad* luck. As evidenced when Brendon turned, hands tucked casually in the pockets of his stonewashed jeans.

Elle grabbed the menu and scrambled to unfold it. Once it formed a nice little cubby, she ducked behind it and rested her cheek against the table.

"Elizabeth Marie, what is wrong with you?"

The better question was what *wasn't* wrong with her.

"Elle?"

So much for that. Elle flicked her bangs out of her eyes and aimed a grin at Brendon who peered down at her with a bemused smile. "Brendon? Wow, hey! How are you?"

"I'm great." His smile brightened, bemusement transforming into amusement with a flash of his teeth. He pointed at his cheek. Brendon had dimples just like Darcy, but he was missing that stupid special freckle, the one Elle had wanted to kiss until the date had gone to hell in a handcart. "You've got a little something . . ."

Elle swiped a hand over her cheek, fingers coming back smudged brown

with what she prayed was chocolate syrup. “Thanks. Um, what are you doing here?”

Getting food, most likely. *Brilliant, Elle.*

Brendon chuckled and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I live right down the street by the park. I drop by most mornings. They’ve got better coffee than the chain places, not so overroasted. What are *you* doing here? Don’t you live downtown?”

A kick landed against her shin. Ow. Right, Mom was staring at her with wide eyes and a tight smile.

“I do, but my family doesn’t.” She gestured across the table. “Brendon, this is my mom, Linda. Mom, this is my friend, Brendon.”

Brendon’s smile widened as he stuck out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Mom’s eyes darted over to Elle as she shook Brendon’s hand. “Always nice to meet a *friend* of Elle’s.”

Elle’s eyes slipped shut at Mom’s less-than-subtle suggestion.

Brendon, however, seemed to think the mix-up was *hilarious*. “Oh no, Elle and I are just friends. And business partners, too, I guess.” His toothy smile went lopsided and Elle’s stomach did an anatomically impossible nosedive, plummeting an unrealistic distance before threatening to drop out her butt. “Though I like to think our friendship supersedes that sort of thing.”

“Right?” Elle chuckled nervously, avoiding Mom’s questioning head tilt.

“Not that your daughter isn’t amazing,” Brendon continued, digging Elle’s hole deeper. “But I’d have to fight my sister and I have full confidence Darcy could whoop my butt.”

Hearing Darcy’s name twisted Elle’s already stressed stomach, her laughter taking on a frantic edge that had both Brendon and Mom staring at her funny. Elle shut the menu and fanned it in front of her, needing the breeze.

Had he not spoken with his sister?

“Elle?” With her brows lifted, the look on Mom’s face brokered no argument.

She cleared her throat. “Right, sorry. Brendon’s the creator of OTP. You know, the dating app?”

Brendon nodded. “The whole team is over the moon”—he dimpled—“to be working with Elle and Margot. Our algorithms are solid, but we’re hoping that with their help, our success rate will break the forty percent threshold on

relationships lasting longer than one month.”

Based on Mom’s frown, Brendon might as well have been speaking Klingon. “And you’re—working for this company, Elle? Is this a salaried position?”

Elle’s face flamed as she flashed an apologetic smile at Brendon. “*Mom*. We’re consulting with OTP as independent contractors. It’s . . . it’s a big deal, okay?”

Mom’s frown deepened, making Elle lose her appetite entirely. So much for that.

Her smile felt flimsy when she looked up at Brendon. “Margot and I are jazzed about it, too. We were just talking about it last night, how excited we are to hit the ground running.”

Brendon stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Speaking of last night . . .”

Shit. Here it goes.

“Darcy made me promise not to say anything, but what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, yeah?” He shot her a conspiratorial wink that under any other circumstance would have made her grin because he was absolute shit at winking, but in a totally endearing way because he either had no clue, or he knew and didn’t care. Now, it just curdled the macchiato in her stomach.

“You talked to Darcy?” She swallowed, ignoring Mom’s curious stare in favor of focusing on Brendon’s face, studying it for any sign of what bombshell he was about to drop that he’d sworn himself to secrecy over. “About . . . about last night?”

“Oh yeah. She’s . . .” Brendon trailed off, shaking his head, the expression on his face inscrutable. Her pulse tripped as she held her breath. Brendon ducked his chin, chuckling down at the table. “I’ve never seen her like this before.”

What the hell? Elle wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him. What did that mean? Never seen her so *what*? “Oh?”

He lifted his head, smile still lovably lopsided. “She said you two really hit it off.”

Elle’s jaw dropped. *The fuck?* “She did?”

Brendon nodded. “She’s . . . God, Elle, I mean it when I say I’ve never seen my sister so . . . so *smitten* before.”

“Smitten,” Elle echoed dumbly.

“Could you not tell?” Brendon laughed as if his sister’s feelings were

utterly obvious.

All she could do was shrug. “Darcy is . . . not the easiest to read.”

Brendon nodded like he understood. “She keeps her cards close to her chest, that’s for sure. But trust me when I say she had a great time.”

Could’ve fooled her.

Either this was some gigantic misunderstanding, or Darcy had lied to her brother. But to what end? Elle had been the one who was late and had spilled wine all over the place, so why lie?

His smile fell. “You had a good time, didn’t you?”

Ah, fudge.

Elle chanced a quick glance at Mom, who wasn’t even pretending she wasn’t listening, and tugged on her earlobe. “I—”

Almost cried on the way home?

Lost her new underwear in a public bathroom she was forced to use because she was too embarrassed to confront Darcy in the restaurant?

Had really hoped they’d hit it off and had been inordinately disappointed when the breath-snatching chemistry hadn’t been *enough*?

Everything she could think to say seemed wrong.

The look on Brendon’s face was so *hopeful*, like he honest to God believed his sister’s happiness hinged on Elle. It didn’t help that Mom was staring at her, that same hope reflected in her blue eyes.

Lying was something Elle avoided, but owning up to her part in last night’s disaster date? Copping to spilled wine and lateness and head-butting over her job and hopes? Elle was tired of everyone looking at her like she was a mess when she was just trying her best.

“I just . . . I’m kind of speechless,” she confessed, forcing out a laugh.

Mom looked at her strangely because if there was one thing anyone who knew Elle, *really* knew her, was aware of, it was that she was seldom at a loss for words.

“You sound like Darcy.” Brendon’s smile went sly as he leaned in, dropping his voice. “Until she finally spilled and told me all about your off-the-charts chemistry.”

Not a misunderstanding, then. At least not one between Darcy and Brendon.

Torn between righteous indignation—because, *ha*, there *were* sparks, she *knew* it—and heavyhearted melancholy—because the confirmation of those sparks meant zilch—Elle chuckled nervously over the rim of her macchiato.

“What can I say?”

Brendon, who continued to look a touch too smug, as if his matchmaking skills were out of this world, looked at her expectantly, clearly waiting for her to finish her statement, but . . . what *could* she say? Darcy had put her in a pickle, a no-win situation.

Fortunately, the waiter swooped in, saving the moment from becoming too awkward when he dropped off their food. Regardless of how rude it was with Brendon still standing there, Elle promptly stuffed a forkful of crepe into her mouth. The cinnamon sugar melted on her tongue, not like butter, but like ash.

Blue eyes bright and smile poorly restrained, Mom looked inordinately pleased by this turn of events. Elle swallowed, wincing as her bite of crepe made a slow, dry descent, sticking thickly in her esophagus.

Brendon ran a hand through his hair. “Well, I should leave you two to your breakfast, but be on the lookout for a text from Darcy, okay? She said she’ll be in touch.”

For a moment, Elle’s chest swelled with a strange surge of something that felt suspiciously like hope. Had *she* read the situation wrong? Maybe—

No.

There was no way. It just wasn’t possible.

That didn’t mean Elle didn’t have questions. Darcy had some explaining to do. She owed Elle that much.

Elle pasted on a smile. “Not if I text her first.”

Chapter Four

Steam wafted off the top of Darcy's mug, tickling her nose as she brought the ceramic to her lips. Her eyes shut as she sipped then let out a contented sigh, her body sinking deeper into the couch cushion.

Bliss. Her apartment was silent, her coffee just this side of scalding, and she had nowhere she needed to be for the entire weekend. Two whole days where she could do what she wanted, when she wanted. No pointless dates or Brendon complaining she was behaving like a homebody.

Darcy cracked open an eye and glared at the coffee table. At her *phone*, which was dancing its way across the surface of her coffee table, vibrating noisily.

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:24 A.M.): you have some explaining to do

Darcy wrinkled her nose and swiped at the screen, quickly tapping in her passcode with her thumb.

DARCY (11:26 A.M.): I think you have the wrong number.

After pressing send, Darcy spared a moment to consider what sort of explaining this person who was *certainly* not her had to do and to whom. Was it a lovers' spat? Some kid about to get a stern talking-to from a parent? Darcy set her phone down beside her. Not her problem.

Against her hip, her phone buzzed, the screen lighting up.

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:29 A.M.): do i darcy?

What the hell? Darcy sat up, swiping at the screen.

DARCY (11:31 A.M.): Who is this?

She stared, watching those three little dots dance. In the meantime, she performed a quick mental inventory of who it could possibly be.

Brendon was saved into her phone alongside a truly awful photo of his sixteen-year-old self, crashed out on the couch, drooling, pizza sauce smeared on his chin. Her parents were saved, filed under their respective first names. She had Annie's number, and her boss never texted. *Never*. Then there was . . . well, that was it. Mostly. Aside from acquaintances who may or may not have had her number. Her texting sphere was small, selective. *Curated*. Darcy's lips tightened at the edges. Of course, there was always the chance it was— No. She'd blocked Natasha's number a long time ago.

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:36 A.M.): your worst nightmare

Her grip tightened, fingers accidentally smashing the volume button on the side of her phone making the thing beep loudly in her fist. Darcy's pulse mimicked the surge, leaping in her throat. *What the actual fuck?*

Thumb trembling as it hovered over the keyboard, Darcy spared an instinctive glance at the front door, double-checking that it was locked. The dead bolt was bolted, the chain was latched, and she was apparently testing the limits of her ability to overreact. Between last night's door-pounding debacle with Brendon and this, she needed to get a grip, even if that text was creepy as hell.

Primed to block the number and move on with her life, another message appeared before she could pull the trigger.

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:39 A.M.): ok that sounded kinda serial killer-ish

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:39 A.M.): which im not

Because that's not exactly what some psycho with a butcher's knife would say.

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:40 A.M.): which is totally what a serial killer would say

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:40 A.M.): oops

At least they were a self-aware psycho.

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:41 A.M.): it was supposed to be like im pissed at you and demand answers but not like im mouth breathing over your shoulder and wearing a hickey mask

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:41 A.M.): *hockey

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:42 A.M.): none of this is helping huh?

UNKNOWN NUMBER (11:42 A.M.): nvm

Darcy lifted her hand, resting her fingers along the notch at the base of her throat. Never mind? No, not never mind. This stranger thought *Darcy* had some explaining to do?

Staring blankly at the absurd conversation, it took the preinstalled wind chime ringtone to snap her out of her daze. **Unknown Number** was calling. Darcy's pulse sped. Should she answer or let it go to voice mail? She hated talking on the phone, even to Brendon. But could she really settle for a voice mail? What if they didn't leave one? On the third ring, the burn of curiosity bested her nerves. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello?" A spike of irritation made Darcy sit up straighter, her spine steeling. "Who is this?"

Hopefully, the *cut to the chase* was implied.

"Right. Hi. It's Elle. Jones. Elle Jones. We had drinks last night—"

"I know who you are." Darcy shut her eyes, and an image of Elle's pretty face appeared behind Darcy's lids. She wasn't easily forgotten.

Elle chuckled, but it lacked spirit, sounded stilted. "Right. I'm sure you're wondering why I'm calling. Aside from, you know, wanting to make sure you didn't think I was *actually* a serial killer."

Worst nightmare wasn't farfetched. Brendon *truly* knew how to pick them.

"Look, can you spare me the runaround and tell me what you want? I'm rather busy at the moment."

Her coffee was getting cold and microwaving it would be a cardinal sin. The sooner they wrapped this up, the sooner Darcy's life could return to business as usual.

A pause, followed by rustling loud enough for Darcy to yank the phone from her ear followed. "—because you'll never guess who I ran into this morning."

Darcy pinched the bridge of her nose. "Who?"

Elle chuckled dryly. "Your brother, and boy did he have some interesting things to say to me."

Elle had run into Brendon, big deal. It wasn't like—

The dots connected, the implication of this run-in clear. *Disastrously* clear.

“Fuck,” she muttered.

“And this”—Elle gave a dramatic pause—“is where you have some explaining to do.”

* * *

Darcy twisted the simple, platinum band around the middle finger of her right hand and stared at the front door.

What was supposed to be a peaceful, productive, bra-off morning was now inching its way into a stressful, inefficacious, bra-on afternoon. Any minute now, Elle would arrive, all because Brendon couldn't keep his big mouth shut.

Granted, somewhere buried in there, Darcy owned a bit of culpability in this, but it was Brendon who'd messed with her otherwise perfect plan for at *least* a month without meddling. She'd *told* him not to say anything to Elle, to not screw this up for her, but he'd outplayed her. Now, she'd have to explain this entire convoluted situation to Elle. Worst part was, she had no road map for this conversation, no game plan; what *she'd* say depended on what Brendon had said, *how much* Brendon had said, and how Elle had reacted.

All Darcy had going in her favor was that Brendon had yet to blow up her phone or come pounding down her door. Best-case scenario, this would be a brief, relatively painless conversation after which she and Elle could, once again, go their separate ways. With the caveat that Elle couldn't say anything to Brendon. Not yet, anyway. Worst-case scenario . . .

Darcy cracked her knuckles. *Painless* might be easier said than done. Already a headache bloomed between her eyes.

A rhythmic, five-note knock sounded against the front door. Darcy's heart tripped, stuttering out the couplet response. Game time. She stood, smoothing the wrinkles from her heather-blue lounge pants, and padded over to the door on bare feet. She took a deep breath and flipped the lock, yanking the door open like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Slouched against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest, Elle glared up at Darcy with a withering stare. A stare made all the more disconcerting when Elle performed another one of those head-to-toe perusals of Darcy's body. Darcy went dizzy with the ferocity and speed of blood rising to the surface of her skin, her blush a beacon that no amount of affectation could

conceal.

Elle's blue eyes swept back up Darcy's body and lingered on her face, stare penetrating. "You're shorter without your heels on."

Darcy sniffed. "That is how it works, yes."

Elle snorted and pressed off the door with her shoulder. Without waiting for an invitation, she slipped past Darcy through the doorway, their arms brushing.

Elle wore a soft, chunky blue cardigan that fell haphazardly from one shoulder, revealing a wide expanse of creamy skin and the jut of her collarbone. Darcy tore her eyes away and made herself focus on the imperfections, the way Elle's jeans were frayed and rain-soaked at the bottom and her Converse were scuffed and sure to leave tracks on the carpet.

"Could you—" Darcy's voice teetered on the verge of cracking. She cleared her throat and lifted her chin to stare down her nose. "Could you take your shoes off?"

Elle's brows lurched upward before she shrugged. "Fine. Figured you'd want me in and out, but yeah, I can get comfy."

Darcy rolled her eyes. Whether Elle was *comfy* wasn't her concern. "I don't want you making a mess of my carpet."

Elle's tongue poked against the inside of her cheek, her expression souring. Rather than argue, she bent at the waist and slipped her fingers behind the heel of one shoe, then the other, straightening to then step out of them. The move caused her sweater to slide farther down her arm, revealing more soft-looking skin and the subtle swell of her breasts. The chances of her wearing something under that sweater were looking slimmer by the second.

Leaving her shoes smack-dab in the center of the foyer, Elle traipsed farther into Darcy's apartment, brazenly surveying her surroundings. She studied the art on the wall with a curious tilt of her chin before moving on to finger the spines of the books on Darcy's shelf. Every so often, her whole face scrunched, occasionally accompanied by a stuck-out tongue that was *not* adorable.

Hanging back, Darcy swallowed down the lump of discomfort growing in her throat. Elle was a bright splash of color against the clean canvas of Darcy's apartment. Cobalt sweater, bleach-splattered jeans, and mismatched socks, one neon green and the other a soft periwinkle, with a pink chevron at her toes and a hole near the ankle.

Darcy tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "By all means, make

yourself at home.”

Elle spun on her holey-sock-covered heel and narrowed her eyes. “Don’t mind if I do,” she said, before taking a seat and drawing both knees up to her chest, feet on Darcy’s pristine sofa.

Darcy stayed standing, arms crossed, and chin raised.

“Nice place.” Elle’s eyes roved around the room, lingering on the neat stack of Darcy’s FSA study guides before darting over to the fern—Darcy’s singular pop of color—in the corner. Her brows furrowed. “Did you just move in?”

Darcy curled her tongue behind her teeth. “No.”

“Huh.” The fact that she was able to pack so much judgment into such a tiny word would’ve been impressive had Darcy not been one, slightly offended, and two, ready to get this conversation over with.

“You have questions.” Darcy didn’t bother asking. For all that Elle had sprawled herself lazily across Darcy’s sectional in an illusion of relaxation, her fingers twitched against her thighs, her feet shifting, toes curling and uncurling as her gaze bounced from one surface to another.

Elle wrapped her arms around her shins. “We’re through with the small talk?”

“In the interest of time.” Darcy dipped her chin. “Like I said, I’m busy.”

Elle’s too perceptive gaze darted from the lone, now-cold cup of coffee to Darcy, her eyes lingering on Darcy’s lounge pants, then her hastily braided hair. “Right. Then in the interest of time, I’ll get straight to it.” Elle lifted her hips, wiggling her phone free from her back pocket. She made several swipes against the screen before clearing her throat. “Question one, what the fuck?”

Darcy shut her eyes and breathed deep for a count of four, held it for a count of seven, and exhaled for a count of eight. She’d have repeated the process had Elle’s stare not been palpable, making the skin between Darcy’s shoulder blades itch. “Can I expect question two to be more specific?”

Elle harrumphed and glanced down at the phone in her hand. “I don’t know, let’s see. Question two, how dare you?”

Darcy abandoned her yoga breathing and cut to the chase. “I’m sorry. Okay?”

Best to issue a broad-stroke apology because Darcy wasn’t entirely sure what Brendon had said, only that Elle’s reaction wasn’t positive.

Elle’s hand flopped down against the couch, her phone bouncing gently. “You’re sorry. Sorry for what exactly?”

“For whatever has you all”—she waved her hand in Elle’s general direction—“vexed.”

Elle’s shoulders shook with slow-building laughter. She leaned forward and dropped her head into her hands before letting out an aggrieved, muffled shriek. “Vexed.” She lifted her head, face flushed pink. “God. Do you insert that stick up your ass every morning, or is it more like an IUD that lasts you five years?”

Her jaw dropped. “You know what—”

“No.” Elle stood and sidestepped the coffee table, stalking toward Darcy. “I’m not finished. You want to know what has me all *vexed*? Let’s see, maybe you’re sorry for being rude last night? Poo-pooing what matters to me like my job? Ordering a fifty-six-dollar glass of wine? Talking smack about me to whoever the hell it was on the phone when you don’t *know* me?” Elle took another step forward, fingers lifted as she aired her grievances. “Or maybe lying to your brother, huh? Telling him we hit it off when we obviously didn’t? You put me in the position of having to choose between going along with *your* lie, a lie I can’t for the life of me understand, or owning up to last night’s disaster all on my own. So I don’t know. Take your pick, Darcy.”

Heat flooded Darcy’s veins, creeping up her chest and neck, shame making her dizzy. Contradictory and ill-timed, a tendril of heat spread lower, settling beneath Darcy’s belly button because anger turned the blue of Elle’s irises into something fierce like a sea during a storm. Color settled high on her cheeks and her messy bun had come undone, strands of hair framing her heart-shaped face. For a moment, Darcy wondered what Elle would look like, sweat dripping down that bare expanse of neck, her back bowing against Darcy’s sheets. The temperature in Darcy’s apartment climbed, her shirt sticking to sweat dotting the small of her back.

“I’m sorry.” Darcy met Elle’s glare, the ferocity of which was softened by a glossy dampness that replaced her urge to see Elle tangled up in sheets with the desire to wrap her up in something soft, a blanket, or Darcy’s favorite duvet. How . . . utterly bizarre. Darcy cleared her throat. “I didn’t mean— It wasn’t my intention to be rude.” Or upset her.

Elle sniffed loudly and crossed her arms, gaze sharpening once more. “Yeah. Well, you were, so . . .”

Her voice trailed off. An unspoken question. Why?

This was the part Darcy had been dreading down to her bones: explaining

herself. Her behavior on the date. Why she'd led Brendon to believe she had any intention of seeing Elle again.

Part of Darcy was tempted not to bother. Wasn't an apology, a sincere one, enough?

Except if Darcy had any hope of salvaging her plan to get Brendon off her back, she'd have to share with Elle. Without an explanation, Elle had no reason not to go directly to Brendon and blab. Or at the very least, inadvertently contradict the carefully crafted picture Darcy had painted.

"Look." Darcy took a step closer and uncrossed her arms, posture relaxing from the defensive stance she'd adopted during Elle's outburst. "My brother is— I love him. But when he gets an idea in his head, he's like a dog with a bone. And he has this idea, misconstrued as it is, that I should be looking for love. That"—Darcy puffed out her cheeks, weighing the best words, the one's with the lowest probability of raising Elle's hackles—"I need to find my special someone. When a serious relationship is not on my radar. At the moment."

When it would be on her radar, *if*, Darcy wasn't sure.

Elle cocked her head, brow furrowing. "Why not?"

Something in her gut said Elle wouldn't be appeased with a simple *because*. Darcy sighed. "I'm busy? I'm studying for my final FSA exam. Once I pass, I'll have reached the highest designation awarded to actuaries by the governing body. The exams are rigorous and the pass rate is only forty percent. Studying takes up my scant amount of free time."

"So you're too busy right now? Tell him that."

As if she hadn't? "Brendon believes I should have a better work-life balance and he acts like it's his calling in life to make sure I do."

Elle shrugged. "He has a point."

Darcy knew how it sounded—too busy for dating, for friends, for any semblance of a social life. Yes, it was true she didn't have any friends in Seattle *yet*, but she was operating according to *her* schedule, not Brendon's. "I don't tell *him* how to run *his* business."

"Tell him you're just not interested."

If only it were that easy. Darcy had tried and it never worked. Brendon knew her too well, knew exactly what buttons to press to get his way. Darcy didn't feel like spilling to Elle that the reason Brendon pushed so hard was because he knew that once upon a time, she *had* wanted a relationship, marriage, family, the whole nine yards. Having the rug yanked out from

under her wasn't something she'd been able to control, but how she chose to move on with the rest of her life was.

Darcy waved it off with a roll of her eyes and a scoff. "Easier said than done. You've met Brendon; he's a romantic, obsessed with happily-ever-after. He keeps setting me up on these dates, and when I try to back out, he acts wounded, like I'm giving up too easily. Last night had less to do with you and more to do with me finally reaching the end of my rope. I had a headache and all I wanted was to go home. You were a . . . casualty. Wrong place at the wrong time."

On a date with the wrong person.

Elle set her jaw. "Whatever. It's not like you're obligated to like me or anything."

It had nothing to do with liking Elle, or not. Had Elle not been looking for love, had she been fine with something less serious and more temporary, Darcy wouldn't have minded exploring what those heated glances could've led to. But Elle *was* looking for something serious and Darcy wasn't, so there was no use wasting time on *what-ifs* when they were inherently incompatible.

"I could've been nicer," Darcy admitted.

"True." Elle's lips quirked, her smile brief, a sun breaking through clouds. "I'm still missing something. Why lie and tell Brendon you wanted to see me again when you clearly don't?"

Not entirely true. Topic of conversation aside, talking with Elle wasn't awful. Granted, it would've been better had she been wearing less clothing. In which case, Darcy would've been happy to see a lot more of Elle. Often.

"Again, product of poor timing." Darcy lifted a shoulder and gave Elle a rueful smile. "Brendon came in here, guns blazing, talking about how I should sign up for speed dating and, to be honest, that sounds like my idea of hell. When my usual excuses—*reasons*—didn't work, I told him I was seeing someone. But then he wondered why I'd agreed to go out with you if I was seeing someone else."

Realization flickered in Elle's eyes. "So you told him it was me you hit it off with."

Darcy bit the edge of her lip and nodded.

For a moment, Elle was silent. Lips twisting to the side and brow furrowing, she finally asked, "What was your end game?"

"My what?"

"You know. How you saw this playing out. You tell Brendon we're

seeing each other and then what was supposed to happen? Didn't you think he'd catch on eventually? Or, I don't know, ask me about you?"

Darcy scratched the side of her neck. She'd made a gamble, yes. She should've known better, but Brendon had given her no choice but to think fast on her feet. As a consequence, her plan had been riddled with holes. It could've worked, but she'd been thwarted by Brendon's absolute inability to keep his trap shut.

"For starters, I swore him to secrecy. I told him I didn't want him messing this up for me. I intended to capitalize on my *intention* to reach out to you and milk that for as long as I could before Brendon finally caught on. I didn't exactly lie, I omitted and let him fill in the blanks."

Elle gawked. "That's cunning. That's . . . that's . . . *Slytherin*."

"Excuse me?"

"*Slytherin*." Elle's jaw dropped. "Oh my god. Don't tell me you don't know your Hogwarts house. Pottermore? The Sorting Hat Quiz?" When Darcy stared, Elle groaned and covered her face. "You don't *do* social media, you don't believe in astrology, and now you don't like Harry Potter. On behalf of our generation, I am offended, you *rock dweller*."

Darcy scoffed. "I do not live under a rock. I know what you're talking about, I was choosing to ignore you because your assumption about me was baseless."

And not that it was any of Elle's business, but Darcy was a Ravenclaw.

"Like I said, I never lied," Darcy reiterated, keeping this conversation from getting further off track. "I stretched the truth."

"Stretched the truth? Are you kidding me?" Elle exhaled noisily through her nose, jaw ticking. "Look, what you choose to tell your brother, or not tell your brother, *whatever*, is your business. But whether you meant to or not, you pulled me into a narrative I'd very much like to be excluded from, *plus*, you put me in a pickle."

Swallowing a laugh at her phrasing, Darcy gave what she hoped was a carefully thoughtful stare. "I put you in a pickle?"

"Yes, a real gherkin of a situation."

How she managed to say that with a straight face was a mystery. Even Darcy couldn't keep from snorting at the word *gherkin* being used to sincerely describe one's state of being. "I didn't realize it would be such a big *dill*."

Elle rolled her shoulders back and glared daggers. "It isn't funny. I was at

breakfast with my mom when your brother waltzed up and spilled your story. Told me you're *smitten*. Now my mom, and most likely my whole family, thinks I'm halfway to being in the first successful relationship I've ever had. I'm sure my mom's working on a cake as we speak. *Elle's finally got her shit together*. Let's bust out the confetti."

Darcy sobered. This was a different side of Elle than the starry-eyed soul-mate-seeking girl she'd met last night.

"I . . . *apologize*. Sincerely. I was remiss in assuming my brother could keep his mouth shut. But this isn't hopeless." Darcy licked her lips, shifting her weight from one foot to the other beneath Elle's stare. "Why don't you tell your mother Brendon was mistaken?"

Elle worried her bottom lip between her teeth, shoulders slumping. "Yeah, *sure*. That'll go great. And what am I supposed to say to your brother?"

"Maybe you could"—Darcy winced—"not say anything to Brendon? Yet."

Elle blinked those blue eyes of her balefully. "I'm sorry. Are you suggesting I lie to your brother? Your brother who happens to be my friend and brand-new business partner? Because that's what it sounds like."

The plan, the promising, practically brilliant plan, was slipping through Darcy's fingers. "I didn't say *lie*, I said don't say *anything*. There's a difference."

Elle stared.

"Look, I didn't mean to rope you into this, I swear, but maybe . . ." Floundering, Darcy was trying and failing to fill in the blank. *Maybes* were flimsy, imprecise. She preferred *probabilities* and *proof* to *perhaps*. She met Elle's eyes and somehow in her stare, she found her answer. "If you look on the bright side, this could be beneficial to us both."

That was the sort of starry-eyed optimism that revved Elle's engine, right?

Elle's eyes narrowed. "How?"

Darcy knew how it would benefit her, but Elle's situation was a bit less defined. Vague, even.

"I'm at my wits' end with my brother's matchmaking," Darcy explained. "And you . . . you want your family to think you can hold down a relationship?"

"I—" Elle shut her mouth and frowned. "What I *want* is an actual

relationship, one I don't have to fib about."

Each time Darcy felt like she was finally regaining her grip, the plan slipped further through her fingers.

"No one's saying you can't have that. This would only be for . . . a month, maybe two. Long enough for Brendon to think I'm trying."

Elle covered her face with her hands. Her fingers pressed into the skin beneath her brows, massaging the ridge of her eye sockets before she dropped her hands and pinned Darcy with a stare. "You want us to . . . to fake a relationship? Are you serious?"

Was it what Darcy wanted? No. Not even close. This had escalated into something she hadn't planned. This was decidedly more involved, requiring partnership when what she'd been aiming for was the soundness of singledom, Darcy Party of One. But she could adapt. She had no choice. "We can say we're spending time together. Getting to know each other, feeling things out. It doesn't have to be a *thing*. Just implied. We don't have to . . . define the relationship."

Elle's tongue poked against her cheek. "This sounds like a supremely stupid plan. Like, *awful*. And if I'm the one saying that?" Elle snorted.

"A month or two, Elle. All you have to do is tell Brendon we're talking and you will have done your good deed for the rest of the year. Then you can go back to trying to find your soul mate." Darcy fought against the urge to cringe.

"You seriously think your brother's going to buy that? No questions asked? Are we talking about the same guy?" Elle lifted a hand over her head. "About this tall, auburn hair, cute grin, shit at winking?"

Darcy sighed. She had a point. Brendon lived for details, *sappy* details, and if their stories didn't align? Brendon was bright, too bright to accept inconsistencies. He'd sniff out Darcy's lies and then she'd really be in hot water.

"That's a fair point," Darcy conceded. Not to mention, there was that pesky annual Christmas party of his. How was she supposed to act like she and Elle were together if they didn't go together? "There's an event or two I might need you to attend."

Elle's shoulders started to shake and it took Darcy a second to realize she was laughing. "Are you kidding me? You have some nerve, you know that?" She shook her head. "Why should I give a fuck about what you need?"

"I'd . . . I'd obviously return the favor." Darcy winced through the offer.

“If that’s what you want.”

Elle blinked. “You’re saying you’d come to something like . . . what, Thanksgiving? With my family?”

Oh Jesus. Darcy swallowed a groan. “I could do that.”

“And you’d . . . act like you’re *smitten*? Like the sun shines out of my ass?”

Darcy nodded. “Sure. Whatever.”

What was one holiday? As long as she got Brendon off her back, she could suffer through a family Thanksgiving with Elle. How bad could it be?

Arms crossed, Elle nibbled on the corner of her lip, eyes staring off into space over Darcy’s shoulder, going glassy. With a quick shake of her head, she snapped out of whatever thoughts were swimming around inside her head. “Darcy—”

“Please.” The word popped out, reflexive. Anything to make Elle say yes. “Just . . . please, Elle.”

Elle blinked, lips parting, pursing as she blew out her breath. “Fine.”

Darcy’s brows rose. “Fine?”

A muscle in Elle’s jaw twitched. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m in.”

She slipped past, arms brushing even though there was plenty of room for her to pass. Maple syrup and spice filled Darcy’s nose, making her mouth water. She swallowed and pivoted, watching as Elle shoved her feet back inside her shoes and opened the front door.

Fingers resting on the doorknob, Elle paused. “We can hammer out the details of this”—she made a face, lips twisting— “arrangement later.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Put my number in your phone. I’ll be in touch.”

Chapter Five

Am I losing my mind, or did you just say you're going to fake a relationship with *Darcy Lowell*?"

Elle winced at the way Margot's voice went shrill. "You're perfectly sane."

Margot stared. "Are *you*?"

"I have my reasons, all right?"

"Name one."

"We haven't hammered out the details *yet*, but we agreed it's only for a month or two tops."

"That's not a reason, that's an excuse. You know what, I actually don't even know what that is, but it makes zero sense."

"Darcy put me in a real bind, okay? Lying to her brother who then blabbed at breakfast in front of my mom."

Margot slammed her laptop shut and tossed it on the cushion beside her. "So tell Darcy to go fuck herself."

"It's not that easy, Mar."

"You open your mouth and say it. *Fuck. You.*" Margot shook her head. "Elle. *Elle*. This isn't what you want. This is the *opposite* of what you want."

A fake relationship *wasn't* what she wanted. What she'd told Darcy was true—Elle wanted a real relationship. And not just any relationship, but *the one*. Her end game. She wasn't picky, no matter what Mom said, but she was tired of going on first dates that never turned into second dates because either they were all wrong for her or she was wrong for them.

"You should've seen the look on my mom's face," Elle said. "Five minutes before that she was accusing me of being afraid of success, setting myself up for failure, and making life harder than it needs to be. In waltzes

Brendon, talking about how his sister's crazy about me. I was caught between a rock and a hard place. What was I supposed to say?"

"I don't know. The truth, maybe?" Margot scowled. "Lying to your family isn't the way to get them to take you seriously. What you need to do is tell them if they don't like how you're living your life, they can go fuck themselves because it's not their life to live."

"Jesus, Margot. Is that your solution to everything? Just tell everyone I know to fuck off?"

Talk about oversimplification. Her family might get on her nerves, but she wasn't upset enough to burn bridges.

Margot drew a breath in and exhaled noisily before speaking. "It's better than lying. You're trying to find a short-term solution to a long-term problem. What are you going to do after your two months are up, hm?"

"When the time comes, I'll . . . I'll cross that bridge. Until then, I'm just . . ." Trying her best and hoping, like always, it would be good enough. "Making the most out of a weird situation."

Margot grabbed her laptop and shoved it inside her messenger bag, hauling the strap onto her shoulder. "Lying to your family's bad enough, Elle. Don't start lying to yourself, too."

* * *

What Rom-Com Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

Aries—*Fools Rush In*

Taurus—*Sweet Home Alabama*

Gemini—*She's All That*

Cancer—*While You Were Sleeping*

Leo—*How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*

Virgo—*The Proposal*

Libra—*Sleepless in Seattle*

Scorpio—*My Best Friend's Wedding*

Sagittarius—*The Holiday*

Capricorn—*Two Weeks Notice*

Aquarius—*Clueless*

Pisces—*Never Been Kissed*

"Whatcha lookin' at?"

Heart rocketing into her throat, Darcy smashed the back button on her phone and aimed a withering stare at Brendon over her shoulder. "Jesus. Could you try not sneaking up on me?"

“Boring.” Brendon straightened from where he’d been crouched and rounded the table, dropping down into the chair opposite hers. “Besides, it’s practically my birthright as a younger brother to give you hell.”

“You’re twenty-six.”

He snagged a menu and ran his finger down the list of beverages. “Point being?”

“*Point being*, you should be above giving me grief on a daily basis. Don’t you have more important things to worry about? Running a company? Being featured on *Forbes’s* Thirty Under Thirty list?”

Flipping the menu over, Brendon shrugged. “Are you done deflecting? Can we discuss the fact that you were scrolling Oh My Stars?”

“I was *not*.” Darcy slipped her phone behind the salt and pepper shakers as if moving it out of sight might further refute Brendon’s accusation. Based on the way his smile grew even as he studied the menu, it did not. “I was . . . okay, fine, I was *glancing*. It doesn’t mean I believe in any of it. It’s ridiculous. How does my astrological sign correlate in any capacity to my preference for rom-coms? It doesn’t. I don’t even like *Two Weeks Notice*.”

Brendon gaped at her. “Blasphemy. It’s got Sandra Bullock and Hugh Grant. Rom-com royalty. Don’t let me catch you saying that sort of thing again or else I’ll sit on you and force you through a remedial rom-com marathon.”

She took a sip of her sparkling water and mock-shivered. “Oh, the horror.”

“I, for one, think it’s *cu-te*”—he drew out the word, turning it into two obnoxious syllables—“you’re reading Oh My Stars. Taking an interest in your partner’s job and hobbies is important, Darce.”

Spare her the touchy-feely mumbo-jumbo, *please*. For starters, she wasn’t relationship illiterate, and two, there was nothing cute about it. Elle was not her partner. Partner in crime perhaps, but Darcy’s perusal of Elle’s Twitter account had nothing to do with caring about astrology and everything to do with preparedness. Like studying for an exam. Clearly, all this astrological malarkey meant something to Elle. If Darcy wanted to sell this relationship, she needed to understand what made Elle tick. If such a thing could even be pinpointed. So far, the verdict was out, the inner workings of one Elle Jones less of a neat little package to be unwrapped and more like a clown car full of increasingly random and terrifyingly endearing quirks.

Darcy took a sip of water. “Right. I was doing—that.”

The waitress swung by the table, dropping off her coffee before taking Brendon's drink order. As soon as she was gone, Brendon leaned in, resting his elbows on the table, and gave her his best shit-eating grin.

"Speaking of Elle."

Darcy took a long, slow sip of her coffee and stared at him over the rim. "What about Elle?"

He rolled his eyes. "Darcy."

She smoothed the linen napkin on her lap and cocked her head. "All right. Should I start with how you did the one thing I *expressly* asked you not to? Not even twelve hours after you promised you wouldn't go blabbing to Elle, what did you do? You ran your mouth, in front of her *mother* no less. You told her I was *smitten*, Brendon. Do you know how mortified I was when Elle told me?"

She had been, just not for the reasons he might think.

"She tattled?" Brendon had the decency to look sheepish for a whole two seconds before his expression shifted into a gloating smirk. "Come on. Tell me this won't make for the greatest toast at your wedding one day."

Wedding. It was almost Pavlovian how the word inspired a visceral reaction, chills racing down her spine, a cold sweat breaking out along the nape of her neck, her molars clacking together. "Slow the fuck down, Brendon. Elle and I aren't getting married."

How she managed to string together complete sentences when her throat was narrower than her coffee's stir straw astounded her. She counted it as no small miracle that she could even say the word *married* at the moment.

Brendon snagged her cup of coffee, taking a sip before his whole face screwed up at the taste. And he called her a snob.

"You don't know that."

She did. But she couldn't say that. Not without calling her own bluff.

"Quit trying to marry me off like I'm some Regency spinster in one of your favorite Austen novels."

"Your name *is* Darcy."

"And I might be a single woman in possession of a good fortune, but I'm not in want of a wife." Once upon a time, she'd wanted that. Look how it had gone. No, thank you. "You're putting the cart in front of the horse. Elle and I aren't even officially together. We're testing the waters. Getting to know each other. Don't get your hopes up, is what I'm saying."

The waitress dropped off Brendon's Arnold Palmer and took their orders

—salmon salad for Brendon and steak carpaccio for Darcy.

What with how Brendon was going around telling everyone, Elle included, that she was *smitten*—God, she detested that word—she’d oversold herself. This, walking it back, was all part of the plan. Make Brendon think she was trying with Elle, putting her heart out there, eradicating any and all belief on his part that she was scared to fall in love. But she had to hold back just enough to make their eventual split believable. It was a balancing act, appearing cautiously optimistic without making excessive promises.

“I can’t believe you right now.”

Darcy’s head snapped up. “Excuse me?”

Brendon slouched in his chair. “You’ve got this great thing started with Elle, you’re in the midst of the magical time at the beginning of a relationship when you’re supposed to be on cloud nine thinking anything’s possible, and yet here you are, being a total downer.”

“Brendon—”

“No.” Brendon shoved his chair back, metal legs squealing, and sat up straight, leaning his elbows on the table. “You’re self-sabotaging right now, Darce. I know it isn’t always easy to break the habit, not with—with what’s happened, but you’ve got to stop seeing a dead end around every corner or else you’re going to turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. And the only person you’re going to have to blame is yourself.”

Darcy traced the rim of her coffee cup with her pointer finger, pausing to rid the porcelain of her red lipstick smudge. If she was avoiding Brendon’s eyes, it was completely coincidental. “I’m not self-sabotaging. I’m getting to know Elle and she’s—she’s more than I bargained for,” Darcy conceded, letting Brendon make of that what he wanted.

Never before had Darcy ever seen someone’s face look quite so much like the human equivalent of the heart-eyes emoji. Like drippy ice cream on a hot summer’s day, Brendon melted in his chair, shoulders slumping as his whole face screwed up, lips pressed together to no doubt keep from *awing*. “Darcy.”

Darcy had to bite the tip of her tongue to maintain her glare. “I swear on all that’s holy, if you so much as make a single joke right now or butcher a playground nursery rhyme about trees and kissing and baby carriages, I’ll let myself into your apartment and use your comic book collection as kindling. Capiche?”

He had to know she was all bark and no bite, but still, Brendon gave a full

body shudder. “Got it.” Brendon thanked the waitress when she dropped off his salad. Fork poised to dig in, Brendon paused, stare going serious and sincere. “I’m happy you’re happy.”

Her stomach twisted itself into a pretzel. “Thanks, Brendon.”

“You know,” he said, picking the tomatoes off his salad and tossing them on her plate. “You do kind of owe me for introducing you to Elle.”

She owed him something all right.

“You know how you could make it up to me?”

She arched a brow. “How?”

Brendon dimpled. “This Saturday, eight o’clock. You, Elle, me, and Cherry. Double date. Say yes.”

Darcy shut her eyes. “I’m sorry, did you say *Cherry*?”

When she opened her eyes, the corner of Brendon’s mouth twitched. “She’s sweet.”

She was choosing to ignore the innuendo wrapped up in that statement because *gross*. “Brendon, I don’t know if that’s—”

“Please, Darce,” he begged. “Say yes. Please say yes. Please, please, please with a cherry on—”

“*Jesus*, all right!” She lifted her hands in concession. Anything to make him *stop* before he finished that sentence.

Brendon’s entire countenance shifted, posture relaxing into his usual *laissez-faire*, long-limbed slouch. He grinned, looking pleased at having pushed the right buttons to get his way. “Thank you. You and Elle, me and Cherry. We’re gonna have a blast.”

Chapter Six

DARCY (4:57 P.M.): I think we need to discuss the details of this arrangement sooner as opposed to later.

ELLE (5:08 P.M.): how come?

ELLE (5:09 P.M.): i mean that's fine

ELLE (5:09 P.M.): jw if there was a reason

ELLE (5:09 P.M.): something i should know

Elle wasn't keen on being kept out of the loop again anytime soon.

DARCY (5:16 P.M.): My brother has invited us on a double date this Saturday. And by invite, I mean strong-armed me into agreeing. In the interest of selling this, I believe it would be best to have our ducks in a row ahead of time.

Elle had already had several stress dreams about Brendon finding out this was all a ruse and hating her for it. In her last dream, she had been on a trashy tabloid talk show. Brendon had forced her to undergo a lie-detector test and after she'd failed, he'd torn up the contract negotiations between OTP and Oh My Stars before storming off the set. In the audience, her entire family had booed. Darcy had been conspicuously absent.

It was just a dream—Elle didn't really believe the deal with OTP was predicated or somehow tied to the success of her relationship with Darcy—but Darcy had a point. She didn't know Darcy's birth date or . . . well, *anything* about her beside the fact that she was an actuary and workaholic. They needed to get to know each other better before this double date or else it'd look like the sham it was.

ELLE (5:20 P.M.): what are we doing?

ELLE (5:20 P.M.): on the double date i mean

DARCY (5:24 P.M.): I didn't ask. Is it relevant?

Elle rolled her eyes. Looks like she'd have to ask Brendon.

ELLE (5:25 P.M.): okay np

ELLE (5:26 P.M.): you free tonight?

ELLE (5:26 P.M.): say 7?

ELLE (5:26 P.M.): we can rendezvous at your place since i know where you live

DARCY (5:33 P.M.): That's fine.

Elle tucked her phone inside her messenger bag and slipped the strap over her shoulder. It was—she peeked at the Kit-Cat clock that hung crooked on the wall beside the microwave—ten to six. Just enough time to stop by Safeway before darting over to Darcy's posh Queen Anne apartment.

Hopping off the barstool, Elle glanced at Margot who continued to click away at her keyboard, pausing every now and again to glare menacingly at the screen. "I'm headed out. I guess I'll see you later if you're still awake."

She made it halfway to the front door—the whole two steps it took—when Margot sighed. "Elle, wait."

Elle bit the inside of her cheek and braced herself for another dig at what she was doing with Darcy. "Yeah?"

Margot set her computer aside and rested her elbows on her knees, fingers laced loosely together in front of her. "When I said you were making an epic mistake the other night, I was out of line. I'm . . . I'm sorry."

Elle shut her mouth. Apologies from Margot were rare. Just as rare as the arguments between them. "You don't have to—"

"No, I do." Margot blew out a breath, the thick fringe of her bangs parting like a curtain. "I'm pissed off, okay? On your behalf. And I know you think because Darcy apologized that it's fine now, but sometimes sorry isn't good enough, Elle. The last thing I want to do is harsh your vibe or rain on your parade, but I take no shit on your behalf. I haven't since the day we moved into the dorms freshman year and you demanded we stay up all night bonding over burnt microwave popcorn because you, and I quote, *have a feeling we're supposed to be best friends*. I'm not going to start now."

Elle wasn't sure whether she was supposed to laugh or cry. Caught in a state of flux, she did both at the same time. She swiped at her face, no doubt smearing eyeliner all over the place. But the pressure inside her chest that had taken up residence during her sort-of tiff with Margot deflated, leaving room for her heart to swell. "Margot. That was nine years ago."

"Stop crying." Margot sniffed, her expression shifting into a put-off frown. "You're going to make me cry. I *hate* crying. Don't hate me, but

please hear me out?”

It would take an utterly uncharacteristic move on Margot’s part, like murdering someone, to make Elle hate her. Even then, Elle would at least ask why before passing judgment.

“You were really upset the other night. I know you were trying to put on a brave face, but it was obvious Darcy hurt you. Worse than you let on. Now you’re agreeing to fake a relationship with her? Because of your family? Elle, if they can’t see how amazing you are . . . this isn’t worth it.”

Elle ground the toe of her boot into the rug, tracing the single mark in the paisley pattern from the Birthday Sparkler Incident of 2017.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing,” she admitted. The lump inside her throat grew, forcing her to swallow to keep her voice from cracking. “I’m just tired of falling short, Mar.”

Margot’s face crumpled. “Elle—”

She jerked her chin and sniffed hard, blinking away the film of tears blurring her vision. She smiled and shrugged. “If I can get my family to take me seriously about *one* thing, see that I have my life together in a way that makes sense to them, maybe they’ll come around to the rest.”

Margot shook her head. “So you’re throwing in the towel? You’re going to be like Lydia now? Dating the sorts of people your parents want and shrinking yourself down to be palatable to people who don’t *get* you? Who don’t even try?”

No. *God* no. Elle wasn’t going to actually compromise who she was or how she lived her life. No, this was a blip on Elle’s radar, a pit stop, a means to an end. Elle wasn’t settling. She just wanted her parents to be proud of her for who she was. If she had to speak their language for a brief bit of time, what was the harm? “No way. This is fake. I just want them to understand I’m not the letdown they think I am. Maybe hearing how awesome I am from someone else, someone like Darcy who’s the sort of person who satisfies their whole *nine-to-five I’m a serious adult* vibe, will help.”

Margot stuck out her tongue, eyes rolling. “Boring, you mean?”

Elle shrugged. “Besides, it’s cuffing season and Lydia’s got a boyfriend. Jane’s got Gabe and Daniel has Mike and I’m just—*Elle*. I’m not exactly jazzed about spending another holiday alone as the black sheep of the family.”

“*Just Elle* is pretty great.” Margot smiled. “But I get it. I mean, I might not be in your shoes, but I understand where you’re coming from. I just want

you to remember that you deserve someone you don't have to fake it with." Both her brows rose. "And I mean that in all ways."

Elle cracked a smile. "Thanks."

"But seriously, have you thought about what you're going to do when your two months are up? How are you going to spin your breakup that doesn't make you look like you can't hold down a relationship?"

Elle grimaced. That would be counterintuitive. "I'm thinking we'll split because of some crucial but faultless incompatibility like . . . I don't know, I want kids but she doesn't."

Breakups happened all the time. There didn't need to be culpability. It could be a mature split that in no way served as a blight on Elle's character.

"Does she want kids?"

"I don't know."

Margot frowned. "Don't you think that's something you should probably discuss before you start making plans? Kids might be excessive, but *things*? Her favorite color. Food allergies. I don't know."

She nodded. "I'm headed to her place now, actually. We're going to get to know each other so we can make this whole thing a little more believable."

Margot worried her lip. She wasn't entirely sold, Elle could tell, but something was better than nothing.

Elle gave one last shrug. "It's not ideal, but it's better than nothing, I guess? It's like hiring an escort but better because it's beneficial for the both of us and on the bright side, I don't have to pay."

"You getting some other perks out of this you failed to mention?" Margot waggled her brows.

Her face warmed. "I don't think it's like that."

"Something else you might want to hammer out, yeah?" Margot's smile flattened into something tense. "Just watch your back. I don't want you getting hurt."

"It's not like Darcy can hurt my feelings any worse than she already has. I know she doesn't like me, so what's the worst that could happen?"

* * *

Elle shifted the bags from her left arm to the right and tried—subsequently failing—to smother her smile when Darcy opened the door, this time wearing a camel-colored pencil skirt that hugged her hips, and a polka-dotted pussy-

bow blouse in off-white that Darcy would probably dub something fancy like eggshell or mascarpone. On anyone else it would've been very *blah*, but the fall of Darcy's copper hair over one shoulder and her curves made it less boring and more librarian chic. Never before had Elle met someone so pretty that it pissed her off.

Darcy shifted her weight from one foot to the other, hips cocking, emphasizing the crescent curve of her waist. She side-eyed the bags looped over Elle's arm, looking equal parts intrigued and distrustful. "Hello."

Elle lifted the bags. "I come bearing libations and craft supplies."

Darcy's brows rocketed to her hairline. "*Craft supplies?*"

Sliding past Darcy into the apartment, Elle bit back a grin. Score one for her for managing to knock Darcy off-kilter. "Mm-hmm. I figured we could hammer out the details of this arrangement and share some facts about ourselves."

Elle set the bags on the floor beside the coffee table. From the first bag she withdrew two notebooks, one black and the other white, and a twelve pack of gel pens. "Facts we can write down in these handy notebooks. I brought gel pens in case you want to color code anything. Because if there's one thing you should know about me—okay, there are a lot of things you should know about me. But right now, it's important to know I don't have much Virgo in my chart. I mean, there's Jupiter and it's retrograde and my seventh house is in Virgo, but that's a whole other story." And too much to unpack in one night. "However, I aspire to Virgo-level detail orientation and I do it through color-coordinated crafts. Got it?"

That was an ultrasimplification, but it was doubtful Darcy wanted details. Elle believed in astrology, believed the cosmos controlled more than met the eye and *that* was what Darcy needed to know if this was going to work, if this fake relationship of theirs would ever fool a single soul. She needed to know it, and inside it might make her roll her eyes and despair at how *silly* Elle was, but outwardly Darcy needed to not scoff at it. Even if this entire charade was pretend, Darcy needed to respect Elle's beliefs. Respect *Elle*, or no dice.

Elle held her breath as Darcy frowned thoughtfully. "Okay, got it. May I ask a question?"

"Absolutely." Elle gestured for Darcy to go on. "There's no such thing as a stupid question. There's a definite learning curve to this."

Darcy nodded. "All right. If your Jupiter is . . . in Virgo?" Elle nodded. "Where's your Uranus?"

“My Uranus is in Capri—” Elle froze. “Wow.”

Darcy’s dimples deepened as she smiled impishly. “Sorry, it was just *right there*. You probably get that a lot.”

“From frat boys and five-year-olds, not . . .” She trailed off, gesturing up and down in Darcy’s general direction with her free hand. “People like you.”

“People like me?” Darcy’s brows rose and fell. “Like me how?”

People who drank fifty-six-dollar glasses of wine and wore tight little pencil skirts and Christian Louboutin heels and worked as actuaries. Insufferable know-it-alls with cunning sensibilities and kissable little moon-shaped freckles. People with eyes like burnt caramel and full lips that looked candy-apple sweet. People who . . . who . . .

Elle waved the notebooks in the air. “I don’t know. Which is why I’m here. I figured, we’d drink a little wine, play twenty questions, jot down our notes, and get to know each other a little. Make this charade a little more believable, if not truthful. Or close enough to assuage my conscience.”

Darcy did that thing where she stared, brown eyes studying Elle from across the living room. It was only a look and yet it made Elle feel weirdly naked.

“If you think it’s silly, we can—”

“No.” Darcy shook her head and stepped closer, nudging the remaining bag with a stocking-covered toe. *Stockings. Fuck.* Elle sunk her teeth into her bottom lip. Pantyhose were the bane of her existence—if she so much as tried to put on a pair, she’d immediately get a run—but on Darcy . . . Elle tore her eyes away and feigned interest in ripping open the cardboard pen packaging. Darcy went on, “It’s not silly. No doubt Brendon will dig for details. It’s important for us to be on the same page. Good idea.”

Good idea. Between the hot librarian getup, complete with pantyhose, and the kernel of praise, Elle had a flashback to when her pretty fifth-grade teacher put gold stars on all her best work.

“You mentioned wine?” Darcy prodded when Elle remained mute, silenced by the awkward fantasy playing out inside her head. A fantasy replete with *bow chicka wow wow* seventies porn music and slo-mo swishing hair.

“Wine! Yes, wine.” Crouching on her knees, Elle set the notebooks aside so she could grab the— “Ta da! Wine.”

Nose wrinkled and lips parted in revulsion, Darcy looked at the box of Franzia rosé in Elle’s hands like it was a personal affront. “What the fuck is

that?”

“Wine,” Elle chirped. “My favorite wine. That merlot I drank the other night? Disgusting. I don’t care how fancy a wine is or about trendy cocktails; I like drinks that actually taste yummy. If it comes in frozen slushie form, even better.”

Darcy’s frown deepened as she digested that little factoid. “Must it come in a *box*?”

Said box in hand, Elle made a beeline for the kitchen. Glasses, glasses, where would Darcy keep her—bingo. Near the sink, logical. Darcy’s middle name. “All my favorite foods come in boxes. Wine. Cereal. Takeout.” Elle smushed the cardboard seal into the box and plucked out the nozzle. She filled both glasses with rosé before passing one to a circumspect Darcy. “Here’s to—”

Elle raised her glass in the air, momentum splashing wine against the back of her wrist, a dribble splattering against Darcy’s floor, a pale pink puddle forming atop the crisp white tile.

“Here’s to not spilling.” Darcy gave a deadpan stare before dropping her eyes to the puddle and arching a brow, a silent command to clean it up. She left the kitchen, shaking her head, hips and hair swaying.

Elle took a swallow of the sweet wine and sighed. “Cheers.”

* * *

Glass of rosé in hand, Elle settled in, getting comfortable on the floor in front of the coffee table. She lifted her glass, taking a generous swig, and set it down, cracking open the spine of her notebook. “All right. Let’s get to know each other, shall we?”

“Do you mind putting that on a coaster?” Darcy gestured to the stack of white Carrara marble coasters.

Elle snagged a coaster, then reached for a pen. “Fact number one—compulsive about coaster usage.”

Darcy huffed softly and took a sip of wine, ignoring the notebook on the couch cushion beside her. “I’m not compulsive.”

Elle clicked the end of her pen. “What are you then? I mean, tell me something about you. Where are you from, where’d you go to school, any pets? Greatest wish, biggest dream? How about any super sordid secrets I should know?”

Darcy swirled the wine in her glass out of habit, obviously, because even Elle knew swirling Franzia was pretty pointless even if it did look posh. “I don’t think you need to know all that if we’ve only known each other a week.”

Elle doodled a smiling flower in the margin of the paper. “What do *you* talk about on first dates? Successful ones.”

“I was born in San Francisco,” Darcy offered up, not *quite* answering her question. “But I grew up across the Bay in Marin County.”

Elle reached for the green gel pen and wrote that down. “California, huh? That must’ve been nice.”

The left corner of Darcy’s mouth quirked upward. “It was.”

Elle waited for Darcy to say something else, keep going, add an anecdote, *anything*. When she simply stared into her glass of pink wine, Elle bit back a sigh. “All right. So you were born in San Francisco and obviously you’ve got a younger brother. Any other siblings?” When Darcy simply shook her head, Elle grabbed her glass and took another swig. Coaxing details out of her was like pulling teeth. “How about the rest of your family?”

Darcy’s teeth sunk into her lower lip for a brief moment before she tipped her glass up, polishing it off in one swallow. Impressive. “We had—*have* a small family. It’s just Brendon, my mother, father, and me. My grandmother—my mother’s mom—passed away five years ago.”

Elle dropped her pen midsentence and stared at Darcy. “I’m sorry. Were you close?”

“My grandmother?” Darcy’s brows rose.

Elle nodded.

“We were.” The platinum band on Darcy’s middle finger tapped against the stem of her empty wineglass. “My, uh, my father traveled a lot, for work. My mother hated how often Dad was away, so Brendon and I spent the summers at my grandmother’s house so my mom could go with him on his business trips.” Darcy pressed her lips together. “The summer before my junior year of high school, my parents divorced. We—my mother, Brendon, and I—moved in with my grandma. I loved living there.” Darcy tucked her hair behind her ears. “And that’s probably way more than you need to know after a week of dating—*fake* dating—me.”

She could take a hint. “All right. Hometown, family, when’d you move here? *Why’d* you move here?”

“Six months ago.” Darcy spun the stem of her glass between her fingers.

An elegant move that Elle wouldn't have been able to pull off without dropping or spilling. "I moved from Philadelphia where I majored in actuarial science at Fox Business School at Temple University before working at a midsize life insurance company. As for why I moved . . ." Darcy pursed her lips and shrugged. "It was time for a change."

"Time for a change," Elle repeated. "That's not, like, code for *I committed a crime and now I'm on the lam*, is it?"

Darcy cocked one brow, lips curling. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

A shiver raced up Elle's spine at the look in Darcy's low-lidded eyes and the way her voice had gone teasing, mischievous. *Evasive*. Elle sat up straighter and smiled. "Seriously. What brought you to Seattle?"

Darcy's lips flattened, eyes darting off toward the wall of windows on the far side of the room. "There wasn't much opportunity for growth at the company I was with and . . . and I went through a breakup and unfortunately, other than my best friend, Annie, most of our friends were mutual, our friend groups intermingled, so my social life stagnated." Her throat jerked as she swallowed. "It really was time for a change." She turned, eyes narrowed slightly and chin lifted. "And that's *definitely* more than you need to know after a week of fake dating me."

A breakup. Interesting, but Elle wouldn't pry. It was none of her business. "So you packed up and moved across the country for a fresh start. That's cool. Like spring cleaning for the soul."

Darcy cracked a smile. "I moved in the spring, so that's a surprisingly accurate metaphor."

"What can I say, I'm full of surprises."

Darcy chuckled. "I'm getting that."

Elle bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning.

"How about you?" Darcy gestured to Elle with her empty wineglass.

"What about me?"

"You know. Your story. Where you're from, your family, that sort of thing?"

"Oh." Right, she'd gotten so wrapped up in learning about Darcy, who until now had been a closed book, that she'd forgotten they were both supposed to be sharing. "Um, born in Seattle on February twenty-second but I grew up in Bellevue. I've got two older siblings, Jane and Daniel. They're both married. And I've got a younger sister, too, Lydia. Jane has a three-year-old, Ryland, and she's expecting twins."

“Big family.” Darcy pulled a face and Elle couldn’t tell if it was overwhelm or wistfulness that made Darcy’s mouth twist and her eyes widen. “Are your parents still together?”

She nodded. “They’re wildly in love with each other. My dad still buys her flowers every Friday.”

Darcy smiled. “That’s sweet.”

It was, but talking about it was doing stupid, painful things to Elle’s insides. “That’s the gist of my immediate family, but I can give you a better briefing closer to Thanksgiving, okay?”

* * *

Darcy nodded and reached for her pen, black, unlike the glittery eyesore-color Elle had selected. She jotted down the basics she’d gleaned thus far. “Fair enough. Born and raised in Seattle—did you go to school here?”

Elle tugged on her ear. “I did. I went to UW. That’s where I met Margot. We roomed together freshman year and when we were unpacking, I noticed she owned a bunch of books on astrology. I’d been studying it since high school, and as soon as I got my driver’s license, I applied for a part-time job at Wishing Well Books, a metaphysical bookstore not far from where I live now. On the weekends and over the summers, when I wasn’t working the register and stocking shelves, the owner kind of took me under her wing, like an apprenticeship. Margot and I bonded over it and we started Oh My Stars the next year. We didn’t really get any traction until a couple years ago when we got a job writing the astrology column for *The Stranger*. Our following grew, one of our posts went viral, and we pretty much blew up.”

If someone had asked Darcy two weeks ago whether she was curious about what went into being a social media astrologer, she’d have unequivocally answered no. Now, after acquainting herself with Oh My Stars’s Twitter account, she’d have to say she was . . . but only from the standpoint that she didn’t like not understanding things. “And now you make memes for a living?”

Elle threw her head back and laughed. “No. I mean, kind of? It’s way more than that.”

“So what do you *do*? What’s a day in the life of Elle look like?”

Elle shrugged. “Wake up, caffeinate, check email and social media accounts. That takes an hour or two. Margot and I handle most aspects of the

business fifty-fifty, but we each have our strengths. Having majored in communications, Margot tends to handle website maintenance and our social accounts and I take on more of the readings because I have more experience there. In between appointments we do live Q and A's, and in our spare time we make content because, yeah, memes get us retweets and followers, which in turn grows our audience. But that's not where we make money. Not really."

Darcy tried not to frown. "How do you make money? If you don't mind me asking."

Elle leaned back on her elbows, reclining on the rug. "We make a tiny bit from advertisements and paid sponsorships, but only if it's a product or service we can get behind, like astro-themed apparel we'd actually wear or zodiac-inspired perfume that really smells good and aligns with your birth chart."

How a scent aligned with a person's *birth chart* was a mystery, but Darcy didn't want to interrupt.

"Our book, which is an astrological primer and guide to compatibility, is up for preorder, but most of our income comes from giving chart readings. We offer thirty-minute and hour-long phone sessions where we review a client's birth chart and break it down or, depending on how much they know, we might touch on a specific topic they want answers on, like their Saturn return. If a client's local and would rather meet in person, we have a deal with the bookstore I used to work at so we can use their back room. Occasionally I'll spend the day there and take walk-ins. We also have subscription plans where clients pay monthly or annually for shorter, check-in text sessions where they can ask any burning questions they might have about transits or retrogrades. That sort of thing."

"People actually pay for that?" Darcy winced as soon as the words were out of her mouth. "Sorry, that was rude of me. I just meant . . . isn't something like that, one and done? You have your chart read and you're set? If you believe in . . . that."

If Elle was offended, it didn't show. Her head tilted to the side, a smile playing at the edges of her lips. Darcy cast a forlorn glance at her glass, wishing it were full, even if the wine was too sweet.

"The planets aren't static and neither are we. It's good to check in with the stars and, if nothing else, it's time spent on self-reflection." Elle's toes curled in the soft pile of the rug, her hot pink toenail polish catching the light.

“As for readings as a whole, don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

Darcy set her wineglass aside.

“Have you ever worked for a company that had you fill out an MBTI questionnaire? INFJ? ENTP? Or enneagram?” Elle asked.

Only every company Darcy had ever worked for, internships included. “And?”

“Tons of people consider MBTI pseudoscience and it has known issues with validity and repeatability. But people dig it because it gives them a way to describe themselves and what they value. How they function.”

Darcy had never been one to care about those four-letter designations. Half the time, her answers changed depending on her mood, the time of day, whether she’d eaten, and how much sleep she’d gotten.

“It’s why we’re obsessed with personality quizzes. Yeah, there are think pieces about how it makes us narcissistic, but we’re not. We’re freaked out and confused. Existential angst is legit. We like to feel *seen* so we cling to meaning where we can find it even if it’s as basic as what your favorite item at the Cheesecake Factory says about you.”

Darcy laughed. “My favorite item at the Cheesecake Factory is not a reflection of some deeper facet of my personality. I don’t even *like* the Cheesecake Factory. The menu is the size of a novel and they use blue-cheese-stuffed olives in their dirty vodka martinis. Not to mention, the decor is confused. Greco-Roman meets Egyptian meets Eye of Sauron. The whole place is bullshit. I’d rather go to a Medieval Times dinner show. It might be kitsch, but at least it’s consistent.”

“Like that doesn’t speak volumes right there.” Elle tapped her pen against her teeth, smiling broadly. “What I’m saying is, we’re all just trying to understand ourselves and each other and what it all means. Why it matters. Astrology gives us a language for that. It helps us practice empathy. Which makes us less shitty.” Elle kicked a foot out, knocking Darcy’s ankle. Darcy froze at the unexpected contact. “Come on. What time were you born?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you not know your time of birth?”

“I just don’t,” she deflected. She knew *exactly* what time she was born at, but she had already told Elle more about herself than she’d planned.

Elle stared hard at Darcy’s face, and Darcy willed her eye not to— *Damn it*. She twitched. Elle threw her pen down and bear-crawled across the room. She heaved herself up onto the couch. “You’re so lying right now. You don’t

want to tell me.”

Darcy puffed out her cheeks and closed her eyes. “Eleven minutes past noon.”

Elle grabbed her phone and swiped against the screen, tapping values into text boxes, before staring at what looked like a wheel divided into wedges of varying sizes. “Hm.”

Darcy’s fingers covered hers, concealing the screen. “Stop. This is . . . strange.”

Elle’s tongue darted out, wetting her bottom lip. “I thought you didn’t believe in it.”

Darcy’s grip loosened, her fingers sweeping against the back of Elle’s hand and ghosting over the thin skin of Elle’s wrist. Darcy dropped her hands back to her lap. “I don’t.” But Elle did. “Fine. Whatever. Read my chart.”

Elle spent a moment studying Darcy’s chart. “Interesting.”

Darcy huffed. “You can’t say something’s interesting and not explain.”

Elle looked up, smirking. “What happened to not believing in it?”

“I *don’t*.” With another aggrieved sigh, Darcy pointed impatiently at Elle’s phone. “But you do. And you’re clearly passing judgments on me based on these beliefs of yours. So go on. Tell me something about myself.”

“It’s not about passing judgments. It’s about empathy, remember?” Thumb swiping down, Elle scrolled back to the top of the page. “All right. Let’s see. You’re a Capricorn sun, Pisces moon, and Taurus rising.”

None of that made a lick of sense.

“Your sun symbolizes your ego, your sense of self. Capricorn’s an earth sign. You’re realistic, reserved, probably a little circumspect. Not known for taking risks. But you’re responsible, so kudos there. Your rising, or ascendant, is the sign that was rising in the eastern horizon at the time of your birth. It often dictates people’s first impression of you, more so even than your sun sign. Taurus means you might be stubborn and resistant to change, but you’re probably loyal and dependable. Also, you likely crave stability and creature comforts like quality clothing and good food. Considering those placements together, no wonder you’re a skeptic,” Elle ribbed her gently.

Darcy rolled her eyes.

“Now, this Pisces moon is interesting. Your moon represents your inner self; it’s representative of how you deal with and express your emotions. You’re imaginative, compassionate, and occasionally value an escape from reality.”

Darcy scratched the side of her neck, refusing to so much as glance at the television where she had two days' worth of soaps recorded.

Elle licked her lips. "You've got a Capricorn stellium, meaning you've got four or more planets in that sign. Big Capricorn Energy, basically. I won't bore you with them all, but you've got Venus in Capricorn meaning you're likely cautious when it comes to love and value goal-oriented partners. You take love seriously, you understand it takes commitment and devotion to make a relationship last. You yearn for the right person to share your life with."

Darcy scoffed, shaking her head. She gathered her hair off her neck and tossed it over her left shoulder. God, she was about to burst into flames she was so hot.

"Your Mercury is in Aquarius, so you might value intellectual debates and even contradicting the opinions of others for kicks."

"Now you're just trying to give me shit."

Elle leaned in, shoving her phone in Darcy's face. "It's all right here. Written in the stars. I'm merely an interpreter."

"Well, are you finished interpreting?"

Elle gave an exaggerated eye roll and stretched across the gap between the couch and the coffee table to set her phone aside. Precariously balanced on her knees, straightening made her sway. The couch cushion dipped and sank under their combined weights, forcing them even closer together, so close Elle was practically in Darcy's lap. She must've realized it at the same time as Darcy because her eyes widened, gaze dropping suddenly to where her hand gripped Darcy's thigh for balance. Darcy's skirt had bunched, riding high and exposing the thick lace band of her stockings. Elle's cheeks pinked and her breath caught, fingers twitching. An inch higher and it would be her skin Elle touched instead of nylon.

Elle lifted her head, catching Darcy staring.

Around them, the air crackled, Darcy's whole body tingling from her scalp to her soles. She shivered as Elle leaned a little closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating off her, her wine-sweet breath warm as it puffed against Darcy's face. *Too close*. Darcy wasn't supposed to be getting close to anyone.

Darcy stood quickly, wobbling briefly before steadying herself on the edge of the couch. "Do you want more wine?" Without waiting for Elle's answer, she strode off in the direction of the kitchen, both their glasses in

hand.

Darcy rested her forehead against the stainless-steel door of her fridge and breathed deep. Get a grip. Clearly there was chemistry at play, but as satisfying as giving in would be in the moment, the consequences would be catastrophic. Elle was looking for love and Darcy wasn't. End of story.

After filling both glasses from the black plastic pour spout on the atrocious box of wine, Darcy took a healthy swallow from hers and returned to the living room, uncertain of whether she'd have to let Elle down gently.

"Enough about astrology," Elle said, taking her glass from Darcy with a smile. "We should probably talk about selling this."

The tension between Darcy's shoulders subsided. They were on the same page then. "More than we have already?"

Elle made a soft noise in the back of her throat. "I mean, the logistics of it all."

Darcy liked logistics. Logistics were safe. They could talk about that. "Okay."

"We've got our double date on Saturday. Then Thanksgiving at my parents' and Brendon's Christmas party. Is that it?"

Is that it? As if it weren't already too much. "Unless Brendon springs something else on us, which is entirely in the realm of possibility." Darcy paused. "That's only one event of yours. Not exactly equitable."

Elle laughed under her breath. "You haven't met my family. But Thanksgiving is an all-day thing anyway, it's like a two-for-one. No worries."

Yes, worries. "If you say so."

Elle pulled a loose thread on the bottom of her sweater. "In terms of *selling it* . . . what exactly are you comfortable with?"

"Comfortable with?"

"You know." Elle huffed. "There's more to making everyone think we're dating than knowing each other's middle names and where we went to school." Her tongue darted out, wetting her bottom lip. "Like, being comfortable with a certain degree of . . . familiarity. Hand holding, touching —"

"Fine." Darcy clutched her wine, thigh burning with the ghost of Elle's touch. "That's . . . fine."

Elle's forehead wrinkled. "Fine? You're good with—"

"Anything." A dizzying wave of heat crashed over her as her mind caught

up to her mouth. It had been how long exactly since she'd gotten laid? Too long apparently. Darcy coughed. "Whatever it takes to sell it."

"Okay." Elle worried the corner of her bottom lip for a moment before gathering up the gel pens scattered across the coffee table. "Well. That's all I had. Unless there was something you wanted to add?"

Right. There was something. She'd made a mental list. If she could just remember, stop getting distracted by— "Actually yes. I was thinking it would be a good idea if we set a termination date."

Elle straightened from where she'd been hunched over the bags of craft supplies. "Sorry, a what?"

Darcy tugged at the hem of her skirt before primly crossing her legs at the ankles, knees slanted to the side. "A termination date, the day on which a contract ends and a deal expires. We should set one."

Elle nodded. "When were you thinking?"

Darcy grabbed her phone off the table and several swipes later, she presented Elle with a screen showing her calendar. Her phone shook faintly in her hand, hopefully not enough for Elle to notice. "Today's November fifth. Why don't we keep it simple? December thirty-first?"

Elle resembled a bobblehead, nodding briskly and for too long. "Sure."

"I know neither of us asked for this," Darcy added. "I'm sure we'll both be glad when we don't have to keep pretending."

God knew she would. This was all more involved than she'd anticipated. Getting to know Elle, being in close proximity with her. It was too much, made it hard for her to think, made her want things she had no business craving with Elle.

The new year couldn't come soon enough.

Chapter Seven

ELLE (7:15 P.M.): about this double date

ELLE (7:15 P.M.): your sister forgot to ask what we're doing

ELLE (7:16 P.M.): so what's the 411?

BRENDON (7:20 P.M.): You know the Seattle Underground? Entrance is in Pioneer Square?

ELLE (7:22 P.M.): i know of it yeah

BRENDON (7:24 P.M.): There's an escape room. I thought it'd be fun. Race against time, you know?

BRENDON (7:25 P.M.): Then drinks? Trivia and drinks? Thoughts?

ELLE (7:27 P.M.): an escape room?!?

ELLE (7:27 P.M.): ive always wanted to do one!

ELLE (7:28 P.M.): and yes to trivia and drinks

BRENDON (7:30 P.M.): Sweet!

BRENDON (7:32 P.M.): Btw! Contracts are moving along on HR's end. You should have a final draft in your inbox early next week.

ELLE (7:33 P.M.): 😊 yesssss

ELLE (7:34 P.M.): cant wait!

ELLE (7:35 P.M.): and thats perfect timing because mercury wont be retrograde yet

ELLE (7:35 P.M.): and youre not supposed to sign contracts during retrograde

BRENDON (7:36 P.M.): See, even the universe is jizzed about us working together.

BRENDON (7:37 P.M.): FML. Jizzed. Sorry. 😞

ELLE (7:38 P.M.): 🙄

* * *

“Be honest. How do I look?” Elle gave a twirl, the hem of her dress flouncing against her thighs as she spun, ending with a spirited flourish of her fingers.

On the couch, legs tucked beneath her, Margot cocked her head, expression inscrutable. “Honest, you said?”

Elle dropped her arms and sighed. “You don’t like it.”

Margot sucked her lips between her teeth. “It’s not that I don’t like it, I do. You look like a punk rock Rainbow Brite.”

Huh. Margot’s comparison wasn’t off the mark. She’d paired her favorite

navy dress from ModCloth, the one with the rainbow unicorn print, with the black rainbow patent Doc Martens she'd snagged on sale at Buffalo Exchange. Shoes that would hopefully be perfect for traipsing around in Seattle's Underground. But, without a doubt, the most critical part of her outfit wasn't the shoes, but instead was her comfortable undies. She was ready for whatever the universe hurled her way, including but not limited to chafing calamities.

Thirty minutes after waving good-bye to Margot, who again assured Elle she looked fine, she stepped inside the heated interior of the Underground's tour office and spotted Darcy's red hair over by the will call window. Right on time.

"Boo." Elle poked Darcy in the side before leaning against the ticket counter.

Darcy's throat jerked, her eyes dipping to take Elle in from head to toe. "Wow."

Elle's knees went weak so she decided to work with her body's reaction rather than against it. Dipping at the knee, she gave a mock-curtsy, tugging at one side of the hem of her dress. "I'm choosing to interpret that as a compliment, Buttercup."

Darcy wrinkled her nose. "*Buttercup?*"

"Baby? Sweetheart? My moon and stars?" The amount of pleasure Elle took in Darcy's deepening look of disgust was second to none. "We forgot to think up pet names."

"Let's not." Darcy thanked the attendant when they slid a stack of tickets beneath the plexiglass divider. "We're trying to sell it to my brother, not make him think I've had a personality transplant."

"Where *is* Brendon?" Elle craned her neck, searching the crowd for Brendon's tall frame and mop of auburn hair.

"Searching for his date." Darcy gestured to an empty bench against the wall beside the posted sign that said TOURS START HERE. "She thought we were meeting at the bar first."

Elle followed as Darcy led the way across the room and tried not to stare. Darcy wore dark, high-waisted, figure-hugging jeans tucked into a pair of brown riding boots that made their height difference a little less disparate, and her green sweater brought out the honey-colored flecks in her eyes. Not that Elle cared about Darcy's eyes or that the color she wore complemented them. It was a passing observation, that was all. The sky was blue. The grass

was green. Darcy was beautiful. Universally acknowledged truths.

Darcy's butt barely touched the bench before she stood back up. "There they are." She pointed across the room to the doubled-doored entrance before quickly spinning back around to face Elle. The corners of her mouth puckered, her nostrils flaring delicately. "Okay, here's the plan. If Brendon starts digging for details, let me do the talking."

"That's a terrible plan, baby."

"It's a *great* plan, and don't call me baby."

"I'm not going mute to make you happy. *I'll* look like the one who's had a personality transplant. Besides, we have a game plan. We discussed it. You don't get to pick the game *and* make all the rules, Darcy."

Elle had agreed to fake a relationship, but she refused to be anyone other than exactly who she was, not for her family, not for the people they set her up with, and definitely not for Darcy. If the idea of being coupled up with her was so objectionable that a few pet names got Darcy huffy, she should've thought twice before fibbing to her brother.

Darcy shot a quick glance over her shoulder and frowned. "Fine. Try not to oversell it and don't offer up information unless Brendon asks."

Before Elle could respond, Brendon spotted them through the crowd, waving and making his way over with a leggy brunette who was rocking the hell out of a pair of four-inch candy-apple red stilettos. Drool-worthy, but not exactly the right attire for heading underground.

"Hey, glad you could make it." Brendon wrapped Darcy in a bear hug before giving Elle a quick, enthusiastic squeeze. "Guys, this is Cherry. Cherry, this is my sister, Darcy, and her girlfriend, Elle."

Girlfriend, huh? Elle glanced at Darcy. She looked like she was about to argue but thought better of it, instead reaching out and resting a slightly stiff hand against the small of Elle's back. Elle leaned into the touch and aimed a dazzling smile up at Darcy. That wasn't so hard, was it?

"It's nice to meet you." Cherry nodded, slipping her fingers around Brendon's elbow. "Cute dress."

"Thanks." Elle tugged at the skirt. "It has pockets."

A man with a thick handlebar mustache approached. "Lowell party of four for the escape room?"

Brendon stepped forward and patted his pockets. "Yeah, I've got the tickets—wait."

"I have them. You asked me to pick them up from will call, remember?"

Darcy passed them to the man whose nametag read *Jim*. He gave the stack a cursory glance before tucking them away inside the inner pocket of his blazer. “Follow me and mind the stairs.” He sighed heavily, mustache twitching when he caught sight of Cherry’s heels. “Terrain gets a touch uneven.”

Down a rickety set of wooden stairs, the man led them into a hall, lit by several flickering incandescent bulbs. The air was cool and damp and a little musty, earthy even. Moss—or maybe that was mildew—grew on the gray brick walls, concentrated around the grout lines. Somewhere, a pipe was leaking, the steady *drip, drip* lending to the overall vibe of abandoned decay.

“Ever been to the Underground before?” Jim asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

“Quick bit of history before I give you the backstory for your one-of-a-kind escape room experience. In 1889, thirty-one blocks were destroyed in the Great Seattle Fire. The buildings were rebuilt and the streets were regraded a couple stories higher than what was previously street level, a strategic decision to prevent flooding from Elliott Bay.”

Jim gestured around them to where the hall branched to the left and right. “Seattle Underground, as we now know it, is a network of passageways that existed at ground level prior to the regrade. For a time, pedestrians and business owners continued to use these underground sidewalks, but that all changed in 1907 when the city condemned the Underground out of fear of the bubonic plague. As a result, portions of the Underground were left to deteriorate. Opium dens, speakeasies, gambling halls, brothels, and doss houses cropped up, operating in the literal shadows of society, right beneath everyone’s feet.”

If the walls down here could talk, she could only imagine the sorts of seedy, scary stories they’d tell.

“Which brings us to your escape room.” Jim set off down the hall to the left at a quick clip, waving for them to follow. When Cherry stumbled on a loose cobblestone, Darcy rolled her eyes.

“Is there a theme? Or are we just trapped in the Underground trying to escape?” Elle asked.

Jim smoothed his mustache with a finger. “Is there a theme? she asks.” He stopped in front of a nondescript door, wooden and without windows or special markings. “The year is 1908. Each of you were unfortunate enough to lose family during the reconstruction that followed the Great Fire, prompting

you to seek closure by communing with your loved ones via a séance.”

Ever the skeptic, Darcy snorted.

Elle couldn't pass up the opportunity to tease. “Psst. Your Capricorn is showing.”

“Shh.” Darcy's cheeks turned pink in the dim, flickering light of the Underground. “That doesn't even make sense.”

“You're cute when you blush,” Elle blurted.

Brendon grinned, looking awfully smug as he rocked back on his heels. Darcy simply stared, blush deepening to the point where her freckles disappeared.

The room was cool and drafty but still, Elle's whole body flushed at her failed brain-to-mouth filter.

Jim continued his spiel, “You were referred to a spiritualist by the name of Madame LeFeaux who operates out of one of the illustrious gambling halls in Seattle's Underground. Under the cover of dark, you convene. Madame LeFeaux begins to conduct the séance, and a foreboding chill settles over the already cool space, an impossible breeze blowing through the enclosed room extinguishing the lights. Someone shrieks.” Jim's pale blue eyes bounced between the three women. Elle narrowed her eyes at the assumption.

“Me.” Brendon pointed at his chest. “I'd totally scream.”

Darcy smiled fondly at her brother.

“Out of nowhere, the lights return. You blink, eyes readjusting, and note that Madame LeFeaux is missing.”

“Perhaps because she was a con artist,” Darcy muttered. *Such* a skeptic.

“You're trapped inside the séance room and the spirits Madame LeFeaux called upon are angry to have been disturbed. You'll have one hour to find the key that opens the door—the *proper* door—that will lead you out of the Underground and to safety. But be careful—there are other doors. Choose wisely, or you won't reach the street, but instead one of the dangerous, illegally run gambling halls. And if you don't escape within an hour?” Jim arched a bushy white brow and let the question hang for a moment, building the suspense. He turned the knob on the door and ushered them inside. “You'll be at the mercy of the spirits who grow stronger by the second.”

Inside the simple, stone-walled room was a large round table covered in a floor-length tablecloth. A crystal ball sat atop its surface. Several chairs were overturned, further setting the scene. Against one of the walls rested a mirror, sturdy and with an ornately carved wood frame.

“Remember.” Jim paused dramatically. This was so campy it hurt. Elle *loved* it. “Whether you’re a skeptic or a believer, there’s more than smoke and mirrors at play. Good luck, and your time starts . . . now.”

Jim shut the door, locking them inside.

For a moment, they were silent, soaking in their surroundings. The room was austere, all stone and hard surfaces, and yet, starting was a little overwhelming. Especially with the giant red timer mounted to the wall, counting down the seconds, reminding them what was at stake even if it wasn’t *real*.

“So.” Brendon rocked back on his heels, neck craning to survey the ceiling. “Anyone have any idea where to start?”

Darcy pointed at the table where the crystal ball sat on a three-legged pewter stand. “There.”

Not a bad idea.

There was nothing special about the crystal ball, nothing Elle could see at least. Nothing other than the fact that it wasn’t perfectly smooth, was more of a nonagon than a sphere, and its stand was glued to the tablecloth. The tablecloth was unadorned and glued to the center of the table, too. Lifting its edges revealed nothing but a smooth, wooden surface. Huffing softly, Elle dropped to her knees.

“What are you doing?” Darcy demanded, stepping closer.

“Call it a hunch.” Elle peeked up at Darcy from beneath her lashes.

“I think Elle has the right idea. You two go low, and Cherry and I’ll search high, yeah?”

Darcy set her purse on the floor beside the door before dropping to her knees beside Elle. She lowered her voice, “What was that about?”

“What was *what* about?”

“I look cute when I blush?” Darcy narrowed her eyes.

“Well, it’s the truth,” Elle admitted, sweeping the floor with her hands.

Darcy scoffed dismissively, effectively brushing aside Elle’s compliment and making her feel like a complete and total fool for bothering to be nice.

“I know it’s *such* a hardship, but at least try to pretend you like me. That’s the whole point, isn’t it?”

Elle ducked her head beneath the tablecloth, squinting into the dusty darkness. She sneezed twice back to back and sniffled. Smitten, her ass. If Darcy didn’t step it up, Brendon was sure to catch on and that was the *last* thing Elle needed. Maybe this hadn’t been her idea, but she’d committed. If

this thing fell apart? Brendon would think her a total liar. *Not* the best way to begin a business partnership.

Using her hands as eyes, Elle felt along the legs of the table, searching for something that stood out, something *different*, anything that could be a clue. On the other side of the table, she could hear Darcy shuffling around, but she couldn't see her, couldn't see anything.

"It's not," Darcy whispered.

"It's not what?" Her nose tingled as she staved off another sneeze.

"A hardship. Liking you . . . pretending . . . this—" Darcy sighed heavily. "You took me by surprise, okay?"

Suddenly there was a hand on the bare skin of Elle's thigh where the hem of her skirt met her leg. Elle's breath caught and a sharp gasp escaped Darcy's lips, no doubt realizing what she was touching, *where* she was touching. Only, Darcy didn't immediately move her hand. Instead her fingers twitched and Elle heard her swallow in the darkness, her breath quickening. Elle held so still she nearly shook as Darcy's touch lingered, frozen, before Darcy finally yanked her hand away as if she'd been burned. If the rest of Elle's body was as scorching as her face, it was no wonder.

Surprise was right. If it hadn't been for Darcy's muttered, "Fuck," Elle might've wondered if she'd imagined the whole thing.

"Hey, keep it PG under there," Brendon joked, making Darcy groan.

Elle shook off the shock and snickered, though her pulse still raced, her skin tingling where Darcy had touched. "Nothing about me is PG, Brendon."

Brendon laughed. "Not trying to ruin the mood, but we're down to fifty minutes."

Elle changed trajectory, tracing her fingers along the bottom of the table above her head. Her thumb raked over a rough notch, an inconsistency in the wood.

"I found something." Elle scrambled out from under the table and blinked, eyesight adjusting. She whipped back the tablecloth as a neon-red-faced Darcy straightened, brushing invisible dust from her knees. Their eyes met and Darcy's lips turned up at the corners, making Elle's pulse leap.

Pressing that lever had ejected a secret compartment from the side of the table. Nestled inside was a ring of skeleton keys and beside them, an old deck of cards, weathered with fraying edges. Not just any deck of cards. A deck of *tarot* cards.

Brendon pumped a fist in the air. "Hell yes. We're rocking this."

Ever the realist, Darcy's gaze locked on the timer. "What now?"

"We could try the keys?" Cherry suggested.

Brendon shook his head, grimacing softly. "We don't know which door is right."

And there were half a dozen keys, each marked with a different number. *Eight, twenty-six, thirty-four, forty-two, fifty-five, ninety.*

Elle flipped through the deck. There was nothing special about it. All the Major and Minor Arcana were present.

"Um, I think I found something."

Across the room, Cherry had lifted a corner of the rug with the toe of her pump, revealing a series of symbols written on the stone floor in ominous red paint.

Brendon cocked his head. "Are those hieroglyphs?"

Elle bounced on her toes. It was like she was in *Indiana Jones*, or better yet, *The Mummy*. This was *too* cool.

"Okay, so we've got a code to crack." Darcy set her hands on her hips, a furrow forming between her brows as her gaze darted between the hieroglyphs and the timer.

Cherry stuck her hand in her purse and pulled out her phone. "Can't we google it?"

"No!" Darcy and Brendon shouted in tandem.

Darcy glared. "That's cheating. We're going to win this and we're going to do it fair and square."

Brendon nodded. "There's got to be a codex somewhere. Do you see any of these symbols on those cards?"

A *codex*. Elle covered her mouth, concealing her smile. Brendon and Darcy took this shit seriously and Elle loved that they did. An image of Darcy with a wide-brimmed, high-crowned fedora, a leather jacket, and a whip flitted through Elle's head.

"Elle?" Brendon stared at her expectantly.

What? Oh. *Right*. Elle shuffled through the deck. No dice. "Nope."

Darcy cracked her knuckles. "Check every surface. We're down to forty-five minutes."

Twenty minutes later, every chair had been overturned, the tablecloth examined, and the rug lifted and flipped. Darcy ran her fingers through her hair, tugging at the roots. "God. This is bullshit."

Claiming her feet hurt, Cherry had taken a seat on the floor, checking out

of the game and engrossing herself in her phone.

Brendon shot his date a look full of exasperation and scraped a palm over his jaw. “There’s got to be something we’re missing. Something obvious.”

He was right. The clue had to be staring them dead in the face. Mocking them for missing it. Twenty-four minutes remained. Elle refused to lose hope.

“Come on, guys, we can do this. Let’s take a closer look at these glyphs.” Elle dropped to her knees, wincing as the stone floor bit into her bare skin. Sighing, Darcy stood beside her, the soft, lived-in denim of her jeans brushing against Elle’s arm, making Elle shiver. Elle swallowed hard and stared down at the floor.

The first symbol was a five-pointed star. Then there was a pharaoh? Lying on its side. Dead? A mummy? Elle bit back a sigh. Next was a crescent. The moon? And after that was—

“Oh. Oh!” Scrambling to stand, Elle rushed over to the table and swiped the tarot cards, quickly flipping through the deck.

Hot on her heels, Darcy asked, “What is it? Did you find something?”

It was so obvious it hurt. “The cards are the codex, after all. The symbols themselves aren’t on the cards, but they represent some of the Major Arcana.”

Darcy blinked. “What does that mean?”

Elle splayed the cards out on the table so that Darcy, and Brendon who’d joined them, could look over her shoulder. “That first symbol on the floor is a star.” Elle pushed the cards around until she found the Star card, separating it from the rest. “Next is a mummy.” She rifled around until she found Death. “There’s a moon. And a set of scales.” Scales . . . scales . . . “Temperance!” She frowned at the last symbol. “I have no freaking idea what that wheelie thing’s supposed to be.”

Brendon’s eyes narrowed before he shuffled the cards out, clearly looking for something. “A cart of some sort?”

Brendon was brilliant. Elle crowed and slapped a card down on the table. “The Chariot.”

Darcy’s face lit up. “This is . . . great job, Elle.”

Elle bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling stupidly.

Across the room, Cherry coughed. “Hey, guys? There’s something happening.”

Something was right. Smoky fog, the kind from dry ice, drifted into the room from beneath the doors. *Uh-oh.*

“Heads in the game, guys.” Darcy snapped her fingers. “What are we supposed to do with the cards?”

She was right. There had to be something about the cards, something Elle was— *Wait*. “These numbers are wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Darcy crowded closer to Elle, so close the delicate scent of her shampoo tickled Elle’s nose. Rosemary and lavender, earthy and sweet. Elle wanted to bury her face in Darcy’s hair and breathe deep.

Elle bit down on the inside of her cheek. The air down here was getting to her. “The Major Arcana all have a numerological association. The Star is seventeen.” She flicked the top of the card. “This has a five written on it.”

Brendon read off the other numbers in the sequence corresponding to the glyphs on the ground. “Eight, thirteen . . . hey, Darce, you’re good with numbers maybe you should—”

“Gimme.” Darcy snagged the cards from Brendon. Several seconds later, Darcy laughed. “Twenty-one, thirty-four.” She tossed the cards back on the table and crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s the Fibonacci sequence. Next comes fifty-five.”

Elle could’ve totally kissed her, aside from the obvious reasons why that was a bad idea. Though they were supposed to be selling it . . . no. Bad, Elle. “You’re brilliant.”

Darcy smirked and *shit*. Elle changed her mind. Being bad sounded like the best idea she’d ever had.

Brendon held up the brass skeleton key etched with the number *fifty-five*. “Can I just pause and say teamwork makes the dream work?”

Darcy hiked a thumb over her shoulder at the door marked *fifty-five*. “You want to get this show on the road and win this thing?”

“Please,” Cherry groaned. “I’m dying for a drink.”

The whole group, save Elle, migrated toward the door. Something didn’t *feel* right. It was too easy.

“Wait.” Three sets of eyes landed on her, expressions expectant. Elle tugged on the lobe of her ear. “I don’t think that’s the right door.”

Darcy set her hands on her hips. “It’s got the number fifty-five on it and it matches the key. I’m not wrong about the Fibonacci sequence.”

Elle wasn’t suggesting she was wrong. Not about that. “I think that’s the right key, but we never solved a clue for the door.”

“We don’t need to.” Darcy shook her head, eyes narrowing. “It matches the key.”

Elle chewed on the inside of her cheek. Her gut niggled. “I don’t know. It makes too much sense.”

Darcy looked at Elle like she’d lost her mind. “How can something make too much sense?”

Brendon lowered his arm, holding the key at his side.

Elle didn’t know how to put into words her intuition, this sense of something being off. “It doesn’t *feel* right.”

Darcy’s brow pinched, her jaw setting.

Elle stared, willing Darcy to understand with every fiber of her being. “Trust me.”

She was asking a lot, she knew, asking Darcy not only to trust her, but her nebulous, indescribable intuition. Nothing solid, nothing *real*, not in the *seeing is believing* sense.

Darcy glanced at the clock. “All right. Go with your gut, Elle. Just *hurry*.”

Four minutes was how long she had to figure out what about that door didn’t feel right. Heart racing, Elle rushed back to the table, double-checking for something, anything, a sign that her gut wasn’t leading her—and the rest of the group—astray.

Nothing. There was nothing she hadn’t touched, turned over. The fog thickened around their feet, rising to their knees. Elle turned, facing the mirror, catching a glimpse of Darcy’s tight-lipped reflection. Elle’s stomach twisted.

Above her head, the clock counted down from two minutes.

Fuck. She couldn’t see anything on the floor, her vision tunneling. Not to mention, the smoke was too thick, practically opaque, and the—

Smoke.

What had Jim said? Elle tugged on her earring. She’d been so excited to get started that she’d stopped paying attention. “Jim said something. Before he locked the door. Something about smoke and mirrors.”

Face slackening, Darcy’s lips parted. “The mirror. Go to the mirror.”

They both made it there at the same time, right as the clock hit seconds.

“What do we do?” Darcy ran her fingers along the mirror’s edge.

“Do *something*,” Brendon urged.

Elle swallowed down her nerves and gripped the edge of the mirror. This couldn’t just be a prop, it *couldn’t*. Wait. *Prop*. Propped against the wall, *angled* against the wall . . .

It was a long shot. “Let’s try tilting it.”

Forty-five seconds.

Together, she and Darcy hauled the mirror forward to where a barely perceptible chalk line was drawn far enough away from the wall for them to angle it back, careful not to drop it. At sixty degrees, the reflection of the overhead light bounced off the stationary crystal ball and pinged across the room, a beam of light landing on the second door, the one *not* marked with the number fifty-five.

“Holy shit.” Brendon laughed and jogged over to the lit door, key held out in front of him like a baton. He slipped it inside the lock, turned the knob, and threw the door open. Confetti and a dozen brightly colored balloons rained down over their heads as the buzzer squawked.

They did it.

They won.

Mirth bubbled up inside Elle like an overflowing champagne fountain, laughter spilling from her lips.

Darcy plucked a blue balloon out of the air and spiked it at Brendon, shrieking when he caught it and rubbed it across her head, static making her strands stick up wildly, confetti catching in her curls.

Through the rising fog and falling confetti, Darcy caught Elle’s eye and beamed.

* * *

“To Elle!” Brendon hoisted his beer in the air. “For going with her gut.”

Darcy clinked her glass of wine against her brother’s bottle and nodded, smile small and conciliatory. But that was fine. There were still bright gold flecks of confetti stuck in her mussed hair. It was the closest Elle had ever seen Darcy to being a *mess*, and she liked it. A little too much. “To Elle.”

Elle laughed and lifted her candy cane cocktail, complete with peppermint stick garnish, acquiescing to the praise. She sipped through the straw, face scrunching at the shock of rum. Surprisingly strong for being half-priced on trivia night.

That same gut feeling that had driven her to search harder urged her to lift her head. Across the table, Darcy was staring, bottom lip trapped between her front teeth.

Elle chewed on her swizzle stick straw, failing epically when she tried not

to smile.

Feedback from the bar's audio system filled the room, rowdy gripes following. At the front of the room near the bar, a man with a full ginger beard and a shiny bald head gave a rueful wince before tapping the mic. "Sorry 'bout that folks. Who's ready for some trivia?"

"Cherry's been outside for a while," Darcy pointed out. "Doesn't take that long to smoke a cigarette. Vape. Whatever." Darcy waved her hand.

Brendon grimaced, one hand reaching back to grip his neck. "Yeah. She texted me. Apparently, she ran into a friend and . . . she's not feeling it, I guess."

Darcy's eyes flashed, jaw dropping. "She *left*. Without saying good-bye?"

Blink and miss it, Darcy glanced across the table, the nostrils of her pert nose flaring.

Elle stiffened. Was that meant to be a comparison, a dig at how Elle had dipped during their date while Darcy was in the bathroom? Because if so, it was apples and oranges. Unfair because the situations couldn't have been more different. Brendon was sweet and thoughtful and fun. Darcy had been rigid and skeptical and downright rude.

And it hadn't been a matter of *not feeling it* when Elle had left, bladder screaming, ego battered, and hopes crushed. She'd felt it, that spark, but Darcy had done everything in her power to douse it. Sparks hadn't mattered, not when Darcy's beliefs, or lack thereof, made them incompatible. You could bring a horse to water, but you couldn't make it drink.

Oblivious to the thread of tension connecting her and Darcy, Brendon shrugged affably, lips quirking. "Wasn't meant to be."

He was a better sport about it than she'd been, that was for sure.

"Onward and upward." Elle gave him a nod. "If she couldn't see how awesome you are, she didn't deserve to revel in your awesomeness."

Brendon laughed and Darcy shot Elle a curious glance, one Elle couldn't quite parse. Darcy patted her brother on the arm. "You'll, um, you'll find her. Your . . . *person*."

Lips pinched together, Brendon met Elle's eyes. They burst out laughing.

Darcy shifted on her barstool, arms crossing over her chest.

Brendon threw an arm around Darcy's shoulders. "Thanks, Darce." He pressed a quick kiss to the crown of her head. "Got to say, I'm starting to think my person is something of a unicorn."

"Ooh, now that could be a problem," Elle joked. "Unicorns are only

attracted to virgins.” She wagged her brows and reached for her drink.

Darcy did a poor job of muffling her laughter with a cough. “Now that would be ironic.”

“Darcy,” he warned, face flushing. “Don’t you dare.”

She waved him off. “It’s not embarrassing.”

“It’s *humiliating*,” Brendon grumbled over the lip of his bottle. “And I told you that in confidence. *Drunken* confidence.”

Darcy turned, focusing on Elle. “Brendon didn’t lose his virginity until he was twenty because he was saving himself for my best friend, Annie, who he had the *biggest* crush on for practically his entire childhood. For years, he was convinced that they were destined to be together.” When Brendon’s head thudded against the table, Darcy snickered. “That’s what you get for telling her I was smitten.”

Brendon lifted his head and glared. “You’re making me sound pathetic. Besmirching my good name.”

“Good name?” Elle teased.

Brendon gasped. “*Elle*. I thought we were friends.” He shook his head. “I see how it is. You’ve picked a side. My own sister turning my friends against me.”

“Oh please. Besides, Annie thought you were cute.” Darcy pinched his cheek before smacking him lightly.

“You’re cruel, Darce. After everything I’ve done for you”—he gestured to Elle—“and *this* is how to repay me? By mocking me?”

Another burst of feedback filtered over the speakers followed by the first question.

Between Elle’s knowledge of the physical sciences, Brendon’s knowledge of the tech industry, their shared knowledge of pop culture, and Darcy’s knowledge of everything from seventeenth-century painters to fashion designers to baseball, they answered nearly every question correctly, tying them for the lead with two other teams.

Elle had reached the fun stage of tipsiness where the lights in the bar were bright and the tip of her nose was numb, when the emcee cleared his throat to ask the final question.

Elle sucked the dregs of her cocktail through the straw as Darcy gripped the pencil in her hand, teeth sunk into her bottom lip.

“The 1999 Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series went to Susan Lucci for playing what character on the ABC daytime drama *All My*

Children?”

Several things happened in quick succession.

The bar fell silent, save for several exasperated groans filtering through the crowd.

Standing so fast he knocked his chair over, Brendon dropped to one knee and pointed at Darcy.

All eyes in the bar on her, Darcy froze. “Get up,” she hissed. A pink, mottled flush crept up her neck.

Brendon tilted his head, gaze narrowing. “Darcy.”

She shut her eyes, mumbled something beneath her breath, then scribbled something on the paper before flinging it at Brendon, their designated runner who flailed his way to the front of the bar, panting as he reached the bewildered emcee.

They were the only team to submit an answer, the question stumping everyone.

Everyone except Darcy, who stared down at the table, lips pinched and face red, wringing her hands together anxiously atop the table.

The emcee shook his head and brought the microphone to his mouth. “Erica Kane was correct. Table three for the win!”

It took a split second for Elle to realize the exultant scream was coming from her own mouth. Darcy Lowell, gorgeous tight-ass with a head for numbers and no room for Elle’s frivolity, watched *soap operas*?

Elle’s feet moved disconnected from her brain. Before she knew it, she had rounded the table and was throwing her arms around Darcy’s neck, wrapping her up in an eager hug that pressed their bodies together.

Darcy tensed in Elle’s arms, body rigid as a board. Elle held her breath and was primed to let go, when Darcy *finally* returned Elle’s embrace. For all that her wit was cutting, her tongue barbed, and her jaw a pretty knife’s-edge cliff, hugging Darcy was anything but sharp. From the lavender-scented silk of her hair against Elle’s cheek to the swell of her breasts pressed against Elle, Darcy’s hug was all softness and the last thing Elle wanted was to let go.

Houston, she had a problem.

Chapter Eight

Don't think about it became Darcy's mantra as she followed her brother out of the pub and onto the sidewalk, Elle floating along at her side. Every other step, Elle would sway into Darcy, arms bumping, the backs of their hands, their fingers, brushing.

Don't think about it.

It could've gone worse, this double date. Sure, Elle had delighted in watching Darcy squirm with each pet name uttered, but there'd been no giant blowup. No fights or spilled wine or ruined silk dresses or sudden disappearances that made Darcy's chest ache. They'd managed to set aside their differences, their distinctly different ways of looking at the world, in order to come together and solve the puzzle, winning the escape room. Brendon was right. Teamwork really had made the dream work even if she had, at first, been reluctant to trust something as imprecise as Elle's *gut*.

They'd escaped the room, won trivia, and as far as Darcy could tell, Brendon was none the wiser that this thing with Elle was all an act. All in all, the night had been a success.

Save for the part where Elle's bright, twinkling laughter made Darcy dizzy. Or how the look of unadulterated joy on Elle's face when those balloons and that annoying confetti had rained down on them made Darcy feel like someone had punched her in the gut, then chopped her off at the knees.

But she wasn't thinking about that. No. She wasn't going to think about how smooth Elle's skin, her thigh, had felt beneath that table, how she'd wanted to stay hidden by the tablecloth. She wasn't going to think about how Elle's breath had tickled her neck during that hug or how Elle's lip had brushed her jaw as she lowered back down from where she'd risen up on her

tippy-toes and flung her arms around Darcy's neck.

No, Darcy wasn't going to give oxygen to that . . . that *spark*. If she breathed life into it, it would grow and that—

Darcy curled her toes inside her boots, nails biting into the palms of her hands. She *definitely* wasn't going to think about what might transpire if she let that happen because it was pointless. Elle was technicolor chaos and the feelings she inspired in Darcy were a hazard straight out of Pandora's box. Treacherous and *confusing* and better kept under lock and key. Darcy didn't need disorder in her life.

Elle stopped walking and jerked her chin to the right. "Hey, so, I'm this way."

She opened her mouth to say good night, when Brendon frowned and shook his head. "Where's your place?"

Elle shoved her hands in the pockets of her crazy dress, the navy color complementing her skin—the rest of her, too—perfectly. She practically glowed. "It's just up Second to Union till it turns to Pike and then up to Belmont." A breeze blew past, ruffling Elle's bangs and making her shiver. "Not far."

Darcy hadn't lived in the city for long, but she knew it was a trek to Capitol Hill, over a mile. It was after eleven, dark, and the temperatures were dropping, not quite below freezing but enough to make her breath fog. Elle wasn't even wearing a jacket. Walking—and by herself no less—wasn't smart.

"We'll split an Uber," she suggested, thankful when Brendon nodded.

Elle didn't look sold. "Isn't that out of the way? You're in Queen Anne and Brendon's over on the Eastside so—"

"I drove." Brendon tucked his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "I left my car in Darcy's parking garage and took advantage of the guest space. Free parking."

Elle appeared a bit more convinced, the frown between her brows softening. "Okay. Thanks."

Within five minutes, their Uber arrived, a blue Prius with a back seat nowhere near big enough for the three of them, so Brendon called shotgun, as if they'd have chosen any other configuration.

Wrinkling her nose at the smell of old takeout and musty gym clothes, Darcy slipped inside the back seat, shuffling over to make room. Elle sat, hands tucking around the back of her skirt as she swung her legs inside the

vehicle, those strange, sparkling combat boots catching the streetlight and turning the black patent leather into an oil slick against Elle's pale skin. Skin bare all the way to where the hem of Elle's dress brushed against her thighs.

Don't think about it.

Face prickling with heat, Darcy tore her eyes away and stared resolutely out the window. The lights from bars and late-night eateries blurred past, stoplights reflecting off puddles on the ground and turning the city into a neon nightscape, still nowhere near as colorful as the girl sitting beside her.

Techno-pop blasted through the speakers and beneath her, the electric engine purred, the combined beat rumbling through her body and sinking into her bones, making her aware of her heartbeat. It was beating too fast, faster even when the driver made a right at the light and the tire rolled over the curb, jostling them until Darcy, once again, nearly had a lapful of Elle.

Elle steadied herself with a hand on Darcy's thigh. *Don't think about it* didn't do shit when those fingers with their chipped blue polish relaxed enough to slide down to where Darcy's hand was gripping her own knee, knuckles white.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

All Darcy could do was think about it. About how Elle's hand was soft, the spaces between her fingers warm as she wiggled them between Darcy's until they were holding hands in the back of the dark car while Brendon sat in the front, unable to even see them.

She tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry.

Darcy stared at their hands, her fingers longer, making Elle's hand look tiny. Elle was a force, a larger-than-life hurricane of a human; her hands were too small, too delicate for someone who'd come crashing her way into Darcy's life with all the finesse of a wrecking ball.

The car braked a touch too fast and Darcy's stomach swooped as if she'd rocketed down Space Mountain.

Darcy wasn't a thrill seeker and she didn't like roller coasters. The probability of being injured on one had been estimated at one in twenty-four million. Slim, but certainly higher than sitting home and reading a book. Growing up, she'd tolerated them, mostly for Brendon's sake.

Surprisingly, what she disliked wasn't the drop, but the moments before, when the rickety boxcar would creep up the metal track, higher and higher, her heart crawling into her throat as she gripped the bar in front of her for dear life. As if clutching a silly metal rod would spare her in the event of an

emergency, total disaster. Those anxious moments right before the plunge, when all those worst-case scenarios would flit through her head, but getting off the ride wasn't an option. Stuck, knowing what would come next, dreading it and being able to do nothing, Darcy hated being out of control, at the mercy of *chance*.

That's what this moment, blazing through yellow lights past a blur of people stumbling from bars, and holding on to Elle's hand felt like. Darcy had gotten on this ride and now she couldn't climb off. Not yet.

The car stopped at the curb of a dingy, but not-unsafe-looking building, and Darcy's anxiety continued to mount, her palms starting to sweat. Elle squeezed Darcy's fingers and it felt like she had a stranglehold on Darcy's pounding heart. "This is me."

"Right." Darcy tried to smile in case Brendon was watching. "Good night."

A cough came from the front seat. Brendon *was* watching, one brow quirked.

Darcy rolled her eyes. "I'll walk you to the door."

The car idled at the curb as Elle finally let go of Darcy's hand so they could climb out of the back seat. Without Elle's fingers twined with hers, Darcy didn't know what to do with her hands and she was suddenly absurdly aware of them, of all her limbs and where they existed in space. Tuck them in her pockets? No, her jeans were too tight, her pockets tiny. She settled on crossing her arms, fingers gripping her biceps as she followed Elle up the steps to the entrance of her building.

Elle reached behind her neck, freeing the clasp of her necklace. From inside the neckline of her dress she withdrew two keys, both hanging from a simple silver chain.

Don't think about it.

"I was thinking." Elle tapped the spiky silver teeth of one of those keys against her bottom lip. The metal had to be warm from resting against her skin all night.

"Oh, no," Darcy joked, trying to regain her footing.

Elle kicked Darcy's shin lightly, and the corners of her eyes crinkled. "I had fun tonight."

So had Darcy, only the words, a simple *so did I* stuck in her throat when the light from the streetlamp hit Elle's eyes. Her eyes *weren't* just blue, but gray, too, silvery striations winding out from a storm cloud center that

hugged her pupils.

“We should kiss,” Darcy blurted.

Elle’s eyes doubled in size.

Darcy knew better, knew that kissing Elle was a terrible idea. It couldn’t lead to anything, Darcy wouldn’t *let* it lead to anything. And yet something inside her, some tiny, illogical part of her rebelled at the idea of never getting a taste of Elle. Even though that’s all it would be. One taste.

The overwhelmingly rational part of her needed to explain, to justify this, apply logic to an altogether illogical desire. “My brother’s probably watching.”

Elle wrinkled her nose. “Is that supposed to make me want to kiss you?”

No, but that made this less dangerous. The odds of getting injured on a roller coaster were slim. They were well-designed, tested. There were seat belts and safety precautions in place. As far as risks went, it was *safe*. This was a safe risk because if this was all fake, there was no chance of Darcy falling.

She laughed, the sound warbling in her throat. “I mean, he’s probably expecting it.”

Elle dropped her eyes to the ground, to the small bit of space between them. Her tongue darted out, wetting her already shiny bottom lip, licking off some of her gloss. Darcy was dying to taste her. “Right. Sure. You should—” Elle cleared her throat and lifted her head, eyes sparkling under the amber glow of the streetlight. “You should really sell it then.”

Darcy stopped thinking about Brendon and stepped closer to Elle, erasing the distance between them. She lifted a hand, commanding it not to shake as she set it on the dip of Elle’s waist, drawing her in until their knees knocked gently.

Don’t think.

If she were lucky, the kiss would be terrible and she’d never want to do it again. The unsettling burning in her chest would fizzle out and all would be restored to normal, the world righted, back on its axis.

Leaning in, she brushed her lips against Elle’s and it was like striking a match, that spark she’d refused to acknowledge catching flame with the slightest friction of lips on lips.

It was mutual, it had to be, because Elle gasped, lips parting and turning what was supposed to be a *fucking stage kiss* into a frenetic exploration, wild and charged. Suddenly Elle’s fingers, those fingers that had touched the

spines of all of Darcy's books and left smudge marks on her coffee table, were buried in Darcy's hair, pulling her closer and keeping her there.

Darcy stumbled, vertigo making her head spin, and backed Elle into the wall beside the building's door. Had it not been for Elle's hands in her hair and the snug press of their bodies, Darcy might've crumbled at the hot, wet drag of Elle's tongue against the edge of her bottom lip. Still, a shiver skittered down Darcy's spine, her knees weakening.

Darcy tilted her hips into Elle, triggering an intense pulse inside her. Something snapped, want overriding everything else. She pressed Elle firmly against the wall and tasted the blunt edges of Elle's teeth, dipped her tongue deeper, traced the roof of Elle's mouth and dropped her hands, palming Elle's hips when Elle shivered and melted. Sweet, Elle's lips tasted like strawberries and her tongue like peppermint. Darcy wanted more, was suddenly greedy for a taste of—

Reality crashed down on her in the form of someone laying on a car horn. Elle rolled her lips together, eyes flitting away. Darcy turned, glaring at the car where her brother was hanging out the window, grinning stupidly.

"Get a room." He winked. *Tried* to wink.

Brendon was getting fucking socks for Christmas. Boring, black, argyle ones.

Darcy turned back to Elle who was chewing on the corner of her lip. Darcy's stomach flipped, not because the world had righted itself and the sudden adjustment was jarring. No, everything had gone pear-shaped, worse than before because now that she'd had a taste of Elle, she wanted another.

Chapter Nine

Darcy wasn't good at this, gift-giving. Not under normal circumstances and this was anything but normal.

What were you supposed to give someone you were fake dating, someone you weren't supposed to like, but were finding yourself increasingly—and worryingly—fond of? Someone you couldn't get out of your head no matter how hard you threw yourself into work, someone whose laugh you couldn't quit hearing inside your head, whose lips you could swear you could still taste, even days later? Darcy was pretty sure *Cosmo* didn't offer a gift guide for the niche category of fake girlfriends. Go figure.

Whatever it was, the gift needed to say *congratulations* without being over the top, and it needed to be something Elle would actually appreciate. An interesting challenge because as a general rule, Darcy usually refused to gift anything that she, herself, didn't like. But Elle's taste was so . . . *distinct* that Darcy needed to think outside the box.

Which was why she was standing in the middle of Northwest Beer and Spirits staring not at the prized Napa cabernets, but at the—she repressed a shiver—boxed wines.

A five-liter box of Franzia sunset blush cost eighteen dollars and twenty-eight cents. The box proclaimed there were thirty-four glasses inside, making each five-ounce glass approximately fifty-four cents. *Fifty-four cents*. Less than a dollar for a glass of wine.

Darcy frowned at the box. Her wallet liked those numbers, but something about paying that little for wine felt . . . unreal. Like someone was going to pop out from the other side of the shelf and shove a camera in her face and tell her she'd been punked before slapping her with a fifty-dollar bill.

Darcy depressed the handle and lifted, cardboard cutting into her fingers.

Maybe it was cheaper than dirt, but it was heavy as lead. Couldn't they at least try to make the design a bit more ergonomic? She'd have paid five more dollars for better packaging alone.

Inside her coat, her phone buzzed. If that wasn't an excuse to set the box down, she didn't know what was.

Annie.

Darcy swiped and lifted the phone to her ear. "Hey, Annie."

A horn honked in the background, followed by muffled cursing. "Darce! How are things?"

She nudged the box of wine with her toe. Where to start? She hadn't spoken to Annie since talking her ear off about the mess she'd gotten herself into, lying to Brendon. "Things are . . . complicated."

"Complicated. Hmm," Annie said. "That wouldn't have something to do with a certain cute blonde? Tiny thing with huge eyes that she has just for you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Another horn honked, meshing with the sound of Annie's laughter. "Brendon posted pics from your date the other night. Elle is all googly-eyed over you in them and you're just as bad. When you're looking at her, she's looking away. And vice versa. It's cute."

Darcy's stomach lurched, pulse pirouetting. "It's fake."

"Sure." Annie was probably rolling her eyes. "When's the next time you're going to see her?"

Darcy glanced at the box by her feet. "Seeing as I'm currently buying her a box of wine, I'd say soon."

"Wait. Slow down. Back the fuck up." Annie sighed. "*Ich spreche mit meinem freund.*"

"Are you speaking *German*?"

"I'm in Berlin. Business trip. Did I forget to mention that?" The better question was since when did Annie speak German. "Sorry. My cabdriver thought I was talking to him. You were saying?"

"It's nothing. Brendon told me the deal with Oh My Stars was finalized this morning and then he asked if the two of us had plans to celebrate and I didn't know what to say and Brendon looked at me like I had dropped the ball. Like I was, I don't know, being a bad girlfriend. So I'm buying Elle a box of wine because it's her favorite. You know. To congratulate her."

Annie didn't say anything for so long that Darcy glanced at the screen,

checking if the call had been disconnected. “Huh. Okay. That’s. Hm.”

“That was a lot of noise for managing to say *nothing*.”

“I was emoting, you bitch. Read between the lines.”

“If you have something to say, *say it*.”

Annie laughed. “Is your brother going to be there when you gift Elle with this *box of wine*?”

“You sound like a snob, Annie.”

Like the drama queen she was, Annie gasped. “Said the pot to the kettle. Stop avoiding my questions.”

“No.” She leaned against the aisle endcap. “Brendon’s not going to be there. What’s your point?”

“Just interesting is all. What’s the point of giving Elle a gift if your brother isn’t there to see it? Unless you *like her*.”

“I—”

She did. She liked Elle. She just didn’t know what it meant or if it meant anything. It was the last thing she wanted to think about, but of course, because her brain was a fucking traitor, that kiss was *all* she could think about. That kiss. Elle’s smile. The way her eyes had shone beneath the streetlights. Her *laugh*.

Brendon might’ve planted the seed that brought her to this liquor store, but she *wanted* to see Elle.

Annie gasped. “Oh my god. You’re shitting me. You like her? *Elle*? The girl who spilled wine all over your favorite dress and believes in *one twu wuv*?” She giggled. “This is perfect. You realize that, right? You’re starring in your own romantic comedy, Darcy. Next thing you know, there’s only going to be one bed at the B&B and you’ll have to huddle for warmth beneath one tiny blanket and—”

“*Stop*.” Darcy pinched the bridge of her nose. “*Annie*.”

“You just whined at me.” Annie cackled. “Oh my god. I’m dead. You’re so fucked. I love it.”

She was right. Darcy was well and truly fucked.

“I hate you.”

“You love me.”

“You had the audacity to compare my life to a romantic comedy.” Darcy scoffed. “You sound like Brendon.”

Annie said, “Speaking of your brother. You didn’t tell me he’d gotten so cute.”

Kill her now. “Don’t be gross, Annie. That’s my little brother you’re talking about.”

“I *know*.” Annie said something else to the driver in German, too fast for Darcy to catch. “He was always adorable, but now he’s—”

“Stop. Do not pass go and whatever you do, do not finish that sentence.” Darcy shivered.

“I’m just saying! Objectively. He rarely posts pictures of himself and when he does, they’re these shoddy cropped selfies with the worst lighting and half the time he’s got his thumb partway over the camera. You’d think with limbs as long as his he’d get his whole self in the frame, but no. He posted that group picture of you guys and it was a shock. Little Brendon grew up nice, is all I’m saying.”

Darcy sniffed. “Brendon is handsome, yes. Of course, he is. He’s *my* brother.”

Annie chuckled. “Okay, okay. No more drooling over your little bro. Got it.”

Gross. “Thank you.”

For a moment, Annie was silent. “How are you really doing, Darcy?”

Darcy sucked on her lower lip, shrugging even though Annie wasn’t there to see. “I’m all right.”

“*Darcy.*”

She dropped her chin. “I’m confused.”

Annie’s sigh was soft. “I didn’t mean to laugh. Not if you’re not laughing, too.”

Friends since fifth grade, Annie had been there through it all—Darcy’s parents’ divorce, moving away to the same college, the death of her grandmother, new jobs, new relationships, *failed* relationships. Annie had packed up most of Darcy’s apartment, the apartment she’d shared with Natasha, just so she wouldn’t have to deal with it. Annie might tease, but if anyone could imagine how confused Darcy felt, it was her.

“I know you didn’t. It’s fine. It’s— I just need to calm down. I’m blowing everything out of proportion.”

She’d give Elle her wine and get out, go home, and put her head down. With eight weeks until the FSA exam, she needed to focus. Not on how Elle tasted or how her laugh made Darcy’s chest throb, but on studying. Just yesterday, her boss had asked how her exam prep was going before dropping the bomb that her coworker Jeremy was *also* scheduled to take his final FSA

exam in January. Mr. Stevens wanted to give the promotion to Darcy since Jeremy had only been at the company four months to Darcy's six, but if she didn't pass . . .

She'd pass.

More of Annie's rapid-fire German came through. Darcy eyed the wine at her feet. "Look, Annie, I should let you go. Call me later, okay? When you're not in a cab."

"Wait. Darcy? I'm not going to be like your brother and pressure you to put yourself out there if you're not ready, but life's short. Carpe diem."

* * *

What Holiday Activity Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

Aries—Snowball Fight
Taurus—Baking Cookies
Gemini—Ski Trip
Cancer—Holiday Movie Binge
Leo—Caroling
Virgo—Secret Santa Gift Exchange
Libra—Volunteering
Scorpio—Photo Session with Santa
Sagittarius—Santa Pub Crawl
Capricorn—Christmas Tree Decorating
Aquarius—Shopping at the Holiday Market
Pisces—Ice Skating

Elle's foot was asleep, her toes tingling, full of pins and needles as soon as she put her weight on it. Whoever was at the door knocked again. "Just a sec!"

It was closer to a minute by the time she hobbled across the room and opened the door. Darcy stood in front of her apartment cradling a box of wine wrapped in a hot pink bow. Elle blinked. She was seeing things. She had to be.

Only, Darcy cleared her throat, hefting the box of wine upward. *Not* a figment of her imagination. "Hello."

"Hello," she echoed. "Sorry, um, come in."

Elle stepped back, letting Darcy pass. She stopped just shy of the kitchen entrance, barely far enough inside for Elle to shut the door.

"Here." Darcy thrust the box of wine into Elle's arms. "I brought this for you."

Elle hugged the box, the satin bow cool against the inside of her wrist. “Thank you?”

“As a congratulations. For finalizing your deal.” Darcy tucked her hair behind her ear and shrugged. She was wearing another pencil skirt, this one navy, and it hugged her hips perfectly. Elle’s mouth went dry. “My brother told me.”

“So you bought me a box of wine?”

“Yes?”

Elle chuckled. “Color me surprised, is all. Didn’t it pain you to purchase boxed wine?”

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, you like it, so.”

Elle bit down on her lip, something inside her chest squeezing hot and tight. “You didn’t have to do that, but thank you. Do you want to come in? Have a glass?”

Darcy’s pert nose wrinkled, a line forming along the bridge. “I’ve got to get back home. Study for my FSA exam. I just wanted to drop that off and . . .”

“And?”

See her?

Kiss her again?

Elle held her breath.

“And congratulate you.”

Of course.

Not that Elle wasn’t thrilled—not to mention relieved—the deal was official, but she’d hoped Darcy showing up meant maybe their kiss had changed things for her. That Darcy had felt the way the earth had shifted beneath their feet, too. That it was something more.

Maybe not.

And yet, Darcy lingered in the entryway.

“Right.” Darcy cleared her throat before pointing at the box of wine. “I didn’t know if you wanted to post that online or something. Because Brendon follows you.”

Elle’s stomach sank. Of course this was about selling it to Brendon. That was what their deal was all about. How silly of her to think otherwise. “Sure. Good idea.”

Darcy’s jaw clenched, her chin lifting, eyes going hard, determined. “Look, Elle—”

An unholy grumble came from Darcy's stomach, so loud and vicious that Elle's eyes widened. Darcy's face turned red, her eyes slipping shut, her lips rolling inward and flattening.

Elle's fingers itched to trace the blush, feel the heat of Darcy's cheeks against the pads of her fingertips. "Hungry?"

"Clearly." Darcy snorted. "I should go before my stomach cannibalizes itself."

"Sexy." Elle leaned her shoulder against the wall and shifted the box of wine, her biceps beginning to burn. "Or you could stay. I've got—"

She performed a quick mental inventory of the contents of her fridge. Salsa. Juice. Freezer-burned breakfast sandwiches. "Or we could go out?"

Darcy's lips twisted in genuine-looking remorse. "I can't. I've got—"

"To eat, yeah? We could do that together." When Darcy didn't immediately fire back a no, Elle pressed on. "I could Instagram a picture of us there. Better than posting a picture of a boring box of wine. And I could brief you on Thanksgiving. Tell you what to expect."

Darcy dropped her chin and chuckled. "I'm too hungry to cook."

"Is that a yes?"

She nodded. "Sure. Why not?"

* * *

It was only four blocks to Katsu Burger, a little hole in the wall joint that served the best Japanese deep-fried burgers Elle had ever tasted. It wasn't fancy by any stretch of the imagination, but the food was fantastic, inexpensive, the service was stellar, and it wasn't too rowdy, a combination not easy to find on this part of Broadway.

Elle jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "You want to snag a table while I order for us?"

Darcy stared at the sprawling menu on the wall with rounded eyes. "I don't have any idea what I want."

"Just go sit down. I know what's good." Elle shooed her off. "Seriously. Trust me."

"Nothing with dairy, all right?"

"Roger that."

Inching her way toward the bank of empty tables, Darcy shot her one final wary glance that made Elle roll her eyes.

After placing their order, Elle wiggled her way through the maze of tables until she reached the one Darcy had claimed in the far back corner. She collapsed into the seat across from Darcy and performed a quick double take at the state of the table. “What the—”

The salt and pepper shakers, bottle of hot sauce, both bottles of soy sauce, *and* the napkin holder had been moved toward the center of the table, dividing Darcy’s table space from Elle’s. Like a moat, only without the water.

Darcy smirked. “I happen to like this outfit.”

“What does that have to do with—” Oh. *Oh*. Her face heated, an undeniable blush creeping up her neck. “*One* accident and you’re taking precautionary measures?”

“Twice,” Darcy argued. “You spilled in my kitchen, too.”

“Once is an instance, twice is merely a coincidence. *Three* times is a pattern.” Elle winced. “But I really am sorry about that. It was . . . ugh.” The shame of that moment returned, the memory of spilling first her glass of wine and then knocking the table and spilling Darcy’s wine as fresh as if it had just happened. Elle dropped her face into her hands and groaned. “Not a great first impression.”

“Not like mine was much better.” Elle lifted her head to find Darcy looking contrite, lips tugged to the side. “Hindsight makes it seem trivial. It’s just—I was wearing my favorite dress. It belonged to my grandmother. So.”

Elle’s stomach plummeted. “Did it come out? The wine stain?”

Darcy lifted her eyes and offered a small smile. “It did. My dry cleaner is a miracle worker.”

Elle breathed a sigh of relief, shoulders slumping. Thank God.

“Two sake bombs?”

Elle glanced up, smiling at the waitress who held a tray with two beers, two shots of sake, and two pairs of chopsticks. “Thanks.”

Darcy glowered at her from across the table. “*Sake bombs?*”

All right, so maybe it wasn’t the *best* choice, but it didn’t have to be messy. You could chug neatly . . . if you set your mind to it . . .

Shrugging, Elle unwrapped her chopsticks and set them across the top of her pint glass, wide enough apart to balance the shot. It appeared Darcy needed a little cajoling when all she did was cross her arms and stare. “Come on. It’s fun. You pound the table, pound your drink, and try to finish first.” She wiggled her brows. “You aren’t *scared*, are you? Worried you won’t

win?”

Eyes narrowed, Darcy snatched her chopsticks off the table and placed them across her glass. She reached for her sake, hand hovering in the air over the shot glass, and then changed course, finger reaching for the topmost button on her blouse. Brown eyes meeting Elle's across the table, the corner of Darcy's mouth twitched as she undid the pearl buttons of her blouse one by one.

Elle's mouth went dry. “What are you doing?”

Darcy's nimble fingers reached the middle of her chest, revealing a strip of nude lace. A camisole. “As I said, I'm fond of this outfit. If you're going to all but dare me to drink with you, I'm not keen on ruining this top.”

Elle tore her eyes from Darcy's cleavage and fiddled with the chopsticks atop her beer. “Ah. Good plan. I, uh, like the way you think.”

Darcy chuckled lowly and untucked her blouse, sliding it down her arms before hanging it over the back of the chair beside her. “I've never done one of these before. Do we go on three?”

“Sake bombs?” Elle goggled. What did Darcy do in college if not attend a copious amount of cheesy *around the world* parties featuring alcohol from other countries? Study? Elle lifted her shot of sake to demonstrate. “Okay. You balance the sake atop the chopsticks, like so. Then you count to three, preferably in Japanese. Ichi, ni, san, then you shout *sake* and bang the table with your fists. The shot falls into the beer and you chug it.”

Darcy shut her eyes and groaned quietly. “Are you serious?”

Elle chuckled. “You don't *have* to.”

Darcy rolled her shoulders back, posture perfecting, and when she opened her eyes, her gaze was steely and determined. Elle wiggled in her seat. *Piece of cake.*

“Ready?”

“As I'll ever be,” Darcy muttered.

“Okay. Ichi, ni, san . . . sake!” Elle banged the table, her chuckle mingling with Darcy's bright bark of laughter as they both tipped back their glasses. Elle squeezed her eyes shut and opened her throat, swallowing as much of the bitter beer as quickly as possible. Foamy, slightly too warm beer dribbled down her chin, sliding down the front of her throat as her eyes and lungs burned, the latter demanding she take a breath. Just a little more.

The slam of glass against the Formica tabletop made her open her eyes. Cheeks pink and lips and chin wet, Darcy grinned, panting, all breathless and

smug.

Elle lowered her pint glass, an inch of foamy beer left in the bottom. “What the fuck.”

Darcy threw her head back and laughed. *Fuck*. A tiny drop of beer trailed down her throat and Elle wanted to lick it off, taste Darcy’s skin. Her back teeth clacked together.

“What do I win?”

Elle snorted and polished off the remainder of her beer. “Bragging rights? I don’t know. Was there something you wanted?”

Either the beer was hitting her hard, or Elle was imagining the way Darcy’s eyes darkened.

Darcy shrugged and sniffed, tossing her hair over one deliciously freckled shoulder. “I’ll think about it.”

So would she.

“You’re full of surprises, you know that?”

Darcy cocked her head, frowning softly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What it sounds like.” Elle ripped the paper of her chopstick wrapper down the middle. “You’re a beer-chugging champ and you watch soap operas? Or at least know enough about them to answer a trivia question that stumped everybody else.”

Darcy’s expression shuttered, her eyes blanking before dropping to the table. “What about it?”

Elle didn’t mean anything by it, definitely no offense. “Nothing. It’s just . . . unexpected. I think it’s cool.”

Darcy scoffed. “Sure.”

“I *do*. Why would I bullshit you? Seriously, what do I have to get out of being anything other than perfectly honest?”

Darcy appeared to weigh her words, the furrow between her brows softening. “Oh.”

“Oh,” Elle teased.

“Most people make fun of them. The plots are contrived and . . . people die and come back to life for crying out loud, but my grandmother was obsessed.” Darcy’s smile went soft and nostalgic, her voice quieting, “During the summers, and then after we moved into her house, I’d watch with her. It was our thing. Every day at one o’clock we’d bring lemonade and little tea sandwiches into the living room and watch *Whisper Cove* and then *Days of*

Our Lives. Every day.”

“Sounds nice,” Elle said, shredding the paper of her chopstick wrapper so she wouldn’t do something ridiculous like reach for Darcy’s hand.

“I know they’re silly,” Darcy said, sounding like she still thought she needed to justify her interests. Temper it by distancing herself from them emotionally.

“It’s not silly. Not if you enjoy it. And even then, silly’s not a bad thing.”

There were far worse things to be.

“Brendon said something similar.”

“I knew I liked him for a reason.” Elle grinned. “He sounds like a great brother.”

Darcy’s smile became achingly fond, her eyes creasing at the corners. “He is. Overbearing at times . . .”

“I’m sure he means well.”

“Yeah, well, he forgets that it’s not his job to take care of me. It’s the other way around.”

Elle brushed the mangled shreds of paper into a pile and pushed her empty beer glass to the right, clearing a space for her to rest her elbows. “Can I ask you a question?”

Darcy’s brows rose. “You can ask.”

The *doesn’t mean I’ll answer* was heavily implied.

“You and Brendon . . . sometimes you talk about him like you raised him.”

The corners of Darcy’s mouth pinched, her throat jerking as she swallowed. She dropped her gaze to the table and traced a gouge in the surface with her finger. “I— It’s nothing so extreme as that. I told you our parents divorced. It was the summer before my junior year of high school. Our mother was awarded custody; Dad didn’t ask for it since he traveled two weeks out of the month. But . . .” Her jaw shifted to the side, her finger pressing against the scraped table so hard her fingertip turned white. “My mother didn’t handle their split well at all. She was heartbroken by it and so, she sort of . . . checked out.”

What did that *mean*?

Darcy saved Elle the trouble of figuring out a polite way to ask. “She slept all day, stayed up till all hours of the night. Stopped leaving the house, hardly even left her room. Someone needed to step up, so I drove Brendon to school and picked him up and took him to his after-school activities. No one

starved on my watch. But I wasn't exactly thinking about paying the mortgage, and apparently neither was my mother, so a few months later the house was foreclosed on and we moved in with my grandmother."

"Junior year of high school . . . you were—"

"Sixteen." Darcy dipped her chin. "Brendon was twelve."

Jesus. "Did your mom ever—"

Get better sounded stupid.

"Grandma helped her find a job. Forced her to, actually. If that's what you mean. She was a photographer, did portraits, weddings, senior photos, that sort of thing, but when I was born, she quit working so she could take care of me and then, when I was a little older, so she could travel with my father. Later, after the divorce, she switched to travel photography, which lets her float wherever she wants whenever she wants, which she prefers." Darcy shrugged, the strap of her camisole sliding off her shoulder. "We've never been close."

"At least you've got Brendon."

A waiter stopped beside their table holding a tray topped with two gargantuan burgers. "Two Mt. Fuji burgers?"

"What the fuck," Darcy whispered once the waiter was gone. "*Elle.*"

Elle stared at her own triple-stacked burger with wide eyes. "I didn't think they would be *this* big."

"What *is* this?" Darcy poked the top bun of her burger, her nose scrunching adorably.

"Um, beef katsu, chicken katsu, pork katsu, egg, bacon, pickles, tomato, cabbage, wasabi mayo, and a few other sauces I can't remember. I had them leave the cheese off yours." Elle snagged a wad of napkins from the holder in the center of the table. She had a feeling she was going to need them.

"How do I even begin to eat this?" Darcy muttered. "Don't we get silverware?"

Elle gasped. "Eating a burger with a fork and knife is a *crime*. You just have to dive in. Shove it in your face and hope most of it winds up in your mouth."

"Do you have a lot of experience with that?"

"I usually order the Tokyo Classic, which is only one—" Darcy's words caught up to her. "Wow."

Darcy's lips twitched into a grin that showed off her perfect teeth. "It was practically *begging* to be said. Come on."

Elle snorted and wrapped her hands around the ginormous burger in front of her. She could barely get her mouth around it, wound up with an unbalanced bite of bun and cabbage, but she had to start somewhere.

Darcy, on the other hand, examined her burger with narrowed eyes before smushing the whole thing down with her palm until it was half its original size. She lifted it to her mouth and took an inelegant bite, wasabi mayo and tonkatsu sauce dripping down her chin as she groaned, eyes rolling back as the flavor combo hit her taste buds.

Elle buried her smile in her burger. “Scale of one to ten, what do you think?”

Darcy wiped her chin and looked thoughtful. “Solid nine point two. You?”

“An eleven, easy.”

“You said scale of one to ten.”

“It’s a hyperbole. Sometimes coloring inside the lines just doesn’t cut it. Like when you’re two hundred percent certain about something. Haven’t you ever felt that?”

Darcy stared for so long that Elle squirmed. “It’s a burger. I don’t think it’s that deep.”

Elle snorted and took another bite.

“What about you?”

Elle finished chewing before she asked, “What about me?”

Darcy set her burger down and reached for another napkin. “Are you close with any of your siblings?”

That was . . . relative. “I’m closest with Daniel, probably. There’s only two years between us, which helps. But these days, he and Jane have the most in common.” Elle reached for her water and took a fortifying sip. “I don’t butt heads with Jane or anything, we’re just on entirely different wavelengths. But she lets me babysit my nephew, so she’s at least deemed me trustworthy enough to watch a toddler.”

Darcy smiled around her straw. “Why do I get the feeling you’re surprisingly good with kids?”

Elle scoffed. “*Surprisingly?* Excuse you, Ryland is lucky to have me as an aunt. Maybe I can’t cook, but I make mean macaroni art and I do voices for all the characters in his books.”

Last-minute requests to watch Ryland were the norm, because as far as Jane was concerned, since Elle *worked* from home, her schedule was flexible.

The only reason she didn't complain was because she enjoyed it.

"What about your other sister?"

"Lydia?" Elle shrugged. "We're like oil and water. She idolizes Jane and figured out a long time ago that the easiest way to get our parents' approval was to do everything by the book, but even then, it's hard to compete with Jane and Daniel because anything you do? They did it first and they probably did it better. They were honor students, on ASB, Daniel was president of the GSA, both did a million sports, and now they've got great jobs and families of their own. Brace yourself for Lydia to be a bit of a brat because she has it in her head that the best way to make herself look good is to point out my flaws."

Darcy frowned. "Your parents don't approve of what you do?"

Approve. If only. "They've sort of stalled in the *grudging acceptance* phase where we mostly don't talk about the fact that I don't have a nice, stable job with a pension plan, not that those really exist anymore. Mom makes the occasional comment about what I do and how she wishes I would settle down with one of the nice, boring people they've set me up with. I'll occasionally catch Jane looking at me like I'm some sort of weird puzzle from another planet she's trying to solve, but mostly everyone just ignores me." *Shit.* Elle grimaced. "I mean, they don't *ignore* me. The things that matter to me don't really rate for them."

The furrow between Darcy's brows deepened. "But you wish it did. Matter to them."

"Well, sure." *Of course.* "But, unlike Lydia, I decided a long time ago that I wasn't going to change who I was just to suit someone else."

"Where do I fit into all this? On Thanksgiving?"

Right. *Thanksgiving.* That was the reason they were here, not to get to know each other better *just because.*

"Act like you like me?" Elle gave an awkward laugh, avoiding Darcy's eyes. "You've got the sort of job and vibe that screams *I've got my shit together*, so if my family thinks you're into me and hears you talk about how awesome you think I am, maybe they'll see me in a different light without me having to, you know, *do anything.*"

Darcy nodded. "I can do that."

Elle's chest squeezed, wishing Darcy didn't have to *act* like she liked her.

"Anything else I should know, or is it more of a learn-as-you-go thing?"

Ha. Elle was still learning how to navigate the waters of formal family

dinners.

“If it’s any consolation, you’ll probably fit in with my family better than me.”

* * *

Despite the conventional wisdom that said no one had any business eating something larger than their head, they both managed to polish off their burgers and a shared order of nori fries.

Back on the street, Elle crossed her arms against the chill and smiled at Darcy who’d been smart enough to wear a coat. Elle had been too caught off guard by Darcy’s unexpected visit to think to grab her jacket. “Well. This was fun.”

Darcy nodded. “It was. Thanks for the food. Are you sure you won’t let me pay for mine?”

Elle waved her off. “My treat.”

She wasn’t sure if they were standing there on the street corner because the light was red, or for some other reason. “All right. Well—”

“I’ll walk with you,” Darcy blurted. “It’s nice out.”

It was *freezing*, but okay. Elle wouldn’t argue. The company was nice.

Elle led them two blocks south, pausing at the corner of Pike and Broadway, waiting for the light. She peeked around the corner, checking for oncoming traffic. The neon sign hanging in the window on the next block caught her eye. She grabbed Darcy’s wrist and tugged her in the new direction.

“What? Where are we going? Your apartment’s that way.”

“Change of plans,” she said, stopping in front of a store with the sign ONE MAN’S TRASH. The *T* in trash was burned out, turning the store into ONE MAN’S RASH, which made Elle chuckle under her breath. “This is my favorite thrift store.”

“And we’re here because . . . ?” Darcy goggled at the window display of half-dressed mannequins posed to look as if they were having an orgy.

“I forgot about my favorite Thanksgiving tradition. It’s the only thing my family does that’s *odd*, if you can even call it that.” Elle reached for the handle on the front door, eager to step inside out of the cold. “We all wear the tackiest ugly Christmas sweaters we can find. We’ve been doing it for years. You *have* to wear one.”

Darcy didn't argue, though she did pull a face, lips twisting like she was beginning to regret this whole plan, if she didn't already.

The inside of the store smelled like fabric softener and Lysol, and beneath that, mothballs and body odor, which Elle tried hard to ignore. Detouring past the front display of puffer jackets, Elle tugged Darcy deeper into the store where they kept their funkier offerings.

"Jesus." Darcy tugged on a poofy, crinoline prom dress shoved between an old D.A.R.E shirt and a leather motorcycle jacket. "There's no rhyme or reason to any of this. How do you find anything in here?"

"You don't. Not really. Stuff tends to find you."

"Like that doesn't sound ominous." Darcy set the dress back on the rack. The bar holding the hangers made a low creak before the entire rack collapsed in on itself. "Shit."

Darcy bent down, reaching to clean up the mess. Something green and sparkly in the pile caught Elle's eye. "Wait, hold up."

She grabbed the item in question, sure enough, a sweater. And not just any sweater, but a delightfully hideous knitted monstrosity with a sequined Grinch.

Darcy recoiled, elbow knocking into the rack of shoes. "Ow. *No*. Absolutely not. Not even if you paid me."

Elle gave her what she hoped was a convincing pout, pulling out all the stops, widening her eyes and jutting out her bottom lip. "I told you—things find you in here."

"Nope." Darcy shook her head. "That is *odious*."

"All the better! It's supposed to be ugly."

"Ugly is an understatement, Elle. It offends me."

Elle thrust the sweater at Darcy, who shrieked and backed away. "Just try it on."

Darcy paled. "*Try it on?* Are you fucking kidding me? I don't know where that's been or who wore it. I'm not buying it, but if I did, you bet your ass I'd wash it first."

"*Gah*." Elle dropped her head back and groaned. "Oh my god. Don't be such a *grinch* about it. You can wear your camisole. You'll be fine."

With a huff, Darcy snatched the sweater from Elle and stomped off in the direction of the dressing room, grumbling nonsense under her breath.

Lingering outside the curtain of the dressing stall, Elle waited, snickering as Darcy muttered to herself about *fucking sweaters* and how she *better not*

get bedbugs or something and Elle better be happy.

Happy was an understatement. When Darcy flung the curtain aside and stepped out of the dressing room, Elle doubled over. Darcy was drowning in the three-sizes-too-big sweater that nearly hung down to her knees. When she lifted her arm to flip Elle off, the sweater slipped over her hand and the excess fabric made it look like she had wings. That didn't even account for the atrocity that was the sparkling Grinch whose eyes lined up rather perfectly with Darcy's chest.

Darcy scratched the base of her throat, her expression twisting, eyes going wide. "I'm itching. Why am I itching?"

"It's probably psychological." Elle shrugged. "Or you've gotten so used to wearing fancy fabrics that polyblend gives you hives?"

"Ugh." Darcy whipped the sweater over her head, her hair sticking up from the static. The strap of camisole slipped down her arm again, the strap of her bra following it down. Elle swallowed thickly. "You happy?" Darcy asked.

"Hmm. Oh!" Elle nodded. "I will be if you buy it."

Darcy threw the sweater on the floor and reached for her blouse. "It's awful."

"It's amazing. You *have* to wear it."

"You wear it if you love it so much."

Elle already had a sweater. "It found you, Darcy. It's *fate*."

Darcy sighed. "Everyone's going to be wearing one?"

"You'll stick out like a sore thumb if you don't."

Darcy's eyes flickered between Elle's pouting face and the sweater pooled on the floor.

"*Please*. It's a tradition."

Her shoulders dropped. "Fine. But I'm washing it first."

Elle couldn't help it. She stepped forward and threw her arms around Darcy, hugging her tight. "Thank you."

Like the first time she hugged her, Darcy stiffened. But this time, she relaxed into the embrace sooner, her own arms wrapping around Elle's waist. She had to have felt the forceful thud of Elle's heart, kicking against her chest, their bodies pressed together.

Darcy was the first to pull away, leaning back, her hands slipping, fingers brushing the small of Elle's back as she dropped her arms. Their faces were close, so close Elle could've leaned in and pressed her lips to Darcy's. She

teetered on her feet, knees faltering at the soft smile Darcy sent her. “It’s . . . it’s fine. It’s just a sweater.”

It wasn’t just about the sweater, but Elle didn’t say that for fear of saying too much. Instead she stepped back and pointed at the rack of recent arrivals. “I’m going to look around for a minute, if you don’t mind?”

Darcy nodded and began doing up the row of tiny pearl buttons on her blouse.

Elle’s favorite thing about One Man’s Trash was that they offered a little bit of everything. Looking for antique silverware? Suits that looked like they were straight out of *Saturday Night Fever*? They had housewares, costumes, knickknacks, a little something for everyone.

Darcy caught up with Elle just as she was salivating over a letterman-style jacket, only instead of being for a school or team, it had a gigantic embroidered cartoon Samantha from *Bewitched* on the back.

“Brendon and I used to watch that when we were little.” Darcy bit her lip. “When we spent summers at Grandma’s, she’d let us build pillow forts in the living room and stay up late to watch *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* on TV Land until we crashed on the floor.”

Elle traced the stitching and smiled. “When I was a kid, I was convinced I was a witch and that the rest of my family were mere mortals and that was why I was different. Never could wiggle my nose like Samantha.” Elle smiled. “You’ve got a very Samantha-ish nose, you know that?”

Darcy cupped her fingers around the tip of her nose, forehead wrinkling. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Why do you always think what I say has some double meaning? It’s a compliment. It means I—” *Like your face.* “I think you’ve got a cute nose.”

It felt like someone had cranked the heat in the store up to a million degrees, like Elle was standing on the surface of the sun instead of wearing an impractical T-shirt in the middle of November. She ignored the flush climbing up the sides of her throat and stared at Darcy from the corner of her eye, watching as an identical blush crept up Darcy’s jaw.

“Oh.” Darcy cleared her throat. “Thanks.”

Elle bit the inside of her cheek and hummed, flipping the tag on the jacket so she could see the price. Her brows rocketed to her hairline. *Never mind.*

Moving down the aisle, Elle stopped in front of a case of creepy dolls that Darcy refused to look at because she’d *seen enough horror movies to know how that goes, thank you very much.* When Elle paused to peruse the vintage

hair accessories, Darcy slipped off to buy her sweater.

Casting one last forlorn glance to the back of the store where the *Bewitched* jacket was tucked away, Elle made her way to the front of the store, meeting Darcy by the door.

Bracing herself for the cold, Elle crossed her arms tight across her body and ducked her chin as she stepped onto the sidewalk. Warm fingers gently seized her by the elbow, keeping her from going far.

“Here.” Darcy shoved a bundle of fabric at her, pressing it to her chest.

It was the jacket, the one she’d wanted terribly, the one that cost ninety dollars. Too much. Elle’s heart climbed its way up her chest, settling inside her throat, an immovable lump that made it hard to swallow. “Darcy—”

“You’re always forgetting to wear a jacket. I start to wonder if you even own one.” Darcy stared at a spot over Elle’s shoulder.

She clutched the jacket to her chest reverently, words failing her.

“It’s really nothing,” Darcy said. “You bought my dinner. And paid for our drinks that first night. Consider it an additional congratulations for closing your deal with OTP.”

Darcy sniffed softly, the move making her nose twitch. All Elle would be able to think about each time she wore the jacket was Darcy’s pert little nose wrinkling.

The box of wine wasn’t nothing and *this*, this was definitely not *nothing*. It was *something*, Elle just didn’t know what. But she liked it, liked that Darcy had thought about her, had gone out of her way to do something kind just because. Despite what she’d said, what they both had said, not once all evening did Darcy press Elle to commemorate the night with a photo she could post so Brendon would see them together. Elle didn’t know what any of it meant, only that it felt like this thing between them had shifted.

Elle slid the jacket over her arms and pushed the sleeves up over her wrists. A perfect fit.

“And you liked it. So.”

There was that word again. *So*. Imagining what came after that teeny tiny word was too tempting.

So tempting that later that night, as Elle lay in bed, staring up at the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to her ceiling, the ones that brought her joy no matter how silly some people might think them, she let herself hope that something real could come from this fake arrangement.

* * *

“—and the engineers want to know how the planets could be represented visually. Like, with emojis. I was thinking eggplant and peach beside Mars since that’s most strongly representative of action and sex drive. And a smoochy face and diamond ring next to Venus for values and— Elle? *Elle*.”

Elle blinked, tearing her eyes away from where she’d zoned out staring at the purple beaded curtain that partitioned off the private room inside Wishing Well Books from the public portion of the bookstore. Elle had had an in-person reading scheduled at five thirty and another at eight, so Margot had tagged along so they could get some prep work done for OTP between her appointments. “Sorry. Eggplants.” She frowned. “When did we start talking about dicks?”

Margot snorted and chucked her pen at Elle. “Let me guess, daydreaming about”—she swooned, draping herself over the arm of her chair—“Darcy.”

“*Stop*.” Elle lobbed the pen back at Margot where it left a fuchsia streak across her arm. Elle opened her mouth to argue, but paused. Anything she would’ve said to the contrary would’ve been a bald-faced lie. “Okay, yeah, I was.”

While Margot still wasn’t pleased with the circumstances that had thrown Darcy and Elle together, or how Darcy had behaved on their blind date, Margot had taken the stance that if Elle was happy, she was happy for her.

“Of course you were.” Margot set her notebook on the table between them beside the sage, cypress, and lemongrass scented pillar candle whose flame flickered softly in the dimly lit room. “What was it this time? The kiss? The jacket? The wine? Her *nose*?”

“All of the above?” Elle shot Margot a subdued smile and shrugged. “I just . . . I want her to like me. Is that silly? You probably think I’m being ridiculous.”

“Do I think you’re ridiculous for wanting the girl you like to like you back?” Margot tsked. “Of course not, Elle. I’m worried you might be playing with fire, but if you think this thing with Darcy, whatever it is”—Margot rolled her eyes—“is worth your time, then I support you. Although, speaking of time, have you given any more thought to how this is supposed to end?”

“I don’t know.” Elle plucked at a loose thread on the hem of her sweater, avoiding Margot’s too-perceptive stare. “Who’s to say this has to end?”

When Margot said nothing, Elle lifted her eyes, flinching at the way

Margot's entire face, from her furrowed brow to her pinched lips, screamed pity. "Elle—"

"*Maybe,*" Elle tacked on. "Maybe it won't end. Maybe she'll . . . we'll . . ." She sank down in her chair with a sigh. "Just because it started out fake doesn't mean it can't become real, right?"

Margot shrugged. "Sure, Elle. Anything's possible."

Right. "Thanks. I didn't mean to get us off track. What were you saying? Engineers and emojis?"

Margot snatched her notebook off the table and slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose. Back to business. "We've got to pick a sampling of placements because, according to the team, the rest of the chart won't be accessible unless users go premium."

Fair enough. OTP had to make money somehow, and as far as incentives went, access to the rest of a match's chart would be a solid draw for users to upgrade. Curiosity was an incredibly powerful motivator. Didn't Elle know it.

"All right. Sample . . . Sun's a given so I'd say . . . Moon, Rising, Mars, and Venus. Shoot, Mercury's important, too."

Without a complete chart, it was difficult to determine compatibility. But most people who hadn't studied astrology extensively—and to be honest, few had, despite the absurd number of astrology accounts cropping up claiming to know what they were talking about—wouldn't be able to parse out the nuances of a natal chart.

Behind the scenes, she and Margot were working with engineers at OTP to fine-tune the algorithms behind matching in a way that considered a more thorough approach to synastry. Most users didn't need the nitty-gritty. And if they wanted it? They'd have to pay.

Margot twirled her earring between her fingers and frowned thoughtfully. "I'm right there with you about Mercury. So much of communication isn't what we say, but how we say it."

Wasn't that the truth. And not only when talking face-to-face, either. It was as important in text, which mattered more than ever. One too many exclamation points and you'd sound too eager. Whether you chose *lol*, *rofl*, or *haha* said something about you, about the conversation. How you spelled the word *okay* mattered, each iteration distinct in tone. *K*, of course, was in a league of its own, and if there was a period behind it? Chances were, things were not, in fact, *okay*.

But not everyone was aces at that, understanding how what they said mattered or how it might be perceived. How a single reply could sink a conversation or how a joke gone wrong could get you blocked. Or ignored. Ghosted.

Texting was a minefield of miscommunication and uncertainty, especially since everyone had unique styles of—

“Margot, you are a genius.” Elle lurched over the table and kissed the side of Margot’s head.

“What?” Margot’s eyes widened behind her lenses. “What did I say?”

“OTP’s chat feature. You know how OTP already does an awesome job of encouraging dialogue? Like when a conversation lags and no one texts for two hours, you get a notification with a helpful hint from the person’s profile? ‘Jenna enjoys watching *Euphoria*. Why don’t you ask her about the latest episode?’”

Margot nodded.

“What if we pitch it to Brendon and the rest of the team that, in addition to those helpful profile convo starters, if users upgrade to premium, they’ll get guidance on how best to communicate with their matches based on what sign their Mercury is in?”

“So premium users would basically be getting us as virtual dating assistants?”

“When you put it like that . . .” Elle winced jokingly.

For whatever reason, it was easier to solve other people’s problems than her own.

A slow smile tugged at the corner of Margot’s mouth. “This is amazing, Elle. Not only would we potentially be able to increase the number of conversations that lead to first dates, but encouraging users to continue to text through the app versus their regular messaging platform would increase retention, which increases revenue from ads. Brendon’s going to eat this up with a spoon.”

Elle snatched her phone, itching to tell him before he heard along with the engineers during their next meeting.

ELLE: mar and i have the coolest idea about the apps chat feature. youre gonna have kittens

On second thought, he’d have kittens and then demand to meet up for coffee to talk about their idea ASAP because *impatience* was Brendon’s

middle name. That conversation would undoubtedly somehow segue into a chat about how things were going with Darcy and no. Elle's headspace was wacky enough when she was on her own; adding Brendon's interference into the mix would only convolute her already tangled web of feelings. Elle pressed the back button, deleting the message. Maybe, for now, avoidance while letting Margot run interference was the smartest solution.

While Margot jotted down a few notes for their next meeting with OTP, Elle started a new list for Oh My Stars based on *How the Zodiac Signs Text*.

As soon as she was finished, she flipped over to her own text messages, rereading the last messages she and Darcy had exchanged earlier that morning.

ELLE (3:14 A.M.): do you think hotel california inspired season five of american horror story?

ELLE (3:19 A.M.): the whole checking out but never leaving part

DARCY (5:32 A.M.): Why were you listening to Hotel California at three in the morning?

ELLE (7:58 A.M.): because that's the best time of day to listen to the eagles

ELLE (7:59 A.M.): obvi

DARCY (8:07 A.M.): You know the song isn't actually about a hotel, right?

DARCY (8:09 A.M.): It's about disillusionment and the American Dream.

ELLE (8:16 A.M.): wooww

ELLE (8:16 A.M.): what song are you gonna ruin for me next darcy?

ELLE (8:17 A.M.): you're beautiful? time of your life? every breath you take?

DARCY (8:20 A.M.): Just a suggestion, but maybe you should google those.

They had extremely different styles of texting, Darcy using proper punctuation and full sentences whereas Elle couldn't be bothered. She could try, but so far it hadn't seemed to hinder their communication, or her success rate. Darcy always responded, even if she wasn't as instantaneous with her responses as Elle was. The way Darcy texted made it possible for Elle to imagine Darcy actually speaking her response, her sense of humor—often dry, sometimes dirty—shining through.

Margot was still engrossed in her notes, so Elle opened a new message.

ELLE (4:16 P.M.): favorite movie

ELLE (4:16 P.M.): go

DARCY (4:19 P.M.): Just one? That's too difficult.

ELLE (4:20 P.M.): fine

ELLE (4:20 P.M.): action comedy rom-com and idk drama?

DARCY (4:25 P.M.): Comedy would be History of the World Part One. Action . . . God, I don't know. The Mummy, maybe? Rom-com . . . America's Sweethearts. Drama would have to be Dead Poets Society.

ELLE (4:26 P.M.): the mummy?!?

ELLE (4:26 P.M.): i credit that movie for my bisexual awakening

She waited, watching the little dots dance up and down, up and down . . .

DARCY (4:28 P.M.): Oh?

ELLE (4:29 P.M.): yeah

ELLE (4:30 P.M.): did I want to be evelyn or did i want to ride off into the sunset with her?

ELLE (4:30 P.M.): both obviously

DARCY (4:32 P.M.): So you came out after watching The Mummy?

ELLE (4:33 P.M.): no

ELLE (4:33 P.M.): it actually took me a while to figure things out

ELLE (4:34 P.M.): i tried to heterotextualize my feelings for a while

ELLE (4:34 P.M.): in retrospect idk why

ELLE (4:35 P.M.): all part of the process i guess

DARCY (4:37 P.M.): You what?

It took her a second to figure out what had confused Darcy.

ELLE (4:39 P.M.): apply hetero context to a super not straight situation

ELLE (4:40 P.M.): hetero + contextualize = heterotextualize

DARCY (4:42 P.M.): Huh. New word. Thanks for broadening my horizons.

Elle bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

ELLE (4:43 P.M.): i made it up

ELLE (4:43 P.M.): but you're welcome

DARCY (4:45 P.M.): 😊 Of course.

DARCY (4:49 P.M.): So when'd you stop? Heterotextualizing?

Elle chuckled as she typed.

ELLE (4:50 P.M.): shortly after I tried to heterotextualize my friend going down on me at a theater cast party when I was in high school

ELLE (4:51 P.M.): just gals being pals

ELLE (4:52 P.M.): the mental leaps and bounds were like, acrobatic

DARCY (4:53 P.M.): You're lucky you didn't pull something.

Cheeky. Elle could be bold, too.

ELLE (4:55 P.M.): it was good head. I might've strained something. I can't remember

A minute later, her phone rang. Stomach fluttering, Elle swiped at the screen as soon as she saw the *Da*— appear on the screen.

“I was kidding. I didn't *really* pull a muscle when she went down on me, I just—”

“Elle?”

Elle cringed so hard she was going to need to see a chiropractor. “Mom?” Margot recoiled in sympathy, sucking in a soft gasp through her teeth.

Mom cleared her throat awkwardly through the line. “I’m guessing you were expecting a different call.”

Sweet Saturn, Mary, and Joseph. *Da*— as in Dad and Mom, the house phone. Kill her now. “Um, can we pretend that didn’t happen?”

“Pretend what didn’t happen?” Mom asked.

“Right, good.” Elle coughed. “You rang.”

“I did. I hadn’t heard from you in a while.”

“I guess I didn’t have much worth reporting.” Aside from finalizing the deal with OTP. Nothing to write home about. But she could try. “Except—”

“I wanted to make sure you were still coming to Thanksgiving.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” It was Thanksgiving. Obviously, she’d be there.

“I wasn’t suggesting you wouldn’t come, Elle. It was a question.”

Arguing wasn’t worth it. “Right. I’ll be there.”

“Good. Lydia’s bringing Marcus over on Thursday and Jane and Gabe will obviously be there with Ryland. Daniel and Mike are getting in on Wednesday so that makes nine—”

“I’m bringing Darcy,” Elle blurted.

Mom paused. “Who?”

“You met her brother, Brendon? At breakfast a couple weeks ago?”

Several seconds ticked by before Mom made a hum of recognition. “Oh, right. The actuary?”

Mom had a terrible habit of reducing everyone to their professions. Jane, the pharmacologist. Daniel, the software engineer. Lydia, the dental student. She could only imagine what Mom referred to her as. *Elle, the disappointment.*

“Yeah, she’s an actuary.”

“You’re still seeing her?”

“I’m still seeing her.”

“It’s been a few weeks.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Honestly, Elle, can you blame me?”

Elle pressed her lips together, damming up the words inside her throat, none of them right.

Mom prattled on, oblivious to Elle’s plight. “Ten for dinner. I’ll need to come up with another side dish. I wish you would have told me you were

bringing her sooner. But I guess you couldn't have known, could you?"

After another two more minutes of back and forth, Elle managed to end the call.

Margot whistled through her teeth. "That sounded fun."

"So much fun. Can't you tell how overjoyed I am right now?"

Margot snorted.

Elle only hoped that phone call wasn't a sign of what she had to look forward to at Thanksgiving.

Chapter Ten

Darcy sipped her coffee and stared at the *check engine* light on Elle's dash, biting her tongue. When Elle forgot to flip off her blinker after merging onto I-90, Darcy couldn't help herself. "Your turn signal's on."

Elle made a soft noise of acknowledgment and flipped it off. "Sorry. I'm a little out of it. Didn't sleep much last night."

Neither had Darcy.

She had been up until two studying. *Trying* to study. Between practice sets, her mind had drifted, thoughts occupied with Elle. How soft her lips had been when they'd kissed. How she'd tasted like strawberries and how she'd made a tiny sound, no more than a catch in the back of her throat when Darcy had bit down on her lip. The way Elle's absurdly blue eyes lit up when she smiled. The bright peal of her laughter when Darcy made a truly awful joke. How she'd clutched the jacket Darcy had bought her—a purchase fueled by the desire to put another smile on Elle's face—with the sort of reverence most people reserved for precious, priceless finds they planned on cherishing.

Elle might not have had on the jacket, but she *was* wearing a truly out-of-this-world Christmas sweater. *Truly*. Colorful bauble planets with sequined rings popped against the black knit, but it was the addition of *actual* light-up stars operated by a battery pack tucked against Elle's back that set the sweater apart. Darcy fingered the hem of her atrocious Grinch sweater that she'd only purchased because it made Elle smile. She felt a little less out of place than when she'd tried it on.

Thumbs tapping absently against the scuffed leather of the steering wheel, Elle pulled alongside the curb in front of a pale green bilevel house in a quiet, older-looking neighborhood. All the homes looked like they'd been built in the fifties, maybe sixties, but had been well-kept, the lawns manicured and

the stoops swept free of leaves. In the driveway, there was an ostentatious green sports car parked alongside a white Honda CR-V and a silver Tesla.

“This is it,” Elle said, hands clenching around the wheel. “Home sweet home.”

“It’s nice.” Darcy rested her fingers on the handle, cracking the door. Elle continued to stare through the window, teeth worrying her bottom lip. Darcy wanted to reach out, tug it free. She cleared her throat. “Are we heading in?”

Elle relaxed her grip on the wheel and nodded. “Yeah. Probably should. It looks like everyone else is already here.”

Darcy wouldn’t say it, definitely not when Elle looked like she’d rather be anywhere else but here, but she was oddly looking forward to a family Thanksgiving even if it wasn’t *her* family and even if this *thing* between her and Elle was contrived. The last official family Thanksgiving Darcy had had was five years ago when Grandma was still alive. Even then, the family was broken up and small—just Grandma, Mom, Brendon, and her. Now, Mom spent every holiday other than Christmas gallivanting off to some foreign country, a ski lodge or a sunny escape like Bali, with her flavor of the week, leaving her and Brendon to fend for themselves. Nothing new. It was the sort of behavior she’d learned to expect from Mom—frivolous, self-centered, careless. Brendon had learned to shrug it off; Thanksgiving was never his favorite holiday anyway, no matter how hard Darcy had tried to make it something they could celebrate together even if it was just the two of them. If there weren’t costumes involved or some tie-in to a movie franchise, Brendon wasn’t interested. At least, for some reason, he still liked Christmas.

Darcy followed Elle up the brick steps. The closer they came to the front door, the slower Elle’s steps became, like she was marching off to the executioner’s block and not her childhood home. On the landing, Elle spun on her heel, nearly knocking into Darcy who was right behind her. Her lips pulled back from her teeth in a grimace. “Look, Darcy—”

The front door opened, stopping Elle from finishing what she’d been trying to say. “Elle, you made it.”

This must have been Elle’s mom. The woman opening the door had the same blue eyes, the same tiny cleft in her chin. Fine lines appeared beside the corners of her eyes when she smiled and reached for Elle, hands curling around her shoulders, tugging her in for a brief hug before drawing back, her eyes darting over Elle’s face, before she caught sight of Darcy over her shoulder. “You must be Darcy. It’s so good to meet you. Call me Linda.”

Darcy slid the strap of her brown leather hobo bag down her arm and withdrew the bottle of wine she'd packed as a hostess gift. "Likewise. Thank you so much for having me. I wasn't sure what kind of wine you like, so I brought my favorite."

Linda's eyebrows lifted high on her forehead. "Why don't I take this to the kitchen and open it up?"

Elle goggled. "Mom, it's barely after noon."

"And?" Linda waved for them to follow as she slipped inside the house.

"How come when I day drink on holidays, it's all 'Elle, be reasonable. Tequila's not a breakfast food.' Or, 'Elle, take that onesie off. You're scaring the kids.' But now you're all, *it's five o'clock somewhere*. What gives?"

Linda ignored her.

"*Mom.*"

"I'm sorry." Linda didn't even look over her shoulder. "I thought that was rhetorical."

Elle frowned sharply as Linda disappeared around the corner, a dismissal if Darcy had ever seen one.

She snagged Elle by the elbow. "You own a onesie?"

"A unicorn onesie, yes. What's your point?"

Darcy tried not to wince when the itchy polyblend of her sweater scratched her shoulders. "Sounds cute."

Laughter drifted down the hall.

"Come on. Let's go meet my family." Fingers tangling with hers, Elle tugged her down the hall, stopping in the entry of a spacious living room, the walls painted a soothing shade of pale olive. The conversation cut off, all eyes on them.

Lifting a hand, Elle was nearly bowled over by the force of a tiny shouting boy. "Aunt Elle!"

Voices blended together into one synchronous, "Hey, Elle," and six sets of eyes quickly turned to Darcy, studying her with looks ranging from openly curious to shrewd.

Elle coughed lightly, hand drifting down to rest on her nephew's head. "Everyone, this is Darcy. Darcy, this is . . . well, everyone."

"I'm Ryland." Elle's nephew peeked up from where he was hugging Elle's knees. He lifted a hand, thumb and pinky folded against his palm. "I'm three."

Darcy dropped to a crouch and grinned. "My name's Darcy. I'm almost

thirty.”

Ryland’s eyes rounded comically.

Chuckles came from the couch. “Come on, Rye. Give your aunt some space.”

Elle’s nephew scampered off toward where a mess of Legos lay scattered by the dining room table.

“I’m Jane, and this is my husband, Gabe.” Elle’s oldest sister waved, her other hand resting atop a noticeable baby bump stretching the limits of her garish red-and-green sweater that matched her husband’s.

“Daniel.” Elle’s brother stood and offered his hand and a warm smile. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the guy holding a chubby dachshund. “That’s the love of my life. And then there’s my husband, Mike.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “Always good to know where I stand. The dog’s Penny, by the way.”

Darcy shook his hand and nodded. “Nice to meet you both. And Penny.”

From the far end of the sofa, dressed in a blue-and-cream snowflake-embroidered sweater that was festive but not *ugly*, waved a girl who had the same chin but darker hair than Elle. “I’m Lydia. And this is my—” She glanced up adoringly at the guy with a blond high fade wearing a basic gray crewneck sweater whose side she was tucked against. He returned her smile, tapping her on the tip of the nose. “Marcus.”

He tipped his chin in a greeting before addressing Elle. “Lyds has told me a lot about you.”

Elle stiffened, her grip on Darcy’s forearm tightening minutely. She gave an awkward chuckle. “All good things, I hope.”

The corner of Marcus’s mouth lifted in a not-quite smile.

Jane cleared her throat and patted the couch. “Come sit. Tell us how you’ve been.”

Darcy took a seat beside Elle on the one open cushion. Elle tapped her fingers against her thighs, prompting Darcy to grab a hand to keep her from openly fidgeting. The gesture earned her a quick squeeze.

“I’ve been good. Actually, I’ve been—”

“I’ve got your wine, Darcy.” Linda returned to the living room, a glass in each hand.

“What about me?” Elle frowned.

Linda took a sip from her glass and sat in the armchair closest to the fire. “Did you want some? You should’ve asked.”

Elle's frown deepened, expression clearing when a tall man with gray hair and smile lines stepped into the room. "Dad."

When she stood, Darcy quickly followed suit.

"Elle-belle." He leaned over the coffee table, planting a kiss on her forehead. "And this must be Darcy who we've all been dying to meet."

Darcy wasn't so sure about the *dying to meet her* bit, but she smiled anyway. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

He batted at the air, chuckling softly. "Sir, bah! Call me Simon." His hazel eyes darted back to Elle as he held out a bottle of hard cider. "Got you covered, kid."

Elle smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

Simon perched on the arm of the chair beside his wife. "So. Darcy. Tell us a little about yourself."

Inside, Darcy groaned. She loathed the spotlight, but she'd been to enough corporate retreats over the last eight years that she had a neat elevator speech at the ready. "Sure. I recently moved to town from Philadelphia, though I'm originally from San Francisco. And I work at Deveraux and Horton Mutual Life as an associate actuary, although I'm currently preparing for my final exam to become an FSA."

Simon whistled. "Impressive."

This wasn't supposed to be about impressing Elle's family. Tangentially, perhaps, if it reflected good on Elle. "Not as impressive as Elle's work."

Across the room, Linda smiled politely. "How about your family? I believe I met your brother. Any other siblings?"

Elle sank into the couch, fingers sliding against Darcy's palm as she attempted to withdraw her hand. Darcy squeezed her fingers, holding firm. "Other than my father who lives in Toronto and my mother who still lives in California, it's just me and Brendon. He's *extremely* excited to be working with Elle."

"Right." Linda's smile tightened. "The *dating app*."

Darcy bit the side of her tongue to keep from pulling a face at the way Elle's mother made *dating app* sound like a dirty word.

"What dating app?" Daniel asked, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

"One True Pairing," she said.

His brows rose. "You're working for OTP?"

Elle cleared her throat, sitting up straight. "*With*. Um." She scratched the side of her neck, eyes darting around the room. A soft flush spread up her

throat, deepening at her cheeks. “Margot and I, we’re consulting with OTP to add synastry, or astrological compatibility, to the app’s matching algorithm. It’s, um, it’s pretty cool, I guess.”

Pretty cool. I guess. Darcy would have to be oblivious not to notice how Elle shrank in on herself, couching her words and understating her success. She was no expert, but she couldn’t help but wonder if Elle subconsciously downplayed her achievements to soften the blow when her family did the same.

Despite the furrow of his brow, Daniel smiled. “Well, congrats, sis.”

Linda nodded absently. “That sounds like a neat opportunity for you, Elle. I’m sure it’ll be a . . . fun job. Right up your alley.”

A neat opportunity. Darcy’s jaw ticked, her ability to tolerate bullshit slim, her ability to tolerate condescension worse.

Could they not have *tried* to appear authentically enthused? Darcy might not have believed in astrology—most of it honestly went over her head, talk of houses and returns and interceptions—but she listened when Elle spoke about it because it may not have mattered to her but it sure as hell mattered to Elle. How could they not see that? How could they not care? At the very least, Darcy understood what a fucking fantastic opportunity this was. Neat, her ass.

Still gripping Elle’s hand fiercely, Darcy sat up straighter. “Elle’s being modest. The deal with my brother’s company is quite frankly, massive. The dating app industry, as a whole, is oversaturated, and while OTP does a fantastic job of offering a unique user experience, it was brilliant of my brother to look to a rapidly growing, yet still young industry like astrology.” Darcy reached for her wine and took a fortifying sip. “Did you know venture capitalists have invested over two *billion* dollars in astrology apps because they’re popular with Gen Z and Millennial women? That means there’s money to be made. There are *thousands* of social media astrology accounts and yet Oh My Stars has more followers on Twitter and Instagram than any of their competitors, so you might not believe in it, plenty of people might not, but a huge number do.” Darcy shrugged. “And like I said, my brother’s brilliant. He wouldn’t take a chance on just anyone, let alone sign a deal this big.”

Linda’s eyes, suddenly wide, darted between her and Elle. “How big?”

Elle’s face had turned the prettiest shade of petal pink, her eyes huge and glassy as she stared at Darcy for a long moment, finally looking at her

mother. “Um. *Big.*”

“Damn, get that bread, sis,” Daniel joked.

“Bread?” Dad frowned thoughtfully. “I thought it was bacon? What’s next, *get that guacamole?*”

Daniel laughed. “Dough, Dad.”

While Elle’s family argued over the etymology of bread as a stand-in for money, Jane insisting it dated back to Cockney slang, Elle leaned in, lips brushing against the shell of Darcy’s ear as she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Two billion dollars, huh?”

Darcy rolled her eyes, but *Jesus*. Elle’s breath against Darcy’s skin did outrageous things to her pulse. “I did my research.”

Elle had no idea how many nights Darcy had stayed up, scouring Oh My Stars’s various social media accounts and reading articles from the *New York Times* on venture capital and astrology apps. It had started as a means of making sure she had her *i*’s dotted and *t*’s crossed if Brendon seemed suspicious about the veracity of her dating Elle. After that kiss, that *fucking* kiss, it had been her way of gaining insight into Elle’s mind. Because perhaps if she understood astrology, she’d understand Elle, and if she understood Elle perhaps, she’d be able to untangle what it was about her that she couldn’t shake.

Why she was so in knots over this impossible woman who had her head in the clouds and wore her heart on her sleeve. A woman with the world’s least refined palate and an inability to sit properly in a chair like a normal person. Darcy should’ve wanted as far away from her as earthly possible and yet her laugh was infectious and made something warm bloom inside Darcy’s chest like stubborn wildflowers poking up through cracks in the pavement, growing where they didn’t belong. And the way she looked at Darcy with those dark blue eyes made Darcy feel *seen* like Elle wasn’t looking at her but into her and it was raw and uncomfortable and yet—

That she’d tacked on the word *yet* should’ve sent warning bells off inside her head. Darcy wasn’t looking to be seen. Not like that. Not now. She had an FSA exam to pass, a career to focus on. The only place Darcy had any business being *seen* was in the mirror each morning as she got ready for work, and yet every free moment—even moments that weren’t free—Darcy spent thinking about Elle. About that kiss. About the sorts of things Darcy could do to put a smile on her face. About—

Something smacked the side of Elle’s head. A bottle cap. Across the

room, with his sock-covered feet propped on the coffee table, Daniel grinned. “Quit making out.”

Elle plucked the cap off the floor and flicked it back at him. “We weren’t making out, you douche canoe.”

“*Elle.*” Jane widened her eyes and tilted her head toward the dining room where Ryland was building a tower out of Legos, none the wiser.

“Oh, come on.”

“Last month after you babysat, Ryland asked me what a”—she dropped her voice—“twatwaffle was and if his could have chocolate chips.”

Darcy pinched her lips together, eyes watering and shoulders shaking as she leaned into Elle who was stifling her laughter—poorly—by biting her knuckles.

“Twatwaffle?” Daniel cackled. “That’s fucking inspired, Elle.”

“*Language.*” Linda glared briefly at Elle before turning to Daniel, lips curved downward in apparent disappointment. “I expect this sort of thing from your sister, but honestly, Daniel?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Elle asked, frowning sharply.

Linda shut her eyes. “Elizabeth—”

“*Ahem.* Not that this isn’t totally *riveting.*” Lydia unfolded herself from the couch and stood, tugging Marcus up with her. “But while we’re talking about good news, Marcus and I have an announcement we’d like to make.”

Beside her, Elle stiffened.

“Oh my god,” Linda breathed, clasping her hands in front of her chest.

Elle’s little sister reached inside her sweater and withdrew a long chain from around her neck. Dangling from its length was an impressively sized princess-cut diamond engagement ring. Lydia bounced on her toes, beaming from ear to ear. “Marcus proposed and I said yes, *obviously.* I’m engaged!”

Darcy swallowed her groan, not that anyone would’ve heard it over the din of Elle’s family jumping to their feet to wrap Lydia in hugs and congratulate the newly engaged happy couple.

She didn’t want to think the worst of Elle’s little sister, but seriously? Of all the times to announce her engagement, did it have to be right on the heels of Elle finally getting her moment in the spotlight? Finally being seen for the bright, successful, enterprising woman she was? She’d argue the timing was circumspect if not for the fact that Lydia did, in fact, have a ring.

“*Elle.*” Linda jerked her head at Lydia pointedly.

“Right, *shit.* I mean, sorry. Congratulations, sis. That’s—” Her eyes shut

for just a moment. When she opened them, she offered Lydia a genuine smile. “I’m really happy for you.”

Lydia had slipped the ring on her finger. She twisted it slightly, adjusting it so it sat right. “Thanks, Elle.” She chuckled. “Who knows, maybe you’ll be next?”

Elle tugged her fingers free from Darcy’s grip and Darcy immediately missed the warmth of her skin.

Her laughter sounded forced, fake. “Ha. Maybe.”

* * *

An hour later, from the head of the table, Mom lifted her glass of wine in the air and looked at Lydia with a glowing smile. God, what Elle wouldn’t give to have Mom look at her like that, just once. “A quick toast. To Lydi-bee. Your father and I are so proud of you and we couldn’t be happier for you and for Marcus as you embark on this exciting journey together. We love you, Lydia.”

Lydia wiped beneath her eyes as everyone, Elle included, saluted them, drinks raised. As soon as she could, Elle gulped her cider, trying to wash out the bitter taste that had taken up residence in the back of her mouth. Envy never failed to make Elle feel guilty; it just wasn’t who she was, wasn’t an emotion she felt at home in, but there was a part of her, a secret part tucked away, buried so deep she didn’t even let on to Margot, that was worried it was who she was becoming. That her feelings of inadequacy were mutating into something ugly. *Resentment*.

She was happy for Lydia, but that didn’t make this any easier. Sitting and smiling and nodding politely as everyone congratulated her loudly, Elle’s own accomplishments once again taking a back seat. God. Not even the back seat because then, at least, she’d be included. There was no room for Elle in the car.

Making matters worse was that Darcy had seen it all unfold, had a painfully intimate front-row seat. And that comment Lydia had made about Elle being next to get married? Fuck her life. Lydia couldn’t have known Darcy and Elle’s relationship was fake; Darcy had done a commendable job of playing the role of besotted girlfriend. An *achingly* good job, so good Elle almost felt like this was real, which was almost worse because added to the brewing resentment was an unhealthy dose of yearning. Tugged in too many

directions, Elle felt sick, stomach queasy.

She had agreed to go along with this fake-dating sham in hopes that her family might take her seriously if they saw her in a different light, if they saw she had one part of her life going according to a plan they could get behind. So far, her stock had barely risen in their eyes even with Darcy talking her up. Adding insult to injury, she and Darcy were scheduled to “break up” in a little over a month.

Where would that leave her? Back where she started or worse? Maybe her family would think her an even bigger mess. She’d hoped to paint the breakup as mutual and faultless, but knowing her luck, her family would find her culpable no matter what she said.

Mom clapped her hands and scooted her chair forward. “All right, everyone. Dig in.”

Serving dishes were passed around the table from person to person until everyone had a plateful of Thanksgiving’s best dishes. A minute later, Marcus’s expression soured.

Lydia was quick to rest her hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Um, I think there’s something wrong with the turkey.”

A concerned frown quickly replaced Mom’s immediate look of startled displeasure. “What is it? Underdone?”

His jaw shifted, tongue rolling against his cheeks. “Tastes like soap? Did you wash it?”

Mom was a lot of things, but domestic goddess wasn’t one of them. Dad cooked 364 days of the year, but for some reason, Mom had claimed Thanksgiving as her own, ruling the kitchen with an iron fist and refusing to surrender even as much as a side dish or dessert to anyone. Her efforts were met with varying degrees of success they were all forced to grin and bear. Elle couldn’t quite wrap her head around why Mom would wash a turkey—don’t ask, don’t tell was Elle’s Turkey Day motto—but in comparison to 2008’s corn and giblet pudding, a little dish soap was mild.

Jane took a bite and after swallowing, said, sounding surprised, “It’s cilantro, yeah?”

“Cilantro lime.” Mom nodded. “I always go with sage and thyme, so I thought I’d try a new recipe. Brighten the meal up a bit.”

Marcus shook his head, a contrite smile crossing his face. “Sorry. I’ve got a thing with cilantro. Tastes weird to me. No offense.”

Mom waved him off. “You’re fine, Marcus. I’ll remember that for next

time.”

Lydia took a bite of her turkey and then hummed, eyes flaring. She finished chewing and smiled broadly. “You know, Elle, you’re a little like cilantro.”

Elle set her fork down. She didn’t want to put the cart in front of the horse, but she had a sneaking suspicion Lydia hadn’t said that because of Elle’s ability to add flavor to a meal. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

A pucker appeared between Lydia’s brows. “You know. People tend to either love cilantro or . . .” She winced. “It was supposed to be a joke because you’re . . .” She wiggled her head. “Never mind.”

The bitter taste in the back of Elle’s mouth returned with a vengeance. “Because I’m *what*, Lydia?”

“Relax, Elle,” Mom chided from the head of the table. “I think what your sister was trying to say is that your interests tend to be a tad peculiar is all.”

“Quirky.” Lydia nodded, smiling placidly like she hadn’t just called her a fucking weirdo.

Elle tossed her napkin beside her plate. She didn’t have much of an appetite. “What exactly is *peculiar* about my interests?”

“All I was trying to say is, your interests are *unique*. For people who aren’t used to your . . . new age philosophy, it can take some time to get used to. Crystals and chakras and relying on advice that might as well be printed in the *Farmer’s Almanac*. Elle. You’re—*they’re*—an acquired taste. I think that’s all your sister meant.”

An acquired taste.

All Elle could hear was *hard to swallow and unpalatable*.

She could sign all the book deals and consulting contracts with Fortune 500 companies, have all her ducks in order, but because she didn’t live her life exactly the way Mom wanted, take the right jobs, date the people Mom set her up with, *settle* for safe, she’d always fall short.

“An acquired taste.” Elle sucked her bottom lip between her teeth to keep it from doing something stupid like quivering. “Nothing I do is ever going to be good enough, is it?”

Dad’s fork clattered against his plate and Jane gasped, the final noise before a collective hush descended over the room.

“*Elizabeth*,” Mom stage-whispered. “What on earth—”

“Come on, Mom. It’s not even an elephant in the room anymore, it’s . . . it’s writing on the wall. Because I don’t have your job or Dad’s, follow in

your footsteps, do everything exactly the way you want, everything according to *your* plan, *your* schedule, I'm *peculiar*."

Dad coughed into his fist. "Elle-belle, no one ever said you had to have the same job as me or your mother. Look at Jane, she's—"

"Perfect." Elle nodded. "And can do no wrong. Old news. I wasn't being literal; I meant the sort of job you have. In an office or a hospital, somewhere I report to a manager and put family photos up in a cubicle and drink tepid coffee in a breakroom and make insignificant small talk with coworkers who probably also hate their jobs. You want me to fit myself in a box and I just . . . I don't. I'm not like that."

Mom stared from the head of the table, hands clenched around her cutlery. One deep breath later, she said, "Only because you don't *try*. Six years of college and grad school and you threw it all away—all that effort, all that money, all that time—so you could have fun becoming a social media sensation? What's going to happen to you when the next big thing comes along, Elle? When Instagram and Twitter are obsolete and people have moved on from this pseudoscientific astrology fad to something else? You could've been a chemical engineer or a climatologist or worked for NASA had you wanted, but—"

"But I didn't!" Elle's eyelids were hot and a sour knot had formed inside her throat, bile and bitter indignation creeping up her esophagus, the resentment she'd buried for years beneath layers of defensive humor and nonchalance clawing its way to the surface. "That's my point. That wasn't what *I* wanted. I wasn't happy."

Mom pressed her fingers to the space between her eyes and gave a weary sigh. "It's Thanksgiving. The whole family is together. Your sister just announced her engagement. Could we *not* make a scene?" Her gaze darted to Darcy who was looking at Elle, eyes wide and jaw clenched.

Inside her head, Elle's pulse beat too loud.

A scene. Of course. Adding insult to injury, she was also a train wreck. A *mess*. Darcy wasn't looking for a relationship, but if she were? What did Elle even have to offer? Not even her own family thought she was good enough.

Her face was hot and her legs weak and her thoughts went disjointed, a scattershot inside her brain of colors and isolated words, desires and aches. She swallowed twice, her tongue thick, curling strangely around her words as she stood, arms hanging limply at her sides, fingertips tingling as the fight drained from her, replaced with bone-deep lethargy. "I'm going to get

another drink and take a minute. So I don't, you know, make another scene."

"Elle," Darcy called out, but Elle kept moving.

Left foot. Right foot. One foot in front of the other until she escaped down the hall to the kitchen with its clean counters and bright white cabinets. Elle ducked her chin and ran her fingers over the jingle bells affixed to her sweater. Blues and reds and greens. Orange and pink planets set against a starry sky. It looked like a box of crayons threw up on her and she *loved* this sweater but no one else did. She'd discovered it in the bottom of a half-off bin at a thrift store in the middle of April, someone having cleared out their closet and tossed it. Deemed it unworthy.

But Elle had loved it enough to take it home.

Elle loved herself, but what a feeling it must be, being loved by someone else exactly as you are, quirks and warts and all. She wouldn't know.

Santa's knit face blurred before her eyes. Over the ringing in her ears, footsteps approached down the hall, getting closer, the loose floorboard near the kitchen door squeaking. *Shoot*. Elle swiped a hand over her face, mopping her tears with her sleeve.

Darcy ducked her head around the corner, eyes flaring when she spotted Elle. Elle who undoubtedly looked like a wreck, face streaked with salty tears and . . . she looked at the sleeve of her sweater. Plum-colored eyeliner smeared the wool. What else was new. Elle was the definition of an ugly crier, her complexion going splotchy and her eyes swelling like she was having an allergic reaction, her body trying to shove her emotions out violently through her tear ducts. Of course, Darcy was there to bear witness to another shade of Elle in all her messy glory.

"So. Your family kind of sucks," Darcy said, plainly.

Elle snorted, but her nose was stuffed so it came out like an awkward honk.

"It's no big deal." She forced a laugh. "If you think about it, it's stupid. I don't know why I'm so upset. Cilantro, I mean . . . shit. Saying I taste like soap to a vocal minority of the population, that's— It's ridiculous."

It didn't *feel* ridiculous.

Darcy's shoulders rose as she stared hard at Elle. Elle crossed her arms, hugging herself tight, and shifted her weight from one foot to the other, briefly lifting one leg to scratch the back of her knee with her opposite toe.

Darcy took a careful step toward her, then another and another until she was close enough that Elle could count the freckles on her nose. Only there

were too many, countless others spreading out along Darcy's cheeks, spilling down her jaw. Of course, there was that special freckle shaped like the moon beside Darcy's mouth, the one bracketed by her dimple.

She was so busy trying in vain to count Darcy's freckles, to remember what the freckle at the corner of her mouth had tasted like when they'd kissed, that it wasn't until Darcy's thumb brushed the skin beneath Elle's right eye that Elle even realized Darcy had reached out to touch her.

"For what it's worth," Darcy said, her right hand joining the left to wipe away the tears and liner from beneath Elle's eyes. "I like cilantro."

Elle blinked, thoughts jamming because there were too many of them competing for space inside her brain. Overriding everything was the fact that Darcy was cradling Elle's face in her hands and staring into Elle's eyes, her perfect teeth sunk into the swell of her lower lip, so sharp her lip had turned white from the pressure.

When Darcy released her lip, the flesh plumped, turning red. Her hands slipped lower, thumbs no longer grazing the thin, delicate skin beneath Elle's eyes, but the side of her jaw, her fingers curling around the back of Elle's neck. "And when we kissed? I really liked how you taste."

Warmth seeped from Elle's chest down into her stomach like she'd taken a shot of tequila. It spread lower, heat settling between her thighs. Her thoughts turned syrupy slow and candy sweet as Darcy leaned in, erasing the distance between them inch by torturous inch.

This was really happening and it couldn't be for show because it was just the two of them inside the kitchen, their faces growing closer together. Elle could taste the sharp, fruity, warmth of Darcy's breath and her chest started to ache, arms and legs and the muscles in her stomach quivering, all but vibrating from keeping still. Waiting . . . waiting . . . Anticipation was the sweetest torture as Darcy exhaled, lips curling in delight at the whimper that clawed its way up Elle's throat when Darcy's nose brushed hers, Darcy's nails—

"There you two— *Whoops.*"

Elle stepped back, hip knocking into the counter, sending a frisson of pain radiating from her hip bone all the way up her side. A pink flush crept up Darcy's jaw as she stepped away, ducking her chin and staring at the floor.

Frozen in the doorway, Dad smiled sheepishly. "Right. Just coming to make sure you were okay, Elle-belle."

"Fine, Dad." At least her voice had barely shook. "We'll be out in a

minute.”

He coughed lightly, feet already carrying him backward through the door.

A moment passed, Elle weighing words that would do her feelings justice. She wanted to chase after the moment, snatch it back, crawl inside that bubble where she and Darcy breathed the same air, but she didn't know how to revive it.

Darcy opened her mouth and a sudden pulse of panic clawed its way up Elle's throat not knowing what Darcy was going to say but terrified it would erase the progress they'd made.

“What are you doing this weekend?” Elle blurted.

Darcy shut her mouth, lashes fluttering. “Why?”

Elle swallowed and took a leap of faith. “Do you want to do something? With me?”

That moment was gone. But they could make a new moment. Several moments. If Darcy wanted. If this, Darcy following her into the kitchen, and saying what she had, meant what Elle hoped it did.

Darcy's lips drew to the side. “Not with your family, right?”

“Definitely not.” Elle laughed, relieved beyond belief that Darcy hadn't immediately said no.

“And not with my brother?”

Darcy was flirting and there was no one around for her to fool, no one to convince that this was anything but exactly what it was. Something real.

Elle shook her head and boldly reached out, brushing a strand of hair out of Darcy's face before it could fall into her eyes. “Just me.”

Hopefully *just Elle* would be enough.

The smirk on Darcy's face grew, spreading, transforming into a genuine smile, the sight of which made Elle's stomach explode in a spray of butterfly wings. “I'd like that.”

Chapter Eleven

Are you sure we're allowed to be here?" Darcy whispered, following Elle up a long, narrow flight of stairs sandwiched between two stone walls.

The step beneath Elle's right foot creaked when she turned, one hand resting on the railing, the other clutching her phone, which served as their flashlight, illuminating the otherwise pitch-black stairway.

"No." A scant amount of light rebounded off the stone wall casting shadows across Elle's face. Darcy couldn't see her mouth, but the lilt to Elle's voice hinted at a smile. "We're actually *not* allowed to be here."

"*Elle.*"

"Come on." Fingers caressed the inside of Darcy's wrist making her shiver. "Break the rules with me, Darcy."

Little did she know Darcy was already breaking all sorts of rules. Rules of Darcy's own making.

Darcy should've known Elle had a reason for refusing to answer any of her questions about where they were going and what Elle had planned for their . . . date? It *felt* like a date, had all the trappings of one. Darcy's stomach had been in tangles all day, thinking about it. Her focus had been shot, her ability to get work done dismal. Rather than accomplish any studying, Darcy had performed an unreliable risk assessment of her own. Answer? If she had to ask whether it was a date, her risk was too high. Even knowing that, all she could think about was Elle, seeing Elle, what it meant and how it terrified her and how, despite the risk, she'd been unable to bring herself to cancel.

Dress warm and be ready by eleven was all Elle had said. At first Darcy had thought Elle meant eleven in the morning because what reasonable person planned a date for eleven at night? But according to Elle, the best adventures happened after dark.

Elle jiggled the knob on the door, hips and ass shaking in the cutest victory dance when the door opened revealing a round, moonlit room. “Tada! Welcome to the Jacobsen Observatory, the second-oldest building on campus.” Arms outstretched above her, fingers lifted toward the domed ceiling, Elle spun in a dizzying circle, her black skirt flouncing out around her tight-covered thighs. She was wearing the jacket Darcy had bought her.

Feigning interest in the building’s architecture, Darcy turned, pressing her fingers to one of the stones in front of her, hiding her smile in the shadows. “How’d you find this place?”

As covertly as possible, she peeked over her shoulder, watching as Elle dropped her arms, her smile dimming. Subtle, but Darcy noticed. She wasn’t sure when it had happened, but she noticed everything about Elle. How she tugged on her ear when she was anxious. Her bad habit of biting her bottom lip, a bad habit Darcy liked very much. *Too much.* She’d never been jealous of someone else’s *teeth* before, but Elle could bite that lip whenever, and there was something patently unfair that Darcy wasn’t allowed the privilege of doing the same.

Losing it. Darcy was absolutely losing it, losing her head, losing her grip, losing it all over Elle. She had sneaked up on Darcy and now here she was, jealous of Elle’s fucking teeth. God help her.

“Come on.” Elle tilted her head toward one of the arched French windows.

Darcy breathed deep, lungs swelling, burning before she exhaled and followed where Elle led.

Like the door, the window wasn’t locked, opening with ease when Elle pressed against the latch. She threw her right leg over the sill, straddling the ledge, then shimmied out the window, dropping onto the balcony that wrapped around half of the turret-shaped building. Elle held out a hand. Resting her fingers in Elle’s warm palm, Darcy stepped over the edge and into the cool, night air, her hair whipping in the breeze.

Above them, bright, winking stars twinkled against an inky blue canvas, the view expansive and impressive and it made Darcy’s breath catch in her throat. “*Oh.*”

Elle tugged, dragging Darcy eagerly over to the stone railing. “Life would be a lot better if we all spent a little more time staring at the stars.” Loose strands of blond hair caught the moonlight, creating a haloed glow around her when she turned her face up to the sky. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Darcy wasn’t looking at the sky.

“You see that cluster of stars right there?” Elle pointed, drawing Darcy’s attention to a grouping to the right. “Right”—she grabbed Darcy’s hand and lifted it toward the sky, tracing a pattern in the stars—“there. That’s the Big Dipper. If you follow those stars—the vertical ones on the end—straight up, you reach Polaris, also known as the North Star. It’s a constant, never moves. If you’re ever lost, you can always find true north, as long as you can spot that star.”

Elle let go of Darcy’s hand and placed her palms flat against the railing. Hyperaware of where her limbs existed in space now that Elle was near but no longer touching her, Darcy’s hand hovered awkwardly at her side, her fingers tingling as she flexed them.

“I know about this place because I was an astronomy major.” Elle’s lips quirked. “The last person I told that to assumed I was some ditz who confused astronomy with astrology and was in for a rude awakening.” She huffed out a laugh. “Shockingly, not true.”

Darcy hadn’t thought it was. “People are assholes.”

“They can be.” Elle’s earrings, dangling azure baubles shaped like planets, skimmed her jaw. She cleared her throat and tilted her head to the side, meeting Darcy’s eyes, her lips crooking. “I got into grad school and got my master’s in astronomy with an emphasis in cosmology.”

Her teeth scraped against the swell of her bottom lip making the muscles in Darcy’s stomach quiver and clench. It was Elle’s lip Darcy was jealous of now, the desire for Elle to sink her teeth into *Darcy’s* lip fierce, consuming.

“I was working toward my PhD. It was a six-year program, the first two geared toward coursework for your master’s, and the rest was teaching, research, writing your dissertation, and preparing for what comes next, whatever that was. I was stuck teaching this intro course that was full of freshmen looking for an easy A and staying up until all hours working on my thesis, and it all just hit me that it wasn’t what I wanted but I kept plugging along because what else was I supposed to do? Then Oh My Stars—it was Margot’s and my side hustle at the time—took off when we got a job writing horoscopes for *The Stranger*. Grad school had zapped the magic out of learning, but Oh My Stars was something I was excited about, the thing that got me out of bed each morning. I woke up the next day and decided I wasn’t going to let anyone take the stars from me so I quit the program.”

“I’m guessing your family didn’t take it well?” Darcy arched a brow.

Elle ducked her head, chuckling in that self-deprecating way people tend to when what they're saying means more to them than they're letting on, than they want you to know. "My family was . . . I want to say concerned, but I think they were *horrified*. They sat me down for an intervention. Everyone thought I was burned out or having a quarter-life crisis. Mom thought I'd lost my mind."

Elle leaned her elbows on the railing and rested her chin in her hands. "I don't . . . I don't expect them to agree, or even completely understand, but I wish they'd respect it. My choices. *Me*. I wish I didn't have to be so . . . so *serious* in order for them to take me seriously. Does that make sense?"

Mom liked to joke that Darcy had been born serious, but that wasn't true. She knew how to have fun; her interests just leaned toward quiet, individual pursuits. Reading. Crossword puzzles. Yoga instead of team sports. Even her more whimsical hobbies—watching soap operas and TV Land—put her firmly in the camp of *millennial grandma*.

That didn't mean she didn't understand how Elle felt. "Fewer than a third of actuaries are women and even that's five times higher than it was a decade or so ago. It's not the same. I'm not trying to say—" She sighed. "My job is conventional. It's garden variety. No one thinks you're peculiar when you say you're an actuary. *Boring*, maybe."

Elle chuckled softly.

"But I've had people assume I'm an administrative assistant. If they know I'm an actuary, they assume I'm a career associate—which there's nothing wrong with, don't get me wrong—but they balk at the idea of me reaching FSA designation. Why would I take all those tests? Aren't I happy being an associate? The pay's good, but—"

"You want more than that," Elle said.

She nodded. "I want more than that."

"I know why I want more, but how about you? Is it proving that you can? That you can be the best? Or I assume the pay *is* better . . ."

It was, but that wasn't why. Or it wasn't only why.

How much did she want to tell Elle? She *didn't* want to talk about it. Simply churning up the memories in turn churned up her stomach until she was queasy. But Elle had been so open, so honest, let herself be vulnerable. Darcy owed the same, and a tiny part of her wanted Elle to know. Know her.

"I told you about my parents." Darcy rubbed the hollow of her throat. "About how my mother quit working when I was born. My father made

enough that he was able to support the family on one income, so even when we got older, she didn't go back to work because she didn't need to. She had hobbies and volunteering to fill up her time, and over the summer, she went with my father when he traveled for business. She didn't like that he was gone so often, or . . . she didn't like that she didn't know what he was doing, she didn't trust him, and seeing as the reason for their divorce was that he left her for his twenty-four-year-old personal assistant, I suppose her worries weren't unfounded."

"Shit," Elle muttered.

"Yeah, it was. It was shit." A gust of wind blew, bitter sharp air biting at the tip of Darcy's nose and messing up her hair. She brushed her curls out of her face and sighed. It wasn't like she'd never told anyone this story. Annie knew all the dirty details; Natasha, too. Maybe that's why it was so hard to talk about. Not because the words were unfamiliar on her tongue, but because she'd hoped that Natasha knowing this, knowing how she felt about the mistrust and disloyalty and how it had wrecked her mother, would've been decent enough not to break Darcy's heart. To be decent enough not to repeat history, in a sense.

Darcy bit the inside of her cheek, the sting of her teeth sinking into the tender flesh of her mouth enough to quell the tears making the stars twinkle and blur. "Mom got custody and child support and a lump sum alimony, but she didn't have the best money management skills, so it was gone in no time. And she hadn't worked in over sixteen years so she had trouble finding a job and getting back on her feet. Having seen her go through that, I promised myself I'd never put myself in the same position. I liked numbers and I was good at math, it made sense. I wanted a job with benefits, a job that paid well. And I was going to be good at it, the best at what I do, so I'd always have job security. I wanted a job that would never just disappear or where I'd become obsolete."

Mom might've had Grandma to fall back on, but Darcy didn't. She only had herself.

"Anyway. That's why."

With a wry twist of her lips, Elle shook her head. "You must think I'm crazy. You have the sort of job my mom would love me to have. You want stable and secure and I want—it's *not* the opposite, not like Mom thinks. I'm not throwing my life away or trying to self-destruct, I just wanted the right fit. But she's not wrong. There isn't job security. All our followers could

disappear tomorrow or a platform could, *poof*, become old news. Or maybe our book bombs or I mess something up some other way.” The forward curl of her shoulders was subtle as Elle drew in on herself. “That would suck, don’t get me wrong, but I’d rather fail at something I love than succeed at something I don’t.”

“You’re not going to fail.” Lifting her head, Darcy glanced up at the sky, at the stars, her eyes catching on the one Elle had pointed out. Polaris. “Despite whatever your family thinks, you’re . . . you’re brilliant at what you do. Not to sound conceited by affiliation, but my brother wouldn’t have wanted to work with you if you aren’t the best.”

“Yeah?” Elle’s teeth were frustrating Darcy again, sunk into her bottom lip. “You think?”

“I know.” Darcy nodded. “And for what it’s worth, I take you seriously.” Elle rolled her eyes. “Sure. Thanks.”

“I mean it.” Darcy gripped the railing and rocked back on her heels. “What I said at Thanksgiving . . . I did do research. Some of what you said about astrology made sense and I wanted to know more. It wasn’t for the sake of selling it, Elle. I didn’t say it because of that. I meant what I said.”

Elle turned her head, meeting Darcy’s eyes. “I never actually thanked you for saying what you did. For defending me. For whatever reason you did.”

It hadn’t even been a question, sticking up for her. Elle who wanted terribly for the world to be full of love and understanding, or at the very least, for her own family to understand.

In retrospect, the impulse terrified Darcy. Protecting Elle had been practically instinctive, but protecting her meant she cared and Darcy wasn’t supposed to care. Not about Elle, not about her hopes and dreams, certainly not how she might factor into them. Or how Elle might factor into hers.

Darcy turned, gazing pointedly at the building behind them. “You still come here. Even though you dropped out. It’s not a reminder? A sore spot for you?”

Elle’s throat jerked, her lips pressed together. “No, it’s the opposite. When I’ve had a crappy week, I come out here and look at the stars and I remember being six years old and watching my first meteor shower on a family camping trip and feeling awe like I’d never felt before. Stars shooting through the sky, it was like . . . it *was* magic. Carl Sagan said we’re made of *star stuff* and it’s true, you know? Stars, the really big ones, don’t just make carbon and oxygen but they keep burning and burning and burning and that

burning produces alpha elements like nitrogen and sulfur, neon and magnesium all the way up to iron. It's called supernova nucleosynthesis. Say that five times fast." Elle laughed and Darcy's chest ached as if something inside her was stretching, making space. Growing pains.

"Eventually, when those massive stars reach the end of their lives, they go out with a bang, a supernova so bright, so beautiful it drowns out all the other stars. And when they do, they throw out all those elements they created. That's what we're made of. We've got calcium in our bones and iron in our blood and nitrogen in our DNA . . . and all of that? It comes from those stars." Elle's eyes glistened, sparkling as bright as the stars she spoke of as she blinked and pointed up at the sky. "We are literally made of stardust."

Moonlight danced off the tips of Elle's pale blond eyelashes and made her eyes twinkle. If anyone was made of star stuff, it was her.

"No matter how old I got or how much everyone told me I needed to *get real* or *be practical* I never stopped wishing on stars or dreaming impossible dreams." A watery laugh spilled from Elle's lips. She shook her head and sniffed, clearing her throat. "Sorry. Whether you take me seriously or not, I know you think it's silly. Astrology and magic and soul mates."

"It's not. I think it's nice," Darcy whispered. "That you still believe in all that."

That Elle woke up every morning and hoped for the best instead of anticipating the worst.

"But you don't, right? Believe in that? Soul mates?"

Darcy gripped the ledge like the safety bar of a roller coaster, her knuckles going white and the bones in her hands aching as she swayed on weak knees. Elle tucked her hair behind her ears and turned her head, blue eyes meeting Darcy's and for a moment, one tenuous moment, Darcy forgot how to breathe.

She couldn't speak, didn't know what she'd say even if she could. Instead, Darcy let go of the railing and reached for Elle, resting her hand on Elle's waist, thumb stroking her through the fabric. Elle lifted her chin, stars reflecting in her eyes, and the curve of her lips dared Darcy to take a chance, a leap of faith. Jump.

Lips covering Elle's and fingers bunching in Elle's hot pink sweater, Darcy threw herself off the cliff's edge and let herself fall. Not to Earth, but toward Elle. Elle, who was magnetic and made it sound like nothing was impossible. That even gravity could be defied if Darcy simply *believed*. That

even if she didn't defy gravity, she could fall anyway and it would be okay because Elle would give Darcy a soft place to land. That Darcy could trust Elle with every fragile inch of herself.

What started slow and soft, a tentative exploration, turned desperate when Elle sucked Darcy's lower lip into her mouth, teeth scraping her flesh. Darcy crushed herself closer, hands circling Elle's neck, her fingers raking through the soft strands at her nape as she rocked her hips into Elle's.

Now that she'd given herself permission to want, to want Elle, she wanted everything, wanted it all with an unbridled urgency. Tearing her mouth from Elle's, she sucked in a gasp of air, lungs filling as she dragged her lips down Elle's cheek, skimming the soft, silky skin of her neck where her pulse beat wildly, an echo to Darcy's own. Tongue darting out to taste the salty sweetness of sweat dotting Elle's throat, Darcy let her hands drift, explore, sliding from Elle's waist down to her hips, around, fingers cupping her ass and squeezing, anything she could do to bring her closer, make her gasp, make her pulse dance harder under Darcy's lips.

The sexiest mewl slipped from Elle's lips when Darcy sucked on the lobe of Elle's ear and tugged, teeth scraping her skin. The sound went straight to Darcy's core, making her ache.

"I— *Fuck*, Darcy." Elle shivered in Darcy's arms, body going tense, then pliant, sagging against the railing at her back.

Fuck, *yes*. Darcy slotted her leg between Elle's and rocked against her, delighting in the way Elle moaned, the sound vibrating against Darcy's lips, and traveling all the way down to her curling toes.

She wanted more. Wanted more of Elle's noises, more of Elle's lips against hers, hers against Elle's, the feel of Elle beneath her hands and between her thighs. She wanted to strip off the rest of Elle's layers and lay her bare, physically, the way Elle had been brave enough to bare her soul beneath this clear, starry sky. She wanted all of Elle—the good, the bad, the messy.

Elle's fingers, the ones that had crept under the cashmere of Darcy's sweater, her nails raking against the sensitive skin above the waistline of Darcy's jeans, pressed, pushing Darcy away.

Darcy stumbled backward, heart pounding. "Sorry."

"Shut up." Elle panted. Her fingers, those fingers that had pulled Darcy closer then pushed her away, slipped around the belt loops of Darcy's jeans, keeping her from fleeing farther. "You're just . . . *ugh*." Elle's head dropped

back on her neck as she groaned, thumbs stroking the thin, sensitive skin over Darcy's hip bones. "You're impossible, you know that?"

The laugh bubbled up inside Darcy's throat unbidden. "Me? *I'm* the impossible one?"

"I dream about impossible things, remember?" Elle grazed a nail against the skin beneath Darcy's navel, making Darcy shiver. Elle's smile was somehow both wicked and sweet. "Come home with me."

Chapter Twelve

Please don't let Margot be awake. Please don't let Margot be awake.

It had occurred to Elle, as they pulled into the lot behind her building, that she should've suggested they go back to Darcy's. Darcy had no roommates, but Elle had blurted out the invitation and could hardly walk it back without fear of it coming across like she was walking it *all* back.

Which was absolutely not the case. Nowhere close, not now, when this nebulous relationship between them had finally started to take shape and become something real.

Twisting the key, Elle pushed the front door open and peered into the dark living room. All the lights were off, save the pineapple-shaped light on the breakfast bar, the one they always kept on in the evenings, no matter what.

Breathing a sigh of relief at her luck, Elle stepped farther into the apartment, waving Darcy in after her.

Darcy had been here before, but only once, and she hadn't stepped beyond the threshold. Now, her eyes made a curious sweep around Elle's Cracker Jack box-size living room. Every now and then she'd pause, alighting on various knickknacks scattered on surfaces, precious memories and mementos Elle and Margot had collected. Turnabout was fair play and all; Elle had definitely taken her sweet time getting acquainted with Darcy's spartan furnishings.

Elle's apartment was decidedly more colorful. And cluttered. A sushi-shaped pushpin holder rested precariously near the edge of the breakfast bar. Photos inside bright, Pantone-colored frames hung crooked on the walls and a cloud-shaped storm glass sat on the windowsill, small dots in the liquid foretelling foggy weather. A floor-to-ceiling tapestry of the zodiac wheel

took up most of the wall beside the couch. Shoes were piled beside the breakfast bar, mostly hers, save for a pair of boots that belonged to Margot. Smack-dab in the center of the floor sat one lone sock, and Elle couldn't remember for the life of her how or why it had ended up there.

"I'm guessing you didn't just move in," Darcy said, smirking over shoulder.

"Ha ha." Elle smiled. "No. I've lived here . . . four years? Five?"

"With Margot?" Darcy asked.

Elle nodded. "With Margot."

Darcy's eyes darted around the space. She flicked the bobblehead astronaut on the bookshelf and arched a brow. "Where *is* Margot?"

Elle jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "Her room, probably."

Her stomach somersaulted when Darcy nodded and stepped toward her, thumbs tucked inside her front pockets. Casual, graceful, Darcy's footsteps didn't even wobble as she put one foot in front of the other, stopping about a foot away from Elle. "And your room is . . . ?"

Elle tugged at the lobe of her ear. "Also, down the hall. Not to be confused with the bathroom. Not that my bedroom looks like a bathroom. Just that you'd be in for a rude awakening if you somehow managed to confuse the two. Basically, everything's down the hall. It's small. My apartment."

"Can I see it?" Darcy asked, hand reaching up and tucking her hair behind her ear.

Elle toyed with the rings on her Neptune earrings. "My room?"

Taking one step closer, so close there was nowhere else for Elle to go, so close their toes bumped, Darcy set her hand on Elle's hip and nodded.

"Sure," Elle breathed. She covered Darcy's hand with hers, slotting their fingers together, and tugged, leading Darcy down the hall to the last door on the right. Feeling along the wall for the switch, she flipped the lights. Not the regular ones that were too bright, gross fluorescents that turned everything in the room an unflattering shade of blue and made her hair look green, but the strands of twinkling fairy lights she'd tacked up along the walls. They bathed the room in a warm, champagne glow bright enough to see, but dim enough to set a certain ambiance. Flattering as candles, but less dangerous. Mood lighting at its safest, not to mention cheapest. That, and hopefully they'd keep Darcy from spotting the mountain of laundry between Elle's desk and dresser that she had yet to fold.

Her concern was for nothing. Darcy didn't look around, definitely didn't judge. She was looking straight at Elle, lids low, her lower lip captured between her teeth.

Elle gripped her sleeve, rubbing the fabric between her fingers and her palm. "So. My room."

Darcy reached out and ran her hands up Elle's arms, over her shoulders, until her fingers rested on either side of Elle's neck. Beneath Darcy's fingertips, Elle's pulse pounded in an unmistakable display of nerves.

Not just nerves. Elle wanted her so badly her fingertips pulsed with the need to touch Darcy, skin burning with the desire to be touched in turn, but she didn't want to mess this up. *This*, whatever it was they were doing that Elle didn't know for sure, didn't want to risk asking because what if she didn't like the answer and—

"Hey." Darcy's thumb brushed along the underside of Elle's jaw, a gentle graze that made Elle shiver. "What are you thinking?"

What was she thinking? God, what *wasn't* Elle thinking? A flurry of half-formed thoughts zipped through her mind. What she wanted, what she hoped . . . so much hope her bones ached, her body too small, almost bursting with holding it inside. Her skin was too tight, hot, itchy, and she wanted to strip it off, strip herself down, let Darcy see the full shape of her heart, messy and imperfect and with a space carved out, a space she'd been aching to fill for so long but no one ever fit, their angles too sharp, too rough, puzzle pieces never lining up right with hers. Elle had been waiting, waiting for the right person to come along who fit inside the space, that space inside her heart carved out just for them. For her person, not a *perfect* person, but a person perfect for *her*.

A person she hoped just might be Darcy.

Elle turned her head and brushed her lips along the inside of Darcy's wrist. "You know, hoping I'm wearing cute underwear."

Laughter sputtered from Darcy's mouth, warm and bright, replacing the anxious swirl in Elle's stomach with a giddy sort of levity.

"I should be the judge of that, don't you think?" Hands still cupping Elle's jaw, cradling her face with a delicacy no one had ever treated her with, Darcy leaned closer until their noses brushed once, twice—

Patience wasn't a virtue Elle possessed. Surging up on her toes, she pressed her lips fully against Darcy's, smiling into the kiss, her stomach erupting in a kaleidoscope of butterflies when Darcy smiled, too.

Hands sliding back to tangle in Elle's hair, Darcy swept her tongue against the seam of Elle's lips. Elle opened, moaning softly when Darcy flicked the tip of Elle's tongue with hers, tasting, teasing.

The kiss was dizzying, her knees going stupidly weak stupidly fast. Screw sports cars, Elle had zero to sixty down pat. Fingers knotting in the hem of Darcy's cashmere sweater, Elle gripped her tight, swaying into her. She groaned when Darcy's tongue traced the roof of her mouth, sending tingles down her spine, her nipples pebbling against the wool of her sweater.

Gasping for air, Elle tore her mouth away and panted. "Can I take this off?"

Elle already felt bare, stripped down to hope and bones and the pulse inside her veins, raw from sharing on the astronomy tower and inviting Darcy over. It was only fair to strip Darcy down a little, too.

Darcy's head bobbed as she lifted her arms into the air, letting Elle tug the sweater up and over her head.

Gah. Darcy's bra was black, all delicate, sheer lace and thin straps that contrasted heavenly against her peaches and cream skin. A flush worked its way up her chest, skin mottling in sunset shades of pink and red, dark orange freckles dotting the swells of her breasts. Elle bit down on a whimper and dropped the sweater to the floor, hands hanging limply at her sides.

"Freckles and dimples and . . . damn it, Darcy." Elle panted. "You're so gorgeous you make my head hurt."

Her heart, too, in the best way. A good ache, the best ache. Anticipation married to a promise, satisfaction guaranteed, only a matter of time.

Darcy threw her head back and laughed, the move highlighting the long, elegant line of her throat. More skin Elle wanted to trace, taste, freckles she wanted to connect in constellations she'd never get tired of exploring, the freckle beside Darcy's mouth, Elle's favorite, the one she'd always come back to. Her new North Star.

"Dimples? They're caused by having a shorter than normal zygomaticus major muscle. It's a facial flaw."

Oh, please. "A sexy flaw."

Cheeks pink and eyes bright, Darcy reached one finger out, curling it beneath the low V-neck of Elle's sweater. Her finger brushed Elle's bare skin right over her heart. "Fair's fair."

Elle reached for the hem of her sweater and yanked it over her head, freezing when the fabric snagged hard on her earring. *Perfect.* "Um. I'm

stuck. Could you . . . ?”

Hands reached up the neck of Elle’s troublesome fluffy sweater. Gently, Darcy freed Elle, then helped her tug the sweater the rest of the way over her head.

Hair mussed and bangs falling in her eyes, Elle blinked, flushing hotter as Darcy’s eyes dipped, staring unapologetically.

Pupils blown wide, Darcy lifted her eyes. Her tongue, bubblegum pink and just as sweet, darted out, licking her lips. “May I?”

Yes, yes. A thousand times, yes. Elle nodded so fast her head spun.

Fingers danced up Elle’s side, forcing her to bite back a giggle at the way it tickled, Darcy’s touch too soft. The laughter stuck in her throat, transforming into a moan when Darcy cupped the small, braless swell of her breast, her thumb sweeping against her nipple, featherlight.

Her knees trembled and her back arched sharply into Darcy’s touch. Her brain forgot how to make words entirely when Darcy dropped her head, lips skimming the skin stretched over her collarbone, and lower, trailing down Elle’s chest, pressing wet kisses to her skin that led to the peak of her right breast. Darcy’s lips wrapped around Elle’s nipple, sucking gently, tugging with her teeth until Elle’s skin went taut, pebbling. Darcy drew back and blew, the sudden rush of cool air against Elle’s sensitive skin making her gasp and reach out, fingers tangling in Darcy’s red hair.

One of Darcy’s hands slipped lower, slid beneath Elle’s skirt and between her thighs, cupping Elle over her leggings and damp underwear and pressing, rubbing with the heel of her hand, making Elle clench and mewl.

Before Elle could get any real relief, Darcy straightened and walked them both backward until Elle’s knees hit the side of her unmade bed. Elle fell, bouncing against her mattress and sinking into the mess of soft blankets.

Darcy tumbled down after her, hands braced on either side of Elle, bracketing her head. She skimmed her nose against Elle’s, breath fanning her mouth, making Elle’s tender, kiss-swollen lips tingle. Eyes dark and lids heavy, those long, enviable lashes that had first caught Elle’s eye on their disastrous blind date swept against the thin skin beneath Darcy’s eyes as she blinked, throat jerking as she swallowed.

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve been dying to taste you?” Rhetorical, it had to be, the way Darcy’s tongue darted out from between red lips turning the question into a confession. “It’s all I can think about. Tell me I can. Please.”

Fingers twisting in the sheets beneath her, Elle arched her back, pushing up into Darcy. The ache between her thighs intensified. “Fuck. Yes.”

A relieved sigh slipped from between Darcy’s lips as if she’d thought Elle might say no. As if there were a universe where Elle would *ever* tell her no.

Darcy slipped lower, lips skimming the hollow of Elle’s throat, the space between her breasts, her hands ghosting over Elle’s ribs, down her waist, her hip, along the curve of her thigh, gooseflesh prickling in the wake of Darcy’s touch. Fingers tucking beneath the band of Elle’s skirt and the leggings underneath, Darcy tugged, yanking the fabric over Elle’s hips and thighs, down her calves and over her feet, her mismatched socks sliding off with them, inside out. Flung across the room and forgotten.

Naked save for the bright blue lace boy shorts hugging her hips—not as sexy as that unfortunate pair she’d lost after their first date, but close—Elle tried not to squirm. The room was warm, but a shiver skittered down her spine at the look in Darcy’s eyes. A look that ignited a want inside Elle that made her dizzy with desperation even though she was lying down. “*Darcy.*”

Blinking fast, Darcy leaned over Elle, lips trailing a hot path down her torso, tongue dipping inside Elle’s navel, making her squirm, hips dancing. Those kisses trailed lower, lips brushing the elastic band of Elle’s underwear, teeth snapping the fabric before her fingers dipped beneath the waistband, tucking and curling. “Okay?”

Elle’s back bowed, hips arching off the bed in silent invitation. Silently pleading for Darcy to *please* get her naked and do dirty things to her, things that would leave her boneless and breathless and blissed out beyond belief.

Taking the hint, Darcy inched Elle’s underwear over her ass and down her legs. She shimmied between Elle’s thighs, lowering herself to the bed, lying on her stomach against the mattress. Warm lips caressed Elle’s inner thigh, laying down teasing kisses, Darcy’s tongue darting out every so often to trace shapes on Elle’s skin. Darcy gently nipped the crease of Elle’s thigh, a pleasant sting that drew a needy whimper from Elle’s lips. One hand hooked Elle’s right knee over Darcy’s shoulder, spreading her legs, opening her wide.

Elle held her breath, chest growing tight as Darcy’s breath ghosted over where Elle ached.

“Oh my god.” Her neck arched against the bed at the first broad swipe of Darcy’s tongue against her.

Darcy’s breath was hot, her lips even hotter as she kissed Elle,

openmouthed and eager, her tongue sliding through Elle's wetness, lapping at her entrance. Another desperate groan spilled from Elle's lips when Darcy wiggled her tongue, slipping inside Elle, her hands reaching down to cup Elle's ass, holding her to Darcy's mouth.

Elle scrunched her eyes shut, fingers clenching the sheets so hard she nearly tore them off the corner of the bed as Darcy licked a path from Elle's entrance all the way to her clit, two slender fingers replacing her tongue. Elle was so slippery with arousal that those fingers sank inside with ease, curling, pressing hard against Elle's front wall, making her thighs tremble and her tummy harden.

In a blink of an eye, those clever fingers of Darcy's slipped out of Elle, making her whimper at the loss. "*God . . . I—*"

Darcy leaned up on one elbow and brought her hand to her mouth, plump red lips enveloping her glistening fingers. Her lashes fluttered, lids lowering on a moan before they flickered open. Intense, brown eyes stared up at Elle, Darcy's lips curling in a devilish smile around her digits, a smile that made everything south of Elle's navel go painfully tight.

Slick with spit, Darcy slipped her fingers back inside Elle, adding another, Elle's walls gripping Darcy tightly. Trembling, Elle's back bowed, neck arching when Darcy splayed one hand against Elle's belly holding her down as she lapped at her clit, soft licks interspersed with openmouthed kisses.

Letting go of the sheets, Elle threaded the fingers of her right hand in Darcy's silky-soft hair. On a whim, she glanced down, breath catching in her throat at the sight of Darcy's brown eyes locked on her face.

Between that stare and the perfect feel of Darcy's mouth, Elle tipped over the edge, back bowing against the mattress, one hand clutching Darcy's head to her sex, the muscles in her thighs shaking as she came apart in slow, trembling convulsions that stole the breath from her lungs and made her chest burn.

A weak whimper fell from Elle's lips as she tugged even more weakly at Darcy's hair. Fingers pressing firmer than before, Darcy didn't back off, didn't let up even when Elle thrashed against the covers, just this side of too sensitive. Elle had barely recovered from her first orgasm when Darcy wrenched another from her, teeth scraping gently against Elle's sensitive clit.

An explosion of color flared against the black of her vision, a supernova bursting behind closed lids. Her back arched, a cry spilling from her lips,

loud and unrestrained, nearly sobbing as Darcy licked her through it, the hand holding her down gently stroking the sweat-slick skin of her stomach.

Fingers untwining from Darcy's hair, Elle let her hand flop down against the bed. Darcy pressed a kiss in parting to Elle's clit and sat back on her haunches, a grin curling her mouth, lips shiny and chin wet, those dark eyes of her gleaming.

Fuck. Elle stared up at the ceiling, at where the stars stuck to her ceiling shone weakly, pale green light competing with the strands of fairy lights illuminating the room in a dim champagne glow. Her heartbeat slowed to something approaching normal, as her brain returned to her body, no longer rocketed to somewhere outside the stratosphere.

Darcy prowled up Elle's body, all lean muscles and mouthwatering curves. She was still only half naked, though the flimsy lace bra she wore did a poor job of concealing much of anything, the taut pucker of her dusky pink nipples visible beneath. Leaning over Elle, hands braced on either side of her head, Darcy dropped, nose nudging Elle's. "Good?"

Boneless and muscles composed of jelly, all Elle could manage was a weak laugh.

"I'll take that as a yes." Darcy grazed her nose against Elle's, lips brushing. Elle parted hers lazily, letting Darcy slip her tongue inside Elle's mouth. A moan slipped from her lips at the taste of herself on Darcy's tongue, warm musk and salty, tangy sweetness. *Fuck.* Elle opened wider, hands clutching the back of Darcy's neck, tugging her close, wanting another taste of herself on Darcy's lips.

Straddling Elle's thigh, Darcy's hips began to rock, riding her desperately.

Elle slid her fingers down the gentle curve of Darcy's stomach to pop the button on her jeans. The sound of the zipper lowering was loud in the otherwise silent room, but nothing compared to the gasp Darcy made when Elle slipped her fingers inside Darcy's undone jeans, fingers rubbing Darcy's clit through her underwear.

"Shit," Darcy swore, scrambling backward and tearing the denim down her thighs.

Of course, her underwear matched. Crisp black lines curved around her hips, a triangle of barely there lace covering her core, red curls trimmed neat beneath.

Elle's heart skipped several beats before crashing against her sternum.

“Come here,” she whispered, hands reaching for Darcy.

Darcy crawled back up the bed, legs straddling Elle’s hips. Her hair spilled over one shoulder and down her back in a cascade of copper curls that Elle wanted to sink her hands into, so she did. Short nails scraping against Darcy’s scalp, she drew her closer, close enough to kiss.

The hand not tangled in Darcy’s hair slipped down her side, tracing the sinful curve of her waist and paving a path lower, fingers plucking at the thin band of Darcy’s underwear, snapping it gently against her skin.

Hips circling, Darcy groaned into Elle’s mouth, rocking against Elle’s thigh.

Taking the hint, Elle slipped her fingers beneath the crotch of Darcy underwear and ran her finger along Darcy’s slit. Sinking two fingers inside, Elle let her thumb brush against Darcy’s swollen clit, lips curling in satisfaction when Darcy whimpered against Elle’s mouth and circled her hips.

“Harder,” Darcy whispered against Elle’s lips. “Please.”

Elle crooked her fingers, applying more pressure to the raised patch of nerves inside Darcy’s slick heat, and thumbed her clit faster. “Like this?”

Darcy threw her head back, long hair tickling the tops of Elle’s thighs as she straightened, riding Elle’s hand. It gave Elle a perfect view of where her fingers disappeared, sinking inside Darcy’s tight, wet heat. Shiny arousal slid down the back of her hand as Darcy rose and fell, fucking herself on Elle’s fingers, starting slow and moving fast, desperate, soft cries spilling from Darcy’s lips as Elle moved her thumb faster, harder, determined to make Darcy come as hard as she’d made Elle.

Gorgeous, Darcy was so unbelievably gorgeous. Sweat broke out along her neck and the space between her breasts. Leaning up on her left elbow, Elle tugged at the cup of Darcy’s bra until it slipped, and closed her lips around Darcy’s nipple, sucking hard, teeth grazing the pebbled flesh and making Darcy keen, thighs shaking as she came hard around Elle’s fingers.

Stroking her through the aftershocks, Elle tried to gauge whether Darcy could keep going, whether she wanted Elle to get her off again. When Darcy reached a hand down, weakly pressing at Elle’s wrist, Elle stopped, fingers sliding out of Darcy and splaying limply on the bed beside her.

Darcy rolled to the side, collapsing against the mattress, chest heaving, her legs tangled up with Elle’s. Her skin was flushed, her bra and panties askew, and a slight sheen of sweat covered her skin from her hairline all the

way down to her navel, which rose and fell, jumping in time with her pulse.

Elle licked her lips, suddenly parched. Reaching over to her nightstand, she unscrewed the lid on her bottle of water and drank deep, gasping lightly after she finished. Pivoting, she turned, bottle in hand, and stared at Darcy's wrecked form.

Hair sticking to her forehead and splayed against the pillow in a fiery halo, Darcy panted lightly, chest heaving and air whistling from between shiny red lips. Debauched, Darcy looked like Elle felt—a beautiful mess.

“You want some?” Elle swung the bottle by its neck, biting the inside of her cheek when Darcy snatched it and arched up, throat working as she chugged deeply until not even a drop remained.

“Sorry.” Darcy laughed, collapsing back against the pillows. “If you wanted more of that.”

Not a big deal. Elle tossed the bottle back on the nightstand where it rolled, landing against the floor. She'd pick it up later.

With a sigh, Elle lowered herself back down to the bed, muscles finally sinking into the mattress as she gave herself permission to go from person to amorphous puddle of goo. Or she did once she flipped over to her side, facing Darcy, who appeared to have finally caught her breath.

Reaching out, Elle rested a jittery hand on the dip of Darcy's waist and waited for her to roll away or say something that would cement the fact that Elle was never this lucky. But that didn't happen. Elle waited another beat for good measure, then paved a path from Darcy's ribs down to her hip, delighting in the way her clumsy touch managed to make Darcy shiver and burrow closer.

Kicking the covers free, Elle reached down and tugged the sheet over them both, cocooning them inside her warm, if not slightly small bed and slid closer, close enough for their knees to knock.

“Stay?” Elle whispered.

Darcy pressed her lips together, her eyes flickering over Elle's face, searchingly. Elle held her breath, hoping that maybe fate and the universe had conspired and decided she had waited long enough. That she could have everything she wanted and then some.

A dimple appeared in Darcy's cheek, bracketing Elle's favorite freckle as her eyes softened. “I can do that.”

Chapter Thirteen

Whoever gave the sun permission to shine that bright needed to take several seats.

Elle scrunched her eyes shut against the midmorning sun streaming through the window beside her bed. Even then, a warm orange glow penetrated her lids, forcing her to burrow into the pillow. With an east-facing bedroom, she seriously needed to invest in some blackout curtains. The legit kind, not the ones she'd bought on sale off Amazon from a third-party seller that had one promising review that she was now ninety-nine percent certain had been written by the seller themselves.

Hadn't the sun gotten the memo that it was the weekend? That Elle had nowhere she needed to be, nothing she needed to do except laze around in bed and—

Bed.

Darcy. Elle had had sex with Darcy. Great sex, too.

Elle smothered her grin against her pillow.

Now with an incentive to face the day, Elle flipped over.

The other half of her bed was empty, the sheets pulled up to the pillow and tucked neatly beneath.

A quick glance revealed that Darcy's clothes were no longer lying on the floor, no longer tossed haphazardly across the room. Darcy was gone.

Pain bloomed between her ribs, jagged and sharp like someone had jabbed a knife into her side and wiggled until the blade found its mark. No good-bye, nothing.

People liked to say the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. Maybe Elle was crazy for expecting this time to have been different, for Darcy to be different. Maybe

she'd lost her mind for assuming something real could come from a fake relationship, but last night had *felt* real. Standing up on the observatory and baring her soul to Darcy, Elle had felt seen in a way she never had before. Seen like there was something inside her Darcy recognized.

There was no word that existed in the English language that meant the opposite of *lonely*. Some came closer than others, but nothing did justice to the feeling of someone looking into your eyes and connecting with you on a soul-deep level.

A connection was what Elle craved. To see and be seen, then to take that one step further and for someone, for Darcy, to like what they saw enough to want to stick around and see more.

But Darcy hadn't stayed. For whatever reason, a reason Elle would probably never know because there was only so much rejection she could handle, so much battering her heart could take before the hope of something better could no longer sustain her. She'd confronted Darcy once before, but that had been *before*. When there'd been significantly less at stake. Darcy hadn't known Elle then; the rejection had barely been personal. To confront Darcy now, to demand to know why she'd left, why Elle hadn't been worth staying for . . . if Elle had to ask, wasn't it obvious?

No, she could take a hint.

Clutching the sheet to her bare chest, Elle bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. Vision blurring, Elle shut her eyes and sniffed hard because she didn't want to cry. Crying sucked.

She sniffed again. Someone in the building was cooking pancakes. At least it smelled like pancakes. Buttery, vanilla-sweet heaven. Either that, or her brain was self-soothing similar to how cats purred, manufacturing her favorite smells where there were none. Was that a sign of an impending stroke? A seizure? WebMD would tell her she had a tumor or some fatal one-in-a-million neurological condition.

Elle sniffed again. No, the smell was unmistakable, stronger each time she took a whiff.

She threw back the covers and rifled through her mountain of unfolded clothing, plucking a robe out from the bottom of the stack. Tying the sash tight, Elle stepped out into the hall to investigate further.

Margot was sitting at the breakfast bar and—

Darcy was in the kitchen, in *her* kitchen, wearing one of Elle's shirts, a bright marigold tee with *Hufflepuff Puff Pass* scrawled above a blunt-

smoking badger. And she was cooking. There were pans and bowls and a spatula—since when did they own a spatula—and the whole apartment smelled like pancakes because Darcy Lowell was cooking inside Elle’s apartment.

Darcy had stayed.

Because she couldn’t just *stand* there, Elle cleared her throat, body flushing with warmth at the way Darcy’s smile lit up her whole face when she looked at Elle. “Morning.”

Darcy wrinkled her nose in that adorable way of hers that Elle loved, before turning and fiddling with one of the knobs on the stove. “Barely. It’s after eleven.”

They hadn’t made it back to Elle’s apartment until after one, hadn’t fallen asleep until easily after two. Not such an egregious lie-in, all facts considered.

Margot spun on her stool, eyes widening as she mouthed the words *Oh my god*.

Elle tugged on the sleeve of her robe, bare toes curling into the carpet. Oh my god was right.

Margot shut her laptop and hopped down off the stool. “All right. I’m off. Don’t have too much fun.” She waggled her brows.

“Where you going? It’s Saturday.”

“Interestingly enough, I’m going rock-climbing with your”—she turned, pointing finger guns at Darcy—“brother.”

Darcy’s lips pulled to the side. “Oh?”

“Settle down. I won’t say anything incriminating.” Margot paused in the doorway. “Speed dating didn’t go the way he planned, apparently, so he’s got it in his head that maybe he needs to join a gym or something. Meet someone out in the wild. I offered to take him rock-climbing. I’ll be back in a few hours.” Margot slipped through the door. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Knotting her fingers in the sash of her robe, Elle stepped into the kitchen. “You’re cooking?”

That Darcy hadn’t left was a relief. Pancakes? Those were promising.

Darcy tucked her hair behind her ear. “It was either that or order in from Postmates and I don’t know what’s good in this neighborhood.”

Elle stepped into the kitchen and sidled up beside Darcy, peeking into the bowl of batter. “Um, everything? It’s Capitol Hill.” At the sight of a short stack of pancakes sitting on a plate, Elle’s mouth watered. “How are you

even making pancakes? We don't have flour. Or eggs. Or milk. Or . . . whatever else you need for pancakes."

Reaching around her, Darcy grabbed a box of pancake mix. The corner was dented and there was a fifty-percent-off sticker slapped across the first half of the brand name. "I found this in the back of your pantry. The best-by date was last month, but I figured it's probably safe."

"I'm not concerned." Bracing her hands on the edge of the counter, Elle heaved herself onto the tile surface, narrowly avoiding putting her butt in the batter bowl. Once settled, she hooked a foot around the back of Darcy's knee, drawing her close. "You met Margot."

Darcy's fingers crept up the inside of Elle's thigh. When she reached the hem of Elle's robe, she walked her fingers backward, down toward Elle's knee. Elle blew out the breath she'd been holding. Such a tease. "I met Margot."

"And?"

Darcy tossed her hair over her shoulder and laughed. "And what? She's nice. A little scary." Darcy retrieved the spatula and flipped the pancake bubbling away in the pan with an expert flick of her wrist. The underside was the perfect shade of golden brown. "She made me pinky promise not to break your heart."

Elle shut her eyes. Damn it, Margot. Way to be the opposite of chill. "She was kidding."

Darcy turned, glancing over her shoulder. There was a hickey on her neck, a bruise in the shape of Elle's mouth, the sight of which made Elle flush from head to toe. "She sounded serious to me."

"Did she say what she'd do if you did?" Elle tore a piece off her pancake and popped it in her mouth. "Break my heart, I mean."

Darcy laughed, the sound light and bright. "I didn't ask."

The simple way Darcy said that, as if that outcome were unlikely, not worth worrying over, put a stupid smile on Elle's face. Leaning back against the cabinets behind her, Elle swished her feet, limbs weightless, gravity nothing in the face of the buoyant force swelling inside her chest.

"Anything else I should be aware of? You know, any torrid secrets Margot might've let slip?"

"Do you *have* any torrid secrets?"

"Depends on what you consider *torrid*, I guess," Elle joked. For the most part, she was an open book. But even the parts of herself she didn't broadcast

she'd revealed to Darcy.

Darcy reached for the bowl and spooned a perfect pancake's worth of batter into the pan. Bubbles appeared around its edges. "We had a good conversation, actually. Margot's funny when she's not threatening me."

"A good conversation about what?" Elle didn't want to come out and ask if they'd talked about her, but she was dying to know what she'd missed. She could always ask Margot later, but she wanted to hear it from Darcy.

Facing the stove, her back toward Elle, Darcy shrugged. Her hair reached the top of her waist and Elle wanted to bury her fingers in it. "She was reading when I came in here, so I asked what. We talked about fanfiction."

"Fanfiction?" Had she heard that right? "Really?"

Darcy's shoulders stiffened. "What's wrong with that?"

Elle frowned at Darcy's defensive tone and brushed the crumbs off her leg. "Nothing. Margot writes it. She's a huge Potterhead. She even admins a couple Facebook groups."

"She told me." With another flick of her wrist, Darcy added a pancake to the stack, replacing the one Elle had snagged. "Margot made it sound more mainstream than when I—"

Record scratch. "When you?"

Darcy glanced over her shoulder, not meeting Elle's eyes, but peeking in her general direction. "Nothing."

Like that would work on her. "When you what? When you—" *No fucking way.* "Darcy Lowell. Do you read fanfiction? Oh my god, what fandom? Do you *write* it? Is it smutty? *Please* tell me it's smutty. What's your—"

Darcy held up a hand. Her entire face was neon, her freckles blending into her flush. "I'm *not* telling you the name of anything I wrote. Margot already tried that."

This was too good to be true. *Darcy. Wrote. Fanfiction. Mind blown.*

"Come on. Don't I get"—*girlfriend* hovered on the tip of her tongue—"I've seen you naked' privileges?"

Darcy arched a copper brow. "Seeing me naked *is* a privilege."

Elle slipped off the counter and sidled up behind Darcy. Gently, Elle brushed the hair off Darcy's neck and around her shoulder before leaning in to brush her lips against the knob at the top of Darcy's spine. When Darcy shivered, Elle grinned. "Lucky me."

Darcy reached out and flipped off the heat to the front burner. "Promise not to laugh?"

Hands drifting and delighting in the way her touch seemed to drive Darcy to distraction, Elle let her fingers dip beneath the hem of Darcy's borrowed shirt, teasing the skin over her hip bones. "Cross my heart."

"I mean it. No laughing or I'll leave."

Elle forced her face into the most earnest expression of sincerity she could muster and waited.

Darcy nibbled on her lip. "When I was in college, I wrote *Days of Our Lives* fanfiction."

Soap opera fanfiction. Elle beamed. "*Darcy.*"

"Ugh." Darcy scrunched up her nose. "I told you not to laugh!"

Elle snagged Darcy by the wrist before she could turn away. "I'm not laughing. I swear. I'm smiling because I think it's cool and if it's something that makes you happy, well . . ." She shrugged. "It makes me happy for you."

Lips pressed together and eyes still averted, Darcy appeared to weigh the veracity of Elle's words. After a moment, the tension in her body bled away, shoulders dropping from where she'd had them hiked up to her ears. "Margot's not well versed on the *Days*' fandom, but she says there's this site that does a great job of archiving fics and keeping everything organized. She wanted my email so she can send me an invitation. Archive of Our Own?" Darcy shrugged. "Apparently the filters for searching for fics are unparalleled, but there's still a bit of a learning curve. She offered to show me the ropes. Give me a tour of the site. In case I want to get back into it. Reading, maybe writing."

Without even thinking, Elle brushed her fingers along Darcy's skin. "You should do it. You should *absolutely* do it."

"Well, I don't exactly have the luxury of loads of free time at the moment." Darcy rested a hand on Elle's arm, just beneath her shoulder. Her thumb made tiny circles against Elle's skin, tiny circles that summoned goose bumps. "Perhaps after I pass this last exam, I might consider it. If it's not too weird."

Darcy was barking up the wrong tree, seeking reassurances that her hobbies weren't odd. Or maybe the right tree. Elle wasn't quite sure. One thing stood out—Darcy didn't have the luxury of free time and yet she was here. She was here with Elle. That had to mean something, something big and undefined. As of *yet*, undefined. She smiled and shrugged. "I say you should go for it. Embrace the weird, Darcy."

Darcy slid her hands up Elle's neck, burying them in her hair. Tipping

Elle's head back and leaning in, Darcy smiled and murmured against Elle's lips, the touch tickling, "Embrace the weird, huh?"

Before Elle could answer, Darcy covered Elle's mouth with hers, kissing her quiet.

Atop the counter, beside the bowl of batter, something buzzed. And kept buzzing. Darcy's phone.

Elle drew back and reached for it, wanting it to shut up so they could keep kissing. She'd pass the phone to Darcy so she could—

Darcy had a fancy calendar widget Elle had never seen before, something that took organization to the next level. The current month and the next were visible from her lock screen. A notification near the top, *Finish C.E. Report*, wasn't what caught Elle's eye as much as the highlighted green text on December thirty-first. *EDT*.

Eastern Daylight Time? Eau De Toilette? Estimated Departure Time?

No, something about that acronym niggled in the back of Elle's mind. It meant something else.

Effective Date of Termination.

Termination Date. The agreed-upon end of their arrangement.

Elle's heart sank into her stomach like a lead weight.

Last night had felt real. *This* felt real, kissing Darcy and eating pancakes and sharing secrets. But what did Elle know? Not what did she *feel*, but actual irrefutable facts.

Nothing. Darcy had said nothing. She'd kissed Elle instead of answering her question last night, about whether Darcy believed in soul mates, whether that had changed. And maybe her not asking Margot what would happen if she broke Elle's heart had less to do with Darcy being optimistic about their relationship, and more about Darcy not believing they had one.

"Is everything okay?" Darcy's eyes darted to her phone clasped loosely inside Elle's hand.

Elle wasn't sure what to say. Elle wasn't sure of anything.

Chapter Fourteen

Darcy's heart crept inside her throat, making it impossible to swallow.

Elle had gone pale, her face draining of color, that pretty flush on her cheeks fading as she stared down at Darcy's phone.

"Elle," she repeated, stepping closer and resting a hand on Elle's bare knee. Elle jerked and lifted her head, eyes going wide.

"Sorry." Elle shook her head and all but tossed the phone at Darcy. She tucked both sides of her peacock-print robe between her thighs, gaze dropping to her covered lap. "You, um, had a calendar notification. Didn't mean to snoop or . . . whatever."

Darcy's phone synced to her Outlook account; on any given day, she would have at least half a dozen calendar notifications. Meetings, appointments, lunch with Brendon, basic task reminders. Big or small, Darcy liked to be prepared, liked to know in advance exactly what her week looked like down to the hour. None of that was any reason for Elle to have suddenly gotten—

Darcy's eyes dipped down to the glaring green text, the only color on her calendar. *EDT*. No wonder Elle was upset.

It would be a lie to say the date hadn't been looming in the periphery of her mind. At first, after getting Elle to agree to go along with her ploy to get Brendon off her back, Darcy had counted down the days until she could drop the act. Until she could ditch Elle and go back to business as usual as intended. But that had been *before*, before she'd gotten to know Elle. Before Elle had crawled under her skin, burrowed even deeper. Somewhere along the way, when exactly she wasn't sure, in the back of the cab probably, it had stopped being an act. The attraction had been there since day one, but feelings . . . feelings Darcy hadn't counted on. Definitely not *these* feelings, a

particular set of emotions Darcy had long ago tried to bury.

Deleting the reminder was instinctive. She wanted that ostentatious green text gone, wanted to rewind the moment and erase that look off Elle's face. Go back to how things had been before, before that terrible little notification had burst their bubble and injected reality into the fantasy world Darcy had immersed herself.

The moment remained fractured. Elle picked at a fraying thread on her robe with unsteady fingers, refusing to make eye contact.

Darcy needed to say something. She had never considered herself particularly skilled at this, verbalizing her emotions. Not because she struggled with eloquence but because she'd attempt to rationalize her feelings to the point of talking herself out of sharing them. In the past year, Darcy had done everything in her power to disconnect herself from them—most of them—altogether.

Two impulses warred within her, churning her stomach, turning her gut into a battlefield. There was the desire to tell Elle that she hadn't expected any of this, but here she was. Completely upside down, but Elle was a bright star lighting up the dark, keeping her from feeling entirely lost, entirely alone in this. That yes, this had started out as a fake relationship, but now these feelings felt anything but fake.

Darcy's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, words clogging in her throat, overpowered by the second impulse, the desire to never talk about why she hadn't wanted a relationship and was so resistant to Brendon's matchmaking, the reason that went beyond being busy. Most of the time she did everything in her power not to *think* about it. Saying it was out of the question.

There had to be a balance between saying something and revealing everything. She needed to find that happy medium, find it *now*, because the look on Elle's face was growing grimmer by the second.

"Brendon." *Fuck*. Her tongue really had adhered to the roof of her mouth. She swallowed and tried again. "Brendon's Christmas party. Do you . . . do you want to go with me?"

Her heart beat against her sternum like an angry kickdrum when Elle frowned. "I already said yes. That was part of our deal, wasn't it? You go to Thanksgiving with me and I go to the Christmas party and whatever else I needed to. To convince your brother."

Darcy was bad at this, rusty at sharing how she felt. She hated being bad

at things, hated not knowing what she was doing, obvious in her ineptitude. She huffed, despising how her cheeks went hot, her feelings splashed across her face.

“I know that. *Obviously*, I know that. I meant.” Darcy took a deep, shuddering breath in and stepped closer into the space between Elle’s knees. “Do you . . . do you *want* to go? Forget the deal. Do you still want to go with me?”

Elle’s head snapped up. “What?”

That her voice was barely above a whisper emboldened Darcy, made her heart beat harder, so hard it was as if it were trying to bust out of her chest and fling itself at Elle.

“I said, forget the deal, Elle.” Darcy rested a hand on the outside of Elle’s leg, gripped the warm skin of her thigh. Her pinkie grazed the soft, thin fold behind Elle’s knee and she could’ve sworn she felt Elle’s pulse jump. “That’s not why I want you to go. Not anymore.”

Elle’s tongue darted out from between her lips. She blinked twice and her shoulders rose and fell on a sigh, breath pancake-sweet. “Why?”

Because she couldn’t stop thinking about her. Because she’d had plans, very specific plans not to enter into a relationship, but Elle made her second-guess every last one. Elle made her want things she wasn’t supposed to want, not right now, not for God knows how long. Until she was ready? Darcy didn’t know when that time would come but here Elle was. And Darcy was right here, too. Wanting and hoping and being terrified of it all but not willing to let Elle go.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, Elle.” Immediately, Darcy lifted a hand, clutching her neck. Her throat wasn’t the only thing left raw by that confession.

Elle’s lip popped free from her teeth, her mouth falling open.

She could do this. She could be brave, be as brave as Elle. “I don’t know what I’m doing, but this doesn’t have anything to do with Brendon. Not anymore. I’m . . . I’m not ready for this to be over.” Darcy didn’t want to wake up to a world where Elle didn’t text her, where there wasn’t the promise of seeing Elle again, of hearing her laugh. Being the reason for it. “I’m not ready to say good-bye.”

Not in one month or two. Maybe not ever.

Behind her, the refrigerator hummed. Elle was disconcertingly quiet as she stared at Darcy, eyes wide and mouth agape. A fresh wave of heat crept

up Darcy's jaw as she waited for Elle to say something. Anything to put her out of her misery.

"Oh my god," Elle muttered. "You like me?"

What kind of question was that? That it was even a question at all was absurd, the most absurd thing to ever come from Elle's mouth and that was truly saying something considering the number of strange, unfiltered thoughts she shared.

Wasn't it obvious? Written all over her face? "You sound surprised."

Elle made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a scoff and kicked at Darcy's leg, missing by a mile. "I *am* surprised."

"Really." Darcy gave Elle her best deadpan stare. "That thing I did with my tongue last night didn't clue you in?"

Her words had the desired effect. Elle's face turned scarlet as she shut her eyes and laughed. Fighting her own smile would've been futile, and in keeping with the theme of the morning, Darcy wasn't in the mood to deny herself. When it came to Elle, Darcy truly was a hedonist.

Elle gave a tiny shrug after she'd calmed down. "But you never actually said it and . . . I don't know. Plenty of people have hookups where they don't particularly know the other person, let alone like them."

She wasn't wrong, but that's not what this was. Darcy had had hookups like Elle had described, and this was nothing like that. Not even close.

"This is different. This is—" Approaching a line she wasn't ready to cross. "I don't cook breakfast for just anyone, you know."

Or spend the night. Or talk about her mother. Or share her fondest memories. *Sharing*, period, was something Darcy seldom did these days.

"Lucky me," Elle said, reaching for the plate of pancakes. She snagged two off the top and brandished the plate in Darcy's direction with a wrist wiggle. "Care to partake in the fruits of your labor? They're extra yummy." As if to make her point, Elle stuffed half the pancake in her mouth. "*Sweriously*."

Darcy bit the inside of her cheek and took the plate from Elle, setting it down beside the stove. Then she grabbed Elle by the hips and pulled, yanking her near the edge of the counter. She stepped into the cradle formed by her thighs and brushed her lips along Elle's jaw, humming in satisfaction when Elle shivered in her arms. "I don't want pancakes."

Chapter Fifteen

December 5

MARGOT (9:43 P.M.): <link>

DARCY (9:55 P.M.): Is there a reason you sent me a compilation video of Greatest Soap Opera Slaps of All Time?

MARGOT (10:02 P.M.): Elle and I are watching soap operas on YouTube and I fell down the rabbit hole.

DARCY (10:03 P.M.): Oh god.

MARGOT (10:04 P.M.): You ever watch Passions?

ELLE (10:05 P.M.): omg there's a soap with a witch Darcy

ELLE (10:05 P.M.): her name is *Tabitha* omg

ELLE (10:06 P.M.): this is the best

DARCY (10:10 P.M.): There's a crossover connection with Bewitched, actually. Tabitha claims to be the daughter of a witch named Samantha and a mortal named Darrin. In a later season, she has a daughter who she names Endora. Dr. Bombay makes a few appearances which suggests that Passions and Bewitched exist in the same universe.

ELLE (10:11 P.M.): #obsessed

MARGOT (10:11 P.M.): Elle just made a weird choking noise and keeps muttering oh my god.

DARCY (10:12 P.M.): Did you try turning her off and turning her on again?

MARGOT (10:12 P.M.): Jesus. Nerd.

MARGOT (10:12 P.M.): You're as bad as your brother.

MARGOT (10:13 P.M.): You're just closeted. A closeted nerd.

MARGOT (10:14 P.M.): Btw turning Elle on is your job. Ugh.

DARCY (10:43 P.M.): Was I supposed to sort by kudos or hits on AO3? I can't remember.

MARGOT (10:47 P.M.): Kudos if you're looking for quality. You strike me as the type who's picky about her word porn.

DARCY (10:48 P.M.): ☹️ Excuse me for being concerned about proper grammar and punctuation.

MARGOT (10:49 P.M.): You're excused. Elle's texting must drive you up the wall.

DARCY (10:52 P.M.): It's fine. I don't mind.

ELLE (10:54 P.M.): awwwww

ELLE (10:54 P.M.): you dont mind my texting shorthand

ELLE (10:55 P.M.): wud u still lik me if i typed lik this

ELLE (10:58 P.M.): darcy?

ELLE (11:03 P.M.): DARRRRRCCY

MARGOT (11:05 P.M.): Idea! You should write a Passions x Bewitched crossover fic. I'll beta it for you.

MARGOT (11:06 P.M.): You'll get like 2 kudos and 6 hits because there's no audience for something that niche, but I'll love it and so will Elle.

DARCY (11:08 P.M.): Maybe.

ELLE (11:10 P.M.): you should do it!

ELLE (11:11 P.M.): 11:11 make a wish!

ELLE (11:13 P.M.): <attached selfie of Elle pouting>

ELLE (11:13 P.M.): Please do it.

DARCY (11:15 P.M.): Fine. Only because you said please and used proper punctuation.

ELLE (11:16 P.M.): 🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏

DARCY (11:18 P.M.): Good night. 😊

ELLE (11:19 P.M.): 😊

DARCY (11:28 P.M.): 😊

* * *

December 6

ANNIE (2:43 P.M.): Elle requested to follow me on Instagram. Should I accept?

DARCY (2:56 P.M.): I don't care.

ANNIE (2:58 P.M.): Just wondering if it was crossing a line or something.

ANNIE (2:58 P.M.): Since, you know. It's fake.

ANNIE (3:01 P.M.): You didn't tell me Elle was so pretty. She's freaking adorable. That group shot your brother posted didn't do her justice.

DARCY (3:06 P.M.): About that. It's not fake.

ANNIE (3:10 P.M.): Wait. What?!

DARCY (3:15 P.M.): It's not fake. It's complicated.

ANNIE (3:20 P.M.): Oh my god. You had sex. You slept with her.

ANNIE (3:21 P.M.): I fucking knew it.

ANNIE (3:24 P.M.): It was good, yeah? It must've been.

ANNIE (3:29 P.M.): <link>

DARCY (3:32 P.M.): Did you really just send me a link to Baby Got Back?

DARCY (3:34 P.M.): I rue the day I ever got a cell phone. I'm at work and everyone I know keeps texting me. I forgot I had my volume on and I tried to play that video and now my coworkers are staring at me like I'm a freak.

ANNIE (3:39 P.M.): 🙄

DARCY (3:40 P.M.): Annie!

ANNIE (3:43 P.M.): Oh boo hoo. You have friends who like talking to you. People care about you. Your coworkers know you listen to music other than fucking Chopin. Wah. Poor Darcy. 🙄

DARCY (3:46 P.M.): It's a hard knock life.

ANNIE (3:47 P.M.): Oh fuck you very much.

* * *

December 9

ELLE (2:08 P.M.): so annie and i were discussing your aesthetic earlier this morning and we think 70s style jumpsuits should be your new thing

ELLE (2:08 P.M.): you have the height to pull them off

ELLE (2:09 P.M.): granted going to the bathroom might be a bitch but you'll look sexy while you struggle

DARCY (4:15 P.M.): Since when do you talk to Annie? Let alone about me?

ELLE (4:27 P.M.): annie and i go waaaaay back to last tuesday

ELLE (4:28 P.M.): catch up

ELLE (4:29 P.M.): jumpsuits yay or nay?

DARCY (4:31 P.M.): May . . . be?

ELLE (4:32 P.M.): 😊

* * *

“Darcy!”

She tore her eyes from the *Passions x Bewitched* fanfic she was drafting in Google Docs on her phone and searched for the source of her name. There, sitting on one of the couches in the center of her apartment’s lobby, was Gillian. *Her mother*. What was she doing in Seattle, let alone her apartment building?

“Mom?” Darcy crossed the lobby, stopping in front of her mother who clasped her arms with cold fingers and buffed a kiss across each of her cheeks. Darcy’s nose wrinkled at the cloying scent of nicotine and Yves Saint Laurent Opium that clung to Mom’s hair, so pungent Darcy could taste it. “What are you doing here?”

The colorful enamel bangles on Mom’s left wrist jingled as she released Darcy. “Have you done something different with your hair?”

“No?”

“Huh.” Mom laughed. “It looks different. Good, but different. You look great.”

“So do you.” Darcy raked her eyes over Mom’s outfit. It was Darcy’s style, but the yellow floral maxi and brown leather jacket looked nice on Mom. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

One hand on Darcy’s back, Mom silently ushered her in the direction of the elevator. “Why don’t we head upstairs?”

Darcy held her tongue until after the elevator spit them out on the ninth floor. “So. What brings you to Seattle?”

“Your brother’s Christmas party is next weekend.” Mom surveyed Darcy’s apartment for the first time with a speculative tilt of her head. Her wall art received an interested hum, her furniture a none-too-subtle frown.

“Does he know you’re already here?”

Mom gave a quiet huff of laughter and plucked a book off the shelf, scanning the cover before placing it back out of order. When Elle had touched Darcy’s things, at least she’d put them back where they belonged. “I would imagine he does, seeing as I’m staying in his guest room.”

Why was she just now hearing about this? Brendon hadn’t said anything at their lunch yesterday. “When did you get into town?”

Mom chuckled. “God, Darcy, what’s with the third degree?”

It wasn’t every Tuesday that Mom showed up at her apartment unannounced, but when she did, it spelled trouble. As much as Darcy wanted to believe this was nothing more than a surprise visit, that maybe Mom wanted to catch up, see how Darcy was settling into a new city, ignoring history would be foolish. Mom didn’t check in and she didn’t stop by for the hell of it. She made time for Darcy when she needed something—occasionally a place to stay for a night’s layover, quick cash when her latest ex screwed her over, most often someone to dump her emotional baggage on.

Every time, Darcy vowed to put a stop to the cycle and every time, she caved. Annie—because she couldn’t talk to Brendon, not about this—encouraged her to establish clear boundaries or else one day she’d snap from the pressure. It wasn’t healthy and it wasn’t fair, but what in life was? She had learned the meaning of resiliency when she managed to muscle through, shoulder a little more of Mom’s baggage.

She ran her fingers over the waist of her skirt, fidgeting with the tuck of her blouse. “You want a drink, Mom?”

Darcy escaped to the kitchen, assuming the answer would be yes.

“Since when do you drink boxed wine?” So much for an escape. Mom stood in the doorway, frowning.

And apparently, she was the one who asked too many questions?

Turning, Darcy reached inside the cabinet and grabbed two glasses. She snagged the bottle of red closest to her and tugged on the cork, quickly filling both glasses before adding an extra splash to hers for good measure.

“It’s not mine.” She offered Mom a glass and slipped past, leaving the kitchen. “A friend left it here.”

“A friend?” Mom asked, aiming for nonchalance and missing by a

landslide.

Taking a generous sip, Darcy set her glass down on a coaster and sat on the far end of the sofa closest to the window. “Yes, Mom. I have friends.”

Mom perched herself on the other end of the couch, pinching her glass tightly by the stem. “Well, go on. I want to hear about this *friend* of yours.”

Her brow wiggle passed suggestive, entering into lewd territory.

Darcy acted like she hadn’t spoken. “So. You’re staying with Brendon.”

Mom hauled her purse onto her lap and rifled through the inner pocket. “No hard feelings, I hope. I called him to pick me up from the airport and he offered his guest room, so . . .”

With a crow of satisfaction, she withdrew a cigarette and lighter from her purse.

“You can’t smoke in here,” Darcy said.

Cigarette hanging from the side of her mouth, Mom waved Darcy off. “Oh what? Like your landlord’s ever going to find out if I—”

“I don’t want you smoking in here.” Yes, it was a building policy, but it was also a Darcy policy. One she wouldn’t budge on.

Mom tugged the cigarette from her mouth and gestured to the wall of windows. “What if I crack a window?”

Jesus. “We’re on the ninth floor. The windows are floor to ceiling; they don’t open.”

With a huff, Mom threw the cig and lighter back into her purse, which she then tossed on the floor. “Okay, *Mom*. Jeez, I never raised you to be such a tight-ass.”

Darcy bit the tip of her tongue, swallowing her retort. Mom had barely raised Darcy at all.

“So you’re here for Brendon’s Christmas party. You must be planning to fly home around the same time as Brendon and me.”

“About that.” Mom tucked one leg up on the couch, turning to face Darcy.

Ah, the *but*. It had only been a matter of time, a matter of how long Mom was going to beat around the bush before she came out with the real reason why she was here. Not only in town, but at Darcy’s apartment, on her couch, guzzling her wine down like it was water, and gripping the stem of her glass so hard Darcy worried it would break.

“I was thinking we’d have Christmas here this year,” Mom said. “Save you and Brendon the trip.”

“We already have tickets.”

Mom opened her mouth only to pause. She took a deep breath and smiled tightly on the exhale. “Your brother canceled those.”

Darcy’s brow furrowed. “He didn’t say anything.”

“I asked him not to.” She scooted closer, sliding across the cushions. “I wanted to tell you myself. Preferably in person.”

Darcy’s pulse stuttered then sped. “Is everything okay? You’re not—”

Mom rested a hand on top of hers. “Everything’s fine. God, you worry too much.” She reached up, poking the space between Darcy’s brows. “It’s gonna give you wrinkles one of these days.”

Darcy batted her fingers away. She worried for good reason.

“Then what is it? Why aren’t we having Christmas in San Francisco?”

“Well, that would be hard to do,” she said, “seeing as I’m selling the house.”

“You’re selling Grandma’s house?” Darcy’s voice nearly cracked, so she coughed.

Mom squeezed her fingers. “It’s just a house, Darcy. A house your grandmother hasn’t lived in for years. A house, quite frankly, you haven’t lived in for years, either.”

It wasn’t just a house. The three-story Victorian with its steeped, gabled roof and bright, stained glass and broad bay window was full of memories. It was weekends spent baking scones and slathering them with homemade strawberry jam and afternoons curled up on the sofa watching soaps with Grandma. It was creaking stairs and an ornate bannister Brendon had broken his arm sliding down when he was eleven. It was summer nights on the porch swing under a blanket and slumber parties with Annie.

To Mom it was a house, but to Darcy it was home.

Darcy twisted the platinum band on her middle finger. “*Why?* Do you need money because I can—”

“It’s just time for a change.”

“What if you rented it? That way if you change your mind—”

“I won’t change my mind.” Mom gave a sardonic laugh, lips twisting in a way that said there was more to this story than she was letting on. “I’m selling it. I’m moving. End of story.”

“Fine.” It wasn’t, but what else was Darcy supposed to say? It wasn’t her house, and while she had a nice nest egg put away, it wasn’t enough to buy a house in San Francisco.

“Darcy, baby, you’re not usually this sentimental.” Mom patted her on the arm.

Darcy covered her flinch by reaching for her wine. “I said, it’s fine.”

Mom heaved a sigh. “Your brother and I are planning on looking at houses this weekend.”

Darcy’s head snapped to the side. “Here? You’re planning on moving here?”

“Well, I don’t know where exactly.” Her head waffled side to side. “Mercer Island, maybe. Somewhere close to the water. Doesn’t it remind you of the Bay?”

Something did *not* compute. “If you’re looking for something that reminds you of the Bay why are you moving?”

Mom pressed her fingers between her brows. “Darcy. Can I not want to move closer to my children?”

Darcy stared.

“Fine.” Mom dropped her hand and sighed. “Kenny and I broke up.”

Of fucking course this was about a guy. When *wasn’t* it about Mom’s latest flavor? “Ah.”

“Yes, *ah.*” Mom huffed. “And where did he decide to move to? He’s renting an apartment two blocks away. I see him all the time.” She reached for her wine and nearly drained it. “I’m sure you of all people can understand what I mean when I say I need distance.”

Mom had effectively backed Darcy into a corner. Because what could she say? She’d packed up her life and moved all the way to Seattle after . . . after she’d broken off her engagement with Natasha. Been *forced* to break off her engagement. It wasn’t so much a choice as an act of self-preservation. She wasn’t going to go through with it, not knowing what she did. And staying in Philadelphia had been too hard, her life there too integrated with Natasha’s to make for an easy break. It had been messy, their group of friends entirely assimilated. Darcy hadn’t just wanted a fresh start, she’d needed one.

“Sure.” Darcy nodded. “I get it.”

Except she had learned her lesson, whereas Mom clearly hadn’t. She bounced from relationship to relationship, building her life around whoever she was seeing. She didn’t know how to just *be*, let alone be alone and so she’d move on to the next guy until the pattern repeated itself and she wound up with a broken heart. Again.

The corners of Mom’s mouth lifted. “I thought you would.” Her veneer of

happiness was flimsy at best, her smile not reaching her eyes. “Brendon and I are going house hunting this Saturday, then we’re grabbing drinks and a show at Can Can. You should come with us. You could use a little fun in your life.”

She might not begrudge Mom her attempt at a fresh start, but house hunting with her? *Drinks?* Darcy could already feel a tension headache forming at the base of her skull. “We’ll see. I might have plans.”

“Plans?” Mom wiggled her brows. “With a friend?”

Darcy reached under her chignon and jabbed her fingers into the space where her head met her neck. “Yes, Mom. A friend.”

“The same friend who leaves cheap wine in your kitchen?”

A strange surge of protectiveness rose up in Darcy’s chest. “Honestly, Mother?”

“You *mothered* me.” Mom stared, dark eyes wide. She lifted a hand, lightly stroking the front of her throat. “Brendon told me you were seeing someone and that it was serious but I couldn’t believe it. Looks like I owe him twenty bucks.”

She wouldn’t quit. Darcy clenched her teeth until her molars creaked. “Brendon doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“So it isn’t serious?” Mom pressed.

“Why do you *care*?”

Mom’s eyes widened. “Darcy, I’m your *mom*.”

“Yeah, well, you could try acting like it.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. “Mom—”

“No.” She sniffed and smiled tightly, eyes wet with tears unshed. “It’s nice to know what you really think. You’re always so tight-lipped with your feelings around me. Tight-lipped, tight-ass.” Mom scoffed out a laugh. “It’s fine.”

The barb barely stung, the slick feeling of guilt swimming in Darcy’s stomach winning out. She meant what she’d said, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t undo it, press rewind if she could. “Look, me and Elle . . . it’s complicated, okay?”

“Complicated?” Mom’s brows flew to her hairline. “Darcy, baby. That doesn’t sound good. Haven’t you had enough of *complicated*?”

Her spine stiffened. *This* wasn’t like *that*, and she had enough with Brendon meddling. She didn’t need Mom nosing in, too. “That wasn’t an invitation to give your two cents.”

“Not the answer to my question. But I can take a hint.” Mom stood and

reached inside her purse, withdrawing her cigarette and lighter. “I’ll get out of your hair, but just let me say this. Your brother . . . he’s like a rubber band. He’s got an immense capacity to love and his highs are high, his lows low, but he always snaps back. His heart is elastic. You and I, we’re more alike than you want to believe. But it’s true.

“When we feel things, we feel them deeply, all the way to our bones. We don’t snap back like your brother, and our hearts aren’t made of elastic. They’re breakable, and once broken, it’s difficult to piece them back together.” She lifted her head and stared at Darcy with wide, shiny eyes. Darcy wasn’t good with tears, not hers, not anyone’s. Definitely not Mom’s. She was all too familiar with those.

Darcy found it hard to swallow. “Mom—”

“I know. You don’t want to talk about Natasha any more than I want to talk about your father, and I understand that. I do. You were ready to spend the rest of your life with her and that’s no small thing. Natasha broke your heart and while I’m sure Elle’s nice—Brendon seems to think she is—do you have any business getting involved in something that’s *complicated* this soon after you’ve put yourself back together, Darcy?”

Cold settled in Darcy’s chest, her stomach heavy and hard.

“Which isn’t to say you should spend the rest of your life alone.” Mom waved her hand, dismissing the thought. “Life is short and you deserve to have fun. But you’re sensible, far more sensible than me and for that I’m thankful. I’m only suggesting that our hearts can lie. You have a good head on your shoulders, baby. Use it.”

Natasha had checked all her boxes, was all the things Darcy thought she wanted. They’d made sense together. She was a safe, sensible choice and Darcy had been ready to spend the rest of their lives together. It had never, for one second, crossed Darcy’s mind to fear that sort of betrayal before it happened, before she saw it with her own eyes. Even knowing what Mom had gone through, learning that Dad had cheated on her during those long business trips, and how Mom had drunkenly told her love was a lie more times than she could count, Darcy hadn’t believed it could happen to her until the day it did.

Was she right? Were they more alike than Darcy wanted to believe? Here she was, supposed to be dedicating her time to passing this FSA exam and instead she was carving out time, carving out a space in her life, for Elle, free-spirited Elle who couldn’t have been less like Natasha if she tried. Elle

was all she could think about half the time and it was more than just *fun*, it was—

God. It was times like these, Darcy would do anything to have just five minutes to talk to Grandma. She'd give it to Darcy straight, tell her if she was behaving irrationally, if she was in danger of losing her head. Grandma had been the only person to get Mom back on some semblance of a track in life and Darcy, for all she tried, couldn't do the same, not alone. It was too much, the weight of it crushing.

But Grandma wasn't here and soon her house would be gone, too.

Darcy's nails bit into her skin when she crossed her arms. "While I appreciate the concern, it's unnecessary." She crossed the room in the direction of the door, hoping Mom would get the hint. "Since we're doing Christmas at Brendon's this year, did you at least pack Grandma's ornaments?"

Mom frowned, cigarette poised halfway to her mouth. "Those old things? Darcy, they were falling apart. I donated everything in the boxes in the basement. They *reeked* of mothballs."

Darcy's heart seized. They weren't *old*, they were one of a kind. Delicate lace angels and hand-carved nutcrackers. Felt trees and mercury glass globes. They were *tradition* and *family* and Mom had tossed them out without a second thought.

Darcy opened the door with sweaty fingers and stepped aside.

"You're not upset with me, are you?" Mom rested a hand on Darcy's shoulder as she passed by, her cigarette tickling her neck.

"I'm—" Darcy shook her head. "Good night, Mom."

As soon as the door was shut, Darcy pressed her back against it, sinking slowly to the floor.

Talking to Mom was like speaking to a brick wall and expecting it to understand, to *empathize*. But Darcy needed to talk to *someone* or else she was going to go crazy.

Who? Normally she could talk to Brendon about anything—*almost* anything—but certainly not this. Annie was still in Berlin, working on behalf of her company, an independent human resources consulting firm, to facilitate a corporate merger. It was just after seven, which meant it was the middle of night there. Then there was—

No one. She'd done an admirable job of accomplishing what she'd set out to do—isolate herself. Before this moment, she'd never realized what a

lonely job it was, protecting a fragile heart.

Darcy clutched her phone, staring at her contacts. No. *Not* no one. She had the phone pressed to her ear before she could second-guess herself.

“ello,” Elle’s voice came through the line, so vibrant and happy it made Darcy ache inside. “Darcy?”

She sniffed as quietly as she could, covering the receiver. “Hey.”

Her voice quivered, but held, flimsy but unbroken.

The line was quiet, the sound of Elle’s breathing a near-silent whistle. “What’s up? Let me guess, can’t stop thinking about me, can you?”

Darcy laughed, the edges of her self-control fraying, thinning, split in too many directions. Elle had no idea how right she was. “Something like that.”

“You know, this is the first time you’ve called me.”

Darcy took a shallow breath. “I hate talking on the phone.”

Elle chuckled. “And yet you called? You could’ve texted.”

She scrunched her eyes shut. “I hate talking on the phone but I—”

Wanted to talk to you. Elle was the exception to so many rules it made her head spin.

“Darcy?”

“Sorry.” She had to clear her throat. “I just— My mom’s here.”

She could hear Elle shift, fabric, a blanket maybe, rustle. “Right now?”

“No, I mean, *yes*. She’s in town, but she was at my apartment. She just left, but she’ll be here through Christmas. She’s, um, she’s selling my grandmother’s house. No questions, just like that. She’s selling the house and she got rid of the Christmas decorations and . . . and I just wanted to . . .”

She trailed off, not because she didn’t know what she wanted but because she did. She knew what she wanted but she didn’t have the slightest idea anymore what she needed. If they were one and the same or polar opposites.

Elle cursed quietly beneath her breath. “God, Darcy. Are you okay?”

“I’m—” It was there, on the tip of her tongue. *Fine*. Darcy always had to be fine, always had to be okay, because if she wasn’t, who would be? She always had to hold it together, be strong, keep her chin up. But she wasn’t. She was anything but fine. “Not really.”

Two words and she split straight down the middle, her voice breaking and her chest cracking open, all the feelings she’d kept compartmentalized, carefully tucked inside boxes set neatly on a shelf deep within herself, spilled out. Messy overflowing feelings seeped out in the most inopportune places, eyes leaking and nose running. *Fuck*.

“Darcy—”

“Sorry,” she said, hating how her voice quivered. “I didn’t mean to call and dump all over you.”

“You didn’t.” Elle sounded sincere, vehement even, her voice a firm contrast to Darcy’s weak *everything*. “You didn’t dump all over me. I swear.”

Nice of Elle to say that, but it wasn’t true.

“Still.” Darcy swiped a hand across her face, the heel of her hand coming back smeared with mascara and smudges of brown and cream eyeshadow mixed with her concealer. “It’s getting late. I just couldn’t talk to Brendon about this and I—” She needed to stop. She had no business making herself more vulnerable than she already was and especially not to someone like Elle, someone who Darcy had no guarantee would be a permanent fixture in her life. She’d make herself vulnerable, crack herself open, and . . . then what? “You know, I should let you go. I should . . .” Darcy scrunched her eyes shut, shoulders bunching by her ears because this was awkward as hell. “Bye.”

“Wait, Darcy, don’t—”

Darcy pressed end and let her phone fall against the floor, her head knocking against the door with a muted thud.

Ears ringing, Darcy played over everything she’d said, her memory unfortunately practically perfect. Mortification set in, her skin itching and stomach churning.

Perhaps Elle would pretend this hadn’t happened. Perhaps they could act like Darcy hadn’t called and gone all soppy, spilling her guts all over the place. Perhaps Darcy could change her name and number and move to a small village in the south of France. She could eat enough butter and wine that the humiliation wouldn’t matter.

Changing her identity might take some time, but she could get a jump start on the wine. Rolling to her knees, Darcy stood and filled a fresh glass with the cheap, cloyingly sweet boxed rosé because it made her think of Elle and apparently, unbeknownst to her until nearly her thirtieth year on this planet, Darcy was a masochist. The more you know.

* * *

Sitting in the middle of her kitchen, pencil skirt hiked up around her waist for comfort, Darcy polished off her second glass and was reaching for her third

when someone knocked on her front door.

Brendon. Darcy shut her eyes. Mom had probably blabbed to him about how poorly Darcy had taken the news. Now she was going to have to do damage control, smoothing over her emotions, sweeping them under the rug. Prove to Brendon that she was fine, that while she wished Mom wasn't selling the house, it hadn't affected her in whatever way Mom claimed.

Ready as she'd ever be, Darcy adjusted her skirt and reached for the knob. As soon as she opened the door, she was greeted with a face-full of plastic pine needles.

"Sorry! Shit, it's slipping. Let me just . . ." The branches pressed against Darcy's face moved, revealing a harried-looking Elle. Blond hair fell free from the messy bun at her nape, and sweat glistened at her temples, her breath coming out in haggard little puffs. "You mind if I . . . ?"

Darcy clutched the—tree? bush?—and let Elle step past. Arms wrapped around a bursting cardboard box, the flaps flipped up and bent to the sides because the contents were brimming over the top, Elle waddled in the direction of the windowed wall where she bent and set the box down with a grunt. "*Fuck*, that was heavy."

Darcy kicked the door shut, plastic pine needles biting into the skin of her biceps. "What is all this?"

Elle's eyes bounced between the box at her feet and Darcy. "It's a good thing you called me when you did. One Man's Trash is only open until eight on weekdays. I managed to slip in right before they closed." She nudged the misshapen box with the toe of her boot. "It was kind of slim pickings this far in the season, so the ornaments are . . . *eclectic*."

Darcy set the tree down beside the box and stared blankly at Elle's haul, trying and failing to make sense of what this was.

"As for the tree." Elle winced. "There were only two, but the other was ginormous. Like, couldn't fit my arms around it even if I tried . . . which, okay I did try. It didn't work. I could actually carry this one and fit it in the back of the Uber I took here. It's a little"—Elle shut one eye and stared at the pile of disassembled branches—"like a shrub. But I think it has a certain charm. A *je ne sais quoi*, you know?"

Darcy pressed her knuckles to her mouth. "But . . . why?"

Elle scuffed her toe against the floor, then seemed to think better of it, quickly toeing her way out of her boots, hobbling when she nearly toppled over. Her pajama bottoms—Christ, she was wearing *PJs*—were too long,

tucked halfway under her fuzzy-socked feet. Darcy's stomach swooped and then disappeared altogether.

"You said your mom got rid of your grandma's holiday decorations, so I just thought . . ." Elle shrugged. "I guess I didn't do much actual thinking. You could've already had a tree and ornaments, or Brendon might've, but I wanted to make sure you had *something*. I know the tree is kind of ugly, and none of the ornaments match but if—"

"It's perfect," Darcy whispered. Her eyes stung, her sinuses burning with each rapid, tear-stifling blink. "It's really perfect."

Too perfect. *Scary* perfect because nothing this good could last forever. It never did.

Elle's smile didn't just light up her face, it lit up the whole room. "Yeah?"

Darcy stepped over the tree and grabbed both of Elle's hands in hers. Elle's fingers were frozen, so Darcy laced them with hers and drew her closer. Elle slid forward, her pajamas gliding against the hardwood, their toes bumping. Darcy used Elle's forward momentum to her advantage, ducking her chin and stealing a kiss, lingering. Just a little more, for a little while longer.

Chapter Sixteen

I think it looks . . . nice.”

Elle cocked her head, studying the tree, not that there was much tree to study. The branches were twiggy and the needles sparse. None of the ornaments matched—a glittery Barbie-pink Jeep hung beside a camouflage snowflake, and several branches down a cranberry-filled snow globe bumped up against a felt stocking and a hideous papier-mâché elf. But at least the tree had come prestrung with lights, none of which were burned out.

Darcy must’ve pressed a button on the switch because the amber-colored lights flickered, and suddenly, the room was bathed in a rainbow of colors. Pink and teal and orange and violet bulbs winked from the branches like little colorful pinpricks of light.

“That’s—”

Darcy threw her head back and laughed. “I love it.”

For someone who had a seemingly bottomless well of hope to draw from, Elle was *hopeless* when it came to Darcy. Hopeless in that there was no cure for how she felt. Hopeless in that, each time Darcy laughed as if taken by surprise by her own joy, Elle’s insides turned to marshmallow fluff. Hopeless in that she wanted to make Darcy laugh so often that the novelty of elation would wear off, but that it might never lose its appeal. Elle was hopeless and she didn’t *want* a cure.

She tugged on Darcy’s sleeve, yanking hard as she knelt in front of the tree. “Come on. Get down here.”

Without so much as a single gripe, Darcy lowered herself to the floor and looked at Elle with one brow raised as if to say *now what?*

Leading by example, Elle scooted backward toward the tree and then lay flat when she had just enough clearance to do so without bumping her head.

Wiggling beneath the lowest branches was a precarious feat, but she did so without knocking a single ornament.

Staring up at the brightly lit branches didn't quite have the same appeal as it did when she was a kid, probably because these branches were relatively bare, but it was still nice. Especially when she scrunched her eyes and the lights twinkled like stars. Even nicer when Darcy joined, snuggling close and tangling their fingers together.

"Didn't they do this on *Grey's Anatomy*?" Darcy whispered.

Elle huffed softly. "Yeah, but I did it first. I used to make Jane and Daniel crawl under the tree with me. Drove Mom crazy because we'd ruffle up the tree skirt and get pine needles all over the place."

"Brendon and I never crawled *under* the tree, but I remember trying to climb *up* it once."

Elle sputtered. "*What?*"

"Well, we forgot the star on top." Darcy's shoulder bumped against hers when she shrugged. "I guess I saw it as a wrong I needed to right and Brendon was smaller so I sort of . . . shoved him up there."

"Was he okay?"

"Of course." Darcy sniffed. "I'd never let him fall. Besides, Grandma caught us when he was barely off the ground."

Elle laughed, stomach muscles burning at the mental image of a little Darcy shoving Brendon up a Christmas tree to place the topper. Plastic pine needles from the lowest branch tickled her nose, a renegade needle managing to go *up* her nose. A suspicious burn built in her sinuses and *no*. It would be the worst if she—

Elle sneezed, catching a face and mouthful of pine needles. On second thought . . . "Maybe if we're going to talk, we shouldn't do it under the tree."

Darcy hummed her agreement and wiggled out from beneath the tree first. When they were both free and clear and leaning against the sectional, she bumped Elle gently with her elbow. "Thanks. Not for encouraging me to climb under a secondhand tree that could be full of, I don't know, bedbugs, but—"

"Oh my god. Lighten up, it doesn't have—"

Darcy pressed a finger to Elle's lips. She was smiling. "I'm kidding. About the bedbugs, not my appreciation. It means a lot that you came, let alone *thought* to bring the tree and decorations, and then to actually do it?" She shook her head, but didn't drop her hand. Instead, she traced the bow of

Elle's mouth with the pad of her fingertip, so gently Elle could feel the delicate friction of each ridge and whirl in Darcy's fingerprint.

Elle shivered and kissed the tip of Darcy's finger because she could.

Breath speeding and eyes darkening, her pupils widening—or maybe that was just a trick of the light—Darcy dropped her hand, not to her lap, but to Elle's knee. Warmth from her palm sank through the flannel of Elle's pajamas. "I, um, I hope I didn't mess up any plans you might've had."

"Plans," Elle echoed, eyes dropping to her pajamas. She hadn't bothered to throw on more than a jacket—the jacket—after Darcy had hung up. She hadn't seen the point, not when it had felt like time was of the essence. That Darcy needed her, needed her right then. "I was just messing around, making memes. I wasn't busy."

"Can I see?"

"Seriously?"

Darcy simply stared, waiting.

Elle fished out her phone, the LED light flashing with a notification. Another text from Daniel and two missed calls from Mom. Her chest went tight as she ignored them both and opened the note she'd made, the one she'd finished in the Uber on the way over. She passed it to Darcy, watching, lip trapped between her teeth as Darcy read down the list.

The Zodiac Signs as Christmas Songs

Aries—"Jingle Bell Rock"

Taurus—"The Twelve Days of Christmas"

Gemini—"Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays"

Cancer—"I'll Be Home for Christmas"

Leo—"All I Want for Christmas Is You"

Virgo—"The Christmas Song"

Libra—"Walking in a Winter Wonderland"

Scorpio—"Baby, It's Cold Outside"

Sagittarius—"Santa Baby"

Capricorn—"White Christmas"

Aquarius—"Do They Know It's Christmas"

Pisces—"Last Christmas"

"'White Christmas.' Are you kidding me?"

"What's wrong with 'White Christmas'? Everyone loves that song. It means you wrap your Christmas presents with the precision of one of Santa's elves. Or Martha Stewart. And you probably buy into charming, old-fashioned traditions like mailing handwritten Christmas cards and roasting

chestnuts or something. Whereas Margot and I hide a pickle in a plastic tree and I take the fairy lights off my wall and repurpose them for a month.”

“Well. Not everyone loves that song. *I* don’t.”

“How? It’s about snow.”

“Exactly.” Darcy nodded. “And I hate snow.”

Elle covered her mouth. “*What?* How? Why? Darcy, who hurt you?”

Darcy wrinkled her nose. “Have you ever spent thirty minutes scraping ice off your windshield?”

“That’s ice, not snow. Snow is pretty.”

She stuck out her tongue. “Oh please. For all of ten minutes before it turns into gray sludge that refreezes into black ice that’s responsible for twenty-four percent of weather-related vehicle crashes, injuring over seventy-five thousand and killing nearly nine hundred annually.”

That was depressing and yet, something about Darcy’s ability to rattle off random statistics—morbid as they were—was oddly hot. Disconcerting competence porn. “Bah fucking humbug. I’ll change your song.” Elle snatched her phone back. “How do you feel about ‘You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch’?”

“Funny.” Darcy’s face didn’t so much as twitch, but her eyes had a bright twinkle that belied her deadpan expression. “I’m not a grinch because I don’t like snow. San Francisco *never* gets snow, or at least it hasn’t in my lifetime, and the weather’s rather temperate. The year I moved to Philadelphia, we had four snowstorms in the span of one month. And it was freezing.” Darcy shivered as if just thinking about it gave her a chill. “I hate being cold.”

Elle leaned into her side. “Is that why you’re always trying to get me to wear a jacket?”

“Not that I don’t like seeing your bare skin, but it makes me cold just looking at you.” Darcy smiled, looking at Elle from the corner of her eye. “You can keep ‘White Christmas.’ I *do* like traditions, especially holiday traditions.” She stared at the tree with its oddly colored lights, her throat jerking on a hard swallow. “I know ornaments are just . . . *things*. Twine and felt and glass and—it feels a little ridiculous to be upset about Mom getting rid of them, but I am.”

Elle’s attachment to material items had always been more fleeting, her most precious keepsakes few and far between and more likely to be photos than anything else. But that didn’t mean she didn’t understand. “They were . . . physical embodiments of memories. It’s not ridiculous to be upset,

Darcy. Whatever you feel is justified, okay?”

Darcy nodded. “That’s exactly it. It’s the memories. Those ornaments were all one of a kind and priceless and we even had these fragile glass balls with each of our names written on them in gold paint. It’s a wonder they never broke.” She huffed. “Came close, though.”

“Climbing the tree?”

Darcy shook her head. “No, it’s silly.”

So far, all of Darcy’s most silly secrets and stories had been revelations. “Tell me.”

Darcy licked her lips. “I was . . . twelve? I think I was twelve, or maybe I was about to be. Brendon was either seven or eight. We had this tradition where we’d bake cookies with Grandma. Always thumbprint cookies and we used homemade jam. Strictly strawberry.” Darcy’s lips curled in a smile. “We’d set out the cookies and a glass of milk beside the fireplace for Santa. Dad would slip downstairs and drink the milk and eat a few cookies. Until that year, when I was twelve, Dad was gone on business. He was flying in that night, Christmas Eve. I didn’t believe in Santa anymore, but Brendon still did, so I lay in bed waiting for Dad to come home so he could drink the milk and eat the cookies but eleven o’clock became midnight became one then two then three and he still wasn’t home. I guess his flight got delayed.”

“Did he make it in time? For Christmas?”

Darcy shook her head, a forlorn smile on her face like she was remembering the disappointment. “For Christmas, but not to be Santa.” She choked out a laugh. “I was Santa that year. After three o’clock, I snuck down the stairs, extracareful to not make any noise since I swear to God, every step creaked. I inhaled six cookies and then I reached for the milk only to remember we put dairy milk out because Dad’s not lactose intolerant, but I am.”

Her eyes widened, seeing where this was going. “No.”

Darcy grimaced. “I didn’t know what to do. I was twelve and trying to be sneaky. I grabbed the glass and was going to head into the kitchen and pour it down the drain when I thought I heard someone on the stairs. I panicked, chugged the milk, and ducked behind the tree. One of those glass ornaments fell, but in the best twist of fate, it hit my slipper, which cushioned the landing. I hid there for at least twenty minutes before sneaking back upstairs. Brendon was fast asleep and none the wiser. And I lay in bed with stomach cramps for the rest of the night.” Darcy’s smile went fond and her voice

dropped to a whisper. “But Brendon believed in Santa for another year, which was all I cared about.”

Elle could picture it perfectly. A too young Darcy sneaking around behind Brendon’s back. She was still doing it, still taking care of him, even now.

Elle bit the inside of her cheek to get a handle on herself. “You really love him, don’t you?” She laughed. “I mean, duh. Of course, you do. I just meant, I love my brother and sisters, and as contentious as things between us can get, I know they love me, too. But I can’t imagine any of them going out of their way to do anything like that for me.”

Darcy shrugged. “I learned about Santa too soon when I was six and realized Santa used the exact same gift tags as Mom and Dad. I wanted Brendon to believe as long as possible. With Dad gone half the time and Mom either traveling with him or being obvious about how she wished she was, it wasn’t much, but it felt like the least I could do.”

There was nothing small about it. Darcy didn’t do the bare minimum, she went above and beyond, more than any sister should feel obligated. Driving him to school, fixing him dinner, making sure he believed in magic for just a little while longer.

Darcy glanced at Elle and squeezed her knee, smiling softly before turning back to the twinkling Christmas tree. It was a quick look, but in that brief moment when their eyes met, something rearranged itself inside Elle’s chest, all her *maybes* becoming *certainties*, her anxious musings about what this was and what it meant, resolved.

Darcy was sitting there, lips pursed so prettily, completely lost in thought, oblivious to how the earth was teeter-tottering under Elle, shifting and turning and spinning her around like those nauseating teacups at Disney she rode each time she visited without fail, because apparently, her memory was a fickle friend.

But Elle wouldn’t forget this, her ass falling asleep from sitting on Darcy’s floor, her heart stuttering and speeding, mind spinning, and her stomach swooping.

She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. “You take care of your brother. You take care of everyone. Who . . . who takes care of you?”

All she could think about was the night she’d sat on her floor beside Margot after that disaster date. Hopeless and raw, and so damn tired. How she’d decided to pack it in, take a break, quit looking for love and let it find

her.

Boy, had it ever.

Something like panic flashed in Darcy's eyes, a fleeting, frantic flicker. She shook her head slowly, shoulders sagging, mouth opening and shutting before a desperate laugh that sounded almost like a sob burst from between her lips. "You're doing a pretty good job of it."

No one had ever said that to her before. Elle had never been put in the position of caring for someone, not really, not beyond a weekend of babysitting. Margot was too headstrong for it, and no one else trusted Elle enough to let her take care of them.

Stomach jittering like it had the first time she'd seen a meteor shower, watched while celestial debris fell from the sky, Elle reached out, cupping Darcy's jaw. She turned Darcy's face toward her and leaned in, brushing a kiss against her mouth that immediately made her stomach drop like she was one of those stars, falling, falling, *gone*.

Quitting grad school and pouring herself, heart and soul, into Oh My Stars hadn't been easy. Making that leap into the unknown had been *terrifying*, but it had always felt right, because she wasn't one to settle. She wanted *more*. This, kissing Darcy beside the rainbow lights of a Christmas tree with more heart than pine needles, was the closest Elle had ever come to experiencing real magic, the kind that sparkled inside her veins and electrified her from the ends of her hair to the tips of her toes.

Hands drifting, Elle sneaked her thumbs beneath the fabric of Darcy's untucked blouse, needing skin, needing more. She traced her nails over the thin skin on Darcy's hip bones, making her suck in a quiet breath.

Darcy drew back, lashes fluttering as her gaze immediately dropped to Elle's mouth like she already missed kissing her. Maybe Elle was giving that look more credence, maybe it was just a look, nothing more, nothing less, but speculating made her heart pound.

"Elle, I—" For a moment, Darcy looked utterly and completely lost and all the more terrified for it. She blinked twice, her breath shuddering from between parted lips that twitched into a smile. "We should go to my room." Darcy reached out, fingers tracing the plains of Elle's face, each brush of her fingers driving Elle's need for her up a notch. She wanted her touch, wanted Darcy to touch her everywhere.

"Oh yeah?" Elle let her fingers drift to the hem of Darcy's skirt. "What for?"

Fingers brushing the soft skin of Darcy's inner thighs as she slid the fabric up her legs, Elle bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling when Darcy practically panted. *Skin*. Now Elle was biting her cheek for a whole other reason. Darcy was wearing stockings, the band of her lace only going so far.

Eyes slipping shut, Darcy's tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip. "Elle."

She leaned in to Elle's touch, hips pressing into Elle's hand like she was trying to get closer. Elle slipped her hand higher, fingers dipping inside Darcy's underwear and through her curls until she found her clit.

Darcy let loose the softest, greediest little moan as her nails bit into Elle's arm, her hips rocking against Elle's hand, squirming. Darcy slipped down until she was no longer resting against the couch but instead splayed against the rug. She glanced up at Elle from beneath heavy lids and thick, dark lashes, and the hungry look in her eyes robbed Elle of the air inside her lungs.

"Kiss me," Darcy panted and used her grip on Elle's arm to pull her down to the floor on top of her. She kept her there with both arms banded around Elle's shoulders.

Leaning in, she nipped the swell of Darcy's lower lip. Ghosting her mouth over Darcy's chin, Elle slipped lower, trailing kisses down her throat, tongue darting out every so often to taste the silk of her skin. When her lips reached Darcy's neckline, Elle sat up on her knees and grabbed the hem of Darcy's blouse.

Darcy leaned up and helped her strip it off. Once her top was gone, Elle took a minute to appreciate all the new skin on display. Her bra was pink and polka-dotted and sheer. Her nipples pebbled against the fabric, begging for attention.

Elle ducked her head and laved her tongue against Darcy's right nipple through the delicate lace, teeth closing around it and biting gently, then harder when Darcy's hand flew to the back of Elle's head, fingers tangling in her hair and holding her there, encouraging her with little whimpers. Drawing back a bit, Elle blew against the pebbled flesh, grinning when Darcy's hips bucked, her back arching.

"Elle, God." Darcy's groan verged on praise, nails raking against Elle's scalp and sending tingles down her spine. "Your mouth. You're killing me."

Darcy's head pressed back against the rug, her hair splayed out around her, the copper a stark contrast against the plush, white sheepskin. Her back

curved, bowing sinfully, her hips arching up off the floor the best they could with Elle straddling her thighs.

Skimming her lips down Darcy's stomach, Elle fumbled for the zipper on Darcy's skirt, finding it tucked away against the side of her hip. She lowered it, the sound of the zipper's teeth loud, making the moment feel a little more charged. Her fingers slid beneath the waist of the skirt, and tugged, yanking the stretchy wool over Darcy's ass and down her thighs. Darcy wiggled, helping Elle slide the tight fabric off the rest of the way, down her calves and over her slender feet, her polished toes visible through her thin stockings.

Fuck. Darcy was . . . pretty beyond belief would be putting it lightly.

She wore a black garter belt, suspenders attached to the flesh-tone stockings ending midthigh. Elle swallowed and traced a finger beneath the thin, satin suspender, snapping it gently, the subtle sting, or maybe just the sound, making Darcy gasp.

Darcy was apparently impatient because one of her hands slipped between her legs, touching herself over her underwear.

"No." Elle batted her hand away and leaned in, kissing the skin where Darcy's leg met her body. "I'm taking care of you, remember?"

Darcy's breath sped, rasping between her lips, and she dropped her hand to the floor.

Elle sucked at the skin on Darcy's inner thigh until her muscles quivered and a sharp gasp slipped from her lips. "*Elle.*"

She stared at the skin she'd turned bright red. As far as unexpected turn-ons went, she had not expected the bright red bloom of a love bite on Darcy's thigh to get her hot. But the thought of Darcy walking around the rest of the week with a mouth-shaped bruise—*Elle's* mouth-shaped bruise—beneath her pristine dresses and perfectly tailored pants was undeniably sexy. Their little secret, proof that Darcy might look pulled together, but Elle had the ability to unravel her at the seams and turn her into something soft and messy to be taken care of, too.

Darcy wiggled against the floor and keened softly, hips arching up off the floor.

Tearing her eyes away from the mark she'd left on Darcy's skin, Elle kissed her way up Darcy's thigh and over, lips skimming the edge of Darcy's underwear. Tapping Darcy's hip so she'd raise her hips, Elle tugged the fabric over her ass and down her thighs, letting Darcy kick them off the rest of the way. She got comfortable between Darcy's legs, reaching out, thumbs

parting her folds. Darcy was soaked, glistening with arousal, her thighs sticky damp when she tried to rub her legs together.

Elle exhaled, breath ghosting over Darcy, and then leaned in and ran her tongue up Darcy's slit, moaning softly at the way she tasted. Darcy's hips jerked, pressing closer to Elle's mouth.

Elle rocked her hips down, grinding into the rug, seeking friction, *something*, anything to take the edge off as she wrapped her arms around Darcy's thighs, holding her down, holding her open. She flicked the tip of her tongue against Darcy's swollen clit, hard and fast, before wrapping her lips around the bundle and sucking it between her lips, adding just the subtlest edge of teeth to the mix.

"Fuck." Darcy's fingers threaded through Elle's hair, tugging hard enough to make her scalp tingle. The feeling shot through her, making her wet. "More. *Please*."

Ignoring the heat between her thighs, Elle sucked harder and moved her tongue faster, sliding one hand up Darcy's thigh. A soft, satisfied mewl slipped from Darcy's lips, her heat clenching as Elle slid her fingers inside Darcy and curled them forward.

"Oh my—fuck." Darcy tossed her head to the side. The muscles in her stomach twitched as she rocked down against Elle's fingers.

Positive Darcy was close, Elle curled her fingers harder, faster, and—

Darcy's back arched, her thighs trembling against Elle's shoulders, as she clenched hot and wet around Elle's fingers. A gasp broke from between her lips followed by a low moan that set Elle's blood on fire.

She withdrew her fingers, moaning softly when Darcy continued to spasm with aftershocks. She kissed the hickey she'd left and rolled to the side, head pillowing on Darcy's thigh.

Darcy's fingers massaged Elle's head, nails raking gently against her scalp. Despite being more turned on than she could remember being, Elle savored the moment, committing it to memory. All of it, the quiet, the peace, the anticipation, the way Darcy's white decor served as the perfect backdrop for the rainbow lights shining from the naked-looking tree. How for the first time, everything in her life felt not just right, but perfect.

* * *

"*Margot*," Elle called out, dropping her bag by the door and leaning against

the wall. After the night she'd had, she could barely feel her legs and her arms weren't much better. "You home?"

Margot popped her head out of the kitchen. "Hey. Have fun?"

"You could say that." Elle skipped around the bar, making a beeline for the kitchen. Darcy had plied her with pancakes—not from a box—but she was still hungry. Little sleep and marathon sex would do that to a girl.

She opened the refrigerator . . . the *empty* refrigerator. Save for a jar of pickles and a Tupperware container full of Taco Bell hot sauces they collected because of the funny sayings on the packets, they had nothing. "Mar, we need to go shopping."

Margot rifled through their basket of assorted K-cups and plucked out an extrabold, dark roast. The kind that made Elle jittery just from inhaling the aroma. "Want me to pick a few things up while I'm out?"

Elle shut the fridge and leaned against it, frowning. "You're going somewhere?"

"Yeah. My stupid fucking computer is practically a relic, you know? It went all *blue screen of death* on me yesterday so Brendon offered to go shopping with me for a new one. He's busy with his mom this afternoon, but said he had some time this morning."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I find your friendship with Brendon mildly terrifying."

"How can something be mildly terrifying?"

"Shut up. You know what I mean."

Maybe it was a consequence of this thing between her and Darcy starting out disastrously, then fake, but Elle had been wary of spending too much time with Brendon outside of their work dealings. What if she let something slip, something incriminating that might blow the whole charade? Hopefully now that she and Darcy were real, *achingly* real, she and Brendon could become closer. Like he and Margot who were suddenly best buds, their shared love of Harry Potter and rock-climbing giving them plenty to bond over in addition to the partnership.

The Keurig beeped, Margot's coffee finished brewing. She snagged her cup and lifted it to her mouth, blowing on it gently. "We *barely* talk about you and Darcy."

"But you *do* talk about us."

"Only in the sense that Brendon moons over you guys and pats himself on the back for, quote, *orchestrating the match of the decade*. I, of course, make

fun of him for saying the words, *match of the decade*.” Margot gulped her coffee even though it had to be scalding. “Then he gets all wistful for a relationship of his own. Let me tell you, Brendon might be more of a romantic than you are. He looked offended when I told him he needs to get laid.”

“Uh, pot, kettle?”

“It’s a dry spell, Elle.”

Elle coughed. “*Drought*.”

Margot reached across the counter into the sink, scooping up a handful of soap bubbles and flinging them at Elle, missing by a hair when she ducked. “I hopped on Tinder and this guy legit thought that being pansexual meant I’m attracted to fucking nonstick cookware. ‘Oh yeah, baby, your griddle fucking turns me on. You shake that wok. Shake it harder.’”

Elle chortled. “That’s not funny.”

“I joke so I won’t commit fucking homicide.” Margot snatched a towel and dried off her hands. “Just because I’m not looking for something serious doesn’t mean I don’t have standards for who I sleep with.”

Elle knew how Margot felt. At least half her matches on dating apps, before she met Darcy, were couples looking for threesomes, thinking because she was bi she’d be into it. Dating, regardless of the type of relationship you were looking for, was hard.

“You keep your standards high.” Elle nodded resolutely. “They make vibrators for a reason.”

Margot’s tongue poked into her cheek. “When in doubt, rub one out?” Margot sighed and slouched against the counter. “You think it would be awful if I hopped on OTP?”

Elle grimaced. While not *expressly* against the terms and conditions of use, OTP wasn’t the app for hookups. It didn’t stop people from using it for flings, but the purpose of the app was to help people find their *one true pairing*, not their one true one-night stand.

“Don’t let Brendon know.”

“God no.” Margot laughed. “He’ll give me that *I’m disappointed in you* puppy-dog frown and I’ll hate myself for at least an hour.”

“At least.” Maybe it was because she was tired from staying up half the night doing delightfully dirty things to Darcy on her living room floor, but for the first time, Elle noticed an arrangement of pink stargazer lilies—her favorite flower. She always stopped to *ooh* and *ah* over them at the market,

but paying thirty dollars for something that would die in a week—sooner probably thanks to her black thumb—felt egregious. “Where’d those come from?”

Margot shrugged, trying so hard to come across nonchalant that she seemed the opposite. “Check the card.”

She plucked the fancy embossed card from the plastic pick sticking up between the lilies’ velvet soft petals. “Did you read it?”

“Mm-hmm.” Margot reached for her coffee. “Go on.”

The way Margot was acting made her hesitate. Who was it from? She’d just been with Darcy half an hour ago; unless she had a florist on speed dial—which hey, knowing Darcy—it seemed improbable the lilies were from her. But who? Only one way to find out. Elle flipped the card open.

Elle,

~~*Jane and I have both texted and you haven't responded, but you're still posting on insta so we feel pretty confident you haven't died. Jane just told me that was a shitty joke and I shouldn't have started with that but I'm writing in pen and I spent six bucks on this card so*~~

~~*Jane and I hope you're doing well. That meme about Mercury retrograde was funny as fuck and Jane just got mad at me for writing fuck but I thought you'd appreciate*~~

The card started over, this time in Jane’s looping handwriting.

Hey Elle,

Daniel and I wanted to send you these flowers as a belated congratulations on your deal with OTP! We're so happy for you, little sister.

Daniel’s slanted, choppy scrawl picked up.

~~*Little sister? Could this sound more Stepford?*~~

A smudge of ink marked the transition.

We're sorry for what happened on Thanksgiving, but more than that, we're sorry for not realizing how you felt sooner. You're our sister and we should have realized you were hurting.

You've never not been good enough, Elle. We're both amazed by how fearlessly you pursue your passions and how you don't let anyone's opinion stop you from doing what feels right. You're an inspiration and I'm so happy that Ryland and the twins will have you to look up to when it comes to always following their dreams and their hearts.

Daniel had once again stolen the pen.

~~*Solid sentiment, corny execution, Jane.*~~

Elle could imagine Jane standing there, hands on her hips, the perfect imitation of their mom save for the twitch at the corners of her mouth.

The next bit was cramped, Jane running out of room to write.

Daniel and I owe you dinner to celebrate, just the three of us, unless you want to bring Darcy. Who we really like by the way.

Daniel put in his two cents.

~~*Definitely. Just between us, we like her better than Marcus, but don't tell Lydia we said that. Hand to God, if he mentioned his Lamborghini one more time, I was going to flip my shit at the table. His car gets eleven miles per gallon. Weird flex, but whatever.*~~

Jane's exasperation shone through in the way her words were a little bolder, as if she'd pressed the pen into the card hard.

*I'll give you a call and we can plan something. Answer, please!
Love you bunches,
Xoxo Jane and Daniel*

P.S. I looked up my natal chart online, and apparently my moon is in Leo. That's good, yeah? You give friends and family discounts, right? -D

Oh god, someone was absolutely cutting onions in the next apartment. Elle sniffled and laughed and shrugged when Margot cocked her head.

"You gonna take them up on dinner?"

"As far as apologies go, that was basically perfect. Which kind of pisses me off because of course Daniel and Jane would make the perfect apology." Elle rolled her eyes, but was mostly kidding.

As hurt and irritated as she'd been, she hated the tension, hated not answering their texts and calls, but she'd reached her breaking point on Thanksgiving. Daniel and Jane acknowledging her feelings was a weight off her shoulders, the validation more of a relief than she could have expected. Not everything was magically resolved, but it was a start.

Margot stared over the rim of her mug. "How about your mom? Still avoiding her?"

"I'm not avoiding her." Elle pinched a velvety petal between her fingers. "I'm ignoring her calls. There's a difference."

Margot frowned. "Elle—"

"Don't *Elle* me like that, like you're disappointed." Elle tossed the card on the counter. "All Mom's messages have been *business as usual*. Asking if

we're still on for brunch. If I'm coming to the next family dinner. It's like Thanksgiving never happened and I can't do it. I can't keep acting like nothing happened. Like I'm not hurt."

"You need to talk it out. Just the two of you. It's good you finally said something, but you barely scraped the surface of the issue, babe, and nothing was resolved. I'm not saying you should act like it never happened and I'm not saying you need to forgive her unless you feel so inclined, but you can't keep sending her to voice mail. What are you going to do when it's Christmas? Have another fight where nothing gets fixed? Not talk?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'll figure it out when the time comes."

Margot sighed. "And you don't feel like this is avoiding the situation?"

Elle didn't say anything.

"Fine." Margot set her cup in the sink. "We won't talk about that. Let's talk about this dinner with Daniel and Jane. Are you going to take Darcy?"

She didn't know. She'd just gotten the card. She hadn't thought about it, hadn't had *time* to think about it. "Maybe? If she has time."

The holidays were hectic enough; add in Darcy's mom drama and studying for her FSA exam . . . Elle didn't want to push.

It's why she'd bitten her tongue last night when she'd been tempted to rainbow vomit her feelings all over Darcy. Caring about someone, *loving* someone, wasn't supposed to be a secret, it was meant to be shared. That was the beauty of it, the whole point, only Elle couldn't imagine a confession of that magnitude going over well this soon, not when they had yet to even define their relationship.

Not that Elle was worried. Not *really*. Darcy knew what Elle was looking for. She had told her in no uncertain terms on that first failed date—was it still a failure if it brought them together in the end?—that she was looking for *the one*. And there wasn't a doubt in Elle's mind that Darcy was it.

And she'd tell her that. Contrary to whatever Margot thought, Elle wasn't avoiding anything. All right, *maybe* she was avoiding Mom, but not this. This was good, great, *amazing*. She just didn't want the first time she told Darcy how she felt to be when Darcy was upset about her mother or stressed about her exam. There was no rush. Not when there was no longer an expiration date looming at the end of the month. Not when this was something Elle wanted to last.

Chapter Seventeen

December 13

DARCY (4:57 P.M.): <link>

ELLE (5:02 P.M.): drops of jupiter by train?

ELLE (5:02 P.M.): it's a great song

ELLE (5:02 P.M.): one of my favorites

DARCY (5:04 P.M.): Popped up on my playlist on my way to work this morning.

DARCY (5:05 P.M.): It made me think of you.

DARCY (5:05 P.M.): And I thought you should know.

ELLE (5:08 P.M.): vhgibuinlkgysyb

ELLE (5:08 P.M.): omg

ELLE (5:08 P.M.): you can't just say things like that

DARCY (5:15 P.M.): Sorry?

ELLE (5:16 P.M.): no it just makes me want to kiss you and you aren't here right now so i can't

ELLE (5:17 P.M.): you should absolutely say things like that

ELLE (5:18 P.M.): i like it

ELLE (5:18 P.M.): just do it when i can express my appreciation you know?

DARCY (5:22 P.M.): Ah.

ELLE (5:24 P.M.): ~ah~

ELLE (5:29 P.M.): what are you doing tonight?

DARCY (5:32 P.M.): Study group.

ELLE (5:33 P.M.): i can help you study

ELLE (5:34 P.M.): question one what is darcy doing tonight?

ELLE (5:34 P.M.): a) elle b) elle c) elle d) elle

ELLE (5:34 P.M.): see?

DARCY (5:36 P.M.): 😊

ELLE (5:37 P.M.): bring your flashcards

ELLE (5:37 P.M.): im great with positive reinforcement

ELLE (5:38 P.M.): strip studying

ELLE (5:38 P.M.): every question you get right ill take off an article of clothing

ELLE (5:39 P.M.): if it worked for billy madison it can totally work for you

DARCY (5:44 P.M.): Fine. But you really have to help me study. And you have to feed me first. I skipped lunch.

ELLE (5:46 P.M.): pizza?

ELLE (5:46 P.M.): pineapple and jalapeño right?

DARCY (5:48 P.M.): And black olives.
ELLE (5:49 P.M.): 🤮 barf
ELLE (5:50 P.M.): but fine
DARCY (5:52 P.M.): And I'm bringing the wine.
ELLE (5:54 P.M.): hard sell but deal
ELLE (5:55 P.M.): pleasure doing business with you
DARCY (5:59 P.M.): No, but it will be.
ELLE (6:02 P.M.): 🌸 🌸 🌸

* * *

Physiologically improbable as it was, Darcy's heart sputtered to a stop before kick-starting when Elle stepped into the Regal Ballroom of the Bellevue Hyatt Brendon had booked for his party.

Forgoing the traditional red or green holiday attire, Elle wore a sparkling silver minidress that made her skin glow, luminescent beneath the twinkling lights of the chandeliers. She accepted a glass of champagne from a waiter and scanned the room. Their eyes met and a bright smile lit up Elle's face. Darcy tore her eyes away and stared at the bubbles rising inside her champagne flute, trying to quell the similar giddy stirring in her stomach.

"Hey." Elle stopped in front of Darcy and reached out, tracing one of the thin straps holding up Darcy's dress. Darcy fought against the resulting shiver and lost. "I like this. It's very 1930s, *let's have clandestine sex in the library.*"

Darcy coughed out a laugh and wiped champagne off her lips with the back of her hand. "I don't even know what to make of that, but thank you?"

Elle shook her head. "*Atonement?* Come on, it was the movie that made me realize you can be sad and horny at the same time."

"I'm surprised you let such a prime opportunity for alliteration slip through your fingers. Angst and arousal. You're off your game," Darcy teased, lifting her flute and taking a sip.

Elle reached out, fingers ghosting down Darcy's arm before dropping. "Your dress is distracting. I'm proud I'm even making words right now. Complete sentences. Whoops. Sentence fragment." Her eyes crinkled at the corners. "Look what you do to me."

As if Elle didn't drive Darcy to distraction, too. The majority of Darcy's dreams, both waking and sleeping, as of late, were about Elle. That terrified and elated her in equal measure.

Not knowing what to say, Darcy took another sip of champagne.

Elle spun, the light overhead catching on the multicolored glitter sprinkled down her zigzagged part, the rest of her hair left down, imperfect waves tumbling atop her shoulders. “Fancy party. I should say hi to your brother, but I haven’t seen him yet.”

Darcy set her glass down on the table of hors d’oeuvres behind her. “He’s near the front of the room making the rounds with my mother.”

“Your mom?” Elle shifted uneasily on her heels. “Do I get to meet her?”

Darcy’s brows rose. “You *want* to?”

Elle reached out, resting a hand on Darcy’s upper arm. “Unless you’d rather I not.”

Darcy stared across the room to where Brendon was currently introducing Mom to a group of coworkers who appeared to hang on her every word. Darcy twisted the ring around her middle finger. “Later? Do you want something else to drink? More champagne?”

Elle stared at her with huge eyes rimmed with dark, smudgy liner. Glitter had fallen from her hair down onto her lids, her cheeks, her jaw. “Okay, that sounds—”

Elle broke off, cocking her head to the side. More glitter scattered around her, falling from her hair.

“This song.” Elle drained her glass and set it aside with one hand, reaching for Darcy’s hand with the other. “I love this song.”

Dancing wasn’t something Darcy usually did unless forced. But the beat was slow, had a hazy dreamy quality to it that she could probably sway to. That and Elle seemed eager, so eager Darcy didn’t want to deny her. She let Elle drag her out onto the dance floor where she wrapped her arms around Darcy’s waist, fingers dragging against the skin left bare by her low-cut dress. Darcy shivered and stepped closer, resting her hands lightly atop Elle’s shoulders.

“Your dress.” She swallowed. There was a lump in her throat that hadn’t been there before, not until she caught a whiff of Elle’s perfume, something sweet but not floral. Vanilla. Elle almost always smelled like cookies or some kind of baked delicacy, mouthwatering. The same scent had clung to Darcy’s pillows, her sheets. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I meant to tell you I like it. You look like—”

“A disco ball?” Elle suggested, laughing. She continued to trace nonsensical patterns against Darcy’s skin.

She gasped softly when Elle’s fingers slipped beneath the satin of her

dress. “I was going to say you look like . . . you look like the moon.”

The stars, too, for that matter. Elle looked like she’d been draped in the night sky, dipped in starlight.

Rather than laugh or roll her eyes at Darcy’s fumbling ineloquence, Elle pressed closer, fingers squeezing Darcy’s waist. Her tongue swept against her bottom lip and Darcy couldn’t help but track the movement. “Fun fact—the moon doesn’t actually produce any light of its own. It reflects light from the sun, making it appear bright at night. So, if I look like the moon, I guess that means I’m reflecting the light that’s around me.”

Her eyes lifted, staring up at Darcy from beneath the blackest of black lashes.

“That’s—”

Elle dropped her eyes, breaking their gaze. “Corny? Sorry.”

No. Or, if it was, Darcy still liked it. She liked *Elle* and all her eccentricities, her quirks. Elle made her smile more in the past month and a half than Darcy could remember smiling over the course of the last two years. “No. I was going to say—” She hadn’t actually known. “Interesting. It’s interesting. I didn’t know that.”

“I taught you something?” Elle trailed a finger down the length of Darcy’s spine and grinned. “Huh. Kudos to me.”

“You’ve taught me plenty of things.” Glitter from Elle’s hair landed on Darcy’s wrist, pink, blue, and silver freckles mingling with the rest of the moles that dotted her skin. Rather than shake it off, Darcy let the glitter linger.

Her cheeks burned when Elle stared, lips quirking curiously. Please don’t let her ask what Darcy had learned.

“Teach *me* something,” Elle said instead. “Preferably something that doesn’t involve death statistics due to inclement weather.”

Darcy cut her eyes. “It was relevant.”

“It was *morbid*.”

Darcy harrumphed.

“Tick tock.” Elle arched a brow sprinkled with glitter.

Darcy drew a blank. Not because all her facts were boring or morose, but because staring at Elle did that to her. Zeroed Darcy’s focus to figuring out what color to call the blue of her eyes. Romantic obsessions that scared her more than any death statistic.

“Um.” Darcy shook her head. “I don’t know. I—” Her facts *weren’t*

boring, but they felt inconsequential in the face of Elle's cosmic knowledge, her ability to expand Darcy's world by reducing the universe to something as finite as the fact that the moon had no light of its own, but also infinite in its ability to take her breath away. Being with Elle, around Elle, in the mere presence of Elle meant getting comfortable with constantly being out of her comfort zone. Paradoxical.

Elle's fingers dipped below the back of Darcy's dress, flirting with hidden skin, almost indecently low. Her lips twitched and Darcy *ached*. "Come on. Anything."

"I could tell you a joke."

What the hell. A joke? Where had that even come from?

Elle's head bobbed in a frenzied nod, her footsteps faltering, losing the rhythm of the song. "Yes."

"It's not funny, not *really*. Lower your expectations. It's—" Darcy sighed. Based on Elle's wide-eyed look of anticipation, Darcy had committed and now she needed to deliver. "On our first . . . our first date, you told me you weren't sure what an actuary does."

Glitter clung to Elle's lashes, making every blink sparkle. "I remember."

Here went nothing. "What I should've said was, an actuary is someone who expects everyone to be dead on time."

Elle blinked, then comprehension dawned on her. She ducked her head and snorted loudly, stumbling into Darcy. "Oh god."

"Lame, right?" Warmth flooded Darcy's chest, the knots inside her stomach loosening. Elle could've rolled her eyes or shook her head in confusion, but she'd laughed. *Snorted*. It was such a genuine sound. Real.

Elle rested her head on Darcy's shoulder and sighed. Each exhale was hot against her neck and it sent a shiver skittering down Darcy's spine. "That was worse than a dad joke. Don't get me wrong, I love it. But wow."

"You asked for it."

"I guess I did, didn't I?" Elle lifted her head, arms banding tighter around Darcy's waist as they continued to sway in time with the slow melody. "Speaking of asking for it, what do you want for Christmas?"

"You don't have to buy me something. You already got me the tree and it was perfect."

She was going to cherish that ugly little stump of a tree with its mismatched ornaments forever, keep them safe, start a new tradition like Elle had said.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I have everything I want.”

Time stopped when Elle looked at her, eyes soft and fond, shining beneath the light of the many chandeliers. She wasn’t entirely sure if she leaned in, or if it was Elle who closed the distance between them, perhaps both. Elle’s lips brushed against hers in a barely there kiss that made her sigh and sway closer, melting into Elle. When the tip of Elle’s tongue darted out, dragging against her bottom lip, Darcy’s toes curled inside her heels and her stomach did a riotous flip, her hands sinking into the waves at the back of Elle’s neck, pulling her closer, keeping her there.

Elle drew back, champagne-sweet breath gusting softly against Darcy’s swollen lips. Glitter from Elle’s hair, her face, had transferred to Darcy’s lashes and when she blinked, her vision went fractal, exploding in a flickering light show. Like when they’d crawled beneath her Christmas tree and she’d squinted at the lights and everything twinkled.

Elle’s face shimmered before her eyes, glowing, and Darcy’s chest seized, something, some tingling emotion rising up inside her too big to be constrained let alone concealed. Darcy glanced down at her chest, nearly expecting to see something there, visible just beneath the surface, pressing and clawing its way out.

Darcy cupped the back of Elle’s neck and let her thumb drift, sweeping against the side of Elle’s throat. “I’m happy you’re here.”

“Thanks for inviting me. For real,” Elle whispered, but that wasn’t what Darcy meant. She was happy Elle was in her life, that their paths had crossed, intertwined, even if at first it had seemed like the worst thing to happen to her. Elle had turned out to be the best, beyond Darcy’s wildest expectations.

“Elle!”

Distracted, Darcy hadn’t realized they’d swayed their way over to the edge of the dance floor.

Elle glanced over Darcy’s shoulder, her face splitting into a grin. “Brendon, hey. Great party.”

Darcy dropped her hands from around Elle’s neck and took a step back, immediately lamenting the loss of Elle’s arms around her. She turned to face Brendon and— Mom. She was standing beside Brendon, lips pressed into a polite smile.

Right. “Mom, this is Elle. Elle, this is my mother, Gillian.”

“Of course. You’re the . . . astrologer?” Mom cocked her head.

“I am. It’s super nice to meet you.” Elle stuck out her hand, blushing lightly when her skin caught the light and sparkled. “Sorry, this stupid glitter won’t stay where it’s supposed to. I guess that’s what I get for using regular craft store stuff instead of splurging on the kind that’s made for your hair. I figured, glitter’s glitter, right? Wrong.”

Elle rolled her lips together and chuckled, a little puff of air exhaled through her nose.

Mom hummed and shook Elle’s hand. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Elle. I wish I could say Darcy’s told me so much about you, but unfortunately my daughter has remained rather tight-lipped. It’s my son who’s brought me up to speed.”

There it was.

Beside her, Elle shifted and Darcy could *feel* the weight of her stare. Darcy’s jaw ticked.

Brendon coughed into his fist. “You mind if I cut in? I know this is a party and everything, but there’s something about the app I’ve been dying to pick your brain on, Elle.”

“Sure.” Elle stepped toward Brendon and shot Darcy a ghost of a smile over her shoulder.

Darcy tried to smile back and failed, dismally, the curve of her lips feeling all kinds of wrong, because Mom was watching her, eyes burning with curiosity.

“I could use another drink. How about you, Darcy?”

She sighed and followed Mom off the edge of the dance floor over to where one of the waiters—dressed like an elf, à la typical Brendon—held a tray of champagne flutes.

Plucking two glasses from the tray, Mom passed one to Darcy before clinking them together. She drained half of hers in one sip. “You and Elle looked cozy out there.”

Darcy crossed her arms. “I suppose.”

“I’ve got to say, you look a lot more serious than you made it sound last week.”

Darcy shut her eyes. “We were dancing, Mom. It’s a party, there’s music. What do you expect?”

“I don’t *expect* anything.” When Darcy opened her eyes, Mom frowned. “I don’t know when you got the idea in your head that I’m not on your side. I’m not your enemy, baby, I’m confused. Brendon’s telling me one thing and

you're telling me something else and what I see is . . . well, it's difficult for me to understand what it is I'm supposed to believe."

"Of course you're confused," Darcy whispered. "You're drunk."

Mom looked offended. "I am not."

Drunk or not, it wasn't for Mom to understand. "I already told you. It's complicated."

"Complicated." Mom's lips furrowed at the corners. "There's that word again. That word worries me for you."

"You're worried about me? That's a first."

"You're the one who made it clear that I haven't acted much like a mother to you over the years. Excuse me for doing what I can to make up for it now."

Talk about too little, too late. Her life was *her* business, not Mom's to dissect and give unwelcome advice on.

"Darcy." Mom reached out and rested a hand on Darcy's crossed forearm. "I'm not trying to be difficult. Elle's . . . sweet. But you have to admit, she seems a bit more like your brother's type, doesn't she?"

"What in god's name is *that* supposed to mean?" She didn't mean to take the bait, but that was ludicrous.

Mom made an abstract gesture in front of her. "An astrologer?"

"Like you don't spend two weeks every summer at a spiritual retreat in Ojai getting high out of your mind."

Mom rolled her eyes. "I don't mean anything by it. I'm just surprised. She doesn't seem like your type at all."

Darcy shook her head. "I don't see why it matters. Last week you were telling me I could use some fun in my life."

"That was when I thought that's all it was." Mom drained her glass. "She seems a little flighty, is all I'm saying."

Darcy scoffed. "That's rich, coming from you."

Mom drew back, looking as if Darcy had slapped her. "I know I wasn't always there, but I'm trying."

"You know nothing, Mom. And you definitely don't know her."

"And you do? How long have you known her? You thought you knew Natasha, didn't you?"

Darcy crossed her arms tighter, fists pressing into her sides, digging into her ribs. "I know Elle."

"God, I—" Mom snatched another glass of champagne and stole a quick

sip.

“What, Mom? Just say it.”

Mom shook her head subtly and stared out across the dance floor for a moment before finally turning her head and pinning Darcy with a bewildered stare. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were in love.”

Chapter Eighteen

You seriously like the addition to the chat feature?”

Brendon bobbed his head enthusiastically as he led Elle around the dance floor. “It’s brilliant. Seriously. It’s a bit more involved for the engineers, but the perks are undeniable. Encouraging users to continue chatting in the app for as long as possible . . . *Elle*. The projections are showing gains that are”—Brendon grinned boyishly, charming—“astronomical. The cost-benefit analysis speaks for itself.”

“That’s great, Brendon. I’m guessing you already told your new best friend the news? I’m feeling awfully left out.”

“Hush. You’re all adorably coupled up with my sister. Don’t act like we left you high and dry.” He raised their hands, encouraging her to twirl. She laughed and went for it. “But yeah, I did. Margot told me it was your idea.”

“It was a joint effort.” Elle craned her neck, peeking over his shoulder. “Have you seen her lately? Margot? We came together and she went MIA on me.”

Elle was dying to get Margot’s opinion on her strange introduction to Darcy’s mom.

Brendon wrinkled his nose and something soft and gentle ached inside her chest, not unpleasant, *full*. Darcy wrinkled her nose the exact same way.

His eyes swept the room. “I think I saw her chatting with a few of the folks in product design before I came over here.”

“I’ll hunt her down later.” Stumbling, Elle smiled in appreciation when he kept her from toppling over.

For a moment, they moved to the music, the silence between them comfortable, companionable.

Brendon cleared his throat. “About that with my mom.”

Elle bit the inside of her cheek. “Yeah. What was that?”

Brendon shut his eyes, briefly since he was the one leading. “It’s . . . nothing to worry about. Don’t take it personally.”

Sure, because that was easy. Elle *never* did that.

“Easier said than done, though, right?” Brendon stole the words right from her head. “I know. Don’t let it get to you. Darcy knows what she feels. I’m serious. Darcy’s crazy about you, you know that, right?”

“You think so?”

He looked at her like she was crazy. “Elle. Come on.”

Elle bit the corner of her lip.

“I’m serious. Darcy keeps her cards close to the chest, but you’d have to be blind not to see how she looks at you.”

Elle knew how it *felt* when Darcy looked at her. How it made her stomach swoop with an intensity that stole her breath, made her flush from head to toe, turned her inside out.

“How does she look at me?” she asked, out of curiosity’s sake, mostly. “Humor me.”

“Darcy looks at you like . . .” Brendon’s lips tugged to the side, his brow furrowing. A smile inched its way across his face, both his dimples gleaming. “She looks at you like you hung the moon.”

If that wasn’t the greatest, most beautiful, cheesiest thing Elle had ever heard, she didn’t know what was. Cheeks aching from the spectacular grin she had no hope of controlling, Elle ducked her chin. “You think?”

Brendon chuckled and when Elle lifted her head, he was staring off over her shoulder with a faraway look in his eyes. “I’d kill to have someone look at me like that, you know?”

Brendon had made his entire life about helping everyone else find their happily-ever-after and he deserved one of his own. If it could happen for her, it could totally happen for him. *Should* happen for him.

“Your dream girl is out there somewhere.” She cuffed him lightly on the arm. “She probably has no idea you’re out here, a total catch who’s just waiting for her to stumble into your open arms.”

Brendon barked out a laugh. “I’ll take your word for it. Though I’m beginning to worry she lives on the opposite side of the world or something. Opposite side of the country, at least.”

“That’s easy. Take a road trip.”

“I’d search every city if I had—” Something over her shoulder caught

Brendon's attention, his eyes widening. "Shoot. One of our investors just walked in. Do you mind if I . . . ?"

She stepped back, waving him off with a smile. "Go. I should go find your sister."

Brendon looked grateful. "I think I saw her talking to Mom by the chocolate fountain."

So the chocolate fountain was where Elle headed, because *nothing* about heading in that direction sounded like a bad idea. If Darcy wasn't there, there'd still be chocolate. Win-win.

As luck would have it, Darcy was by the fondue, and so was her mother. Brushing her fingers against the edge of her dress, Elle approached. But just as she was almost close enough to announce herself, a group of three women whose giraffish height was only exaggerated by the stilettos on their feet stepped in front of her, cutting her off. She edged around them, approaching Darcy and her mom from behind instead.

"That was when I thought that's all it was." Darcy's mom finished her champagne and set the glass aside, swaying slightly. "Then Brendon's telling me you're crazy about Elle and you're telling me it's complicated. She seems a little flighty, is all I'm saying."

Darcy scoffed. "That's rich, coming from you."

"I know I wasn't always there, but I'm trying."

"You know nothing, Mom. And you definitely don't know her."

"And you do? How long have you known her? You thought you knew Natasha, didn't you?"

Darcy's shoulders curled forward. "I know Elle."

"God, I—" Her mom grabbed another glass of champagne.

"What, Mom? Just say it."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were in love."

Elle's heart stopped. Eavesdropping was wrong, but she was weak.

Darcy's scoff came out strangled. "You're drunk."

"I said I'm not." Gillian teetered on her heels. "Not really."

"You're being ridiculous."

"You're saying you're not in love with her?" her mom asked.

Regret hastened through Elle's veins like poison. She should've walked away. She shouldn't have eavesdropped. She didn't want to hear anything more but she couldn't move. Anchored to the floor like cinder blocks, her feet wouldn't budge.

“We’ve been dating a month and a half, if you can even call it that.” Darcy shook her head. “I’m just having fun. Of course I’m not in love with her. Don’t . . . don’t be absurd.”

Elle pressed a hand to her stomach as if that gesture alone could hold her together.

Just having fun.

Darcy didn’t love her.

Darcy didn’t.

Because that would . . . that would be *absurd*.

Fuck, her eyes stung. She wouldn’t cry, she refused. She needed fresh air, a moment alone, a moment to process, to set her world to rights and fix this dissonance, believing one thing, feeling it in her gut, feeling it down to her bones only to hear that it wasn’t true.

Elle stepped back, footsteps faltering as Darcy turned. Their eyes met and Elle’s chest went tight, shrink-wrap around her heart, squeezing until she couldn’t breathe.

A flicker of something Elle had no name for passed over Darcy’s butterscotch brown eyes. Realization? Regret? Concern? Pity? “Elle—”

“Found you!” Elle’s laugh sounded fake even to her own ears. Fake and forced and flimsy, a paper-thin front to cover what she was feeling. “I wanted to let you know I’m going to get some fresh air. I’ll be back.”

She turned before her face could do something terrible like crumble beneath Darcy’s mother’s scrutinizing stare. It made Elle want to shrink in on herself so she kept walking, kept moving in the direction of the ballroom exit, even when Darcy called out after her.

Chapter Nineteen

Darcy's lungs burned as she quickened her steps, one heel catching on a crack in the pavement in front of the hotel. Thankfully Elle drew to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Darcy wasn't made for running in shoes like these.

"Elle." Her breath crystalized in the air, turning to fog in front of her. "It's cold out here."

Understatement of the century. It was *freezing*, the sort of cold that cramped your muscles and made your bones ache. Darcy hugged her arms across her body, skin prickling with gooseflesh as she waited for Elle to say something.

"I'm fine," Elle mumbled, back still to Darcy. Light from the streetlamp caught on the glitter that had rained down her shoulders, her arms, her bare upper back. Darcy's vision went fractal again, all that glitter turning to crushed diamonds on Elle's skin. Stardust.

Darcy's teeth chattered when she tried to speak. "At least . . . at least get your coat or something if you're going to stand out here. It's—"

"I said I'm fine," Elle bit out, voice wavering around her words, whittling them into something thin and sharp that pierced Darcy right through the chest.

She took a step forward, knees knocking as she shivered. "You don't . . . you don't sound fine."

She sounded anything but. What the hell had happened? Everything had been wonderful, *perfect*, and sure, Mom had been brusque, but that wasn't worth getting upset over. It certainly wasn't worth dashing off into the cold without a coat. Yet Darcy had followed. Chasing after Elle had been instinctive, something she hadn't thought about. Elle had looked upset, her

smile forced, and she'd taken off and Darcy had been halfway out the ballroom before it had even occurred to her that she hadn't said anything to Mom. She'd left their conversation, that stupid, worthless conversation hanging and had followed Elle out into the night.

Above them, the sky was dark, not a star in sight, not even the moon. Elle was, by far, the brightest thing Darcy could see, brighter than the streetlights and the lamps, a beacon in the darkness.

Elle's shoulders curled forward, the curve of her spine enticing. Keeping one arm around herself, Darcy reached out to stroke the skin of Elle's back, to run her fingers down that arch until skin met sparkling fabric. Elle turned before Darcy could make contact and something about her hand hovering in the space between them left Darcy feeling so vulnerable that she dropped her arm like she'd been burned.

Nothing about Elle's expression looked *fine*. A furrow had formed between her brows, her eyes damp and narrowed. She'd licked the gloss from her lips, worried them red, and the cold air chapped them further, making her pout more pronounced.

"I'm . . ." With a shrug, Elle crossed her arms. One strap slipped down her shoulder and she slid it back into place absently, sniffing softly, because it was cold or because of something else, Darcy had no idea. Elle cleared her throat and lifted her chin. The look in her glossy blue eyes rooted Darcy where she stood. "I heard. What you said to your mom. I overheard."

What she'd said to her mom . . . Darcy's heart stuttered inside her chest. "What part?"

Elle scoffed gently and hugged herself tighter, elbows squeezing in, making the curl of her shoulders and the jut of her collarbone sharper, more pronounced. "All of it?"

All of it . . . okay. That was why Elle was *not* fine. Why she'd taken off, run out into the cold. Something about what she'd heard, she hadn't liked.

Nothing about that conversation had sat well with Darcy. Not Mom's prying, not her demeaning Elle, not her assumptions, and definitely not the part where she tried to force Darcy to reckon with her feelings. As if that were her place. As if Darcy needed that. Mom had no idea what Darcy needed.

Darcy shoved the heel of her hand into her breastbone and stared down the sidewalk. Empty. No one was crazy enough to be standing outside when it was this cold. No one except for her and Elle.

“Okay.” She turned, facing Elle once more.

Elle shook her head, lashes fluttering as she blinked, lights catching on the glitter. “Okay? That’s—” She blew out her breath, shivering softly.

“Let’s . . . let’s go back inside.” Darcy gestured over her shoulder. It was warm in the hotel and Darcy desperately wanted to head back inside just like she desperately wanted to *not* have this conversation. She wanted to step this whole night back, return to the dance floor, back to when everything had been far less confusing, the thoughts inside her head less of a jumble. The fear of what she felt would’ve still been there, but it wouldn’t have been so suffocating, bearing down on her with an intensity that made it difficult to do something as basic as stand there and act like she was okay. It had lingered in her periphery, but if she kept her eyes on Elle, kept looking ahead—not *too* far ahead—it was okay.

Elle’s chin wobbled gently before she clenched her jaw and lifted her head, staring up at Darcy, the blue of her eyes as dark and glassy as the lake at night. “That’s it? I said I overheard and you don’t have anything . . . anything to say?”

Darcy bit the inside of her lip. “What do you want me to say?”

Elle stared for a heartbeat, then two, three, and Darcy’s heart quickened. The air around them crackled, cold and electric and quiet. Elle’s chin jerked in a barely there shake. “*Something*. I want you to say *something*.” Her tongue swept out, wetting her bottom lip. “Is this— What is this to you?” she whispered.

Darcy’s heart clenched, the back of her throat narrowing.

She’d told Mom that she was having fun with Elle, and that was true, but it was more than that. It was fun and frightening and more than anything Darcy had felt in a long, long time.

“It’s . . . it’s complicated,” she admitted, feeling like that *was* the right word, the only one that could do her quagmire of feelings any justice.

Elle’s jaw dropped, a little gasp tearing from between her lips before she laughed, low and dry, humorless. “That’s— Could you *uncomplicate* it for me?”

If only it were that easy. “It’s not that simple, Elle.”

Elle stared, eyes narrowing before she pressed her lips together and gave a tiny shrug. “Isn’t it? Or shouldn’t it be? It is for me.”

The back of Darcy’s throat burned. “You wouldn’t understand—”

“Why not?” Elle glared. “I might be *flighty*, but I’m not stupid, Darcy.”

Darcy hugged herself tighter until her ribs ached. “I never said you were. I never called you flighty.”

“Your mom did.” Elle’s jaw clenched tighter as she stared down and to the side where a crack in the pavement spread like branching veins all the way to the curb.

Darcy’s chest went cold. “I am not my mother.”

Elle was quiet and as much as Darcy didn’t want to have this conversation there was something unsettling in this silence, alarming in the stillness of Elle’s body, her posture. She was a force, always in movement. Twitching, shifting, vibrant. This wasn’t like her, wasn’t normal. It wasn’t like how some of their silences were comfortable. Those contained breath in every space between their words. This was deprivation, asphyxiation in the grim absence of Elle’s voice, her laugh, the sound she made when she sighed softly and she was simply *there*. Touchable.

The distance between them now felt vast and Darcy didn’t have the slightest clue how to traverse it. If she could.

With another barely perceptible jerk of her chin, Elle frowned. “I’m not asking for . . . for a proposal, Darcy.”

Bile crept up her esophagus, her heart tripping, flailing, faltering.

“I’m not asking you to promise me forever.” Elle sniffed hard. “It’s only been a few weeks, but you’re all I can think about and I just want to know what this is. We were fake and now we’re not, but what are we? What am I? Am I your girlfriend? Is this— How do you *feel*?”

Like she was going to throw up.

Outside of the immediate moment, Darcy had never felt like *this*, not this soon, not this fast, not this deep, not this much, none of it. Not for anyone, not even Natasha. And like Mom had said, Darcy had been ready to spend the rest of her life with Natasha, had loved her, and as a result, finding her in bed with a mutual friend had *broken* Darcy. Had shattered her heart into a million pieces and it had taken nearly two years and a cross-country move to glue herself back together and even then, until recently, she sometimes wondered if she’d put herself back together wrong.

If she was more like Mom than she wanted to believe.

What she felt for Elle was immense and it made what she’d felt for Natasha seem trivial. She’d loved Natasha but she’d never forgotten how to breathe when Natasha stared at her and remembered how when Natasha smiled. Darcy had never lost her mind over Natasha’s laugh. She’d never

stared at her phone waiting for Natasha to text. She'd never counted the minutes until she'd see Natasha again. She'd never felt so helpless and powerful at the same time when they kissed, like she was holding the entire magnificent, fragile universe inside her hands when they touched. Her feelings for Natasha had been . . . steady. Steady and secure with both feet firmly planted on the ground at all times. A comfortable sort of love. Sensible.

Natasha had been safe and she'd still cut Darcy to the quick.

If she felt this much for Elle, as much as she did, a scary amount, it only stood to reason that with more time, her feelings would continue to grow. Like one of those stars Elle had told her about, the ones that grew bigger and bigger and burned brighter and hotter, until one day, inevitably, they exploded, drowning out the light of all the stars around them. Like a supernova, the resulting heartbreak would drown out the memory of all those other brokenhearted moments, make them pale by comparison.

It was inevitable—sparks either fizzled or they caught fire and burned you. It had happened to Mom after twenty-five years and it had happened to Darcy, too.

No place on Earth would be far enough to run to escape that sort of pain, to start over. Not as long as there were stars in the sky and a moon over her head. She and Elle would look up at that same sky every night and no amount of distance would ever be enough to make her forget what the moon looked like reflecting off Elle's features. How it made Darcy feel like anything was possible.

Darcy curled her arms tighter around herself, going numb and not just from the cold. "I don't know. I've got my FSA exam—"

"In a couple weeks. What about after that?"

After that. Next month and the next—long-term plans. One day she'd find herself so wrapped up in Elle that when the inevitable happened, there'd be no such thing as a clean break. When she lost Elle, she'd lose part of herself, too. Something she'd sworn never to do.

"I don't *know*, Elle. I don't . . . I didn't plan for any of this, I wasn't *looking* for this. I didn't *want* this."

Elle's expression soured, lips folding in, chin quivering before she rolled her shoulders back and stood a little straighter. "Sorry to wreck your perfect plans by having feelings."

Apparently she was not numb enough because Elle's words stung like a

paper cut, not deep but unexpected. A jagged ambush that sliced open the surface of her skin, proving how easy it was for Elle to hurt her without much effort. Darcy wasn't a robot, she wasn't unfeeling, not like Elle made it sound. She felt . . . *God*, she felt and sometimes she wished she didn't. Wished she could turn it all off because she felt *too much*.

She gulped down a breath of cold air and watched as her ragged exhale fogged in front of her face. "That's not fair."

Elle's eyes squeezed shut. Her front teeth sank into her lower lip and her nails bit into the skin of her upper arms. She sniffed hard and opened her eyes. Glassy and damp, moisture clung to her lashes.

Darcy's chest panged. She'd put that look on Elle's face and it wasn't what she wanted. None of this was going the way she'd wanted.

"Not fair?" A watery laugh spilled from Elle's lips as a single tear slipped from the corner of her eyes, tracking down her cheek, and with it, glitter. One sparkling tear track. "What's not fair is that you had me going. For a minute there, I hoped"—Elle's throat bobbed and her voice cracked—"we could have something real."

Behind them, the door to the hotel opened, the soft strains of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" spilling out onto the sidewalk. Of all the stupid songs in the world. "Elle—"

Elle gave a curt jerk of her head and scrubbed her hand over her face, wiping away her tears and smearing more glitter across her skin. "No, you know, I might be starry-eyed and I might be a little bit of a mess sometimes, and maybe I wear my heart on my sleeve." Elle took a stuttered breath in through her mouth, gasping softly. "But at least I have a heart, Darcy."

Whatever little bit of warmth remained in Darcy's body extinguished as the world spun to a stop, time slowing to a crawl. This didn't *feel* like heartbreak, this *was* heartbreak. Darcy had miscalculated; she wasn't *falling*, she'd *fallen*. She pressed a hand to her chest as if in doing so she could keep her heart from shattering entirely, but the damage was already done. Too late.

"Whoa, whoa."

Darcy turned, chin trembling and nose running, arms wrapped around her body so tight she could barely suck air in. She would not lose it. Not now, not yet. Not in front of Elle and not in front of Brendon, who'd just stepped onto the sidewalk, footsteps slowing as he approached.

He glanced between her and Elle, eyes narrowed, lingering on Elle at last. "Elle, that's not—"

A frustrated cry slipped from Elle's lips as she shook her head, walking backward, slipping away. "No offense, Brendon," she choked out, eyes wet and dull, holding none of the sparkle Darcy loved. "But you have *no idea* what this is."

Elle pivoted on her heel and in that second before she turned, their eyes met. A spark flickered in Darcy's chest, an echo of heat, of what was, what could've been. *If only.*

And then Elle was gone, turning and striding down the sidewalk impossibly fast, or it looked like that because Darcy's vision was blurred and each time she blinked she caught a staggered snapshot of Elle walking away, the distance between them growing larger and larger.

Brendon placed a hot hand on her shoulder, hissing through his teeth. "Darce, come on, you're—"

"She's right." The air was so fucking cold and it stung her scratchy throat, burned her nose. But nothing hurt as badly as her heart. Splintered and fractured, with each inhale it felt like fragmented shards scraped against her chest like daggers. Darcy could barely breathe. It was too much to bear. Darcy didn't want to hurt, didn't want to feel. "You have—you have *no idea*, Brendon."

"It'll be okay," and he sounded so sincere that what was left of her resolve crumbled.

Spine bowing forward, Darcy curled in on herself and gasped out a sob, startling herself and Brendon. "It's not. It won't. It was— *Fuck*, Brendon, it was *fake*."

Brendon looked confused. "What? Darcy—"

"Me and Elle, it started out fake." Once she started, she couldn't stop. The words tripped off her tongue as salty tears dripped from the tip of her nose, her vision obscuring until Brendon was nothing more than a tall blur beside her. "It wasn't real. It was so you'd get off my back and quit setting me up on dates because I didn't want to fall in love, Brendon. I didn't want to fall in love and *this . . . this is why.*"

Darcy scrunched her eyes shut and gave a violent shiver, limbs going cold, colder than she thought was possible. It was Seattle for crying out loud, why was she so cold?

Arms wrapped around her, pulling her close until her forehead rested against Brendon's chest. His bow tie dug into her temple but she didn't care. She lifted her hands and fisted them in the front of his shirt.

“This doesn’t look fake,” he whispered, one hand stroking down the back of her head over her hair.

Too choked up to speak, Darcy hiccuped and burrowed deeper into Brendon’s shoulder.

Something cold and wet landed on her bare back. Again, and again, until Darcy lifted her head and tilted back, glaring up at the black night sky.

Soft, fat snowflakes fell from the sky, dancing on the wind and landing on Darcy’s arms, her exposed back, irritating her bare skin like tiny pinpricks. She shut her eyes and dropped her forehead back to Brendon’s chest, muffling a sob with a bite of her lip.

Fucking snow.

Chapter Twenty

The front door banged against the wall, followed by the sound of several heavy thuds. Margot's creative cursing punctuated the ruckus, further interrupting Pat Benatar telling Elle that love was a battlefield and that she was strong.

"Motherfucking duck fucker," Margot shouted. "Ben can go fuck himself. Jerry, too. *Chunky Monkey* for goddamn sure. Christ on a shingle that fucking *hurt*." A pause. "Oh, hi, Mrs. Harrison. No, I'm good. No, no, no one's doing anything unseemly to any ducks. Nope. Monkeys, neither. Sorry. Yep, I'll get right on that. Wash my mouth out *really* well."

Oh, Margot. Their landlord was going to *love* getting a call from Mrs. Harrison complaining about them, *again*.

Margot stuck her head around the corner, peering into the living room. Elle waved weakly from her spot on the couch and Margot's face brightened. "Hey. You brushed your hair. Go, Elle."

Rude.

Elle rolled over and assumed the position she'd been in before Margot had loudly interrupted her sulk fest. Face buried in the arm of the sofa, afghan pulled halfway over her head, one eye open so she could watch the television, which was currently on mute. Beside her, her phone was turned screen side down, Bluetooth connected to the speakers on the kitchen bar.

"Mrs. Harrison sends her love." Margot stepped farther into the living room, nose wrinkling as she stared at the coffee table.

There were a few takeout containers. Three. Okay, five. And some tissues. A lot of tissues. Elle was going to clean up after herself as soon as she scraped together the willpower to get off the couch for longer than a trip to the bathroom.

“What was with all that noise?” Elle mumbled.

Margot kicked a small pile of crumpled notebook paper with her toe. “You know, casually breaking my foot in the doorway. Speaking of, I’m going to unload the groceries I bought and then we can talk about . . . *this*.”

She frowned pointedly at the clutter before leaving.

Elle pulled the afghan the rest of the way over her head and mouthed the words to “Love Is a Battlefield.”

Strong was the last thing she felt at the moment. Her chest felt like someone had punched a hole through it, ripping out her heart and shredding it into bleeding bits of confetti before stuffing it back inside her body and duct-taping the hole shut.

“I have soup,” Margot shouted from the kitchen. “Your favorite. Pho Rau Cai from What the Pho.”

Elle stuck her nose out from the blanket. “I’m not sick, Margot.”

“You’re not sick *yet*.” A cabinet slammed followed by the sound of the freezer opening. “You walked all the way to Starbucks in the snow, Elle.”

Big deal. “It wasn’t even a mile.”

“Wearing spaghetti straps in twenty-eight-degree weather. *Snow*.” Margot huffed loudly.

She sounded like—

Elle scrunched her eyes shut as another hot wave of tears flooded her ducts. *Fuck*.

“I mean, as far as dramatic exits go, that was a good one,” Margot prattled on, oblivious.

A dramatic exit hadn’t been Elle’s intention. She hadn’t meant to storm off without cash, her keys, or her phone. She hadn’t meant to walk all the way from the hotel to the twenty-four-hour Starbucks several blocks over, but the need to get as far away from Darcy and her painful inability to speak had carried Elle across town on autopilot, snow and strappy heels be damned.

At least the baristas on shift had taken mercy on her, letting her use the store’s phone. Then they’d gone above and beyond, embodying the real spirit of the holiday season by pouring free peppermint tea in her until she’d thawed and Margot showed up with her car, Elle thankfully having left her keys and phone in the pocket of the jacket she’d checked at the hotel.

“I don’t want soup,” Elle mumbled.

For a moment, Margot was quiet. The song switched from “Love Is a Battlefield” to “I Fall Apart” by Post Malone and Elle’s chin wobbled.

“All right.” The freezer opened again. “I bought Chunky Monkey, Half Baked, Phish Food and”—there was rustling, followed by the sound of something wet hitting the floor, then more of Margot’s colorful swearing —“we’ve still got half a pint of Chocolate Therapy, but it’s been tucked behind the frozen peas so I think it might be freezer burned.”

Ah, the frozen peas. Without a doubt freezer burned, then. She and Margot only kept the frozen peas on hand in case of emergencies. They were cheaper than an icepack.

“Elle? Which do you want?”

Elle gulped in a breath of stagnant air beneath the blanket. “Both. Both is good.”

“I gave you four options. Which *both*?”

“Yes.”

Margot sighed and shut the freezer. A minute later, the blanket lifted, and Margot pressed something cold and hard against Elle’s cheek. Elle yelped. A spoon. Margot had pressed a spoon to her hot, puffy face.

With a flourish of her fingers, Margot gestured to the coffee table where she’d shoved some of the takeout containers aside, making room for the four pints of Ben and Jerry’s she’d lined up. “Ice cream therapy. Dig in.”

Elle adjusted the blanket around her shoulders like a cape and jabbed her spoon into the pint of Half Baked. Spoon laden with cookie dough goodness, Elle collapsed back against the couch and nibbled. That was enough energy expended.

“Okay, now that you have ice cream, you want to tell me about *this*?” Margot gestured to the table and surrounding area.

“It’s not that bad,” Elle mumbled around her spoon. “I’m gonna clean it up.”

Margot sighed and dipped her own spoon into the Chunky Monkey. “Elle, it’s a mess.”

It *wasn’t*. It was some takeout and some tissues. And paper. A cup. Socks. Elle’s eyes burned.

“You’re right.” It was a mess. *She* was a mess. “My mom’s right. Darcy’s right. I’m a mess.”

Margot’s eyes widened. “What? No. I didn’t say that. Darcy’s not right about anything. Fuck Darcy.” Margot set the ice cream down and crawled her way across the floor, heaving herself onto the couch and wrapping her arms around Elle, squeezing until Elle could barely breathe. “Say it with me. Fuck.

Darcy.”

Elle shook her head. She couldn't do it. Rendered mute, she sniffed instead.

“Elle, you're not—” Margot sighed. “Okay, right now, you're a little bit of a mess. But it's temporary. You'll clean this up and you'll stop being a mess, yeah? Eat your ice cream.”

Elle shoved her spoon in her mouth and closed her eyes.

If only it were that easy. Clean up the mess and be okay. Problems solved. “I'm not a Virgo, Mar.”

Margot leaned back, dropping her arms. “You're right. It's— Shit, Elle. Just . . . tell me what you did today. You've obviously been busy with”—she reached over the edge of the couch and grabbed a handful of crumpled paper off the floor—“lists! You've been making lists. Oh My Stars lists?”

Elle nodded.

Focus on work. That's what she had planned to do after that awful first date with Darcy. Her plan had been waylaid, but she could pick it up now. Who says heartbreak had to ruin her focus?

Margot stared down at the crinkled paper in her hand. “Asphyxiation, decapitation by elevator, burned alive in a tanning booth . . .” Margot looked up at her with startled eyes. “What the actual fuck, Elle? This is morbid.”

She pointed her spoon at the television. “Horror movie marathon. How would you die in *Final Destination* based on your eighth house?”

“That's . . . I don't know what to say.” Margot scrunched the piece of paper back up and threw it across the room. “Moving on. What”—she tilted the paper to the side and furrowed her brow—“I can't read this. It's all smeared. What does this say?”

She shoved the paper in Elle's face. Once Elle had uncrossed her eyes and pulled the paper back, she grimaced both because of what it said and because the paper was blotted with tears . . . snot, too. “This one's dumb.”

“Does it involve death and dismemberment?” Margot grabbed the pint of Chunky Monkey off the table and cradled it in her lap.

“No,” Elle admitted. Not in the literal sense. “It's the zodiac signs as breakup songs.”

Maybe heartbreak was screwing with her focus. But only a little.

Understanding passed over Margot's face as she tilted her head and lifted a finger in the air. “Hence the music.”

Other way around. Bless Spotify. The playlist *I Should Be a Sad Bitch*

had pulled double duty, letting Elle sit in her feels while providing inspiration. Multitasking at its most depressing.

“Give it back.” Margot snatched the paper and brought it closer to her face, squinting. “This is good. Except . . . *Elle*.”

What Breakup Song Should You Listen to Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

Aries— “Survivor” by Destiny’s Child

Taurus— “No Scrubs” by TLC

Gemini— “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” by Taylor Swift

Cancer— “Bleeding Love” by Leona Lewis

Leo— “Irreplaceable” by Beyoncé

Virgo— “Happier” by Marshmello

Libra— “Thank U, Next” by Ariana Grande

Scorpio— “Before He Cheats” by Carrie Underwood

Sagittarius— “Truth Hurts” by Lizzo

Capricorn— “I Am a Rock” by Simon and Garfunkel

Aquarius— “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor

Pisces— “Total Eclipse of the Heart” by Bonnie Tyler

Elle snagged the pint of Half Baked off the coffee table and shoved another bite in her mouth, studiously ignoring Margot’s exasperated stare.

“‘I Am a Rock’?” Margot demanded. “Elizabeth Marie.”

“What?” Elle sighed around her spoon. “It’s fitting. It’s— Darcy’s a Capricorn.”

And clearly, she was a rock, an island who had no need for feelings. At least not any feelings that had anything to do with Elle.

Elle stabbed at her ice cream. Maybe it wasn’t Darcy. Maybe it was her. Elle *was* the common denominator in her love life or lack thereof, after all.

“Here.” Margot grabbed a pen and crossed out the song, scribbling something neatly in its place.

Elle licked her spoon, then shoved it back in the pint before setting it on the coffee table. She wasn’t hungry. “What did you put?”

With a nonchalance Elle couldn’t muster if she tried, Margot tossed the pen and paper on the table. “‘Too Good at Goodbyes’ by Sam Smith.”

The back of Elle’s eyelids burned, her vision blurring with tears. She wasn’t going to cry. She wasn’t. She was going to keep staring at the coffee table until she became dehydrated and her body reabsorbed her tears. They wouldn’t fall. They wouldn’t. She wasn’t—

A hot tear slid down her face, trailing sideways on the curve of her cheek and catching on the side of her nostril, salt burning her chapped skin. Damn

it.

“*Elle.*” Margot grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her across the couch until Elle was halfway lying in Margot’s lap. She petted the back of Elle’s head and that did it.

Composure completely kaput, Elle buried her nose in Margot’s stomach and clenched her eyes shut. Fat, slippery tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, making her face wet and sticky, her nose beginning to run. She gasped in a broken breath and clenched her fingers in Margot’s sweater. “What’s *wrong* with me?”

Gently, Margot brushed back the baby-fine hair from around Elle’s temples. “Nothing. Nothing at all, Elle.”

“Obviously, something.” There had to be. There must’ve been something about her that made it so easy for Darcy to walk away. Metaphorically. Elle had done the actual walking but Darcy hadn’t stopped her, hadn’t even tried.

Elle had bared her heart for Darcy, her soul. From day one, she’d been clear with Darcy on what she wanted, what she craved. Darcy had given her hope that she could have that, that *they* could have that together. False hope or no hope, Elle wasn’t sure which was worse. From where she was sitting, both made her ache, made her feel like there was something critical missing inside her. That spark, the little voice that kept her going when everything else was grim and dark and bearing down on her. Hope didn’t spring eternal in Elle after all.

She couldn’t even sleep in her own room, couldn’t stand the sight of the stars on her ceiling because now all they reminded her of was the night that Darcy had stayed, their night beneath the stars.

Darcy Lowell had ruined the fucking stars for Elle. Of all the things. Elle had given Darcy *everything* and now she had nothing.

“Darcy has fucking problems, okay? And those are on her, not on you. You did nothing wrong. Do you hear me?”

Elle lifted her head and stared up at Margot through clumpy lashes. She bit the inside of her cheek and had to drop her voice to a whisper to get her question out without choking. “But why doesn’t she want me?”

That was the question that had kept her up last night, awake and staring at the ceiling of the living room until her puffy eyelids grew too heavy and she eventually drifted off into a fitful sleep plagued by dreams of happier times. Like last week when Darcy had made her pancakes for the second time and had kissed the inside of Elle’s wrist when she’d stopped Elle from stealing

one off the plate. Or when they'd been up on the astronomy tower at UW and Darcy had looked at her, ambient light from the stars and the moon turning her hair into spun sunlight, all reds and golds, fire in the night, and Elle had felt seen. Like Darcy had taken a peek at Elle's soul, had heard the tempo of her heart, and decided she liked it. Liked it enough to stay.

But only for a little while, apparently. Temporarily. Not long enough.

"Elle—"

"Am I not enough?"

Margot shook her head, eyes fierce, the clench of her jaw vehement. "No. You are absolutely enough."

Of the wrong things. Her chin wobbled, a fresh batch of tears sluicing down her cheeks. She didn't have the energy to try to stop them. "Then am I too much, Margot? Be honest."

Her family certainly thought so. Darcy, too.

"You're just right, Elle." Margot pushed back Elle's bangs and rubbed her thumb over Elle's temple, wiping away tears. "*No one* is worth feeling like you're not good enough, that you're not amazing exactly as you are. If Darcy can't see that, that means she isn't right for you, okay? It means she's not *your* perfect person."

Elle bit down on the side of her tongue until she could speak without fear of sobbing out her words. "I don't think I have one of those. A perfect person."

This was the antithesis of who she was—full of fear, doubt, hopeless. But she didn't feel like herself, not at all. Maybe a sanitized version, scrubbed down to all bones, no heart. *Elle minus*.

Margot grabbed the sides of Elle's face, forcing Elle to meet her stare. Margot's throat jerked and she blinked fast. "You do. You absolutely do, you hear me? And honestly, you probably have lots of perfect people. Look at us. You're one of my perfect people. You're my best friend, Elle. You're my *family*."

Shit.

"Margot." Elle's nose stuffed, her throat burning like she swallowed sandpaper.

"And you don't need to change a single thing about yourself for anyone, okay?" Margot cocked her head, black hair curling against her neck. "Okay, you need to shower and, like, open a window to air the apartment out because it smells rank in here, but other than that, you don't need to change a damn

thing.”

Elle coughed out a weak laugh.

“You deserve someone great, Elle. Someone who loves you for exactly who you are, as you are.” Margot stretched, snagging a fistful of tissues from the table. She pressed the whole bunch into Elle’s face, making her laugh a little stronger.

Wiping the tears from her face, Elle scooted to sitting. “I get it.” She touched the side of her head with the pads of her fingers before tapping her chest. “But when am I gonna *believe* it?”

She wanted to feel that certainty she was so used to. Positivity, that unerring ability to *believe* everything was going to be all right. Optimism. She missed that. She wanted it back.

Margot frowned and shook her head slowly. “I don’t know, babe. But I’ll keep telling you until you do, okay?”

“It could take years, Mar.”

Margot arched a dark brow, expression shrewd. “Are you going anywhere? Because I’m sure as shit not.”

Elle sucked in a shuddering breath and nodded. “Thanks.”

“That’s what friends are for, right?” Margot stood and reached for the ice cream that was beginning to go soupy. “You know what else friends are for?”

Elle shook her head. She could come up with plenty of things friends were for, but it was easier to ask when Margot made it sound like she had something specific in mind.

Margot headed into the kitchen and put the ice cream back in the freezer. Then she grabbed a paper bag from beneath the counter hefting it into the air. Stamped across the paper was the logo from the liquor store on the corner.

She grinned. “Tequila.”

* * *

Elle rolled over, trying to get comfortable, but the couch was so hard. Something dug into her side and something under her gave off a terrible, shrill squeak. She shifted away, smacking her funny bone on something even harder. A frisson of pain shot down to her wrist all the way up to her shoulder, her fingers tingling. *Ow*.

Cracking open an eye—*ah*, bad idea. Elle burrowed her head into—Styrofoam?

She tried again, cracking open her eyes slowly. Beneath her face was one of the many takeout containers. And she was using it as a pillow because . . . she was on the floor. “What the hell?”

Ew. Her tongue was gummy and her teeth needed to be scrubbed. Twice. For good measure.

Sitting up slowly, Elle squinted around her. The coffee table was still littered with all the same junk, plus a bottle of tequila . . . missing most of the tequila. Oh. She pressed a hand to her forehead. No wonder she felt like hell and had slept on the floor. *Fucking tequila.*

“Oh, hey. You’re up.” Margot bounced into the living room looking bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and not at all hungover. Not one bit. She was wearing real people clothing, black jeans and a lace bodysuit. And makeup.

“Mar,” she croaked. “What the fuck? Please tell me there’s not a tiger in the bathroom.”

“There’s not a tiger in the bathroom and I promise you still have all your teeth.” Margot winced, eyes darting over to the tequila. “Yeah. You had a lot of that.”

“What about you?”

“Me?” Margot set the glass of water she was holding on the table in front of Elle. “I drank a little, but I wanted to keep an eye on you.”

Elle tilted the glass and let the cool water run down her parched throat, soothing the burn. She was so thirsty she felt the water run down through her chest and into her churning stomach. Now all she needed was some ibuprofen and—

“What the heck is that?” Elle pointed at the floor beside the couch where a strange doll-shaped bundle sat.

Margot followed her gaze, eyes widening and lips rolling together. “I meant to get rid of that before you woke up. You . . . how much do you remember?”

There’d been ice cream. And crying. Then tequila. She and Margot had made a list of all Darcy’s most annoying attributes and . . . her memory went fuzzy. “We made a list?”

“Good, yeah.” Margot chewed on her thumbnail. “We made a list and you kind of lost the plot and started saying things you liked about Darcy so I tried to get you back on track. Which worked. You got pretty amped up and you decided to . . .”

“To what?” Between the alcohol and Margot’s reluctance to give Elle a

straight answer, Elle's stomach churned and her mind flitted from one worst-case scenario to the next, her panic escalating. She had decided to call Darcy? FaceTime her? Elle brought her glass to her lips and took a slow sip to soothe her tummy.

Margot winced. "You made a Darcy voodoo doll."

Elle choked, sputtering water down her chin. "What?"

"You know, a Darcy effigy—"

"I know what a voodoo doll is, Margot." Elle set her glass down roughly, water sloshing on the table. She scrambled across the carpet on her hands and knees and grabbed the human-shaped doll off the floor. In reality, it was a T-shirt stuffed with what looked like pillow fluff made humanoid by tying off limbs with hair ties at the joints. Thankfully, it looked like she hadn't gotten to the point of doing something crazy—*crazier*—and poking pins in the damn thing. "What the hell was I thinking?"

Margot bared her teeth in a grimace. "Tequila. You weren't doing much thinking."

"Did I . . . did I realize how stupid this was?" Elle shook the doll in the air. She'd even attached those twisty-ties they kept in the junk drawer, the red ones from bread loaves, to the doll's head like hair. It looked terrifying, like some rustic doll of olden time possessed with the spirit of a vengeful child. Elle was creeped out that *she* had made it. "Please tell me I came to my senses."

Margot's head seesawed side to side. "Uh. Honestly? You started crying that you couldn't get the freckles right and then you passed out beside the coffee table."

She stared at the doll with wide eyes. Sure enough, there were scribbled splotches, smudged dots that had bled into the cotton fabric. Freckles. Elle slammed her eyes shut and clutched the doll to her chest. *Fuck*.

She hadn't had enough time to commit the constellations those freckles and moles connected into memory. Not nearly enough. She was never going to see those freckles again.

A hand landed on Elle's shoulder making her jolt. Margot tugged the Darcy doll from Elle's hands, setting it aside. In its place, she pressed Elle's phone. "You might want to check that."

Elle's heart crawled into her throat. "I didn't call anybody, right?"

Margot set her hands on her hips, an affronted frown on her face. "I'd never let you do that. You have another missed call from your mom." Her

mouth pinched. “And you have a text.”

“Did you . . . did you look?”

Margot bit her lip and nodded.

“Is it—” She stared at Margot, eyes wide and heart pounding inside her chest, pulse leaping painfully in her neck.

One little jerk of Margot’s head was all it took to send her spirits plummeting. “It’s Brendon.”

* * *

Inside her pocket, her phone buzzed. Brendon, maybe? She wasn’t running late.

No. *Mom*.

If she didn’t answer, Mom would just keep calling. The calls had escalated in frequency over the past two weeks, word no doubt getting back to Mom that Elle was no longer avoiding Jane and Daniel, just her. Better to bite the bullet than prolong the inevitable. “Hello.”

“Elle, you answered. Good.” She sounded relieved.

Elle shut her eyes and leaned against the stop-walk sign. “Look, Mom, now’s not a good time.”

“I’ve called half a dozen times. I left you messages.”

Something about the way she said it, as if *Elle* owed *her* an explanation made Elle grit her teeth.

“I didn’t have anything to say.” No, that wasn’t right. “Or I did, but it didn’t feel like you were ready to listen.”

Silence filled the line, until the clearing of Mom’s throat broke it. “Elle, I’m . . . I’m sorry. It was never my intention to belittle what you do.”

“But you did. You called it a pseudoscientific fad. Do you not realize how badly that hurt?”

It *still* hurt, the sting of her words fresher than ever after Elle’s falling-out with Darcy.

“I didn’t. I just . . .” Mom sighed. “I’m just worried. It’s my job to worry about you, Elle-belle. I want what’s best for you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

What about what she wanted? They’d been having some variation of this conversation for years, tiptoeing around it and Elle was *tired*. “I’m happy. Why can’t that be good enough?”

“I’ve gone about it all wrong. I know that now.”

“Let me guess. Jane said something? Daniel?”

“It was Lydia, actually.” At Elle’s stunned silence, Mom laughed. “She confessed that she agrees with a lot of what you said. That I put too much pressure on you, *all* of you, Lydia included. I had . . . I had no idea, Elle. But Lydia, she told me that she and Marcus are thinking about eloping, can you believe that? She doesn’t want to plan a wedding with me. Apparently, I have *impossible* standards and not just when it comes to color schemes and venues. Which makes me feel great, let me tell you.” Mom’s laughter took on a frantic edge. “I just want what’s best for all of you. The best, Elle. I read all these stories about no one being able to retire, that no one can buy a house, and there might be another recession, and it makes me nervous.”

“Look on the bright side, I might not be able to retire but at least I love what I do. I’ll be super happy working until the day I die.”

Elle cringed until Mom chuckled. “I don’t know if that’s supposed to be funny.”

“I don’t know either.” The light turned green and Elle hustled across the street.

“Maybe”—Mom coughed—“at our next brunch, you can tell me more about this consulting you’re doing for OTP. I promise to actually listen this time.”

Elle chewed on the side of her thumbnail, frowning at the brick building but not yet going inside. Brendon was waiting for her, waiting to talk. About what, Elle wasn’t sure, but she’d been having flashes of that stress dream, the one where Brendon ripped up their negotiations.

Contracts had been signed; there’d have to be some massive breach to void them, or else OTP would have to pay her and Margot out. Regardless of the legalities, Brendon wouldn’t be spiteful like that. Then again, what did Elle know? Nothing. Her gut was all wrong, miscalibrated.

Hopefully when this was all said and done there would still be a deal to tell Mom about. “Sure. But right now, I need to go. I’m meeting a friend for coffee.”

“Darcy?”

The sound of her name put a lump in Elle’s throat. “Brendon, actually. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“You’ll be home for Christmas, won’t you?”

“Of course. I’ll drive over on the twenty-fourth, okay?”

One phone call didn't automatically undo years of damage, and she'd bet Mom still wouldn't *approve*, but maybe she wouldn't be so antagonistic. It was a start, a tiny weight lifted off Elle's shoulders. She'd take it.

Shoving her phone back into her pocket, Elle stepped through the door, the warm, nutty aroma of coffee hitting her like a wave. In the back corner of the coffee shop, Brendon sat, frowning at his cup.

Elle's chest throbbed at the sight of him. The resemblance was obvious, painfully so.

Rather than dawdle in the doorway, Elle skirted the ordering counter and headed straight for Brendon's table. Her stomach was too unsettled for caffeine and the acid in the coffee would only amplify the burn in her chest. The sooner she got this over with, the sooner she could head home and—Well, then she'd figure out what came next. This—whatever urgent matter Brendon had requested they meet to discuss—was eating up all her focus, all her energy, her attention.

Brendon looked up from staring morosely into his cup, his brown eyes widening as he caught sight of Elle. Unfolding his long legs from beneath the table, Brendon stood and took a half step toward her before awkwardly freezing like he didn't know how to greet her. "Elle. Hey. You made it."

Elle rested her hands on the back of the chair across from him. "I said I would."

"Right." He nodded, too quick. Frenetic. Jerky. "You did." He cleared his throat and gestured to the chair with a silly little sweep of his hand. "Sorry. Sit. Please."

Elle lowered herself into the chair on wobbling knees. She set her hands on the edge of the table, fingers curling around the wood. Ugh, that made her look nervous. Which she was. But Brendon didn't need to know that. She dropped her hands into her lap and clasped them tightly before finally shoving them between her knees. "So."

Brendon collapsed into the chair with a heavy sigh, raking his fingers through his hair and messing up the strands. "So."

So. This was awkward, more so because Brendon was *acting* awkward, exacerbating an inherently thorny situation. It set her teeth on edge, wondering what *exactly* it was that had Brendon all in knots. "Is . . . is everything all right with the partnership. OTP and Oh My Stars?"

She held her breath, shoulders tensing.

Brendon's jaw dropped. "What?"

“Is—”

“No, I heard you.” Brendon ran a hand over his face, eyes shutting for a second before opening and looking tired. He looked . . . exhausted. Not as rough as she felt, but not well rested, that was for sure. He met her eyes, lips curling in a weak smile. “Everything’s fine with the partnership, Elle. Of course, it is. It’s . . . it’s perfect.”

Her shoulders relaxed infinitesimally. “Good. That’s good.”

“I didn’t ask you to meet me here because of work,” Brendon said, shifting forward in his seat. He pushed his tea aside and rested his arms on the table. “This doesn’t have anything to do with OTP.”

Elle bit the corner of her lip, too nervous to ask what he *had* asked her here to discuss.

Brendon dropped his chin, staring at his hands. “Darcy.”

Even knowing, realistically, what was coming, hearing Brendon say his sister’s name made Elle’s heart stutter pathetically. “Hmm.”

“Elle.” Brendon stared at her, with wide eyes the *exact* same color as Darcy’s. “I need you to be honest with me.”

She blinked, trying hard not to take offense. “Excuse me?”

Brendon licked his lips. “I said—”

“I *heard* you.” Elle shook her head, knees pressing hard in on her hands. “When exactly have I ever been anything other than totally honest?”

“I didn’t say you weren’t, I—”

“Implied it,” she said, shoving down her rapidly rising hackles. Now wasn’t the time to lose her chill. “I’ve always been honest. With you and with your sister, too, for that matter. And I’m sorry, but I don’t exactly appreciate you implying otherwise.”

Brendon lifted his hands in supplication. “Sorry. Sorry. I’m . . .” He raked one of his hands through his hair again. “Out of my depth, yeah? I’m trying.”

Trying to what, exactly? She shook her head. “Why’d you ask me here, Brendon?”

“I’m saying this all wrong.” Brendon dropped his head into his hands and groaned. “Darcy is a wreck, Elle.”

Darcy was a wreck? *Why?* She wasn’t the one who’d gotten her heart broken. Her life hadn’t been upended, her whole world turned upside down.

“Darcy told me. She told me how this started and she also told me how it changed,” Brendon said. “She told me . . . she told me everything.”

A chilling sense of understanding settled in Elle’s upset stomach, cooling

her anger into frosty irritation. “Well, sorry I ruined her ruse. Wasn’t my intention.”

Just like falling in love with Darcy hadn’t been Elle’s plan. It had just . . . happened. Hindsight being what it was, Elle should’ve known better than to think she wouldn’t fall ass over head for someone like Darcy.

Brendon groaned softly. “That’s still not— *Fuck*, Elle.”

Elle stared. Had she ever heard Brendon swear?

“What you said on the street. You were wrong, Elle. Darcy’s not heartless, okay?”

Elle pried her hands out from between her knees and crossed her arms, shielding herself from the intensity of Brendon’s stare. “Did you ask me here to tell me off, or something? Because to be honest, I’m a little hungover and a lot miserable, and I’m not in the mood to be scolded—”

“No.” Brendon shook his head quickly. “Look, Darcy keeps her cards close to the chest.”

He kept saying that, but this wasn’t a game of poker and she and Darcy weren’t supposed to be playing against each other.

“I don’t think that’s an excuse at this—”

“Darcy was engaged,” Brendon blurted.

Elle’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” Brendon admitted.

A spike of irritation shot through her. Wasn’t that what got her into this entire mess to begin with? Brendon revealing state secrets. Well, and Darcy lying. “Maybe you *shouldn’t* then.”

Even though a part of her was desperate for him to keep talking.

Brendon shrugged and gave a weak little laugh. “In for a penny, in for a pound, yeah? I’m trying to fix this.”

She worried her lip and waited.

He took a sip of his tea. “Natasha. Her name was Natasha. They met in college, dated, moved in together. Darcy proposed. She was happy.”

Elle’s chest threatened to cave in on itself.

“A month before the wedding, Darcy came home early from work. She . . .” Brendon puffed out his cheeks, eyes dropping to the table. “She, um, found Natasha in bed with a friend. Darcy’s friend. A mutual friend. Ex-friend, now. But yeah. She broke things off.”

Sympathy spread throughout her chest, hot and achy. “Brendon. You shouldn’t—”

“Too late.” He lifted his head and blinked fast. “It was bad, Elle. It was”—he coughed—“bad. Darcy tried to make things work in Philadelphia, but it was too rough. She packed up and moved to Seattle.”

That’s why Darcy had moved. She’d mentioned a breakup and how she’d wanted a fresh start, but she’d never said *that*, nothing that communicated that ugly or painful of an end.

God. “That sucks.”

Brendon’s lips quirked wryly. “Understatement.”

None of this explained why Brendon was telling her this. “Why are you telling me this?”

He stared. “It’s not obvious?”

She could fill in the blanks, but that was all she ever did. Fill in other people’s blanks. Darcy’s blanks. “Spell it out for me.”

“My sister has trouble letting people in. She’s scared, Elle. She doesn’t think I know. Darcy does everything she can to keep me in the dark because she’s got it in her head that she’s got to be strong all the time, but I know her better than she realizes. I’ve been pushing her to put herself out there because if I didn’t, she wasn’t ever going to. Because she thinks it’s easier to be alone than risk falling in love and getting hurt again.”

Elle shook her head. “I understand. I get it. But your sister doesn’t love me, okay? She’s not—we’re not anything, okay?”

Brendon cut his eyes. “Nothing? You don’t feel anything for her? Nothing.”

That’s not what she said. “Look, Brendon. I love that you care about your sister. You’re a great brother, clearly. And I like you and I like working with you. You’re a good friend. But it’s not fair for you to try to turn this around and make it about what I feel, okay? Because I’ve been up-front about what I’m looking for since day one. Since day one I told Darcy what I wanted. I never stopped wanting to find someone to fall in love with. My soul mate. And Darcy knows that.” Her next inhale was shaky. “I understand that your sister has baggage, but we all have baggage, Brendon. We’ve all got shit and I’m—” She sniffed, stupid eyes watering. “I’m tired of having to constantly put myself out there and not be met halfway. That’s not fair.”

Elle wasn’t so naïve as to believe life was fair, definitely not *love*, or at least the pursuit of it, but she wished she didn’t have to keep stripping her skin off and showing the whole world her tender heart to get her point across.

Brendon bit his knuckle and nodded.

Elle's head ached, her eyes burning with tears unshed. She stood, arms dropping to her side. "And no offense, but next time, if Darcy has something to say to me, she can say it herself. I . . . I deserve that."

Margot would be so proud. But Elle would celebrate that tiny victory later. Right now, she felt like she was going to either cry or be sick and doing either in the middle of Starbucks sounded like a recipe for humiliation.

Brendon covered his mouth with his hand and nodded, eyes full of despair yet nowhere close to what Elle felt. "Yeah. That's . . . you're right."

She was. She didn't need Brendon to keep acting as Darcy's emotional intermediary, constantly translating.

Elle clenched her back teeth until her jaw creaked. She needed to get out of here. "I'm gonna . . . I'll see you around, okay?"

She didn't wait for Brendon to reply. Turning on her heel, Elle booked it out of the coffee shop, stepping out into the cool, gloomy afternoon light. Gray skies and low-hanging clouds promised rain.

Elle stopped at the crosswalk and stared hard at the red light until she saw spots, the glow burned into her glassy eyes.

I deserve that.

Maybe if she kept saying it, she'd start to believe it. Not in her head, but in her heart, where for her, it mattered most.

Chapter Twenty-One

Darcy's apartment was quiet in a way that had nothing to do with noise.

She'd always appreciated that her neighbors were considerate and the noises from traffic never penetrated the serene little neighborhood pocketed in downtown. This was different. Never before had the loudest sound inside her apartment been the ever-persistent thud of her heart.

Darcy cradled her coffee cup against her chest and spun in a slow circle. Perhaps the loudest sound wasn't the thud of her heart, but the echoes of Elle that lingered in the kitchen and on the couch, the floor, the shelves, the Christmas tree beside the window. The curious hum Elle had made when running her fingers down the spines of Darcy's books. The sweet chime of her laughter in the kitchen when she'd dunked her finger in the pancake batter and dotted a dollop on Darcy's cheek. How that laughter had evolved into the prettiest moan that had resulted in burned pancakes and a blaring smoke alarm and sheepish smiles and Darcy whispering the words *fuck it* against Elle's neck.

The longer she stood studying her apartment, the less quiet it seemed.

How the hell was Darcy supposed to get rid of an *echo*? A sage smudge stick? Even that sounded like something Elle would say, and she would've gotten a kick out of the look on Darcy's face when she suggested it.

Darcy glared at her bookshelf and chewed on the inside of her cheek. No, she'd do things her way. Erasing all traces of Elle would be her first step, a sound one. She'd scrub her apartment from top to bottom, bust out the Ajax, then she'd spackle over the void with all new furnishings if that's what it took.

Erase all traces.

Darcy inhaled deeply and set her coffee cup on the table. She could do

this.

She'd alphabetized the shelves by author's last name. An hour later, they were now alphabetized by title, books lined neatly in a row, nary a one sticking out farther than the rest. Darcy had double-checked, taken a goddamn ruler to the shelves to make sure. Elle might've touched those spines, but not in that order. And she'd never touch them again. Darcy bit the inside of her cheek and nodded.

Don't think about it.

Next, Darcy hauled the box of rosé over to the sink and twisted the nozzle, pink wine swirling down the drain. The wine bladder went into the trash and the box into recycling. Kitchen back to normal, Darcy moved back to the living room, checking off items from her mental to-do list, spring cleaning in the middle of winter.

She got down on her hands and knees and fished out the gel pen that had rolled beneath her television stand. *Indigo Sky*. Darcy frowned at the pen. It was a close match to the shade of Elle's eyes.

Don't think about it.

Darcy stared at the tree, chest burning. She couldn't bring herself to tear it down, not yet. She'd just try not to look at it. Christmas was tomorrow, anyway. She'd take it down right after.

Don't think about it.

Darcy moved into her bedroom. Stark white sheets and a matching duvet covered her bed. Nothing was remiss save for the speckled composition notebook full of facts about Elle lying on the nightstand. Her birth date. Her favorite gummy bear flavor. All her planets . . . placements . . . houses . . . something like that. Elle in a nutshell. Darcy smoothed her hand across the cover, thumb brushing the pages at the bottom.

Not true. Elle couldn't be contained in pages, constrained to paper. She was larger than life, but these pages held an imprint, the closest Darcy would ever again get.

Recycle, it belonged in the recycle. All she had to do was chuck it and her apartment would be an Elle-free zone once more. Neat, tidy, everything where it belonged. *Quiet*.

Darcy clutched the notebook to her chest and left the room. She opened the cabinet beneath her sink where the trash and recycling resided, and paused. *Drop it*. It was only a notebook, only paper. It wasn't Elle. So would it really matter if she kept it? She'd only used a few of the pages, it would be

a waste to toss it. She could rip out the front pages and repurpose the rest. And she'd do that later. But for now, she'd tuck it in the back of her closet behind her shoeboxes. Out of sight, out of mind. She'd ignore it, just like the tree.

Darcy shut off the light to her closet and stood in the middle of her bedroom, arms crossed. There was nothing left to do, nothing left to fill her time, nothing to drive away the silence she was desperate to fill with action and noise.

Sitting still wasn't an option. If she sat down, she might not get back up. Like an object in motion, Darcy needed to keep moving or else the feelings inside her chest that had taken root would branch out. Like some invasive species they'd wrap around her, choking her until she couldn't breathe, couldn't—

Darcy pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. Keep moving. She'd shower, then— *No*. One step at a time. Minute by minute. Like sands through an hourglass, so were the days of her life.

A desperate, broken chuckle splintered the silence. Darcy clapped a hand over her mouth and breathed in through her nose.

Don't think about it.

Stepping into the bathroom, Darcy flipped the light switch, then reached for the hem of her shirt, pulling it over her head. Her eyes caught on her reflection, something out of place on her face. She dropped her shirt and leaned closer, tilting her head. That wasn't there earlier, that was—

Glitter.

A speck of glitter stuck to her cheek, beneath her eye where the skin was puffy and swollen, so puffy no eye mask or cold compress could combat it.

Darcy rubbed at her skin with her fingers. No dice. She rubbed harder, scraping with the edge of her nail. It wouldn't budge. It was adhered to her skin like glue, going nowhere. She turned on the faucet and splashed her face, gasping a little at the shock of ice-cold water against her flushed skin.

Jesus, was it embedded? Was it stuck beneath the surface? It was *glitter*, of course it wasn't going anywhere. Glitter never went anywhere other than exactly where you didn't want it, where it didn't belong.

Turning off the water, she hung her head, sucking in air through her mouth because her nose wasn't working. Was suddenly stuffed. She couldn't breathe through it, why couldn't she—

“Darce?”

She shrieked and jumped back, nearly slipping on her discarded shirt atop the tile floor. Hands grasping the counter, Darcy caught herself, then ducked and grabbed her shirt, tugging it over her head. The tag brushed her chin, her shirt backward.

Brendon.

“What the fuck? Don’t you knock?” Blood pumped adrenaline to her extremities, making her fingers twitch.

Brendon stared at her with wide, frazzled eyes, the crests of his cheeks pink. “I did? I knocked. I called. I texted. You didn’t answer so I used the key —”

“The key I gave you in case of *emergencies*, Brendon. Christ. This isn’t . . . this isn’t an emergency. It’s *not*. You don’t get to come in here, just waltz in my apartment like you own the place. An emergency is if I don’t pick up for hours or a day or two days. This isn’t an emergency.”

Brendon guppied like a goldfish. “I was worried. I didn’t—”

“That’s not your job.” Darcy pressed a hand to her chest over her racing heart. “*You* are not supposed to worry about *me*. I worry about *you*, got it? That’s *my* job.”

“Darce—”

“*No*. I’m mad. I am mad at you. Do you hear me? I’m *so* mad.” Darcy sucked in a gasp and bit the inside of her cheek. Her vision blurred so she shut her eyes. “God, what’s wrong with me?”

Hands grasped her arms tight, held her as she sunk down to the bathroom floor. She tucked her knees against her body and leaned into Brendon who shushed her with empty words meant to make her feel better. *I’m sorry. There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re okay. It’s going to be okay.*

“It’s not.” She gasped. “It’s not going to be okay.”

She could scrub the apartment from top to bottom. She could rearrange her books and get rid of all Elle’s things, everything Elle had touched. Darcy could burn her whole apartment to the ground, salt the earth, and move halfway across the world but there’d be no escaping the memories, the *glitter*. Virtual fingerprints she’d never get rid of.

There wasn’t a part of Darcy Elle hadn’t touched, her skin, her hips, her hair, her lips, her heart. She’d be finding glitter from now until eternity.

Brendon cupped the back of her neck with fingers that felt cool against her flushed skin. “You’ve got to believe that it’s going to be okay. *I* believe it’s going to be okay.”

God. He sounded like Elle.

Darcy pushed at Brendon's shoulders and lifted her head. "Elle wanted to know how I felt. I told her I didn't know. I was—"

Scared. Like Brendon had accused her of being.

And now he knew. It was hard to pretend to be some pillar of strength when he'd watched her fall apart.

He leaned back, staring. "All right. Then tell *me* how you feel. Tell me something about Elle."

Seriously? "Brendon—"

"Come on." He nudged her with his knee.

"*Why?*" Anger sparked, never having gone away, instead drifting into the background, pain pervading. Why did Brendon care? When was he going to stop making her do things she didn't want? Things it was so hard for her to say no to?

He took her outburst in stride, shrugging congenially. "Why? Because I care about you and you're wrong. It's not your job to take care of me."

"It *is*—"

"No." Brendon shook his head. "It's not. You're not Mom, and it was never supposed to be your job to take care of me. You did more than you needed to, more than I probably know about, but you don't have to do it by yourself anymore. It's our job to take care of each other, okay?"

"I don't need you to take care of me," she whispered.

"Needing help, *wanting* help, it doesn't make you weak, Darce. Let me in. Let me help you."

This was Brendon. And apparently, he knew more, was far more perceptive, than she'd given him credit for. He'd already seen her at rock bottom; how much worse could it be opening up? "You want me to tell you about Elle?"

He nudged her again. "Humor me."

Fine. Darcy licked her lips. "She tastes like strawberries."

Brendon wrinkled his nose, face scrunching up in disgust. "Oh, come on."

Darcy kicked him in the foot and laughed, swiping beneath her eyes. "I meant her lip gloss. She tastes like the strawberry jam Grandma used to make. Remember?"

Brendon leaned his head back against the bathroom wall and smiled. "Yeah?"

She twisted the ring on her hand and nodded.

“What else?”

The easier question wasn't what she liked about Elle, but what she didn't. Because Elle wasn't perfect, there were things about her that drove Darcy up the wall, like how she never wore a jacket and would sometimes drop off in the middle of a sentence when a new thought flitted through her mind, but listing the things she loved about Elle was like asking her to count the stars in the sky. They'd be there all night and even then, it wouldn't be enough time.

“Her eyes are my new favorite color and if you make fun of me for saying that I'll—”

“Issue an empty threat?” Brendon nodded. “Not laughing, but got it. Go on.”

Darcy sighed and leaned back against the bathroom cabinet. “I can talk to her, trust her with things I don't tell everyone. Like how I watch soap operas and used to write *Days* fanfic—*don't* say anything—and she didn't laugh. She told me I should do whatever makes me happy.” Darcy rested her hand over her throat. “She makes me happy. *Made* me happy.”

Brendon reached out, resting a hand on the top of her foot. “Sounds like you love her.”

Darcy shut her eyes and bit her tongue.

He hadn't said it the way Mom had, intrusive and anxious. Brendon made it sound simple. The sky is gray. It's raining out. You love Elle. As if it were easy. But there was nothing simple about how she felt.

“Brendon.” She choked. “I can't. I can't love her. I can't do it.”

He squeezed the top of her shin and made a soft sound in the back of his throat, half hum and half cough. “I don't think it's a matter of can or can't. You either do or you don't, and I think we both know you do. There's— If I make a Yoda joke, will you kill me?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “You feel how you feel and that's not going to change just because you didn't tell her, because you didn't say the words. I mean, you didn't stop loving her after the party the other night, did you? How you feel . . . that's not really the question, is it? It's whether you're going to let Elle in. Whether you're going to let her love you the way you deserve to be loved, Darce.”

Would Elle even want to hear how she felt, or was it too late? What if Elle turned her away? Or worse, what if everything went perfect, only to go wrong again in a month, six months, two years?

There was no accounting for anything when it came to love and that was terrifying.

“Come on,” Brendon said. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Darcy swallowed. “I’m scared.”

Brendon’s brow furrowed like he wasn’t expecting her to admit it, to finally say it. But it was about time she finally owned up to the fact that she was constantly terrified. That her fears had come true and the hope of fixing this only to fail all over again was almost enough to make her throw in the towel and never put herself out there again.

“That’s normal, Darce. Everyone’s scared. You wouldn’t be human if you weren’t.”

But not everyone was afraid of *this*. “I don’t want to be like Mom. She built her entire life around Dad and . . . look how that turned out.”

Maybe Darcy hadn’t built her life *around* Natasha, but she’d built a life *with* her and when that life had come crashing down, there was no clean break, no easy way to separate out the parts of that life that belonged to her alone. There was too much overlap, too much muddying of the waters. She’d lost her apartment and her friends, save for Annie. Darcy still had her job, so no, it wasn’t exactly the same as Mom, but the fear of everything else crumbling around her again, the thought of having to rebuild her life all over again, after having already done it once, was suffocating enough to make the differences in their situations feel nominal. It was the whole reason why she’d sworn off dating and buried herself in her work and exam prep in the first place.

“I’m not trying to take anything away from you or downplay what happened with Natasha—you went through a breakup, a really bad breakup granted, but it’s not the same. That’s not the type of person you are.” Brendon took a deep breath. “Running at the first sign of something serious because you’re afraid someone’s going to hurt you isn’t any better. You’re just going to hurt yourself like you’re hurting right now. And you’re going to keep hurting until you do something to fix it. Try. Be honest with her. Trust her.”

Darcy had a choice. Not whether to love Elle, because Brendon was right. There was no choice in that. What she was going to do about it was a different matter. Because maybe she couldn’t control what happened in a month or six months or a year or twenty years, but she could do something about this. Here and now.

Brendon's lips quirked as if he knew what was going through her head.

Darcy scrunched the hem of her shirt in her hands, wringing the fabric. "What if I'm too late?"

"You love her?"

Darcy screwed up her face. *Obviously* or she wouldn't be in this pathetic state on her bathroom floor crying over glitter. Not that she didn't appreciate the wake-up call, but why did it have to be *glitter*?

Brendon laughed at her expression and kicked her gently. "Then it's not too late. It's never too late if you love someone."

"Wow," Darcy teased. "You sound like a Hallmark card."

"What occasion would that be? Belated anniversary? Birthday? Just because?"

"It's going to be *sympathy* if you don't get out of my apartment." Darcy smiled, softening the threat. She grabbed the counter and used it to heave herself to standing. "I have to clean myself up and figure out what I'm going to say." Her heart raced frantically. No matter what Brendon said, this was going to be no small undertaking.

"I'm good with grand gestures if you need help." He cracked his knuckles and hopped to standing. "My favorite movies have prepared me for this."

Darcy was less concerned with what to *do* and more concerned with what to *say*. "I'm going to have to tell her . . . everything."

Darcy gritted her teeth. Fun.

"About that." Brendon raked his fingers through his hair, wincing sharply. "Don't hate me, but I, uh, might've meddled." He held up his hand, thumb and index finger nearly touching. "A little."

* * *

Darcy shifted the potted plant in her arms and grimaced.

Too late to ask Brendon for advice on grand gestures now. Standing in front of the door to Elle's apartment was it. Showtime.

Darcy knocked just below the shiny silver wreath hanging lopsided from a Command Strip hook. Then she waited. And waited. And—

The lock flipped, the door opening. The beautiful, haunting voice of Joni Mitchell singing "River" poured out into the hall as an arm rested against the doorframe, blocking her view into the apartment.

Margot.

A decidedly pissed-off-looking Margot. Darcy gulped and stood up straighter, smoothing her expression into a mask of disaffection no doubt undermined by the terra-cotta planter cradled in her arms.

“Margot.” Darcy dipped her chin in a polite greeting.

Margot glared. *Hard.*

Fuck. The air was stifling, the building’s heat turning the hall into a sauna. Darcy shifted the plant again and swept her hair over one shoulder.

“Elle’s not here.” Margot began to shut the door.

She had not hiked all the way to the market to buy this stupid, precious plant and then all the way up to Elle’s apartment only to get turned away. No. This was not her dead end. All she needed was a chance. Needed to try, needed Elle to know how she felt.

Darcy clenched her back teeth and shoved the boot of her toe in between the door and frame, wincing a bit when the door bounced off her foot. “Then where is she?”

“Alexa, stop.” The music cut off midverse. “In case you hadn’t noticed, it’s Christmas Eve. I have an hour-long drive ahead of me *if* traffic’s clear, which it won’t be. All I want is to finish packing, hit the road, make it home before my dad eats all the gingerbread cookies, and then I want to drink several strong glasses of eggnog. Talking to you doesn’t rank very high on my to-do list. In fact, it doesn’t even warrant a spot. So, piss off, Darcy.”

“I just want to know where Elle is and then I’ll leave you alone.”

Margot narrowed her eyes. “Why do you care?”

“Look—”

“No, you look.” Margot let go of the door and leaned against the frame, crossing her arms over her chest and thrusting out her chin. “You don’t get to come here, demanding to see my best friend if you can’t even tell me why you want to see her.”

Darcy bit the side of her tongue. Not that she’d ever thought for a second Elle hadn’t told Margot about what had happened between them, but there was the confirmation. Confirmation that Darcy had fucked up.

She met Margot’s eyes so she’d see how sincere Darcy was. “I fucked up.”

Margot pursed her lips. “Huh. Something we agree on.”

Darcy huffed. “Well. Can you help me *un-fuck* up?”

“I could.” Margot’s way of making it painfully clear Darcy’s fate partially rested in her hands.

Between the nerves and the hike to Pike Place and her difficulty finding this plant, the *right* plant, Darcy was at her wits' end. "Are you *going* to help me?"

Margot cocked her head, one slender brow arching sharply above the frames of her glasses. "Depends."

"On?"

"Do you love her?"

That question. A flicker of fear lit up her brain, the part that signaled to her legs to flee the danger. Darcy planted her feet and gripped the plant in her arms tighter.

"I think I should tell that to Elle."

Margot shoved her thumb under the ridge of her brow bone. "Shockingly, something else we agree on. Question is, *are* you going to say something or are you gonna fuck up all over again?"

"Aiming to not fuck up. Hence the reason I'm here."

Margot dropped her hand, eyes lowering to stare at the plant in Darcy's arms. "What the fuck is that?"

Darcy cleared her throat, heat creeping up the back of her neck. "It doesn't matter. Could you please just tell me where Elle is?"

Margot sighed. "Look. I told Elle I wasn't a fan of this, this *fake dating* shit you sprang on her. I told her from the beginning not to expend emotional labor you didn't deserve. Quite frankly, I'm still not sure you deserve Elle because she's my best friend and the greatest person I know. I will *always* think she deserves the absolute best and I don't like you right now so in my book, you're the worst. But who's best for her isn't up to me to decide. I pour the drinks and feed her ice cream and hold her hand when she cries and yeah, I give my opinion and plenty of advice, but Elle can make her own decisions. For whatever reason, she wants you. But so help me god, if you break her heart again, I will slash your tires, Darcy Lowell."

"I sold my car when I moved here," Darcy admitted.

Margot rolled her eyes. "Then I'll break into your apartment and move everything three inches to the left and fuck with your flow, okay?"

Darcy stared because, *shit*, that actually sounded awful.

The sentiment, however, was nice. Nice that Elle had someone who had her back, who loved her enough to make those kinds of eerily unsettling threats. Good thing Darcy wasn't planning on ever breaking Elle's heart. Not if she had her way.

“Got it. Loud and clear. Now, can you please tell me where to find Elle so I can try to fix this?”

A slow smirk tugged at Margot’s lips, easily as unsettling as that threat to induce paranoia by subtly altering Darcy’s surroundings. “How do you feel about metaphysical bookstores?”

* * *

A bell above the door chimed loudly as Darcy stepped into the bookstore. Patchouli and sandalwood tickled her nose, nearly making her sneeze. She coughed lightly and gripped the plant tighter in her arms, glancing around the hole-in-the-wall bookstore.

A dizzying maze of wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling shelves were crammed inside the store, the aisles between them narrow, a fire hazard. Near the front of the tiny shop was a wide rectangular table wrapped in silver garland and covered in colorful, translucent crystals and nonfiction paperbacks. *How to Awaken Your Third Eye. Tantric Sex 101. You and Your Yoni.*

“Can I help you find something?”

Darcy jumped, nerves getting the best of her. Behind the counter stood a man in a red-and-green caftan and a woman decked out in a black corset, leather pants, and an ear full of piercings. Darcy glanced down at her wool trousers and sensible green sweater, plant cradled against her chest. Out of her comfort zone was putting it lightly.

They were both watching her expectantly. Darcy pasted on a smile. “Yes, actually. I’m looking for Elle Jones.”

The woman with the many silver piercings in her cartilage grabbed a binder from under the desk and ran her coffin-shaped candy-cane-striped nail down the page. “She should be finishing up with a client in the next few minutes if you—”

Beside the counter, a purple beaded curtain parted. Out stepped a woman who looked to be in her midfifties wearing a smile as she spoke in hushed tones over her shoulder.

Elle stepped through the curtain, batting the beads out of her face and Darcy’s heart seized.

Gently patting her client on the shoulder, Elle then waved good-bye. She performed a quick double take before staring at Darcy.

Darcy shoved down the nerves threatening to choke her, render her mute.

That was the opposite of what she needed. “Hey.”

Elle sucked her lower lip between her teeth, eyes dropping to the floor in front of Darcy’s feet. Her shoulders rose and she lifted her eyes, pinning Darcy with a merciless glare. “Darcy.”

The look in Elle’s eyes turned Darcy’s stomach, weakening her resolve. *No*. She’d come this far. Hunted down this plant, faced Margot. She could do this. “Can we talk?”

Elle crossed her arms over her chest. “Not gonna have Brendon run interference?”

Ow. She deserved that but it didn’t make the jab sting any less.

Darcy squared her shoulders and shook her head. “No. I’m not. I’d like to talk to you.”

A flicker of interest passed over Elle’s face, her eyes narrowing briefly before her expression smoothed into a mask of indifference. Darcy knew that look. She’d perfected that look. “I’m busy. Working, in case you didn’t notice.”

Darcy hadn’t come all this way to have the door metaphorically slammed in her face. “How much for a . . . reading?”

“What?” Elle’s eyes bugged.

Darcy juggled the plant in her arms, shifting until she could reach inside her crossbody purse and grab her wallet.

A soft noise of distress slipped from Elle’s lips. “You don’t . . . you don’t believe in astrology. It’s a waste of time. Yours and mine.”

“You accept cards, I assume?” Darcy slid her Visa across the glass counter.

Elle made a tiny choked sound in the back of her throat, half shriek and part huff. “*Darcy*.”

Darcy took her card back from the woman and signed the receipt with a flourish, turning back to Elle with wide, pleading eyes. “Please, Elle.”

She held her breath as Elle deliberated, chewing on the side of her lip, eyes locked on Darcy’s face. After a gut-wrenching moment wherein Darcy tried to mentally and facially communicate how sincere she was—likely looking crazed or worse, constipated—Elle finally sighed, tossing her hands in the air before stepping back through the beaded curtain. “Fine. You want a reading? I’ll give you a reading.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Elle threw herself into the velvet wingback chair behind the slightly wobbly round table and watched as Darcy's nose occasionally wrinkled, no doubt having all sorts of opinions about the Nag Champa wafting from the incense burner in the corner of the room.

She tucked her right leg beneath her and crossed her arms over her stomach. This was fine. Darcy wanted a reading? Elle would read her to filth.

"Have a seat." She reached for her phone and pulled up the chart she'd saved weeks ago. She set her phone on the table, eyes staring shrewdly at Darcy's houses and alignments. "Let's see, you want to start with your Capricorn stellium? Maybe dig into your seventh house Pluto? Hmm, we could spend a whole hour talking about your south node in Virgo."

Darcy shifted that stupid-looking plant—*why* in the world was she carrying a fucking *shrub*?—on her lap and nodded quickly. "Okay. Sure."

Just like that, Elle deflated.

She couldn't do this. She couldn't take Darcy's chart and use it against her. Astrology was a tool for empathy, not one to exact payback. She wasn't going to twist something beautiful into something ugly, make it malicious, because her feelings were hurt. Understatement. But still. This wasn't how Elle operated and she wasn't going to change that, no matter how heartbroken she was. She wasn't cruel and she didn't want to hurt Darcy with barbed words, tear her down. Hurting Darcy wouldn't mend Elle's broken heart.

Elle flipped her phone over. "I can't do this."

Darcy pursed her lips, sitting up straighter. "I paid."

"Go ask Sheila for a refund, then. I'm not going to waste my time giving you a reading when you don't even believe in this. Especially not on Christmas Eve, Darcy."

Darcy's hands hugged that ugly terra-cotta planter, knuckles turning white from her grip. Her nail polish, that same boring pink shade she always wore, was chipped, peeling away from her thumbnail. All her nails were bitten down to the quick. "You're right. I don't believe in astrology."

Despite having given Darcy the out, Elle's throat narrowed, her chest tightening.

What hurt the most in that moment was that she'd thought Darcy had understood. That it wasn't whether it was real, but it was about understanding each other. Connecting. Feeling less alone. "Cool. Like I said, ask Sheila for a refund."

Darcy didn't move, didn't get up, didn't leave the room. She barely shook her head. "But you do. You believe in it."

Duh.

"It's been a long time since I believed in something, anything," Darcy whispered. She opened her mouth and a little hiccup of a gasp slipped out. "You make me want to believe in something, Elle. And I do. I don't believe in astrology, but I believe in you and I believe in this, in what I feel. And I know you're mad and it's probably too late, but could you let me explain? Please."

Elle's heart went haywire. Stuttering, speeding, *stopping* before clawing its way up her chest. Speaking wasn't something she could do with her heart lodged inside her throat. She nodded instead.

"Yes, I never planned for this. I didn't want to fall in love, not again, not after—" Darcy broke off, air stuttering from between her lips, lips that quivered gently before she swallowed and got ahold of herself. She met Elle's eyes across the table, didn't so much as flinch at the contact. Her brown eyes were wide and vulnerable, brow lightly pinched, but the rest of her face was lax. "Brendon told me he already told you about Natasha. I'll spare you the dirty details but putting myself out there again was the last thing I wanted. Then you came along."

Elle snorted. Ah, yes. She came crashing into Darcy's life, uninvited. How could she forget? Spilled wine and butting heads. Charming.

"You were the exact opposite of what I wanted," Darcy said.

Elle clenched her hands into fists. She'd asked for sincerity, but she hadn't asked for *this*. Hearing her worst fears confirmed. "That's—"

"Please," Darcy whispered, shaking her head. "I'm not . . . you were the opposite of what I thought I wanted but it turned out you were exactly what I

needed and somewhere along the way you became the one thing I wanted more than anything. What I said to my mother, it wasn't true, Elle. I lied to her and I lied to myself. This is so much more than me just having fun."

Elle took the deepest breath she could with her arms crossed snug over her stomach. "I know I'm not the most punctual person and I can't tell the difference between a cabernet sauv—whatever and a pinot to save my life. I believe in astrology and I follow my gut more than I follow my head. And all of that? It's who I am." Her stupid eyes had to go and water. Elle blinked fast and shrugged. "I like who I am. A lot. What I do, who I am, it makes me happy. And I . . . I deserve someone who likes me exactly the way I am, mess and all. I need to be able to know that. I need to hear that. I need to believe it. I deserve someone who can say it."

Each time she said it, she believed it a little more, and a little more. This time, she believed it all the way, believed it the way she believed in the stars, and the moon. Elle believed in herself, and no matter how much she wanted Darcy—which was an absurd amount—loving herself was no mere consolation prize.

Darcy's throat worked through several convulsions, and she nodded. "You do. You do deserve that, Elle."

Elle sniffed and jerked her chin, curiosity finally getting the best of her. "And by the way, I can't take care of plants. I have the opposite of a green thumb. So . . ."

Might as well be totally honest. What else did she have to lose that she hadn't already lost?

Darcy stared down at the plant, laughing wryly. "I should've asked Brendon for his advice after all. Grand gestures aren't exactly my forte. And I'm bad at saying something. But it doesn't have anything to do with you. It's me. I was scared." Darcy shut her eyes and rolled her lips together. A pink flush worked its way up her face, turning her nose and the skin beneath her eyes red. When she opened her eyes and lifted her head, the bloodshot look of desperation in her glassy eyes snatched Elle's breath.

"I was *terrified*. I'd gotten my heart broken once before and it scared me because I'd watched my mom fall apart and suddenly, *I* was the one falling apart and I never wanted to put myself in a position where that would happen again. I moved to Seattle and promised I wouldn't let that happen. Falling in love was the last thing I wanted, but then you came into my life and somewhere along the way what I felt for you was more, *so much* bigger than

I'd ever felt for anyone else. Bigger than I felt for the person I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with. One month, Elle. One month and I was—" Darcy pressed the back of her hand against her mouth. "I fell for you and it scared me because, what if I lost you? What if something happened? What if you broke my heart?" Darcy turned her head to the side and blinked fast, lashes fluttering like butterfly wings. "I was scared of losing you and I was equally as afraid of getting to keep you, because how much worse would it hurt if I lost you later? I said nothing and I lost you anyway."

Darcy lifted the potted plant in front of her. "It's cilantro. Because I've liked you for longer than I knew how to say, before I could say it. Before I could say it the way you deserve to hear it. But I have and I do. I like you exactly the way you are, Elle. Boxed wine and glitter and astrology and most of all"—Darcy sucked in a gasping breath—"I love the way you make me hope. You make me hope and you make me happy. You make me so happy, Elle."

Astrology involved a certain balance between prediction and manifestation, preparation and action. This though, Elle never could've seen this coming. This was too good to be true, even better because it was.

"Yeah?" she whispered, eyes wide and unblinking because if she blinked, she'd cry and she wanted to be able to see Darcy's face, watch her, drink her in. Memorize this moment, a picture-perfect snapshot she'd cherish for the rest of her life, for as long as she could remember.

"I told you I didn't know how I felt." Darcy set the cilantro plant on the table between them and stood. She brushed her palms on her thighs, shoulders rising with her inhale. "I lied. I know how I feel and I'm five hundred percent certain that on a scale of one to ten, I want to be with you, exactly as you are, infinity."

Elle pressed her fingers to her lips, both trembling. "Infinity? That's . . . that's a big number."

And Darcy saying it was an even bigger deal.

Darcy rounded the table and reached out, grabbing Elle's hand in hers. Darcy's hand shook and something about that little tremor made Elle flush with warmth from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Darcy cared enough that she was shaking, shaking like Elle. "Technically, infinity isn't a real number. But what I feel for you? That's real. It's the realest thing I've ever felt, Elle."

Thumb stroking the back of Elle's hand, Darcy met her eyes. A spark. A

connection, the kind that couldn't be faked.

Elle pressed up on her toes and wrapped her free hand around the back of Darcy's neck, smiling into the kiss. Champagne fizzing and shooting stars, fireworks and late nights riding in the back of a too-fast car, lights of the city whizzing past, the bridge of her favorite song blaring. None of it held a candle to this moment, this feeling burning in her veins and warming her chest, bubbling in her stomach and erupting goose bumps along her skin. *Magic.*

For the first time, Elle didn't need a *maybe*, didn't need to *hope* because she *knew*.

This was it.

Boom.

End game.

A lifetime of butterflies.

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Keep an eye out for Brendon's story . . .

HANG THE MOON

Coming Summer 2021

About the Author

ALEXANDRIA BELLEFLEUR is an author of swoony contemporary romance often featuring lovable grumps and the sunshine characters who bring them to their knees. A Pacific Northwesterner at heart, Alexandria has a weakness for good coffee, Pike Place IPA, and Voodoo Doughnuts. Her special skills include finding the best pad Thai in every city she visits, remembering faces but not names, falling asleep in movie theaters, and keeping cool while reading smutty books in public. She was a 2018 Romance Writers of America Golden Heart finalist. You can find her at www.alexandriabellefleur.com or on Twitter at @ambellefleur.

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“With perfectly woven vulnerability and playfulness, *Written in the Stars* is a riotous and heartfelt read. I was hooked from the very first page!”

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“*Written in the Stars* had me hooked from the first page. It’s an adorable and heartfelt romance with everything I adore: a killer meet-cute, loads of cute banter, steamy love scenes, all the feels, and a happily ever after that left me in happy tears. I fell head over heels for Elle and Darcy’s love story. Alexandria Bellefleur’s debut will have readers seeing stars in the best way.”

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—Scarlett Peckham, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Rakess*



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AUTHOR OF *WRITTEN IN THE STARS*

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FOR THE ONE...
BUT MAYBE HE'S
ALREADY MET HER?



A
NOVEL

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Announcement

About the Author

Praise

Also by Alexandria Bellefleur

Copyright

About the Publisher

Chapter One

What Summer Song Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

Aries—“Cruel Summer” by Taylor Swift

Taurus—“Summertime” by George Gershwin

Gemini—“Summer Lovin’” by John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John

Cancer—“Summertime Sadness” by Lana Del Rey

Leo—“Hot Girl Summer” by Megan Thee Stallion

Virgo—“Summer Games” by Drake

Libra—“Cool for the Summer” by Demi Lovato

Scorpio—“This Summer’s Gonna Hurt Like a Motherfucker” by Maroon 5

Sagittarius—“Summer of ’69” by Bryan Adams

Capricorn—“The Boys of Summer” by Don Henley

Aquarius—“Summer Girls” by LFO

Pisces—“Summer Love” by Justin Timberlake

Friday, May 28

Annie nearly wept tears of joy. Starbucks, the holy grail of coffee, was within spitting distance of Gate D2. Something cold, creamy, and above all, caffeinated was exactly what she craved after a day of planes, trains, and automobiles.

Dragging her carry-on with its one busted wheel behind her, she joined the line, fishing around inside the chaos of her bag for her wallet. Her fingers brushed the creased edge of her boarding pass and the plastic wrapper of the protein cookie she’d purchased before sprinting to catch her connecting flight in Atlanta. It claimed to be birthday cake flavored but instead tasted like sawdust and sadness. What a waste of five bucks.

She found her wallet just in time to step up to the counter, where a pretty barista with lilac-colored hair and an ear full of silver jewelry smiled at her, Sharpie at the ready. “Hi. Can I get an iced quad grande cinnamon dolce latte?”

The barista grinned, revealing an intriguing glimpse of silver hardware in her tongue. “Can I get a name for your order?”

“Annie.” She slid her credit card inside the reader and waited for it to chirp before tucking her card back inside her wallet.

“You in town for business or pleasure?” the barista asked, handing Annie her receipt. “Or are you from here?”

If Annie had a dollar for every time she’d been asked that question, she’d have been richer than sin. Thanks to her job at Brockman and Brady Inc., an independent human resource consulting firm that specialized in international mergers and acquisitions, she traveled thirty weeks out of the year. But that wasn’t why she was in Seattle.

“I’m visiting my best friend.”

If she didn’t visit Darcy now, who knew when she’d have a chance? In little more than a month, she’d be moving to London, *permanently*, having accepted a promotion as the managing director of the new Brockman and Brady London branch. She didn’t know when she’d be able to take off to visit her best friend again, with an ocean and the entire United States separating them.

“Well then, I hope you enjoy your stay.” The barista winked and handed over her receipt.

Annie’s face went pleasantly warm as she stuffed the receipt and her wallet back into the black abyss of her bag, before stepping over to the bar. She adjusted the French tuck of her button-down shirt, smoothing the wrinkles from eight hours of sitting in a crammed window seat, then snagged her phone from the back pocket of her jeans.

She hit *call* and cradled her phone between her shoulder and her ear, lips curving in a smile when Darcy picked up on the second ring.

“Annie?”

“*Guess where I am,*” Annie answered in singsong, sliding to the side to make room beside the coffee bar.

“Mmm . . . Istanbul?”

Her grip slipped and her hand lurched out to save her phone before it clattered to the tile floor. Her screen already had a decent-sized crack across it, a fine spiderwebbing that rendered the bottom left corner ineffective no matter how hard she pressed or swiped. “Why the hell would I be in Istanbul?”

Darcy huffed. “You told me to guess, I guessed.”

Annie squawked sharply, doing her best impression of a buzzer. The man beside her looked at her funny. “Wrong! Try again.”

Behind the counter, the barista with the lilac-colored lob passed Annie her latte with another wink. Annie mouthed, “*Thank you,*” and snagged her drink, taking a sip while Darcy deliberated. The coffee hit the back of her tongue, sweet, but not quite sweet enough to combat the extra shot of espresso. Annie wrinkled her nose and popped the plastic lid with her thumb before snagging some sugar off the bar. She dumped the entire packet into her cup and gave the drink a quick stir with her straw so the granules would dissolve.

“Northern Hemisphere?”

“No cheating.”

Darcy scoffed softly. “Come on. At least tell me if I’m on the right continent.”

“Are you asking if I’m in Asia or Europe? It could be either, you know.”

She was 99 percent certain Darcy called her a smart-ass through a poorly muffled cough. “*Annie.*”

“I’m not in Asia or Europe. There.”

“Are you at home?”

Home. If Darcy meant Annie’s apartment in Philadelphia, the one she was almost never at, the answer was a big fat no. Not that Philadelphia felt much like home these days.

“I’m not in Philadelphia. I’m in Starbucks.”

“Oh gee, that really helps narrow it down.”

And Darcy called *her* a smart-ass. Annie rolled her eyes. “I’d tell you which Starbucks, but I’m not sure that would help. I’m still in the airport.”

With perfect timing, a voice announced over the loudspeaker, “*Flight two twenty-three departing from SeaTac for Portland.*”

Annie grinned at the choked-off sound Darcy made.

“You’re in *Seattle*?”

“Surprise!”

“I’m—I mean—you’re here and—*why*?”

Annie cringed. “Yeesh, Darce. Do I need a reason beyond wanting to visit my best friend? My best friend whom I haven’t seen in . . .” She quickly did the math and cringed harder. “Over a year?”

It was the longest they’d gone without seeing each other since they became best friends in fifth grade.

“No, no, of course not. I just wish you would’ve told me . . .”

Annie juggled her drink, carry-on, purse, and phone as she stepped aside, clearing room for the customers still awaiting their beverages. “That would defeat the whole point of it being a surprise.”

Darcy exhaled loudly, her breath turning to static over the line. “Right, Annie . . .”

Darcy didn’t sound nearly as excited to see her as she was to see Darcy.

She set the drink aside before adjusting her hold on her phone. “Yes?”

“I’m not in Seattle. I’m in Canada. On vacation.”

Annie palmed her face with her now free hand. “You? Take a vacation?” She huffed out a laugh. “Wonders never cease.”

Better Darcy discovered a work-life balance sooner rather than later, but did it have to happen *now*? Talk about terrible timing.

“Ha ha,” Darcy deadpanned before clearing her throat. “I’m in Vancouver. *Elle* and I are in Vancouver.”

Ah, *Elle*. Suddenly it made sense. Of course it would take Darcy’s new—did it still count as new if they’d been dating over six months?—girlfriend to convince her to step away from her desk and take a much-needed vacation.

Annie smiled. After talking to her via numerous texts and phone calls, she was looking forward to finally meeting the girl who had her best friend totally smitten. Or she *had* been looking forward to it. Annie’s smile wavered, but she mustered up some semi-genuine enthusiasm. “Sounds fun! About time you took a vacation.”

Enthusiasm Darcy promptly saw through. “I wish I would’ve known you were flying into town, Annie. I’d have—”

“What, you’d have canceled your plans?” She scoffed. “Oh, please. It’s fine.” Totally fine. She’d figure it out. Find a hotel and explore Seattle on her own until Darcy returned. By this point, she was a pro at exploring cities solo.

“We got in last night, an extended weekend because of Memorial Day.” Darcy paused. “But we can come back early if you—”

“Nope.” Annie shook her head even though Darcy couldn’t see. “Absolutely not.”

“But, Annie—”

“Hush.” She laughed. “I’ll be fine. I’m a big girl; I can handle a few days in a city by myself.”

“How long are you in town for?”

Annie picked at the cardboard sleeve of her cup. “A little over two weeks. I fly back to Philly early in the morning on the thirteenth. So really, a few missing days is nothing in the grand scheme of things.”

“Two weeks? That’s a long vacation.”

Abort, abort.

“Some of us actually use our paid time off,” she teased.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want us to come back early?” Darcy asked, ignoring Annie’s jibe entirely. “Because we can. Elle’s nodding. Just say the word and we’ll hit the road tomorrow morning, bright and early.”

Yes. Annie shut her eyes. “No way. I’ll be super pissed if you do that. I mean it. I’ll passive-aggressively replace your toilet paper the wrong way the entire time I’m here if you do that. And I’ll leave, like, an inch of juice in your carton and not tell you about it. I know you hate when I do that.”

“Annie.”

“*Darcy,*” she said, mimicking Darcy’s tone. “Go. Have fun with Elle in Vancouver. I’ll see you on . . .”

“Monday evening.”

“Monday evening,” Annie agreed. “I’ve got to go. I bet my luggage hit the carousel by now.”

“No, no, wait! Where are you staying?”

She’d been hoping to crash at Darcy’s, but that was a bust. “I’ll find somewhere. No worries.”

Darcy made a soft sound of discontent. “No. *Yes, worries.* That’s ridiculous. Just stay at my place. You have my address, right?”

“I do. But I don’t have a key.”

Darcy paused. “Don’t worry. Just take a cab or an Uber over and I’ll take care of the rest.”

* * *

“Knock, knock!” The door to Brendon Lowell’s office glided open silently. Katie, One True Pairing’s head of public relations and communications, poked her head inside. “Got a minute?”

Brendon scrambled to exit out of “The Ten Most Romantic Proposals of All Time” on YouTube, sniffed hard, and waved Katie inside. “For you? Always.”

“Are you all right? You’re looking kind of”—she pointed at his face —“teary?”

Outside his window, a giant alder tree was dumping a load of pollen, dusting the sidewalk yellow. “Allergies. Pollen count’s through the roof,” he fibbed.

She wrinkled her nose. “You were watching mushy videos again, weren’t you?”

For a split second he considered lying, then thought better of it. “Guilty.”

“*Well.* I’m glad you’re sitting down and hopefully circulating loads of happy-making dopamine.” Clutched against her chest was her trusty tablet. His pulse leaped.

Katie stared at him, unblinking, for an unsettling beat. Then her eyes rolled skyward. “I’m kidding. Relax, before you burst something.” She stepped inside his office, shutting the door behind her. “Chill out, okay? It’s just the annual independent study on intimacy and relationships. The one you asked me to show you as soon as it was published?”

“Way to give me a heart attack.” He pressed a hand to his chest. “I should have you written up for insubordination.”

She cocked her head. “Insubordination? I don’t think that’s in the employee rulebook. I remember *You shall not yuck anyone’s yum and slander ships you do not personally sail*, but insubordination? I think not.”

Corporate culture at OTP was less *corporate* and more an amalgamation of all the truisms Brendon subscribed to—don’t be a douche, listen to the dungeon master, and the only way to fail was to not try.

He eyed the tablet in Katie’s hands, her bright orange nails clicking against the black protective sleeve. “Did you look at it already?”

Once a year, the Dew Research Center reported their findings regarding the public’s perception of intimacy and dating in the digital age. No apps were named, but the trends were enlightening and helped OTP to better understand their target demographic, along with the overall pain and pressure points felt with online dating.

Katie passed him the tablet. “I did. Most of it’s what we expected from the previous two years. The whole market is seeing a slowdown in growth of new users, not only us.”

He cradled the tablet in his hands. “Overall outlook?”

She reached for the smiley-face stress ball on his desk, giving it a good squeeze. She made a series of *hmms* and *mehs*, sounding like an out-of-tune piano, and shrugged.

That didn't sound promising.

He skimmed the intro section on methodology and polling practices, scrolling with his index finger until he reached the section labeled "Outlooks and Experiences."

Roughly half of users who had used one or more dating apps reported their experience left them feeling *more* frustrated, rather than hopeful. Forty percent of users reported their experience left them feeling *more* pessimistic than optimistic, while nearly 40 percent reported feeling neither.

A whopping 30 percent of users expressed that dating apps made courtships impersonal and devoid of romance.

Devoid of romance?

Meh was right.

Katie sighed and set his stress ball aside. "I know. Some of this is . . . less than ideal, but remember, none of this is app specific. According to our last in-house survey, over half of our users report high levels of satisfaction, and that was even *before* the updates we made last quarter. We *own* the market with Gen Z and younger millennial users, and users of other apps who switch are most likely to download OTP. Focus on *those* figures and be happy. This survey? Hardly relevant. Pretend it doesn't exist. You saw nothing."

Easier said than done when almost a third of people polled believed dating apps had killed romance when OTP was trying to *revive* it. Not that he'd believed it was dead to begin with.

The poll wasn't personal, it wasn't a jab at him or his company, but it was the principle of the matter. OTP's entire *raison d'être*, the canon he clung to without fail, was that everyone had a perfect person. Not a person who was perfect, but a person perfect for them. Puzzle pieces slotting together just so. OTP promised to help users find that person.

It was disheartening to see that so many people were jaded.

He smiled wanly, having gone from buoyant to bummed in under five minutes. "Mind emailing me this?"

"As if it's not already sitting in your inbox." Katie rolled her eyes and snagged her tablet, powering the screen down into sleep mode. "I figured you'd want to study the data."

Agonize over it, more like.

“You know me so well,” he joked.

“It’s almost like I’ve worked with you for the past five years,” she teased, standing and adjusting the tuck of her Captain Marvel T-shirt into the band of her pencil skirt. “You’re coming out with us tonight, right? Six-dollar rum slushies?”

He shook his head. “Can’t. Rain check?”

Katie pouted. “I see how it is. Boss is too cool to hang out with the plebes.”

“Oh please.” He rolled his eyes. “You just want me to pay for the first round.”

Her smile went sly as she inched toward the door. “Guilty as charged. See you on Monday?”

“Tuesday. Holiday, remember? Don’t you and Jian have big plans?” Next week, Katie and Jian, OTP’s senior VP of analytics, were getting married after two years of dating. The whole office was invited and it had been all everyone could talk about for weeks. Weddings and happy endings were a big deal at OTP. “Bachelor and bachelorette parties? Couple’s shower?”

Katie scoffed. “If you mean will I be sleeping as much as humanly possible before my family comes into town and I forget the meaning of the word *rest*? Then, yeah. *Big plans.*”

She smiled and stepped out of his office, shutting the door behind her.

Five minutes later, Margot, his friend and sort of business partner, texted him.

MARGOT (4:35 P.M.): Katie said you’re bailing?! What the fuck?

MARGOT (4:36 P.M.): Did she mention \$6 happy hour rum slushies?

Margot and his sister’s girlfriend, Elle, were the voices behind Oh My Stars, a social media astrology account turned viral sensation. He’d brought them on to consult with OTP and incorporate astrological compatibility into the app’s matching algorithm back in December. He’d also fixed Elle up with his sister, Darcy, and he and Margot had become good friends as a result.

BRENDON (4:37 P.M.): I’ve got a date tonight.

MARGOT (4:39 P.M.): Ofc you do. Remind me, what’s this one’s name? Tiffany? Diana? Susan? They’re all starting to blur together.

Yeesh.

There was nothing wrong with any of the girls Margot had mentioned, but by the third date, he hadn't been able to picture his future with them. There was a . . . disconnect, something missing that was mission critical, no fault of theirs and hopefully not of his, either.

Fireworks.

Undeniable, irrefutable, heart-stopping chemistry. Not love at first sight—he wasn't naïve—and not just physical attraction, but a spark, a flame that could be fanned into a once-in-a-lifetime, roll-the-credits, *Thank you for writing the screenplay, Nora Ephron* kind of love. There were plenty of fish in the sea and he wasn't going to stop searching until he found *the one*, the Sally to his Harry, because unlike the 30 percent of dating app users polled, he believed romance was alive and kicking.

BRENDON (4:41 P.M.): Her name is Danielle.

MARGOT (4:43 P.M.): Well, have fun with Danielle.

MARGOT (4:43 P.M.): Good luck?

MARGOT (4:44 P.M.): Break a leg?

MARGOT (4:44 P.M.): May the odds be ever in your favor? Not quite sure the proper sentiment here.

He rolled his eyes, powering down his monitor for the day. He was supposed to meet Danielle at six, but traffic at this time on a holiday weekend was guaranteed to be a pain.

The opening notes to the *Twilight Zone* intro song filled his office, his phone lighting up in his hand. “Hey, Darce. How’s Vancouver?”

“You’re on speaker,” she answered, her voice ever so slightly muffled. “And it’s nice. Like Seattle, but even cleaner.”

Of course that was what Darcy cared about.

“Hey, Brendon!” Elle shouted.

He swapped his phone from his left hand to his right and tugged at his collar, loosening the top button. “Elle, how’s it going?”

“You’re not busy right now, are you?” Darcy asked.

He glanced at the clock and frowned. “What’s up?”

“I need a favor.”

He sat up straighter. “Is everything all right?”

“Technically. I need you to swing over to my place and drop off my keys.”

“Drop them off with whom?” Darcy was with Elle and the only other person he could imagine needing to get inside her apartment on such short notice was him.

“Annie.”

His arm slipped off the edge of the desk, elbow rolling over his ulnar nerve. A flash of pain rocketed up his arm as his chair slid backward on its wheels, knocking him into the wall behind his desk. There was nothing funny about the “funny bone.”

“Annie? Annie Kyriakos is in town?” A vision of smooth, golden skin and eyes the color of the Aegean Sea flashed through his mind, the phantom scent of watermelon candy and sunscreen filling his nose. He hadn’t seen Annie in . . . hell, eight years. Not since the summer after his freshman year of college. “I didn’t know she was visiting.”

“Neither did I,” she said, sounding wry. “She decided to surprise me. Hence my asking you to bring her my key. She’s downtown waiting. I gave her the code to my building, but she can’t get inside my apartment.”

He reached inside the front zippered pocket of his laptop bag and grabbed his keys, double-checking that Darcy’s spare was still on the carabiner. He tossed the keys back inside, zipped the pocket, and stood, hauling the strap of the bag onto his shoulder. “On it. I’ll be there ASAP.”

Chapter Two

Eight. Six. Seven. Two. Six. One. Four.

The keypad to Darcy's apartment building flashed green and Annie made a break for it, grabbing the heavy brass handle and wrenching the door open. She waved at her Uber driver over her shoulder as she ducked for cover from the out-of-the-blue rain shower. The wobbly back wheel of her suitcase snagged on the threshold, causing her to stumble backward when she tugged harder, her black strappy kitten heels slipping on the slick marble floor.

Slightly out of breath, she dragged her suitcase out of the immediate path and posted up against the expansive wall of windows. Outside, the rain picked up, a gust of wind splattering the panes with droplets. Luckily she'd made it inside when she had, a little damp, but not soaked to the bone like she would've been had she still been on the street. She gathered her damp hair off the nape of her neck and twisted it into a messy bun, securing it with the band around her wrist, before getting her bearings.

Darcy's building was impressive, all black marble shot through with gold veins, and immaculate—if impractical—white leather couches facing one another on either side of the lobby. Directly across from the door she'd stepped through was a gleaming silver elevator. She double-checked the text Darcy had sent her as soon as they'd gotten off the phone.

DARCY (4:44 P.M.): The code is 8672614.

DARCY (4:52 P.M.): Brendon's on his way with the key. He should be there in 20 minutes.

Brendon Lowell. Last time she'd seen him in person had been eight years ago, back when he was a gangly college freshman with an adorable penchant for talking with his hands when he got fired up about something. For a guy who'd created one of the most popular apps on the market, he

was shockingly bad at keeping his personal social media up to date. It would be interesting to see how he'd changed. If he'd changed.

Ten minutes later, the rain had passed, the cloud cover overhead breaking. The sun hovered at the horizon, painting the sky fiery orange, fingers of pink and yellow bleeding up into the beginnings of purple evening. Twilight approached, daylight burning away. Golden hour, her favorite time of day, when the shadows weren't so dark and everything was bathed in shades of amber warmth. Leaving her suitcase inside, she stepped back out onto the sidewalk, breathing deep, inhaling the smell of rain-soaked pavement. The temperature was dropping and she crossed her arms against the breeze.

Darcy's apartment was located on a steep hill several blocks northwest of the internationally famous Pike Place Market, in what appeared to be a quiet, older neighborhood. Traffic was lighter than it had been in the thick of downtown, and Annie's vantage point afforded her an unencumbered view of the street. A silver Smart car shot down the hill like a bullet, cruising to a stop beside the curb.

It even had a giant windup key affixed to the trunk that was too cute not to document. She dug her phone out of her back pocket and snapped several pictures before flipping over to video and recording a brief clip of the key as it rotated.

The engine shut off and the driver's-side door opened and—Annie blinked twice. *Hello*. Her lips parted, her jaw falling open a smidge, just enough to let out a choked gasp of appreciation as the driver unfolded himself from the car, all six feet, *several* inches of him.

It was a clown-car situation—how the driver had managed to pack all of that inside such a small space eluded her, but she wasn't going to complain. No sir. She was going to thank the universe wholeheartedly for bringing her to this place, at this time, so she could appreciate the sight of this gorgeous guy shutting the door to his tiny car and lifting an arm—holy biceps, Batman—to . . . wave?

Heat crept up her neck, spreading like wildfire over her jaw. Oh God, he was looking right at her while she recorded him in all his long-legged, broad-shouldered, "*hello* forearms" glory. She fumbled her phone, tapping the button to stop recording, but her stupid cracked screen was having none of it. To save face, she pivoted hard to the right, pretending to record the sunset instead.

From the corner of her eye, she watched as the driver of the Smart car hopped the curb and—Jesus, he and his snug shirt were coming her way.

“Annie Kyriakos.”

That was her name. Smart car guy knew her name. He was standing a foot from her, smiling so broadly that the corners of his brown eyes crinkled and his dimples deepened and—

Holy shit.

Smart car guy was Brendon Lowell, Darcy’s not-so-baby brother, and he and his biceps and dimples and bronze-haired beauty had rendered her mute. Mute and frozen, like someone had pressed the pause button on her body, her system coming back online only when he reached out, wrapping his arms around her, drawing her in for a hug that eked a squeak from her lips. “*Brendon?*”

Her face pressed against the solid muscle of his chest, her nose buried in the soft, warm cotton of his shirt, which smelled like laundry detergent and rain. After a moment, she stepped back, her knees missing the memo and nearly giving out beneath her. She scrambled for stability, hands wrapping around—*forearms*. Brendon’s forearms.

Tearing her gaze from where her bright blue nails were biting into the pale, freckled skin of his forearms, leaving little crescent moons behind, her eyes made a slow, meandering path up his body.

By the time she’d made it back to his face, his grin had gone crooked. “It’s been a while.”

Understatement of the century. It had been long enough that he had gone from *cute*—all auburn hair and freckles, tall and lithe, his limbs a touch too long and his light brown eyes wide, doe-like—to *this*. She swallowed hard. Brendon had grown up *exceptionally* well. “Only eight years.”

He laughed, the sound coming from somewhere deep inside his chest. “Only.” Eyes still crinkled with laughter, he studied her. “You haven’t been waiting out here this entire time, have you?”

“N—no.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder, her suitcase visible through the glass window of the lobby. “I was inside and then it stopped raining so I decided to come back out here because it wasn’t . . . raining.” *Wow*. Brilliant. She cleared her throat, suddenly jittery. Probably thanks to the quad grande latte she’d sucked down on an empty stomach. Yeah, that

must've been it. "I, uh, really appreciate you coming all the way over here to drop off the key. I hope I didn't interrupt your evening."

He fished inside his front pocket, withdrawing the key to Darcy's apartment. One hand grazed the small of her back as he stepped around her. She stood up straighter. With a quick wave of the key fob, a sensor flashed green and he opened the door, moving aside to let her pass. "Nah, I'm happy to help."

She smiled sheepishly. "I guess this is what I get for flying into town without checking with Darcy first."

He followed her inside the lobby, trading the key for her suitcase. She smiled gratefully and shouldered her purse, following him to the elevator.

"How long are you in town for?"

"Two and a half weeks." She joined him inside the elevator. "Roughly. I fly back on the thirteenth."

He punched the button for the ninth floor and whistled. "I wish I got two and a half weeks off."

She tutted, starting to regain her bearings. No longer *quite* so topsy-turvy over the difference eight years made. "Ah, the plight of Mr. *Forbes* Thirty Under Thirty."

He grinned. "Been keeping tabs on me, have you?"

Heat crept up the front of her throat, a startled laugh spilling from her lips at Brendon's brazenness. "Darcy brags."

He hummed, rocking back on his heels. "Did she tell you I made the *Fortune* Forty Under Forty list, too?"

"She forgot to mention how humble you've become." She pressed her lips together, smothering a smile as she stepped out of the elevator and to the side, letting him lead the way. She didn't know which unit was Darcy's.

He stopped in front of the third door on the left, apartment 909. She unlocked the door and stepped inside, blinking at the sudden brightness when Brendon flipped the switch.

"Thanks." She took her suitcase from him, wheeling it over the threshold and inside Darcy's foyer, her blasted back wheel proving itself a bitch once again.

Darcy's apartment, while minimalist in design, was cozier than any hotel room Annie could've picked on the fly, and far more spacious. Annie spun in a quick circle, getting the lay of the land. "Nice place."

He lingered in the doorway, one hand tucked in his pocket. “Other than Darcy’s allergy to color, yeah.”

She swallowed a laugh. The place *was* monochromatic. “I’m guessing the guest room’s—”

Brendon jerked his head to the left. “Down the hall, second room on the right. There’s a Jack-and-Jill bathroom shared between the two bedrooms and a half bath across the hall. Linens are in the bathroom closet and spare toiletries are under the sink.”

Darcy had already given her that spiel, but Annie appreciated the reminder. Not that Annie needed spare toiletries. Her collection of travel-sized shampoos was getting out of hand. “Thanks. Let me just put this in my room. I’ll be right back.”

She wheeled her suitcase down the hall, careful not to scuff the baseboards as she turned the corner. Like the rest of the apartment, the guest bedroom was simple and streamlined, with dark wood floors mostly covered with plush white rugs and white walls unadorned, save for the occasional piece of black and white art that probably cost a fortune.

Annie left her suitcase beside the queen-sized bed—she couldn’t wait to faceplant onto it as soon as she showered off her travel grime—and returned to the foyer. Brendon tucked his phone back inside his pocket and smiled. “Anything you need before I let you get settled?”

Not that she could think of. “Nah. I’m just going to clean up and unpack.” Her stomach gave a growl that made him laugh. She smiled wryly. “Okay. First I’m going to raid Darcy’s fridge and *then* I’m going to clean up and unpack.”

Brendon made a face, lips twisting and drawing to the side. “You can look, but knowing Darce, she probably cleaned out the fridge so nothing would spoil.”

“I’m sure I can scrounge something up.” Hopefully.

He scratched his jaw. “*Or* there’s a place on Sixth Avenue that has great dim sum. If you’re interested.”

What else was she going to do? The protein cookie buried at the bottom of her bag wasn’t going to cut it.

Her stomach gave another grumble, making the decision for her. “I’m in.”

* * *

“Two whole weeks in Seattle. What’s on your agenda?”

“Aside from visiting Darcy, I don’t really have one.” She reached for her wine, swirling it thoughtfully. “I don’t know. See the Space Needle maybe?”

When he nudged the last dumpling toward her, she waved him off, completely stuffed.

He plucked it from the basket with his chopsticks. “The Space Needle? Isn’t that one of those places you visit once? One and done?”

She sipped and shrugged. “I guess I’ll let you know once I see it if I feel compelled to go again.”

His brows rocketed to his hairline. “You’ve never been?”

“First time in Seattle,” she said, laughing when he stared. “What?”

“I just assumed you’d been.” His lips twitched. “You’ve been everywhere else.”

“I haven’t been *everywhere*.”

Technically she *had* been to Seattle, but until today, she’d never left the airport. Which didn’t count.

He set his chopsticks aside. “Let’s see. Berlin. Prague. Paris.” He ticked each city off on his fingers. “New York. Singapore. Should I keep going?”

“Been keeping tabs on me, have you?” she teased, using his words from earlier against him.

“Darcy talks about you all the time.”

She ducked her chin, burying her pleased smile in her glass of wine. It was nice knowing Darcy thought about her often.

Belatedly, it struck her that she’d only been in Prague for less than a day thanks to a long layover. “I don’t think I ever told Darcy I was in Prague.”

The tips of his ears turned pink. “All right. I might’ve seen that on Instagram.”

She bit back a smile. “So you *have* been keeping tabs on me?”

“You make it sound creepy.” He palmed his face, groaning softly into his hand. “Like I was Facebook-stalking you or something.”

She snickered. “Were you?”

Humor danced in his whiskey-brown eyes as he rested his elbow on the table and ran his thumb over his bottom lip. “Now, why would I do something like that?”

Why indeed. She didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t turn her into a total hypocrite, seeing as she’d stalked his Instagram, too. First, because

Darcy didn't have one and he was the best source of updates on her friend. Then, because his content was interesting and the handful of selfies he'd posted over the years were cute. Rather than speak, she smiled.

"Okay, there's a question I've been dying to ask." He leaned in, resting his forearms on the table. "Just how many languages do you speak?"

She laughed. "Fluently? Or 'I can fumble my way through a conversation but I might stick my foot in my mouth'?"

"Why do I feel like there's a story there?"

She pressed her hands to her fiery cheeks. "It's so embarrassing."

"You realize you're obligated to share now, don't you?"

It was a good story, only she wished it hadn't happened to *her*. "I was in Rome on business, but I decided to take a guided tour on my one day off. After it was over, I told the tour guide I was going to need a nap after the day spent trekking around the city on foot. Which would've been fine, except the word for nap is *pisolino*, which is staggeringly similar to the word *pisellino*"—she shut her eyes—"which means 'small penis.'"

He sputtered into his fist. "You told your tour guide you were going to need a—"

"Mm-hmm." She nodded miserably. "Awkward."

Brendon's broad shoulders shook with silent laughter. He wiped his eyes and grinned. "Okay. All languages, then."

She enumerated them on her fingers. "English, obviously."

"Obviously."

"Greek."

"You were born in Greece, right?"

She was surprised he remembered that. "Yeah. My dad is from Thessaloniki and was working at the consulate, and my mom was a translator for the US embassy in Greece. That's how they met." They hadn't moved to the States until she was seven, at which point she was fluent in both English and Greek.

"I'm fluent in French. I know enough Italian to embarrass myself, apparently; enough German to order food or get a cab that will take me to the right place eighty percent of the time; and"—she smirked—"thanks to Duolingo, I can even say a few words in High Valyrian."

He grinned and lifted a hand to his chest. "Be still my heart."

"I figured you'd get a kick out of that."

His eyes narrowed playfully. "Are you calling me a nerd, Annie?"

She shut one eye. “If it walks like a duck . . .”

He barked out a surprised laugh and threw his napkin at her across the table. It missed her wineglass by a narrow margin and she had a startling flashback to Darcy’s first disaster date with Elle, wherein Elle had toppled over two glasses of wine into Darcy’s lap.

Brendon blanched, likely thinking the same thing. “That could’ve been bad.”

She balled up the napkin and hurled it back at him, laughing when his eyes widened. “Lucky for you, I’m not attached to this blouse.”

His eyes dipped before darting back to her face, the tips of his ears turning adorably pink once more. “It’s a nice blouse.”

His teeth sank into his bottom lip, a smile flirting at the edges of his mouth. On anyone else, that smile would’ve been dangerous. The sort of smile that got Annie to do ill-advised acts after a first date. But this wasn’t a date and this was Brendon, her best friend’s baby brother. He was harmless.

“Thanks.”

His tongue slipped out, wetting the lip he’d trapped between his teeth, and a tiny flicker of heat flared to life in her stomach. She cleared her throat and took a sip of water. *Totally* harmless.

“Getting to travel for work, this must be your dream job.”

She snorted into her glass. “Is HR *anyone’s* dream job?”

It took his frowning for her to realize how awful that sounded.

“I’m really good at what I do, don’t get me wrong. I like visiting new places and I love languages. But most of what I see is the inside of boardrooms and hotels, and even though they considered my being multilingual an asset, most business is conducted in English.”

Reality had fallen short of her expectations. Story of her life. Sometimes her job was a bit of a soul-suck, but it paid her bills. She had no business complaining.

She gave a sharp shake of her head and pasted on a smile. “We’ve spent practically the whole time talking about me.”

He leaned a little further over the edge of the table, his shoulders bunching. His smile was puzzled. “I’m not complaining.”

Not yet, maybe. “Speaking of dream jobs.” She stared pointedly at him.

“Me?” He laughed and slumped back in his chair. “Oh, no. This isn’t my dream job.”

Her brows rose. “It isn’t?”

“No. I had much higher aspirations,” he said, face solemn.

“Higher aspirations than creating a successful dating app? Owning a company?”

He looked over his shoulder, then leaned forward and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I wanted to be Hugh Grant.”

She blinked. “Hugh—Hugh Grant.”

He hummed and the corner of his mouth twitched.

“You’re fucking with me.” She laughed.

“Am not!” His grin stretched from ear to ear. “I wanted to be Hugh Grant. I was ten years old, granted.” He tried to wink and failed miserably, both his eyes shutting in a stuttered blink that made her grin. “Pun unintended.”

“Ten? That doesn’t count.”

His jaw dropped, his eyes sparkling beneath the dim lights of the restaurant. “It counts. Don’t belittle my dreams, Annie.”

She pinched her lips together. “My apologies. Please, tell me more about how you wanted to be”—she sputtered—“Hugh Grant.”

“He was in all my favorite movies. *Notting Hill*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Two Weeks Notice*. He was charming in an accessible, awkward way I identified with on a soul-deep level.” He dimpled at her. “And he always got the girl.”

Her cheeks hurt from smiling. “So you wanted to be an actor?”

“No.” He frowned thoughtfully. “Just Hugh Grant. Minus the arrest record, obviously.”

“Obviously.” She rested her chin on her palm, mirroring him. “You changed your mind?”

He heaved a dramatic sigh. “Alas, like Highlander, there can only be one Hugh Grant. So, I spent several years adrift. Unsure of my direction in life.”

“And then you discovered your true calling, creating the greatest dating app known.”

His cheeks colored. “That’s kind. But no. Then I took a screenwriting class in college because I figured if I couldn’t be Hugh Grant, I could be Nora Ephron.”

“Makes *perfect* sense.”

“I had a bit of a problem, though,” he confessed. “I hated writing conflict between couples. Which, would you believe, is actually necessary.”

“Stories need conflict?” She tutted. “Who’d have thunk it?”

He ducked his chin, chuckling quietly. “Unfortunately, not freshman me. My professor commended me on writing a spectacular script”—he winced—“if I was aiming for late-night soft-core porn.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth. “Please tell me this script still exists.”

And that she could get her eyeballs on it ASAP.

“Uh-uh.” He crossed his arms. “No way.”

“You can’t tease me with soft-core porn and then not deliver. That’s rude.”

“It *wasn’t* porn, that’s the thing. There was—there was character development.” He made what he probably thought was an innocent gesture with his hand, fingers pointed up and spreading. “*Growth.*”

She struggled to keep a straight face. “I’m sure there was lots and *lots* of growth.”

“Quit.” He groaned softly. “Needless to say, I decided to leave the writing hobby to my sister.”

“And the rest is history.”

He shrugged. “So if working in HR wasn’t your childhood dream job”—she snorted—“what did you want to be when you grew up?”

She smirked. “Who says I wanted to grow up?”

He beamed at her.

“Don’t laugh,” she warned.

“You laughed at me.”

Fair point. “Okay. Do you remember *Total Request Live*? Or was that before your time?”

“You are two years older than me,” he deadpanned.

“Every day after I took the bus home from school, I’d plop down in front of the TV and watch MTV until my parents came home. I was kind of obsessed with *TRL*. I wanted to be a VJ when I grew up. Then *TRL* went defunct and my hopes and dreams were obliterated.” She wiped an imaginary tear from the corner of her eye.

“And you were forced to settle for your second passion, business strategy implementation.”

“I think you mean *corporate* strategy and strategic management, but it’s easy to mix them up. I’m sure OTP has a whole human resources department that knows the difference for you,” she teased.

“I can see why you have such a deep, abiding passion for what you do. It sounds riveting,” he fired back.

Deep, abiding passion and human resources didn’t exactly go together, at least not in her mind. It wasn’t her calling in life or what got her out of bed in the morning. It was her job. Nothing more, nothing less.

His tongue poked at the inside of his cheek. “So, what you’re telling me is you wanted to grow up to be Carson Daly?”

She buried her face in her hands and peeked through her fingers. “Oh God. I kind of did?”

His laughter trailed off until he was staring at her, a smile playing at the edges of his lips.

Either it was her, or the restaurant had gotten warm. She worked the band around her wrist over her hand and threw her hair up in a quick bun. “Jokes aside, how are things with OTP?”

Suddenly sheepish, Brendon ran his hand over the top of his head. “Good, good. Mostly. We’re contending with an overall slowdown in market growth, and the annual I-and-D survey results were . . . mixed, but good. We’re seeing a bit of an increase in anti-dating app sentiment. Burnout, I guess.” He shrugged. “Dating’s fun, but it has its frustrations.”

Fun was not a word she’d have used to describe dating.

Her brow knit. “I and D?”

“Intimacy and dating.” He tugged at his collar, undoing the top button, revealing the hollow of his throat and a strip of skin beneath. His Adam’s apple bobbed and she swallowed, too. “Once a year, the Dew Research Center publishes their findings on the public’s perception of dating in the digital age. It’s in general, not about OTP, but it’s important to keep abreast of the trends and impressions so we can get ahead of issues before they arise.”

“And the results were mixed?”

He cracked his knuckles and shrugged. “Decent overall, but thirty percent of respondents reported feeling like apps have made dating impersonal and devoid of romance.”

“On the bright side, that means seventy percent don’t feel that way.”

“This is true.”

She reached for her wine and took a long, slow sip. “I feel like an all-or-nothing attribution isn’t fair.”

He cocked his head.

“I mean, I wouldn’t say dating apps are solely to blame.”

His brow furrowed. “Solely? As in you think—sorry, what are you saying?”

Uh-oh. She’d managed to insert her foot into her mouth in English just as well as she could in Italian.

“Nothing,” she said, backpedaling.

“Come on.” This time, he nudged her under the table. “You won’t offend me. I want to hear what you have to say.”

“I don’t even use dating apps anymore. I’m not in your demographic.”

She didn’t use dating apps anymore because she didn’t *date* anymore. Period.

“That isn’t what I asked.”

With a resigned sigh, she accepted there’d be no wiggling her way out of this. That would be too easy.

“I wouldn’t say dating apps are responsible for the death of romance, but—”

“Whoa, *whoa*.” His jaw hung open as he stared at her. “*Death* of romance?”

Who was to say what exactly had killed it, but she had a suspicion modern dating had delivered the final blow. With the advent of dating apps, people didn’t have to *work* to get laid, which was all most people were after. The old, tried-and-true bare minimum of wining and dining someone wasn’t even necessary anymore, not in this world of instant gratification. And those who claimed to be looking for more, for love? They might put in the effort at first, but it was only ever a matter of time before the mask slipped and people showed their true colors.

People stopped trying, then they stopped caring.

She’d watched it happen, experienced it firsthand, too many times, so many she’d lost count. Sparks that fizzled. Forgotten birthdays, breakups that happened via text if they even happened at all, with ghosting the new norm. Having expectations for more was exhausting. She would rather expect the worst than suffer constant disappointment, hoping one day someone might surprise her.

She took another fortifying sip and proceeded with caution. “You have to admit, people have ridiculously short attention spans.”

“Most people,” he agreed, causing her shoulders to slump in relief.

“*Most* people want a thirty-second sound bite, two hundred and eighty characters or less. Anything longer than that and they move on, because they don’t really care. And no one remembers anything, because why should they? It’s all online. When was the last time you remembered a friend’s birthday without Facebook reminding you?”

He frowned. “It’s convenient.”

“Since when are friendships, let alone love, supposed to be convenient? Swiping through pictures—”

“We aren’t swipe based. We have an algorithm that matches users based on several key compatibility variables determined via questionnaires and what we hope are fun personality quizzes. We evaluate shared interests and values, communication styles, senses of humor.” Forearms once again resting on the edge of the table, Brendon spoke zealously, his eyes brightening. “Actually, one of the common complaints about OTP is that we *aren’t* as convenient as other apps. No one wants to answer a fifty-question survey just so they can access their available matches in hopes of *maybe* finding someone to get laid. It’s easier to download a different app. Which is fine. I’m not worried about being the most downloaded app, the one with the greatest number of users. That’s not what we’re about. It’s not about ad revenue. It’s not about the money from premium account upgrades. It’s about making people happy by helping them find love. *That* is what I want OTP to be best at.”

She smiled tightly, biting her tongue. She didn’t want to burst his bubble by telling him she believed that he could try, but for every person who cared about finding love, there’d be a dozen more who didn’t care at all. That they might say they did, might bemoan their singledom, might even start out with the best intentions, but when push came to shove, most people wanted easy. “That sounds . . . commendable.”

He stared, gaze intensely locked on her face, while he chewed on his lip, the gears in his head all but visibly whirring. She crossed her ankles and braced herself for him to give her his best. Worst. *Whatever*.

“You know, Darcy sounded pretty jaded about dating before she met Elle.”

She threw her napkin on the table beside her plate and shook her head, laughing under her breath.

“Oh my God. I cannot believe I walked into that.” She should’ve seen this coming a mile away. She should’ve seen this coming *light-years* away.

From outer space, a galaxy far, far away. “I don’t even know where to start. You’re so many shades of wrong, it’s not even funny.”

His lips twitched. “And yet you’re laughing.”

“Because I am *flummoxed* by how we went, in the span of five minutes, from discussing Carson Daly to *this*.”

He laughed harder, which spurred her on, making her pinch her lips together to keep from chuckling.

“You’re ridiculous and I shouldn’t have expected anything less. Darcy told me you were like this.”

“Like what?” A curious divot appeared between his brows.

Upon moving to Seattle, Darcy had suffered through countless blind dates set up by her brother, who refused to listen when she told him time and time again that she wasn’t interested. Granted, Darcy’s heart had been broken by her good-for-nothing ex, Natasha, so when she said she wasn’t interested, it didn’t exactly take a genius to understand she was scared of putting her heart on the line. Brendon had had good intentions in pushing her to put herself back out there, and he’d successfully found a match for Darcy in Elle, but none of that changed the fact that he didn’t know when to pump the brakes when it came to his meddling.

She twirled the stem of her nearly empty wineglass between her fingers. “Stubborn, for starters.”

“I prefer *tenacious*.”

She sputtered, glad she had yet to take a sip. Brendon would’ve wound up wearing wine. “Pretty sure the exact word Darcy used was *pigheaded*.”

He smiled roguishly. “You sure she didn’t say *pleasantly persistent*?”

Her pulse pounded. Something about the flash of his white teeth against the pink of his lips paired with their rapidly heating argument caused her heart to race.

“Pushy, more like. And she said you have a penchant for armchair psychology.” She tucked a strand of hair she’d missed behind her ear. “I’m not your sister, Brendon.”

Something she couldn’t put a name to flickered in his brown eyes. “No. You’re not.”

She swallowed hard, her throat inexplicably dry. “And I’m not nursing a broken heart, either. Nor am I secretly waiting around for someone to sweep me off my feet.”

“Sure.” He nodded dismissively. “Whatever you say.”

She pursed her lips. "I'm *not*."

The way he smiled and said nothing was infuriating.

She polished off her wine, setting the glass aside. "All right. You want to know what *I* think?"

"What's that?" He leaned in eagerly.

"I think it's interesting how you're *so* invested in what everyone around you, even strangers, thinks about love to the extent that you go the extra mile to try to fix their problems."

He held up his hands. "What can I say? I'm a selfless guy."

While she wouldn't argue against that, she had a sneaking suspicion there was a lot more to Brendon than that. "Maybe. But I wonder why it's so much easier for you to solve everyone else's issues with love than your own. Hmm. Avoidance, maybe? Repression? No, what do they call it . . . projection?"

He scoffed out a laugh, head shaking. "Tiny flaw in your logic. I don't *have* any issues with my love life."

"Repression it is." She nodded sagely.

A muscle in his jaw spasmed. "I *don't*."

"Are you still single?"

Thanks to Darcy, she already knew he was.

His eyes narrowed. "I am."

"Hm."

"*Hm*." He mimicked her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Just thinking about how on airplanes they advise you to put your oxygen mask on before you assist others."

His jaw slid forward, just a hair, so little that it might have been only a twitch to the unsuspecting eye. "I haven't found the right girl yet."

She traced the stem of her empty glass. "Ever wonder why that is?"

A muscle in his jaw jumped. "There's what, seven billion people on the planet? Lots of fish in the sea."

"Well, I'm sure with a few more swipes, you'll hook your dream girl."

The waiter swooped by, dropping off the check. Brendon reached for his wallet.

"I've got it," she said. "It's the least I can do to thank you for dropping off Darcy's key."

He snagged the check holder and shook his head. "I invited you to dinner. My treat." He tucked his credit card inside the leather holder and

placed it on the edge of the table. “Back to our discussion.”

“I don’t want to argue with you, Brendon.”

“You sure? It seemed like you were having a good time.”

Strangely, she was. Brendon gave as good as he got, his verbal sparring witty without crossing a line into territory that would piss her off.

“I don’t think there’s anything left to discuss. I have my opinions—”

“And I’m going to change your mind. Romance isn’t dead, and I’m going to prove it.”

Laughter burst from between her lips. “You can try.”

His mouth twitched. “Do or do not, Annie.”

She’d walked right into that one. “How exactly do you plan on changing my mind?”

He scoffed, his smile belying the sound. “Reveal my methods? What do you take me for? An amateur?”

All those dates Brendon had set Darcy up on sprang to mind. “No blind dates. I don’t live here, remember?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Then how—” She bit her tongue. It didn’t matter because it wasn’t going to work. “Fine. Good luck.”

The left corner of his mouth curved in a smirk that brought out the dimple in his cheek. “I don’t need luck, Annie.”

Chapter Three

What Romantic Movie Gesture Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

Aries—*Sweet Home Alabama*'s kiss in the rain

Taurus—*Pretty Woman*'s fire escape serenade

Gemini—*Never Been Kissed*'s first kiss on the baseball field

Cancer—*The Notebook*'s dream house

Leo—*10 Things I Hate About You*'s bleacher serenade

Virgo—*Love Actually*'s cue cards

Libra—*Notting Hill*'s Chagall painting

Scorpio—*The Breakfast Club*'s diamond earring gift

Sagittarius—*Beauty and the Beast*'s library access

Capricorn—*Pride and Prejudice*'s Darcy paying for Lydia's wedding

Aquarius—*Say Anything*'s boom box serenade

Pisces—*Bridget Jones's Diary*'s undie run + diary gift

Saturday, May 29

Brendon's calves burned as he stretched up on his toes, his left arm extended above his head, reaching for the yellow handhold. His fingers skimmed the bottom; close, but no cigar. He gripped the dusty pink rock a little tighter and adjusted his footing, hiking his right leg up to his waist, bracing the ball of his foot against the green sliver of a hold at hip height. Bouncing on his toes, he used the momentum to heave himself up, his fingers pinching the higher handhold. Sweat trickled down his spine, soaking into his gym shorts. *Success.*

Several feet below, Margot grunted as she hefted herself up the rock wall. "You're awfully quiet this morning."

His right foot slipped and his stomach went into free fall. He caught himself, hugging the wall as his breathing evened out. "Sorry. Just have a lot on my mind."

Last night he'd lain in bed wondering how someone like Annie had become so jaded. Darcy, he'd understood. But what had pushed Annie to

the point of swearing off love? It didn't seem like she had towering, fortress-style walls erected around her heart like Darcy, whose guardedness had been plain to see. Granted, he'd only spent a few hours talking to Annie, but she'd seemed more . . . apathetic about love than someone who'd been burned by it.

None of it sat right, her resignation nor her flippant attitude to his promise to prove her wrong. She'd seemed as sure of herself as he was, which only made him more determined to change her mind.

Problem was, he didn't know where to start.

"About?"

Knowing Margot, she'd give him shit for this, but maybe she could help him look at things from a different angle. Illuminate a blind spot. "Let's say I needed to prove to someone that romance isn't dead."

"*Someone*. Does this have something to do with OTP?"

In a sense. If he could figure out how to change Annie's mind about love, it might help him better understand the disconnect for that jaded 30 percent of dating app users.

"Kind of? This is more of a . . . personal project."

His fingers started to ache, the tendon crossing the meat of his thumb cramping.

"Personal—" Margot exhaled roughly and muttered something he couldn't quite make out under her breath. "Get down here."

He let his feet dangle and breathed through the burn in his shoulders before dropping to the ground, knees bent to cushion his landing. Margot wiped the back of her hand against her forehead, leaving a trail of chalk dust against her skin.

"Someone *who*?"

Brendon crouched down, digging his water bottle out of his gym bag. With his teeth, he tugged on the spout, tipping the bottle back and drinking deep, draining half in one swallow. He ran his hand against his mouth and sighed. "Darcy's friend Annie flew into town yesterday."

Margot's eyes widened gleefully. "*Annie*? As in the girl you had a total hard-on for as a kid? The girl you—"

He held up a hand, stopping her before she could mortify him further. He was going to have a *long* talk with Darcy about what was and wasn't acceptable to share about his childhood. Telling her girlfriend was one thing, but sharing in the presence of her girlfriend's roommate? Who

happened to be his friend? His friend who took great joy in giving him shit? Out of bounds.

“Yes, that Annie. She wanted to surprise Darcy by visiting. I had to drop off her spare key.”

“Well, well, well. Suddenly your Saturday morning crisis makes all the sense.”

“I’m not having a crisis. I just need to prove a point.”

“About *love*.” She drew the word out, giving it several extra syllables. “To the girl you used to *be* in love with. Interesting.”

He was beginning to rethink asking Margot for help since it looked like all she was going to do was rag on him. “It’s not interesting. At dinner, she said—”

“Dinner? What happened to you having a date with Diana?”

“*Danielle*,” he said, correcting her. “And I canceled. Or, rescheduled.”

Danielle was going out of town to visit family in Lake Chelan and they’d agreed to play their rain check by ear.

Margot smirked at him. “So that you could go on a date with Annie instead. I see how it is.”

She really didn’t. “That’s—that’s not how it was.” He cupped the back of his neck, his skin burning beneath his palm. “It wasn’t a date.”

Margot lay down on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. She hugged her knee to her chest, stretching out her hamstrings. “Dinner is the quintessential first date.”

“People have to eat, Margot.” He sighed. “We’re getting off topic. We had dinner. We talked. Annie told me, get this—she believes romance is dead. I told her I was going to prove her wrong, but honestly? I’m stumped. Setting her up with someone is off the table; she’s only in town for a little over two weeks and I don’t know her type well enough to know someone, off the top of my head, who’d mesh well with her.”

And not that he’d admit it, but the thought of setting Annie up with someone put a terrible taste in his mouth.

“The app? Can’t you just get her to download OTP and problem solved?”

That was a hard no; she’d made her thoughts on dating apps clear. “I think dating apps might be part of the problem.”

He needed to think outside the box. Something he was usually stellar at.

Margot frowned. “It’s times like these I truly pity your Venus-Mars placements.”

What the fuck. “Margot.”

“I’m just saying.” She held up her hands. “You poor little Aries Venus, Cancer Mars. You are a funky cinnamon roll who knows what he wants but not how to get it.”

She tutted, shaking her head. Her exaggerated pout gave away the fact she was fucking with him.

“Can you be serious for a second?” he begged. “I’m asking for your help.”

“Why do you care whether Annie thinks romance is dead? It’s no skin off your nose what your sister’s best friend thinks.”

He couldn’t stand the thought of anyone thinking love was a lost cause, believing they needed to settle for less than fireworks because they hadn’t found the right person yet. *Yet* being the operative word.

“It’s the principle of the matter. It’s *sad*. And, okay, from a professional standpoint I *do* have skin in the game. Annie’s not the only person who thinks romance is dead. The annual intimacy-and-dating survey was pubbed yesterday. *Thirty percent* of people polled think dating apps have removed the romance from dating. I can’t just ignore that.” OTP couldn’t ignore that, either. Maybe he couldn’t convince everyone, but if he could convince Annie? It would be a start.

A line formed between her brows, and her lips twisted downward in a frown. “I say this with all the love in my heart, but you need to accept the fact that you can’t single-handedly deliver happily-ever-afters for every person on the planet. Even you have limits, Brendon.”

Limits, his ass. He shot her a grin. “Says who?”

She pressed a hand to her forehead. “Didn’t you learn *anything* from what happened with your sister and Elle? Like, I don’t know, *not* to meddle in other people’s love lives?”

Sure, there’d been that hiccup where Darcy’s fear of winding up with a broken heart had led to her pushing Elle away and ruing the day Brendon set them up, but she’d gotten over it, proving that love could, in fact, conquer everything, including your deepest, darkest fears. “Everyone keeps throwing that in my face, but I’m pretty sure my intervention paid off. Besides, this isn’t meddling. I told Annie I’m going to change her mind. I just don’t know *how*.”

“And you thought, what? *Let me ask Margot. She’s a fount of knowledge.* You’re the expert on mushy shit, not me.”

“*Mushy shit?*”

She rolled her eyes. “I said what I said. All that *you complete me and had me at hello and you’ve bewitched me and you make me a better man and you’re perfect and you’re a bird*—which, what the fuck does that even mean?” She stuck out her tongue. “Mushy.”

“There were at least five butchered romance references in there, maybe more. You sound pretty knowledgeable to me,” he teased.

“All movies *you* have forced me to watch. You live for sappy shit, is what I’m saying.”

“They aren’t sappy. And even if they were, there’s nothing wrong with a little sap. They’re hopeful. They show that love . . .” He trailed off. An idea formed, hazy and incomplete but more than anything he’d been working with so far.

Margot’s brows rose. “Show that love . . . ?”

He riffed out loud, “What better way to prove to Annie that romance isn’t dead than to show her?”

“Show her *what*? No offense, but I don’t think forcing her to sit through a remedial rom-com marathon’s really going to do the trick.”

A lightbulb went off, puzzle pieces clicking into place. “You’re a genius.”

“Duh.” Her expression faltered. “Mind filling me in on *why* I’m a genius?”

“Because you’re right. Showing her a bunch of movies isn’t going to cut it.” He tossed his water bottle back into his bag with a grin. “Which is why I’m going to woo her.”

“Woo her?” She shut her eyes and groaned. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“No, I’m serious. I’m going to woo Annie, and what better way to do it than by using my favorite movies as the blueprint?”

The greatest grand gestures and romantic moments? He was going to re-create them.

She stared at him blankly from behind her glasses.

“I’m serious, Mar. Do you know how many movies were either filmed or set in Seattle? *Say Anything, Sleepless in Seattle, 10 Things I Hate About You, Singles*—”

“I get the picture.”

“This city’s more romantic than anyone gives it credit for. We’ve got the greatest restaurants, the waterfront, a giant Ferris wheel—”

“What the fuck does a Ferris wheel have to do with romance?”

“Have you seen *The Notebook*? *Love, Simon*? *Never Been Kissed*?” Ferris wheels were a romance staple by this point. “You have no chance of being interrupted, you get a stellar view, it’s private—”

“Ergo, romance.” Margot rolled her eyes. “And your end goal with all of this is *what*? Make Annie fall in love with you?”

“All I’m looking to do is show her romance isn’t a lost cause. That there’s someone out there for everyone and the right person will be willing to sweep her off her feet. At the very least, we’ll have fun.”

If, on the off chance, something more came out of this plan? He wasn’t going to complain. What was meant to be would be.

“And you don’t think—” Margot pinched her lips together. “You know what? Never mind. There’s no point trying to reason with you when you get like this.”

“What?” He grinned. “When I’m right?”

Margot shook her head. “One of these days, your hero complex is going to bite you in the ass. And *I* am going to have to bite my tongue to keep from saying I told you so.”

Chapter Four

Thanks to bouncing from one time zone to another for work, Annie's internal clock was utterly botched. She had no problem falling asleep; the problem was staying asleep. Between overly firm hotel beds and early checkout times, seldom was she able to stay in bed past dawn.

To combat her insomnia, she'd taken up the highly masochistic hobby of early morning running.

Feeling thoroughly punished yet also a little loopy on endorphins, she used the bottom of her ratty old shirt to mop the sweat from her forehead and toed her way out of her running shoes, before padding into the kitchen with a single-minded purpose.

Coffee.

Her eyes swept the counter in search of Darcy's—*no*.

Eating up half the space beside the stove was a silver monstrosity with a wheel of buttons and more knobs and spouts than she could begin to guess what their function was.

This was not a coffeemaker, this was a contraption, one she was pretty sure she wasn't qualified to operate. There were too many buttons and no words, only symbols whose meaning was far more ambiguous than the manufacturer assumed. A coffee bean. A droplet of water. Two squiggly lines running parallel to one another, looking an awful lot like the zodiac symbol for Aquarius. A plus and minus sign beside one wheel, dots increasing from small to large beside another.

She squinted and scowled. Caffeine was not supposed to be a prerequisite to operate a coffeemaker . . . espresso machine . . . *whatever*.

Beside the professional-grade gadget were Darcy's mugs, bowl sized, white, and stacked upside down within their silver stand, no doubt to keep dust from gathering inside. She grabbed the top mug and clutched it in front of her chest, staring at the coffeemaker with disdainful eyes.

She could figure this out. She'd watched the baristas at Starbucks pull shots of espresso countless times. Worst-case scenario, she'd wind up with a too-strong brew she could doctor with cream and enough sugar to render the caffeine superfluous.

She set the mug beneath the spout to the right, her finger hovering in the air in front of the center wheel. She pressed the button with the cup-shaped symbol beside it and the whole machine came to life, the buttons on the front lighting up bright blue, the appliance whirring and churning as beans from the back cascaded down into the bowels of the machine and—

The nozzle at the front sputtered and a rich dark brew streamed down the front of the machine, down the cabinets, and onto the floor. *Fuck*. She fumbled for the mug and slid it beneath the proper spout before she made a bigger mess.

At least she'd figured the coffeemaker out. It hadn't been *that* difficult, just a little—

She had spoken too soon. Coffee reached the rim of the mug and sloshed over the sides, pooling on the counter and dripping onto the floor, the puddle growing. Hot espresso reached her toes, her feet slipping and sliding on the tile.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

She spun the knob in the center of the machine like she was on *Wheel of Fortune*, but the only change was that the coffee coming out of the spout was darker, blacker, *sludgy*.

Hands braced on the counter, her legs in a split around the puddle, she reached behind the coffeemaker, tugging the cord from the wall.

All at once, the machine cut off, not even powering down. Everything just stopped, the whirring and grinding and sloshing and sputtering giving way to blessed silence save for the thrum of her heartbeat inside her head.

The place was a wreck, a coffee-splattered war zone.

She sighed and grabbed a fistful of paper towels. Starbucks, it was.

One steamy shower later, she was dressed in a pleated maxi skirt in her favorite shade of blush, a white cropped T-shirt, and a sensible pair of gladiator sandals, her weather app promising sunshine and a high of seventy-four degrees. Flipping over to her web browser, she started to type.

Top ten things to do in Seattle—

Alone, autofill suggested.

“Thanks, Google,” she muttered into the quiet of Darcy’s living room.

Armed with an agenda of places to go and landmarks to see, a map of the downtown area bookmarked on her home screen, she shot one last glare at Darcy's coffeemaker. She snagged her keys from the entry table and opened the door.

Standing in the hall, fist poised to knock, was Brendon. Cradled in the nook of his right elbow was a white, nondescript box.

"Brendon. Hey." She stepped aside, waving him in. "What brings you by?"

"Believe it or not, I was in the neighborhood." He hefted the box a little higher. "On Saturday mornings, Margot—Elle's roommate, I'm sure you've heard of her—and I go rock climbing at a gym near the Seattle Center. Then we swing by this bakery on Roy Street and pick up pastries before heading over here for breakfast with Elle and Darce. It's turned into a tradition. Like game night, which I'm sure Darcy will tell you all about." He flipped the box around, opening the lid. Oh, sweet Jesus. Inside were at least a dozen flaky-looking pastries, all golden brown, the heavenly aroma of butter and fruit preserves wafting up to her nose, making her stomach grumble. His lips twitched. "I know Darcy's out of town, but it's hard to break a habit. I didn't think you'd mind."

Mind? She had to swallow so she wouldn't drool. "Yeah, I'm so offended right now. How dare you bring me something that looks this delicious. *Rude.*"

He laughed and stepped past her into the kitchen, setting the box on the counter. "The marzipan roll's my favorite, but I have it on good authority the white chocolate cherry Danish is damn good, too."

She plucked the cherry Danish out of the box, eager to dig in. She moaned around her first bite, flushing when Brendon grinned. "'S good."

So good it almost rivaled the pastries she'd gorged herself on the last time she was in France.

"Told you." He snagged a marzipan roll and leaned his hip against the counter beside the evil espresso maker.

He was wearing a simple T-shirt with a giraffe on the front. The words above it proclaimed *Giraffes have ginormous hearts* and a speech bubble above the giraffe's mouth added, *I care a lot*. The cotton hugged his biceps, drawing her eyes to his arms. His pale skin was sprinkled with light brown hair and a smattering of freckles that crept up the side of his hand. His long

fingers wrapped around his pastry, the tendon in his wrist flexing beneath the cross of dark blue veins.

She finished chewing and swallowed, tearing her eyes from his muscled forearms. “So. Rock climbing, huh?”

He dusted his hands off over the sink. “Margot got me into it.”

Her eyes darted to the door. “Is Margot coming?”

He’d said this was their tradition, after all.

“Nah, she had other plans,” he said, leaving it at that. He jerked his chin in the direction of Darcy’s foyer. “Were you headed out?”

She nodded, eyeing the box of pastries, the almond croissant calling her name. Maybe he’d split it with her. “I was about to scout out the closest Starbucks.”

Brendon made a choked sound and stood up straighter, shaking his head. “You’re in Seattle. You can do better than the swill they call coffee.”

Swill? She coughed. “Snob.”

“They over-roast their beans!” His hand moved in front of his body as he gesticulated zealously. Powdered sugar dusted the room.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” She nodded at the espresso machine behind him. “I’m guessing I have you to thank for buying Darcy that infernal contraption?”

She certainly hadn’t owned it when she’d roomed with Annie. Not to mention, Darcy didn’t strike her as the type to own something so frivolous. As far as Annie knew, Darcy had been Team French Press. Maybe moving to Seattle had changed her, but Annie thought it was more likely someone else was responsible for the coffeemaker. Someone like Brendon.

He pressed his lips together, chin quivering. “Infernal contraption?”

She narrowed her eyes. “That is, by far, the nicest thing I’ve called it this morning. I spent ten minutes mopping espresso off the floor after it overflowed my mug. The buttons are incomprehensible. You shouldn’t need a manual to make a cup of coffee.”

“You push the button with the coffee cup on it and then set the dial to six, eight, or twelve ounces,” he said, lips twitching.

Her face warmed. When he put it like that, it sounded straightforward.

“Or I could pay someone four dollars to do it for me. Plus, they have cinnamon dolce syrup. Darcy does not.”

His face scrunched in obvious distaste. “Over-roasted *and* overpriced. You’re killing me. You’re going to pay four bucks for burned bean water?”

She smirked. “Burned bean water with milk and sugar.”

Brendon shivered in mock horror. “No way. Absolutely not.”

“Excuse me?” She was *going* to get her coffee come hell or high water.

“You heard me. I can’t in good conscience let you settle for Starbucks while you’re in Seattle. I’ll show you good coffee.”

She shifted awkwardly on her feet. While she wouldn’t mind the company, she didn’t want to impose. “You don’t have to do that. I’m sure you have plans.”

He rocked back on his heels. “Now I do.” He grinned, dimples flashing. “Grab your keys. I’m going to introduce you to Seattle.”

* * *

Brendon did a shitty job of disguising his revulsion, his lips puckering as Annie slurped her extra-large caramel crunch frappe through her straw.

“Want a sip?” She held out her drink, laughing when he nearly tripped over the curb in his haste to back away.

“No, I do not. It’s not even *coffee*.”

“The three shots of espresso in here beg to differ.” She smiled around her straw.

“It’s a glorified milkshake. A six-dollar glorified milkshake.”

“And it’s tasty.” Between the sugar and caffeine, she was feeling much perkier. “Besides, what do you have against milkshakes?”

He grimaced. “You don’t remember?”

She craned her neck to look up at him. “Remember what?”

The freckled bridge of his nose crinkled. “That time I bet you I could finish my milkshake first? Ring any bells?”

The memory hit her like a freight train. Immediately, her eyes scrunched shut, her lips rolling inward, the rest of her shuddering. “Don’t. You’re going to retraumatize me. You ruined me for French fries for over a year.”

A serious feat seeing as French fries were one of her favorite foods.

“I ruined *you* on French fries?” His shoulders shook with laughter as they wiggled their way through the Saturday morning foot traffic near Pike Place Market. “I’m the one who had the fry lodged up his nose.”

She gagged. “Don’t talk about it!”

A simple bet on who could finish their milkshake first—Darcy had been unable to participate, what with being lactose intolerant—had resulted in

Brendon, thirteen at the time, barfing in the parking lot of In-N-Out. She'd gotten the worst brain freeze of her life and somehow—she still wasn't entirely sure how it was physiologically possible—Brendon had wound up with a poorly chewed French fry lodged up his nose in the aftermath of puking his guts out. It was stuck inside his nasal cavity to the point where it had required a trip to the emergency room to dislodge it.

“Talk about it? I had to live it. I can't look at a milkshake without my sinuses stinging.”

Her own nose burned sympathetically. “Fair. But the point stands—you don't have to like it, but this counts as coffee.”

“I take you to the coffee shop that, arguably, has the best organic, ethically sourced coffee in the city and you order *that*.” He clucked his tongue against his teeth. “Shame.”

She slurped. “I feel *awful*.”

Crossing the street, he guided her alongside the market, past stalls of handcrafted soaps, locally sourced honey, bright bouquets of flowers, fresh produce, jewelry, and mason jars full of pepper jelly. A few yards away, a crowd gathered around men in heavy-duty orange rubber overalls hurling huge salmon across a counter while shouting.

A gentle tug on her wrist stopped her from stepping inside the covered market for a closer look. Brendon jerked his chin to the left. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

Without letting go of her hand, he led her around a corner, veering off down a shadowy tunnel that opened up into an alley, the brick walls covered in—

“Gum?” She laughed.

So much gum, more gum than brick. Pink and red, vibrant blues and dusty yellows, off-white, orange, green—wads and wads of gum were stuck to the walls of the alley, several inches thick. It was as disgusting as it was fascinating.

“The Gum Wall.” He reached inside his pocket and withdrew two sticks of Juicy Fruit, offering her one. “I know it's touristy, but it's a Seattle landmark. You've got to go at least once.”

She set her drink down on the cobblestones close to the wall and unwrapped the stick of gum, sliding it between her lips, biting it in half. A burst of watermelon hit her tongue, tart and sweet. She chewed until the stick lost its shape, fruity flavor flooding her mouth.

Brendon's lips rolled together and his tongue slipped out, covered in green gum. His cheeks puffed, his nostrils twitching, a ginormous bubble forming in front of him. It went from opaque to translucent, the gum growing thinner and thinner.

She wasn't entirely sure what possessed her to do it, but she reached out, popping Brendon's bubble. A thin sheen of pale green gum covered his lips, his cheeks, the tip of his nose, the little cleft in his chin.

He froze, eyes wide and lips parted, gum stringing between them. "I can't believe you just did that."

She snickered and grabbed her phone, snapping a quick shot of Brendon covered in gum. "Sorry?"

Chuckling, he began the arduous process of scraping bits of gum free from his stubble. Finally, he figured out that it was easier to roll it off, his fingers making little concentric circles until most of the gum was gone, save for the bit clinging to the side of his nose.

She stifled a laugh and pointed. "You've got some right there."

He rubbed at the wrong side. "Did I get it?"

"No, it's—" She stood on her toes, reaching up to do it for him, huffing when it wouldn't budge. "It's really sticky."

His breath tickled her hand. "That's what she said."

She snorted and smacked his arm. "Hold still. I can't get it if you keep wiggling your head."

His nose scrunched. "Sorry. It tickles."

Her calves were beginning to burn from standing on her tippy-toes. "You're too tall."

One of his hands dropped to her waist, holding her steady as he leaned closer. Close enough that she could count the freckles on the bridge of his nose. His tongue sneaked out, wetting his bottom lip. His breath smelled fruity sweet, wafting gently in her face. "Better?"

She nodded quietly, tongue-tied.

Ding! Ding!

She jerked forward, colliding into Brendon as a bicycle passed behind her, skirting the wall as it zipped down the alley and around the corner, disappearing from sight.

"You good?"

They were pressed tightly together from their chests to their knees. The hand he'd had resting on her hip had curved around her waist, holding her

against him, keeping her steady.

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, her knees suddenly stupidly weak. “Mm-hmm.”

She lifted her face from where it was buried against his firm chest. Sunlight caught on his pale, enviably long lashes when he blinked, bringing out the flecks of amber in his irises, his pupils appearing blacker by contrast.

He chuckled, the vibration of his laughter rumbling all the way down to her toes. *All* the way. “You sure?”

She stepped back, dropping her hands, flushing hotly as her fingers brushed the solid steel of his arms on the way down. “Yep.”

Just peachy.

His gaze dropped to the ground. “Ah shit. Dropped my gum.”

It was impossible to tell which piece was his, the cobblestones covered, nearly as much as the buildings to either side of them.

“Better the ground than stuck in my hair,” she said, shaking off how being pressed up against him had bizarrely knocked her off-kilter.

He hummed his agreement. “True. Want to add yours to the wall?”

Heat crept up her jaw. “I, um. I swallowed it.”

Between the cyclist and being pressed against Brendon, she’d gulped it down without thinking.

“You want a picture?”

“Sure.” She smiled at his offer, passing him her phone.

He snapped several pictures in quick succession.

When she held her hand out for her phone, he lifted it out of reach. “Got to make sure they turned out.”

He swiped, chuckling when his gum-covered face appeared. He swiped once more and the last picture she’d taken flashed across the screen, a shot of Trafalgar Square at dusk.

“London?” he asked, passing her the phone.

She nodded.

“What’s your favorite place you’ve traveled?”

She slipped her phone inside her bag and grabbed her drink off the ground. “Are we talking for work or in general?”

“In general.”

“Hmm. That’s tough, but I’d have to probably go with France.”

“Paris?”

She shook her head. “Paris is beautiful, but I was lucky enough to spend three weeks in Provence during lavender season. It was all rolling fields of purple flowers and the air smelled amazing. I slept with the windows open.”

His eyes crinkled. “That sounds beautiful. And it makes me think of this little town, Sequim, that’s not *too* far from here. It’s known as the ‘Lavender Capital of North America.’ It’s where most of the lavender at the market comes from.”

That sounded—and, no doubt, smelled—amazing. “I wish I were here longer. I’d love to see it.”

He smiled. “Well, you’ve been to Provence, so . . .”

She laughed. “It *was* pretty unparalleled. The views were breathtaking.” She sidestepped what appeared to be a fresh wad of gum, not wanting to ruin her shoes, and her arm bumped his gently. “How about you? What’s your favorite place you’ve ever been?”

With a chuckle, he ran a hand across his jaw. The way he glanced at her from the corner of his eye seemed almost bashful. “It’s . . . well, it’s not Provence.”

She bumped him with her hip. “Come on. Tell me.”

“It’s . . . *gah*.” He covered his face. “You’re going to laugh.”

She did, but only because he was making a big deal out of it. “Does it have a funny name? Is it, like, Wank, Germany? Or Bendova, Czech Republic? Intercourse, Pennsylvania?”

He threw his head back and laughed loudly. “*No*.”

Then it couldn’t be that bad.

“Okay.” He calmed down, clearing his throat. “It’s Tomorrowland.”

Tomorrow . . . “Disney?”

A flush crept up the side of his jaw as he stared straight ahead. “Yup.”

Her smile grew. “*Brendon*.”

“I know, I *know*. It’s ridiculous that you’ve traveled to all these amazing places and my favorite place on the planet is Disneyland.”

That wouldn’t do. She poked him in his very solid arm. “I’ll have you know, Space Mountain is my all-time favorite roller coaster. I used to think—well, I still do—the asteroids looked like giant chocolate chip cookies.”

His eyes widened. “I love Space Mountain. As soon as I was tall enough to ride, I made Darcy ride it with me over and over again. She got so sick of it.”

“I could never get sick of Space Mountain. I love roller coasters.”

“Yeah?” His smile grew and he nodded his head to the right. “I’ve got an idea. Let’s go this way.”

She followed him deeper down the alley and around the corner. He stopped in front of a long wooden pier and pointed up at a giant Ferris wheel. “It’s no roller coaster, but it’s close.”

Hand cupped over her brow, she shielded her face from the glare of the sun and stared up at the wheel. “Let’s do it.”

Frappe empty, she ducked over to a trash can beside the public bathroom. She hesitated, eyeing the door to the restroom. In the last two hours, she’d consumed a whopping thirty-two ounces of iced coffee and her bladder had reached capacity.

“Annie.” She turned. The line had moved and Brendon was at the front, standing near the attendant, waving her over. She glanced back at the restroom and frowned. It was a Ferris wheel; how long could it take to go in a circle? Fifteen minutes?

“Come on!” Brendon called again, the attendant tapping his foot behind him, beginning to look annoyed, as if she were holding things up.

She could wait fifteen minutes.

Having hit the sweet spot on timing, they were the only two people in their cabin. She settled in atop the leather bench seat, wiggling a little to get comfortable. The bench could’ve comfortably sat four grown adults and yet Brendon sat directly beside her, their knees knocking gently as he stretched his long legs out in front of him.

The wheel was relatively slow moving; it took five minutes for their cabin to reach the top. The view was more than worth the wait. Sunlight glinted off the placid, glassy blue surface of Elliott Bay. To the right, the Space Needle stood tall and proud against a clear, blue sky.

“Mount Rainier.” He pointed at the snowcapped mountain looming majestically in the distance. “We picked a good day to come up here.”

She dug into the depths of her bag for her phone, wanting more pictures. “It’s beautiful.”

“It is.”

The space between her shoulder blades itched with awareness. She turned. He was staring at her, not the view, and his brown eyes were locked on her face, his lips tipped up at the corners.

“You ever miss San Francisco?” she asked, changing the subject. He wasn’t implying *she* was beautiful. That would be ridiculous, not to

mention utterly corny. People didn't say things like that in real life. Not to her, they didn't.

He shifted on the bench, his thigh pressing firmly alongside hers. "Sometimes. I miss In-N-Out, but Dick's isn't bad."

"*Dick's?*" What was that? A—she wasn't even going to let her brain fill in the blanks.

"Burger joint. Great fries. I've heard they make a decent milkshake." His smile went charmingly crooked. "Not that I'd know."

"I'll have to check it out. See for myself how it stacks up."

He nodded. "You picked the best time of year to visit. Nothing beats summer in Seattle. It's a running joke that if you want to convince someone to move here you should get them to visit May to September."

"Not October through April?"

He bobbed his head from side to side. "That's the rainy season. Not that it rains as much as people say it does. Miami gets almost double the rainfall annually as Seattle. It just drizzles a lot."

"I don't mind rain." A good thing, as London was known for being gray, almost as much as Seattle.

"It grows on you," he agreed. "How about you?"

"Do I miss San Francisco?"

He nodded.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and shrugged. "The last time I was in San Francisco was . . . four years ago? It's not really home anymore."

Not that anywhere felt like home these days.

"Four years?" He sounded surprised.

"My parents moved back to Greece after my dad retired."

His brows knit. "Wow. That's—far."

"I visit for Christmas. One year, I even managed to swing an extra week of vacation and I was able to spend my birthday over there."

"*One* year? What do you usually do for your birthday? It's on the nineteenth, right?"

"Facebook tell you that?" she teased.

He stared at her. "I don't need Facebook to remind me of your birthday, Annie. I've known you half my life."

Known was a bit of a stretch, but she knew what he meant.

"When Darcy was still in Philadelphia, we'd usually go out to celebrate at a restaurant of her choice, a fancy place she heard about on Food

Network.” Her eye roll was fond. “And if my birthday fell on a weekday, she’d have my favorite bakery deliver a dozen cupcakes to my office.”

“Sounds like Darce.” Brendon smiled.

Last year on Annie’s birthday, she’d ordered an obscene amount of sushi and eaten it all by herself while bingeing her favorite French reality show. Darcy had still sent her cupcakes to the office, but it hadn’t compared to spending her birthday with her best friend.

She could feel her smile slipping, wavering at the edges, melancholy threatening to overwhelm her, because next December Darcy would still be here in Seattle and Annie would be across the world and who knew if Darcy could even have cupcakes delivered from that far away? She clenched her back teeth together and grinned, reminding herself that Darcy was happy here and that was what mattered. “You must’ve been thrilled when Darcy moved to town. And then your mom?”

“Darcy, sure. Mom . . .” Brendon made a vague, frazzled gesture, his hand sweeping out in front of him before his fingers twitched and he ran them through his hair, leaving it sweetly disheveled. It was longer than she remembered it ever being. Not *long*, but nothing like the crop he’d had when he was a kid. His auburn hair was thick, lush, the kind of hair you could sink your fingers into. “I’m sure you know how my mom is.”

She knew enough from Darcy. Gillian Lowell was, well—*mercurial* would be putting it kindly. Her highs were high and her lows *low*. She’d checked out following her divorce, leaving Darcy to care for Brendon until their grandmother stepped in. Her heaping loads of undue responsibility on Annie’s best friend would forever make Annie look at Gillian sideways.

“It seems like she’s happy here,” she said. “Darcy, I mean.”

He cracked a smile. “All thanks to Elle.”

She bumped his arm with hers. “All thanks to your matchmaking.”

His shoulders rose, his shrug lazy as he sank back against the bench seat, slouching. The cocky smirk curling his lips should’ve been totally unappealing but instead it made her insides twist. The fuck? “There you have it. Proof that romance isn’t dead.”

Oh, Jesus. She laughed. “This again?”

He tsked softly. “Did you think I forgot?”

“Here I was hoping,” she joked, crossing her legs.

She really should’ve peed. The pressure in her abdomen abated with the shift in position, the shouting of her bladder subsiding into something she

could ignore . . . for now.

“Well, I didn’t forget.”

Of course he hadn’t. Because that would be too easy and completely unlike Brendon. Pigheaded was right. “Look, I didn’t say people couldn’t fall in love. I just think true love is rare. The kind that goes the distance. Most people want easy. But every rule has an exception.”

“Most people,” he repeated, eyes locked on her face, studying her closely.

She dipped her chin.

“And this rule.” He sat up straighter. “You’d say Elle was the exception for my sister?”

“I guess?”

“So it would stand to reason that maybe you haven’t met your exception yet.” He looked smug at his deductive reasoning, his twisting of her logic.

She wasn’t going to hold her breath. Maybe every rule had an exception and maybe there was someone out there *perfect* for her, but while Brendon might’ve found the prospect of seven billion people promising, she found the odds bleak. Bleaker than bleak. “The exceptions *prove* the rule. The fact you can enumerate a finite list highlights the rarity of the exceptions.”

“The exceptions prove the rule?” The arch of his brow screamed skepticism.

“It’s a *thing*.”

He threw his head back, laughter filling the glass-enclosed gondola. “Sure.”

“Shut up.” She pressed her hand to the cool glass. “Shouldn’t we be moving?”

He shut his eyes, lips curling in a lazy little grin, his empty coffee cup resting against his flat stomach. “You’re not scared of heights, are you?”

“I told you I love roller coasters. Heights don’t bother me.”

Her bladder, on the other hand, was hard to ignore.

Above their heads, crackling static came from a recessed speaker. A throat cleared. “Um, sorry for the interruption, folks. We’re having some technical difficulties, which is why we’ve been stalled out for the last few minutes.” *Few minutes?* They’d been up here for going on half an hour. “Good news is, our technician is taking a look as we speak. Sit tight and we should have the wheel up and running shortly.”

Perfect. God only knew how long they'd be stuck in this cabin, dangling up in the air.

She crossed her legs tighter, and when that didn't relieve the pressure, she leaned forward, bracing her hands on the bench to either side of her, her fingers gripping the leather seat.

Brendon set his hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

She opened her mouth, pausing when her bladder seized, cramping. Her lips twisted. "Yeah. I'm fine."

She was *not* fine. She felt like she was about to burst, to be honest. She released her grip on the bench and crossed her legs the opposite direction, squirming in her seat.

He frowned. "You sure?"

"I should've stopped by the restroom before getting on. I didn't think we'd get stuck up here," she admitted, warmth creeping up the back of her neck.

He winced. "Sorry."

"Because you're totally responsible for my bladder." She huffed out a laugh, scrunching her nose. On second thought, laughing was bad. "Distract me."

His eyes dipped, his gaze landing and lingering on her mouth, making her wonder for one bizarre moment what method of distraction he was considering.

She swallowed hard. Either Brendon freaking Lowell had miraculously gotten her wet with just that look, or she had peed a little. She *really* needed to up her Kegel game.

Whatever method of distraction he had in mind didn't matter when her phone rang, Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" blaring from inside her bag.

He laughed. "Is that your ringtone?"

She fished around inside her purse, finding her phone buried deep beneath her wallet. "Just for Darcy."

Her thumb hovered over the screen, ultimately sending Darcy to voicemail. She was a smidge preoccupied at the moment, her bladder making it difficult to concentrate. That, and she was with Brendon. He deserved her—mostly—undivided attention.

She slipped her phone back inside her bag. She'd call Darcy later.

"Have you heard of the Astley paradox?" he asked.

She shook her head. “Is it like the Mandela effect? Where half the people remember something one way and half don’t? Because I swear on all that’s holy the Monopoly man once wore a monocle.”

“Yes!” He slapped his thighs eagerly. “Or, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. The Abominable Snowman—”

“Had a toothache!” Thank God she wasn’t the only one who remembered that. “And the little dentist elf fixed it and then he—”

“Bumble,” he said. “The Abominable Snowman’s name was Bumble.”

“Bumble.” She nodded. “Then he wasn’t abominable anymore.”

He sighed grimly. “I don’t get how people don’t remember that.”

“Right? Too weird.” Her bladder gave another twinge. “So this Astley paradox?”

“Oh, right.” He swiveled slightly, their knees knocking. “No, totally different. Okay, imagine you ask Rick Astley to borrow his copy of the movie *Up*.”

She nodded, going along with the hypothetical situation wherein she’d, first, *know* Rick Astley, and, second, need to borrow an animated movie. “All right.”

Brendon laughed softly under his breath. “He can’t give it to you because he promised he’s never going to give you up.”

Oh God. She shut her eyes. “Geez.”

“*But*,” he continued, “by not letting you borrow the movie, he’s letting you down. Something else he promised to never do. A paradox.”

“That’s so hokey.” She grinned. “I *do* love that movie, though.”

“*Up*?”

She nodded. “Arguably my favorite Pixar film. Though, *WALL-E* is a close second.”

His lips parted. “I think I’m in love.”

She laughed and—bad idea. *Epic*ly bad idea. The pressure in her bladder grew harder to ignore. She breathed shallowly. “I’m guessing you like *Up*, too?”

“Don’t tell Darcy, okay?” He reached for the bottom hem of his shirt and started to lift it, revealing his flat stomach with its *many* ridges. Chiseled. That was the word. Brendon’s body was chiseled.

Heat crept up her jaw. “What are you doing?”

More like, why the hell was he taking his clothes off? Not that she was complaining, *per se*, but still . . .

He grinned, hiking his shirt up under his armpits. “Yeah, you could say *Up* is one of my favorites.”

On his chest, over his left pectoral, was a bright splash of color. Hundreds of vividly colored balloons were inked into his skin in shades of pink and green and red and blue, just as bright and cheerful as the gum wall they’d visited. Beneath the balloons was a tiny house floating beneath his flat nipple.

She bit her lip, clenching her fingers into fists so she wouldn’t do something silly like reach out and trace the pigmented lines. “That’s adorable. Not to mention, really well done. I love it.”

He beamed at her and dropped his shirt, covering himself back up. “Thanks.”

“Why am I not supposed to tell Darcy?”

He shot her a look that screamed *duh*. “Darce *hates* tattoos. I mean, she’s fine with them on other people, but me? I’d never hear the end of it.”

She snickered. “You’re kidding.”

The look on his face said he wasn’t.

“Okay, let me tell you a little about your sister,” she said, grinning because this was juicy knowledge Darcy would *hate* his knowing, but harmless. Brendon would get a kick out of it. “The summer we moved to Philadelphia for college, Darcy and I—I’m glad you’re sitting down—got matching tattoos.”

His jaw dropped. “You’re shitting me.”

She shook her head. No, but she was worried she was going to pee herself. “Nope, matching *butterfly* tattoos.”

She bit her lip, smiling around it. That had been a good night.

“Were you guys drunk?” he asked, agog.

“No. Well, I wasn’t.” She didn’t need alcohol to make impulsive decisions. She made those just fine sober.

“Where? I’ve never seen—” His face scrunched in horror. “Forget I asked.”

“Where does every eighteen-year-old girl born in the late eighties or early nineties get a butterfly tattoo when three sheets to the wind?” She grinned. “Your sister is one hundred percent in possession of a secret tramp stamp.”

He grinned. “Oh, she’s going to *hate* it when she finds out that I know.”

“Which is why you aren’t going to tell her I told you,” she said sweetly, though her smile was a threat unto itself. “She’ll *murder* me.”

He dipped his chin. “Fair. I can keep a secret.” He cocked his head to the side, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “So, does this mean *you* also have a tattoo on your—”

Overhead, the speaker crackled to life once more. “Hi again. Sorry about the wait, folks. Nothing to worry about, but it does look like we’ve got a bit of an issue with our electrical system. The maintenance crew’s working to get the backup generator up and running. They’ve estimated that it shouldn’t take longer than fifteen minutes. We’re sorry about the inconvenience, so we’ll be refunding tickets once we get you all back down here safely.”

Fifteen minutes. She whimpered.

She had no choice but to hold it, but she wasn’t sure she could. She shifted, rocking forward, squirming in her seat, her feet tap-dancing against the glass floor.

Brendon popped the lid off his coffee. He held the cup out, offering it to her. “Okay. Enough is enough. *Urine* luck.”

She stared at him. “I’m not peeing in a cup, Brendon.”

“Look, I know it’s not ideal—”

“No way.”

It wasn’t *not ideal*; it was not on the table. Not an option. She wasn’t about to pee in a coffee cup in a glass-encased gondola hovering hundreds of feet in the air with Brendon beside her.

“Come on. Haven’t you ever peed in front of Darcy?”

His point? “Yeah, *Darcy*. My best friend.”

“How about people you’ve dated?”

Uh . . . “No?”

“Seriously?”

She stared at him. “Have you?”

“Well, no, but—”

She laughed, immediately regretting it when she was forced to clamp down hard on her pelvic floor muscles.

“Everyone pees, Annie.”

“Not in front of people, they don’t.”

“You’re telling me your parents never peed in front of each other?”

“That’s different! They’re married.”

Not that anyone had, but under any circumstance where someone she'd dated would've witnessed her relieve herself, they'd have likely already seen her naked. Seeing as Brendon was neither her best friend, nor had he ever seen her naked, nor were they dating, she couldn't justify peeing in front of him.

He laughed. "Okay."

"I'm fine. I'll hold it."

Easier said than done. Breathing was beginning to hurt, her was stomach swollen, and squirming and crossing her legs were no longer providing any relief.

More static crackled over the speaker and she held her breath. "Our technicians are hard at work on getting our backup generator up and running, but we've hit a minor snag. We're now looking at about a thirty-minute delay."

Half an hour. She hugged her arms around her stomach and groaned.

He jiggled his coffee cup at her. "I promise I won't look."

She couldn't believe she was actually considering this. Peeing in a coffee cup in public. Not that anyone could see—save for Brendon—unless they had binoculars, but still.

Unfortunately, her bladder didn't care a whit about where she was. She sighed and snagged the cup from him, clutching it in her fist, staring down at the drops of coffee clinging to the wax-coated interior. Her bladder was stupid full; what if she peed too much? She had already had one disaster with a coffee cup overflowing today, and that was one disaster too many. Overflowing this cup would be catastrophic.

Swallowing down her mortification, she pinned Brendon with a hard stare. "Turn around and . . . talk. Loudly."

Loudly enough to drown out her peeing, please.

Brendon spun around, throwing one leg over the seat, straddling the bench, giving her his broad back. "Am I going to have to do something to embarrass myself? Even the playing field to make you feel better?"

She slid forward on the bench and reached under her skirt, tugging her underwear down. Just like sitting on a toilet . . . hopefully there weren't cameras on this damn ride. "Are you offering to whip it out and pee in front of me?"

He laughed. "I mean . . . would that actually make you feel better?"

"Doubtful."

“Thought so.”

“Hey. Brendon?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“You stopped talking.”

“Oh, right. Uh . . . did Darcy ever tell you about the time we went down to the Underground for an escape room?”

“I think she mentioned something about it?”

“It was a lot of fun, actually. We wound up . . .”

She tuned out his words, instead focusing on the deep cadence of his voice, her face flaming as she prepared to pee in this stupid coffee cup. It took her bladder a moment to get the memo that it was okay to relax. At the first echoey splash, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

His words faltered for a split second before he raised his voice, nearly shouting. “So yeah, it was fun. Solved a bunch of puzzles, and you should’ve seen the look on Darcy’s face when Elle . . .”

Her bladder breathed a sigh of relief, even as her head went dizzy with mortification. She’d actually done it. Peed in a coffee cup on top of a Ferris wheel. That was one item she could cross off her bucket list of unanticipated, humiliating acts she never wanted to repeat.

She wrinkled her nose at the cup and wiggled her underwear back up her thighs one-handed. “Brendon.”

He stopped talking. “Yeah?”

Her face burned. “Can I have the lid?”

“Oh.” He passed the flimsy plastic lid over his shoulder.

She snapped it on and then stared blandly at the cup in her hand. At least it was well insulated and opaque. No one would be the wiser as to its contents save for her and Brendon, which was bad enough.

“You can turn around now. I’m . . . done.”

At first, she thought she was imagining things, the lightness of her bladder throwing her off, making her feel like the gondola was moving. But no. Their cabin swayed, beginning a slow, smooth descent back down to Earth.

She clutched the cup in her fist and groaned when Brendon snorted, covering his laughter with a cough.

Thirty minutes, her ass.

Chapter Five

Brendon was 99 percent sure Annie's giant tote contained some sort of portal to another realm. How she crammed that much stuff inside one purse was a mystery, but she managed to withdraw a pair of earrings, several quarters, her passport, a tangled pair of earbuds, one of those ultra-flat flip-flops nail salons handed out, and a bottlecap, all before finally muttering a quick, "*Aha!*," Darcy's key jingling in her hand. "Let's pretend today never happened."

"Ah, come on. It wasn't—"

"Shh." She pressed a finger to her lips. "Let us never speak of this day again."

He chuckled. "It wasn't that bad. At least no worse than going to the hospital for emergency French fry removal after puking your guts up in front of the girl you have a crush on."

Annie shoved the key inside Darcy's door and paused, looking over her shoulder, her eyes wide.

"What?"

Her face flushed the prettiest shade of rose pink to match her skirt. "I just—I wasn't expecting you to come right out and say it."

"Was it a secret?" He laughed. "Worst-kept secret ever, then. I wasn't exactly covert." There were probably prehistoric cave drawings, hieroglyphs detailing his feelings for her. That was how obvious he had been. "Darcy still gives me grief about it to this day."

"You were cute. I was flattered."

He ducked his chin and gripped the back of his neck. "Cute, what every teenage boy aspires to be." He lifted his eyes and stepped closer, leaning against the door frame. Close enough to breathe in the fruitiness of Annie's coconut body lotion. His tongue curled against the back of his teeth, his mouth watering. Sunscreen and watermelon Jolly Ranchers, coconut and

sunshine—even in the dead of winter Annie had always smelled like summer. “I was delusional. You were so far out of my league.”

The corners of Annie’s mouth tightened when she swallowed, the smooth skin of her throat jerking, her lids fluttering as she stared up at him from beneath a fringe of dark lashes. “I don’t know about that.”

It was true. “You were beautiful and funny and my older sister’s cool, popular best friend.” All of which was still true. “And I could barely string a sentence together in front of you.”

She scoffed, her blue-green eyes bright as she rolled them to the ceiling. “I was not—”

“You *were*.” He dropped his hand, tucking both inside his front pockets so he wouldn’t revert to bad habits and fidget. He’d never known what to do with his hands around her. “And my idea of flirting was challenging you to a milkshake-drinking competition.”

Annie’s throaty chuckle made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, his heart rate ratcheting up like he’d run a mile at breakneck speed. “You might’ve missed the mark on that one.” Her tongue poked out between her lips as she lifted her hand, holding her fingers a smidge apart. “Just a little.”

He clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth, shaking his head. “I knew I screwed up somewhere.”

“I’m sure you know what you’re doing now.” She leaned her head back against the door, her blond waves cascading over her shoulders, the tips of her hair flirting with the swells of her breasts.

His mouth fell open as he stared at her.

“I mean . . .” Her eyes darted from side to side, pink creeping up the front of her throat. “You created a dating app, for Christ’s sake.” Her laugh was sharp, high-pitched. She scratched the side of her neck. “According to Darcy, you don’t have any trouble meeting women.”

Perhaps he didn’t have trouble meeting women, and maybe he knew how to talk to them without flailing his hands like a fool—most of the time—but he had yet to meet the *right* woman. Someone he clicked with. Someone who made his heart race and his palms sweat with a single smile.

Someone like Annie.

He’d had more fun playing tourist in his own city with her than he’d had on the last ten dates he’d been on. She made him laugh, and if the way

she had checked him out meant anything, he was positive the attraction was mutual.

His brows rose. "You and Darcy sure talk about me a lot."

"She cares about you." She shrugged and stared at his shoulder. "And I care about her."

What would it take to become someone Annie cared about? He wanted to find out everything there was to know about her, not just to prove her wrong about romance's being dead, but to satisfy his own burning curiosity.

What he'd told Margot this morning was no longer true. Not the whole truth, at least. This was no longer merely about a point of pride, the principle of the matter.

This *was* personal.

"I know you'd probably rather be spending time with Darcy, but I hope, in the meantime, I'm a suitable stand-in."

She smiled up at him. "More than suitable. I appreciate you showing me around. Today was fun." Her nose wrinkled. "Minus the mortification."

"Come on, we bonded, Annie."

"*Bonded?*" She laughed. "Okay."

"I told you I'd be happy to even the score. Humiliate myself somehow."

It was bound to happen at some point organically.

Her brows rose. "Promise?"

He held out his little finger. "*Pinky* promise."

"Ooh." She hooked her fingers around his and he held tight for a second longer than appropriate. "Serious stuff."

"Right up there with double-dog dares."

She snickered and dropped her hand, leaning her head against Darcy's door. The way she arched her back caused her cropped shirt to rise even higher, revealing a strip of smooth, golden skin. "I look forward to you following through."

She'd played into his hands perfectly.

"I always keep my promises. How's tomorrow work for you?"

Annie shot him a puzzled frown.

"Darcy's not back until Monday," he said.

"Right. I keep forgetting it's a holiday weekend. Tomorrow, then. As long as I'm not interfering with any plans you have."

He didn't have plans, but even if he had, Annie was only in town for two and a half weeks. The clock was ticking, the time to both prove his

point and explore the sparks between them—to see if there was something more than simple attraction at play—limited.

He refused to waste a single moment.

* * *

ANNIE (7:17 P.M.): You should've warned me your brother is even hotter in person.

Predictably, her phone rang two minutes later.

"You're disgusting," Darcy greeted her.

Annie threw herself down on Darcy's couch and laughed. "Hello to you, too. How's Vancouver?"

"Wonderful." She paused, muffled sounds filtering through the speaker. "Elle says hi. Now, don't change the subject."

"You're too easy. You realize that, right?" Darcy's mod, chrome-colored floor lamp cast shadows across the ceiling. Annie stretched her legs out, holding them up, tracing the shadows with her toes.

"Are you telling me you *don't* find my brother"—she gagged—"hotter in person?"

"No, no. I do. It's just, I bet if I'd have texted you, *Hey, what's up*, it would've taken you an hour to respond."

"We'll never know the answer to that now, will we?" Darcy sounded smug. "Besides, I called you earlier and you sent me to voicemail."

This was true. "I was a little preoccupied."

"It's fine. How was your first day in Seattle? See anything interesting?"

The way Brendon had looked at her had certainly been *interesting*, her own reactions even more so. But she wasn't about to confess that to Darcy. "As a matter of fact, I did. Your brother played tour guide."

A long pause followed. "He did, did he?"

"He did."

Darcy *hmm*ed quietly under her breath.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't *hmm* me. He took me to the Gum Wall and up on the Great Wheel. It was fun."

"Huh."

"What did I just say?"

"That was a *huh*, not a *hmm*. Phonetically worlds apart."

"Are you really going to condescend to me, of all people, about linguistic variants? Seriously?"

“I just think it’s interesting. That’s all.”

That’s all never meant that was *truly* all when it came from Darcy’s mouth. It was the equivalent of a comma. Better yet, an ellipsis. A pregnant pause.

Predictably, Darcy took a breath before launching in. “You spent the day with my brother and then you text me that he’s hotter in person.”

“To get your attention.”

“It worked.” Darcy huffed. “He had a crush on you, you know.”

“*Eight* years ago.”

“I think you’re underestimating Brendon’s ability to hold on to things.”

She laughed. “He’s persistent, I’ll give him that. But it was a *crush*. You’re acting like he was in love with me.” She rolled her eyes, finding this entire conversation ludicrous.

“You know how baby animals imprint? How attached they get?”

Annie palmed her face. “Your brother didn’t *imprint* on me. I’m getting shades of *Twilight* here. I refuse to be the funky CGI baby in this equation.”

Darcy snickered. “You were his first crush. He liked you for *years*.”

“And it’s been years since he last saw me. He doesn’t know me. Not beyond the basics.”

“You spent the day together.”

“It wasn’t that deep.”

“Did you have fun?”

“Yeah?”

Darcy *hmm*ed.

“You *hmm* me one more time and I’m hanging up on you.”

Darcy laughed. “Wouldn’t it be an interesting twist if after all these years, you wound up with my brother?”

Annie lifted the phone away from her ear and stared at the screen. “Okay, my caller ID says this is Darcy Lowell, but I’m not convinced. Who the hell are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“I’m not going to start spouting off about soul mates any time soon, but maybe Elle’s rubbed off on me. A little.”

“A little,” she repeated, reeling.

“Come on, Annie. If you married my brother, we’d be sisters. You could move to Seattle.”

Married? Sisters? Move to *Seattle*? The fuck? “Are you *drunk*?”

Darcy giggled. *Giggled*. “I am not entirely sober at the moment.”

In the background, Elle laughed.

“Okay. I’m going to let you go. Enjoy your night.”

“No, I’m not finished.”

Yeah, well, Annie was.

Elle sang into the receiver, “*Dum, dum, da dum.*”

Darcy lost it, laughing harder.

Annie palmed her face, her lips twitching. She was losing the battle, trying and failing not to laugh. “*Stop.* I’m not interested in your brother. I’m definitely not marrying him. Absolutely not.”

“‘Absolutely not’? What’s that supposed to mean? What’s wrong with my brother?”

Damned if she did, damned if she didn’t. “*Nothing* is wrong with your brother. I don’t *know* your brother.”

“What’s there to know? He’s successful. He owns his own company. He’s—”

“—and you think he’s hot,” Elle added, oh so helpfully.

Darcy did a poor job of muffling her laughter. “Brendon’s sweet—”

“—you think he’s *gorgeous*. You want to *kiss* him. You want to *bone* him—”

Darcy choked on her laughter.

“I do not.” Annie huffed. “No, I do *not* want to kiss him. I do *not* want to bone him. I do *not* like—”

“—him, Sam-I-Am.” Elle dissolved into riotous giggles.

“I don’t want to date anyone!” Annie blurted. “Okay? I have sworn off dating entirely.”

Elle’s laughter petered out. From the muffled whispers, Annie was pretty sure Darcy had covered the receiver. She bit her lip, tempted to shove her face in one of Darcy’s decorative pillows.

On the other end of the line, a door shut quietly. Darcy cleared her throat. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“You’re fine. I really should let you get back to your vacation. Back to Elle.”

“Elle’s fine,” Darcy said, brushing off Annie’s concerns. “Are *you*?”

She scoffed out a laugh. “Of course.”

“Annie.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Contrary to how my little outburst might make it seem, I really am fine. Promise.”

She was fine. Just fine.

Darcy sighed. “I know I’ve been . . . wrapped up in Elle—”

“As you should be.”

“But you’re my best friend. I should be better about reaching out.”

Annie bit down on the inside of her lip.

It was fine.

It was the natural course of things. Darcy had moved to Seattle. Annie lived on the opposite side of the country. Darcy was now happily coupled up with Elle. Annie was no longer the first person she called, the first person she texted, the first person she turned to.

Darcy was still Annie’s person, but Annie wasn’t hers.

It wasn’t bad. It was normal. Annie was happy for her. Darcy deserved to be happy, deserved to be with someone who loved her as much as Elle.

Yet, on a deeply irrational, shitty, never-would-she-in-a-million-years-admit-it-aloud level, it stung.

She didn’t begrudge Darcy her relationship. She just wished it didn’t feel like the whole world was moving on while she was stuck standing still. Ironic, seeing as she was the one in constant motion, bopping from city to city, bouncing from one destination to the next. All her friends were settling down or trying. And she used the word *friend* loosely. They were more like acquaintances at this point, because for most people it was out of sight, out of mind. Annie was out of sight more often than not these days, and her brunch invitations had suffered for it.

“You’ve sworn off dating?” Darcy asked.

Annie pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s not a *thing*. Just . . .” She shrugged even though Darcy couldn’t see her. “Just a lot of little disappointments that added up.”

Disappointments that made the thought of putting herself out there, baring her heart, completely unappealing.

“I’m burned out,” she added. “It’s not fun, you know? I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to be fun and it’s become the opposite.”

First dates had become something she dreaded more than trips to the dentist. At best, they were unromantic, more akin to job interviews than anything. At worst, they made her hope. And hope was a dangerous thing.

How many more times was she supposed to go on first dates where the other person expected her to jump into bed with them, to put out just because they bought her a drink?

How many more times was she supposed to shrug and cut her losses when people didn't want to put up with long distance, her job making it hard to nail down plans?

How many times was she supposed to ease into a new relationship, only to stare at her phone, waiting, wondering if she'd ever get a text back?

She'd been ghosted, roached, benched—if there was a dating term for it, she'd experienced it firsthand.

The last guy she'd dated had been the straw that broke the camel's back. After two months of dating, she'd been certain things between them were going well. Ryker was nice, a little stiff, but he occasionally made her laugh. He wasn't allergic to texting her back and he could successfully get her off. All points in his favor. Then she'd gone out of town for a two-week business trip and, upon returning, discovered they were less exclusive than she'd assumed when he told her he couldn't do dinner because he had plans with someone else. A date with someone else. It was her fault for assuming, but he'd made her feel stupid about it. He'd *laughed* when she'd admitted she hadn't known he was seeing other people.

She was tired. She was *done*.

Sparks didn't mean shit. And butterflies? Buzzards circling overhead was far more apt.

The next person she dated, if and when she decided to put herself out there, would be a safe, reliable choice. She didn't need sparks; she wanted . . . stability. Steadiness. Someone with a mind like a Trapper Keeper. Maybe that sounded boring, but she was tired of investing herself in people who didn't invest in her, butterflies be damned.

Darcy cleared her throat. "You said you had fun with Brendon."

She had. "It wasn't a date, Darcy."

Yes, she'd had fun.

And it was true, Brendon was gorgeous in a way that had totally taken her by surprise.

But that was it.

A fun day with a funny, attractive guy.

It didn't change the fact that she wasn't looking for love. Not with anyone; certainly not with her best friend's baby brother who didn't know her. If he still liked her, it was only because he had some false idea of her inside his head, because he'd put her on a pedestal. If she gave him the chance, if she let him get to know her, he'd move on to greener pastures.

Everyone always did.

It didn't change the fact that in two weeks she'd be back in Philadelphia, there for a short stint to finish packing up her apartment.

It didn't change the fact that soon she'd be in London, half a world away.

Whatever attraction there was?

It didn't change anything.

Pretending otherwise would be silly.

But she couldn't say that over the phone. Two more days and she could tell Darcy in person, but not now.

"Okay," Darcy said. "I just . . . I care about you. And I care about my brother."

Another reason why her attraction to Brendon didn't change a thing.

He was Darcy's brother. And Darcy meant too much to her to risk their friendship over the potential of something more transpiring between her and Brendon. Transpiring and, inevitably, fizzling.

"Brendon makes a very cute tour guide." A fine—*very* fine—distraction until Darcy returned from vacation. Good company so she wasn't stuck exploring on her own. "But that's it."

Chapter Six

Sunday, May 30

BRENDON (12:19 P.M.): Hey! Are we still on for today?

Annie sipped the Starbucks cinnamon dolce latte she'd purchased around the corner from Darcy's apartment and hovered her thumb over her keyboard, remembering what she'd told Darcy on the phone.

Brendon makes a very cute tour guide. But that's it.

Whatever Darcy thought was going on? She was wrong. Brendon was showing her around Seattle. He was being friendly. So what if he'd gone from adorable, gangly teenager to broad shouldered and gorgeous? So what if he was wicked funny and made her laugh? It didn't mean anything that his smiles—and dimples—made her tingle. Utterly irrelevant.

ANNIE (12:27 P.M.): Sure. What time?

BRENDON (12:31 P.M.): If I swing by at 5, does that work?

She tipped her cup back, draining the dregs of her latte. That was nearly five hours from now. Breakfast had consisted of leftover pastries. She'd have to track down some real food for lunch, because Darcy's refrigerator was empty save for a bottle of pinot grigio and a box of Go-Gurt she'd bet belonged to Elle.

ANNIE (12:34 P.M.): Works for me ☺

ANNIE (12:36 P.M.): Where are we going?

BRENDON (12:37 P.M.): ☹

A secret. Interesting.

BRENDON (12:38 P.M.): Bring a jacket. Temps are dropping into the low sixties tonight.

They'd be outside. Not much of a hint. It was summer, or as good as, and most landmarks were outdoors. He could be taking her anywhere. The Space Needle. The . . . okay, that was the only guess she had. There was the market and Microsoft and Mount Rainier, and according to Darcy, the city's culture was eclectic. Actually, the word she'd used was *weird*, but in the past couple of months *weird* had earned the addition of *wonderfully*, so Annie had read between the lines.

ANNIE (12:39 P.M.): Will do!

His determination to prove to her that romance wasn't dead lingered in the back of her mind. Yesterday he might've dropped a few comments about love and romance into their conversations, but nothing so overt that she felt as if he'd actually tried. She couldn't help but wonder what sort of ace he had up his sleeve.

ANNIE (12:40 P.M.): Are you sure I can't get a teeny hint?

BRENDON (12:46 P.M.): 😊

* * *

At 4:55, there was a knock at the door.

"Coming!"

She stole one last sip of wine from the glass she'd been nursing over the past half hour and opened the door.

She immediately zeroed in on the bouquet of pink roses clutched in Brendon's left hand. There were at least two dozen, their stems long and tied off with a grosgrain ribbon the same color as the blooms.

Her eyes darted between the bouquet and Brendon's crinkle-eyed grin.

"Hi." He dimpled, offering her the flowers. "These are for you."

His fingers brushed hers as she took the roses from him, pleased to note there weren't any thorns to contend with, though the bouquet was heavier than she'd expected. She choked up on the stems when the bouquet wobbled, teetering to the side.

She walked backward, waving him inside. Hopefully Darcy had a vase tucked away somewhere. "They're beautiful, Brendon. Thank you."

Truth be told, she found roses overrated—not to mention their aroma funky—but she wasn't about to tell him that because the gesture was sweet. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had bought her flowers.

He shut the door behind her, following her into the kitchen, where he went straight for the cabinet beside the sink and grabbed a crystal vase from the top shelf. He turned on the tap, filling it with several inches of water. “I wasn’t sure whether you’d prefer pink or red.”

“Pink’s my favorite color.”

Brendon beamed at her. “You ready to head out?”

“Still won’t tell me where we’re going?” She grabbed her jacket off the bar and slipped it over her arms, tying the belt around her waist. Beneath it, she had on a pair of black cigarette trousers and a striped boatneck tee, her flats sensible in case they had a far walk ahead of them.

Brendon was dressed in what she’d begun to think of as Pacific Northwestern attire. Jeans, a navy dress shirt unbuttoned over a tee that read *Beam Me Up, Scotty*, a pair of brown leather boots, and a black North Face rain jacket she’d seen on so many people she was pretty sure they handed them out when you moved to town. Her light pink trench stuck out like a sore thumb.

He pretended to lock his lips and throw away the key. She had to hand it to his commitment to keep her in the dark.

“Let’s go,” she said.

* * *

Without any rain in the forecast, Brendon suggested they walk.

At the corner of Queen Anne Avenue North and Denny Way, Annie asked, “Still won’t tell me where we’re headed?”

He pointed across the street.

She frowned at the nondescript bar he was pointing at.

“You don’t see the sign?” He led her across the street, one hand resting lightly on the small of her back. “*Look.*”

A sandwich-board sign set outside the bar read, *Hey, all you Whitney Wannabes and Halsey Hopefuls. Show off your singing skills at karaoke every Saturday and Sunday from six to close.*

“Got to love the alliteration,” she joked, backing away slowly. The color drained from her face as she jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Funny joke, Brendon. Want to tell me where we’re actually going?”

“Not a joke.”

“Karaoke? Getting up onstage and blustering my way through a song in front of a bunch of strangers?” She shuddered. “Hard pass. I don’t sing.”

“And I’m not asking you to. Do you remember the promise I made you yesterday? I think the exact words I used were *humiliate myself*.”

The hallmark of almost all his favorite romantic comedies was a musical number, and nine times out of ten, its purpose wasn’t to impress. It was to *woo*.

Patrick running from the security guards while singing on the bleachers in *10 Things I Hate About You*.

Lloyd holding the boom box playing “In Your Eyes” by Peter Gabriel over his head in *Say Anything*.

Robbie strumming his guitar as he walked down the aisle of the airplane, serenading Julia in *The Wedding Singer*.

Annie wasn’t the only one who couldn’t sing. Public speaking was one thing. He could work a crowd. But carry a tune? Stay on pitch? He had no ear for music. He couldn’t even hum on key. Hell, when he was in college, the RA had posted a sign on the bathroom door telling the whole dorm that, in addition to jacking off in the communal shower, singing there was strictly prohibited. He knew who that sign had been meant for, his proclivity for belting out the chorus to Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep” during his early morning showers no secret.

Humiliate himself was right. But in the movies, no one cared if you sucked, because it wasn’t about talent or technical skill. It was about effort, enthusiasm. About doing the unexpected.

Her eyes were bright and her smile broad. “I didn’t think you were serious.”

“I told you I always keep my promises.” *All* his promises. “Ready to go watch me humiliate myself in front of a room full of strangers?”

Annie barked out a laugh. “Do you even have to ask?”

The inside of the bar was delightfully kitschy. The booths were decorated like huts. Palm trees in brightly colored ceramic planters, strings of neon lights, and tiki statues were scattered about on most surfaces. Hibiscus flowers, plumeria, and birds of paradise covered tables and swayed from the ceiling.

“Welcome to Hualani’s,” the hostess greeted them, reaching for the stack of menus. “Two?”

Annie's head swiveled, taking in the Polynesian tiki bar theme. "Could we get a table near the front?"

The waitress nodded and led them through a winding maze of tables all the way to the front of the bar, smack-dab in front of the stage. "Your waitress will be with you shortly."

Annie slid her arms out of her jacket and tossed it over the back of her chair. Her shirt slipped, revealing the curve of her shoulder and the black strap of her bra. She adjusted the neck of her shirt, studying her menu, none the wiser that he suddenly felt like a thirteen-year-old again, getting his first glimpse of a woman's undergarments.

He tugged at his collar, eyes flitting between the laminated pages of his menu, the stage, and Annie.

A waitress appeared, pen and pad in hand. "Can I get you something to drink?"

He gestured for Annie to go first.

"Can I get a piña colada?"

The waitress nodded and scribbled the order on the pad. "And for you?"

Straight rum, maybe? Despite his blustering, he was going to need liquid courage to get through this. He skimmed the drink list, searching for something strong. "How big is the Late Night Buddha Call bowl?"

The waitress made a circle with her hands, her fingers nowhere close to touching. "Big."

Perfect. "Yeah, I'll have one of those."

"Do you know what you want to eat, or should I give you a minute?"

Annie folded her menu shut. "I'll have the Hula Burger."

His appetite had deserted him, his stomach a riot of nerves. "I'll have the same."

Once their waitress disappeared, Annie pointed to the edge of the stage, where a guy wearing a neon-orange floral-print shirt had a computer open and hooked up to the sound system. "I think that's where you put your name down."

He pushed his chair back and stood. "Be right back."

"Hey, man," the guy at the computer greeted him as he approached.

Brendon wiped his hands on his jeans and dipped his chin. "Is this where you sign up for karaoke?"

"Sure is. Got a song in mind?" The guy plopped a fat binder down in front of him. The vinyl cover was peeling, well-worn. "We've got this in

case you need any inspo.”

Brendon shoved his hands inside his pockets so they wouldn't shake. “You wouldn't happen to know any songs without high notes, would you?” He grimaced. “Low notes, either?”

“So, no notes?” The guy smirked.

Was that really too much to ask? Brendon sighed. “I'll, uh, peruse this. I guess.”

He glanced over his shoulder. Annie was watching him from their table, a soft smile playing at the edges of her mouth. She lifted her piña colada into the air, saluting him.

He turned back around and flipped through the book, eyes widening. “Annie's Song” by John Denver.

He could take a crack at that.

He turned the binder around and jabbed his finger at the page. “This one.”

The guy stared at him, one pierced brow rising slowly. “You sure about that?”

“Yeah?”

The guy chuckled and scratched his cheek. “Your funeral, dude.” The guy spun his pencil between his fingers. “Name?”

“Brendon.”

The guy set his clipboard aside and turned his attention to his computer screen. “All right, Brandon.”

“Brendon.”

The guy stared at him. “*Right*. I'll call you up when it's your turn. Got a few folks in front of you.”

Brendon returned to the table, pep in his step.

Annie smiled around her straw and nodded at his fishbowl drink, which was served in a hollowed-out coconut. “Cheers?”

He hefted his in the air, knocking it gently against the rim of her far daintier glass, trying not to slosh any of his precious rum and mango juice. He took a sip through the decorative, bright green silly straw and coughed. *Holy shit*. He pulled a face, eyes scrunching shut at the shock of rum that hit the back of his throat, burning hot and sweet.

“I have one request and one request only. No recording,” he warned, pointing at Annie's phone when he set his drink down, careful not to splash.

“Come on. Not even for . . .” She pinched her lips together. “Not even for posterity’s sake?”

“You mean so you can forward the video to my sister.”

She shut one eye and wrinkled her nose. “Guilty.”

The waitress swung by, dropping off their food.

They reached for the ketchup at the same time, fingers brushing. He nudged the bottle closer to her and she smiled before covering her fries.

“I wanted to ask this the other day, but how did you even get into your line of work?”

“Human resources?” she asked, passing him the bottle.

He squirted his ketchup in a neat mound beside his fries. “Human resources, *international* human resources. How’d you go from wanting to be Carson Daly—”

She laughed. “A video jockey!”

“A video jockey,” he said. “To HR. That’s a . . . leap.”

Annie chewed slowly on a fry, swallowing it down before speaking. “The whole VJ thing was a childhood dream. It wasn’t serious. I like music and I spent way too much time watching MTV because my parents weren’t around much. I was kind of a . . . latchkey kid, I guess? Raised on TV and microwave dinners.” She laughed. “As for human resources . . .” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know. In college, I majored in linguistics and cross-cultural communications and minored in French. I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to teach or get a job in Greece to be closer to my parents since I knew their plan was to move back, so I went to the job fair for inspiration. As one does.”

He lifted his burger and nodded for her to go on.

“Brockman and Brady had a booth, and the representatives from the company liked that I had a strong background in linguistics and could speak Greek and French, but suggested I spend the summer completing Temple’s certificate program for corporate social responsibility if I was interested in applying for a job with them. So, I did. I thought working on international mergers and acquisitions would be a great opportunity to see the world.”

“Sensing a *but* here.”

“*But*”—she laughed wryly—“it’s like I said the other night. It’s not what I thought it would be. I hardly get to explore the cities I travel to and I hardly have anyone to explore them with. It gets a tad . . . lonely?” She frowned. “And my job barely has anything to do with any of the languages I

know aside from the rare instance where I need to translate a comment here or there.”

He couldn't help but feel like Annie didn't really like what she did. “So if you weren't working in HR or becoming the next Carson Daly”—that got her to crack a smile—“what would you be doing? Any job you could have. Not your childhood dream, but today's dream. Right here, right now.”

She plucked another fry from her basket and shoved it into her mouth. “I don't think I'm cut out for teaching. I'm not patient enough.” She grabbed her drink and took a slow sip. “But something to do with language. Translation, most likely. I just . . . I *love* the nuances of language and all their quirks. Like how certain words exist in foreign languages and have no direct English equivalent. *Meraki* in Greek means, basically, to do something with love, but there's no English word for it. The closest is ‘labor of love,’ but that sounds like you're being put-upon. *Meraki* means to do something with pleasure, to pour your whole heart into a task or craft. Like putting all your love into a meal or a gift.” She ducked her chin and shrugged. “So, yeah. Translation would be my dream job. Puzzling out how to keep the text true even when it's not easy. There's a cultural component you can't ignore without”—her lips curved—“losing something in translation.”

The way Annie's eyes lit up filled his chest with—he had no word for it. It was warm and light and also heavy at the same time, because she should be doing that. Something that lit her up inside. Something she was passionate about, her words coming quicker the longer she spoke. “That sounds like more of an art than a science.”

Annie beamed at him. “It is. It's cool that you think so, too.”

Sticky feedback filled the air, followed by a jarring tap against a microphone. The guy who'd given him grief over his choice of song stood on the stage, clipboard in hand. “All right, folks. Welcome to karaoke. First up, we've got Billy singing ‘I Touch Myself’ by the Divinyls. Come on up, Billy. Let's all give him a warm round of applause.”

“I Touch Myself”? Seriously? And the dude was giving Brendon shit about a ballad?

“I wish I had a knack for languages,” he confessed, returning to their conversation.

“Back in college, I wished *I* had a knack for numbers.” She made a face, sticking out her tongue. “I hated calculus. I passed that class by the skin of

my teeth, and because of your sister. She tutored me for *hours*. I'm talking she laminated my notes and stuck them on our shower wall. She was mortified when I got a B on the final."

Billy was currently getting into the song, one hand sliding down his belly as he crooned the lyrics. Brendon had to hand it to him. He was enthusiastic, that was for sure.

"I like numbers," he said. "Zeros and ones, mostly."

"That's a coding joke, right?"

He scratched his eyebrow, wincing. "A bad one."

Her lips twitched. "A binary one."

"See? You know what you're talking about."

"Barely." Her lips twitched and she popped two fries into her mouth at once. She chewed, then said, "The extent of my coding knowledge was how to personalize my Myspace theme."

He shuddered, having a violent flashback to 2005.

Onstage, Billy grabbed his crotch and gave a power thrust as the song ended.

Annie laughed. "That's going to be a tough act to follow."

His heart clawed its way up his throat, nerves ratcheting as the guy with the clipboard took the stage. Brendon sighed in relief when his name wasn't called.

She looked at his fries. "Are you going to finish those?"

He grinned and slid them toward her. "So, translation, huh? Not something to do with travel?"

She took a bite before answering. "I like traveling, I just wish I didn't have to do it so often. *Have to* being the operative words. Living out of a suitcase gets old after a while. Sometimes I wish I could get a . . . I don't know. A plant."

His brows rose. "A plant?"

"A plant." She nodded, wiping her fingers on her napkin. "I wish I could get a pet, but that's wishful thinking. One day I could see getting a fish or a cat, but I think maybe I'll start with something hard to kill, like a succulent, and work my way up to something finnick, like"—she fingered the petals of the arrangement on the table—"an orchid, maybe. Your sister has a ficus. It seems . . . hardy."

He laughed. "Did Darcy tell you about the cilantro bush she gave Elle?"

Annie's face brightened. "You mean their love fern?"

He opened his mouth, the words dying in the back of his throat when the guy with the clipboard tapped his microphone. “All right. Great job. Let’s make some more noise for Anjani.” He clapped his hands. “And up next we’ve got . . . Brandon.”

Brendon sighed at the flub and stood.

It was time to face the music.

“Good luck?” Annie offered, a huge grin overtaking her face. She was enjoying this too much.

And that was fine. She had no idea he was about to totally blow her away with the best performance of his life.

Fingers crossed.

He took one final fortifying sip of his drink before standing and wiping his palms on his pants. He made his way up the stairs to the stage on shaky legs, reaching for and gripping the microphone stand, mostly for stability. He stared off into the audience. The lights up here were bright, too bright to see much of anything. Faces stared back at him, expressions washed out. Brendon blinked and found Annie in the crowd as the lights dimmed. She had her lips pressed together, her blue eyes shining across the restaurant as she beamed at him.

His chest loosened further. He could do this. He could totally do this.

He lifted the microphone to his lips and took a deep breath, eyes locked on the screen, waiting for the lyrics to scroll across. Ready to—

This wasn’t “Annie’s Song.” He strangled the microphone, static filling his head as the countdown-style opening to “Annie Mae” by Warren G played over the sound system.

Fucking dude with the clipboard. Brendon shot a frantic glance at the bastard, frowning when the guy circled his hand in the air, telling Brendon to get on with it. Someone in the back of the bar booed.

He could walk offstage and return to the table with his tail tucked between his legs, or . . .

He could go for it. All in. Go big or go home.

Dizzy and sweating beneath the stage lights, Brendon opened his mouth and then—he was pretty sure he’d blacked out, because everyone in the bar was on their feet and they were—clapping? For him? On what planet?

He searched out Annie’s face in the crowd. Tears streamed down her flushed cheeks, her shoulders shaking with laughter. She shoved her fingers in her mouth and wolf-whistled across the bar.

Chapter Seven

Brendon leaned against the wall as Annie fished around in the depths of her purse, fingers catching on a gum wrapper, a zipper, something fuzzy, a tube of her favorite bright pink lipstick she'd thought she'd lost last month, and *aha!* Darcy's key. She turned and smiled. His blush seemed permanent at this point, and there was something utterly charming about how he could go from opinionated and bold to bashful in the blink of an eye.

He ducked his chin and gripped the back of his neck, laughing softly beneath his breath. "Tonight was . . . not at all what I had planned."

She'd given up trying not to laugh early in the evening. Her stomach ached and her cheeks were sore from smiling more in one night than she had in weeks. "You mean it wasn't your plan all along to dedicate a nineties rap song to me?"

"It was supposed to be a John Denver song," he said for the umpteenth time before burying his face in his hands.

Poor Brendon. She reached up, setting a hand on his shoulder. "It was definitely a first for me. No one's ever serenaded me before."

He cracked open his eyes, staring at her dubiously. "No one's ever serenaded you so poorly, you mean."

She shook her head. No one had ever dedicated a song to her or written her a poem—hell, no one had even recited one.

His teeth scraped against his bottom lip, drawing her eye to his mouth.

"I think you've been dating the wrong people." His tone was breezy, but his steady gaze screamed sincerity.

Her heartbeat faltered, then tripped over itself in its haste to climb into her throat.

Maybe it was true and he was right. Maybe she had been dating the wrong people, but that didn't mean she was interested in putting herself out there over and over again, praying to stumble across the right person.

And despite the fact Brendon was attractive and made her laugh and her pulse race, this wasn't a date. Even if she completely lost her mind and decided to throw caution to the wind, be reckless, risk her heart, there simply wasn't enough time.

It was pointless, hopeless. Asking for trouble.

She squared her shoulders. "I had fun tonight."

He bobbed his head, his smile adorably crooked. "So did I."

Her chest twinged at how unexpectedly difficult this was. There was a fuzzy disconnect between her brain and her body, between what was smart and what felt right. She needed to step back, but she couldn't bring herself to do it, to put the necessary distance between them and clear her head.

Brendon stepped forward, but not so close she felt boxed in. Just close enough that she could smell the butterscotch candy she'd offered him after dinner each time he exhaled, the fresh laundry detergent scent clinging to his clothes. Just close enough that she wanted him closer. "Tell me you don't feel *something* here." The crests of his cheeks turned an endearing shade of pink. "Tell me you don't feel—feel *sparks*."

His tongue darted out, wetting his lips before his upper teeth sank into his bottom lip, and he watched her with raised brows.

"I—" Her voice cracked. She couldn't do it. She couldn't *lie*. Not when he was looking at her like he could see inside her head. Like he already knew. "If I do?"

She pressed her lips together, a hot flush creeping up her neck and around her jaw when he reached out, sliding his hand through the strands of her hair. His fingers felt slightly cool as he tucked her hair back, her skin undoubtedly red, her blush crawling up her temples and spreading across her cheeks.

Cradling her head in his hand, Brendon swept his thumb out, tracing the curve of her cheek, the skin beneath her eye. His other hand trembled when he rested his hand on the curve of her waist.

Her breath quickened, her chest rising and falling, unable to so much as blink. What the fuck was happening and why, *why* wasn't she stopping it?

He leaned down and closed the distance between their faces until the tip of his nose brushed hers, barely touching, even then, giving her an out.

An out she should've taken.

An out she didn't want to take.

She held so still she practically vibrated as Brendon's lips parted and he angled his head, sliding his nose against hers once, twice, drawing it out, pure torture. Her pulse pounded harder, so hard he could probably feel it against the side of his hand, her chest rising and falling against his as she arched into him further.

Brendon's mouth came crashing down against hers.

She'd watched enough movies, listened to enough of her friends moon over *magical* kisses. She'd rolled her eyes at descriptions of toes curling and breaths being snatched, of *drowning* in someone, that made it sound like a great time. Of hearts galloping like the hooves of a hundred wild horses and colors flashing prismaticly behind closed lids. She'd laughed at how two people pressing their mouths together could *ever* be described with the sort of near-orgasmic passion that usually required she have her pants off.

She could say with certainty she'd had plenty of nice kisses in her life—a few god-awful ones, too—but nothing that lived up to the hype. Kisses, usually, were perfunctory. What you did before you got to the good stuff.

But kissing Brendon? This was a revelation. All those clichés? They didn't hold a candle to the way his lips turned her body into a living, breathing live wire of sensation.

His tongue snaked out, flirting with the tip of hers, and—*holy fuck*. She fisted his shirt, pulling him closer, before sliding her hand around the back of his neck and tangling her fingers in his short hair, tugging hard like a tiny part of her had wanted to do since their first dinner.

He hissed into her mouth and dragged his palm up her waist, dancing his fingers along the ladder of her ribs and over, skimming the thin skin of her inner elbow, her forearm. His fingers wrapped around her wrist, her pulse fluttering wildly inside her veins as he tangled their fingers together and pinned her hand against the door beside her head, a move that made her back bow.

He tore his mouth from hers and pressed his lips to the curve of her jaw. Her breath caught in the back of her throat when his teeth grazed a particularly sensitive spot on her neck, and she raked her nails over his scalp, hiking her thigh up his hip, her heel pressing into the back of his leg.

"*Annie.*" He panted against her throat, the gravel of his voice making her whimper.

Down the hall, a door slammed, the reverberation of wood on wood making her pulse leap.

Brendon chuckled quietly against her throat and pressed one last kiss to the hinge of her jaw. “Wow.”

“Uh-huh,” she said dumbly, having passed discombobulated at the first brush of their mouths. Air gusted from between her tender lips as she struggled to catch her breath.

She didn’t do this, lose herself in kisses to the point where everything else faded away and she forgot where she was. *Who* she was. Who she was kissing.

She screwed her eyes shut. “This was a bad idea.”

His breaths were almost as noisy as hers, the only sound that filled the hall before he cleared his throat. “Annie.”

She cracked open her eyes.

“It sure felt like a fantastic idea to me.” His smile was infuriatingly smug, like he was confident he could convince her this was a good idea. As if it were simple.

She wasn’t sure whether she wanted to kiss the smile off his face or smack him.

“I’m not the person you want me to be. I—we’re not looking for the same things.”

His mouth turned down at the corners. “You’re telling me you’ve never stumbled across something great? Maybe you weren’t looking for it, but it turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to you? Don’t you think that’s possible? That sometimes we just get lucky?”

For some people, maybe.

But in her experience, if something seemed too good to be true, usually it was.

Everything he’d said sounded dreamy, but she’d been disappointed too many times to let her feelings get the better of her when she knew this wasn’t smart. She knew better. “Even if any of that were true, I don’t live here.”

The most damning argument of all.

Brendon’s throat jerked before he gave a quiet laugh. “What’s three thousand miles?”

Everything?

His determination was as sweet as it was bound to be short-lived. No one she'd ever dated had been able to handle her traveling two weeks out of the month. And it wasn't just three thousand miles.

"Brendon." She lifted her hand to rest it against her breastbone, fingers splayed against the front of her throat. Her pulse pounded in her neck, her heart still hammering away. "It's a lot more than that."

His shoulders rose and fell, just jerky enough to show that he didn't feel as nonchalant about this as he was pretending to be. He bobbed his head. "I know your job—"

She shook her head. "You don't know." She hadn't wanted to do this, talk about this, but she had no choice. "I'm moving. To London. There was a promotion and I—I start in July."

He opened and shut his mouth, clearly at a loss for words.

Her stomach soured. "I really hope you find what you're looking for. But I'm not it." She reached back, her fingers curling around the doorknob. "Please don't tell Darcy. I want to tell her in person."

Then she slipped inside the apartment and shut the door, the crestfallen expression on his face more than she could stomach.

Chapter Eight

Monday, May 31

The sudden scrape of the dead bolt caused Annie to jerk her head in the direction of the front door. For a split second, her whole body froze, save for the rapid pitter-patter of her heart. *Someone* was at the door. Then the time and place caught up with her.

Darcy was home.

Annie vaulted over the arm of the couch, stumbling on the slightly curled edge of the rug in her haste to make it to the front door. She righted herself against the wall, cringing when her bare toes bumped Darcy's entry table. *Ouch*.

The pain in her foot was all but forgotten when the door opened and a slightly windswept-looking Darcy wheeled her suitcase over the threshold.

"*Oof*." Darcy froze with her arms at her sides when Annie launched herself at her. She laughed sharply and returned the hug, squeezing Annie back just as tight, so tight Annie ached. But then the ugly, melancholic pressure in her chest let up, because Darcy was *here*.

She buried her face in Darcy's shoulder and inhaled the crisp, clean lavender and bergamot scent of Darcy's shampoo. "I missed you."

For a split second, she felt like a total loser, getting choked up after sniffing her best friend's hair, but when she drew back—Darcy's strong hold, while totally appreciated, made it hard for Annie's lungs to function—Darcy's eyes were glassy and her lips were pursed tight, like she was trying not to cry.

Darcy sniffed and tossed her head, flipping her long, coppery hair over her shoulder. "Thirteen months is entirely too long to go without seeing each other." She lifted her chin up in the air. "*Too long*. This is my official complaint on the matter. Visit me sooner, next time."

“I’m not the only one who can hop on a plane, you know.”

Or call, or text, or FaceTime first.

Darcy’s smile slipped, a line appearing between her expertly arched brows. “Annie—”

“I’m teasing,” she blurted, pasting on a smile to soften the bite of her earlier words. “I know you’ve been busy.”

Darcy had had a whirlwind of a year. Packing up her life in Philadelphia, starting over in Seattle. Working her way up the ranks at her new job. Meeting Elle.

Elle had changed Darcy’s life for the better, so Annie wasn’t about to begrudge her best friend’s being busy. Her being happy.

Annie just wished she’d call sometimes instead of Annie’s being the one to initiate nine times out of ten. That was all.

“Busy with *Elle*,” she added, bumping Darcy’s hip with hers.

A hint of color rose to the surface of Darcy’s cheeks. Oh, she had it *bad*.

Darcy cleared her throat. “I—well.” She dropped her head and laughed, pressing her palm to her forehead. “Yeah.”

Annie’s smiled widened. “Oh my God. You’re *smitten*.”

Darcy scoffed. “I hate that word.” She lifted her eyes, one brow ticking higher. “That’s *Brendon*’s word.”

Annie curled her toes in the plush carpet and shrugged. Brendon didn’t own a word. So, maybe it had rubbed off on her. Big whoop. “It’s fitting.”

Darcy made a soft, curious *hmm*, her brown eyes flitting over Annie’s face.

She fought against the squirmy urge to blurt out that she’d kissed Darcy’s brother. Unnecessary information. Irrelevant. *Moving on*.

“How was Vancouver?” She wrapped her hand around Darcy’s wrist and tugged her across the room, stopping when they reached the couch. She took a seat, tucking her legs under her. “Come on, spill.”

Darcy joined her, leaning back and crossing her legs demurely at the ankle. “Beautiful. We had a lot of fun exploring. Elle wanted to go see the H. R. MacMillan Space Centre, which is an astronomy museum. They have an observatory and”—she chuckled—“the *Cosmic Courtyard*. They do live demonstrations and you can touch one of the only five touchable moon rocks on the planet. It’s mostly for kids, field trips, that sort of thing, but you should’ve seen Elle’s face.”

Darcy should've seen her own face. When she talked about Elle, her eyes turned soft and her mouth curled fondly, her voice taking on this incredibly sweet tone Annie had never heard from her before.

She shoved Darcy lightly. "You're in *love*."

"Yeah, yeah." Darcy reached inside her pocket and withdrew her phone. She swiped at the screen and turned it toward Annie. "They had a photo op. Elle made me."

On the screen was a picture of Elle and Darcy with their faces poking through the helmets of two astronaut suits.

Annie chortled. "Looks like you had a good time."

Darcy tucked her phone away and nodded. "I think you'd like it, especially Gastown. Lots of cute boutiques and unique bars, plus there's a giant steam-powered clock smack-dab in the middle of the district."

"Sounds funky."

"Right up your alley," Darcy teased, eyes dipping and brows rising shortly after. "Nice muumuu, by the way."

"Excuse you, this is a caftan." Annie *loved* this caftan. She prioritized comfort when she lounged; sue her.

"I didn't mean anything by it. It's perfectly lovely." Darcy's lips twitched. "And I'm pretty sure my grandmother owned one just like it."

Annie rolled her eyes and hauled one of Darcy's decorative pillows onto her lap. "Enough about my caftan. Back to Elle and your first vacation together. This *was* your first vacation with Elle, right?"

"Mm-hmm."

"And you didn't want to kill each other by the end of it. Kudos."

Darcy's lips tipped up before pressing tightly together, her throat jerking hard, her gulp audible.

"You *didn't* want to kill each other by the end of it, right?"

Darcy gave a curt shake of her head and ran her fingers through her hair. "No. The opposite, actually." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to ask Elle to move in with me."

Annie's eyes widened. "Wow."

Moving in together.

Darcy was about to merge her stuff, her apartment, her world, with Elle's.

Then it would only be a matter of time before they'd get married, because deep down, Darcy was *all* about the proverbial white picket fence.

Before long, Annie would be in London and Darcy . . . Darcy wouldn't have room in her new life for a friend who lived halfway around the world.

"We've been together six months. Almost seven," Darcy said, a touch defensive.

Annie held up her hands. "I think it's great! I just wasn't expecting it. I'm really happy for you."

She refused to let the bittersweet ache in her chest put a damper on Darcy's mood, because if anyone deserved to be happy, it was Darcy.

"Thanks." Darcy sniffed and smiled. "But enough about me. How have you been?"

Her back teeth clenched together. "Great! I've been super."

Darcy blinked at her, looking startled. "Okay? I . . ." She huffed out a quiet laugh. "Gosh, where were you last? Berlin? Paris?"

Annie pressed her lips together. "London, actually." No better time to tell Darcy the news than the present. She swallowed over the steadily growing lump in her throat and jumped up from the couch. Or she could wait. "But speaking of Germany . . ." She darted over to where her purse rested on the chair across the room. "I've got something for you. It's not much."

Darcy leaned forward, propping her elbows on her knees. "You didn't need to get me anything."

No, but she'd wanted to.

Annie wrapped her fingers around the package and carried it over to the couch. "I saw it in the window of this little shop in Nuremberg and I immediately thought of you."

Tearing delicately at the wrapping paper, Darcy gasped softly when the present was revealed. "It's beautiful."

"The object is to move the ball through the maze of gears and corridors. It's a puzzle, but it's pretty enough to be kept out."

Darcy smoothed her hand over the laser-cut wooden maze featuring intricate mechanics Annie knew would appeal to her analytical side. "I love it. It looks like a piece of art."

Annie smiled and silently patted herself on the back for a job well done. She prided herself on being stellar at gift giving and she was proud to say she'd outdone herself.

"Do you mind if we just order in?" Darcy asked. "I'm kind of beat and I want to hear more about what you've been up to."

“Sure, works for me.” Minus the talking-about-herself bit.

Darcy cocked her head. “So.”

Annie bit down on the tip of her tongue and smiled.

“You’re acting weird.” Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “You’re quiet. You’re never quiet.”

She scoffed. “I can be quiet. Maybe I’m tired.”

Darcy’s brows rose. “*Are* you tired?”

No, but that was beside the point. “I wouldn’t mind a cup of coffee. Your espresso maker hates me.”

“Annie.” Darcy stared at her and she stared right back. Darcy caved first, rolling her eyes. “What did you do yesterday?”

Kissed your brother. Annie swallowed thickly and gave a noncommittal shrug. “I went for a long run. I saw the, um, sculpture park?”

Darcy nodded for her to go on.

Annie scratched the side of her neck, her skin suddenly itchy, tight. “Then Brendon swung by and we went to—well, it’s a funny story.”

Darcy’s brows rose again. “Okay . . . I’m all ears.”

Her stomach twisted in on itself, contorting into a pretzel. “We went to karaoke.”

“Karaoke?” Darcy wrinkled her nose.

Annie shrugged. “It was fun. *Funny*. I had a lot of fun.”

The most fun she could remember having in a long, *long* time. Too much fun.

Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “What’s with your face?”

“My face?” Annie’s eyes widened. “There’s nothing happening with my face.”

“Hmm.” Darcy cut her eyes at Annie. “No, there’s definitely something going on with your face.”

Annie’s cheeks burned. “My face is just my face, Darcy. If you don’t like it, don’t look at it.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.” Her voice came out as a squeak and she shut her eyes. “Fuck.”

Darcy snickered. “You’re a shitty liar.”

Darcy didn’t have to sound so damn happy about it.

Annie sighed and slumped back against the couch. “Okay, don’t kill me.”

“I’d never kill you. Depending on what you did, I might maim you a little, but I’d never kill you.”

A shocked laugh burst from her. “*Darcy.*”

All Darcy did was stare, her lips twitching.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath, steeling herself for Darcy’s reaction. “I might’ve accidentally . . . kissed your brother.”

One of Darcy’s brows rose, a sign of impeccable forehead control Annie had never been able to master. Her own brows were strictly a two-for-one package. “How do you *accidentally* kiss someone? Did you trip?”

She huffed. “No.”

Darcy’s right brow rose, joining its twin. “Did he?”

“No. Smart-ass. Nobody tripped.”

“Did someone require emergency resuscitation?”

Annie reached out and smacked Darcy’s shoulder. “Shut up.”

“Ooh.” Darcy’s eyes widened gleefully. “You’re getting violent. I must’ve struck a nerve.”

“You’re such a bitch.” Annie laughed. “I hate you.”

“That’s a rude thing to say to your future sister-in-law.”

Annie buried her face in her hands and groaned. “Not gonna happen.”

When she lifted her head, Darcy had schooled her expression. “I thought you said you weren’t interested in my brother.”

“I’m *not.*”

“And yet your actions point to the contrary.”

“For a minute, I forgot who he was and I forgot who I was and I forgot *where* I was and I just—” *Felt.* She had just let herself feel. “Got caught up in the moment.” She shot Darcy a flimsy grin. “Your brother’s really hot.”

Darcy mimed a gag. “You already said that.” She crossed her arms. “But I find it hard to believe you’re so desperate you threw caution to the wind and kissed Brendon for the hell of it.”

Annie shrugged. “You know, now that you mention it, it *has* been a while since I’ve gotten laid. So . . .”

“Ugh.” Darcy shivered. “Stop trying to derail the conversation by yucking me out.”

“Is it working?”

“No.”

Annie laughed. “Let it go. We kissed. It’s not a thing. It’s not going to happen again. I only told you because I’m incapable of keeping secrets

from you. End of story.”

“*Not.*” Darcy swiveled, knees bumping Annie’s. “It’s not the end of the story. Not when you haven’t *told* me the whole story. Spill.”

Annie wrinkled her nose. “Spill what?” She laughed. “There’s nothing *to* spill. Your brother is cute. He’s funny. I had a good time. But I told you I’m not interested in dating anyone.”

Darcy frowned. “That was before you went and kissed my brother.”

“He kissed me.” Annie tucked her hair behind her ears. “Or we kissed each other. That—that is beside the point.”

Darcy’s lips twisted to the side. “*Isn’t* that the point? Or if not, what *is* the point? At the very least it’s point adjacent.”

Point adjacent. Jesus.

“It’s not a thing.”

Darcy stared.

“*Gah.*” Annie threw her hands up. “Brendon doesn’t know me, so—”

“Would it be so bad? Letting him get to know you?”

Yes.

It wasn’t just a bad idea.

It was the worst idea.

Because letting Brendon get to know her meant letting him in. It meant trusting him with a million little facts, all the haphazard pieces of herself, and hoping he’d remember them all.

You couldn’t be disappointed when someone forgot your middle name if they didn’t know your middle name. You couldn’t be upset when someone forgot your favorite food or how you felt about your job if you never told them to begin with. You couldn’t be disappointed when someone stopped caring if you never expected them to in the first place.

Rejections always stung, but nothing hurt quite as badly as sharing pieces of yourself, trusting someone with your heart, and then being cast aside when you cared more than they did.

“Jesus, Darce. Why are you pushing this so hard?”

“I’m not *pushing*. I’m asking.” Darcy frowned. “Why are you getting so defensive?”

“I’m *not*. I’m—” Shit. She was. Annie shut her eyes. “Sorry.”

Darcy made a soft sound in the back of her throat before waving off the apology. “It’s fine. I just wish you’d talk to me. I know Brendon’s my brother and I have a tendency to get a little protective—”

Annie snorted. Understatement of the century.

“Okay.” Darcy rolled her eyes. “*A lot* protective. But you’re my best friend and I care about you, too. I’m not trying to meddle, I swear. I’m trying to understand.”

When Darcy put it like that, it was hard to remain defensive. Annie sighed. “Like I said, I got caught up in the moment. It was just a kiss. And it’s not going to happen again.”

Darcy didn’t look convinced. “Why not?”

“Darcy . . .”

Darcy waited, hands clasped in her lap.

This was the moment Annie had come to town for, at least part of the impetus behind her decision to fly to Seattle. So she could tell Darcy this in person instead of over the phone.

She’d known this was coming and she’d already told Brendon, so why was it so hard to just *say* it? Maybe because telling Darcy made it real. That was the only thing she could come up with, the reason why she was stalling.

Annie squared her shoulders. “I got a promotion.”

Darcy sucked in a breath. “You did?”

She nodded. “I did.”

Darcy waited.

Here went nothing. “It’s—it’s a great opportunity. Higher salary, for one.”

Darcy smiled tightly. “Long lead-in. I’m sensing a *but* here.”

Annie dropped her eyes. “But it’s in London.”

A pause followed. “I’m assuming you accepted. You must’ve, if you’re telling me.”

“I did.” Annie lifted her eyes. Darcy was staring behind her, glaring at the wall like it had personally offended her. “My flight is in exactly a month.”

Darcy gave a curt nod. “That’s—that’s great. I’m happy for you.”

Then how come she didn’t sound like it? “Darcy.”

She sniffed. “What?” She gave a wet laugh. “I’m trying really hard to work up some genuine enthusiasm. Give me a moment.”

Annie waited, not bothering to hold her breath.

“*London?*” Darcy shook her head. “Why do you want to move to London? You—you don’t even like tea. Christ, Annie, you *hate* tomatoes. They’re constantly eating stewed tomatoes and baked beans and you—

you're allergic to mushrooms. There's nothing about an English breakfast you'd eat."

"Toast," Annie said. "I like toast."

"Fuck toast," Darcy muttered. "It's dry bread. Completely overrated."

She was pretty sure they ate more than traditional breakfast foods in England. In fact, she *knew* they did. But now wasn't the time to point out the hilarity of Darcy's argument.

"Darcy."

"They have a monarchy. Who wants one of those? It's not all fun royal weddings and hot duchesses. There is a grim history of colonialism and . . ." Darcy swiped angrily under her eyes. "Look, I understand I am being completely irrational, but you're going to have to give me a minute, okay? I see you for the first time in over a year and you tell me you're moving even further away?"

"I won't have to travel as often. I'm getting tired of constantly being on the go."

This job was offering her a chance to put down roots, a place to call home for longer than two weeks out of the month.

"And you can't, I don't know, pick a job that keeps you in one place and that place happens to be a little closer?" Darcy asked, voice small. "At least in the country?"

Annie fidgeted with the hem of her caftan. "It came out of nowhere. What was I supposed to say?"

The promotion was perfect on paper. Exactly what she'd been looking for as long as she kind of . . . squinted.

So what if working in HR wasn't her dream? Sometimes a job was just a job. She wasn't practical to the point of eschewing everything else, including her own happiness, but she couldn't turn her whole life upside down and, what? Change careers? No.

Darcy sniffled. "I know I'm the one who moved here to Seattle, but . . ." She pressed her fingers to the space between her brows. "Call it wishful thinking on my part, but I'd always hoped we'd wind up back in the same city. At least the same coast. Philadelphia's far enough as is, but London?"

"You never said," Annie murmured.

"I didn't think I needed to. I thought it went without saying. You're my best friend."

Annie said nothing, because honestly, she hadn't thought Darcy would care.

Darcy frowned. "I guess I was wrong. It didn't go without saying."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Annie said. "I don't want this to be a big black cloud hanging over us for the rest of my trip. Let's just . . ."

"Pretend you aren't moving halfway across the world?" Darcy's voice went dry.

"Darcy."

She held up her hands. "Fine. I'll drop it."

"Thank you."

"For now." Darcy's brows rose. "I'll drop it for now."

Chapter Nine

Tuesday, June 1

Brendon was no stranger to the sort of run-of-the-mill misfortune that everyone experienced from time to time. A bad haircut. Getting splashed by a car while standing on the curb. Sleeping through his alarm. Even getting stood up.

Hearing Annie tell him she was moving to London when he could still taste her on his lips? When he'd just discovered how perfectly she fit into his arms? He didn't have words for how badly that had blown.

Kissing her might not have been planned on his part, but the chemistry between them had been palpable. He'd had a great time and it was clear she had, too. Ending the night with a kiss had felt like the most natural thing in the world, the thought of her living on the opposite side of the country unimportant in light of the sparks he felt.

Philadelphia wasn't convenient, but London?

Traveling got lonely, Annie had said. Moving an ocean away would make her *less* lonely? What about how she'd said her job involved less translation than she'd hoped it would? Wouldn't it involve even *less* if she'd be traveling less frequently?

The longer he thought about it, the less sense it made.

"Brendon? Brendon?"

He jerked in his seat. Seven sets of eyes stared at him from around the conference table.

"Sorry." His face went hot at getting caught zoning out in the middle of a meeting. A meeting he was meant to lead. "It's been a long day. You were saying?"

Katie snickered. "Long day? Brendon, it isn't even noon."

“Someone had too much fun this weekend,” Jenny, the senior director of marketing, teased.

“Hardly.” Brendon laughed it off the best he could, pasting on a smile. “Now, this coming weekend? Whole other story.”

Jian’s face scrunched in mock confusion. “This weekend? Is something happening?”

“Probably something really boring.” Katie beamed at him from across the table. “Not at all special.”

A bittersweet ache gripped his heart.

Envy was too ugly a word for what he felt. He didn’t begrudge anyone their happiness; the opposite, in fact. But he wanted the same, what Katie and Jian had. Darcy and Elle. The way they looked at each other was nothing short of magic, like everyone else faded away when their eyes met across the room.

“I couldn’t be more excited for the both of you,” he said, choosing to focus on his friends and coworkers’ happiness rather than stew in self-pity because he didn’t have that. Yet.

Katie pinched her lips together, doing a poor job of smothering her smile. “We need to change the subject before Brendon gets too choked up to continue the meeting.”

“The one he wasn’t paying any attention to, you mean?” Jenny asked.

“Okay.” He held up his hands. “Quit roasting me. Jian, you were saying?”

“Q two’s numbers are in.”

His eyes dropped to the manila folder sitting ominously atop the conference table in front of Jian. “Okay. Don’t leave me in suspense.”

“Our operating expenses rose, but we made some hefty changes. Investments.”

Partnering with Oh My Stars had involved some heavy-duty shifts in their algorithms, not to mention their budgets.

“That being said”—Jian slid the folder across the table—“our numbers exceeded our projections. Revenue rose. More than we hoped.”

Brendon flipped through the report, brows rising. These numbers were good. These numbers were *really* good. He set the report aside. “This is fantastic.”

Jian winced. “I agree. *Those* numbers are certainly worth celebrating.”

Brendon braced his elbows on the table, waiting for the other shoe to drop. That happened to him a lot lately. “But?”

“We had a bit of a slump in accounts.”

“But we see that every year, people canceling their premium subscriptions post-cuffing season.”

“Right.” Jian tossed the stress ball between his hands. “Problem is, we’ve got a bit of an elephant in the room, and it’s the fact that the whole market is seeing a slowdown in growth of new users.”

“The whole market,” Brendon stressed, looking to Katie for confirmation. “Not just us.”

She offered him a smile and nodded.

Jian sighed. “I’m not trying to be a Donnie Downer or anything, but our model, what sets OTP apart, is that we promise to help users find their person so they can ditch the app and ride off into the sunset.” He held up his hands. “I’m not harshing what we stand for. Just, from a business standpoint, if we want users to delete the app, we’ve got to replace them with others. If we’ve got a slowdown in growth—”

“We’ve got a problem,” Brendon surmised.

Jian nodded. “Or we will. Right now, our revenue is exceeding expectations; great. User satisfaction?”

Katie shot him a thumbs-up. “Is at an all-time high.”

“We don’t need to panic, but we’ve got a problem on the horizon and it’s one we’re going to need to tackle sooner or later.” Jian shrugged. “Personally, I’m in favor of sooner.”

“Sooner sounds good,” Brendon agreed, leaning back in his chair.

Jenny leaned forward. “If I’m understanding this correctly, our issue is attracting new users to the app? Refresh the pool of singles, so to speak?”

Jian nodded. “But don’t ask me how. I’m the numbers guy.”

Katie and Jenny exchanged a look before Katie gave a sharp nod. “We’ll get right on it.”

Jenny reached for her pen and began scribbling in her notebook. “Testimonials, maybe? Those usually work.”

“If we want to see big growth, not just a trickle here and there like we get from users switching between apps, I think we’ve got to branch outside our usual demographic.” Brendon turned to Katie. “Those thirty percent of dating app users who feel apps have made courtships devoid of romance.”

Katie frowned sharply. “You want us to convince a bunch of skeptics?”

Jenny dropped her pen. “How are we supposed to do that?”

Therein lay the million-dollar question.

“*Challenge* is another word for *opportunity*,” Katie said, shooting Jenny a glare. “We’ll brainstorm.”

“We’ve got time,” Jian reminded them. “No rush.”

Brendon wished he could say the same.

* * *

DARCY (3:16 P.M.): Could you please come over after work? I think Annie broke my espresso machine.

BRENDON (3:22 P.M.): Did you try turning it off and back on?

DARCY (3:25 P.M.): ☺

BRENDON (3:26 P.M.): Kidding! Yeah, I can drop by. What time?

DARCY (3:29 P.M.): I’ll be home at 5:00.

BRENDON (3:32 P.M.): I’ll swing by around 5:10. How’s that sound?

DARCY (3:35 P.M.): That works. Thanks.

* * *

Brendon rapped his knuckles against Darcy’s door and waited.

And waited and waited and waited.

“Hey, Darce?” he called out. “It’s Brendon. You told me to swing by after work?”

After a moment, a shadow appeared beneath the door before it opened. Arms crossed over her body, Annie stood blocking the threshold, her full bottom lip trapped between her teeth. “Hi.”

His breath caught in the back of his throat, his lungs constricting. Fuck. She was gorgeous, her long hair swept up in a messy bun on the top of her head. Several tendrils had fallen, framing her heart-shaped face, which was free of makeup, making it possible to see the tiny spray of freckles dotting the bridge of her nose. She didn’t have many—not like him; he was covered head to toe—which made the few she had all the more adorable. Precious in their scarcity.

“Hey.” He pasted on a smile he prayed didn’t give away the fact that just looking at her gave him palpitations. That his fingers itched with the urge to tuck one of those loose strands of hair behind her ear. That his mouth burned with the memory of how soft the skin beside her jaw had felt, how he’d been able to feel her pulse trip under his lips. He cracked his

knuckles, not just because she made him nervous, but because the desire to reach out and touch her was too strong. “Is my sister home?”

When she tugged on the fabric, his eye was drawn to the expanse of golden skin left bare by Annie’s skimpy shorts. It was obvious she hadn’t been expecting company. “Darcy’s still at work. She told me this morning she’d be late. She’s, uh, playing catch-up, apparently. Since she took Friday off.”

“She told you that this morning?”

Annie nodded.

That didn’t make any sense. Darcy had texted him this afternoon. “She asked me to come over. Apparently, her espresso machine’s busted.”

She made a soft, embarrassed hum, a distant cousin of the throaty moan she’d made the other night, the one he’d felt vibrate against his lips. The space between his shoulder blades tingled, the hair on his arms standing on end, when she lifted her eyes, meeting his. “Whoops?”

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as Darcy thinks,” he fibbed.

She leaned against the door frame, reminding him of how he’d had her pressed up against the same place two nights ago. How she’d whimpered when he’d kissed her. How she had tasted like pineapple and coconut. *Fuck*. He sucked a shaky breath in through his mouth and shoved his hands inside his pockets.

“You’re, um, welcome to come inside and wait,” she offered, gesturing behind her. “Or take a look at it.” She rolled her lips together, smile slightly wry. “I didn’t realize I totally screwed it up that badly. Me and fancy appliances do not get along.”

He laughed under his breath and followed her inside the kitchen, stopping in front of the espresso machine. It didn’t *look* ruined.

“You think it’s fixable?” she asked, leaning against Darcy’s fridge. “Or did I kill it?”

“I’m hopeful,” he said, reaching behind the machine to plug it into the outlet.

“Me too.” Annie traced a grout line with the tip of her bare toe. Her nails were painted an electric shade of aqua that made her skin look tanner by contrast. “Otherwise, I owe Darcy a new coffeemaker.”

He grabbed a mug and placed it beneath the spout before pressing the button for an eight-ounce Americano. The machine sputtered before dark coffee filled the cup.

That had been easy. *Too* easy. No fixing involved, just a press of a button and voilà, coffee. “Seems fine to me.”

“Whew.” Her lips turned up at the corners, her smile verging on shy as she pushed off the fridge and took a step toward him. “Brendon, about the other night. I don’t want you to think I’m not—”

“Brendon? I saw your car out front.”

The award for worst timing went to Darcy. Annie didn’t want him to think she wasn’t *what?*

He stared at Annie for a moment longer, willing his eyes to communicate what his mouth couldn’t. *This isn’t over.* He smiled at Darcy even though a huge part of him wanted to shove her back through the front door. “Your coffeemaker’s fixed.”

“Oh, good.” Darcy set her purse down on the counter. “It wasn’t too complicated, was it?”

“Complicated?” He laughed. “Try turning it on.”

“How strange,” she said, not quite meeting his eyes.

Something strange was certainly afoot. He just couldn’t put his finger on *what*.

Darcy sighed and massaged the space between her brows, a quiet but not quite silent groan slipping out of her mouth.

Annie frowned. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” Darcy waved her off with a strained smile. “Just exhausted. I opened up my email this morning and nearly had a heart attack. I take a few days off and I come back to the office in shambles. This week . . .” Her words trailed off, the lines forming around her lips filling in what she hadn’t said. She offered Annie a contrite smile. “I’m just worried we’re not going to have as much time together as I’d hoped. We’ll have the weekend, obviously, but I’ve got my boss breathing down my neck about finalizing these reports for some of our high-priority accounts and . . . I’ll probably be at the office late most days.”

Annie gave an awkward laugh. “I picked a really bad time to visit, didn’t I?”

“No,” Darcy blurted. “You’re here, which by default makes your timing excellent.” She glanced between him and Annie. “Say, Brendon?”

He stole a sip of the test coffee he’d brewed. Not bad. “Hmm?”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed, her head cocking. Oh, he knew that look, was quite familiar with it, if he was being honest. He’d given Darcy the same

look a time or two. It was a look that said he, or in this instance Darcy, hadn't come to play. "What's your schedule look like this week?"

A seemingly innocuous question for an altogether not innocuous look. He frowned. Or was it *nocuous*? A *nocuous* look? Was that a word? If something could be innocuous, shouldn't *nocuous* be an option? Or was it like flammable versus inflammable? Wow, *tangent*. Thanks, brain. Brendon shook his head. "Not bad. Why?"

He had Jian and Katie's wedding, but that wasn't until Friday. With their all-team meeting out of the way, his days would mostly consist of fielding emails and racking his brain trying to figure out a solution to the problem Jian had rightfully posed this morning. Thursday, he had a big meeting with investors regarding their potential expansion out of North America, but the rest of his week was relatively malleable.

"I was thinking—"

"A danger to us all," he teased.

Darcy reached out, pinching the thin skin of his inner elbow, left bare from rolling up his shirtsleeves. Motherfucker, that hurt. "Ow."

"As I was saying," she gritted out, her eyes wide like she was trying to silently communicate with him. "If you aren't too terribly busy, maybe you could show Annie around?" Darcy suggested, eyes twinkling in a way that had absolutely nothing to do with her fancy recessed lighting.

Another look he was familiar with. As the baby in the family, he'd perfected that look. All wide-eyed innocence, cunning lurking beneath the surface.

Brendon grinned and swallowed the urge to wipe away an imaginary tear. Clap, maybe. Darcy had played him, she'd played him *good*, and he couldn't even bring himself to be upset about it because—while he might not have been completely clear as to her motivations—it had worked out in his favor.

Annie, apparently none the wiser about his sister's machinations, shook her head. "Oh, no. That's—"

"Fine," he said, cutting Annie off. "I'd love to show you around."

Spending time with Annie was the opposite of an imposition.

Color rose in Annie's cheeks as their eyes met and their gazes held, his breath burning in his lungs until she dropped her eyes to the floor, breaking their magnetic eye contact.

It took a moment for his mouth to make words. “How’s tomorrow afternoon sound? My last meeting’s at three. Barring traffic, I could be here by a quarter after four.”

Annie gnawed on her bottom lip before nodding slowly. “That . . . sounds like a plan.”

“Perfect.” Darcy beamed.

Still staring at the floor, Annie absently lifted a hand to her mouth, fingers tracing her lips in a way that made him immediately wonder whether she was thinking about their kiss.

“I’ll text you when I’m on the way.”

Annie startled slightly, lifting her head, the color in her cheeks deepening. She gave a sharp, decisive nod before smiling tightly. “Looking forward to it.” She turned to Darcy. “I’m going to run through a shower. I ordered takeout since I wasn’t sure when you’d be back.”

“I’ll answer the door.” Darcy nodded.

With a fleeting smile aimed in his general direction, Annie scurried past, disappearing down the hall.

“Sorry to have you come all this way for nothing,” Darcy said, walking him to the front door.

“Not a big deal. It was on my way.”

And it gave him an opportunity to see Annie again. A win-win in his book.

“I’ll walk you to the elevator,” she offered, pulling the door shut behind her. As soon as they were halfway down the hall, she grabbed his arm, tugging him to a stop. Her lips pursed, dropping whatever act she’d done a surprisingly good job of putting on inside her kitchen. “Did she tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

She huffed. “Don’t play dumb with me. *London.*”

Right. *That.* He shoved his hands in his pockets and winced. “She made me promise not to tell you. She wanted to tell you herself.”

“I hate it,” Darcy muttered, beginning to pace slowly. “I told Elle when we were in Vancouver that I hoped to show Annie how great Seattle is. Her job in Philadelphia is—*was*—remote most of the time. She could’ve relocated. Or, she could’ve found another job. A job closer.” She shut her eyes. “I *cried*, Brendon. I cried and made a big to-do over—over stewed tomatoes.”

“Stewed tomatoes?”

Despite the glare she leveled at him, she looked on the verge of tears.

“Did you tell her you wished she wouldn’t move?”

“What part of *cried over stewed tomatoes* did you not get?”

“Does she know you want her *here*? Did you tell her that? Did you tell her that before? When she was in Philadelphia?”

“I thought she knew.” Darcy shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I . . . assumed she did.” Her eyes widened, growing even glossier. “Fuck. I messed up. My best friend is moving halfway across the world and —” She broke off, face splotching pink as she blinked hard. “I’m the worst.”

“You’re not. You’ve been busy.”

“I’ve been wrapped up in myself, is what I’ve been.” Darcy took a deep breath, then paused, eyes flaring. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Meddling! That’s your MO, not mine.”

He scoffed. “I don’t meddle. I nudge. I help.”

“You meddle, Brendon. Not that I’m in any position to judge when I’m doing the same thing. At least I’m being honest about it.”

“Honest. Right. Like when you asked me to come fix your broken coffeemaker.”

“It got you over here, didn’t it?” She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Annie told me that you kissed.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. You’re my brother. Annie’s like a sister to me, you know that. I love you both.” She shrugged. “Besides, I’m pretty sure Annie likes you, too.”

His eyes darted down the hall, and even though the door was shut, he dropped his voice. “Did she tell you that?”

“Not in so many words. Which is why I’m asking you to do me a huge favor.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “I’m listening.”

“I need you to help me convince Annie to move here,” she whispered. “You know the city better than I do.”

“I already said I’d show her around.”

“Yes, well, I need you to be all in. Give it your best. And maybe . . .” She trailed off, blushing. “Maybe show her what she’d be missing out on if she moves.”

He frowned. “Isn’t that the—” *Oh*. “Wow. Are you asking me to seduce your best friend?”

Darcy smacked his arm. “Gross. No.” She paused. “Maybe? Ugh.”

“I can’t believe it.” He tsked. “My own sister, pimping me out.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything you weren’t already. Just, I don’t know, step it up. Consider the stakes a little higher now. That’s all.”

Never in a million years would he have imagined that Darcy would be giving him permission—no, *asking* him to woo her best friend. “Are you even planning on putting in long hours at the office or was that bullshit?”

Darcy had the decency to look chagrined. “Both? I *am* going to be busy this week and you and Annie seemed to hit it off so I thought . . . I’m willing to use whatever I can to my advantage.” She frowned. “If you don’t want to—”

“I never said that. I said I was in.”

“Good.” Darcy nodded decidedly. “This stays between us. Capiche?”

He rolled his eyes. “No, I’m going to run off and tell Annie as soon as I can.”

“I’m serious, Brendon.”

He met her eyes. “So am I.”

Chapter Ten

Wednesday, June 2

At the red light, Brendon drummed his long fingers against the steering wheel.

Annie knew what those fingers felt like wrapped around her wrist, how easily he'd circled her arm and pinned her hand to the door when they'd kissed. His wide palm had gripped the back of her neck, and if she concentrated hard enough she could feel the phantom rasp of his calluses against the shell of her ear, the friction of skin on skin.

She shivered violently, hard enough that Brendon noticed.

"Cold? Want me to turn the air down?" he offered, reaching for the knob.

"I'm fine." Her words came out mortifyingly breathy, like she was auditioning for a job as a phone sex operator. She ground her back teeth together. *Get a grip.*

He nodded slowly and rested his hand back on the wheel, looking at her like she was behaving strangely. Because she *was*.

This had been a bad idea. Spending time with Brendon. Not that she'd had much of a choice, with Darcy and Brendon ganging up on her. Stubbornness clearly ran in their family.

Which was fine. Once she put her mind to something, she could be equally as stubborn as the Lowells. Annie was *not* going to let her attraction to Brendon get the better of her.

Remaining calm, cool, and collected was easier said than done when every time she looked at him her eyes were drawn to his mouth and all she could think about was that kiss. The kiss that put all others to shame. The kiss that made her wonder whether she could even call all the other kisses

she'd had in her life kisses or if they needed a new name, something to denote them as lesser.

Maybe she'd stick to calling the kiss they'd shared a revelation. Fitting, because there'd be no repeat. No kissing Brendon. *Definitely* nothing more.

A change of subject was in order. Anything to get her mind off how impossibly hot his lips felt against hers. *Gah*. "Are we headed back to the market?"

Brendon shook his head, a secretive smile playing at the edges of his mouth. His very kissable-looking—

Jesus. Who was she kidding, underestimating the power—not to mention obstinacy—of her libido. The bitch clearly had a mind of her own.

She pivoted her body, staring out the window, her frowning face reflected in the glass. *Hangry* was a portmanteau of *hungry* and *angry*; was there a word for when you felt horny and were angry about it? *Hornry*? No, that sounded ridiculous, like she was hungry and horny, instead of angry at being aroused.

The giant wheel she'd been forced to relieve herself on zipped by as they cruised past the pier. "Space Needle?"

"Wrong direction."

She craned her neck, peering through the tiny back windshield. Right. They were heading *away* from Darcy's.

"How about—" She swallowed the rest of her guess when Brendon flipped his turn signal, making a smooth right at the . . . "Ferry terminal?"

Up ahead, a long line of cars moved steadily forward, stopping briefly at the attendant booth before boarding the ferry.

"We're heading out of the city?"

Brendon rolled down his window. "You'll see."

She let her head drop back against the headrest, barely biting back a groan of frustration.

She'd figured he'd show her around the city, the famous landmarks, all part of Darcy's plan to convince Annie Seattle was the greatest city on Earth. She'd assumed Brendon would take her to the Space Needle, maybe that funky cement bridge troll over in Fremont. A trip outside of the city was unexpected.

A fluttery feeling took up residence inside her stomach. The city provided a sort of . . . safety net. Restaurants and crowded tourist destinations, plenty of people. *Public*. She wasn't sure where Brendon was

taking her, but it was outside the city, and that meant more time in his car, more time with him, no outside distractions or noise or—she swallowed hard—interruptions. No escape.

It wasn't Brendon she worried about; she didn't trust herself not to do something stupid and ill-advised like kiss him again. No, kissing Brendon would be bad because . . . oh, God. She drew a blank. Now was not the time to lose her head. There were reasons, good reasons, reasons she needed to routinely remind herself of if she was going to get through the day without doing a very bad thing that wouldn't be fair to either of them. Right. *Reasons.*

One, she was moving to London. *Huge* reason there. The mother of all reasons.

Two, she'd sworn off dating, tired of getting her hopes dashed.

If Brendon were just a cute, funny guy she'd met, maybe she could've given her libido the reins and let it run the show for a few days. A vacation fling, no strings, scratch this itch, get it out of her system before she got on a plane. Not her usual MO, but not something she was inherently opposed to, either. But Brendon wasn't just a random guy. He came with all sorts of strings attached. He was looking for the one. He was her best friend's brother. It didn't get much more complicated than that.

There was no way following through on her attraction to Brendon could end any way but badly.

After paying the fare, Brendon drove forward, following the signs for parking aboard the ferry. He pulled to a stop behind a large SUV and cut the engine. "Want to head up to the observation deck?"

She smiled and nodded, unlatching her seat belt. Exploring this attraction was out of the question, but that didn't mean she couldn't make the most of the day.

"Is it usually this crowded?" she asked, stumbling into Brendon when a group of kids raced past her.

"Unless it's raining." His chest brushed her back, heat from his body soaking into hers. God, he was a human furnace. For a brief second he rested his palm on the small of her back, warmth from his hand sinking into the sliver of skin left bare between her shorts and her shirt.

She needed to remember her reasons and treat them like a mantra. *Do not kiss Brendon. London. Dating equals disappointment. Lots of strings. Tangled, messy strings.*

Annie quickened her steps, making a beeline for the railing.

Despite its being a tad windy—Annie’s hair was whipping in her face—it *was* nice out. The temperature was hovering in the midseventies and the sun had broken through the cloud cover.

Brendon joined her, resting his arms on the railing. He’d slipped on a pair of aviators, the lenses tinted black, making it impossible to see his eyes. For a moment, they stood in silence, staring out at the choppy water. When Brendon finally spoke, he threw her a curveball. “How’d your friends in Philadelphia take the news?”

She turned slightly, leaning her elbow against the railing as she faced him. “What do you mean?”

“You did tell them you’re moving, didn’t you?”

Oh. About *that*. “They’re happy for me.”

His dark bronze brows rose over his sunglasses. “Happy?”

Happy in the way people you saw once every other month at brunch could be. They’d gone through all the motions of *We’ll miss you so much* and *We’re absolutely going to stay in touch*. But Annie knew better. Proximity meant everything to most people, and if it was difficult enough to get close when she was living in Philadelphia and traveling for work, it would be impossible once she’d moved to London.

She nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

He scratched his jaw. “I guess Zoom makes staying in touch a lot easier, huh?”

Her eyes flitted to his face before darting back to the dark water of Elliott Bay. “I’m not around very much as it is. I’m on a plane or I’m in a different time zone. Occasionally, I’m a whole day ahead. Zoom, Marco Polo, FaceTime—a million applications exist to make staying connected easier than ever. But even with all the right tools, no one can make people put in the effort if they don’t want to.” She offered him a pained smile. “I don’t have very many—any, really—close friends in Philadelphia is what I’m saying. No one’s going to miss me.”

She traced a crack in the concrete deck with her toe and bit down hard on the side of her cheek.

Attraction wasn’t the only risk Brendon posed. He was too damn easy to talk to, to confide in. Still, admitting that she had no close friends in Philadelphia? Embarrassing.

He stared at her gravely and her stomach pretzeled. Okay, make that *mortifying*.

“I find that hard to believe.”

She looked at him sharply. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He gripped the back of his neck, posture relaxing as he slouched against the railing. “You said no one’s really going to miss you. And I think . . .” His tongue sneaked out, wetting his lips. “I think you’re underestimating the effect you have.”

She looked at him askance. “The effect I have?”

He ducked his chin, a quiet chuckle rumbling from his chest. “You’re easy to get along with. I’m having trouble wrapping my head around someone meeting you and getting to know you and not wanting to spend as much time with you as possible. You’re like . . . Lay’s potato chips. You can’t eat just one.”

A sunbeam of warmth flared inside her chest. “Did you just . . . compare me to a *potato chip*?”

He nodded, face twisted, looking pained. “I think I did?”

She laughed and reached out, wrapping her hand around his forearm to show him she wasn’t mad. “That was—that was strangely sweet, Brendon. No one has ever compared me to a potato chip before.”

A summer’s day had nothing on her favorite junk food.

His flush deepened to the point where even his freckles were obscured, his whole face a shocking shade of neon. “I was trying to say . . . you know what? I’m going to quit while I’m—shit, not even ahead. I’m going to quit before I insert my *whole* foot in my mouth.”

She swept her thumb against his skin, her fingers brushing the fine dusting of spun-copper hair along the side of his wrist. “I’m not mad.”

Beneath her fingers, his tendons flexed. *Unf.* Not mad at all.

He was staring down at her, his sunglasses obscuring his eyes, but she could tell he was studying her, could *feel* it.

The mantra, remember the mantra. *Do not kiss Brendon. London. Dating equals disappointment. Lots of strings. Tangled, messy strings.*

She dropped his arm and stole several steps back, cringing when her hip knocked into the metal railing. That would leave a nice bruise. “I don’t want to pretend like I’m not partially to blame. For not having close friends in town. I got tired of being the one always reaching out. *Usually* reaching out. Eventually, I stopped. Inevitably, get-togethers tapered off when I

wasn't the one arranging them." She shrugged. "Friendships need more TLC than plants. Who'd have thought?"

He reached down, the fingers of his opposite hand absently brushing against the wrist she had previously circled. "For what it's worth, you'll always have Darcy. You know she's pretty upset, right?"

Seeing as she'd tried to use the fact England had a monarchy to sway Annie into staying, *yeah*. "She'll be fine. She has you and Elle and—it won't be any different than it was when I lived in Philly."

Brendon tugged off his glasses, squinting briefly at the brightness. "Can I ask you a question?"

She dipped her chin.

"Why London?"

"London's where the office is that I was offered—"

"No." He shook his head. "I mean, why'd you take the promotion?"

"Other than the fact that it's a *promotion*?" She laughed.

Brendon didn't. His lips didn't even twitch. "Feel free to tell me to fuck off if you want to, because I know it's not my place, but the way you sounded the other night . . . you don't seem to like your job."

That wasn't—okay, it was a little true. But so not the point.

"I'm tired of traveling, yes." Tired of traveling alone, mostly. "But as managing director of the London office, I won't have to travel as often. Once a quarter, maybe."

"But it's still HR, still not your dream job. You deserve to be doing something that makes you happy. Whether that's working in human resources or coming to steal Carson Daly's thunder or anything in between."

Annie gripped the railing until her knuckles turned white. "Sometimes a job is just a job, Brendon."

"True," he said quickly. "So if London isn't your dream city and this isn't your dream job, why not find another one? If a job is just a job, it should hardly be your whole reason for moving halfway across the world."

It was more complicated than that. Unless she was making it more complicated than it needed to be? She shut her eyes and let the subtle rocking of the ferry calm her.

"You're Darcy's best friend. She misses you, misses having you nearby. She's mentioned it. And if Philadelphia's far, London's even further." He

cleared his throat. “Four thousand seven hundred eighty-one miles. I googled it.”

She laughed. That sounded like something he’d do.

“You’ve got people here that care about you, Annie. People who would really like it if you were closer. Darcy.” He took a step toward her and another, until she had to crane her neck to look up at him. He’d crowded her against the railing, not quite touching, but close enough that all it would take was one deep breath and their chests would brush.

Her breath hitched, escaping her lips in short, staccato pants as he lifted his hand and rested it on the side of her neck, cradling her jaw. It was all so reminiscent of their kiss that she ached, her bare toes clenching and curling inside her sandals.

Her knees felt loose, like marionette limbs linked with string, stiff until they weren’t. Like she might collapse if not for the railing at her back. Her hands reached out, settling on his waist, clutching at his shirt.

His lids were low as his thumb swept against the curve of her cheek, tickling her skin with the rough whorls and ridges of his fingerprint. “Me.”

For one dizzying moment, that sunbeam of warmth inside her chest returned and expanded, flaring hot and bright as Brendon stared at her, a soft smile playing at the edges of his mouth. A mouth she wanted so desperately to kiss.

Almost as desperately as she wished what he’d said was true.

But how could it be?

Friday. Saturday. Sunday. Monday. Tuesday. Wednesday. Six days. Annie had been in town for less than a week. How could Brendon care about her if he barely knew her?

Dating equals disappointment. Lots of strings. Tangled, messy strings.

She dropped her hands from his solid torso and crossed her arms against a sudden chill. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

* * *

The sun had just barely slipped below the horizon when Brendon’s GPS told him to turn on the narrow road ahead.

Annie hunched forward in her seat, elbows resting on her knees. “Wheel-In Motor Movie. Wait. Is this a drive-in?”

His tires bounced along the gravel as he slowed to a crawl. “One of only four left in the state.”

They were in Port Townsend, two hours northwest of Seattle. His original plan had been to take Annie on a picnic near his apartment where they showed movies in the park during the summer months, a date reminiscent of *The Wedding Planner*, but the chance of rain in the forecast had caused the park association to cancel. Luckily, he had a backup plan, one he liked even better than the original.

Drive-ins were, by default, romantic. Plus, this plan allowed him to show Annie a little more of the state than if he had simply taken her to a park, managing to kill two birds with one stone.

“How does this even work?” she asked after he paid for their tickets at the booth located halfway up the gravel drive. “Don’t we need speakers or something?”

“We just have to set the radio to the FM channel on the ticket.” He parked in the center of the lot, a perfect distance from the dark screen. “Movie starts at dusk.” He unhooked his seat belt. “Want something from concessions?”

Her answer was immediate and enthusiastic. “Popcorn, please.”

They were relatively early, and the line outside the concession stand was short, moving fast.

Annie popped his door for him when he returned, arms laden with buckets of popcorn and an assortment of candy.

“I got extra,” he said. “Just in case.”

“What are we watching?” she asked, one hand already buried in her bucket of popcorn.

He grinned. “*Say Anything*.”

“Confession? I’ve never seen it.”

That was unacceptable, a wrong he was glad to right immediately. “The boom box, Annie. John Cusack and the boom box playing ‘In Your Eyes’ by Peter Gabriel. Classic.”

“Eh.” She wrinkled her nose. “I know it’s supposed to be all iconic and everything, but it always seemed . . . stalkerish to me.”

“Stalker—no. *No*. It’s romantic. He plays the song they listened to the night they first . . .” He wet his lips, brows rising suggestively. “You know.”

She snorted. “Ah, *so* romantic. Here, let me stand outside your window playing the song we first banged to. You’re right. Not stalkerish in the

least.”

When she put it like that, he winced. “All right. Maybe it hasn’t aged well, but—”

“Chill.” Annie smiled. “Plenty of my favorite movies haven’t aged well. Maybe I just need to watch it before I pass judgment.”

His shoulders dropped in relief that this night wasn’t a bust before it had really begun. “It’s set in Seattle, you know.”

She swallowed her mouthful of popcorn. “Yeah?”

“Tons of the best movies are. *Sleepless in Seattle*, *10 Things I Hate About You*—”

“*The Ring*.” Annie grinned when he grimaced. She set her bucket of popcorn on the floor between her feet and reached for the box of Sour Patch Kids. “I’m just teasing you. I enjoy a good rom-com as much as the next person.” She paused. “Okay, maybe not as much as you.”

A fair assumption. His love for romantic comedies was off the charts.

“I’m confused,” he admitted.

Annie shook out a handful of candy before offering him the box. “About?”

“How can you possibly say romance is dead when these movies are proof that it isn’t?”

Her laughter filled the car, sharp and sweet. It tapered off when she realized he wasn’t laughing with her. Her eyes widened. “Are you serious? Oh my God, you are. They’re movies. It’s all fake. It would be like using *Jurassic Park* as proof that dinosaurs are real.”

“Dinosaurs are real.”

“Were real.” She stared at him pointedly. “And now they’re dead.”

“The whole plot of *Jurassic Park* is that dinosaurs were revived using fossilized DNA.”

She laughed. “Okay. Better example. It would be like using *Men in Black* as proof that aliens exist.”

He refused to smile, refused to give himself away. “Aliens do exist. The Pentagon released footage of unidentified flying objects.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh my God.”

“Area Fifty-One, Annie.”

She dropped her hand and goggled at him. “Is an Air Force facility.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize believing in aliens was so controversial.” He smiled, letting her know he was kidding . . . a little.

She shifted toward him, her knees bumping the center console. “Come here.”

“What are you doing?” He slid over, dropping his head forward when she gestured for him to come closer to her height.

“Hold still.” She laughed hard, her face turning red as she ran her fingers through his hair, messing it up. Her nails raked against his scalp, sending shivers skittering down his spine. “There. Now hold your hands up and say *aliens*.”

Oh, Jesus. He patted his hair down. “I’m not nearly as fanatical as the dude from *Ancient Aliens*.”

She pressed her lips together.

“Look, I’m not saying aliens had anything to do with Stonehenge, but I’m not not saying it.”

Annie buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking.

“Romance, dinosaurs, aliens.” He tsked. “What’s next? Are you going to tell me you don’t believe in the Loch Ness Monster?”

Annie clutched her stomach, gasping with laughter. “*Brendon*.”

Her eyes locked on his across the seat and for one heart-stopping moment he was trapped in her gaze like a fly in a web, his breath lodged in his throat. The hair on the back of his neck rose, his toes curling in his boots.

Outside, the stadium-style lights around the lot dimmed as the title card appeared on the giant screen. Annie broke their eye contact first, her gaze dropping to the bucket of popcorn between them. She shivered, and he’d have bet his last cent it wasn’t because she was cold.

“I’ll make a believer out of you, Annie,” he whispered, earning himself a fleeting look he couldn’t quite discern. “Just you wait.”

Chapter Eleven

What did you think? Exceed your expectations?”

Annie’s head bobbed from side to side as he started the car and put it in reverse. “It was better than I thought it would be, I’ll grant you that. I liked the ending.”

“Why? Because it was over?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “No. I liked that he got on the plane with her. That part was sweet.”

“I’m sensing a *but* here.”

“*But*, after watching the whole movie, I can safely say my initial impression of the boom box scene stands. If I broke up with someone—regardless of why—and they stood outside my window playing the song we listened to after having sex, I’d be seriously creeped out. Even factoring in the teenage angst, no thanks.” Annie shivered. “But before you get all bent out of shape about it, I feel that way about, like, ninety-nine percent of grand gestures in movies.”

“And this is because . . . ?”

“Most of the time, they’re performative and add pressure to something that should be private.”

“You know, for someone who claimed romance is dead on her first day in town, you’re sure a proponent of looking at love through a . . . practical lens.”

Which he wasn’t too proud to admit confused him greatly.

Her brows rose. “No, I simply don’t view it through rose-colored glasses, and I never said anything about being happy that romance is dead. Only that I feel it is.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I guess if you define romance as public proposals and kisses on Jumbotrons, crashing weddings and interrupting once-in-a-lifetime interviews so you can declare your love at the worst possible time, then sure, I seem practical by

comparison.” Annie shrugged. “All of that looks great on-screen, I guess. It’s cinematic. Flashy. But at the expense of intimacy and . . . I don’t know, I always wonder what happens after the screen goes black and the credits roll.”

“What do you mean?”

“*And they lived happily ever after.*” She snorted. “What does that even mean?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“No. I just mean, you never see what happens after the credits roll, because I guess no one wants to watch a movie about a couple filing their taxes or bickering about who was supposed to take out the trash or how to pay for their kids’ dance lessons.” Annie laughed. “That would be boring, granted. But I guess that’s my point. Getting together is different than staying together. It’s not all fireworks and sunshine and roses and splashy grand gestures. What happens after the kiss in the rain? The proposal at Fenway Park in front of the supposed love of your life and a thousand of your closest friends?” She rolled her eyes. “Am I really supposed to believe any of those couples have staying power? That those relationships have longevity?” She made a soft noise of disbelief. “You can bet your bottom dollar all that wooing comes to a screeching standstill as soon as the love interest is a sure thing.”

“Okay, but the whole point of these movies is to show two characters falling in love and then, despite the odds, despite the fact that the circumstances conspiring to keep them apart are seemingly insurmountable, they surmount those obstacles. The storm they weather shows they can handle whatever else life will throw at them down the road. Taxes or trash or dance lessons, true love conquers all. And the right person? They wouldn’t stop showing you how much they love you every day.”

Annie scoffed softly, staring out the window. “I’m going to have to go with seeing is believing on that one.”

He didn’t know what to say to that; Annie’s despondency was in direct opposition to his own optimistic outlook. Rather than potentially put his foot in his mouth, he turned up the radio, letting his acoustic playlist serve as background noise as they zipped down the highway. Ten minutes of near silence later, Brendon made a left, pulling into the lot for the ferry terminal. The booth was dim and the attendant was missing. He frowned, searching for an automated ticket dispenser.

“Um, Brendon?” Annie pointed at the Plexiglas partition above the booth’s window, where the ferry’s schedule and fares were posted.

He squinted. The last ferry to Seattle ran at ten thirty. Which was fine. It was only—

Ten forty.

His head thudded against the headrest.

Fuck.

* * *

“On the bright side, they have a TV?”

Brendon flipped the dead bolt and slumped against the door. That was the only bright side.

Between the missed ferry and the fifteen miles they’d had to drive out of their way to find a hotel that wasn’t totally booked for the night, this trip had turned into a comedy of errors, heavy on the errors and light on the comedy. “True.”

“And the place looks . . . clean.”

Clean was generous. The industrial carpeting was the color of wine, probably chosen for its ability to disguise stains. The walls appeared to have once been white, but time and nicotine had stained them a dingy shade of cream.

“The bed looks . . . comfy. Oh, and look.” Annie flourished her hand near the headboard. “Four pillows. Housekeeping was generous.”

Bed. As in, just the one. The mustard-yellow duvet cover *appeared* free of mysterious stains, but he wouldn’t have wanted to search the place with a black light.

He darted a glance at the stiff-looking armchair wedged into the corner of the room. Stuffing spilled out from one of the arms like beige cotton candy.

He let out his breath slowly, like air escaping from a dying balloon. “Comfy.”

Annie pressed her lips together but the crinkling at the corners of her eyes gave her away. At least she wasn’t upset by this wrench in their plans. In fact, it had been her idea to stop for the night and wait for the earliest ferry rather than drive the long way back to the city. “It could be worse?”

Against the wall, a rhythmic thumping started, joined by a chorus of grunts.

The back of his neck burned, a flush creeping up his chest, steadily bleeding up his jaw.

“Never mind.” She blushed prettily. “This is pretty bad.”

The lamp on the bedside table wobbled, the headboard from the room next door slamming into the wall. He winced. “I think I liked it better when you were being the unerringly optimistic one.”

Her blond brows rose. “The place definitely has a certain . . . je ne sais quoi.”

He palmed his face and groaned. “That’s a polite way of saying this place sucks.”

“Hey, *you’re* the one who asked me to blow sunshine up your ass.”

“I’ve always wondered about that phrase. How does one begin to blow sunshine, let alone up someone’s ass? A very sturdy straw?”

Her laughter filled the room, sharp and sweet. “Gives new meaning to looking on the bright side.”

“I guess it does, doesn’t it?” His laughter tapered off, leaving his chest filled with pleasant warmth.

High-pitched, breathy moans joined the symphony of lewd sounds next door.

“TV?” he suggested, stripping off his jacket and tossing it atop the flimsy fiberboard dresser, suddenly so warm he could hardly stand it.

Annie circled the bed, plucking the remote off the nightstand. “Let’s see what channels we have.”

She collapsed on the bed, making a face when the mattress’s springs squealed. She shifted atop the covers, getting comfortable. “It’s not bad.” She patted the space beside her.

He swallowed hard and jerked his chin at the chair. “I’m good.”

“Oh, come on.” She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be stupid.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure?”

Annie stared.

She was right. They could share this bed. No big deal. So what if he already knew how sweet she tasted and that he wanted her in the worst way? Annie was addictive, but no matter how fucking phenomenal kissing her had been, he didn’t just want Annie, he wanted her to want him. Want him for longer than one night. Especially one night in a dingy motel that

smelled faintly of cigarettes and stale sweat, with the soundtrack of some other couple sounding as if they were filming an amateur porno next door.

He sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and tugged off his shoes, leaving his socks on, because while the place appeared clean, looks could be deceiving. Annie smiled and turned the TV on as soon as he'd settled back against the headboard. Earsplitting static immediately filled the room.

"Yikes." Annie flipped the channel, sighing in relief when the picture came through. "Okay, that's promising. It's golf, but it's . . . something." She navigated past C-SPAN, a cooking competition, easily a dozen channels. He was about to suggest they look for a channel guide when Annie gasped. "No way."

It took him a split second to realize the show she'd stopped on wasn't in English, instead in French.

"I can't believe this is on. Then again, we're kind of close to Canada, so I guess it makes sense that they might have a channel in French."

"What is this?"

"*L'amour est dans le pré*. It's a French dating show." A soft smile flirted at the edges of her mouth. "I bet you'd like it."

It sounded like Annie liked it, which was enough of an endorsement for him. "Sounds good."

Annie's smile broadened as she set the remote down between them. She leaned back against the pillows, her arm brushing his.

One episode and he was hooked. Granted, because it was entirely in French and un-subtitled, he couldn't understand a word anyone said. But laughter and love were universal; he didn't need to speak French to appreciate the magic of watching two people tentatively fall in love on-screen. Annie's sporadic translations did help.

"You never really answered my question," he said during a commercial.

"What question was that?"

"If you're not a fan of the grand gesture, what *do* you find romantic?"

She pressed her lips together and swallowed hard. "I feel like you want me to give you a list of activities or gestures and I don't know how to do that because I feel like it's sort of antithetical, in a way."

A list would certainly be convenient, but he held his tongue.

Annie drew her knees up to her chest. "In my mind, romance is just showing someone that you know them, you're thinking of them, you care about them, and you want them to know it. There's nothing wrong with

chocolates and flowers and even grand gestures if that's what someone genuinely likes, if that's what makes them feel appreciated. Because *that's* romance. It depends on what your love language is."

He was familiar with the concept. "Words of affirmation, gifts, quality time, that sort of thing?"

Annie nodded. "Mm-hmm. It can be like speaking two different languages if you express love one way and someone else prefers to receive it differently."

"Lost in translation," he surmised. "Nice analogy."

"I was a linguistics major, what can I say?" She laughed. "I've already made my thoughts on flashy gestures clear. If someone proposed to me in public, I'm pretty sure I'd die of mortification." She shivered and cringed. "To me, the quiet gestures matter more. Someone remembering my coffee order or my favorite movie. Random *I'm thinking of you* texts. Believe it or not, this is pretty perfect." Her eyes widened. "Not that I'm saying this is a date. Because it's not. But if it were."

He filed away her exaggerated vehemence that this wasn't a date but bit his tongue against the urge to make a *doth protest too much* joke, positive it wouldn't fly. He spared a glance around the dingy hotel room, which smelled like body odor and cigarettes beneath several generous spritzes of Febreze. His brows rose. "This?"

Annie wrinkled her nose. "Okay, not exactly this. But low-key nights in? If we had a bottle of wine and Greek takeout, I'd be in heaven." Her smile went sheepish. "I know it probably seems totally at odds with my job, but I'm actually a homebody. Maybe it's because of my job, actually. I like downtime and I'd take sweatpants and slippers over heels and going out to clubs any day."

He grinned. "Same. The general idea, I mean. Not the heels. Can't speak to that experience."

The corners of her eyes crinkled. "I'm sure you could pull off a pair of pumps."

"With my arches?" he joked.

Her laugh made his stomach clench.

"What about you? When it comes to romance, you're the expert."

"Expert?" He scoffed. "I don't feel like much of an expert."

Between his foot-in-mouth blunders and the D-and-I report that had both him and his team puzzled over how to proceed if they wanted OTP to

go the distance, he'd never felt so out of his depth.

"I find that hard to believe," Annie said. "You created a dating app. A successful one." That was up for debate. "Clearly, you must have opinions. Come on, hit me with it. What does Brendon Lowell find romantic? Public proposals? Kisses in the rain? Mad dashes to the airport, racing the clock?" Her smile went sly. "Serenading someone via karaoke?"

"That predictable, am I?" He chuckled awkwardly.

"I'm right?" Annie smacked her hands on the bedspread and twisted, facing him. "Is that what you were doing? Re-creating scenes from rom-coms to prove your point?"

That was how it had started, with wanting to prove a point. Then it had turned into something more, something that had nothing to do with winning a bet, unless the prize was more personal than mere bragging rights.

"And here I thought I was being stealthy." He paused, heart creeping into his throat. "Does that bother you?"

"Well, you didn't stick my face on a Jumbotron, so kudos for that. Until I put two and two together, which was, like, an hour ago, I was none the wiser. Then again, I'm not exactly a rom-com aficionado." She snickered, then sobered, her expression softening, her smile sweet. "I just felt like Annie, spending time with a guy who was going to great lengths to show me a good time in his favorite city."

His heart had yet to return to his chest, instead getting right at home in the hollow of his throat, his every word that much more vulnerable for it. "Can I ask you a question? Another one, I mean."

She nodded, albeit hesitantly. "You can ask."

He dug deep for courage, terrified of what her answer would be, but more afraid of not asking. Of looking back on this moment and regretting letting this chance pass him by. Even if it pained him, he needed to know. "If you weren't moving to London, would this be different? Would you give me a chance?"

With each increasingly fraught blink she made, her eyes growing glassier, his nerves ratcheted until his whole body had evolved into his final form, one raw, exposed nerve.

After a few seconds she pressed her lips into a sad little smile that made his heart twist.

"I don't know, Brendon. Maybe?" she whispered. "But I am moving to London, so it doesn't really matter, does it?"

Maybe.

It mattered to him.

He just needed to show her that it did.

* * *

Thursday, June 3

Brendon cracked an eye open, blinking into pitch-blackness. The AC unit beneath the window whirred to life, ruffling the gauzy curtains covering the window, a sliver of golden sunlight illuminating a wedge of the hotel room.

The TV had shut off automatically due to inactivity, the black screen making the red lights from the clock below it appear brighter by contrast. Eight fifteen.

He stretched, then stilled when the heavy weight on his chest shifted. Annie had wrapped an arm around his stomach and buried her face against his chest. She hummed sweetly, sighed, and started to snore.

Not a quiet, snuffling snore, but a chain-saw roar that ruffled her hair, her lips quivering with each subsequent breath. The sort of snore that belonged to a man twice her size. A man twice her size who had a deviated septum and smoked a pack a day.

His chest rumbled with quiet laughter.

“Hey, Annie,” he whispered, shaking her shoulder. “Annie.”

Her brow furrowed and she shoved him roughly. “Whatisit. Shutup. ’M sleeping.”

He laughed harder, causing her to rise and fall against his side. Still, she slept on. “Annie, it’s morning.”

She cuddled closer and continued to snore.

“Annie.” He shook her shoulder with a little more gusto.

When she didn’t respond, he sighed. Maybe he should just leave her be, let her sleep a little longer. He’d already emailed his assistant, Tyler, letting him know he’d be taking the day off. Technically, Annie could sleep until noon if she wanted. As long as they made it back before the last ferry of the day shipped out, they’d be fine.

He gave in to the urge he’d repressed all yesterday and brushed the soft wisps of baby-fine hair back from her forehead. His heart thudded hard when she smiled, burrowing closer into his chest. Her whole body went

unnaturally still as her snoring stopped. A gasp flew from her mouth and she lifted her head.

Ambient light from the sun peeking in between the curtains bathed half her face in an amber glow, her blue eyes wide and alert. “Oh God. I fell asleep. When did I fall asleep?”

“We both did, at some point. I just woke up.”

She scrubbed a hand over her face and yawned. “I must’ve been really out of it.” She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Normally I’m not a deep sleeper. I have trouble staying asleep more than a few hours.” She smiled, sleepy and soft. “I must’ve been super comfortable.”

His chest puffed up and he was glad his face was still in shadow so that she couldn’t see the completely involuntary smirk that curved his lips. “Maybe you should fall asleep on top of me more often.”

A sliver of sunlight caught on her pale lashes when she blinked. She gave a sharp laugh, her eyes practically glowing. “Maybe I should. You make a damn good body pillow.” Her tongue swept against her lips. “You’re very solid.”

He stared, enraptured by her mouth. How she was still halfway on top of him. “Solid.”

She nodded, and the hand resting on his chest slipped lower, touching his stomach through his shirt. Her throat clicked and he held his breath. “Firm.”

If she moved her hand any lower, she’d swiftly find out his chest wasn’t the only thing that was hard.

His chuckle came out breathless. “Happy to have been of service.”

She seemed regretful when she removed her hand from his body, her fingers lingering for a moment before she lifted them and scooted away, sitting and swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. She cleared her throat. “Let me, um, wash up and then whenever you’re ready we can hit the road.”

Annie grabbed her purse and scurried into the bathroom.

Chapter Twelve

Annie closed Darcy's front door and rested her weight against the wood. A whimper escaped her lips as she slid to the floor, landing in a pitiful heap atop the welcome mat. She shoved the heels of her hands into her eyes, her fingers trembling ever so slightly against her brows.

She was so entirely screwed.

"*Ahem.*"

She jolted, knocking her arm into the door, groaning at the blow to her funny bone.

Darcy sat on the far end of her sofa, legs crossed neatly, her hair cascading over her shoulders in loose curls. She looked like a redheaded Veronica Lake, complete with a vintage-style dressing gown. Like some sort of film noir detective missing only a cigarette, Darcy drummed her fingers against the arm of the couch and scrutinized Annie through narrowed eyes.

"Have fun?" Her right brow arched.

Hands braced against the floor, Annie hauled herself to standing. Maybe Darcy would be kind enough to pretend she hadn't witnessed the beginning of Annie's meltdown. "Shouldn't you be at work? What happened to *I've got my boss breathing down my neck, important accounts, long nights, et cetera?*"

Darcy gestured to her open laptop atop her coffee table. "I decided to work from home when *someone* was out all night."

Annie rolled her eyes and slid off her flip-flops. She collapsed against the couch and kicked her feet up onto Darcy's lap. Darcy wrinkled her nose. "I texted you. We missed the last ferry. No big."

"No big?" Darcy's brows rose.

Life would've had to be too kind for Darcy to let Annie's sleepover and floor mini-meltdown go unmentioned.

No big.

Annie remembered how it had felt, waking up in Brendon's arms. How, for a moment, she'd forgotten all the reasons why getting close to Brendon, letting him in, was a bad idea. How it wasn't the first time she'd lost her head around Brendon. How it kept happening and how each time she struggled more and more to tear herself away.

Annie let out a desperate laugh. "I'm so confused," she muttered, staring up at the shadow shapes on Darcy's ceiling.

Darcy patted her hand gently. "Where's your head at?"

"Pfff." Annie scoffed. "I don't know."

Darcy waited.

"Brendon's . . . he's sweet. He makes me laugh." Plus, she wanted to do dirty things to him she wasn't about to tell Darcy. "He seems like a great guy, but he's looking for . . ." Annie searched for the word. "*Magic*. He wants fireworks. He's got this picture in his head of what love's supposed to be like. It's all . . . feelings."

Darcy frowned. "Love *is* a feeling, Annie. A really great one."

"No. I mean, *yes*. Obviously. But it's also a choice. It's . . . it's a verb. Falling in love is one thing, but staying in love? Feelings fade, you know that."

Darcy nodded.

"It takes a . . . concerted effort to keep a relationship afloat."

An effort most people didn't want to expend. Not in her experience.

"And you don't think my brother can, what? Hack it?" Darcy asked, sounding offended on his behalf.

"I didn't say that. *You* are the one who told me he's constantly going on first dates looking for the *right girl*. The one. But"—she bit down hard on her cheek—"what happens when something better comes along?"

Not that she assumed he thought of her as that. The one. God, no. But he'd mentioned sparks. Said he wanted to get to know her.

Brendon seemed like a genuinely great guy, but for the most part, everyone she'd dated had seemed great at first. Just like she must've seemed—at the very least—pretty decent to those people, too. As much as she felt *something* for Brendon, he seemed in love with the idea of love. Infatuated with the chase. Maybe even a little infatuated with who he *thought* she was, perhaps some remnant of his teenage crush making her a

little rosier to him than she'd have been had he not known her, once upon a time.

In a completely hypothetical situation where she wasn't moving to London, where she lived here, what would happen if she let him in more than she already had? What if he didn't like her nearly as much as he thought he would? What if *she* liked him more than she already did after just a few short days? What if, as soon as she was a sure thing, she lost her shine?

"Brendon doesn't want to settle for anything less than someone who's perfect for him," Darcy said. "And there's nothing wrong with that."

Internally, she groaned. Talking about this with Darcy was a bad idea and she'd known it.

"Brendon deserves the best," Darcy plowed on. "But I'm biased. I'm also pretty sure there's not a person on this planet better than you, so . . ." Darcy cracked a smile. "Consider me biased on both fronts."

Her sinuses tingled, her eyes flooding. *Fuck*. "Warn me before you say something like that." Annie sniffed hard, blotting at the corners of her eyes. "Jesus."

She'd missed this. Missed *clicking* with someone the way she did with Darcy.

"I also think you aren't giving my brother the credit he's due," Darcy said. "I'm confident he'd be deeply committed. He just needs to find the right girl to commit to."

"Yeah, well." She shrugged. "That can't be me."

Even though, after the last week, and last night in particular, she'd started to wonder what it would be like if that girl were her. A what-if. Nothing more. She couldn't help what thoughts popped into her brain and wouldn't leave. She had zero control over that sort of thing.

Darcy pursed her lips and stood, wandering off toward her kitchen. She opened the fridge and grabbed the bottle of wine inside the door. "Hmm."

Not this again. "Darcy. Cut it out."

She snagged two glasses and carried them into the living room, filling both and passing one to Annie. "I think you and my brother both want the same thing. Only, you have wildly different ways of reacting to not getting it."

Annie gripped the stem of her glass and stared. "Uh, yeah, that makes no sense."

“It makes *perfect* sense,” Darcy said, sitting down. “You’re clearly disenchanted with the people you’ve been dating because they haven’t lived up to your expectations. You’ve been let down.”

“I never said—”

“*A lot of little disappointments,*” Darcy said, mimicking her, head teetering from side to side.

Annie bit her tongue.

“And Brendon’s looking for someone who will live up to *his* expectations,” Darcy said, swirling her wine. “Neither of you have found what you’re looking for, but he’s thrown himself into dating headfirst, searching high and low, upping the ante. You’ve pumped the brakes. He’s got high hopes. You’ve lowered your expectations.”

Annie scoffed. “Wow. Who needs therapy when you have a best friend who thinks they know everything? Runs in your family.”

Darcy offered her a tiny smile. “Am I wrong?”

Annie said nothing.

“Look, you want to know why I wound up giving Elle a chance? Giving my *feelings* a chance? It’s because of what you told me. *Carpe diem.*” Darcy sipped her wine, studying Annie over the rim of her glass. “Maybe you should take your own advice.”

They were good words, words to live by. Or they had been. Somewhere along the way, Annie had gotten tired of being the only one doing the seizing. The only one trying. The only one who cared.

“There will be no *seizing* when it comes to your brother,” Annie said crisply. “In fact, I did some thinking on the drive back from Port Townsend.”

Darcy cocked her head.

If Annie couldn’t control her thoughts around Brendon, she’d simply have to see less of him. A lot less of him. “As much as I appreciate his offer to show me around, I think it would be in both our best interests if we . . . saw a little less of each other.”

A lot less of each other.

“Sure.” Darcy smirked. “You can start by seeing a lot less of each other tomorrow at game night.”

Annie shut her eyes. *Damn it.*

“*Carpe diem,*” Darcy taunted.

Annie let loose the closest thing to a growl that had ever passed her lips, because this was *so* not going according to plan. “It is a moot point. I’m moving to London. I can’t exactly give Brendon a chance from five thousand miles away.”

“You’re not five thousand miles away yet.” Darcy reached out, covering Annie’s hand. “You’re here. He’s here. And if my brother wants to try to give you a reason to stay? You’ll have to excuse me if I’m not exactly keen on discouraging him.”

Chapter Thirteen

Friday, June 4

What Board Game Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

Aries—Battleship

Taurus—Life

Gemini—Trivial Pursuit

Cancer—Sorry

Leo—Clue

Virgo—Scrabble

Libra—Chutes and Ladders

Scorpio—Scruples

Sagittarius—Jenga

Capricorn—Monopoly

Aquarius—Cranium

Pisces—Candy Land

FROM: BrendonLowell@OTP.net

TO: JianZhao@OTP.net, KatieDrake@OTP.net, JenniferSmith@OTP.net, . . . 6 others

SUBJECT: Meeting Invitation

WHEN: Friday, June 11, 2 p.m.–3 p.m.

WHERE: Microsoft Teams Meeting

Hey everyone,

I had an idea (👉!!!) re: the new user acquisition that we discussed during last week's meeting. I checked everyone's calendars before scheduling, but let me know if you have any conflicts and we can work a different date out. I blocked out an hour, but we might not need it.

I have a *great* feeling about this.

Best,
Brendon

P.S. It might be helpful to read up on the five love languages prior to our meeting. 📖

*W*ith his last email of the day sent, Brendon powered down his monitor. He was reaching for his keys when his phone buzzed twice in quick succession, rattling loudly against the edge of his keyboard.

DARCY (6:03 P.M.): Where are you? Elle and Margot are getting restless. They're attempting to coerce me into having my aura photographed.

DARCY (6:03 P.M.): My *aura*, Brendon.

He checked the time and winced. He was only running a little late, but Darce was a stickler for punctuality. Even if it was only game night.

BRENDON (6:04 P.M.): On my way!

Elle and Margot's apartment was ten minutes from his office, fifteen if he caught every traffic light, which, mercifully, he did not. He made it across town in eight minutes, a new record, and glided to a stop beside the curb just as it started to drizzle.

Elle answered his knock, bouncing on her bare toes in the doorway. "Hey, Brendon. Come on in." She stepped back and shouted, "Darce, your brother's here!"

Like always, the place smelled faintly of patchouli, but beneath that was a sharper, more acrid smell. Cloyingly sweet and also . . . burned. Upon entering the kitchen, the culprit was clear. A plate of chocolate chip cookies—he was pretty sure those had been chocolate chips, perhaps raisins—sat on the counter, their edges charred black.

Elle reached inside a cabinet, withdrawing an assortment of cups, none of them matching. She placed his favorite, a cup resembling a mock Holy Grail, in front of him. "We've got the usual suspects. Wine, water, and . . ." She shut one eye, thinking. "Coffee."

"Water works, thanks."

"Oh! We might have hot chocolate but it's the kind without the marshmallows."

"No, you have the ones with marshmallows. They're behind your coffee filters, beside the box of apple cider packets that expired in 2014." Darcy stepped inside the kitchen, posting up against the counter. "Hey. You made it."

"When have I ever missed game night?" He smiled when Elle passed him his cup of water. "Thanks."

Elle paused in the doorway of the kitchen, a plastic souvenir cup of rosé in hand. “You guys coming?”

“In a second,” Darcy said. “I need to talk to Brendon about something.”

“Sure. We’re still waiting on Annie, anyway.”

Elle skipped from the kitchen, leaving him with Darcy.

“Annie didn’t come with you?” He frowned.

Darcy crossed her arms, pinching the stem of her wineglass. It was probably the only real glass in this apartment. “No. She wasn’t at my apartment when I came home from work. I texted her and she said something about wandering the market. I gave her Elle’s address and she promised to meet us here.” Darcy flipped her wrist over, checking the time. “If she’s not here in fifteen minutes, I’ll text her. Until then, I thought I’d take advantage of her not being here so you and I could have a little tête-à-tête.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “Tête-à-tête?”

“Do you want to hear what Annie told me after you dropped her off yesterday or not?”

His stomach contorted, because of course he wanted to know what Annie had said, especially if it had to do with him. “Let me think . . . is water wet?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “She thinks you’re sweet. You make her laugh. She told me you have chemistry.”

He nodded slowly. Sweet. Funny. Chemistry. His brows rose. Yeah, he could work with that. “Great.”

“But—”

“Why does there always have to be a *but*?” he muttered.

Darcy frowned sympathetically. “I think she’s afraid that you like the idea of her more than you like her.”

Like the idea of her more than . . . “What gave her that idea? That’s completely not true. That’s—” He broke off with a groan. “Jesus. Does this have to do with my crush? Because come on. Last Friday was the first time I had seen Annie in eight years. I’m not carrying a torch for the girl I used to like when I was in high school. I like Annie *now*.”

He’d had a great time getting to know who Annie was now. A fantastic time. She was hilarious, her sense of humor meshing perfectly with his. She could laugh at herself and she was—fuck, she was stunning. There were

sparks. The sort of connection he'd been searching for, unable to find no matter how many dates he went on.

There was nothing wrong with any of the girls he'd dated, but they hadn't been right for him. The last few dates he'd gone on had been with women he'd met on OTP, and on paper, they'd had plenty in common. But in person? Nothing. He hadn't felt any of the sparks he was supposed to when they'd spoken, and his skin hadn't tingled when they touched. He hadn't even felt remotely warm.

Nothing held a candle to the way he burned when Annie touched him.

He didn't want to put the cart before the horse and call Annie *the one*, but there was too much potential between them for him to just throw in the towel. If anything, it sounded like he needed to step up his game.

"I know you do," Darcy stressed. "You're a romantic, but I never pegged you as certifiable. I'd have never asked you to spend time with my best friend if I thought you were just trying to live out some teenage fantasy."

"But that's what Annie thinks?"

"She didn't say that. She didn't mention your crush on her at all, actually." Darcy took a sip of wine and set her glass aside. "What I'm about to tell you is in confidence, okay?"

He was too engrossed in the conversation to make a quip about how all of this was in confidence. "Okay."

"Annie's dating history is . . . lackluster. She hasn't had the best experiences. I think she's afraid of being disappointed. Again." Darcy frowned. "She's a little . . . skittish. I think more so now that she's realized she really likes you. I just wanted you to know what you're up against."

He frowned, nodding slowly. He wouldn't call them confessions, but some of what Annie had said certainly aligned with what Darcy had said. How, when he'd said the point of his favorite movies was to show that love could conquer all, Annie had scoffed and said seeing was believing. How she believed romance was dead.

What Annie needed was someone to show her that disappointment wasn't an inevitability. Someone who knew how to listen. Someone who liked her, not the idea of her like she was worried about.

Not just anyone, but the right someone.

"I won't disappoint her."

Her expression softened. "I know you won't."

Darcy gave his arm a gentle squeeze on her way out of the kitchen.

Brendon eyed the plate of burned chocolate chip cookies and sad assortment of snacks on the counter before fishing inside his pocket for his phone.

* * *

“Thank God. I was about to send out a search party,” Darcy teased, waving Annie inside Elle’s apartment.

Annie had spent the day exploring the parts of Pike Place Brendon hadn’t gotten around to showing her last Saturday, namely the lower levels, which gave *eclectic* a whole new meaning. There was a magic shop, a luggage store, a store dedicated to all things purple—a real head scratcher—and more smoke shops than she could shake a stick at. The hours had flown by and she was still positive she hadn’t explored every nook and cranny the market had to offer.

“Sorry I’m late. Completely lost track of time.” She slipped off her sandals, leaving them beside a haphazard pile of shoes near the door. “I hope you guys weren’t waiting for me to start.”

A loud shriek came from further inside the apartment.

Darcy winced. “It’s fine. They decided to play Egyptian Ratscrew to pass the time. I’m glad you’re here because it’s starting to get a little . . . violent.” Her eyes dropped to the shopping bag Annie was holding. “What’s that?”

Annie swung the bag behind her back. “It’s nothing. Just something I saw at the market.”

One of Darcy’s brows rose. “Can I see?”

It was an impulse purchase. A dumb one she was already regretting.

Annie had spotted a colorful-looking store that, in addition to comics, sold movie memorabilia—everything from mugs to action figures to movie screenplays. The script of *When Harry Met Sally* had jumped out at her. Against her better judgment, she’d joined the checkout line with only one thought on her mind, and it was how she was dying to see the look on Brendon’s face when she gave it to him.

It wasn’t supposed to be a big deal. It was a screenplay. A reproduced screenplay. A million other copies existed. She bought her friends gifts all the time, little tokens and trinkets from her travels. *I’m thinking of you* gifts.

Maybe that was why, standing in Elle's foyer with Darcy staring at her quizzically, it felt like a bigger deal than she'd bargained for.

In her hands was proof that even when he wasn't around, Annie was thinking of him, and on some level, she wanted him to know it.

"It's just something I saw in a comic book store," she said, downplaying it.

"*You* found something you liked in a comic book store." Darcy sounded skeptical.

"Excuse you, I *devoured* the *Archie* comics as a kid. My first crush was on Archie, for crying out loud."

Darcy's lips twitched. "Your first crush was on an accident-prone, well-meaning redheaded comic book character with a heart of gold?"

And her point was—

Her face went hot. Huh. The resemblance was uncanny, but she wasn't about to admit that. "Shut up."

Darcy held up her hands in supplication. "What's in the bag, Annie?"

Resistance was futile. "Fine. I saw a thing and it made me think of Brendon."

Darcy shot her a wicked smirk. "For Brendon, huh?"

Annie glared. "It's nothing."

"We'll see." Darcy turned. "Hey, Brendon. Annie brought you something."

"I hate you," she hissed, trying to keep from blushing through sheer force of will. "I hate you so much."

Brendon appeared around the corner, wearing a button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, the top two buttons undone, revealing the all-too-lickable-looking hollow of his throat.

"Hey." His grin bordered on boyish, the crinkle of his eyes achingly earnest as he stared at her. "Glad you could make it."

Annie cleared her throat and wiped her palm against the side of her leg. Her hands had gone stupidly clammy. "Wasn't about to miss game night when I'd heard so much about it."

Brendon crossed his arms and leaned his shoulder against the wall. "Darcy told you things tend to get . . . intense?"

"I think the word she used was *vicious*. Not that I need a warning."

She'd witnessed enough flipped Monopoly boards to know how Brendon and Darcy could get when there were bragging rights at stake.

He gave another one of those easygoing smiles that brought out the dimples in his cheeks and made her knees weak. “Darcy said you brought me something?”

“Yeah, Annie. Why don’t you show Brendon what you got him.” Darcy smiled at her, all faux innocence. “I’m going to refresh my drink. Want me to grab you something?”

“Wine. Please. Or, on second thought, water. I haven’t eaten anything.”

Brendon reached inside his back pocket, withdrawing his phone. “I ordered a bunch of takeout. It should be here in about half an hour.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow.

Annie caved. “Fine. Wine.”

Darcy disappeared around the corner. Brendon looked at Annie expectantly.

Right. His present.

She cleared her throat and brought the plastic bag around to her front, fiddling with the straps. “It’s just something I saw. And I—I thought of you.”

His lips twitched as he stepped closer, close enough that he could reach inside the bag himself, if he wanted. Mostly close enough that she could smell his aftershave, even over the sharp smell of incense. “Don’t leave me in suspense, Annie.”

Her laugh came out breathless. “Says the guy who always refuses to tell me where he’s taking me.”

“Don’t try to tell me you don’t like surprises,” he teased, stepping closer, resting his hand on top of hers. “Am I supposed to guess what’s in the bag?”

“You can try.” Her pulse pounded in her neck, her heart hammering away, some combination of nerves and proximity to Brendon making her dizzy.

“Hmm.” Brendon’s lips pulled to the side, eyes narrowing playfully. “Does it have something to do with somewhere we’ve been in the last few days?”

She mulled it over. “Yes and no.”

He laughed. “Okay. I’m throwing in the towel.” His thumb raked across the inside of her wrist as he loosened her grip on the bag. “Can I see?”

With a deep breath to brace herself, she let him take the bag. He delved inside, eyes staring up at the ceiling, stretching out the anticipation. Her

eyes remained locked on his face as he finally lowered his gaze to the thick, bound script in his hands. His jaw dropped, his brown eyes doubling in size.

“Annie.” The way he breathed her name put all the other times anyone had ever said her name to shame. It sounded different the way he uttered it, turning it into a form of praise that somehow rooted her to the spot and made her want to run, all at the same time. He lifted his eyes, and the intensity of them about bowled her over. “This is . . .”

She dropped her eyes to the scant space between them. “I just thought, you love romantic comedies and Nora Ephron and it was on the shelf, so—”

“I love it.”

Her head snapped up. For a moment, she completely forgot how to suck air into her lungs when he looked at her, the weight of his stare a heavy, tangible thing ensnaring her. “This is the greatest present anyone’s ever gotten me.”

She batted at the air. “It’s a reprint. It’s nothing.”

Had she the wherewithal to look up *meaningful glance* in the dictionary, there’d have been a picture of Brendon’s whiskey-colored eyes gazing out at her from off the page. “It’s not nothing.”

No, she supposed it wasn’t. This was something. *They* were something. What that something was, she didn’t have the slightest clue, but continuing to call him her best friend’s brother seemed woefully insufficient when she couldn’t stop thinking about their kiss. A kiss she was pretty sure would haunt her for the rest of her life, with no other kiss capable of measuring up.

Darcy had asked her where her head was at, and if possible, she had even less of a clue today than she had yesterday. Liking Brendon wasn’t smart, and wanting him to kiss her again definitely fell into the realm of bad ideas, but that hadn’t stopped her from thinking about him as she wandered the market, wondering what he’d think of this little trinket or how he’d wrinkle his nose at the Starbucks cups littering the ground around the trash cans.

Utterly irrational, her own feelings were going to wind up giving her whiplash.

Annie wished . . . God, she didn’t even know what she wanted at this point. Maybe to go back in time to before Brendon had turned her inside out, upside down. Back when she’d known exactly what she wanted, when it had made sense.

Take the job. Move to London. Buy a houseplant. Try to make some friends. Acquire a taste for tea. Familiarize herself with her vibrator.

Now she was all mixed up, what she wanted at war with what was smart, what was safe. This thing, whatever it was, couldn't go anywhere, but that didn't stop her from wishing it could.

"I don't know how to thank you for this," he murmured softly.

She had several ideas of where he could start.

He must've been thinking something along the same lines, because he reached out, cradling her jaw, his hand trembling softly, sweetly, against the side of her cheek as he brushed a wisp of hair out of her face. She held her breath, her bare toes curling against the linoleum floor, her whole body vibrating a little from holding still as he lowered his face to hers.

"Are you guys coming? If we keep playing this stupid fucking card game, I swear to God I'm going to wind up with a broken finger," a voice she didn't recognize shouted, shattering the moment.

A muscle in Brendon's jaw flexed as he stepped back with his eyes shut.

It was a blessing in disguise.

That's what she told herself as she stepped out of the foyer and into the living room, heart still racing.

On the floor in front of a well-loved sofa, Darcy sat with her legs crossed, a glass of rosé on the coffee table beside a stack of battered board games. Behind her on the couch, Elle was in the process of fashioning Darcy's long hair into an intricate braid.

Sprawled across the sole armchair, legs over one arm of the chair, head leaned back against the other, was a girl with a razor-sharp lob and cat-eye glasses that further accentuated her dark, almond-shaped eyes. Her checkered Vans bounced against the chair as she swung her legs.

Her lips spread in a smile and she sat up, curling her legs beneath her. "You're Annie."

"I am."

"I'm Margot." She reached for her glass and took a sip, appraising Annie over her drink. "So you're the girl who's got Brendon all in knots."

Brendon groaned and her stomach swooped. He'd talked about her. "*Margot.*"

"I'm sorry," Margot said, smiling, sounding the opposite of apologetic. "Was I not supposed to tell her that?"

He rubbed his eyebrow and sighed, his face turning a shade of pink she had no business finding adorable. And *yet*.

Elle nodded to the opposite end of the couch. "Have a seat. There's your drink."

Annie settled in on the center cushion, scooting over, trying to make room for Brendon and his long legs. It was a tight squeeze, their thighs pressed snug together, the rough denim of his jeans making her hyperaware of the fact that her shorts left her legs bare.

Margot smirked at her. "So, Annie. How are you liking Seattle so far?"

Annie reached for her glass of what appeared to be rosé and took a quick sip. It was ultra-sweet, almost cloying, and more than likely a lot stronger than it seemed. "It's been great. I don't know, I guess I had this picture in my head of constant buckets of rain falling from the sky, and I'd heard rumors about the Seattle Freeze, but everyone I've met has been super friendly. And the food's been amazing. Darcy and I went out to . . . what was it?"

"The Pink Door," Darcy said, wincing when Elle accidentally tugged on her hair.

"Right. Best seafood of my life," Annie said.

"Great food, great beer, and we're super close to a bunch of wineries if your tastes are a little more refined than Elle's and mine." Margot smirked.

"Reliable public transportation if you don't want to drive," Elle chimed in.

Margot nodded. "Totally. We've got an awesome arts scene. Stellar music venues. Diverse communities. Super queer friendly."

"We've got mountains *and* water," Elle said. "And if you're willing to go for a drive, we've got a rain forest to the west and a desert to the east. All in one state. Plus, great day trips."

"Right? We've got Leavenworth, which is this quaint little Bavarian-style town that turns into Santa's village come winter. And Portland's only a couple of hours away."

"What more could you want?" Elle grinned.

Annie bit the inside of her cheek, trying not to laugh. "What more, indeed?"

"Washington has no state income tax," Darcy added, aiming for nonchalance and missing by a mile.

Annie shook her head, chuckling softly. “Why does this feel like an intervention?”

Darcy shrugged. “Not an intervention. Just facts. Do with them what you will.”

Brendon cleared his throat. “As much as I’m sure Annie appreciates these selling points, maybe we should give her some time to, I don’t know, digest them?” He shrugged. “Besides, it’s game night.”

Annie was both touched and overwhelmed by everyone’s trying to sell her on their city. The logical part of her knew Darcy had put them up to it, but still. It was nice to feel wanted, something she hadn’t felt in . . . too long.

But it was a lot to take in at once. Annie jostled Brendon lightly with her arm, staring up at him with a grateful smile. He squeezed her knee, his palm warm against the skin left bare by her shorts.

“Whose turn is it to pick?” Darcy asked.

“Pick?” Annie wondered aloud, still overly aware of Brendon’s hand on her thigh. “Pick what?”

Elle worked a bright blue hair tie off her wrist, wrapping it around Darcy’s new braid. “House rule. Winner of the last game night picks what game we play. *But* it can’t be whatever game or games they won. Because that wouldn’t be fair.”

Brendon and Darcy shared a look, lips curving in twin smirks at the word *fair*.

“That would be me,” Margot said, cracking her knuckles. “I won Jenga, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Darcy mumbled, shivering at the memory it must’ve evoked.

“True. *Or* we could let Annie choose,” Elle suggested. “You know, since this is her first game night.”

First and only, but Annie didn’t correct her.

Margot deliberated for a minute, lips pursed and eyes narrowed behind her lenses. “All right. But choose wisely. I’ll judge you if you pick something stupid like Candy Land.”

“Hey! I love Candy Land,” Elle argued. “Who here can say they *don’t* have a little bit of a crush on Queen Frostine?”

Everyone stared at her.

“Fine, no Candy Land.” Elle sank back into the couch, pouting.

Annie surveyed the boxes of board games stacked on the table. They had everything from Battleship to Cranium to Settlers of Catan, and even a game called Exploding Kittens. If this was a test, she wanted to pass, but she also didn't want to risk life and limb, knowing how competitive Darcy and Brendon could get. "How about Scruples?"

That sounded low risk.

Margot grinned. "I like you."

Darcy shook her head. "We should finish with Scruples. I need more wine before I play that game."

Elle laughed. "Charades first?"

"Fine." Darcy dropped her head back against Elle's thigh. "But we have to pick new teams."

"Normally Brendon and I partner up," Margot explained. "It's not safe to put those two"—she nodded at Darcy and Brendon—"on a team together. They're ruthless."

"I replaced your coffee table, didn't I?" Darcy arched a brow. "No harm, no foul."

"Brendon fell *through* the coffee table. It was scarring." Margot shivered. "I thought we were going to have to drive him to the emergency room."

Brendon turned to Annie and smiled. "Be my partner?"

"As long as I don't fall through a coffee table," she joked.

"Don't worry." He tried and failed to wink, an adorable quirk of his. Less adorable and far more arousing, his thumb rubbed a maddeningly little circle on the skin of her knee. "I'd catch you."

Logic told her it was time to move his hand away. That the longer she left it there without saying something, the more obvious it was she liked it when he touched her. That it would be harder to deny herself these little touches that didn't *feel* like nothing. Each brush of his skin against hers made her want another, made her want more. It was becoming harder and harder—nearly impossible—to remember why she wasn't supposed to be letting this happen.

She set her glass on the table and, in the process, shifted slightly forward, dislodging Brendon's hand from her knee.

Margot stood and stretched, her back popping. "I'll be with Elle and Darcy. Let me run and grab some paper."

She returned in a flash. In one hand she had a handful of scrap paper and in the other two plastic cups. “The rules are simple. Charades, at least according to our house rules, involves each player writing a ten-word-or-less phrase, song title, movie, or other pop culture reference on a slip of paper. You then fold your suggestion in half and slip it inside your designated cup. One player draws from the opposite team’s cup, then has one minute to act out whatever is on the slip of paper. Sound good?”

Annie nodded. The next five minutes were spent in near silence, save for the occasional muffled whisper and snicker as they each individually filled out their slips.

Elle drew first, her smile immediate. “Okay. Everyone ready?”

Margot and Darcy nodded, both sitting up straighter. Brendon’s thumb hovered over the timer on his phone.

“And . . . go!” he said, starting the clock.

Immediately, Elle pointed upward.

“Ceiling!”

“Roof!”

“Sky?” Margot guessed.

Elle bounced on her toes, grinning, gesturing for them to keep going.

“Sky . . . sky . . . stars?” Margot said.

Elle clapped her hands and nodded. She made a fist and punched at the air.

“Fight?”

She frowned and bobbed her head from side to side. With her thumb and forefinger, she made a gun, shooting at some invisible enemy.

“Shoot? Fire?” Darcy guessed.

As if holding a baseball bat, Elle swung, then stepped back, nearly tripping over the rug as she parried an imaginary blow.

“Battle! War! *Star Wars!*” Darcy screamed.

Elle shrieked and threw herself at Darcy. One point to the opposing team. Brendon stared at Annie with wide, serious eyes. “You want to act first or guess?”

She wiped her hands on her legs and stood, reaching inside the cup for a slip of paper. “You guess.”

Her eyes skimmed the writing on the slip; she recognized Darcy’s perfect, looping handwriting. Heat crept up Annie’s jaw.

“Ready?” Darcy smiled.

No. No, she really wasn't.

Brendon had his forearms resting on his knees. He nodded.

"And . . . go!"

Okay . . . she could figure out a way around this. She held up two fingers.

He frowned. "Two words?"

She nodded and held up one finger.

"First word."

She grimaced and got down on her hands and knees. Darcy snickered before clapping a hand over her face. Annie was *so* going to murder her in her sleep.

"Uh . . . ?" Brendon shook his head.

Here went nothing. Annie stuck out her tongue and started to pant.

Brendon stared, cocking his head to the side, doing a better job of looking like an adorably confused puppy dog than she was.

She couldn't believe she was about to do this. She started to shake her butt, still while on her hands and knees. Darcy covered her face with her hands, shaking so hard Annie was pretty sure Darcy was about to start crying.

"Um . . ." Brendon tugged on his hair. "Wiggle?"

Jesus. Annie swallowed down her mortification and hiked her leg in the air, pretending to pee on an imaginary hydrant.

Darcy fell over, and Elle and Margot lost it entirely, their laughter filling the apartment.

"Dog?" he guessed.

She waffled her head from side to side.

"Puppy?"

Gah. Annie made a frazzled gesture for him to keep guessing.

"Dog . . . doggo . . . doggy!"

Annie collapsed to the floor with relief.

"Twenty seconds!" Margot shouted.

Annie held up two fingers.

"Second word," Brendon blurted, nodding quickly.

Annie stood and gestured to her blouse.

"Shirt? Clothes. Fashion."

Annie bounced up and down. So close.

Brendon's eyes widened before he pinched his lips shut and snorted. "Doggy style?"

Face on fire, Annie tossed Darcy a quick, gloating smile before Brendon wrapped his arms around her waist and hefted her in the air, spinning her in a dizzying circle that made her stomach swoop.

"Okay. This one's easy. I want to get it over with." Margot shoved the paper in her back pocket and took the floor. She stuck one arm out in front of her, then the next, before flipping her right arm palm side up, then the left.

Darcy laughed. "Oh! It's the—"

"Shh!" Elle snickered. "I'm confused. Keep going, Mar."

Margot rolled her eyes and cycled through the entire Macarena, Elle laughing the whole time. Lips curved in a grin, but her eyes locked on the timer, Darcy called out the guess when there were ten seconds left. Ever cautious.

"I hate you both," Margot said, collapsing back in her chair with a put-upon sigh.

"Oh please." Annie scoffed. "That was tame."

Darcy smirked. "So was *doggy style*."

Annie could feel the color drain from her face even as her eyes narrowed. What game were they playing?

Brendon was up next. He glanced at his slip of paper and immediately shook his head, a neon flush inching up his jaw. "Nope. Hard pass."

Margot smirked. "You could forfeit."

He clenched his jaw. "Fine. Start the clock."

"Go!"

He held up three fingers, then just one. She nodded. Brendon pointed at himself.

"I?"

He nodded. Two fingers went up before he wrapped his fingers around his opposite wrist.

"Grab? Hold? Grip?"

He grimaced, shooting Margot another *if looks could kill* glare, before changing tactics. He rested his hand on his chest and dragged it slowly down his body, stopping just before he reached indecent territory. He met Annie's eyes across the room, his brows rising and lips curling in a quick

and dirty little smirk before he performed a quick hip thrust that made her flush to the roots of her hair.

“Um . . .” Her brain wasn’t working.

“Twelve seconds.”

Shit.

Brendon lifted three fingers then pointed at himself all over again.

“I?”

He shook his head.

“Me?”

He circled his hand for her to keep going.

“Um . . .” Oh. *Oh!* “I touch myself!”

Brendon collapsed on the floor and covered his face, groaning into his hands. “I hate you, Margot.”

“Love you, too, babe. Darcy, you’re up.”

Last, but certainly not least, Darcy acted out *Pride and Prejudice*, resorting to pointing to herself in frustration. Down to the wire, Elle guessed correctly.

Darcy pulled a face, shuddering hard as she returned to her seat. “I can’t be the only one who’d rather be playing Monopoly, right?”

Groans rose up around the living room.

“What?” Darcy crossed her arms.

“As if you don’t know perfectly well,” Annie said, shaking her head. “You once flipped the board when you lost.”

“I was twelve.” Darcy sniffed. “It’s my favorite game. I get a little competitive. Sue me.”

“A little?” Annie laughed. “Understatement of the year award goes to . . .”

Brendon gave a drumroll. “*Darcy*. Come on, admit it. You trounce everyone.”

“You play without mercy, buying all the utilities and putting up hotels as soon as you can,” Annie said.

Darcy turned to Elle, brows raised, clearly looking for help.

“Landlords suck,” Elle muttered, avoiding Darcy’s eyes.

“Wow.” Darcy tutted. “That is the *point* of the game.”

“All in favor of switching over to Monopoly?” Margot asked.

Predictably, one hand rose. Darcy’s.

“All opposed?”

Everyone else raised a hand. Elle lifted both and blew Darcy a kiss.

“The nays have it,” Margot said. “Someone pick another slip.”

“Could we get new ones?” Brendon muttered. “I feel like this game is rigged.”

It was true. She and Brendon were the only ones getting extremely innuendo-laden phrases.

“It’s not our fault you didn’t come to win,” Darcy said, smirking.

Annie had a feeling there was something else afoot. She was getting some distinct matchmaking vibes, the none-too-subtle smirks exchanged by Darcy, Elle, and Margot impossible to ignore.

She reached for her phone and opened her texts, about to tell Darcy to cool it. She didn’t need Darcy to play matchmaker for her and she *definitely* didn’t need any help realizing she was crazy stupid attracted to Brendon. It was the rest she was fuzzy on, and no amount of miming lewd sex acts was going to bring her any clarity.

Her thumb hovered over the *send* button when someone pounded heavily against the front door.

“Food must be here,” Brendon said, leaving the room, giving her an ample view of how snugly his jeans fit in all the right places.

Annie shut her eyes.

Maybe switching to Monopoly wasn’t such a bad idea.

* * *

Annie’s stomach hurt from laughing.

Elle and Darcy had ducked out for more wine, a bottle Darcy swore would go better with Greek food than Elle’s boxed rosé. Margot had retreated to her bedroom to make a phone call, leaving Annie and Brendon alone.

“What did—” She clamped her lips together, about to lose her composure all over again. “What did you call it?”

Brendon wiped the tzatziki sauce off his chin. “*Zatzeekie* sauce.” When she sputtered through tightly pressed lips, his cheeks began to color. “What? That’s what it’s called!”

She gasped through her laughter and held her stomach, praying she wouldn’t slide off the counter and onto the floor. Oh God, her abs were starting to burn. “That’s—that’s not even remotely close to how you say it.”

“It is!” His nose scrunched. “Isn’t it?”

Nope. She shook her head.

“Ah, hell.” He gripped the back of his neck, looking chagrined. “I thought it was like *tsar*. You know, but with a silent *t*.”

“Tsah-see-key,” she enunciated. “It’s like saying pizza without the first syllable.”

“I’ve been saying it wrong my whole life.” He hung his head and groaned. “Every time I order, I ask for extra *zatzeekie* sauce. I’m impressed with everyone’s ability to keep a straight face.”

“Except for me,” she teased.

Brendon grinned. “You are the exception.”

She snickered into her Gyrito, a gyro/beer-battered burrito hybrid stuffed with gyro meat, tomatoes, and feta cheese. It was so delicious she was a smidge disappointed Brendon had ordered just one. On the other hand, he’d ordered Greek food, and she was 99 percent certain he’d done so because she’d mentioned how much she loved it the other night when they were stranded in that grimy motel. She was surprised he remembered, and even more surprised he’d actually ordered it when, according to Darcy, the group usually ordered from the Thai place right around the corner. “I’m sure plenty of people mispronounce it. Consonant clusters are a bitch. Try saying *strč prst skrz krk* five times fast.”

“Was that—what *was* that?” He gaped.

He’d missed a spot of tzatziki at the corner of his mouth, making him look all the more adorable in his horror over his mispronunciation and her tongue-twister. Without thinking, she leaned forward and thumbed it away, gasping when his tongue darted out against her skin.

All Brendon did was smile, like licking her finger was no big deal.

Her pulse pounded in her head. “It’s—it’s a, um . . . a Czech tongue-twister. It means ‘stick a finger through the throat.’”

He recoiled in horror and her head fell back against the cabinet, her stomach burning with laughter all over again. She did that a lot around him, laughing so hard she ached. Her stomach, her chest, her heart. All good aches, like stretching underused muscles.

“What it translates to doesn’t really matter,” she explained, wiping her fingers off on her napkin. “Each word has no vowels and a syllabic *r*, which —” She broke off, realizing he probably didn’t care about the nuances of Slavic languages. “It’s just a funny tongue-twister.”

He cocked his head, looking genuinely curious. “Syllabic *r*?”

She smiled, more pleased than she’d admit. “Yeah. The *r* is a syllabic consonant sound unto itself, so you don’t need vowels. Like the *m* in *rhythm*.”

He hummed, sounding intrigued. “You never said you spoke Czech, too.”

“I don’t. In one of my linguistics courses in college that was an example of liquid consonants. Hard to forget.”

He smiled crookedly. “Well, at least I know I’m saying *gyro* right.”

She buried her smile in her napkin, because he *wasn’t*. As with *tzatziki*, he’d butchered it, albeit not quite as horrifically. He was *close* by calling it a “euro.”

His smile fell, replaced with a hangdog look of dismay. “No.”

“Yep. It’s *yee-roh*.”

He hung his head. “I can never show my face in George’s again.”

“I’m sure they hear *way* worse all the time. At least you didn’t call it a *jy-roh* or a *grrr-roh*.”

He snickered. “At least.”

She eyed his order of Greek-style poutine hungrily. Her Gyrito had been satisfying but not the most filling. She plucked a fry from the basket and cradled it with her other hand, careful not to drip grease all over the counter as she brought it to her mouth. Her taste buds exploded with that one perfectly balanced bite of feta cheese, tzatziki sauce, and Kalamata olives. She groaned and plucked another fry from the paper boat, scarfing it down before going back for one more.

“You fry thief.” He laughed. “You’re going to have to pay for that, you know.”

She lowered her fry from her lips and frowned quizzically. “Hmm?”

A mischievous smile played at the edges of his mouth. “You eat my fries, you pay taxes.”

“Taxes? What kind of taxes?”

Brendon stepped in front of her, one arm on either side of her hips, his palms resting on the counter. She swallowed hard, breath coming quicker as he leaned closer, boxing her in.

“Spend tomorrow with me.”

She blinked twice.

Those were not the sort of taxes she had on the brain.

“What did you have in mind?”

“It’s sort of . . . OTP adjacent.”

“Is it, like, a company picnic or something?”

“Or something.” Brendon smiled. “It’s not every day our head of public relations ties the knot with our VP of analytics.”

“A wedding? You’re inviting me to a wedding?”

He took another step closer, firmly cradled between her thighs in a way that was unambiguously intimate. Friends didn’t stand like this or touch each other like this, and they definitely, without a doubt, didn’t stare at each other’s mouths like Brendon was eyeing hers. “I was going to strongarm Margot into being my plus-one, but if you aren’t doing anything”—he swallowed—“maybe you want to be my date?”

She held her breath.

The word rattled around inside her brain.

Date.

Date.

Date.

She leaned back against the cabinet, her head suddenly too heavy to hold upright. “I don’t know, Brendon.”

“It’ll be fun, Annie,” he promised. “We’ll make it fun.”

Having fun with Brendon wasn’t her concern.

Weddings were . . . serious, this one bound to be more so seeing as Brendon worked with some percentage of the guest list. A *large* percentage, she’d wager. There would be questions. Who Annie was. Who she was to Brendon. Weddings had a funny way of making people comfortable asking prying questions that under any other circumstances would be deemed impolite.

How long have you been together? Is it serious? Think that’ll be the two of you up there someday? You’re not getting any younger. Why don’t you try to catch the bouquet?

“The venue’s on the water in Kirkland. You can see the whole city from there. Just think. Delicious food—”

“Rubbery chicken, you mean.”

He chuckled. “I was thinking more along the lines of wedding cake. You like cake, don’t you?”

Duh, but she couldn’t help but tease, “Depends on the flavor.”

Just like she'd imagined earlier, only better, Brendon's hands skimmed up her thighs, gripping her, thumbs making more of those maddening circles against her skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake. They inched higher, approaching the hem of her shorts, flirting with where denim met skin. "Dancing. You can't honestly tell me you don't want to watch me do the 'Cha Cha Slide'?"

It was difficult to string her thoughts together with Brendon touching her like this. "I—I don't know if I could h—handle the secondhand embarrassment."

Brendon's thumbs slipped just under the fabric of her shorts, his brows lifting high on his forehead. She shivered violently, making Brendon grin.

Oh, that was dirty pool. So utterly unfair.

His voice was rough-hewn and he sounded as breathless as she felt. "Please?"

Something about that one word completely undid her.

"Okay."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "It's . . . it's a date."

One date. That was hardly promising anything. It wasn't like she'd agreed to move here and marry him or anything absurd like that. Just a date.

Brendon's tongue darted out, wetting his lips as he leaned in, arching over her. His fingers bit into the skin of her thighs, pleasant pressure that made her stomach clench in anticipation.

Yes. The moment she'd been dying for since their almost-kiss in the foyer. Before that, if she was being honest. Since their last kiss, their first kiss, what was supposed to have been their only kiss, because she had a mantra. A list of reasons that right now she couldn't have given less of a fuck about.

"We've got wine!"

Brendon swore quietly under his breath, tearing himself away quickly, regret shining in his dark eyes. Eyes that remained locked on hers as he reached down, adjusting himself in his jeans, not bothering to hide what he was doing.

She bit back a whimper.

Tearing herself from Brendon was becoming increasingly difficult, the ache between her thighs so intense she could hardly look Darcy in the eye when she stepped inside the kitchen, brown paper bag of wine in hand.

* * *

An hour later, after every last scrap of takeout had been devoured, game night had turned into less of a vicious competition and more of a lazy evening of chatting, music playing quietly in the background. Annie ducked out to use the restroom and when she stepped back into the hall, she nearly collided with Elle. “Whoops. Sorry.”

Elle shook her head. “I was waiting for you.”

Annie’s brows rose. “Oh. Okay?”

“I was thinking, if you don’t already have plans tomorrow, we could hang out? I have a few calls I have to make in the morning, but I’m free after noon if you want to grab lunch and maybe go shopping.” Elle offered her a smile. “I know a great antique market, if that sounds like something you might be interested in.”

Her lips twisted in a genuine apology, touched by the offer. “I’d love to, but I already promised Brendon I’d spent the afternoon with him.”

“No worries. Next week, maybe?”

“I’m in.”

Elle beamed at her before her eyes darted briefly to the living room. “This has been nice. All of us. I’m happy you’re here.”

“So am I. Aside from, you know, the total humiliation of having to act out *doggy style* in front of everyone, it was fun.”

She was happier than she could remember being in a long, long time. She didn’t feel particularly compelled to do the math—any kind of math, but especially math this depressing—but it had been too long since she’d had friends who included her in any of their plans. Friends who bothered to remember when she was in town or where she was when she wasn’t. True friends.

One night with Darcy, Elle, Margot, and Brendon and Annie already felt more welcome than she had the last five times she’d been out with her “friends” in Philadelphia. Even if Darcy had put them all up to their little *let’s sell Annie on the virtues of Seattle spiel*, they’d obviously cared enough to go along with it.

These were people who wanted her around, and that was new. New and not something Annie was thrilled to leave behind.

She paused in the entryway of the hall, watching as Elle returned to her place on the couch behind Darcy. Brendon looked over his shoulder and

smiled at Annie, gesturing to the space beside him.

Her chest grew tight.

In less than a week, she'd be on a plane to Philadelphia, a pitstop where she'd pack her apartment up and continue on to London.

Unless . . .

She pressed the heel of her hand to her chest, trying and failing to alleviate the pressure squeezing her, making her feel like the room was suddenly too small for five people plus all her tangled-up feelings.

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday, June 5

*E*arly showers had cooled the air considerably, the temperatures hovering in the midseventies. Rays of sunshine had broken through the cloud cover during the ceremony, right as Katie and Jian exchanged vows. Now the sun hovered at the horizon, streaking the blue sky with shades of sherbet orange and pink. Golden light reflected off the placid surface of Lake Washington, and a gentle breeze ruffled the crisp white tablecloths beneath the pavilion as Annie took a sip of champagne and admired the view.

Nothing she'd ever heard about Seattle had done the place justice. Not even pictures could capture the city in its glory. Blue skies streaked with white clouds served as a backdrop for the skyscrapers, mountains peeking out to the right. Everything was green—the trees, the grass—all thanks to the rain she didn't mind as much as she'd first thought she would. The whole city felt vibrant and alive in a way no place she'd ever lived before had.

Saying goodbye to Seattle might be the hardest thing she'd ever done. So hard, she was already dreading it, and she wasn't even gone yet.

"Is my tie crooked?" Brendon fidgeted with the hot-pink bow tie knotted at his throat. "It feels crooked."

She had to swallow fast before she spewed champagne across the table. "It's not crooked, it's completely lopsided. Come here."

He leaned forward, baring his throat, allowing her to adjust his bow tie, all the while staring down at her from beneath his coppery lashes. Fingers trembling ever so subtly, she smoothed the satin, then ran her hands along his broad shoulders, brushing away imaginary lint. A poor excuse to keep touching him.

Brendon was currently sporting the most dapper outfit she'd ever seen him in: a sharp-looking navy suit tailored to perfection—though he'd ditched the jacket after the ceremony—a white button-down, a pink tie, and polished brown loafers. His auburn hair was combed neatly back, save for one rogue strand that kept curling at his temple.

For some reason, probably because this was a wedding, Annie had a flashback to when she was five, maybe six, and had tagged along with Mom to the bakery to put in the order for Dad's birthday cake. In the center of the shop had been a display of the most gorgeous wedding cakes Annie had ever seen. Multitiered and covered in fondant and delicate sugar flowers, those cakes had captivated her. When no one was looking, Annie had swiped her finger through the frosting, dying for just one taste. Icing-laden finger poised an inch in front of her mouth, she'd frozen when the woman working behind the counter had wagged a finger, scolding her with a severe frown that had left Annie quaking.

Brendon was like one of those cakes. Delicious looking, tempting, completely off-limits if she knew what was good for her.

"There." She dropped her hands back to her lap, a safe distance away. "All better."

Brendon offered her a crooked smile and reached for his glass of water, draining half of it in one chug.

She curled her fingers around the taut muscles of his forearms, squeezing gently. Her hands had a mind of their own, apparently having missed the whole *no-touchy* memo. "Are you okay? You're looking a little . . . peaky."

During the ceremony, he'd shed a few happy tears, the vows even choking her up a little, but afterward, during cocktail hour, he'd grown pale faced and fidgety. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out why.

He set his water aside and grabbed his champagne, tipping it back and coughing. "Ah, bubbles." He pinched his nose, making her laugh. "I'm supposed to give a speech." He patted the breast pocket of his suit. "I jotted a few notes down but now I'm second-guessing myself."

"Just . . . speak from the heart? You're amazing at that."

A deep flush worked its way up his jaw, his skin matching his bow tie. She had the fiercest urge to press a kiss to the hinge of his strong jaw, feel his skin warm under her lips. "Thanks, Annie."

He squeezed her knee, his palm hot against the skin left bare by her dress. The familiarity of the gesture made her breath hitch, and a stupid part of her wanted to trap his hand between her thighs, to see what he'd do. If the flush would creep higher up his face, bleed into his hairline, or if he'd smirk and slide his hand even higher.

She hadn't brought any clothes to Seattle that were formal enough for a wedding, even an outdoor summer ceremony. Darcy had given her free rein in her closet, but the height difference made picking something out to borrow difficult. Darcy's short dresses fell at an unflattering spot on her calves, chopping her off just below the knees. Her maxis drowned Annie, fabric dragging on the ground. She'd chosen the one dress that didn't make her look like a little girl playing dress-up in her mom's closet, a number that was probably tea-length on Darcy but fell to Annie's ankles. The bodice was a little roomy, but because it was a halter, Annie hadn't had a problem adjusting it so there'd be no accidental slippage. There was a deep slit up the side, the blush silk fluttering around her legs.

His hand lingered on her thigh, an embarrassingly breathy sigh escaping her lips when his thumb caressed the crease of her knee.

"Shit," he swore under his breath, making her jump. This wasn't the time or the place to be thinking about what Brendon's face would look like if she grabbed his wrist and tugged it higher up her thigh beneath the privacy of the tablecloth.

Her sip of water did little to quench her thirst. "What's wrong?"

Brendon stared across the room, his smile verging on a grimace. "Jian's mother is gesturing for me."

Annie followed his eyes. An older woman wearing a beautiful sapphire gown winked at Brendon.

"I think that's your cue," Annie said.

He stood stiffly, looking almost as petrified as he had when he'd climbed the stage for karaoke. "Wish me luck."

Without thinking, she reached out, grabbing his hand. She squeezed his fingers, finding their clamminess adorable. "Good luck. I'll be here when it's over."

He squeezed back and marched off toward the front of the room, where the groom's mothers welcomed him with eager smiles.

"Your boyfriend seems nervous."

It took her a minute to realize the woman sitting at the next table over was speaking to her.

“Oh, he’s not my—he’s just . . .” Annie sighed and laughed. Here it was, the first of many times where she would be forced to explain her relationship to Brendon. “My friend.”

A friend she was painfully attracted to, but a friend nonetheless.

The other woman smiled. “Friends. Ten years ago I was just friends with that guy over there”—she jerked her chin in the direction of a man standing and talking to the groom—“but then one thing led to another and we had three of those”—she pointed at the group of kids playing near the edge of the lake—“and now we’re expecting another.”

She rested her hand on her bump.

Annie laughed. “Congratulations?”

“Life comes at you fast.” The woman beamed at her. “You don’t look like ‘just friends.’”

Was she really having this conversation? With a stranger? Of course she was. Awkward conversations with strangers were par for the course at weddings. “It’s a long story.”

“The best ones usually are.” The woman laughed. “I’m just saying. I know that look. That *will we, won’t we* look. Where he’s looking at you when you aren’t, and then you’re looking at him when he isn’t. When both of you are too scared to bite the bullet, so you dance around each other until finally . . .” She waggled her brows. “*Boom.*”

Annie dropped her elbow to the table and rested her chin on her hand. “*Boom*, huh? I guess I’m worried about the wrong sort of *boom*, if you catch my drift. The painful kind that implodes in your face.”

She turned and Annie followed her gaze. Brendon stood at the front of the pavilion, watching Annie. He winked, both eyes shutting adorably.

“I doubt you have anything to worry about, because that guy?” The woman leaned in, whispering. “He looks at you like you hung the moon.”

* * *

Brendon had immediately been pulled into a conversation upon the conclusion of his speech, which had thankfully inspired as much laughter as it had tears. Problem was, as soon as he’d slipped away from *that*

conversation, he'd been drawn into another and another, when all he wanted was to spend time with Annie.

"Hi." Speak of the devil. Only, Annie looked more like an angel in her pink dress, her blond hair creating a soft halo around her face as she wrapped her hand around his arm, tucking her fingers into the crook of his elbow. "I hope you don't mind if I steal my date."

The older woman he'd been speaking to, a great-aunt of Katie's, waved them off with a smile.

"Sorry it took me a minute to rescue you," Annie said as they crossed the room, circling the dance floor. "Cake came first."

"As it always should." He smiled down at her.

The sun had slinked beneath the horizon, leaving behind a fiery strip of crimson and burnished bronze that bled upward into navy and indigo. Around the same time the desserts had been brought out, someone had flipped on the looping strands of fairy lights strung up around the pavilion. Their golden glow brought out the flecks of darker blue in Annie's eyes. *Breathtaking* didn't do her beauty justice.

Throughout the ceremony, when he hadn't been focused on Katie and Jian, he'd stolen glances at Annie from the corner of his eye, scarcely believing that she was here. That she'd agreed to come with him. His date. No pretenses, no excuses; he'd asked her because he wanted her here. Not because Darcy needed his help convincing Annie to move to Seattle. Not because of their bet, his determination to prove to her romance wasn't dead. If he was lucky, witnessing two people vow to spend the rest of their lives together might help him do just that, but that wasn't why he'd asked Annie.

There wasn't a single person he'd have rather had with him.

"My speech wasn't a total cluster, was it?" he asked.

"I loved it," she said, sounding completely sincere.

"Yeah?" His brows rose.

She nodded. "It's been a year or so since I've been to a wedding, but after a while, all the speeches and vows start to blur together. Yours, I'd remember."

"Want to hear something wild?" Without asking, he led her over to the dance floor, just in time for the upbeat song to transition into something a little slower they could talk during while they swayed.

Annie rested her hands on his shoulders, their sizable height difference less disparate with her towering pumps. "Wild? Uh, *duh*. I'm not sure why

you'd waste your breath asking."

He smiled and rested his hands on her hips. His fingers brushed the skin left bare by the low back of her dress. The way she shivered and stepped closer was intensely gratifying. "All right. This is the fifth wedding I've been to this year."

She jerked back, staring up at him with wide, horrified eyes. "*Fifth?*" She snickered. "Oh God, is this where you tell me you've been a groomsman twenty-seven times?"

He gripped her waist, not leading her in any particular set of steps as much as swaying softly to the music. They were near the edge of the dance floor, out of everyone's way. "Hardly. Besides, three of those weddings were for people who met on OTP and sent me an invitation."

She goggled at him. "People *do* that? Send strangers invitations? I mean, I know people invite, like, Taylor Swift to things, but . . ." She scrunched her nose. "You're not Taylor Swift. No offense."

"None taken."

"And you go?"

"Of course." He shrugged. "What's not to love about weddings?"

Her fingers gently twisted in the short strands at his nape. A pleasant shiver raced from his scalp down his spine. That was new. Someone playing with his hair. It was nice, something he could get used to.

"I can only speak to the weddings I've been to, but usually the food sucks, there's never an open bar, someone's aunt or uncle still manages to get sloppy drunk and make a pass at the wedding party, someone has a breakdown in the bathroom, the DJ thinks the chicken dance is still in vogue, and everyone makes *way* too big of a deal out of the bouquet toss." She stared up at him through long lashes made dark by the makeup around her eyes. "I guess weddings feel like a party for everyone *except* the bride and groom. It has nothing to do with their marriage."

"I've been to weddings like that," he conceded, stepping back before reaching for Annie's hand, spinning her in an unexpected twirl that made her laugh. The sound was music to his ears, better than whatever the DJ was playing, which had faded into the background, just noise. "Where everyone forgets what it's all supposed to be about."

"Which is?" Annie rested her hands on his chest, no doubt able to feel his heart thundering away beneath his breastbone.

“The party favors, obviously.” He grinned. “Free stuff. What’s not to love?”

She shoved him lightly, then let her hands drift back to his shoulders. She stepped closer than before, her stomach pressed intimately into his hips, a move that made him swallow hard. “I find it difficult to believe you come to all these weddings for cellophane-wrapped kettle corn and bottle openers engraved with someone else’s initials.”

“You got me there.” He ran his hands down her back, stifling another smile when her breath caught, audible even over the music. “It’s—don’t laugh.”

She mimed zipping her lips.

“There’s just something about watching two people pledge their love to one another, celebrate their commitment surrounded by family and friends, and step into the next chapter of their lives. It more than makes up for the rubbery chicken.” He traced absent circles along her back, staring down at her. Her blue eyes were serious as they flitted over his face, her lashes fluttering softly. “I’ve been thinking. The other night, in the hotel. You asked me what I think is romantic. And yeah, I am a fan of the grand gesture. Not every grand gesture, because I thought about it, and you’re right. Plenty are flawed and creepy, poorly executed, or try to make up for shoddy communication skills. But emblematically? I do love it. That big, demonstrative moment where nothing else matters but making sure the person you care about knows it. That you’re in. You’re all in and you want everyone to know, no matter how wild or risky it is. Weddings are like that. The vows are, at least.”

Something about the soft look in Annie’s eyes, wistful almost, compelled him to keep going. To confess what he’d never told anyone before.

“I don’t have a single memory of my mom and dad saying *I love you* to each other.” Annie made a soft noise, but he soldiered on, wanting to get this out. “Maybe those movies aren’t perfect, but for most of my life, they were the best proof I had that people could wind up happy together.”

Their gentle swaying had come to a stop at the edge of the dance floor. Annie frowned sharply and her fingers tightened in his hair, forcing him to turn his face down. “Brendon.”

“Sorry.” He chuckled, eyes darting around the pavilion. Everyone else was in their own little world, paying the two of them no mind. “Didn’t

mean to go off on a tangent. Or be such a bummer.”

She gave a quick, curt shake of her head. “No, no. That’s . . . I always viewed the grand gesture as sort of selfish. *If I do this, I’ll get this out of it.* I never thought of it the way you described it before.”

An uneven exhale escaped from between his lips when Annie’s thumb brushed the space beneath his ear. “And I never really thought about the little things, until you talked about it the other night. But I think you’re right. With the right person, I don’t think it matters what you do or where you are.”

The smile she graced him with made his heart roll over like the engine of his junky first car. “Exactly.”

The last strains of the slow song they’d swayed to ended, and the DJ switched over to something loud and poppy. Brendon stole a step back, bopping his head and shaking his hips from side to side in an exaggerated shimmy, trying to make Annie laugh.

His performance had the desired effect, causing Annie to grip her stomach as she giggled.

“Go on.” She jerked her chin at him when he stopped. “I was enjoying myself.”

Across the floor, someone wolf-whistled. He followed the sound to where Jian had his fingers in his mouth, Katie at his side, falling over herself laughing.

Brendon flushed. “Yeah, you and everyone else.”

Annie smiled and reached for his hand, leading him off the dance floor.

Caught up in the feel of her much smaller fingers laced with his, he missed the fact she’d led them not in the direction of their table, but instead to a table covered in tiny vials of bubbles and other party favors.

Mixed in with the bubbles and miniature bottles of tequila were a dozen Fujifilm Instax cameras and a sign that read, *Please borrow a camera and help us capture our special day. Take a selfie or group picture and add it to our guestbook! Xoxo, Katie and Jian*

Brendon snagged a camera and snapped a candid of Annie. A startled laugh escaped her lips.

“Gimme.” She snatched the camera right out of his hands. A bright flash filled his vision, making him jump even though he knew it was coming.

Annie lowered the camera and grabbed the photo that popped out from the top.

“Let me see,” he said, reaching for the camera.

She shook her head, holding the camera out of reach. His arms were longer, so he could’ve grabbed it had he truly wanted, but he didn’t. Not when Annie was beaming at him. Not when he’d do anything to keep her smiling. Smiling because of him. “Uh-uh. I bet that one turned out blurry.”

She snapped another picture and another soon after that, capturing him midlaugh.

“Oh, come on. *Annie.*” He stepped forward. “Don’t I get a turn?”

She backed away, leaving the cover of the pavilion, stepping out onto the strip of grass that led down to a set of concrete stairs that descended into the lake.

“Quit running away from me,” he gasped out, laughing. He narrowly avoided the group of children playing and quickened his steps, practically running. Up ahead, Annie quickened her stride, her dress flapping around her ankles.

She stopped at the edge of the lake. His momentum too great, Brendon was forced to wrap his arms around her waist to keep from barreling into her. Annie caught herself with her hands splayed against his stomach.

He smiled down at her, and the blue-hued twilight played against the high crests of her cheeks, highlighting the sweep of her lashes and the curve of her upper lip.

“I think . . . I think I like having you chase me,” she whispered.

Inhaling the brackish smell of lake water and the delicate scent of Annie’s perfume, he held still as she slid her hands higher, resting them on his chest. Beneath her palms, his heart pounded, making it obvious how much he wanted her.

“I caught you,” he rasped. “What do I get?”

Heat curled deep in his gut when the tip of her tongue slipped out from between her lips.

“I guess that would all depend on what you want,” she whispered, eyes only leaving his for a split-second glance at his mouth.

Annie’s hands drifted over his shoulders and wrapped around the back of his neck in a move that brought them closer, barely a sliver of space between their bodies. She twirled her fingers into the short strands at his nape and craned her neck, staring up at him from beneath low lids.

Somewhere not far behind them, a child's shriek pierced the air, reminding him they weren't alone. Even if he desperately wished they were, the things he wanted to do to her would be indecent for adult eyes, let alone children's.

He made to take a step back, putting some much needed distance between them. Only there wasn't room, one concrete stair the only thing separating him from the lake.

His contrite smile froze on his face as the ground disappeared from beneath him, the world tilting. Doing everything in his power to stay upright, he pinwheeled his arms at his sides as he careened backward, gasping as he plunged beneath the surface of the frigid water.

Chapter Fifteen

It could've been worse.”

Brendon flipped his blinker, turning onto Darcy's street. “How?”

She clamped her lips together, hiding her smile. “You could've pulled me in with you?”

He put the car in park and shook his head slowly, lips twitching. “Maybe I should've.”

Had he, maybe they'd have had an excuse to leave the reception sooner. As it was, half the guests had rushed out of the pavilion at the sound of Brendon's splashing in the lake, fully dressed, and it had taken thirty minutes of his assuring everyone he was no worse for wear—only wet—before he was able to grab a change of clothes from the gym bag he had stored in the tiny trunk of his car. They'd made their exit shortly after.

Unfortunately, she didn't have his patience. Then again, he hadn't done anything to recapture the moment since they'd gotten in his car. He'd hopped directly on Highway 520 and driven to Darcy's without asking if she'd have rather gone to his place, so he didn't seem especially keen on rekindling the mood.

Which was fine. For the best, even. She'd gotten wrapped up in the moment, had too much fun, and let it go to her head. That was another problem with weddings, one she hadn't shared with Brendon. For all their rubbery chicken, line dances, and antiquated traditions like garter tosses, Brendon was right about one thing.

Annie would've needed a heart of stone not to feel *something* watching two people stand up in front of all their family and friends, vowing to spend the rest of their lives together no matter what obstacles life threw their way. She didn't have a heart of stone, not even close, and being here in Seattle, spending time with Brendon, was chipping away at the defenses she *had*

erected around her heart. Making her want things she had no business wanting. Desires that scared her shitless.

Big things, forever things, the sort of things that with each failed relationship and bad date had felt a little further out of reach. Made her feel a little more hopeless, resigned to the idea that romance was dead and there was no one out there who could prove otherwise to her. No one who'd even bother to try.

And then came Brendon.

If the circumstances were different, maybe what she felt, what Brendon made her feel, would be a risk worth taking.

But they weren't.

So.

She reached for the door handle and gave Brendon a smile that felt fifty shades of flimsy, strained. *Pained*. "I had fun today, Brendon."

He ran a hand through his hair, wincing when his fingers snagged in the strands. It had dried since he'd fallen in the lake, but it stuck up oddly. *Adorably*. "Me too. Thanks for being my date."

Annie opened the door and reached down to the floorboard for her purse.

"Oh, hold on." He turned, fishing around in the backseat before swiveling and facing her. "Here."

He pressed a small cardboard box into her hands. *Breathe Right Nasal Strips*.

She frowned.

He scratched his jaw. "I noticed you snore the other night when we crashed at the hotel. And I didn't know if you knew, but I saw these."

"And you thought of me?"

"That's not weird, is it?" His eyes widened. "Ah shit, that's weird."

Without a doubt, it was the weirdest present anyone had ever given her.

But that didn't mean it wasn't welcome.

It was weird and wonderful and welcome because it meant he had been thinking of her. As far as gestures went, it was so strangely touching that saying thank you seemed woefully insufficient.

So she stretched across the console and kissed him instead.

For one heart-stopping moment, Brendon didn't move. His lips remained listless until she drew back, gut churning with disappointment and mortification that she'd read the moment so ridiculously wrong. Something

about her lips leaving his must've brought him online, because his hand reached up and cradled her jaw, his fingers tickling the skin beneath her ear.

His tongue dragged against her bottom lip and she melted, distantly recognizing the moan that filled his tiny car as her own. Want overrode everything, making it impossible for her to churn up even an ounce of embarrassment when he captured her lip between his teeth and nipped.

Her fingers knotted in his collar. She pushed him back an inch and held him there. "Walk me up."

Without taking his eyes off her, Brendon reached down, releasing his seat belt. He searched blindly for the handle and as soon as the door was open, he climbed out, quickly circling the nonexistent nose of his car to help her up onto the curb. His thumb brushed the back of her knuckles and she shivered, mysteriously too hot and too cold at the same time. Her nipples pebbled against the silk bodice of her borrowed dress, and the AC inside the lobby of Darcy's apartment didn't lessen her predicament.

She was determined to get her mouth on Brendon as soon as they were in the elevator, but fate saw fit to throw a wrench in her plans. An older woman she recognized from Darcy's floor stuck her cane between the doors before they could touch, sending them rebounding open. She joined them, smiling, none the wiser to the fact that Annie wanted to press Brendon up against the glass paneling and have her wicked way with him ASAP, possible security cameras be damned.

"Nice weather we're having," the older woman, Mrs. . . . —shoot, Darcy had told Annie her name—said. "Lovely, lovely weather. I think I saw a rainbow earlier."

Brendon's fingers strangled her hand and his teeth sank into his bottom lip as he did an all-around shitty job of stifling his laughter. "Great weather, Mrs. Clarence. How's Princess?"

Annie scrunched her nose and mouthed, "*Princess?*"

His lips twitched. "*Cat.*"

Mrs. Clarence prattled on about her Persian longhair, but most of it went in one ear and out the other. Brendon's thumb continued to swipe against the back of her hand, rhythmic as a metronome, and it drove her insane, making her breath come out in short, sharp gasps she struggled to soften.

His hands were maddening. She felt like some sort of Regency-era heroine, swooning over the way his fingers brushed hers, but it was like the ridges and furrows of his fingerprints were uniquely coded to make her

brain fuzz out and her veins flood with heat. When his grip loosened and his thumb swept against the inside of her wrist, she clenched her thighs together. *Fuck.*

The elevator dinged and opened, spitting them out onto the ninth floor. Mrs. Clarence waved as she opened her door, the first off the hall, and disappeared inside. Annie's steps quickened as she dragged Brendon after her, on a mission.

Where was the key? Annie could've cried as she searched the depths of her purse, coming up empty until—there. She crowed her delight and shoved the key in the door, twisting the knob, stepping over the threshold.

The apartment was dark save for the lights above the bar. Annie peeked down the hall. No light beneath Darcy's door, either.

That didn't mean she wasn't home. She could've been sleeping or reading or simply lying in the dark.

They'd have to be quiet.

Something about that made Annie's breath hitch, then quicken. She liked a challenge.

Brendon shut the door and leaned against it, one hand buried in his pocket, the other raking through his hair.

"Do you want something to drink?" she asked, praying he'd say no, still feeling compelled to be polite. "Water? Coffee?"

His lips curved in a smirk and the words *panty dropping* flashed like a neon sign inside her head. "If I wanted coffee, could you even make it?"

She huffed. "Doubtful."

His smile grew and her knees trembled. "I don't want coffee, Annie."

He pressed off the door and stalked toward her. Her heart raced.

She backed in the direction of her room, encouraging him down the hall. "What *do* you want?"

"Short answer?" His long legs ate up the distance between them until he was so close she had to crane her neck to stare up at him as she tripped into the guest room she called home. "You."

He closed the door carefully and she took the chance to kick off her heels. They landed just shy of the closet and she could've wept with relief that they hadn't clattered against the louvered doors.

He turned the lock and her stomach somersaulted. The ache between her legs intensified, the heat in her veins growing hotter.

"Long answer?" she whispered.

Beneath his boyish grin and dimples, something daring flashed in his eyes. "I want you for longer than tonight."

Her heartbeat sped. She swallowed hard and laughed, breathless. "You haven't even had me once and you're already thinking about round two?"

He stared. "Annie."

She wet her lips, not knowing what to say in the face of his radical honesty. Honesty that could've sent her running for the hills. Honesty he had to have known could've brought this all to a total standstill, and yet he'd said it anyway. Her knees trembled and she locked them so she wouldn't visibly shake.

"But if you meant tonight, specifically," he said, "then what I want would depend on what you want."

The intensity of his gaze emboldened her, maybe not to quite the same level of vulnerability he'd displayed, but to tell the truth, nonetheless. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to die if you don't touch me."

He reached out, tucking her hair behind her ear. His hand lingered near her jaw, the friction of his fingers sweeping over her skin driving her wild, her thoughts spiraling to what his caress would feel like against the rest of her. "Touch you?"

She rested her hands on his stomach, clutching at the fabric of his shirt, bunching it in her hands as she yanked it free from his pants. "As a start."

He slid his hand around the back of her neck and buried his fingers in her hair, tugging gently, drawing her eyes back to his. "And then?"

Her lips curled. "That would depend on what you want."

His grip on her hair tightened, making her gasp, then whimper. Heat slithered down her body and settled between her thighs.

"I want to hear you make more of those sounds." His hands glided down her sides, over her dress to where the silk split. Brendon's fingertips made maddening little circles on the outside of her bare thigh. His tongue darted out, his throat bobbing as he swallowed hard. "I want to be the one who makes you make those sounds."

Her breath sped, growing shallow.

"You want to know what I want? More than anything?"

Yes. She slipped her hands under the bottom of his shirt and pressed her palms to the warm, bare skin of his stomach. He shuddered and his short, blunt nails scraped against the skin of her outer thigh. "Tell me."

He leaned closer, lips brushing the shell of her ear. “I want to bury my face between your thighs and make you *sing*, Annie. I want to taste you. I want to—”

He broke off with a low groan and she swayed into him, suddenly dizzy. All the blood in her body had rushed south, leaving little for her head.

He walked her backward, and when her knees hit the edge of the bed, they buckled, sending her sprawling atop the mattress.

He followed her down, boxing her in with an arm on either side of her head. He held himself up over her, his broad shoulders blocking out most of the light spilling from beneath the lampshade, leaving him backlit, shadowed. He dropped his head and pressed his forehead against hers, their noses bumping. “Can I? God, Annie. Please.”

She wiggled beneath him, arching up, pressing her body against his. He gritted his teeth, a sharp exhale sliding out from between his lips. He was hard, his cock pressing against her hip through his pants, and she shuddered, her breath leaving her mouth in a broken pant.

“Yeah. *Yes*.”

He slipped backward off the bed and kneeled in front of the mattress. His hands circled her thighs, fingers pressing into her skin as he tugged, hauling her toward the edge of the bed, making her gasp. Her dress bunched around her hips, the slit splayed open, leaving her on display.

Bolder than before, he palmed the front of her thighs, his thumbs inching higher, closer, *closer*, almost grazing the crease where her legs met her body.

“Can I take this off?” he asked, tugging gently on her dress.

She nodded and arched up, helping him tug the fabric up and off her body. The dress sailed across the room, where it landed atop the lamp, knocking the shade askew and bathing the room in rose-colored shadows.

Brendon grinned. “Whoops?”

He sank back onto his haunches and lost his balance, toppling over onto his ass.

She snorted.

“Shh.” He did a poor job of quieting his own laughter as he rose to his knees and crawled toward her. He hauled himself up the bed and leaned over her, pressing his fingers to her lips.

He looked at her then, eyes lingering, savoring, staring down at her with the most breath-snatching combination of covetousness and reverence.

“Fuck. You’re so beautiful.”

She melted inside.

He looks at you like you hung the moon.

Annie didn’t know what she’d done to deserve anyone, but especially Brendon, looking at her like she was something special. But she was going to revel in it, enjoy it for as long as she could. When the day inevitably came that he stopped looking at her like that, she’d at least have this memory.

Leaning over her, he pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth, trailing kisses down the curve of her jaw.

“Do you know how long I’ve been dying to taste you? How many times I’ve thought about it?” His voice rumbled against her throat, his kisses trailing lower, over the jut of her collarbone, soft brushes of his lips interspersed with nips of his teeth that made her gasp, never knowing which she was going to get. Soft or hard, sweet or rough.

Fitting, because the Brendon she’d gotten to know could be both cocky and bashful, serious and funny, pushy and sensitive. There was more to him than met the eye, and she liked him, all of him, more than she’d bargained for.

“If it’s as many times as I’ve thought about it today alone, a lot.”

He smiled against her skin. His mouth skimmed down the swell of her breast, his lips grazing her nipple, wrapping around it, worrying it gently between his teeth. Pleasure shot from her chest down to her core, making her throb, making her wish she could rub her thighs together and get a tiny bit of relief, friction, but she couldn’t. Not with Brendon between her legs, keeping them spread wide.

He slid lower down the bed, lips brushing the bottom curve of her breast, the ticklish skin over her ribs. He pressed an almost reverent kiss to the gnarly scar from her appendectomy, which she hated, and worked his way down to her belly button, his tongue dipping inside, making her squirm.

“Can I take these off?” Lightly, he snapped the lace band of her underwear against her hip.

She arched her back, struggling to lift her hips off the bed with her feet barely skimming the floor. A quiet huff of frustration passed her lips. “Yes.”

He reached under her, pulling the lace over her ass and down her legs, shifting between her thighs and settling back on his knees. Leaning up on

her elbows, she watched as he bent forward and pressed a kiss to her mound, his hands sliding down her thighs. Her breath quickened and her face heated as Brendon stared at her, his eyes dark and low lidded. “You’re so beautiful.”

If kissing Brendon was a revelation, having his mouth on her was heaven. She whimpered and canted her hips, raising one hand to the back of his head, burying her fingers in his thick red hair as she rocked against his mouth. His eyes flashed up to her face, his pupils blown, the look in them almost enough to send her over the edge.

Her thighs shook and drew in. “*Brendon.*”

He pressed his right forearm against her stomach, pinning her to the bed, keeping her hips from dancing. The pressure between her thighs intensified, the thread holding her together fraying rapidly before he sent her flying, a gasp that verged on a sob spilling from her lips. Her neck arched and her abs burned as she crunched forward, one hand still fisted in his hair, until it became too much. Weakly, she shoved him away before flopping boneless against the bed, struggling to catch her breath, her lungs burning and her throat raw from sucking in air.

He pressed a kiss to the crease of her thigh before lowering it to the bed, then crawled across the covers, settling in beside her, and reached out, brushing strands of hair from her face, tucking them behind her ears. “Good?”

She gave a breathless laugh. “You’re the Obi-Wan of oral.”

As someone who prided herself on her own cunnilingus skills, she bowed down. Brendon gave her a run for her money.

The bed shook when he laughed. “A *Star Wars* reference? Be still my heart.”

She rolled over and reached for the buttons on his shirt, hands trembling. She succeeded in freeing a grand total of two before he took mercy on her and helped. As soon as his shirt fell open, she trailed a finger down the center of his chest, zigzagging between his pecs, past his colorful tattoo, in a poor attempt at connecting his freckles. He had too many to count, and yet a silly part of her wanted to try to kiss them all.

When she reached his flank, he twitched, laughter bubbling between his lips before he pressed them tightly together and snagged her hand, holding it still.

“Ticklish?”

“No.” His left eye twitched, then his lips. “Maybe.”

She grinned. Something to explore some other time when being quiet wasn't paramount. She tugged on his shirttails. “You should be naked.”

His brows rose and he grinned. “I should, should I?”

“You should.” Like, yesterday.

He shed his shirt and stood, dropping his hands to the button on his pants. He was straining the zipper, visibly hard. The relief on his face was obvious when he tucked his fingers beneath the slackened waist of his pants and boxers, shedding both at once.

Her mouth went dry.

A flush had turned his chest pink, color wrapping around the front of his throat. Freckles dotted his chest, growing less concentrated the further south her eyes dipped. Her tongue slipped out, wetting her lips, wanting to trace the ridges of his stomach and kiss the deep cut of muscles that flared like an arrow, pointing to where his cock proudly jutted out from his body.

He took one step forward and froze, a line appearing between his brows. “Fuck.”

That was kind of the point? “Yes?”

His head rolled back on his shoulders and he stared up at the ceiling. “I don't have a condom.”

That would've been a problem had she not been 99 percent sure there was one inside her makeup bag. “Well, Darcy definitely won't have one lying around.”

He shuddered and palmed his cock. “Please don't talk about my sister while I have an erection.”

She stifled a laugh and pointed at her open suitcase. “Check the side pocket of the pink bag.”

He found a condom quickly, holding it up, looking both pleased and relieved as he crossed the room toward the bed.

She sat up, watching Brendon's hands shake as he tore open the foil. His eyes flashed up, meeting hers, his lips twitching into a grin as he stroked his condom-covered shaft and set a knee on the bed.

She slid backward, higher up the bed, then changed her mind, rolling over onto her hands and knees.

Behind her, his breath hitched audibly and he groaned. “Fuck.”

Even as her heart pounded and anticipation made her breath quicken, her lips curved. She craned her neck, looking over her shoulder. Brendon

was watching her, lids heavy and color high on his cheeks, his hand gripping his cock.

“Is this okay?” she asked.

She wanted to feel him surrounding her, wanted him to touch as much of her as possible, to feel his heart pound, his chest pressed against her back.

The bed dipped, sinking beneath their combined weight, as he crawled closer on his knees. His throat jerked when he swallowed and nodded.

Just like she’d wanted, he molded himself to her back, pressing an openmouthed kiss to the ball of her shoulder. She turned her head and he was right there, close enough to kiss, so she did.

His mouth still covering hers, he guided himself to her entrance, the head of his cock sliding through her folds, making her quake with anticipation verging on impatience. He drew back an inch and asked, “You sure?”

She’d have rolled her eyes had she not been stupidly smitten with how *sweet* he was.

She nodded, then gasped against his lips, her fingers twisting in the sheets, as he sank inside her, stretching her, stopping only when his hips were flush with hers. Her head fell forward, breaking the kiss, as she panted softly.

He exhaled sharply, his hands settling on her hips, fingers pressing into her skin as he drew back. His first thrust was slow but still managed to knock the wind from her lungs as she hung her head and closed her eyes.

“Fuck.” He set a slow pace, too slow, the friction of his cock inside her making her desperate.

It was good, *so good*, but not enough. “Harder.”

His hips snapped, making her mewl and clench the sheet in her fists, the force of his thrusts almost driving her up the bed.

“Like this?” He panted, his breaths hot and ragged against her skin, as he delivered on exactly what she’d asked for.

She nodded and he swore, his teeth nipping her earlobe gently. She gasped at the subtle sting that shot straight to her core. His tongue swept the shell of her ear, making her shiver.

One of his arms banded around her waist, yanking her back onto his lap as he kneeled. Wordless gasps spilled from her mouth, desperate little sounds she couldn’t have swallowed had she tried.

This was a million times better than she'd imagined.

His other hand wrapped around her chin, turning her head so he could kiss her, swallow her cries as he rocked into her.

The look in his eyes was unbelievably intense. So intense she could barely breathe. Her chest burned, her heart squeezing. She wanted to look away but she couldn't, completely trapped in his gaze, spiraling, coming apart at the seams in a way that had nothing to do with what he was doing to her body.

Needing something to hold on to, something to steady herself, she lifted a shaking arm and hooked it around the back of his neck.

Eyes hazy, she licked her dry lips, wishing she could press her mouth to his skin, taste his sweat. She was close, achingly close, her heart pounding against her sternum, her blood thrumming in her head, her ears ringing like she was underwater. She just needed a little more, a little something to send her over the edge, make her come. "Please."

He reached up, running his callused thumb along her bottom lip, groaning when her tongue darted out, tasting, curling around it, trying to suck it between her lips. He let her, pressing his thumb against her tongue, his eyes darkening as she sucked, teeth scraping the pad of his finger.

Her head fell back against his shoulder, releasing his thumb, and he dropped his hand between her thighs, circling her clit. She shattered, biting down hard on her lip so she wouldn't make too much noise as Brendon drove her over the edge, her brain blanking out as she clenched, pleasure washing over her.

His teeth closed around her shoulder, the sound of his groan rumbling through her, his heart beating erratically against her back as he followed her over the edge with one final hard thrust.

His lips skimmed up her throat and over her jaw; when he finally kissed her it was slow, gentle, so different from a moment before, when everything had been fast and hard and so intense she couldn't breathe. She was still having trouble catching her breath, panting into Brendon's mouth, sharing air.

After a moment, he drew back, resting his forehead against her temple.

Her arm fell to her side and her lids fluttered open; she blinked into the dim, pink-tinged light of the room.

Brendon was smiling at her, a look so achingly intimate her heart pounded faster again, beating against her sternum.

“I’ll be right back,” she whispered, sliding past him and off the bed. She padded across the room and fled into the adjoining bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

She peed fast and washed her hands, unable to keep from staring at her reflection. At the back of her head, her hair was a knotted mess, her chignon more of a bird’s nest thanks to her thrashing against the covers when Brendon had gone down on her. Beneath her eyes, her liner was smudged, and the skin around her mouth was pink from his stubble.

She shut off the faucet and dried her hands, reaching for her makeup remover wipes, too lazy to wash her face.

When she stepped back into the bedroom, Brendon was sitting on the edge of the bed, his pants in his lap, but not on. He lifted his head and smiled at her crookedly. “Hey.”

Her toes curled in the carpet, pleasant warmth filling her veins, replacing the heat from earlier. “Hi.” She nodded at his pants. “You’re not . . . leaving, are you?”

Saying it put an unexpected lump in her throat.

“Oh.” His fingers closed around his clothes. “I didn’t know if you wanted me to stay.”

What she wanted was a topic for a different time, the morning maybe. She needed to do some serious . . . *soul searching*, but not now.

Right now, what she wanted was to wiggle beneath the sheets and sleep, preferably with Brendon spooned behind her. She wanted the weight of his arm around her waist, his chin hooked over the top of her head. She wanted to press her slightly chilly feet back against the furnace of his body and discover what he’d do. If he’d yelp or chuckle or lean closer. She wanted to lie in bed with him talking until midnight, and she wanted to wake up beside him in the morning and watch the sun peek through the slats in the blinds, dawn turning his auburn hair into burnished bronze.

Her chest ached and her fingertips tingled and the lump in her throat tripled in size.

She’d caught capital-F *Feelings* for Brendon. Feelings that had nothing—okay, a little something—to do with orgasms. Feelings that had everything to do with liking the sound of his laugh and how he could just look at her and turn her bones into butter. Feelings that had to do with his earnest efforts to bring joy to everyone he knew, even the people he didn’t. It was his corny jokes and how he put his whole heart into everything he

did, from rapping in front of a room full of strangers to giving a heartfelt speech at a coworker's wedding.

Brendon cared.

And so did she.

"I do," she said, casting a glance around the room. He'd moved her dress off the lamp in the corner, so the cream-colored walls were no longer pink. His shirt still lay in a heap on the floor along with her underwear, but that wasn't why she blushed. Nor was it because she was naked and so was he. "I'd like it if you stayed." Her smile was a touch hesitant, not shy but . . . hopeful. "I mean, if you're willing to risk running into your sister in the morning."

Brendon tossed his pants aside and reached for the duvet. He stripped it back, the top sheet, too, and fluffed the pillows.

"Left or right?" he asked, grinning at her.

"No preference," she said, stepping closer.

He stood, letting her slide in first. "I'll take the left."

She crawled in and he made to slide in beside her, but she said, "The lamp?"

He nodded, crossing the room. His footsteps faltered when he reached the foot of the bed and he doubled back, bending down and grabbing her purse.

She frowned.

"You forgot your Breathe Right strip."

Her bones liquefied and her heart swelled. "Grab them for me?"

He reached inside her purse, plucking out the box and ripping it open. He grabbed a single-use strip and returned to the bed, peeling off the plastic backing. "Come here."

She scooted to the edge of the bed and he pressed the strip beneath the bridge of her nose. "Is this lavender scented?"

His cheeks colored. "You mentioned liking the lavender fields in Provence, so I . . . yeah."

Her heart climbed into her throat, her breath quickening. Surely he could feel each exhale against his wrist as he adjusted the strip. She could feel her nostrils flare subtly open when he finished.

"How do I look?" she asked. "Super sexy, I'm sure."

"So sexy." He chuckled and brushed his thumb against the curve of her cheek. "I'm having trouble keeping my hands to myself."

She turned her face into his hand and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist, loving how his breath stuttered loudly.

Good thing he didn't have to.

Chapter Sixteen

Sunday, June 6

Sprawled across Brendon like a starfish, Annie had left a small puddle of drool on his chest. It was a sure sign he was completely and utterly gone, a lost cause if there ever was one, if he found drool adorable. Drool. He was such a sucker for her he found her *spit* cute.

Last night, something had shifted. He wasn't so oblivious as to have missed the subtle signs before, but had he, last night would've been in his face, unmistakable.

He wasn't entirely sure *what* had changed for Annie or *why* it had changed, but he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. She wanted him and he wanted her, and the rest? The rest was just noise.

Ever so carefully, he extracted himself out from under Annie, rolling to the side and setting her arm gently down on the mattress between them. She snuffled softly but didn't snore—score one for the nasal strips—and grabbed for her pillow in place of his body, cuddling it tight, tucking it beneath her chin.

He rested his head on his hand and watched her snuggle her pillow until his need to relieve his bladder outweighed his desire to watch her sleep.

Tiptoeing quietly out of the bathroom, he paused in the middle of the room, weighing out whether to wake her or not. He didn't know the time—his phone had joined him for his impromptu swim and was fried—only that it was light out, sun streaming in through the slatted blinds, blanketing the room in a dusty golden glow.

Slipping on his boxers, he padded his way out into the hall. Coffee would have to come before pants and *absolutely* before he even entertained the idea of putting on socks and shoes.

Softly humming “Walking on Sunshine,” he choked on his spit when his sister greeted him.

“Morning.” Darcy stared over the rim of her mug. One of her brows arched severely.

Uh. He crossed his arms over his chest, shoulders hunching high up by his ears. “Morning?”

She sniffed and gestured toward the kitchen with a wide wave of her cup. “Help yourself.” She paused. “You honestly couldn’t put clothes on? Seriously?”

He sighed and sank down on her sofa. “I wasn’t exactly expecting to run into you.”

“In *my* apartment? At seven fifteen on a Sunday morning?”

“When you put it like that . . .”

She flung a throw blanket at him. “Cover yourself, please. That’s too much thigh for me.” Her eyes widened. “And since when do you have a *tattoo*?”

He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, clutching it in front of his throat. “Don’t start. I know all about your butterfly.”

She flushed neon and said nothing.

“You’re up early,” he added.

She set her coffee on the table. “I could say the same to you.”

He scratched his eyebrow. “This is awkward.”

He tucked the blanket tighter around his shoulders, praying the flap of his boxers hadn’t parted before he could cover himself.

Darcy cocked her head. “Annie still asleep?”

His ears burned. “Yup.”

“Are you *blushing*?”

“Likely.”

Her shoulders shook as she laughed at him, taking too much pleasure in his embarrassment.

“Can you . . . I don’t know, spare me the teasing? Please. I haven’t had any coffee yet. I’m at an automatic disadvantage.”

“In your dreams.” She stood and crossed over to her kitchen. “I won’t spare you the teasing but I will make you coffee.”

“Bless you.”

Her coffeemaker whirred to life, the crunch of beans filling the air. As appealing as coffee was, and as much as he loved his sister, he was sorely

tempted to sneak down the hall and crawl back in bed beside Annie for a few blissful hours of respite.

Darcy returned, mug in hand. “Here.” Her lips twitched. “Do I need to check Annie for fangs? You have a hickey the size of Texas on your throat. You’re not in high school, for crying out loud.”

No, but sometimes Annie made him feel like he was. Like he was a kid discovering everything for the first time, things he’d never felt before. He liked it. He *loved* it, loved that everything with Annie felt shiny and new, like the sunlight streaming in through the window. Golden.

He brought the mug to his lips. The hot coffee was a touch over-extracted for his taste, Darcy’s beans a little too finely ground, resulting in a bitter brew. But he wasn’t about to complain, certainly not when the coffee was a nice buffer from the embarrassment. “Shut up.”

“So, what happened last night?”

He coughed, spraying coffee spittle against the back of his hand.

“Not *that*.” Darcy wrinkled her nose. “I can add two and two together perfectly well, *thanks*. When I asked Annie about you inviting her to a wedding, all I heard was a lot of protesting about how she was *just your plus-one*.”

“I guess . . . something changed between us.”

Somewhere between the ceremony, their dance, his confession, and their almost-kiss by the water, it seemed that Annie had finally joined him on the same page.

Darcy’s face sobered as she stared at him. “I know I put you up to this —”

“You did no such thing,” he argued. “I’ve been spending time with Annie because I want to. All you did was ask me to show her around Seattle and I’d have done that anyway, okay?”

“I only want for you to be careful, okay? Careful and realistic.”

“Look at that, my two middle names.”

She drummed her fingers against the side of her mug. “Be serious, Brendon.”

He didn’t want to be serious. Or he did, but he didn’t think that being serious required taking a sharp turn for the melancholic. “I am serious. I feel *very* serious about Annie, okay? But everything’s going to work itself out.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “Look. Mom said—”

“Since when do *you* quote Mom?” His stomach sank to his knees. “Since when do you *listen* to Mom?”

“I take everything she says with a heaping tablespoon of salt.” Her lips twisted to the side in a wry smile. “It was back in December.”

Ah. When Mom had dumped her own fears about love all over Darcy, made her second-guess her feelings, her relationship with Elle. “What wisdom did she impart this time?”

Darcy’s tongue poked against the side of her cheek. “She was trying to make a point about how she and I are similar. That we don’t get over things as quickly as . . .”

“As?” he prompted, not liking where this was going.

Darcy’s eyes closed briefly. “As you do.”

He frowned. What did that even mean?

“She said your heart is like a rubber band,” Darcy added, and yeah, that sounded like something Mom would say, something strange and hippie-ish, something she probably thought sounded way deeper and more meaningful than it was. Half the things she said were probably regurgitated advice off a kombucha bottle or the inside of a Dove chocolate wrapper. “That you snap back was her point.” The corners of her mouth pinched, her lips pressed together. “But I think Mom’s wrong.”

“Yeah, well, I love Mom, but I think we can both agree she’s wrong about a lot of things.”

Darcy’s throat jerked. “*My* point is that Mom thinks your heart is elastic but I think the real truth is that your heart is as breakable as everyone else’s, only you’ve never had it broken before.” She reached across the couch and squeezed his hand, the one not preserving his modesty. “The last thing I want is for you to get hurt.”

He squeezed her fingers back and smiled. “Please don’t worry about me.”

She shook her head, her grip around his fingers tightening. “You’re my brother, it’s my job to worry about you.”

Brendon’s chest squeezed. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

He knew better than to tell her not to again, tell her there was nothing to worry about. Worrying was something Darcy came by naturally.

“Every time I try to slip London into the conversation, Annie changes the subject. She’s not talking about it.” She blinked fast, lashes fluttering

against her cheeks. “What if, no matter how hard we try, Annie still moves away?”

Darcy’s concerns were legitimate, definitely not unfounded. But he didn’t want to worry. “There’s still time, Darce.”

Time to show her that Seattle was amazing. That she could make this city her home. That she had people here who cared about her.

Time to show her that he was a good choice. That if she jumped, he’d be there to catch her. He wouldn’t let her down like she’d been let down before.

He could be her exception if she only gave him—*them*—a chance.

She looked at him, dark eyes glassy. “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

Too late.

A throat cleared, followed by a stifled giggle.

Standing just off the hall, wearing nothing but his button-down, was Annie. Her hair resembled a nest, her face was bright pink, and she still had her Breathe Right strip molded to her nose.

Brendon had never seen anyone more beautiful.

“Good morning.” Annie padded over to the couch, tugging at the hem of her borrowed shirt. She studiously avoided looking at Darcy as she sat on the arm of the sofa beside him. Her lips twitched as she eyed his ensemble. “Nice blanket.”

He let his eyes drag down her body and back up to her face. “Nice shirt.”

“Ew,” Darcy muttered.

Annie stole his cup and took a sip. Her nose wrinkled and his heart rolled over like a golden retriever wanting its belly scratched. “Needs sugar.”

* * *

BRENDON (7:19 P.M.): Got a new phone, FYI. ☺

ANNIE (7:21 P.M.): Old one couldn’t be salvaged?

BRENDON (7:23 P.M.): Waterlogged beyond repair. Guy at the Verizon store found my story about falling in the lake hilarious, though.

ANNIE (7:25 P.M.): It *was** hilarious ☺

BRENDON (7:26 P.M.): ☺

ANNIE (7:27 P.M.): I’d say your night was far from ruined ☺

BRENDON (7:39 P.M.): I’ve drafted and deleted a dozen different texts and I can’t seem to find a smooth way of saying I had an amazing time last night without sounding

like my mind's in the gutter.

Heat settled in a distinctly different part of her body than she'd been expecting when she'd sent her last text. Not between her thighs, but in her chest. A pleasant squeezing warmth, because what Brendon had said sounded the opposite of guttery. Sweet, *so* sweet, but she could do with its being a little more sinfully so.

ANNIE (7:39 P.M.): Or . . .

BRENDON (7:39 P.M.): Or?

ANNIE (7:39 P.M.): You could come to the dark side and join me down here in the gutter.

BRENDON (7:40 P.M.): Dark side, huh? Do you, uh, have cookies?

She stifled a laugh.

ANNIE (7:41 P.M.): Cookies, sure. If that's what you want to call it.

As seconds turned to minutes and Brendon didn't respond, she read back through her messages and worried she'd crossed the line from flirty to thirsty. *Desperately* thirsty.

BRENDON (7:44 P.M.): Then I guess you won't judge me too harshly if I tell you I can't stop thinking about that little gasp you made when I slid inside you.

BRENDON (7:45 P.M.): Or the way I could feel your pulse flutter against my tongue when you clenched around my fingers.

Her breath quickened and the warmth that had settled in her chest slithered lower.

BRENDON (7:46 P.M.): And that, if I'd had my way, I would have spent the morning with my head between your thighs making you come so hard you forgot your name.

She lifted a hand, pressing her fingers against the notch at the base of her throat. Jesus Christ.

BRENDON (7:47 P.M.): That the thought of getting you in my bed, where you can be as loud as you want, has me so hard I can't think straight. That I'm supposed to be prepping for a meeting tomorrow and instead I have my hand wrapped around my dick thinking about how you taste.

She whimpered. It was like a switch had been flipped, Brendon going from adorkable to filthy in under five minutes. She liked it, she *really* liked it.

ANNIE (7:48 P.M.): Jfc, Brendon.

BRENDON (7:49 P.M.): That, uh, guttery enough for you?

ANNIE (7:50 P.M.): I'd say that earns you a cookie, yeah. If only I could reward you in person.

BRENDON (7:51 P.M.): Tomorrow.

BRENDON (7:52 P.M.): Come over.

BRENDON (7:52 P.M.): So I can make you come.

Her teeth scraped her bottom lip.

She didn't regret sleeping with him, not in the slightest. She'd be remiss to say it had been solely due to the heat of the moment, but that had been a big part of it. This tension between them had been simmering and last night it had boiled over.

Planning ahead felt different. Deliberate. Like it meant more than just . . . scratching an itch. Like if she agreed, she'd be acknowledging she wanted him, not just for one night, but longer. Like she wanted to keep doing this. Keep *him*.

BRENDON (7:54 P.M.): And we can watch more of that show. With the French farmers?

Her chest clenched. She was so screwed.

ANNIE (7:55 P.M.): Don't you have to work tomorrow?

BRENDON (7:56 P.M.): Tomorrow evening, then. We can go out to eat first.

BRENDON (7:57 P.M.): Then we can go back to my place and I can eat you out.

She wet her lips, breathing heavily.

ANNIE (7:59 P.M.): Yes.

Chapter Seventeen

Monday, June 7

Through the window of the car, Brendon gestured to Annie that he was going to duck inside the gas station. He'd just filled his tank, but the machine was out of receipt paper.

"Need anything?" he mouthed.

She shook her head and smiled before returning to her phone.

Inside, he quickly retrieved his receipt. Beside the register sat a Lucite tray of potted plants. Miniature succulents in palm-sized terra-cotta planters. He laughed under his breath and selected one with chunky, pale blue-green leaves that curled into a tight rosette atop the small mound of dirt. He set it beside the register and passed the cashier his credit card.

"We've got a five-dollar minimum," the guy said.

Brendon grabbed a Snickers and waved off a plastic bag.

Annie looked up when he slid inside the car and graced him with a smile. "All set?"

He nodded and opened his hand, revealing the plant. "I got you a present."

A furrow appeared between her brows for a split second before her eyes widened with glee. "Is that—"

"A succulent." He nodded, letting her take it from him. "You said you wanted a houseplant, so . . ."

He'd buy her a million tiny succulents if they made her smile like she was now.

"Brendon," she simpered, and held the plant aloft between them. "You bought me a *love fern*."

He palmed his face and laughed. "Try not to kill it?"

She stroked the buttery-soft leaves with a finger and murmured nonsense to it under her breath, in turn making him chuckle. “I’ll do my best.”

He started the car. “Can you, uh, take plants on a plane?”

From the corner of his eye, Annie frowned, still stroking the succulent with her fingers. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to check.”

He hummed and pulled out of the parking lot.

Five days. That’s how long it was until she boarded a plane back to Philadelphia.

At least, that was her plan. She hadn’t said anything to the contrary, but he hadn’t asked, too nervous to hear her answer. To hear her say nothing had changed. That not *enough* had changed. That she was still planning on moving to London.

By the time they reached his apartment, he’d psyched himself up. He could do this. Broach this conversation. Tell her how he felt. Tell her he wanted her to stay.

Annie set the succulent on his bar, then leaned back against the counter, smiling. “I had fun tonight. Hands down, that was the best sandwich of my life. I’m going to have very, *very* fond dreams of that sandwich.”

He reached out, cupping her jaw, smoothing his thumb against her cheek. She leaned into his palm and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist. He’d never considered it to be an erogenous zone before, but the feel of her warm lips against his skin had his heart beating faster and his breath quickening. “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself.”

He’d taken her to Beth’s Café, a local greasy spoon. It had been featured on the Food Network and was a favorite of his, for both the food and the quintessential Seattle atmosphere. In the mornings, you could easily find people in business attire ordering coffee and pastries at the counter, whereas in the evenings, theater kids belted show tunes while couples cozied up in the booths near the back of the restaurant.

He smiled and stepped closer, boxing her in against the counter. She sucked in a quick gasp that made him bite the inside of his cheek. “I, on the other hand, am going to have very, *very* fond dreams of your Meg Ryan impression.”

As a joke, Annie had insisted on ordering a turkey sandwich with all the fixings on the side à la Sally in the infamous diner scene in *When Harry Met Sally*. Much to his delight, she’d even gone so far as to—*quietly*—

reenact the *I'll have what's she having* fake-orgasm scene. It was as hilarious as it was arousing, a novel combination.

She craned her neck back, staring at him from beneath her lashes. "Was it an Oscar-worthy performance?"

He had a feeling she wouldn't be winning an award for her acting any time soon. "I feel like that's a trick question, so I'm going to stick with saying I prefer the real thing."

Annie snickered. "You don't want me to fake it?"

Fuck no. He lifted a hand, running his thumb along the curve of her cheek. "I'd rather it be real."

All of it. He wanted everything about them to be real. Not a vacation romance, a layover on her way to London, but something that could have an actual shot at longevity if Annie would just give him a chance.

Annie's hands drifted down his chest, lingering on the button of his jeans. "Faking it's overrated."

She undid the button and his breath caught in the back of his throat. Fuck.

Her fingers nimbly lowered the zipper and the waist of his jeans slackened around his hips. All his thoughts left his head as she reached her hand inside his boxers and wrapped her fingers around his dick.

This was not at all what he'd meant, but talking could wait.

It would have to because he couldn't form words, let alone coherent ones.

An embarrassing groan was the most he could manage.

Annie chuckled against his shoulder and gripped him tighter, making his eyes roll back in his head. "You want to take this to the bedroom?"

He swallowed and wrapped his fingers around her wrist, stilling her hand, causing her to frown. He shook his head and dropped his hands to the button of her shorts, fumbling to work it free. "Too far."

As soon as her shorts hit the hardwood, she stepped out of them. She gasped quietly when he wrapped his hands around her thighs and lifted her onto the counter. She threw her head back, narrowly avoiding the cabinet behind her, and laughed, sharp and bright.

"Cold," she said, wiggling atop the granite.

He smiled crookedly and stepped between her thighs. "Sorry?"

She reached down, whipping her shirt up over her head.

Barely-there cream lace did a poor job of covering her breasts, but it did a *stellar* job of making it hard for him to speak, words dying on his tongue.

Most words.

“Fuck.” He bent down and wrapped his lips around her nipple, laving it through the lace.

Annie keened and the sound made his cock swell. Her hands flew to the back of his head, burying in his hair, tugging, holding him to her chest. “Shit, that feels nice.”

Nice? He could do better than nice.

He lifted his head, sealing his mouth over hers, swallowing the soft, needy sounds she made as he let his hands drift down her sides, her skin like silk under his fingertips. When he encountered lace, he tugged the crotch of her underwear to the side and drew his mouth from hers, eyes darting down. He groaned quietly at the sight she made. Cream lace framed golden skin and pretty pink flesh atop the dark marble beneath her.

He ran his fingers up her slit, parting her folds, gathering wetness, dragging it up to her clit. She moaned and clutched his shoulders, drawing his mouth back down to hers as her nails dug into the skin at the back of his neck.

He’d learned she liked it best when he made short, quick circles around her clit. Her breath hitched, then sped, her thighs quivering and drawing in around his hips as she got close.

Dragging his mouth along the curve of her cheek and down her jawline, he nipped at her skin and soothed each gentle bite with a kiss. When he reached her ear, he sucked the lobe between his lips and scraped it with the edge of his teeth. Her nails bit harder into his skin, making him hiss and speed up his ministrations between her thighs.

He nudged the shell of her ear with the tip of his nose and murmured softly, “Does this feel *nice?*”

Her hips bucked against his hand and she gave a sharp, breathless laugh. “*Shut up.*”

He laughed and replaced his fingers with his thumb, sliding two fingers inside her, crooking them upward.

Her breasts shoved against his chest as her back bowed, a soft whine filling the kitchen as she shook and came apart under his fingers.

“Fuck,” she murmured, and dropped her head to his chest, clutching at his arms. She continued to flutter around his fingers, her body twitching

with the occasional aftershock he drew out, pumping his fingers inside of her slowly, curling them occasionally, making her whimper sweetly, sounds that went straight to his cock. A louder moan tore itself from her throat as she rocked against his hand harder. “You’re going to make me come again.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and curled his fingers harder. “That was the plan.”

He’d see her *nice* and raise her *earth-shattering*. He might not have been the expert on all things love related like he’d once thought, but he was positive that—in addition to making her laugh and showering her with affection in the form of thoughtful little gestures—spending as much time with his head and his hands between her thighs as she’d allow put him on the right track.

Beneath his lips, sweat broke out along her forehead, making her skin damp and dewy, and the baby-fine hair around her temples clung to it. His heart beat faster, in time with the desperate noises falling off her lips.

Annie buried her face in his shoulder, stifling a shriek he’d have rather heard. But the way her hot breaths tickled his neck and sent shivers down his spine made up for it.

Her breathing had come close to approaching normal when she shoved his shoulders back and slipped off the counter. The suddenness made him frown. “Annie—”

The question died on his tongue when she sank down to her knees in front of him and curled her fingers around his cock.

“Jesus.” He gripped the edge of the counter when she wrapped her lips around him, drawing him into the exquisite heat of her mouth.

All his plans to wring another orgasm from her with his cock flew out the window. He made a mental note to make it up to her later.

His eyes fluttered shut and he lost himself in the perfect feel of Annie—her hands, one on his thigh and the other wrapped around the base of his cock, the ever-quickening glide of her mouth up his length, the way she flicked her tongue against the vein on the underside of his shaft. The silk of her hair when he gently threaded his fingers through it.

He was close. A soft hum around his cock made his eyes fly open, and the sight of Annie on her knees, staring up at him with wide blue eyes and hollowed cheeks, was enough to make his knees weaken. He gripped the counter harder, his knuckles turning white.

“M close,” he warned, cupping her face and stroking her cheek with his thumb.

She doubled her efforts and hummed softly, his undoing. His eyes snapped shut and behind his clenched lids, bright stars flashed.

“Holy shit,” were the first words out of his mouth as soon as he regained the ability to speak.

Annie laughed, and with her hands wrapped around the bottom of his shirt, she dragged him down to the floor. The tile was hard and unforgiving, but he followed because he’d have been a fool to put up a fight. If she asked him to go to the moon for her, he’d figure out a way to get there. Try his damndest at the very least.

He’d do anything, if he had even an inkling it would bring a smile to her face.

Sometime later—how long he didn’t know because the clock was out of sight and he was too lazy to check—after he’d regained enough feeling in his limbs to successfully bunch his pants behind his head, unable to move any further in search of an actual pillow, he swallowed hard. “Hey, Annie?”

More than ever before, his chest burned with the need to speak his truth. To make his feelings known and hope they were on the same page.

She traced shapes into his stomach that made him shiver pleasantly, her fingers raking through the coarse hair beneath his belly button. “Mm-hmm?”

Caring about Annie made him feel like he was reaching for the sun; how close would she let him get? Would he wind up burning like Icarus if he flew too close, pressed too hard, wanted too much?

It was now or never. “Just—let me get this out, okay? Don’t say anything, or . . . don’t feel like you *have* to say anything. Not until—”

“Brendon.” She rested her chin on the notch at the bottom of his sternum, and it was a wonder her head didn’t bounce with the way his heart pounded against the wall of his chest. Her lips twitched upward, her expression verging on bemused. “Breathe.”

Breathing would help. Passing out would *not*. He let his hand drift down to the small of her back and up again, breathing in time with the leisurely drag of his palm against her smooth skin.

“I don’t want you to move to London.”

Her expression shuttered, her eyes falling to his chin.

Words fell from his lips in a dizzying rush because he had to get this out. “I don’t want you to move to London and I know that’s selfish of me, but it’s also not? Because I want you to be happy and I don’t think you’ll be as happy there as you could be here.”

“Brendon—”

“Please. Let me finish.”

She nodded, eyes darting warily over his face.

“I want more time with you. This past week has been the greatest and somehow, also the worst of my life because—”

“What does that mean?” Annie scrunched her face up. “Sorry. Go on.”

He laughed and ran his hand up her back, smiling when she shivered and pressed closer. “Because it’s been everything I wanted, and the thought of you getting on a plane and this all going away? Of you going away?” He shook his head. “That’s the last thing I want.”

She resumed her lip nibbling.

“A week and a half hasn’t been enough.” He debated the next part, not wanting to scare her, but . . . if he was being honest, he might as well go for broke. “I don’t think any amount of time would be enough.”

She lifted her eyes, her lip popping out from between her teeth when her jaw dropped.

“I want more mornings waking up next to you. I want to show you the rest of my favorite places around town. I want to take you out to Sequim to show you the lavender fields and I want lazy nights spent with you, watching French television shows I can’t understand.”

She cracked a smile.

“Everything I learn about you makes me want to know more.”

Her eyes went glassy, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks.

“I want to know how you prefer yours eggs and whether you like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones better, or if you hate them both. If you’ve been bungee jumping. Whether you’ve ever stayed up until four in the morning reading. Your opinion on oatmeal cookies. Your favorite way to spend Sunday afternoons.”

Annie gave a watery laugh. “Soft boiled, the Rolling Stones, no but I want to, yes, I don’t discriminate against cookies, and”—she swallowed hard—“if you asked me two weeks ago, I’d have told you the best Sundays are when I don’t get out of my pajamas, but now? Right now I’d say my favorite way to spend any afternoon is with you.”

His heart flung itself at her through the wall of his chest. “I can’t believe you like oatmeal cookies. You heathen.”

She smiled at him, and his awareness of his heartbeat increased threefold. “I even like them with raisins.”

“*Gah.*” He laughed, even though his sinuses burned. “Well, that’s that. Time for you to go.”

Annie laughed and nothing sounded sweeter.

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone before,” he whispered. “And I don’t really know what I’m doing. But I want the chance to figure it out, Annie. I want the chance to figure it out with you.”

Annie raised her chin, shifting almost to sitting. She folded her arms on top of his chest and leaned over him.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, either,” she admitted, her voice a whisper he had to strain to hear. “I never planned for any of this to happen. I never thought . . .”

She shut her eyes and pressed her lips together, and his chest ached with the desire to make it better. Whatever she was feeling, whatever was tearing her up inside, leaving her conflicted, he wanted to take care of it, shoulder the weight for her, or at least share in it. He continued to rub her back, because if that was the only thing he could do for her, the only thing to make her feel marginally better at the moment? He’d do it well.

“I knew I wasn’t happy in Philadelphia, but I tried not to think about it. No one wants to *think* about how unhappy they are,” she admitted. “I think . . . I think I’ve been settling for less than happy for so long that I’d forgotten what being happy *really* felt like.” The smile she gave him started slow, almost shy, before brightening into something steady and sure. “Until I came here. You’ve been a huge part of that, Brendon.”

Laughter built in his chest, bursting from between his lips, incandescent and joyful. Unstoppable. The insides of his eyes stung.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she repeated, but this time it didn’t make his chest ache as intensely. It sounded more like a confession than an apology, and that gave him hope. Annie rested her hand against his cheek, her fingers brushing the thin skin beneath his eye. “But I promise . . . I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

Chapter Eighteen

Wednesday, June 9

Do you like these?” Elle held up a pair of earrings shaped like sparkly, pale pink sugar cubes. “Or these better?” She held up another pair shaped like swirling bunches of cotton candy.

Annie tore herself from the curio cabinet full of antique estate jewelry and took in the options Elle held. Both were kitschy but so perfectly Elle that it made it hard for Annie to choose. “That’s a dilemma. Both?”

Elle flipped over the cardboard cards they were affixed to. “On sale.” She beamed. “Both it is. Thanks.”

Texting and even the occasional FaceTime chat with Elle hadn’t done her spunky, whimsical, occasionally harebrained personality justice. She was a hyperactive ray of sunshine with a penchant for looking on the bright side and tossing out random resonant pieces of wisdom.

Annie held up a pair of leather ankle boots. “What do you think?”

“Cute.” Elle smiled but shook her head. “But you’re not supposed to buy shoes secondhand.”

“Right.” Annie set them back on the rack with a wistful sigh. “Throws off your gait.”

Elle gave her a startled frown. “No. I mean, yeah, I guess. But it’s bad luck.”

Annie stared at her.

“You know. If you buy secondhand shoes you’ll wind up walking someone else’s path.”

Annie snickered. “Guess that completely rules out purchasing vintage lingerie.”

“No.” Elle smiled. “I think that’s fine as long as you have it laundered first. But not underwear.” She frowned. “That’s just gross.”

Shopping with Elle was an unparalleled experience. *Antiquing* was next-level. The shop they were currently browsing was divided roughly by decade, with the oldest wares in the back and the newest near the front, with the exception of the fine jewelry, which was kept beneath glass close to the register. Elle bounced from aisle to aisle, her enthusiasm contagious.

“Pink cups!” Elle hurried down the aisle, stopping in front of a collection of brightly colored Depression glass in almost every color of the rainbow, from avocado green and dusty pink to milky blue and canary yellow. “Margot and I *should* probably invest in matching dishes. It’s past time.”

Little did Elle know Darcy planned to ask her to move in. Annie bit back a smirk. On second thought . . . “You should *definitely* buy the whole set. But make it rainbow. Green plates and pink wineglasses.”

Elle laughed. “To match my rosé.”

“And blue water glasses.”

“Yellow bowls.”

“You *need* an ultramarine cookie jar.”

Elle threw her head back. “I think I do.”

Darcy was going to have kittens when the time came to merge their belongings. Annie could picture Elle’s Depression glassware beside Darcy’s pristine porcelain plates and stainless flatware. Hell, if Elle didn’t buy it, Annie would, and she’d gift it to her. A nice housewarming present.

Elle took off for the front of the store and returned a moment later with a shopping basket, which she quickly and carefully filled with Depression glass and her new earrings.

While Elle weighed the merits of aquamarine versus delphite cups, Annie meandered down the aisle, pausing in front of a metal carousel of old postcards. The cardstock was buttery soft and slightly yellowed with age, the picturesque fronts faded in places from fingerprints, but otherwise they were preserved, the ink only slightly grayed. Annie selected a beautiful black and white postcard that looked like something straight out of a French fairy tale. It reminded her of a town she’d visited in Provence. In the bottom left corner was the location—Palais des Papes, Avignon. She bounced on her toes. It *was* in Provence.

She flipped the postcard over. The handwriting was beautiful, all slanted cursive. French, too. Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t merely a postcard but

a love letter, if the salutation, “*Ma chère femme*,” was anything to go off. A love letter from 1935. Her jaw dropped.

“Find something?” Elle chirped.

Annie spun quickly, clasping the postcard delicately to her chest. “Just a postcard.”

She flipped it over, showing Elle the writing.

Elle cocked her head. “French?”

Annie nodded. “A love letter. It’s . . .” She scanned the words, some of the swooping letters tricky to decipher. Her heart warmed. “It’s really sweet actually. It’s from a man to his wife. He talks about missing her and how they’ve been married”—she squinted to make out the number—“forty-five years. He seems . . . smitten.”

Elle smiled. “You should buy it.”

Maybe she would. Only, she didn’t think she’d keep it. As much as she loved it, it felt like something Brendon would treasure. She glanced at the postcard and smiled. Oh yeah, he’d love it, even if she had to translate it for him.

“Hey, Elle?” she asked after they’d turned the corner.

“Mm-hmm?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“That is a question.” Elle winked. “But sure.”

“Your job is . . .”

“Weird?” Elle grinned knowingly.

Annie laughed. “I was going to say *unique*, but sure. That.”

If Elle was bothered, she certainly didn’t seem it. She gave a nonchalant shrug and leaned against a shelf, first checking to make sure it was sturdy enough to hold her weight. “It is a little offbeat. I’m under no delusions about it.”

“But it makes you really happy,” Annie said. “What you do. Being an astrologer.”

“It does. I wouldn’t trade it for the chance to do anything.” She pursed her lips. “Maybe go to space.”

“But it wasn’t what you originally planned on being, right?”

Elle shook her head. “No. I dropped out of my PhD program in astronomy.”

Annie’s pulse quickened at the idea of veering so far off one’s path. Especially a path so heavily invested in. “Did you just . . . wake up one

morning and decide to pull the trigger?”

“Kind of?” Elle wrinkled her nose, then laughed. “I’d been laying the groundwork to make the leap for a while and I’d been thinking about it, disenchanted with what I was doing for longer. It wasn’t some spur-of-the-moment, *I’m dropping out* kind of crisis. I’d thought about it, but I *did* wake up one morning completely fed up with the idea of getting out of bed and teaching a bunch of undergrads about astronomy knowing most of them were only there because Rocks for Jocks had already filled up. I decided enough was enough. I wanted to feel . . . excited again. I wanted to love what I do.” She shrugged and smiled impishly. “So I did it.”

“Didn’t it . . . scare you shitless?” Annie asked, laughing lightly. “Talk about a leap of faith.”

Elle nodded. “I’d be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge I was extremely privileged to be in the position to shift course like I did. I had my family to fall back on—not that they liked my decision or even supported it, but they’d never have let me suffer because of it. And I had Margot, which made it easier since I wasn’t alone in shifting to Oh My Stars full-time. But yeah, of course it scared me. But I was more afraid of waking up one day and wondering how my life had become something so far from what I’d originally wanted for myself. I never wanted to wake up and wonder whether I’d be happier if I’d followed my heart. If I had taken that risk. Life’s too short for should-haves.”

“Carpe diem,” Annie said with a wry smile.

Elle smiled brightly. “Exactly! I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“Likewise.”

Elle jerked her head in the direction of a wall of vintage hats; simply looking at them made Annie’s skin crawl.

“Life’s too short to waste on what-ifs and regrets. Life should be lived to the fullest. Quit school. Take a weird job. Pursue your passion. Ask the girl out.” She looked at Annie askance. “Or guy.”

Her lips curved upward. “*Or* girl.”

Elle’s smile brightened and she held out a hand. “Bi five.”

Annie laughed and gave Elle a high five. It had been a long time since she’d had friends, close friends, whom she felt she could be herself around. Friends around whom she could let her hair down, be dorky without feeling judged for it. Friends who weren’t afraid to be unabashedly themselves and preferred funky antiquing outings to drinking bottomless mimosas at

brunch. Not that Annie had anything against bottomless mimosas *or* brunch, but she liked to mix it up.

With an eager gasp, Elle plucked a cloche hat with a giant blue butterfly affixed to it off the wall and shoved it on her head. Annie struggled not to full-body cringe, but she held her tongue. Clothes were one thing, shoes even, but *hats*? Hard pass.

“So.” Elle modeled her selection in the vertical mirror. “Is this about not liking your job or is it about liking Brendon?”

Annie stared, because *wow*, she hadn’t expected Elle to come out and just *say* it.

Elle winced, one eye shutting. “Shoot. Was that too blunt?”

Annie laughed, recovering from her shock. “Blunt? Yes. Too blunt? No. I like that you say what’s on your mind. It’s . . . refreshing.”

Elle cackled. “That’s one way to put it. My lack of a brain-to-mouth filter drives Darcy up the wall.”

“No way. She *loves* it.”

Elle worried her bottom lip. “Did she tell you that?”

“She didn’t have to,” Annie said. “I know Darcy.”

Most days, she was convinced she knew Darcy better than she knew herself. And vice versa.

Elle continued to look skeptical.

“Look, did Darcy ever tell you how we became best friends?”

“She told me you moved in down the street.”

That didn’t even skim the surface of their story. “I did. My family didn’t move to the United States until I was seven. And even then, first we moved to Chicago, where my mom was originally from, and we were living in an apartment building and there were no kids close to my age. When we moved to San Francisco and I saw Darcy, I was *so* excited. I’d played with cousins, but they were either older than me or younger, so having someone my age around was completely new. I was a little . . . overzealous?” She laughed, memories flooding back. “I asked Darcy if she wanted to be my friend and she told me she already had a brother and *he* was her best friend. She slammed her front door in my face.”

“Oh my God.” Elle laughed.

“Yeah.” Annie slouched against the wall beside the mirror and remembered the acute sense of disappointment that came with someone rejecting her for the first time. A laugh burst from between her lips, because

Darcy's hesitance had been no match for Annie's dogged determination. "So, Darcy successfully kept me at arm's length until October, when we had sex ed."

Elle's dark blue eyes widened comically.

"We had a unit on sexually transmitted infections and, look, I *know* there's nothing funny about syphilis, but it's like there's some sort of short inside my head that makes me laugh at the most inopportune times. I kept giggling, and Darcy was in the desk next to me, and for some reason our teacher sent both of us to the principal's office."

Elle's jaw dropped. "No."

"Right?" Darcy had fumed. "The principal asked us what was so funny about venereal disease and I just—I lost it. Round two. I couldn't stop laughing no matter how hard I tried. All of a sudden, Darcy started snickering, and we were both . . . we were a mess. Crying, shaking, falling against each other, laughing so hard we couldn't speak. It was contagious and terrible and amazing, and our principal finally threw her hands up and called our parents. We were both sent home and assigned two-page essays on the importance of taking sexual health seriously."

Elle's eyes were bright and glassy from laughing. "And the rest is history?"

"Well, the rest is that Darcy ignored me for three days because I ruined her perfect record—and honestly, what kind of middle schooler is concerned about their record?"

"Darcy." Elle's smile softened.

"Darcy." She nodded. "Well, then she knocked on my front door and asked if I'd written my essay, only to berate me for slacking off and not turning it in early like she had. She harangued me into writing it and lectured me about the importance of condom usage, which, in retrospect? Hilarious."

Elle posed in front of the mirror, tugging on the brim of her hat. She laughed and ripped it off, hanging it back on its hook. "And *then* the rest is history?"

"Which is my long-winded way of telling you she appreciates your lack of brain-to-mouth filter. Because she's put up with mine for about twenty years."

"Okay, I'm convinced. I firmly retract my apology for being blunt." Elle grinned. "Tell me about Brendon."

Her face warmed. “I don’t want to be the type of person to make big life decisions all because of someone I’m seeing.”

“But is that really what this is?” Elle asked. “Or is it a little more complicated than that?”

“*Complicated* is certainly a word for what I’m feeling.”

“Welcome to Gemini season,” Elle said, which meant exactly nothing to Annie.

“Ah.”

Elle laughed. “Gemini is a mutable sign, so it’s a good time to approach the possibility of change with an open mind and heart, meet a new lover, and reconnect with old friends. Being an air sign, it’s *also* all about rationality. So I can see why you’re struggling. You’re a Sagittarius, right?”

Annie nodded.

Elle wrinkled her nose, eyes darting up and to the left, the gears in her head visibly whirring. “I’d need your whole chart, but Gemini is your opposite sign, so the season tends to affect you strongly. I’d say now is a pertinent time to consider ridding yourself of the baggage that doesn’t belong to you so you can make room for who you’re meant to be.”

Everything Elle had said resonated, but Annie was pretty sure that had nothing to do with its being Gemini season and everything to do with her own mixed-up feelings.

“Astrology aside”—Elle shot her a conciliatory smile—“you’re struggling with what you want and what you *think* you should want, right?”

Annie pressed a palm to her forehead and sighed. “I don’t know? Yes?”

“Do you love him?” Elle asked, completely out of the blue.

Sweat broke out along her hairline. It had been *two weeks*. “Not yet. But I think I could. Is that crazy? Oh my God, please don’t answer that.”

Elle laughed. “If you want my opinion, it doesn’t sound like you want to move to London. What part of the equation is tripping you up here?”

The timing? The magnitude of the decision awaiting her? The idea of rearranging her whole life?

She was at a crossroads. Not having a job in Philadelphia meant there was nothing there for her. She could go through with the plan and move to London, start over there, or, technically, she could move anywhere she wanted, assuming she could find a job.

She liked everything Seattle had to offer: her best friend lived here; there were people here she liked and wanted to know better, people she

could see letting herself get close to. The city was beautiful.

And then there was Brendon.

He wasn't her sole reason for considering the wildest decision of her life, but he was certainly a piece of the puzzle. She liked him, more than a little. She already cared about him, which was scary all on its own.

She shrugged. "I don't feel particularly invested in moving to London or the job there. It all sounds great on paper. Good pay. A chance to put down roots. But I don't . . . *care* about it."

"But there are things you care about here? People you care about?"

Annie nodded.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Elle frowned.

She shrugged.

"Caring about people isn't a weakness, you know," Elle said.

Annie gave a sharp laugh, then winced. "No, no it's not. As long as you don't care too much."

"There's no such thing as caring too much."

What an utterly sweet, guileless sentiment. "It's when you start hoping that others will care that you wind up in hot water."

"You think Brendon doesn't care about you?"

I've never felt this way about anyone before.

Annie swallowed hard. "No, I believe he does. But it's been thirteen days. I think he cares now, but . . ." She shook her head. "Brendon's never been in a relationship before. Not one that lasted longer than a few weeks. I believe he wants me now, but what happens if he changes his mind? Right now, everything is new and exciting, but what happens when it's not new? What happens if I pack up and move across the country and he decides I'm not what he wants anymore?"

If she didn't live up to the fantasy expectations he had in his head of what a relationship was supposed to be?

Elle offered her a tiny smile and reached out, resting her hand on Annie's arm. "You're worried it's going to go wrong, but what if it goes right? What if Brendon turns out to be the best thing that ever happened to you?"

Chapter Nineteen

You think they're ever going to give us a gay season of *The Bachelor*?"

Darcy dug her chopsticks into her carton of pad thai. "What's that spin-off show? The one where they sequester the rejects on an island?"

Annie tried in vain to fluff one of Darcy's decorative pillows, but it still felt like lying on a shiny satin brick. "*Bachelor in Paradise*?"

"I guess? Wasn't someone bi?"

"Yeah, but I mean a whole season dedicated to a queer lead. MTV did it back in 2007 with *Shot at Love with Tila Tequila*. Over ten years later and we're still thirsting for a full-fledged season of *The Bachelorette* where two dozen women in slinky ballgowns and bespoke pantsuits compete for the affection of one woman." Annie snagged her phone off the coffee table and set it face down on her stomach. "I'm telling you, *L'amour est dans le pré* is infinitely superior to—"

Darcy snorted.

Annie cut her eyes at her. "What?"

"The French version of *Farmer Wants a Wife*?" Her brown eyes widened gleefully. "Annie, I've had an epiphany."

She waited, staring at Darcy askance.

"The reason you've never had any success with dating apps is because you were using the wrong ones."

Annie laughed. "Your brother already espoused the values of OTP—"

"Not OTP." Darcy snickered. "Farmers Only."

"Ugh." Annie kicked Darcy's leg. "I forgot how mean you can be. I don't think *L'amour est dans le pré* would resonate the same over here anyway."

She liked watching *The Bachelor* as much as the next person, but it wasn't *real*. *L'amour est dans le pré* appealed to both her romantic and

pragmatic sensibilities. And they'd featured several gay farmers, something *The Bachelor* had yet to do. Feature gay contestants, *not* farmers.

"Probably not," Darcy agreed. "Cheese and wine and olives are sexier than soybeans."

A stranger sentence had never been spoken, not that Annie disagreed.

"And"—Darcy scrutinized her chopsticks, studiously avoiding Annie's eyes—"maybe if you lived closer, you wouldn't forget integral parts of my personality."

Another sly yet less-than-subtle hint. Darcy had been dropping them regularly and with increasing frequency over the past forty-eight hours.

"Being a bitch is an integral part of your personality?" Annie laughed. "Way to embrace your bad self."

"If the shoe fits," Darcy said, droll.

Annie's stomach vibrated. She checked her phone, swiping hard and huffing when her swipes wouldn't register. The crack had spread across her screen, rendering her device practically worthless.

ELLE (9:41 P.M.): 🍷🥂

Annie zoomed in, laughing out loud at the box of rosé posed beside Elle's new pink Depression glassware.

Darcy lifted her head, a curious furrow forming between her eyes. "Brendon?" She wrinkled her nose. "You're not sending *more* inappropriate texts while you sit on my couch, are you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Do you often laugh when you sext?" When Darcy turned an unhealthy shade of pink, she added, "On second thought, forget I asked."

"Forgotten," Darcy murmured.

"Relax, I'm texting Elle."

Darcy's expression went melty. "Oh."

"You know what? You're not a bitch, you're a marshmallow."

Darcy balked. "I am not a *marshmallow*."

"You are. You're an ooey, gooey ball of sugary, cavity-inducing fluff. You make me sick and I love every second of it."

"Take it back." Darcy set her dinner aside.

"Nope. You're exactly like one of those Lucky Charms marshmallows I watched you feed Elle in her kitchen the other night when you thought no one was watching."

Crunchy on the outside, but melt-in-your-mouth sweet.

Darcy buried her flushed face in her hands.

Annie sat up and threw her arms around Darcy's neck, rocking them both from side to side. "I'm happy you're happy."

"Me too." Darcy drew back, the serious look in her eyes undermining her smile. "You know my guest room always has your name on it, right? Even if Elle moves in—"

"When. *When* Elle moves in."

"When," Darcy said with a nod. "My apartment is large enough for three people if you want to stay for two weeks or two months or two years or—"

"Whoa." Annie held up her hands, nipping that idea in the bud. "I'm not crashing your love nest, Darce."

"You wouldn't." With a vehement shake of her head, Darcy set her jaw. She looked fierce, bound and determined to reassure Annie.

Annie wrinkled her nose. "Pretty sure I *did* crash. Showing up unexpectedly—"

"Well, now I'm inviting you. I'm *asking*," Darcy said. She drew her lip between her teeth and blinked several times in quick succession, dispelling the glassy sheen that had formed in her eyes. "This place is big enough for three people and you're my best friend and you and Elle get along like a house on fire."

This was all true, but . . . "What happens when you want to cook naked or—"

"That's just asking to wind up with third-degree burns somewhere embarrassing," Darcy blurted.

"Oh my God. I'm not cockblocking my best friend in her own apartment. The last thing you and Elle need is a roommate."

Darcy frowned sharply. "The last thing I need is my best friend moving halfway around the world."

It was the first time Darcy had so bluntly expressed her displeasure over Annie's potential move since their original conversation.

Annie drew her lip between her teeth and nodded. "I know you aren't thrilled—"

"Thrilled?" Darcy scoffed. "I'm not *thrilled* about Elle bringing a bunch of multicolored glassware into my—*our* kitchen. I'm not *thrilled* when I

have to work late on Fridays. I'm not *thrilled* when I forget to pack a lunch. But this?" Her bottom lip trembled. "I'm devastated, Annie."

Annie winced and turned away. "I know—"

"You don't." Darcy rested her fingers on the back of Annie's hand. "You don't know. Because I'm—I'm upset about you moving, but what kills me is that I messed up."

Annie's head snapped to the side. "What?"

"Let me finish," Darcy demanded, expression stern despite the red rimming her eyes. "I took you and I took our friendship for granted."

"You did *no*—"

Darcy squeezed her hand and frowned. "I *said* let me finish."

She rolled her eyes but pressed her lips together, holding her tongue.

"We've been friends since middle school. We moved across the country together for school. We shared a dorm and an apartment and—you've always been there. After everything happened with Natasha—"

Annie sneered at the mention of Darcy's terrible ex.

"I needed a fresh start," Darcy continued. "I needed distance. But not from you. Never from you."

A lump formed in Annie's throat, making it hard to swallow. It was a good thing she wasn't allowed to speak.

"I should've been better about texting and calling and *being* there even if I was here and you were there. If that makes sense?"

"It—can I talk?"

Darcy gave a tight nod.

"It makes sense, but I'm not upset. You needed a fresh start and I couldn't be happier for you. You moved on and you met Elle and you have a whole life here. That's how it's supposed to be. That's what I wanted for you when you decided to move to Seattle."

"Yes, but—let me be selfish, okay?" Darcy gave a wet laugh and wiped under her eyes, her mascara smudging. "I want *you* to be a part of my life here, too. I want to have my cake and eat it, too, Annie."

Fuck. She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. "I don't know what I'm doing."

Darcy sniffled and shifted closer until they were pressed together, hip to hip, thigh to thigh. She rested her hand on Annie's back and rubbed soothing circles between her shoulder blades.

"Is this about my brother?" she asked quietly.

Annie lifted her head and blew her hair out of her face with a sharp sigh. “I don’t know.”

Without question, Brendon contributed to her confusion. She’d be remiss if she didn’t acknowledge him as the driving force behind her reevaluation of her choices, of what she thought she wanted. Beyond that, he inspired feelings in her she’d sworn off and elevated her expectations, and it was terrifying and exciting and all happening so *fast*.

“I came to Seattle to tell you I was moving. A bon voyage. I’ve been here less than two weeks and I’m questioning everything.” She groaned and let her head drop back on her shoulders. “I’m seriously considering changing all my plans after *days*, Darcy. I have a job lined up in London and it’s what I thought I wanted and now . . . I don’t know if that’s what I want anymore.”

“If London isn’t what you want, what’s your alternative?”

Annie covered her face with a hand. “I could turn down the promotion and stay on with Brockman and Brady in the Philadelphia office. Problem with that is, I already have a sublet lined up. I would need to find a new apartment. Stat.”

“*Or*”—Darcy took a deep breath—“you could pack up all of your things and move here.”

Until two weeks ago, moving to London had been *the plan*, the only one she’d had. But that wasn’t true anymore. She had options. Options that terrified her but thrilled her, too. Options that felt *right* in a way that moving to London didn’t.

She let herself think about it. Not just a peripheral glimpse at what the future might hold before she tore her eyes away, too afraid of staring it down. This time, she forced herself to confront it, head-on. What it would be like, living in Seattle, making a life here. Calling this city home.

There’d be no need to cross days off on a calendar. Sure, she’d have to fly back to Philadelphia and take care of things, tie up loose ends, put her plans in motion, figure out the finer details, but she could be back in the blink of an eye, and all of this? Darcy, not just a phone call away, but within driving distance. Game nights and spectacularly strange shopping trips with Elle. Nights with Brendon on his couch, laughing until she cried and her stomach ached. Exploring the city and discovering Brendon, letting him discover her.

Annie stared up at the ceiling. “I could.”

“Wait.” Darcy shoved Annie’s shoulder. *Hard*. “Are you serious?”

Annie laughed. “I said I could. Not that I was going to.”

“So it’s a maybe?”

Annie nodded slowly.

“What do you need to turn that *maybe* into a *yes*?”

“A crystal ball?” Annie joked, pressing her fingertips to her right temple. Her head was beginning to hurt. “A glimpse into the future would help.”

Darcy frowned. “Look, I don’t believe in astrology, but if you need me to ask Elle—”

“I was kidding. What I need is far harder to come by. A plan. A job.”

She had enough money in savings to swing a few months in limbo, but that was it.

Darcy waved her hand like it was no big deal. “We can find you a job. Easy. You have references, experience.” She pursed her lips. “I bet I could get you an interview at Devereaux and Horton. I think our HR department might be hiring.”

That was nice and all but . . . “I don’t know if I want to work in HR anymore.”

If—and it was a big, up-in-the-air *if*—she was starting over, she might as well look for a job she actually liked.

“Okay.” Darcy nodded, taking Annie’s confession in stride. “If not HR, what?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “Maybe something that actually puts my degree in linguistics to use? Translation?”

“All right. We can do some research. I can put feelers out.”

Time was of the essence and all, but this was moving at a rapid pace. A cart-before-the-horse rapid pace. “I never said I was sure, Darcy. It’s a possibility. I still have to think about it.”

“What’s there to think about? You don’t want to work in human resources. You don’t know anyone in London. You’ve already subleased your apartment in Philadelphia. You like it here, don’t you?”

Annie nodded. There was nothing about Seattle she didn’t like. The city was vibrant, the geography stunning. Based on what she’d seen, she had a feeling she’d never be bored, not with everything the city had to offer.

“You have friends here, Annie.”

True. Everything Darcy had said was true. And yet . . .

This was a huge decision. A life-altering one. Not one to make lightly or quickly.

Darcy rested her hands on her knees. “You want to make a list? Pros and cons? A cost-benefit analysis?”

“You’re biased. You’d have to, like, recuse yourself from evaluating my risk.”

“Recuse myself? Annie, I’m an actuary, not an attorney, and we’re discussing your inevitable move to Seattle, not an insurance claim. It just *feels* like a life-or-death situation; it isn’t one.”

Annie’s chin wobbled, her smile shaking. “God, I really missed you. You’re such a smart-ass.”

“Pro”—Darcy reached for her phone, opening up her notes app—“you move to Seattle and you get twenty-four/seven access to me in all my smart-ass glory.”

“Twenty-four/seven? Really? I could call you at two in the morning and expect a pithy quip?”

“You *could*. But let’s go with sixteen/seven,” she said. “I don’t perform well on fewer than eight hours of sleep.”

Warmth spread through Annie’s chest, along with an overwhelming sense of rightness. *Certainty*. This was what she wanted.

Chapter Twenty

What Controversy Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

Aries—Ross and Rachel: were they on a break?

Taurus—Reclining your seat on an airplane: acceptable or infuriating?

Gemini—Pineapple on a pizza: delicious or disgusting?

Cancer—Team Edward vs. Team Jacob

Leo—Pet names for significant others: cute or gag-worthy?

Virgo—Toilet paper: over or under?

Libra—*Pride & Prejudice* (2005 movie) vs. *Pride and Prejudice* (1995 miniseries)

Scorpio—Martinis: gin or vodka?

Sagittarius—Centaur penis placement: human or horse?

Capricorn—The left lane is for passing only: yay or nay?

Aquarius—~Aliens~

Pisces—Peeing in the shower: gross or acceptable?

Friday, June 11

Brendon exited out of Twitter and set his phone aside when someone knocked on his office door.

“Come in.” He leaned back in his chair, swiveling gently from side to side, steepling his fingers in front of him.

The door opened and Margot entered, shutting the door behind her. One of her brows quirked high on her forehead as her dark eyes swept over his seated form. “Wasn’t aware I stepped inside the office of Hugo Drax.”

He frowned. “Hugo *who*?”

“Drax.” At his blank stare, she huffed. “Hugo Drax, Bond villain.” She mimicked him, tenting her fingers in front of her body. “You look very dastardly. Like you’re about to fire a laser at the moon unless someone sends you one million dollars.”

He dropped his hands and slumped back in his chair. “It’s a sign of impassioned intelligence according to the leading experts in body language psychology.”

“Did you research that?” Margot threw her messenger bag on the floor and collapsed into one of his chairs. She kicked her feet up on his desk, sending his stress ball rolling. “Who am I kidding? Of course you did.”

He leaned down and snagged it off the floor, tossing it at Margot. She snatched it out of the air and gave it a hard clench.

“Did you come here to give me shit or was there some other reason for your visit?”

She rifled around inside her bag before tossing what he was pretty sure was an aluminum foil brick on his desk. “Chipotle. Enjoy.”

Ah, *food*. He’d spent most of the morning going over his notes for this afternoon’s all-team meeting and had completely lost track of time. By the time he’d checked the clock, it was too late to dash out for a quick bite. He tore the foil open, revealing a steamy burrito nearly the size of his head. “Thanks.”

Margot already had her mouth wrapped around hers, tearing into her meal with gusto.

“Hey, Mar?”

She nodded and continued to chew.

“Is centaur penis placement seriously up for debate?”

She coughed, catching a handful of half-chewed burrito. “Jesus, Brendon.”

“I mean, it’s obviously back by the horse half, right?” He frowned. “Or no? Then again, centaurs have two rib cages, which suggests the possibility of *two* hearts, so—”

“*Okay*. Warn a girl before you start talking about penises, *please*.” Margot snagged a napkin off his desk.

“We’re hardly in public and you have the foulest mouth of anyone I’ve ever met. Don’t act scandalized.”

She lifted a hand to her chest and sniffed. “Fuck, that might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. I am touched. Touched, I tell you.”

He balled up his napkin and tossed it at her head. She batted it aside and cackled.

“For the record, I’m the one who made this particular meme.” Margot preened. “I’m especially proud.”

He cracked a smile. “It’s a good one.”

She studied him over her burrito. “How’s Annie?”

“Annie’s great.”

She stared at him blankly. “She’s great?”

He laughed. “Yeah, Mar. Great. As in that state of being that denotes goodness. Positivity. Ring any bells?”

“Normally I can’t get you to shut up about the girls you go out with. Now you’re being all tight-lipped?”

Margot wasn’t wrong. Usually he was eager to share when he’d had a great date. For some reason, this felt different.

This thing between him and Annie was already so precious to him that he felt . . . protective. Like he was holding something fragile in the palms of his hands. Holding too tight might crush it; not tight enough and it might drift away. And talking about it?

“I don’t want to jinx this.” He slumped back in his chair and kicked away from his desk, spinning in a slow circle as he stared up at the ceiling. “Does that sound weird?”

“Weird.” Margot smirked. “Right up your alley.”

“Funny.”

“I wasn’t finished. Right up your alley *and* we love you for it.”

“We? Who is this *we* you speak of?”

“I was using the royal *we*, you douche, but I take it back.”

He sniffled. “That is the nicest thing *you* have ever said to me.”

“Calling you a douche? Whatever floats your boat, I guess.”

He checked to make sure his office door was shut, then flipped her off. “I really like her, Margot.”

Margot’s expression softened. “I can tell. Hell, you’ve got a pretty serious case of heart eyes going on. Someone says *Annie* and your face does this melty thing and it’s so gross it makes me want to hurl, but like, in a happy way.”

“Happy hurling,” he repeated. “And you called me weird.”

She threw a packet of hot sauce at him. “Giving you grief is how I show affection.”

He glanced at his notebook. “Ah, yes, shit-giving. The lesser-known sixth love language.”

Her brows rose over the top of her glasses.

“Nothing.” He waved her off. “Thinking about the meeting I’ve got in”—he checked the time—“ten minutes. We’re trying to reach a new demographic.”

Margot snagged another packet of sauce and tore it open with her teeth. “Which would be . . . ?”

“The thirty percent of dating app users who believe apps have rendered courtships impersonal and devoid of romance.”

A flicker of recognition passed over her face, her brows ticking higher. “Damn. Well, you like a challenge. Example: Annie. Only you would fall hard and fast for a girl who doesn’t live here.”

He shot her a wry smile. “Since when is love supposed to be convenient?”

Margot squeezed her burrito so hard the filling squashed out the bottom, splattering against the foil on her lap. “Whoa, *whoa*. Did you just imply that you *love* her?”

He set his burrito down carefully. Had he?

When Annie stepped into a room, everything else fell away. Touching Annie, kissing her, her laugh alone, made his heart skip several beats like he’d downed a red-eye coffee. Under that was an overwhelming sense of rightness. When his heartbeat returned to normal, she was still the only person he wanted, and he’d have given anything to be that person for her.

Perhaps it wasn’t love, but it was headed in that direction. Or, it could.

“She’s leaving tomorrow night.”

With an aggrieved huff, she set her deconstructed burrito aside. “That was not the answer to my question.”

“But a valid point, nonetheless.”

She pinned him with a no-nonsense stare. “Those dimples, while adorable, don’t work on me.”

Obfuscation was getting him nowhere. “Look, even I’m willing to admit this has all happened at breakneck speed, okay? Excuse me if I don’t want to cheapen my feelings by sticking a label on them too soon.”

Her brows rose over the top of her glasses. “Holy shit. You’re *really* serious about her.”

“I am, but—” His voice broke off abruptly and he forced down a swallow before coughing to clear his throat. “Again, she’s leaving tomorrow.”

And she had yet to say if she was moving to London or staying in Philadelphia or maybe, just maybe, thinking of relocating here.

Margot frowned, picking at the outer fold of the tortilla. “How goes *the plan*?”

“Plan?”

“You know, *the plan*. The one I inadvertently inspired? What you’ve been doing this entire time? Proving to Annie that romance isn’t dead by wooing, taking cues from all your favorite sappy movies? It must’ve worked better than I thought if it got you this far.”

“Do my ears deceive me or did you just admit you were wrong about something?”

Margot rolled her eyes. “Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, hiring a skywriter or getting her face tattooed on your stomach or something?”

“If that’s what you think passes for romance, I pity the person you fall in love with.” He smiled, softening the barb.

“Good thing I’m not looking to fall in love with anyone.”

“One of these days—”

“Finish that sentence.” She narrowed her eyes. “I dare you.”

He held his tongue, knowing better than to press the issue. But *God*, he was going to love to say *I told you so* to her one day. “The movie scene recreations worked as far as giving us the opportunity to get to know one another while also showing Annie around town. I *think* she appreciates the effort I put into our dates”—even he had to admit his execution, at times, was a bit of a fail, what with the Great Wheel malfunctioning, the wrong song playing at karaoke, getting stranded by the ferry, falling in the water at the wedding—“but grand gestures aren’t her love language.”

Margot shrugged. “Okay, then speak her language.”

He slumped back in his chair and pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. “What do you think I’ve been trying to do?”

Show Annie he cared via thoughtful gifts and quality time, all without overwhelming her.

She winced. “Maybe grab a megaphone and speak her language louder?”

Maybe Margot was right. Tomorrow, Annie would be on a plane. Now wasn’t the time to play it safe.

He checked his phone. Five minutes until his meeting. He balled up his foil burrito wrapper and tossed it in the trash. “Speaking of time, I’ve got to head over to the conference room. You’re welcome to hang around in here if you want.”

“Nah, I’ve got places to be.” Margot kicked her feet off his desk and stood, following him out of his office. She paused in the hall, just before the

bank of elevators. “Good luck with your meeting.”

He rocked back on his heels. Nerves were settling in, his hopes for this meeting high. “Thanks.”

“And, Brendon?” She reached out, patting him on the shoulder. “Good luck with Annie. Just remember, there’s only so much anyone can do. You, Darcy, Elle—we all think it would be great if Annie stayed, but at the end of the day? Whether she stays or goes is her choice.”

* * *

Brendon sank down into the couch and snagged Annie around the waist, dragging her into his lap. His fingers dug into her sides and she squirmed, howling.

“Oh my God, Brendon! Stop! That tickles!”

He cut it out, chuckling softly.

She shifted, getting comfy, her head pillowed atop his thighs. “You’re in a good mood.”

His nose scrunched. “Aren’t I usually?”

“Yes, but you’re, like, extra cheerful right now.” She snagged his hand and laced their fingers together atop her stomach. “Your enthusiasm’s beginning to rub off on me.”

He wagged his brows, making her snort-laugh. “*Brendon.*”

“Sorry.” He didn’t sound it. “I had a great day.”

“Yeah? Tell me about it.”

“You remember how I mentioned the intimacy-and-dating survey?”

Her lips twitched. How could she have possibly forgotten *that* conversation? “Vaguely.”

Brendon pinched her hip lightly, making her squeal. “You’re hilarious.”

She flourished her free hand in the air. “Thank you, thank you. I’ll be here all night.”

“*Well*, I’ve been doing some thinking—”

She gasped. “No way.”

“Quit!” Brendon snickered, fingers once again digging into her sides, making her shriek with laughter.

“*Uncle!*” She sniffed, face on fire and eyes damp. “I’m sorry. I’m listening. I promise.”

She really did want to hear what he had to say. It was just difficult to focus when his hands were on her. When he was wearing next to nothing, only his boxer shorts, and she was in her underwear and a shirt of his she'd *borrowed*. She had zero intention of giving it back.

"As I was saying." He narrowed his eyes playfully. "We've all been doing some brainstorming about how to draw in new users to the app because, right now? Growth is stagnating. Not an issue at the moment, but down the road . . ."

"Got it. Easier to prevent a fire from starting than be forced to put one out." She nodded, showing she was following along.

"Exactly." Brendon stroked his thumb across her wrist. "I already told you about how, at OTP, we emphasize compatibility and communication—we've even got helpful icebreakers to inspire users to keep a dialogue running so conversations don't drag—but at the end of the day, it's all meant to help users *find* their one true pairing, their person." His teeth scraped against his lip. "We're good at what we do, the finding part, but what comes next is out of our hands."

"That's true for any dating app."

"Right, but then something you said got me thinking."

"What did I say that was so poignant?"

"Try, everything?"

Her face warmed and so did the rest of her. "Brendon."

"I thought about our conversation, what you find romantic, what romance means to you. About how we all have our own love language that dictates how we show affection and how we recognize affection. That two people can have the best intentions and still struggle if they're speaking two different languages and don't even know it." He smiled down at her. "At today's meeting, I proposed that we make a few small tweaks. Not to the matching algorithm, but in the account setup. Maybe we should have users take a quick 'What Love Language Do You Speak?' quiz, and the results can appear on their profile along with a link to what each language means."

She smiled up at him. The warm, amber glow of the lamp beside his couch played against the chiseled edge of his jaw, his cheeks, highlighting the sharp strength of his features.

"That's not a bad idea," she admitted. "It's a great idea, actually."

"I have you to thank for planting the seed in my head." He beamed down at her. "And I know—how'd you put it? Even with all the right tools,

you can't make someone put in the effort? What users choose to do with the additional knowledge will be up to them, but *maybe* those thirty percent of skeptical dating app users will at least know we've heard them and we're trying. Maybe they need to try, too."

"As far as dating apps go?" She sat forward and twisted around, settling into his lap with a smile, her knees bracketing his thighs. "What you guys do at OTP seems really . . . thoughtful."

Everything Brendon did was thoughtful. He tried at everything he did, tried harder than anyone she'd ever met.

"Thoughtful, huh?" he whispered, staring at her mouth. "I'll take it."

With his hand on the back of her head, he angled her just so, allowing his mouth to cover hers. His lips pillowed her bottom lip briefly before nipping it gently, the pleasant sting making her gasp and grind her hips downward.

He grunted into her mouth. "Fuck, Annie."

Brendon's cursing should've been outlawed, not because she didn't like it, but because she liked it *too* much. He seldom ever swore except during sex. Hearing the word *fuck* fall from his tongue was a promise and prelude all in one, and it never failed to make her heart stutter, a heady sense of anticipation threatening to overwhelm her.

She ran her hands down his chest, splaying her fingers against the dips and valleys of his abs through his thin T-shirt. When she dug her nails in, he tore his mouth away, pressing their foreheads together and panting softly.

"Why'd you stop?"

He grasped her chin and tilted it back, staring down at her, lids low. "I want to take my time." He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth and another and another in a meandering line across her jaw that led down to the hollow beneath her ear. "Besides"—his tongue curled around her lobe and his teeth grazed her skin, causing her back to bow—"aren't you the slightest bit curious whether I managed to figure out your love language?"

"As long as you keep kissing me," she murmured, tilting her head to the side, "I'm all ears."

"Lucky for you, I'm a pro at multitasking." His lips skimmed her throat in a gentle kiss. "Quality time."

Her brain went fuzzy when he sucked at the skin over her pounding pulse. "Huh?"

“Love languages, Annie.” He chuckled against her neck. “Yours is quality time. Spending time just being together.”

Her eyes drifted shut, relishing the feeling of his lips against her skin. Brendon wasn't wrong.

He tugged at the neck of her borrowed shirt, his kisses trailing lower. “According to my research, we tend to show affection the way we prefer to receive it.” His teeth scraped the thin skin over her collarbone, making her shiver. “Yours is also receiving gifts. Not because it's material, but because of the thought and effort that goes into it. Your actions speak louder than words.”

She swallowed hard, her throat suddenly narrow. “What about physical touch? That's a love language, isn't it?”

Brendon lifted his head, staring up at her. The glow of the lamp caught on his copper lashes and brought out the tawny flecks in his warm brown eyes. He dimpled at her. “You *are* multilingual, so . . .”

Letting Brendon in, letting him this close, had never been her intention. Somehow, without meaning to, he'd slipped past her defenses, scaled her walls, and now he knew her better than people she'd dated for *months*.

If quality time and gifts were her love languages, words of affirmation was Brendon's.

She leaned forward and captured his lips in an unhurried kiss, mostly to stifle the smile threatening to split her face in two. Against his mouth, she whispered, “Remember how you told me you've never felt this way about anyone before?” She swallowed hard and confessed, “No one's ever made me feel this way before, either.”

She was pretty sure there were butterflies in her stomach; either that or her food wasn't agreeing with her, because she felt like she was going to hurl but also like she wanted to laugh? Both? And maybe kiss Brendon? It was an extremely confusing feeling that would've been off-putting if not for the fact that he was looking at her now and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the dimples in his cheeks, the crooked curve of his mouth, made her think that maybe this feeling wasn't so scary. Not if she wasn't the only one who felt like this, the only one who cared. If they were in this together.

He swept the hair off her face, fingers tracing the shell of her ear after tucking her hair behind it. “Say you'll move here. Say you'll move to Seattle.” The expression on his face was achingly tender. “Say you want to be with me.”

She *did*. She wanted Brendon to be hers and she wanted to be his. Wanted it with a sudden ferocity that stole her breath and made her heart race. It battered against the wall of her chest, fluttering viciously inside her veins.

Annie swallowed hard and threw herself over the edge of the cliff. “I want that.”

Brendon’s smile put the sun and moon and all the stars in the sky to shame. He whispered her name, his thumb grazing her cheek as he rested his forehead against hers. For a moment, they simply breathed each other’s air.

Something buzzed against her thigh.

A line appeared between Brendon’s brows as he drew back, feeling around atop the couch for what must’ve been his phone. Hers was buried somewhere in the bottom of her purse.

“Everything okay?” she asked, reaching up and tracing the chiseled line of his jaw with her fingertips. God, he was handsome. And she was lucky.

“Hmm?” He glanced up from his phone and smiled. “Yeah, yeah. Unknown caller. Lost a bunch of my contacts when I fell in the lake with my phone. This could be about today’s meeting—”

“It’s fine.” She smiled and let her hand fall to his shoulder. “Take it.”

He swiped and lifted the phone to his ear. “Hello? Yeah, this is Brendon.” His eyes doubled in size. “Oh, hey.” His gaze flickered to her face and he offered her a brief, tight smile. “Listen, I’m sorry, Danielle, but I’m going to have to bow out. I’m actually seeing someone.”

Without meaning to, she stiffened. He offered her another smile, this one a little broader, but it did nothing to alleviate her confusion.

“Thanks. You, too.” He ended the call and set his phone aside.

Nosy was the last thing she wanted to be, but she was pretty sure her curiosity was warranted seeing as his call had had something to do with her. “Who was that?”

His lips pressed together and he reached for her hand, playing with her too-stiff fingers. “Ah, that was . . .” He laughed. “It’s kind of a funny story?”

She was all ears.

“The day you came into town and Darcy called, asking me to drop off her key, I actually”—he gave another awkward chuckle and scratched the side of his neck—“I was supposed to go out for a drink.”

She connected the dots. “You had a date.”

He winced. “Yeah. I canceled, obviously. Then we said we’d play it by ear because she had a family vacation scheduled and I completely forgot about it, to be honest.” His thumb brushed the back of her knuckles. “I’ve been a little preoccupied.”

His smile went crooked and her heart squeezed, even as her stomach made a slow descent, sinking. She reached for the hem of her—his—shirt and tugged it down her thighs before sliding off his lap and tucking her knees beneath her.

“Hey.” His smile fell and the furrow between his brows reappeared, and it made her chest twist, because what she was feeling was nonsensical and she knew it. She didn’t need him to know it, too. “You’re not . . . upset, are you?”

She waved off his concern. “No. No. Of course not. Why would I be upset?”

Even to her own ears that sounded a bit *doth protest too much* to be entirely genuine. Her grimace was sharp and instantaneous. Fuck.

Brendon saw straight through her bullshit and slid closer, leaning his head down, forcing her to look up at him. His face was a picture of concern, his forehead wrinkled and his brown eyes flitting over her face. He reached out, tucking that same errant strand of hair behind her ear, the wily one with a mind of its own. “We matched on the app. I never even went out with her. It was going to be a first date, drinks. And I told her—”

She cut him off with a sharp jerk of her chin, her face burning. “You really don’t have to explain. I get it, I promise.”

It didn’t bother her that he’d had plans with someone before her. Everyone had a past. What bothered her was that she’d been in town for such a short stint of time that his rain check coincided with her visit. That his past was so recent it butted up against their present, practically overlapping.

He hadn’t done anything wrong. She didn’t feel betrayed or hurt or like he’d played her. She’d had no claim over him, hadn’t wanted him to be hers until a few days ago.

This was a not-so-gentle reminder that all of this—not just her relationship with Brendon, but her job, Seattle, *everything*—was moving awfully fast.

Perhaps too fast.

She found it hard to swallow, but she soldiered on, taking it one step further and pasting on a smile, choking out what she prayed sounded like a breezy laugh. She needed Brendon to understand she wasn't upset with him. "I'm not mad. Promise."

Two minutes ago she'd been so achingly certain that this was right, and now? Now she wasn't so sure she was making a smart decision.

She'd always had a tendency to leap before she looked. To speak before she thought. What made this any different?

What she'd told him was true. She wanted him, wanted to be with him, but it terrified her how fast she'd fallen for him in such a short period of time. How fast she'd deviated from her plan, the one that up until two weeks ago might've been her only plan, but a sound one.

She believed Brendon when he said he'd never felt this way before either, but what was stopping him from changing his mind? From feeling differently in two weeks or a month if someone else caught his eye and made him feel sparks, a stronger connection than he had with her? What was stopping her from becoming the girl on the phone he was canceling plans with?

She had no idea.

And that terrified her.

Chapter Twenty-One

Saturday, June 12

After picking up a truly obscene order of sweet and savory piroshkis from the Russian bakery across from the market, Brendon headed straight to Darcy's, parking out front and dashing inside, rain beginning to fall in a light sprinkle from the heavy clouds hanging overhead.

Annie answered the door, her smile strained and her eyes drawn. "Hey." She stepped aside, letting him through into the apartment.

"I know your flight isn't until this evening, but I thought I'd swing by a little early. See if you were hungry. Figured you'd be head-down with the packing and not thinking about food." He set the box of pastries on the kitchen counter, a folder full of research he'd done for Annie perched atop it. "Where's Darce?"

"She's grabbing lunch with Elle and borrowing her car so she can drive me to the airport later."

"I could've driven you."

Her brows rose, humor dancing in her eyes. "In your car? No offense, but I don't think I could fit my carry-on in your backseat, let alone my suitcase."

She had a point. "Fair."

Annie rose up on her tiptoes, lips brushing his throat. "Thanks for the offer. And the food."

Every inch of her—from the wisps of hair that floated free of her bun to the polish on her pinky toes—had the power to bring him to his knees, but her lips against his skin were especially dangerous. Her mouth made him lose his mind, made it impossible for him to think straight.

Her fingers trailed down his front, freezing, splayed against his stomach when it rumbled. Her eyes widened with mirth.

“Hungry?” she asked, dropping her hand.

He smiled sheepishly. “Starving.”

She hefted herself up onto the counter, legs swinging, her bare feet knocking gently against the cabinet beneath her while he dug into the bag. She took the spinach piroshki he offered her and smiled.

“Thank you,” she said, stretching her leg out and tapping him with her toes.

He leaned back against the counter. From across the room he spotted the tiny succulent he’d purchased her sitting neatly on Darcy’s coffee table atop a coaster.

“Did you ever find out if you can bring plants on a plane?”

“Plants on a—” She followed his gaze, her eyes widening as understanding dawned on her. “Oh. Right. No, I didn’t. I guess I should check the TSA’s website?”

“You could do that.” He licked at his suddenly dry lips. “Or I could”—he gave a chuckle that sounded as desperate and confused as he felt—“hold on to it for you.”

Until you get back.

The way Annie’s face fell freaked him out. She lifted a hand, resting her fingers at the hollow of her throat. “I’m not sure when that’s going to be.”

He picked at his thumbnail and shrugged, as nonchalantly as he could manage when it felt like he’d swallowed a brick and it was trapped in his chest. “Annie.”

Her brows rose but she didn’t lift her eyes, staring resolutely off into space over his shoulder.

He pressed off the counter and stepped toward her. “Look at me.”

His request went unmet for one breath, two, before she lifted her eyes, gaze steady but guarded.

He tried not to let the frustration he was feeling leach out into his voice. “You’re getting on a plane in twelve hours.”

“Thanks, I’d almost forgotten,” she sniped. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she shut her eyes, lips flattening inward in obvious contrition. “I’m sorry. It’s just . . . I *know* I’m leaving and I know there’s plenty we need to talk about but . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“If you’re open to suggestions, I have a few,” he joked. “*I’ve decided not to move to London* is a good one. Or, *I’m moving to Seattle.*”

She frowned. “It’s not that simple.”

Wasn't it? He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Last night you told me this is what you want. I think you're making this more difficult than it needs to be."

Her eyes lifted and widened, goggling at him. "You think this is easy? This is my whole life we're talking about. What I want is only one piece of the puzzle. There are logistics to consider if I . . . *if*." She shook her head. "Figuring out what to do for work—"

"Here." He reached for the folder, Annie's name scribbled across the front in thick black Sharpie. "A dozen career ideas involving linguistics and foreign languages." He tapped the folder. "Freelance ideas and even a few places that are hiring here in Seattle."

Annie took the folder from him and traced the swooping *A* of her name with one trembling finger. "This . . . you didn't have to do this for me, Brendon."

This was small, but it was something for him to do, and he'd needed to do *something* so he didn't feel like he was sitting around and *waiting*. There was nothing he hated more than feeling powerless, unable to help, spinning his wheels and getting nowhere. "I know I didn't have to. I wanted to."

"Thank you. This is wonderful and—really helpful." Her throat jerked as she lifted her eyes. "There's still packing and hiring a moving company and—and looking for an apartment because I refuse to overstay my welcome at Darcy's—"

"You're welcome to stay at my place."

For some reason, she blanched. "Brendon."

She'd spent the night at his place more often than not since the night of the wedding. "I'm not asking you to move in with me. Not that I'd complain."

She was welcome to stay with him as long as she wanted and she'd hear not a single peep out of him. He'd gotten used to waking up next to her, her body curved into his, her hair in his mouth. Or the cold press of her feet against his when they crawled beneath the covers.

"That's—that's . . ." She trailed off with a hard shake of her head as if to dismiss the suggestion entirely. "I'm going to pretend you didn't seriously say that."

What was the big deal with his offering her a solution? "I'm not proposing, Annie."

What little color remained in her face drained, leaving her pale as a sheet. His grimace was immediate and instinctive, and he tried to quash it. When that didn't work, he hid it with his hand instead, covering his mouth with his palm. He *wasn't* proposing, but her horrified reaction stung.

"I'm not—I *can't* be the type of girl who moves across the country on a whim," she whispered, setting the folder he'd given her aside.

A whim. This didn't feel like a whim, not to him. His whole life, he'd been waiting for something that felt this right. And now she wanted to walk away.

"I don't know if I've given this enough thought. I need time to think. And I can't—I can't do that around you." She lifted her head and stared up at him, her eyes bloodshot and glossy. "Because when I'm around you, I lose my head."

"The feeling's mutual. I told you, I've never felt this way about anyone before."

When he was with Annie, she became the only thing he could think about. The only thing that mattered in those moments when it was just the two of them. Only, he didn't feel like that was wrong.

"And two weeks from now? Am I going to be the girl you're canceling plans with for someone else you've *never felt this way about*?"

Her insinuation—no, *accusation*—knocked the wind out of him.

He didn't know how to make her understand that this was different.

It felt like he was fighting a losing battle, showing her he cared without overwhelming her, without moving too fast. With every step he took forward, she took one back. Soon enough, there'd be an entire ocean between them.

"I don't know how to prove to you I'm serious. I—" He swallowed hard, words clogging in his throat as realization sank in. "If this is about that phone call—"

"It's not about the phone call." Her denial came too quickly and was too emphatic to be sincere. She must've known it, too, because she shut her eyes and pressed her hand to her forehead, looking chagrined at her outburst. "It's *not*. It's about the fact that I remembered I've been here two weeks. *Two* weeks. Long enough that your rain check hadn't even come to fruition."

He clenched his jaw. "So it is about the phone call."

A call he had no control over.

“I don’t care about your date—”

“I canceled it,” he reiterated, raking his fingers through his hair and fisting the strands. “Because I haven’t thought about a single person but you since you came to town, Annie.”

Every waking moment, he thought about her. She existed at the forefront of his brain. What she was doing, what was she thinking, if she was thinking about him. With every kiss he fell a little harder, and he wondered if it was the same for her.

It looked like he had his answer.

“Which was two weeks ago.” She hopped off the counter and began to pace across the kitchen, wringing her hands together. “*Two weeks.*”

“Fifteen days,” he muttered.

She stopped pacing and scoffed. “Jesus Christ, you are *such* a smart-ass.”

“You like it,” he said, taking a step toward her and another and another until she was close enough for him to reach out and touch. His hand skimmed her waist, but before he could hold her, she stepped back, slipping through his fingers.

She wasn’t even two feet from him but she might as well have been a million miles away already. He could see her, he was looking right at her, but it felt like he’d already lost her. If she had even been his to begin with.

“I do.” Her bottom lip wobbled and his chest ached. “I like everything about you, Brendon. But . . .” She pressed her fingers to her lips, staring at the sliver of space between them. “I think we’re moving a little fast. I think *all* of this is moving a little fast.” Tears pooled in her eyes, moisture clumping her lower lashes together. “*A lot* fast.”

One tear slipped down her cheek when she blinked. Another followed, sluicing the same path, picking up speed. At her jaw, it curved, sliding down her chin. He clenched his hands into fists at his sides, the temptation to erase the evidence of her unhappiness too great.

He wanted to *fix* this, but at every turn, his hands were tied.

“Why do I feel like when you get on that plane, I’m not going to see you for eight more years?”

“No. *No*. That’s not going to happen. I just need—God, this sounds so cliché.” She sniffled hard and gulped in a deeper breath. Her eyes fluttered open, her lashes sticking together, and what *he* needed was for her to finish that sentence. Anything she needed, he’d give it to her. “Time.”

Why couldn't it have been something simple? A place to stay? He'd make her a million promises, but he couldn't speed up time and he couldn't make up her mind for her.

No matter how badly he wished he could fix this, he couldn't.

The word *hope* flashed through his mind. Hope that all she needed was a little time and space. Hope that with enough of both, she'd realize what she wanted was here. Hope that she'd choose him, choose what made her happy. Hope. If he thought it enough times, the word ceased to lose meaning.

He bit the inside of his cheek. "I just really want you to be happy."

Her lashes fluttered and she sniffed, staring at him, studying him, eyes flitting over his face, growing gradually wider. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Of course I do," he said.

All the way down to the marrow of his bones.

With his eyes, he begged her to understand. For those two words to mean enough to her. That maybe she would want to stay.

When she dropped her eyes to the floor and curled her arms tighter around herself, he knew his hopes had been in vain.

Call it selfish, but he couldn't stomach the thought of letting her leave without getting the chance to hold her in his arms one more time. He stepped forward, hands trembling as he reached for her, praying she'd let him. He held his breath and let one hand fall against the curve of her waist, the other cupping the side of her face. Beneath his fingers, her skin was feverishly hot, her cheeks flushed and damp from crying.

"I hope you figure out what it is you want." His tongue darted out, wetting his lips. "Until then, I'll be here. Waiting."

"Brendon." His name burst from her lips as a weak sob. Briefly, she turned into his hand, mouth brushing the inside of his wrist, making his pulse go haywire. Her breath ghosted against his skin like a brand and his whole body burned, his throat, the back of his eyelids, his chest worst of all. "What if it takes me longer than a week to make up my mind?"

She craned her head back, staring up at him with wide, round eyes, bluer than he'd ever seen them due to how bloodshot they were.

That fist squeezing his heart gripped it harder, turning it to pulp.

His jaw slid forward and back, his composure close to cracking. *Fuck.* The inside of his nose burned, sinuses tingling.

“Then it takes you longer than a week.” He bit down hard on the side of his tongue and forced himself to smile through the pain. “The way I see it, you can’t rush something you want to last forever.”

She buried her face in his chest and fisted her fingers in his shirt, knotting the fabric in her hands. He closed his eyes and let his hand drift, fingers threading through her silky-soft hair, holding her, memorizing the feel of her and hating that when he thought about what it felt like to hold her, the memory would be tainted by the dampness of her tears soaking into his shirt and the way her body trembled against him, racked with near-silent sobs.

If his heart was elastic, it had snapped in two.

The lights mounted above the cabinets blurred as he leaned in, pressing his lips to her forehead. She smelled like summer, like the cool night air after a hot, rainy day, electric and a little wild. Under that, she smelled like his shampoo. He breathed deep, drawing her into his lungs, and let his lips linger against her skin.

Her breath evened out and her fingers released his shirt and—he swallowed hard, stealing a second longer. Just a second. Two seconds. Three. *Fuck*. No amount of time would be sufficient because he couldn’t get enough of her.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to let her go.

“Text me?” he asked, voice raspy from all the words he’d swallowed. “When you land?”

She gave a jerky nod and dragged the heel of her hand under each eye, mopping up what remained of her tears. “I will,” she murmured.

“Have a safe flight.”

She offered him a wan, watery smile in return that waned quickly.

If he didn’t leave now, didn’t drag himself out of Darcy’s apartment, he feared desperation might drive him to do something drastic. Get down on his knees and beg Annie to stay. Plead a little too hard and push her even further away.

Forcing his feet to move, he turned and walked out of the kitchen, grabbing his keys off the entry table and letting himself out the front door. Leaving what felt like a piece of his heart behind.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Which Star-Crossed Lovers Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign? (Check Your Venus, Too!)

Aries—Romeo and Juliet

Taurus—Cecilia and Robbie from *Atonement*

Gemini—William and Viola from *Shakespeare in Love*

Cancer—Jack and Ennis from *Brokeback Mountain*

Leo—Satine and Christian from *Moulin Rouge!*

Virgo—Hero and Leander

Libra—Marianne and Héloïse from *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Scorpio—Catherine and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*

Sagittarius—Jack and Rose from *Titanic*

Capricorn—Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai from *The Butterfly Lovers*

Aquarius—Neo and Trinity from *The Matrix*

Pisces—Landon and Jamie from *A Walk to Remember*

“You have everything?” Darcy stepped to the side when a harried-looking mother dragging two small children muttered *Excuse me* and bolted around her, heading toward security.

Even if Annie had forgotten something, it was too late to go back for it. She had a flight to catch. “I think so.”

Darcy frowned at Annie’s carry-on. “You have your phone? Charger?”

Check and double check. “Got ’em. If I forgot anything—”

“I can mail it to you.” Darcy crossed her arms, still staring at Annie’s bag. Darcy hadn’t looked at her straight-on since Annie had briefly filled her in on what had happened between her and Brendon while she was gone. “Or I can always hold on to it for safekeeping.”

Annie’s smile went strained.

Over the airport intercom a voice proclaimed it was now a quarter to ten P.M. Her flight was at 12:01, and from the looks of the crowd heading through the central terminal toward the S gates, getting through security would take a while.

This was it.

She turned back to Darcy, her traitorous eyes sparing a quick glance over Darcy's shoulder in the direction of the glass doors. Her heart climbed into her throat as she thought for a split second maybe that was—*no*, it was a different guy, not tall enough, hair too dark, not bronze enough, not Brendon.

It was stupid, but she couldn't make herself stop looking for him in the crowd, searching for his face in a sea of strangers, a tiny part of her hoping she'd turn around and he'd be there. That he'd rush through the terminal, leap over a luggage cart or something equally ridiculous, and stop in front of her, panting, smiling, eyes pleading. That at the eleventh hour he'd show up and—what? Ask her to stay?

He'd done that already, and she'd told him she needed time to think. Which was true, she *did*, but that didn't stop a tiny, irrational part of her from hoping he'd show up and kiss her one last time.

Irrational was right. Brendon wasn't here and he wasn't coming because she wasn't living in the last ten minutes of one of those movies he loved.

"I should probably—" She jerked her thumb behind her, gesturing toward the security line.

"Speaking as someone with experience, it feels like you're running away," Darcy said, not bothering to beat around the bush, instead lunging straight for Annie's throat.

Annie winced and tucked her hair behind her ear, accidentally tugging strands loose from the sloppy fishtail braid she'd thrown her hair into in the car on the way to the airport. "Running away would've been booking an earlier flight, cutting my trip short. I had this booked, Darce. Round-trip. Besides, how do you run away to the place you already live?"

"When it's not home. When you're leaving for the wrong reasons." Darcy frowned sharply. "When you're leaving not because it's smart but because you're scared."

"Oof." Annie huffed. Darcy's words had hit their mark. "You had those at the ready."

"I'm a fount of knowledge and rotten firsthand experience with running scared," Darcy said, wry.

"That's not true. You moved to Seattle because you needed space. Distance."

“I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about when I pushed Elle away because I was scared to tell her how I felt. Because I was scared of how much I felt.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed shrewdly and Annie looked away, unsure of what Darcy could see on her face but sure it was more than Annie wanted. She felt like her feelings were stamped on her forehead, like she was completely transparent. In that moment, she both loved and hated how well Darcy knew her. How well Darcy could read her.

“I’m not running away,” she reiterated. “I’m heading back to Philadelphia to think. I need time. You can’t honestly begrudge me that, can you?”

Of all people, Darcy, with her pros and cons and checklists and risk analyses, had to understand where Annie was coming from. That little more than two weeks wasn’t enough time to shift the entire course of her life. Annie didn’t know how much time was enough, but it had to be more than fifteen days.

Lips pinched tight and eyes wide, Darcy sniffed hard and threw her arms around Annie, enveloping her in a hug. Annie buried her nose against Darcy’s shoulder and squeezed her tight.

“I get it,” Darcy whispered. “I don’t like it, but I understand.”

Annie willed herself not to cry. “I’m going to miss you.”

Darcy squeezed her tighter, so tight it was difficult to breathe, but Annie couldn’t find it in her to complain. “Don’t say that.”

Annie coughed out a laugh. “You’re supposed to say you’ll miss me, too.”

“That makes it sound like you’ve already made your decision and you’re not coming back and I’m not going to see you for another year and a half.” Hands squeezing Annie’s shoulders, Darcy stepped back, holding her in place. The sheen of tears in her eyes did nothing to soften the glare Darcy leveled at her. “You’re my best friend, Annie. You’re irreplaceable. Of course I’d miss you. I just don’t want a reason to *have* to miss you.”

“Sound logic,” Annie joked. “Leave it to you to be rational about missing me.”

Darcy pursed her lips. The tip of her nose was red, as was the delicate skin beneath her eyes. “Quit using humor to defuse the situation.”

Annie dropped her eyes, cowed. “Sometimes I think you know me a little *too* well.”

“No, you don’t. You’re just saying that because it would be easier for you to hide how you’re feeling from anyone else. But I see through your bullshit.”

“Precisely why I said what I said,” Annie muttered.

Darcy shoved her arm. Hard. “I am going to miss you, Annie.” She ducked her head, forcing Annie to meet her eyes. “And so is Brendon.”

Hearing his name made her eyes burn. She felt a pang in her chest and she swallowed over the lump that had yet to disappear since he had left Darcy’s kitchen. “Maybe.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Darcy stepped back and crossed her arms, expression turning frosty, the glare in her eyes downright glacial. “You know what’s going to happen if you don’t come back, right?”

Annie drew her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Perhaps he’ll mope for a month, maybe longer. Who knows? He’ll move on, meet some other girl and take her to . . . I don’t know, karaoke.”

Annie clenched her back teeth, eyes burning, her vision beginning to swim.

Darcy cocked her head, lips pursed in contemplation. “She’ll be his date to weddings and he’ll bring her along to game night. They’ll wind up having all sorts of stupid inside jokes about television shows they both love.”

“Stop it,” Annie gritted out.

Darcy’s brows rose and Annie wanted to smack the smug, mean little smirk off her face. “He might even buy her Breathe Right strips, because he’ll definitely find out whether she snores.”

“Shut up,” she whispered. “Please just shut up.”

“He might buy her a houseplant and help her take care of it and one day ___”

“I *said* shut up.” Annie swiped beneath her eyes angrily, pissed that Darcy had driven her to tears when she’d cried enough for one day. “Jesus, that wasn’t an invitation to be cruel.”

Darcy reached out and rubbed Annie’s arm. “I’m not being cruel. I was just making a point.”

“Well, congratulations.” Annie took a stuttered breath in. “You made it.”
And then some.

“You asked for a crystal ball, Annie,” Darcy reminded her. “I’m just giving you a glimpse into the inevitable future if you don’t come back.

Some variation of what I just described? That's what's going to happen." She paused. "But it doesn't have to happen like that and you know it."

Annie's moving to Seattle wouldn't necessarily prevent everything Darcy had described from playing out. It just meant she would have turned her life upside down, moved across the country, fallen a little deeper for Brendon. If she took that risk and Brendon moved on, just like everyone she'd ever dated had, the resulting disappointment wouldn't just sting, it would crush her. If she were in Seattle, she'd have a front-row seat to the show when Brendon moved on and would get to watch it play out in painful detail. Her life would become entangled with his, Darcy forever tethering them together.

Annie curled her arms around herself tighter, hugging herself, trying and failing to hold it together. "I *don't* know." Her shoulders rose and fell in a halfhearted shrug. "That's why I need some time. To figure out where my head is at. You know how I am." She laughed sharply. "I leap before I look. I speak before I think. I—"

"And you'd jump in front of a bus for the people you care about," Darcy said. "Between you and me, I think you should be less concerned with where your head's at and more focused on your heart." As soon as she'd said it, she held up her hands. "I know. Who am I and what have I done with Darcy?"

Annie laughed. "Took the words right out of my mouth."

"Yeah, yeah." Darcy rolled her eyes. "Let *me* be your voice of reason, okay? If *I'm* telling you I think taking a chance is a good idea, perhaps you should listen."

The security line had grown.

"I have to go," she murmured.

Darcy's lips flattened and she nodded. "Please think about what I said."

How could she not? She had a feeling it would be the only thing she thought about. What Darcy had said. What Brendon had said. What she felt. What it meant.

The first thing she was going to do once she got through TSA was pop two ibuprofens; her head was beginning to throb dully. Recycled air and barometric pressure changes wouldn't help.

"I will," she promised. "I'll think about it."

Without warning, Darcy threw herself at Annie, wrapping her up in a hug so tight she was nearly sure something in her chest cracked. It was hard

to tell when she ached enough as it was.

“Text me when you land, okay?”

She nodded. If she opened her mouth, she’d start to cry, for real this time, and once she started, once the floodgates were open, there’d be no closing them. She’d be a sniveling, splotchy-faced mess for the rest of the night.

Darcy sniffed and shoved Annie away, blinking hard and fast before schooling her features into a stoic mask. “I’m going to text you every day you’re gone. And call you, too. All hours. Elle will, too. You’re going to be so sick of us that you’ll have no choice but to fly back and make us stop in person.”

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye when she laughed. “Darcy.”

“I mean it.” Darcy’s eyes darted toward the long stretch of hall that led to security. “Now get out of here.”

Annie waved weakly and turned, heading toward the terminal. When it was time to veer left, she turned around again, but Darcy was already gone.

No final wave, no smile, no stretching it out. Darcy had always been the worst at goodbyes, but maybe it was better this way. A clean break.

Trudging through the terminal, she joined the line for security. It took twenty minutes to move through the winding queue to the body scanners because *some people* thought they were the exception to the rules, leaving keys in their pockets, full bottles of water in their purses, thinking they didn’t need to remove their shoes.

Even then, she still made it to her gate with time to spare before boarding began. Taking a seat near the window overlooking the tarmac, she watched blandly as children chased each other down the airside and men in suits hurried toward their gates with phones pressed to their ears. A sullen-looking teen with her earphones on followed a few steps behind her family, feet dragging, a travel pillow dangling from her fingers.

She was a pro at people watching, looking in from the outside.

When they called her boarding class, she stood and joined the line, going through the motions on autopilot. She stepped off the jet bridge and onto the plane and searched for her seat, 23A, the aisle.

Both seats beside her remained empty until eventually an older woman with kind eyes pointed at the window seat. The rest of the plane filled up and still no one had taken the middle seat, not even when the flight

attendants began to stroll down the aisle, checking to make sure everyone had stored their bags properly.

Her pulse started to pound.

She could picture it. Brendon rushing onto the plane, saying something as dorky as it was charming. *Is this seat taken?* He'd make a speech and the flight attendants would try to interrupt but someone, maybe the sweet-looking old lady in the window seat, would hush them. *Let the boy talk.* Brendon would beg Annie to stay and then he'd kiss her to the applause of everyone around them. Even the pilot would clap as Brendon dragged her off the plane.

"Cabin crew, prepare for takeoff."

She glared at the headrest in front of her, her face reflected in the screen attached to the seat back, and scolded herself for being silly. She wasn't one for splashy gestures and she'd told Brendon she needed space. She'd meant it. The fact that he was respecting her wishes should have made her happy, but instead, she just felt hollow. Disappointed even though she had no right to be.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sunday, June 13

ANNIE (9:57 A.M.): Hey. I wanted to let you know I just landed.

BRENDON (10:00 A.M.): I'm glad you made it safely.

ANNIE (10:02 A.M.): Thanks, Brendon.

BRENDON (10:03 A.M.): ☺

Friday, June 18

Brendon stabbed at his salmon salad, huffing when he sent a stupid cherry tomato rolling across the table. He didn't trust a fruit that disguised itself as a vegetable, and cherry tomatoes were, by and large, the worst. It wasn't so much the taste but the texture of tomato guts spraying against the roof of his mouth. Disgusting. He'd asked for them to be left off, but here they were.

"Brendon . . . did you hear what I said?"

Without lifting his head, he scooped the tomatoes off his salad one by one and deposited them on Darcy's plate beside her so-rare-it-was-mooing prime rib. The tomatoes rolled into a puddle of pink-tinged au jus. "Sorry, what?"

She waited to speak until he looked at her, and when she did, her voice was a touch too soft, setting his teeth on edge. "I asked how you were doing."

He nodded briskly. "Good, good. Katie, Jenny, and I had a great brainstorming session about our new marketing campaign. We looped the engineering department in for the profile tweaks we've got planned, and our expansion is going ahead—I mentioned that to you already, yeah?" He continued to ferry tomatoes from his plate to Darcy's. "We're starting with the Canadian expansion later this year, beginning in—well, Q one,

technically. And then we'll move on to Mexico before expanding to Europe. Our investors are jazzed, I'm jazzed, we're all—"

"Jazzed?" Darcy quirked a brow. "Brendon."

He reached for Darcy's coffee and stole a sip. One taste was more than enough to remind him why he didn't order coffee at this restaurant. "Hm?"

"How are you, *really*?"

He chewed on his lip. "Fine?"

"Fine."

He pasted on a smile. "Are you going to repeat everything I say?"

With a hard swallow that made the column of her throat jerk, Darcy set her fork and knife on her plate, the silverware quietly clanking against the porcelain. She lifted her napkin to her lips, dabbing carefully at the corners of her mouth, careful not to mess up her lipstick. Only once she'd replaced the napkin in her lap, smoothing the linen over her legs, did she look at him.

He wished she hadn't. The sheer amount of pity in her gaze about bowled him over.

"It's okay if you're not, you know. Fine."

He shoved his salad to the side and ran a hand over the back of his head. "What do you want me to say, Darce? You want me to tell you I'm *not* fine?"

Her tongue poked against the inside of her cheek and he could practically hear her counting to five before she spoke. "You don't have to put on an act around me. It's pointless. I can see through it. I wish you didn't feel like it was necessary to lie to me—"

"I'm not lying. I don't really see the point in hashing it out."

Talking wouldn't bring Annie back to Seattle any sooner. *Talking* wouldn't bring her back at all.

Darcy's teeth sank into her bottom lip before she must've remembered her lipstick. She released it, pursing her mouth instead. "Bottling up your emotions and pasting on a happy-go-lucky façade isn't the way to handle this. I am speaking from experience when I tell you that you will wind up the emotional equivalent of Pop Rocks in a bottle of soda. You'll bubble over and you'll burst, and it would be better if you let it out rather than let it fester and explode."

He scratched his eyebrow. "Are you auditioning for the role of my therapist now?"

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t be a prick, Brendon. I’m your sister, and I *got* that advice from my therapist.”

Her expression dared him to laugh, something he wouldn’t have dreamed of doing.

“Sorry,” he muttered, feeling every inch the prick she’d called him. “I didn’t know. That’s—that’s great, Darce. I’m . . . happy you’re talking to someone?”

She rolled her eyes. “You give great advice, don’t get me wrong, but I figured I needed an impartial third party to talk to about . . . things.”

“Things,” he echoed, not wanting to pry, but curious nonetheless.

She circled the rim of her cup with her finger. “*Things*. Mom and Dad things. Grandma things. Natasha things. Elle things.” She lifted her eyes, her gaze unguarded. “I love Elle. *A lot*. And I don’t want whatever baggage I’m carrying around that I don’t even know about to jeopardize our relationship. So yes, I decided it would be wise for me to see someone.”

He pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth and reached out, covering Darcy’s hand with his. “I’m proud of you.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Brendon. It’s not a *thing*.” The way she flipped her hand over and squeezed his fingers said otherwise. “I asked Elle to move in with me.”

His lips curved in a genuine smile, the first of the day. “Yeah? When do you need me to help with the boxes?”

“As if your tiny car could *hold* any boxes,” Darcy teased, eyes sparkling. “And shouldn’t you be asking me if she said yes?”

“Psh.” He waved her off. “Of course she said yes.”

Darcy smiled softly. “She said yes.”

He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. “I’m really happy for you.”

Her smile went watery and she ducked her chin, sniffing hard. “Me too.” She cleared her throat and lifted her head, pinning him with a stare. “It’s okay if you’re upset.”

His back teeth clacked together and for a second he was tempted to brush her off with another breezy smile. Her honesty compelled him to be truthful in return.

“If I don’t talk about—about Annie, it’s easier for me to tell myself she’s coming back. That *this* is temporary. Talking about it, saying it out loud, makes it real. It’s—it’s hard to keep acting like everything’s going to be okay when I put it out there.” He dragged his thumb along his lower lip

and shrugged. “Annie’s been gone a week. And as much as I want to pretend like everything is okay, I know that’s wishful thinking. I just . . .”

Darcy frowned and waited while he gathered his thoughts, preparing himself to ask the question that had been on his mind for the past six days.

He swallowed over the ever-growing lump in his throat, the one he had no hope of getting rid of any time soon. “I keep wondering if there’s something else I could’ve done, something I could’ve said, something I *should’ve* said that might’ve made a difference and—”

“Brendon.” Darcy squeezed his fingers and gave a quick jerk of her head. “Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t play that game. *What if*. There’s nothing you could’ve done differently that would’ve swayed Annie’s decision. She has to make her own choices.”

He ducked his chin, a sardonic laugh bubbling up that he couldn’t stop. “Why is that such a hard pill to swallow?”

Her fingers rubbed the back of his knuckles soothingly, nearly hypnotic in their rhythm. Like a metronome. “Because you want to solve everything for everybody. Make everyone happy. You like to fix things, but some things aren’t yours to fix.”

He shut his eyes against the wave of emotion that crashed over him. *Everything* had a solution. Nothing was unfixable, beyond repair. It was never too late if you cared about someone. You just had to want to fix it badly enough, try harder, and—he coughed, lifting his head and looking up at Darcy, his brow furrowed. “Margot told me I have a hero complex.”

Darcy smiled sadly. “You do. You created an entire dating app because you’re desperate to bring people joy. You have been ever since Mom and Dad split. You tried to bake her snickerdoodles when Dad moved out. You forgot to pull the pans out when you preheated the oven and you used cloves instead of cinnamon because we didn’t have any. They were barely edible. Remember?”

He pressed his knuckles against the seam of his lips. “Vaguely.”

Mostly, he just remembered feeling confused, because to him, they’d appeared perfectly happy until they weren’t. He remembered staring out his bedroom window and wishing Dad would move back home. That Mom would leave her room, because she hadn’t in days. He remembered the sickening sense of dread, his stomach dropping out his ass, when he’d first heard the word *divorce* whispered. He remembered feeling helpless and

then relieved once they moved in with Grandma. And then *guilty* over his relief.

He didn't really remember the cookies, though he was sure Darcy wasn't wrong. It sounded like something he'd have done at twelve. Think that cookies could—maybe not *heal* a broken heart, but help. Want to fix a situation that wasn't his to repair with a little sugar and a lot of hope.

"You should probably talk to someone about it. A professional," Darcy said, matter-of-fact.

He laughed. "Probably."

"Have you talked to Annie since she left?"

"A few texts." He hedged, not wanting to admit that for every text he'd sent her, another three had languished in his drafts, unsent. He hadn't wanted to overwhelm her with every tiny, insignificant moment that made him think of her and therefore felt significant to him.

"That's good. Make sure she knows you're still thinking about her, that she's still on your mind even though she isn't here."

Even though she might not come back.

Knowing that didn't change how he felt. Even if Annie wasn't his, wouldn't ever be his, even if she moved halfway across the world, he'd still care about her. And he wanted her to know that, because caring for her came without strings.

He had to wet his lips before he could force the words up his throat. "Annie's not coming back, is she?"

She dropped her eyes, staring down at the starched tablecloth. "She hasn't said—"

"Don't do that," he rasped.

She frowned sharply. "Don't do *what*?"

"That *thing*." He tugged his hand out from her grasp and pulled hard at his hair in frustration. "You're asking me to be honest and you're sitting there lying to protect my feelings."

Her mouth opened and shut several times before she finally managed to get out, "I'm not lying, Brendon. I'm—"

"Covering up the truth, then. Brushing it under the rug. Bandaging it up in a neat bow so I won't worry. Whatever you want to call it, you've been doing it for as long as I can remember. Hell, Darce, you realize it's not exactly normal that you pretended to be Santa Claus just so I'd keep believing in him after Mom and Dad dropped the ball, right?"

Her lips parted, her jaw falling open. “You weren’t supposed to know about that.”

She had been protecting him from the harshness of reality for most of his life, but she couldn’t protect him from feeling *this*. This crushing sense of disappointment that came from wanting Annie so badly and doing everything in his power to show her he cared and still not measuring up. From the fact that after everything, she’d still questioned the veracity of his feelings. That she hadn’t felt secure enough with him to let herself want him, maybe.

“I know,” he said.

He could only imagine everything Darcy had done for him that he hadn’t witnessed. A fresh ache settled in his chest and he tapped her shin lightly with his foot beneath the table.

Darcy’s chin quivered. “I honestly don’t know if Annie’s coming back.”

Darcy’s inhale sounded more like a gasp. Her face had gone red, her eyes, too. A renegade tear slipped down her cheek and she swiped at it angrily.

He clutched the armrests tighter. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Her eyes lifted and her lips parted, a disbelieving huff leaving her mouth. “*You’re* crying, Brendon. I’m crying because you are.”

He lifted a hand to his face and—fuck. His fingers were wet because he was crying in the middle of a restaurant in the middle of his lunch hour. He scrambled for his napkin and wiped his burning face with the stiff, overly starched cloth. As soon as he staunched his tears, he stood, reaching inside his back pocket for his wallet. He ignored Darcy’s look of dismay and threw down enough cash to cover their meal.

“Brendon—”

“I need some space,” he blurted, a hysterical laugh following on the heels of his explanation as soon as his choice of words sank in.

Her fingers snared his wrist, stopping him from making a quick escape. “Are you going to be okay?”

I’ll be fine hovered on the tip of his tongue, but something in her stare drove him to be honest. “Ask me in another week, okay?”

He didn’t know what he was right now, only that everything hurt.

She nodded, looking on the verge of tears.

“Hey.” He tapped her on the shoulder. “I really am happy for you and Elle.”

She blotted her eyes and offered him a small smile. “Thanks, Brendon.”

When it came to matchmaking, bringing people together, helping them find their happily-ever-after, he got it right more often than he didn't.

He only wished he wasn't the exception.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sunday, June 20

Annie stared at the pros-and-cons list she'd scribbled on a napkin during her flight. Aside from a few added scribbles, it hadn't changed in the week since she'd been back in Philadelphia.

Seattle

- +Friends*
- +Darcy*
- +Brendon*
- +Great food*
- +Nice weather (even the rain isn't bad)*
- +Funky shops*
- +No state income tax*
- +Brendon*
- No job?! (addendum, no job yet)*

London

- +Job security*
- A job I don't love*
- +Nice accents?!*

It took her a few days to realize she'd added Brendon's name twice.

A month ago, on paper, moving to London had seemed like *the decision*. Not simply the only one, but the right one. The smart one. Now, looking at this list, seeing it all laid out on paper, it was obvious Seattle had more going for it than London did. The sheer number of pros was irrefutable.

But job security was important.

So was being happy.

But what if she moved to Seattle and things with Brendon didn't work out? She'd have Darcy, but Brendon was Darcy's brother and that would inevitably be *messy*.

Maybe she was overcomplicating matters. But what if she wasn't? What if—

Annie shut her eyes.

Her heart was in Seattle and her head . . . she didn't know where her head was.

Time wasn't an inexhaustible resource. Her flight to London was leaving in ten days and regardless of whether she was on it, her subletter was moving in on the fifth of July.

No matter what, she had no choice but to pack.

Perched atop a stack of books on her nightstand, Annie's phone buzzed. She stretched across her bed to grab it and her lips curved into an involuntary smile, warmth blooming wild in her chest.

Brendon.

He'd texted almost daily. Not often enough to overwhelm her, but the little reminders that he was thinking about her made her feel . . . cherished? Whatever the opposite of neglected was.

BRENDON (11:19 P.M.): What does "petite a petite le wasoh fay son need" mean?

She squinted at the screen. Gibberish was what that was.

ANNIE (11:27 P.M.): Um, what language is that supposed to be?

She mouthed the words he'd sent and snickered softly. *Not* gibberish, just French typed out phonetically. *Poorly*.

ANNIE (11:29 P.M.): Oh. Do you mean "petit a petit, l'oiseau fait son nid"?

BRENDON (11:31 P.M.): I guess? 😊

BRENDON (11:32 P.M.): I'm watching *L'amour est dans le pré* and there are no subtitles.

BRENDON (11:32 P.M.): I lost my favorite translator and I'm dying here.

A vicious ache rippled through her chest as she slipped back beneath the covers. He was still watching even though she wasn't there to explain what was happening.

If she could've blinked her eyes and been sitting on his couch beside him, she'd have done it in a heartbeat.

ANNIE (11:34 P.M.): It means "little by little, the bird makes its nest." It's a French proverb about persevering and having patience. Like, Rome wasn't built in a day.

BRENDON (11:36 P.M.): Ah, okay. That makes sense. Thank you ☺

Her fingers faltered on her keypad, second-guessing what she'd typed out.

Thank you for being patient with me. I miss you, by the way. More than is fair, but I do.

She scrunched her eyes shut and hit delete, playing it safe.

ANNIE (11:37 P.M.): Anytime.

* * *

Monday, June 21

Annie flipped through the folder Brendon had given her on job opportunities for linguistics majors.

- Lexicography
- Speech and language therapy
- Teaching
- Freelance translation
- Copyediting
- Technical writing

Half the options made her wrinkle her nose. Others had promise. Lexicography had a certain appeal; the idea of compiling and editing dictionaries, especially dictionaries for bilingual speakers, was intriguing.

Freelance translation caught her eye. That was totally up her alley.

She reached for her phone and navigated to her web browser.

She had some research to do.

* * *

Tuesday, June 22

BRENDON (10:56 P.M.): I'm in need of translation again.

She smiled. God, was that the first time she'd smiled all day? She hadn't had much to smile about lately.

ANNIE (10:59 P.M.): Hit me with it.

BRENDON (11:02 P.M.): C'est a tes coat que je view construire ma vee

It took a minute to translate what he'd typed into actual French. The words materialized inside her mind and she dropped her head, staring at her toes against the bare laminate flooring of her living room.

ANNIE (11:04 P.M.): C'est à tes côtés que je veux construire ma vie.

Her vision swam and a knot formed in her throat. *God*, she missed him.

ANNIE (11:04 P.M.): It means "I'd like to build my life with you by my side."

She stared at her phone, watching the time tick by, seconds turning into minutes. Her heart leaped into her throat when another message appeared.

BRENDON (11:07 P.M.): Ah.

BRENDON (11:08 P.M.): Thank you.

She set her phone down and buried her face in her hands.

* * *

Thursday, June 24

Her passport was *somewhere* in the black hole of her purse. The exact location was yet to be seen, but it wasn't where it was supposed to be, neatly tucked away in the side zipped pocket where she kept her important documents for travel.

She dumped her bag upside down on her bedroom floor, a mountain of miscellaneous items forming atop the carpet. Lipstick. Another lipstick. Sunscreen. Wallet. She wrinkled her nose. Junk. Panic gripped her chest. Where the *hell* was her passport?

Sorting through the pile with clammy fingers, she sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart.

Maybe this wasn't a bad thing.

Maybe if she lost her passport, it was the universe's way of telling her not to move to London, not to take the job, financial security be damned. Fate had taken the wheel and was deciding her path for—

Buried at the bottom of the pile, beneath her tin of cinnamon Altoids, was her passport. Her shoulders slumped. There went that theory. Her destiny was still hers to control. She plucked her passport from the pile and something tucked inside fluttered to the floor.

Her hand stilled, hovering over the photo. It was one of the pictures Brendon had taken of her at the wedding, her face fuzzy as she reached for the camera. As she reached for Brendon.

She lifted the photo up, studying her slash of a smile, tracing it with her fingertips. Even blurry, she radiated happiness. She lifted a hand to her face and traced the poor facsimile curving her mouth.

The photo was nice, but it couldn't compare to the real thing. Being there. Laughing with Brendon. Her fingertips pulsing as she'd rested them against his chest. *His dimples*. Her heart leaping into her throat when he'd fallen backward into the water. Her stomach aching from holding in her laughter when he'd broken the surface, sputtering.

Blindly, Annie patted the carpet behind her, searching for her phone so she could take a picture of the photo and send it to Brendon. A small gesture, maybe, but she wanted him to know she was thinking about him. That she appreciated his patience, his putting up with her indecision. That he'd given her the space to make up her mind and do it on her terms.

Her phone was somewhere. She grimaced. Fingers crossed she hadn't accidentally packed it in one of her boxes. Hunting it down would be a *real* treat seeing as it was on silent.

She found it beneath her roll of packing tape and breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn't totally fucked up; it would have rendered her packing useless if she had to reopen all her boxes and dig through her belongings just to find her phone. She set the volume on full blast just in case she misplaced it again. *When* she misplaced it again.

Before she could open her camera, she noticed a notification and swiped to open it.

Elle had tagged her in a photo on Instagram.

She frowned because she wasn't in the photo. Elle had snapped a picture selfie-style of her, Margot, Darcy, and Brendon seated around the coffee table, where Monopoly was spread out. Annie tapped the photo and pressed her lips together, her eyes watering viciously. Elle had tagged her on the empty cushion beside Brendon.

His arms were resting casually on his knees and his smile was the brightest thing in the photo. She could hear his throaty chuckle when she shut her eyes, knew exactly how his lips felt curving against her mouth in that same grin.

The caption read, *The gang's all here minus @anniekyriakos. We miss you!* 🥺💔

She couldn't stop herself from clicking on his profile, getting her fix any way she could.

She shouldn't have.

Her breath escaped her in a punched-out exhale, her chest threatening to cave in on itself. She ground her teeth together to keep her chin from trembling, vision blurring and face burning as she stared at Brendon's latest post.

He looked gorgeous, like he always did. So did the girl practically draped over him as they both smiled for the camera.

The way I see it, you can't rush something you want to last forever.

That had lasted, what? Little more than a week?

Her breath hitched, her lungs constricting. She hiccupped and hugged her knees to her chest.

She wasn't sure who she was angrier with, herself or Brendon.

There was moving on and then there was—*this*. She hadn't even been gone two weeks when he'd posted this picture. This felt like rubbing her face in the fact that he'd found someone new. That Annie had only been a blip on his radar, completely replaceable.

Her lips flattened. She hadn't asked him to wait for her. She had no right to be upset. This wasn't—she swallowed hard—a long-distance relationship. They weren't even on a break. He wasn't hers. *Clearly*.

Darcy had warned her this would happen, that Brendon would move on. She just hadn't expected it to happen this soon. Or for it to feel like someone had carved into her chest with a dull knife, ripping her open from her throat to her belly button. Gutting her.

She jammed the heel of her hand into her breastbone and sucked in a stuttered breath. She'd done this to herself, first by getting involved with Brendon and then by pushing him away. She had no one to blame but herself, because she'd known better than to play with fire.

She always cared more. *Always*. Why had she thought this would be any different? Because she *felt* more than she ever had? Jesus. She scoffed into the silence of her bedroom and buried her face in her hands. How stupidly naïve, believing this would be different. That this would be the exception when all it did was prove that she was right.

She'd never hated being right this much in her life.

"Never Gonna Give You Up" by Rick Astley blared, making her jump, her head knocking into the boxes stacked precariously behind her. She blinked up, watching the tower sway ominously over her head, and wondered if they'd all come crashing down. If they'd split open at the seams, if everything she owned would spread out around her in a pile as messy and turbulent as the feelings hastening through her veins. If she'd be able to tape them back together or if it would be as impossible as using packing tape to Humpty Dumpty her heart back together again.

She pressed her hand to her mouth and choked down a sob as Darcy's ringtone continued to blast, Rick Astley promising that he'd never give her up. Never let her down.

For a chunk of cheap plastic, her phone felt a lot like a brick in her hand as she lifted it, thumb hovering over the screen to send Darcy to voicemail.

But *persistent* might as well have been Darcy's middle name. She'd call again and again until Annie answered, if the last few days were anything to go off.

Annie prayed her voice wouldn't wobble. "Hello?"

"Just checking in," Darcy said. "Elle says hi."

She sucked in a breath, needing to breathe, but wires crossed and her eyes watered, her nose, too. Her next inhale was noisy and ragged, and she pinched her lips together, face burning, her whole body sizzling with shame at how *obvious* she was in her sadness. That she couldn't be a neater crier, keep her emotions contained for a few fucking minutes to put Darcy off her trail. She just *had* to choose this minute to be a wreck and fall apart while talking to the worst possible person. The person who, without fail, saw through her bullshit, her best defenses. Annie wasn't even playing at 50 percent.

“Annie?” Darcy sounded worried. Typical. Go fucking figure. “Are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm,” she lied, grinding her molars together because it was better than the alternative: Bursting into tears and having to explain herself. Hearing Darcy say *I told you so*. Or worse, offer platitudes of condolence. Even though Annie was the one who’d gotten herself into this mess and Darcy *had* warned her. Annie just hadn’t listened. “Just dandy.”

“Want to try that again?”

Annie laughed through her tears, which had started to flow with a vengeance. They dripped down her face and ran down her neck, settling in the hollows above her collarbone. She swiped at them furiously, unable to staunch the flow. “It’s—allergies.” She sniffed hard, sinuses burning. “All this fucking pollen is killing me.”

“Bullshit,” Darcy said.

Annie scoffed and dropped her head back, watching the boxes wobble to and fro like a tree in gale-force winds. “You were right.”

“I usually am.” Darcy paused, clearing her throat delicately. “Care to tell me what I was right about this time?”

Her laugh was watery and weak. “Not really.”

“Let’s try again.”

Annie rolled her eyes. “Just—can we *not*? Can you drop it? Please, Darce.”

“If you don’t tell me what’s wrong, I’m booking the next flight I can find to Philadelphia.”

There wasn’t a doubt in her mind Darcy meant it.

She pinched her lips together and tried to regulate her heart rate. It was too fast, pounding too hard against her sternum, each beat like a punch against the wall of her chest. Her throat felt raw, gritty, and sore when she swallowed. “Darcy.”

“Expedia is telling me I can book a seat on a flight out tonight.”

Annie sniffed. “For how much? A thousand dollars?”

“Helping you is priceless, Annie.”

She scrunched her eyes, hot tears spilling down her cheeks. “Please don’t.”

“Talk to me,” Darcy pleaded. “Or else I’ll drop an ungodly amount of cash flying to Philadelphia.”

It was no empty threat. Darcy would do it in a heartbeat. Annie knew it because she'd do it for Darcy, too.

"You were right. About Brendon moving on. He did. And I'm—"

"*What?*" Darcy had the audacity to laugh. Annie was sitting on her bedroom floor, tears dripping off her chin, and Darcy was laughing at her. "Annie."

"Don't *Annie* me. I saw what I saw."

"What *exactly* do you think you saw?" Darcy demanded, and Annie wasn't sure if the anger in Darcy's voice was directed at her or at Brendon.

Annie rolled her eyes. "Instagram. Elle tagged me and I—I went to his profile and . . . she's really pretty and he looks—"

Happy.

Like Annie's being gone hadn't affected him at all. He definitely didn't look broken up over it. Every day, Annie missed him, and every day she grew a little surer that she wasn't supposed to move to London. Seattle called her name. She woke up and thought about Brendon. She fell asleep thinking about him. She read his texts and *ached*.

And in the short span of twelve days he'd moved on, his texts to her a total sham, throwing her off the fact that he'd found someone new.

Darcy growled. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"*Instagram*," she repeated, pounding her free hand against the carpet, wishing for more than a dull thud to punctuate her frustration.

"I don't *have* Instagram." Darcy huffed. "Just give me a second."

Through the line, Annie could hear Darcy typing, her nails clicking quickly against her keyboard. There was a brief pause before Darcy started to laugh.

"I'm hanging up," Annie threatened.

"*Annie*." Darcy sniffled. "Oh my God. Please calm down."

"You calm down," she fired back, lacking a better rebuttal.

"That's Jenny."

Whoop-dee-freaking-do.

"She works in the marketing department at OTP." Darcy spoke in a slow, soothing way that verged on condescending, but Annie couldn't bring herself to complain because it was working magic on her nervous system.

"They work together, Annie. They're friends."

She went dizzy with shame. "Oh."

"*Oh*," Darcy teased.

“Shut up,” she grouched. “There are, like, a million and one HR violations in that picture. Their faces are touching.”

Darcy cackled. “You’re jealous.”

“I’m *not*, I’m—”

“Annie, it’s okay.”

It really wasn’t okay. When did she become the type of person to hop on Instagram and jump to wild conclusions?

“I hate this.” She palmed her face and groaned. “This is so humiliating.”

“Remember who you’re talking to,” Darcy reminded her. “Remember my thirteenth birthday when you slept over and you—”

“We pinky-swore *never* to talk about that. It didn’t happen.”

“Point being,” Darcy continued, “you’ve done far more humiliating things.”

“You *really* know how to make a girl feel better.”

“Annie.”

She swallowed hard. “I am jealous. And it’s stupid. *I’m* stupid.”

“Shut up. That’s my best friend you’re talking about.”

Annie laughed. “Your best friend is stupid. Deal with it.”

“My best friend is stupid about my brother. I’ll accept that.”

“Yeah.” Annie nodded even though Darcy couldn’t see her. Her voice dropped to a pathetic whisper. “I really am.”

“He’s been moping, you know? He really misses you.”

Her eyelids burned. “I miss him, too. A lot.”

A *lot*, a lot.

What was she doing? Sitting here, packing her apartment, torturing herself looking at photos and *thinking* about Brendon when she could have the real thing? She’d *had* the real thing and she *wanted* the real thing.

She didn’t want another stamp in her passport. She wanted Brendon.

“Are you ready to come home?” Darcy asked gently, as if afraid of spooking her, like she was some startled horse.

Home.

It was a risk, but wasn’t having everything she wanted worth it when the alternative was never having it at all? Was sitting here, alone, miserable because of her own choices?

Her eyes stung as she made a slow sweep around her room, most of her belongings packed, the rest strewn haphazardly across the carpet awaiting boxes or a suitcase. There were no pictures on the walls. Her bookshelves

were empty. In a little over a week, someone else would inhabit this apartment. Hopefully they would do more living here than she had.

She sucked a breath in and listened to the relentless pounding of her heart. “Yeah. I think I am.”

Darcy gave a sharp cry, breathless and shocked. “Thank *fuck*.”

Annie pressed her trembling fingers to her lips and blubbered out a laugh. “Eloquent.”

“Shut up.” Darcy sniffled. “Are you serious?”

Since when is love supposed to be convenient?

She’d known it all along, but she’d been afraid. Scared shitless. Scared that Brendon would be like everyone else she’d ever dated. But the truth was, he was unlike anyone she’d ever known. And he’d never given her reason to doubt him or his affections. At every turn, he’d shown her he cared. Even now, when he had no reason to believe she’d be back, he’d texted her more frequently than any of her so-called friends here in Philadelphia. She was the one who’d compared him to the people from her past, misjudging him. That was a wrong she wanted—*needed*—desperately to right.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I am. I’m—” Her ears popped when she slid her jaw forward, trying to fend off another wave of tears. “Am I too late?”

“Too late?” Darcy scoffed loudly into the line. “For Brendon? Are you kidding me? Are we talking about the same person? My brother, who told me when I finally pulled my head out of my ass that it’s never too late if you love someone? *That* Brendon? A walking, talking Hallmark greeting card with red hair and a heart of gold? Six-foot-four—”

“*Darcy.*”

“Brendon’s not going to begrudge you a couple weeks to make a life-altering decision. He understands. He’ll be relieved when he—”

“You can’t say anything,” she blurted.

“I can’t?” Darcy sounded suspicious.

“No. You can’t.” She sat up a little straighter, easing her weight off the boxes at her back. “I want to tell him.”

And she wanted to do it in person. See the look on his face when he realized she was in Seattle. For good. That she was *all in*.

“I won’t say anything.” She couldn’t see Darcy’s eye roll, but she could practically hear it.

“And you can’t mention this,” she urged, rolling to her knees. “You can’t tell him about the picture or me freaking out. He’ll think—”

“That you’re human and sometimes we have messy reactions that aren’t always grounded in rationality? I won’t tell him.”

“Thank you. Not for the condescension, but the rest.”

“You’re welcome. Now, tell me when I can pick you up from the airport.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Saturday, June 26

ANNIE (8:15 A.M.): Look what I found.

Brendon grinned at the blurry photo of Annie he'd snapped the night of Katie and Jian's wedding. She was bathed in blue light, the sun slinking below the horizon behind her. Her smile was fuzzy but blinding, making his entire chest throb.

He reached for his towel, wiping the chalk dust off his hands from his morning climb, before he typed his response.

BRENDON (8:22 A.M.): You look beautiful.

ANNIE (8:26 A.M.): I was looking at you.

Tuesday, June 29

ANNIE (4:23 P.M.): I miss you.

His fingers hovered over his keypad.

You don't have to miss me. Come back. Please.

BRENDON (4:25 P.M.): Me too.

ANNIE (4:31 P.M.): ♥

Thursday, July 1

BRENDON (11:11 A.M.): Thinking about you.

"Brendon. *Brendon.*"

He tore his eyes from his phone. No unread messages. He offered Mom a tight smile from across the table of the bistro she'd chosen for their lunch. "Sorry. You were saying?"

“I said we should grab dinner together on Saturday. There’s this new restaurant that opened up on Main Street I’ve been dying to try. Maybe you could even drag your sister along if you can pry her away from her girlfriend for long enough.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Mom and Darcy’s relationship had been contentious for nearly as long as he could remember, but the subtle pokes and prods from Mom that put him in the middle wore on him.

“Sure.” He nodded absently, glancing at his phone when it vibrated.

It was a call, and from a wrong number, no less.

“It’s rude to keep checking your phone at the table.”

He gritted his teeth. “Sorry. You’re right. I’m just . . . waiting on a text.”

“From someone . . . *special*?” Mom drew out the word.

She had no idea.

“I’ve been seeing someone, actually.” He braced himself. “It’s Annie.”

Mom pursed her lips. “Annie? Your sister’s Annie?”

The one and only Annie he knew, yes. “That Annie.”

“Huh.” She laughed. “You used to have the biggest crush on her.”

He fiddled with his silverware. “Mm-hmm. I did.”

“I didn’t know Annie lived in Seattle.”

He winced. “She doesn’t actually. She’s still in Philadelphia, but she’s thinking about moving. I’m . . . I’m hoping she does.”

His phone vibrated atop the table.

ANNIE (12:01 P.M.): Sorry! I was up in the air. Thinking about you, too.

Up in the air . . . he sucked in a rasping breath.

Mom cooed. “You’re such an optimist, Brendon. I love how nothing gets you down. You just bounce right back. I admire that, you know?”

Brendon clenched his jaw. He didn’t feel like much of an optimist.

* * *

Friday, July 2

BRENDON (11:14 A.M.): Hey. Hope you’re settling in.

He stared at his screen, praying an explanation would materialize. At the very least a message that she’d made it to London safely.

ANNIE (11:22 A.M.): ☺

He closed his eyes and threw his phone across the room, where it bounced against his bed.

* * *

Saturday, July 4

Brendon rested his arms on the railing of the *Argosy* and stared out at the dark, choppy water of Lake Union. The sun had sunk beneath the horizon forty-five minutes ago, the sky now an indigo canvas dotted with bright twinkling stars. The moon, almost full, reflected off the turbulent water, turning the surface into liquid chrome.

Bracing himself against the breeze, he tucked his arms in tighter, trying to keep the wind from cutting through him on the upper deck of the boat, where Elle had dragged him. None of this had been his idea, celebrating the Fourth of July, going out on the lake, standing on the top observation deck.

July Fourth. Three weeks had passed since Annie had left Seattle. Three days since her scheduled flight to London. It was time—*past* time—for him to accept the fact she wasn't coming back.

Darcy could've let him stew in peace, but oh no. She, Elle, and Margot had dragged him out onto a boat to watch the fireworks with a hundred strangers. He'd been perfectly content to stay at home and catch the fireworks from his balcony overlooking the park like he did every year, the only part of this holiday he'd ever enjoyed. This year he was struggling to muster the enthusiasm for even that.

Elle bumped him with her hip and smiled. "Excited for the show?"

"Sure." He smiled briefly before turning and facing the water and the city beyond.

Pretending to be okay when he felt anything but was exhausting.

A loud whistle filled the air, followed by a sharp crackle as the first firework burst overhead. Bright white light lit up the air in a quick strobe of flickers and flashes that signaled the start of the show. A dozen pops followed in quick succession as cascading stars filled the sky, their tails long and glittering as palm frond-shaped sparkles rained down, golden in color.

Flashes of red and blue illuminated the night, reflecting off the lake, making it bright as midday. Beside him, Elle oohed softly. He tore his eyes from the light show and watched as she sank back against Darcy, who stood behind her. Darcy's arm was braced on the railing, bracketing Elle in. She whispered something in Elle's ear that made Elle beam and turn, pressing a quick kiss to Darcy's cheek, before looking back at the sky. On his left, Margot narrated the show on Instagram Live, calling each firework by its proper name. *Brocade. Chrysanthemum. Pistil. Palm. Spinner. Fish.*

One glowing comet rocketed high into the air, a tight ball of bright white light. It burst and sparkles rained down, reigniting and sending off another cascade of stars that dissolved as they floated toward the earth.

His eyes burned as he stared unblinkingly at the sky. When he was finally forced to break his stare, a reverse image wound up imprinted on his retinas, a zigzag of black against bright white on the backs of his eyelids. He swallowed hard, over the sudden sour knot that had taken up residence in the back of his throat.

Had he not been standing on the observation deck of a boat in the middle of the lake, the breeze ruffling his hair and pushing it off his forehead, he'd have thought he needed air. He didn't know what he needed, but it wasn't here. He had a feeling it was five thousand miles away. Unreachable. Untouchable. Not his.

He stepped away from the railing, needing—needing a minute. Just a minute. A minute to . . . he didn't actually know what he needed to do. Standing here, watching the fireworks and feeling painfully alone despite being surrounded by a crowd of people, his friends, his family, was too fucking much for him.

Fingers circled his wrist, stopping him from going far.

"Where are you going?" Darcy asked, frowning. "You're going to miss the show."

He sank his teeth into the flesh of his cheeks, needing the brief flicker of pain to ground himself, and shrugged, still feeling disjointed. "Okay."

Her frown deepened, the line between her delicate brows turning into a trench. "You love fireworks, Brendon."

He used to, yeah, back when he'd had something to celebrate. Something to rejoice over. "I'm not in the mood, Darce."

When he was a kid, he'd wished on those fireworks as if they were real shooting stars. Now he wasn't so naïve. When the show was over and the

boat returned to the harbor, the sky would return to a black slate. He would climb inside his car and drive back to his empty apartment, and Annie . . . Annie would still be in London. No amount of wishing would bring her back. Watching fireworks explode was a poor substitute for the way he'd felt when Annie had touched him, when they'd kissed, when she'd *breathed* in his vicinity.

He tugged his hand free as gently as he could. "I'll be back."

After all, it was hard to go far on a boat.

Ignoring the almost crushing weight of Darcy's gaze, he turned.

And froze.

Several yards away, in the center of the observation deck beside the stairs, stood Annie.

Color from the fireworks reflected off her face, off her white halter dress. Her blond hair turned shades of vivid pink and purple, illuminated like fiber-optic strands. A loud crash filled the air, but it had nothing on the thunder of his heartbeat inside his head.

Someone nudged him hard and he stumbled forward, stopping several feet from Annie, giving her a wide berth because—he had to be seeing things. Dreaming.

Her lips curved a tentative smile that verged on shy. "You're missing the fireworks."

Another loud boom sounded behind him and his heart crashed against his sternum.

"No." He swallowed hard and shook his head. "I'm not."

Annie threw her head back and blinked hard up at the sky, her lashes beating against her cheek. She sniffed hard and laughed. "You're not supposed to say things like that."

The lump in his throat swelled to epic proportions, making it hard for him to breathe. "I'm not?"

She gave a quick, curt shake of her head. She was *here*. On this boat, standing in front of him, more beautiful and breathtaking than any firework show he had ever witnessed.

She lifted her chin and the fireworks overhead exploded in a bright spray of strobing sparkles. Blues and reds and greens and purples all reflected in Annie's eyes. A rainbow captured on the plains of her face for his eyes only. His heart beat harder, a violent clatter of cymbals and

thunderous booms joining the symphony of pyrotechnic pops and whistles and crackles overhead.

She blinked and her eyes shined brighter than all the fireworks. Brighter than the stars and the moon and the city lights across the lake. His heart stuttered when she swallowed, her throat jerking visibly.

“No.” She shook her head, lashes continuing to flutter with each fast blink.

He stepped toward her, gaining confidence as he slowly closed the distance between them. “No?”

She stood a little straighter, chin lifting. “This is *my* grand gesture. I came here to sweep all six feet four inches of you off your feet and you saying something like *that* is—it’s not fair. Stealing my thunder when I tried so hard to—”

He cupped her face in his hands and leaned in, swallowing her words, smiling when she melted against him, her whole body sinking into his. He wasn’t sure when he’d crossed the remainder of the distance between them, only that he had, his feet carrying him across the deck, something in his chest tugging hard with a need to be near her. To touch her. He clutched her close, determined to never let her go again.

She laughed against his lips and he’d never tasted anything sweeter than her joy. He grinned, and he could hardly call what they were doing kissing, their mouths merely mashed together as they laughed.

Annie shoved weakly at his chest with one hand, not so much stepping back as curving her spine and craning her neck, staring up at him with soft, fond eyes that made him weak. It almost brought him to his knees, dragging her to the deck with him. Fireworks continued to rain down behind him; he knew only because Annie’s face remained washed in color.

“Sorry?” He shrugged, circling her waist with his hands, resting his fingers against the small of her back.

“No, you’re not,” she said, still smiling.

“No, I’m really not.” He shook his head, scarcely able to believe she was here. That she was here and she was smiling up at him and he was touching her. He huffed out a quiet, disbelieving laugh. “Pinch me?”

“Is that an invitation?” she asked, her smile cheeky. Her hands dipped lower, tucking beneath the waistband of his jeans, inching into indecent territory.

He grinned. “You have permission to feel me up whenever you want.”

Someone gave him a sharp pinch on the ass. “Hey!”

Over his shoulder, Margot shot him a saucy wink, no longer filming the fireworks. Instead, her phone was trained on him and Annie. He rolled his eyes and turned back to the only thing at the moment that mattered.

“You’re really here.”

Annie nodded.

“What are you doing here?” he whispered, almost too afraid to ask, but unable to help himself. Unable to shove down the insatiable curiosity gnawing at him, dying to know if she was here for good or if this was just a visit. A layover. A dream.

Too good to be true.

With one hand, Annie reached up, curling her fingers around the back of his neck, playing with his hair. She continued to smile up at him, and something in his chest crackled when fireworks burst in her eyes. “Don’t you know? I live here now.”

He choked out a laugh and his eyes prickled at the corners. “Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm.” Her smile brightened, the white of her teeth reflecting raspberry blue as the fireworks behind them burst. “I do.”

“When I said I hoped you were settling in . . .”

Annie leaned forward, nose nudging his. “I was. Settling in. Here.”

“Are you living with Darce?”

She shook her head, waves of her hair swishing against her bare shoulders, her skin golden. “I now live with Margot in Elle’s old room.”

He craned his neck, laughing because Margot was still recording, her tongue stuck out. She mouthed *yuck* and blew him a kiss.

Annie lived with Margot. Annie now lived in Capitol Hill. Annie lived in Seattle. Annie lived *here*.

His eyes stung. “Really?”

Her head bobbed. “I know I told you you’d be the first to know, but I wanted to surprise you so—”

“I can settle for second. Or third.” He tried to wink and failed miserably, but Annie laughed anyway.

“Fourth?” Her eyes darted behind him. “It was a group effort getting you to agree to come here. But I know—” She pressed her lips together, eyes flooding, making his sting, too. “I know how you feel about fireworks.”

A confetti cannon exploded inside his chest. “Fireworks are nice. What I wanted was you.”

The wait was worth it. Worth this. Annie was worth it. She’d have been worth waiting weeks, months, for. This feeling, this rightness in his gut, in his soul, had no expiration date. He’d meant what he said; forever couldn’t be rushed.

A tear slipped down her cheek, fast and furious, dripping off her chin. One of his hands lifted and his thumb swept against the thin skin beneath her eye.

She clutched his shoulder and sniffed hard, eyes filling, tears spilling over.

His stomach somersaulted. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

She blubbered out a laugh. “*Nothing*, I’m just . . . verklempt.”

His whole body shook with laughter. “You’re *verklempt*?”

“Shut up.” She batted his hands away and swiped at her eyes.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and cupped the back of her head. “I’m not making fun of you.” When she leveled a glare at him, he laughed. “Okay, I am. A little. But mostly I feel the need to tell you that if you say the word *verklempt* again, and with a straight face, I’m absolutely going to fall in love with you.”

He rubbed the lobe of her ear between his fingers and she leaned into his touch, letting him cradle her face in his hand.

“Fair warning?” she whispered.

He smiled and drew her in with the hand cradling the back of her head. Her lips were warm against his and yet he shivered all the same.

“Fair warning,” he murmured against her mouth.

“Verklempt,” she whispered, lips curling.

His heart soared. “Is that a dare?”

She beamed up at him. “A double-dog dare.”

“I’ll do you one better,” he muttered. “How about I promise?”

Annie’s smiled softened when he dropped his forehead down to hers. “Brendon?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Epilogue

Sunday, December 19

Brendon, you know I love riding Space Mountain almost as much as I love you, but isn't five times in a row a little excessive?"

He paused, tugging at the double neckline of his shirts, and beamed at Annie. No matter how many times she said those words—*I love you*—they'd never get old. His heart, already lodged in the back of his throat, swelled.

"One more time," he begged, tangling their fingers together and dragging her to the winding line rapidly growing longer.

Annie adjusted the Minnie Mouse ears perched atop her head, the matching set to his Mickey ears. She then tugged on the hem of her denim romper. Over the course of the last three days in sunny California, her skin had turned the same shade of gold it had over the summer. Even in December, the temps were sweltering, the sun oppressive.

"All I'm saying is, maybe we could change it up a little and come back later. Ride something else in between. Like, Pirates of the Caribbean. Or the Haunted Mansion ride." Her smile turned sly and she leaned into him, stretching up onto her toes. He bent down so she could whisper in his ear. "I'll even let you feel me up when the lights go out."

His brows rocketed to his rapidly dampening hairline, his scalp sweating. All of him was sweating. "Kinky," he said, winking as well as he could, which wasn't at all.

She beamed up at him. "Is that a yes?"

As tempting as her offer was, he had a plan. A plan he'd failed to enact four times in a row. A plan he'd be damned if he didn't get right. Not right, perfect.

He shook his head and tugged harder on his neckline. Wearing two shirts in the middle of the Anaheim heat was a bad idea, but it was part and parcel of his plan. He had no intention of wearing both shirts all day, only until he did what he'd come here to do.

"No?" Annie pouted. "Brendon, are you serious?"

"One last time," he promised, as much to her as to himself.

He was giving himself one last shot to do this. He refused to chicken out again.

She rolled her eyes, smiling up at him fondly. "One more time. And then we get to go on whatever rides I want for the next hour, okay?" She bumped his hip with hers. "Or did you forget it's my birthday?"

Of course he hadn't.

Today was Annie's birthday, and it was almost seven months since her fateful trip to Seattle. Two hundred and three days since their first kiss. He'd counted. Almost six months since she'd moved to Seattle permanently. Five months since he'd blurted out that he loved her and she'd shyly returned the sentiment. Also five months since she'd gotten her business up and running, working as a freelance translator specializing in business contracts while occasionally taking on passion projects outside her field of specialization. Four months since she'd given up living with Margot and moved in with him because she spent most of her time at his place anyway. It was the practical choice.

He was 99.99 percent sure she'd say yes, but it was the .01 percent that had him sweating.

Well, that and the fact he was wearing two shirts.

He leaned down, brushing his lips against her forehead. "Of course not." How could he have when he'd booked this trip as a surprise specifically for her birthday, whisking her out of Washington for an impromptu vacation? Hopefully, the first of a lifetime of vacations for them. Vacations to places much more exciting than California. But he had a goal and it required Space Mountain. "You can pick the next ride. And I promise to feel you up on it."

She threw her head back and laughed, making him grin. "How magnanimous of you."

The line moved forward. Inside his left pocket, his cell buzzed. He surreptitiously checked it.

MARGOT (12:32 P.M.): Did you do it yet? Did you? I'm fucking dying over here.

He bit back a chuckle.

BRENDON (12:35 P.M.): Not yet. You that eager to be my Best Woman?

MARGOT (12:36 P.M.): As long as I get to wear a killer tux, I'm all in. Now, pony the fuck up and do it already!!!! 😊

He tucked his phone away, nerves diminishing, but only for a moment. The closer they got to the front, snaking their way through the winding queue, the more difficult he found it to stand still. He rocked forward on his toes and back on his heels, bouncing worse than the group of small children several paces ahead. He raked his fingers through his damp hair and tugged at his neckline again, sweat dripping down his scalp and the back of his neck, soaking through both his layers. He was rocking armpit sweat stains, for crying out loud, but he couldn't back down. Not when he'd come this far, this close.

As soon as this was over, he'd need about a gallon of water to rehydrate. Hell, something with electrolytes, too. All this stress was probably wreaking havoc on his B vitamins.

"Hey." Annie tugged on his sleeve, brow pinched in concern. "Take one of these off. I swear, you don't need two shirts when it's over eighty out."

"I'm fine," he lied, adjusting the collar of his chambray button-down. "I'm going for a certain aesthetic, Annie."

She looked at him like he'd lost it but smiled affably. "You're so weird."

"You love me anyway."

She beamed up at him. "I must be just as weird, because I do."

I do.

He rolled his shoulders back and stepped forward when the line moved. He could do this. Five more minutes of risking heatstroke and—fuck, he'd think about the rest when it came time.

Maybe it was the feel of Annie's fingers laced through his, her thumb stroking soothing circles against the back of his hand, but time flew until the attendant waved them forward, gesturing for them to take the first two seats on the cart. He let Annie slide in first and then crawled in after, pulling down the safety bar over his shoulders.

This was the point where he'd chickened out the last four times they'd ridden this ride. All he had to do was unbutton his shirt, revealing the tee

beneath. Which had a very important question printed on it, just for this occasion.

While Annie was preoccupied strapping herself in, he reached for the topmost button of his shirt, fingers trembling. He stole a deep breath in and parted his shirt the rest of the way, careful to keep the message beneath hidden until they took off, rocketing into the darkness.

The ride began to move and Annie reached out, gripping his hand. He squeezed back and, with his right hand, adjusted his shirt until the words beneath could be seen. Not by Annie, but by the hidden camera, wherever it was located, the one that snapped a picture of passengers on the ride.

As the roller coaster crept up the tracks and plummeted down into the dark abyss, he prayed his face didn't look too nauseated. Annie was right; five times was pushing it. As much as he adored roller coasters, loved *this* roller coaster, riding it five times back-to-back was rougher on his system now than it had been when he was a kid. His nerves weren't helping his queasiness, either.

At the first drop, their cart zipping along the track, her grip on his hand intensified, strangling his fingers. He squeezed back and clenched his eyes shut, smiling despite the anxious churning of his stomach. There was no going back now. Not that he'd want to. He never wanted to go back. Not when he could go forward with Annie.

In what felt like no time at all, the ride slowed to a stop and docked where they'd first climbed on. Exiting to the left instead of the right, he buttoned his shirt up haphazardly, mismatching his buttons, not giving a fuck because in a few minutes he could hopefully shed the thing altogether and stuff it inside the locker they'd rented with the rest of their belongings.

At the gift shop, Annie made a hard right toward the outside exit. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, keeping her from leaving. She shot him a quizzical frown.

"Don't you want to see our picture?" His tongue darted out, wetting his suddenly parched lips.

She wrinkled her nose. "Souvenir photos? Brendon, those cost a fortune and no one ever looks halfway decent. They're embarrassing and blurry and I'd rather not see my screaming face immortalized on overpriced photo paper."

No, no. She had to look at the photos. It was crucial. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder at the screens. *Loading, please be patient* flashed

across the monitors. He swallowed hard and turned back to face her. “Let’s at least take a look. We don’t have to buy anything if we don’t want.”

With a good-natured eye roll, Annie nodded and followed him over to the counter where the digital photos were processing. It was a good thing she’d let go of his hand in order to post up against the counter, because his palms were starting to sweat all over again, worse than before. In as nonchalant a move as possible, he shoved his hands inside the pockets of his cargo shorts and quadruple-checked that the velvet box he’d tucked inside this morning was still there. That, despite the button closure, it hadn’t flown out on the ride, lost forever, or until one of the ride techs could recover it for him.

It was there. He rubbed his thumb over the smooth velvet and tried to regulate his breathing as the photos began to appear in their respective boxes across the screen.

“Where are we?” She leaned closer, eyes flitting from one screen to the next. “I don’t see us anywhere.”

He scanned and—there they were. Smack-dab in the center; Annie simply hadn’t noticed yet. While she was preoccupied, he withdrew the box from his pocket, hand trembling, holding it at the ready.

Her blue eyes widened and she bounced on her toes. “I see us! Oh my God, my hair is all over the—” She froze, save for the flaring of her eyes and drop of her jaw.

There, on the screen, clear as day, in black on white, his shirt read, *Will you marry me?*

He sank down on one knee, wobbling, briefly losing his balance and winding up on both knees.

This was it.

He stole a deep breath that rattled in his throat. “Annie Kyriakos—”

“Yes,” she blurted, quickly clapping a hand over her mouth.

Laughter built inside his chest. “*Annie*. I—I had a speech.”

Her eyes doubled in size and behind her palm, she snorted. “I’m sorry? Keep going.”

He nodded and—blanked. He completely spaced out on what he wanted to say, his mind just poof, empty. She’d said yes and all his carefully rehearsed words had flown out of his head. He’d practiced in front of the mirror for weeks, in the shower—any time she wasn’t nearby, he’d gone

over what he wanted to say. Hell, he'd roped Margot into listening, and now . . . nothing. His brain had gone kaput at the worst possible time.

He ducked his chin, laughing at the irony of it. How he, someone who made a hobby of watching viral proposals on YouTube, could just completely forget everything he'd painstakingly planned on saying about how she made him laugh, how she made him want to be better, how she made him feel like he could conquer the world, except much, much more eloquently than all of that. Her vehement yes had done that to him, and he couldn't churn up one single ounce of indignation because holy fuck. She'd said yes.

"I forgot what I wanted to say," he confessed, the tips of his ears burning even though his face hurt from smiling.

Annie threw her head back and laughed. "Stand up and give me my damn ring, Brendon."

Legs still trembling, he stood and pried open the box, revealing a 1930s-era marquise diamond ring Elle and Darcy had helped him pick out from one of Annie's favorite antique stores.

"Holy fuck," she blurted. Annie wiggled her finger eagerly and sputtered out another laugh when he slipped the ring over her knuckle.

Rather than let go of her hand and allow her to admire her new jewelry, he held fast, staring into her eyes. He couldn't remember everything he'd planned on saying, but he remembered this.

"Annie, I promise to always have a cup ready for you to pee in on a Ferris wheel." He grinned when Annie snorted and turned red, ducking her chin. "I promise to always keep you stocked in Breathe Right strips and to never overwater our succulents." He rested his free hand on her face, cupping her jaw. "I promise—"

"Those are vows." Annie beamed at him, eyes going glassy and squinting at the corners, and not because of the bright midday sun. "You're supposed to save those for our wedding."

Wedding. Holy fuck was right. He was getting married to Annie Kyriakos, the girl who far surpassed his wildest dreams.

"Whoops?" He chuckled and brushed his thumb along the curve of her cheek, aching with how much he loved her. "Annie, knowing you and loving you, being loved by you, has made me a better man in more ways than I can count, and you've made me the luckiest person on the planet—no, in the universe. Vows or not, I promise to always love you. I promise to

always try. I promise to never stop giving it my all even when you put the toilet paper on the holder the wrong way—”

“It goes over, you monster!”

His smile softened, as did hers. “And I promise we’ll travel somewhere much better for our honeymoon than Disneyland.”

She wrinkled her nose, then grinned. “What do you think about Disneyland Paris?”

He’d fly her to the moon if it made her happy.

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Writing is often said to be a solitary endeavor and in 2020 this could've proven especially true. Lucky for me, I have the greatest group of friends to lean on. Rompire, your unwavering support means the world to me. Anna, Amy, Em, Julia, Lana, Lisa, and Megan, we might be scattered across the country, but you all have been my bright spot this year. Thank you for being my cheerleaders, therapists, and always being there when I need to brainstorm. I'm crossing my fingers that one day soon we'll all be able to get together and have a writing retreat in person.

To the 2020 Debuts, thank you for your kindness, support, and commiseration. Debuting in 2020 was a unique experience, to say the least, but I'm grateful to be in a debut class with such talented authors. I am so happy for all of you and I can't wait to see what's in store for all of us next!

Mom, thank you for being my rock and always, without fail, having my back. You've been my biggest fan and greatest supporter since day one and there's no way that words can do justice to how much I love and appreciate you. You're the best person I know.

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Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my readers. There are so many wonderful books in the world, and the fact that you've taken the time to read mine means everything to me. My sincerest wish is that my words provide an escape, a warm hug, and hope to whoever needs it.

Announcement

Keep an eye out for Margot's story . . .

COUNT YOUR LUCKY STARS

Coming in early 2022!

About the Author

ALEXANDRIA BELLEFLEUR is an author of swoony contemporary romance often featuring lovable grumps and the sunshine characters who bring them to their knees. A Pacific Northwesterner at heart, Alexandria has a weakness for good coffee, Pike IPA, and Voodoo Doughnuts. Her special skills include finding the best pad thai in every city she visits, remembering faces but not names, falling asleep in movie theaters, and keeping cool while reading smutty books in public. She was a 2018 Romance Writers of America Golden Heart finalist. You can find her at alexandriabellefleur.com or on Twitter [@ambellefleur](https://twitter.com/ambellefleur).

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Praise for the Work of Alexandria Bellefleur

“With perfectly woven vulnerability and playfulness, *Written in the Stars* is a riotous and heartfelt read. I was hooked from the very first page!”

—Christina Lauren, *New York Times* bestselling author of *In a Holiday*

“*Written in the Stars* is everything I want from a rom-com: fun, whimsical, sexy. This modern *Pride and Prejudice* glitters with romance.”

—Talia Hibbert, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Get a Life*, *Chloe Brown*

“Alexandria Bellefleur is an author to watch. Her writing is joyful and heartfelt, and her voice sparkles with a delightful mix of wit, humor, and good-natured sarcasm. I can’t wait to see how she wows us next!”

—Mia Sosa, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Worst Best Man*

“*Written in the Stars* had me hooked from the first page. It’s an adorable and heartfelt romance with everything I adore: a killer meet-cute, loads of cute banter, steamy love scenes, all the feels, and a happily ever after that left me in happy tears . . . Alexandria Bellefleur’s debut will have readers seeing stars in the best way.”

—Sarah Smith, author of *Faker* and *Simmer Down*

“A dazzling debut! The perfect combination of humor and heart really makes this book shine.”

—Rachel Lacey, author of *Don’t Cry for Me*

“*Written in the Stars* is what you might get if your favorite Instagram astrologer wrote you an adorable romance novel. Delightful, funny, and sweet, with just the right touch of woo-woo.”

—Scarlett Peckham, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Rakes*

“A disastrous blind date kicks off Bellefleur’s excellent rom-com debut. . . . Readers will be rapt by the sensuous love scenes. . . . This is a delight.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Fans of pop culture–inspired astrology sites will love the effortless and entertaining way the author weaves zodiac memes throughout the text. The stars align in this charming queer rom-com.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Bellefleur has a droll, distinct voice, and her one-liners zing off the page, striking both the heart and funny bone. She has a gift for comedy, possessing more style and panache than a debut writer has any right to. . . . There’s a sparkling quality here, one that mirrors the starry title. Bellefleur writes as if she’s captured fairy lights in a mason jar, twinkly and lovely within something solid yet fragile.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“In this heart-thawing holiday romance, debut novelist Bellefleur remixes Austen’s indelible clash of personalities into something fresh and totally queer.”

—*O, The Oprah Magazine* (Best LGBTQ Books of 2020)

“[A] distinctly modern frolic, charming and effervescent and entirely itself.”

—*Washington Post*

“There are many, many *Pride and Prejudice* retellings out there, but *Written in the Stars* by Alexandria Bellefleur might just be the best.”

—PopSugar (Best New Romance Books in November)

“Just what 2020 needs: a delightful rom-com that once again gives us the beloved fake relationship trope—and the fuzzies you didn’t know you needed.”

—Shondaland (5 Best Books of November)

“A delightful, heart-warming romance, Bellefleur’s novel shows eloquently how two characters can fall in love more deeply than either dared to dream. So whether you follow astrology or not, *Written in the Stars* has the reading you won’t want to miss.”

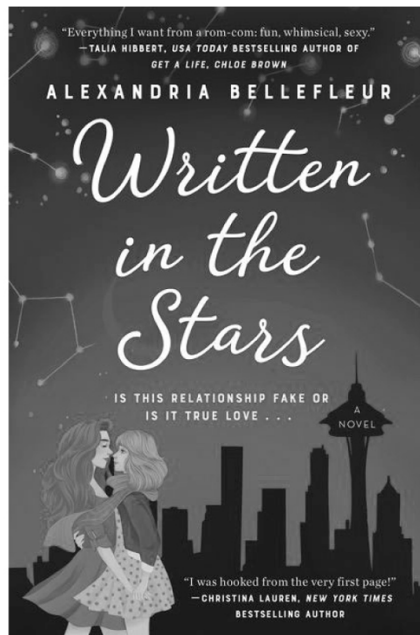
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“This book is a delight.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

Also by Alexandria Bellefleur

Written in the Stars
Hang the Moon



WRITTEN IN THE STARS

“This book is a delight.” – *New York Times Book Review*

Named one of the Best Romances of 2020 by *Washington Post*, *Bustle*, and *Buzzfeed*!

With nods to *Bridget Jones* and *Pride & Prejudice*, this debut is a delightful #ownvoices queer rom-com about a free-spirited social media astrologer who agrees to fake a relationship with an uptight actuary until New Year’s Eve—with results not even the stars could predict!

After a disastrous blind date, Darcy Lowell is desperate to stop her well-meaning brother from playing matchmaker ever again. Love—and the inevitable heartbreak—is the last thing she wants. So she fibs and says her latest set up was a success. Darcy doesn’t expect her lie to bite her in the ass.

Elle Jones, one of the astrologers behind the popular Twitter account Oh My Stars, dreams of finding her soul mate. But she knows it is most assuredly not Darcy... a no-nonsense stick-in-the-mud, who is way too analytical, punctual, and skeptical for someone as free-spirited as Elle. When Darcy’s brother—and Elle’s new business partner—expresses how happy he is that they hit it off, Elle is baffled. Was Darcy on the same date? Because... awkward.

Darcy begs Elle to play along and she agrees to pretend they’re dating. But with a few conditions: Darcy must help Elle navigate her own overbearing family during the holidays and their arrangement expires on New Year’s Eve. The last thing they expect is to develop real feelings during a faux relationship. But maybe opposites can attract when true love is written in the stars?

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A NOVEL



Count Your Lucky Stars

A NOVEL

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Praise for the Work of Alexandria Bellefleur

By Alexandria Bellefleur

Copyright

About the Publisher

Chapter One

In the seven months Olivia Grant had worked at Emerald City Events as an assistant event coordinator, she had encountered her fair share of odd demands. But the Roberts' stipulation that their wedding menu be lacto-ovo-pescatarian-vegetarian and Keto-friendly was a new one.

“OTP? What the hell is that?”

“The dating app? One True Pairing? What rock have you been living under?”

Olivia drained the dregs of her tea, which had long gone cold, and tried to tune out her coworkers' chitchat.

“Uh, I've been *married* for twenty-five years?” Naomi said.

“That's no excuse. Their ads are everywhere. Come on. I bet even Olivia knows what I'm talking about.”

“Hmm?” Olivia finished skimming the email from the caterer for the Roberts' wedding—which mostly amounted to confusion and consternation about what the hell he was supposed to serve—before lowering the screen of her laptop. She'd commiserate with him later. “Sorry, even I know what?”

Kira, marketing director at Emerald City Events, leaned her chin on her hand. “OTP. Please tell me you've heard of it.”

Olivia shrugged. “Sure. Hasn't everyone?”

Kira shot Naomi a pointed look and smirked. “See?”

“And like I said”—Naomi wiggled her left hand, the platinum wedding band gleaming against her deep brown skin—“married.”

“So was Liv.”

The tan line on Olivia’s ring finger had faded months ago, unlike the habit she had of running her thumb along the space where her wedding ring had once rested. She tucked her hand under her thigh and smiled. “I thought you were seeing that barista. What’s her name? Blake?”

“Oh, totally. Strictly secondhand knowledge of the app on my part. I’ve got a cousin who met their boyfriend on the app, but that’s it.” Kira grinned at Naomi. “But at least I know about it.”

“OOC, OTP, AO3, PWP, you kids and your abbreviations.” Naomi tutted. “You wanna know the only three-letter acronym I give a damn about?” She tapped the pin on her lapel and grinned. “COO, thank you very much.”

Kira crowed in delight. “*PWP?* Naomi, you naughty girl, what have *you* been reading?”

Olivia hid her smile behind her fingers.

Utterly unabashed, Naomi shrugged one shoulder. “I like what I like.”

“I’ve got another three-letter acronym for you.” Kira swiveled her chair from side to side, in time with each letter she listed. “VIP.”

She waited for the punch line, for Kira or Naomi to expound on what those three letters meant in the context of their conversation. “Who’s a VIP?”

Emerald City Events, Seattle’s premier events management company, catered to a variety of clientele, from street festivals to nonprofits to Fortune 500 tech companies. Olivia had yet to help with an event for any of their higher-profile clients, but she knew they existed.

“Brendon Lowell,” Kira said. “Owner and creator of OTP.”

That explained why Kira and Naomi were discussing the dating app.

“Does he want to hire us for an event?”

“Mm-hmm. His wedding.” Kira leaned her elbows on her desk. “Lori’s upstairs having kittens.”

Olivia frowned. “Shouldn’t Lori be thrilled?”

“She would be,” Naomi said. “If he hadn’t called her last-minute.”

Oh. “Shotgun wedding?” She wrinkled her nose. “Do people still call them that? I mean, do people even *care*?”

“You’re the one who grew up in BFE, Liv. You tell me.” Kira snickered, sobering quickly. “Sorry, it’s really not funny. Brendon Lowell had plans to get married over on the Olympic Peninsula. The venue was all-inclusive—event planner, catering, DJ, decorations, cake, the whole shebang offered in-house. Sounds great, right?”

Call it a hunch, but Olivia was going to go with *no*.

“Apparently there was a fire at the venue yesterday. Extensive damage to the rental house and ceremony space. They’ve canceled all events through the end of the year.” Kira grimaced. “Lowell got a full refund on his deposit, obviously, but they’re starting from scratch with three weeks until the big day. Guests have already booked flights, so they’re pretty adamant about not changing the date.”

Three weeks was less than ideal, but it was doable. With the right budget, Olivia could probably plan a wedding in half that time. Money talked, and it opened doors. Facts of life. “Lori could pull it off.”

“Lori could pull it off *if* she weren’t already booked that day,” Naomi said, brows rising. “Hell, she’ll *still* pull it off, even if it kills her. She’s upstairs, trying to figure out how to break it to her other client that she’s going to miss their big day.”

“Lori’s had me step in before.”

Kira's lips drew to the side. "Yeah, except the other client? It's her *daughter*."

Olivia's jaw dropped. "Lori's going to skip her own daughter's wedding?"

"Mm-hmm." Naomi pursed her lips. "VIP."

"The *Seattle Times* is covering the Lowell wedding for the Vows section," Kira explained. "It could be huge for ECE. Lori doesn't want to miss out on that."

And she didn't have to.

"I can do it."

Kira and Naomi stared.

"What? I *can*." Olivia stood and smoothed down the front of her skirt. "I'm going to go talk to Lori."

This was her chance to prove herself, the break she had been waiting for, *hoping* for since she'd packed up her Subaru and left Enumclaw eight months ago.

A look passed between Kira and Naomi before Naomi dropped her eyes. "Good luck."

Despite her blustering, Olivia had a feeling she was going to need all the luck she could get.

Emerald City Events was located out of a charming two-story Craftsman in the Ballard neighborhood of Seattle. Lori's office encompassed most of the sprawling upstairs, the whole place extensively renovated and open concept.

Lori's desk was visible from the top of the stairs, but she wasn't seated behind it. Instead, she stood in front of the window, forehead pressed to the rain-splattered glass, shoulders hunched. Usually, Lori was the pinnacle of calm, cool collectedness, unflappable under pressure. For her, this was practically a breakdown.

Olivia rapped her knuckles against the wall. "Knock, knock. I, uh, heard there's a bit of a scheduling fiasco?"

Lori's spine straightened as she lifted her head, stepping away from the window. She turned and smiled, all teeth and

faux brightness, her eyes hardly creasing at the corners. “No fiasco. I trust you completely.”

Olivia’s heart tripped over the next beat.

“Sasha will be in great hands on the day of her wedding.”

Sasha. Lori’s *daughter*, Sasha. Olivia wasn’t sure whether to take that as the world’s highest compliment or greatest insult, Lori entrusting Olivia with her daughter’s wedding when there was another solution, *right* there, staring her straight in the face.

Olivia clasped her hands together loosely and crossed the room, stopping beside Lori. “Or.”

Lori’s expression barely budged, save for the gentle rise of her left brow. “Or?”

Olivia took a deep breath. “*Or* you could go to your daughter’s wedding and let *me* plan the Lowell wedding.”

Lori dropped her eyes and sighed. “Olivia—”

“I’m *good* at this, Lori.”

“Of course you are.” Lori crossed her arms and sniffed. “I hired you, after all.”

Olivia held her breath.

“But I feel like the Lowell wedding might be a tad ambitious for your first solo gig.”

Every event since Olivia had started working at ECE had been *a tad ambitious* according to Lori.

Olivia deflated. “Oh.”

Lori turned, staring out the window, where outside, a fine mist fell from the gray sky. She drummed her fingers against her arm and sighed sharply through her nose. “I’ve worked with Brendon Lowell on several events in the past—company parties, corporate retreats, that sort of thing. He’s easy to work with, knows what he likes, and he’s local to the area. Best part of all, he *loves* weddings.”

“Sounds like a dream,” Olivia murmured, trying to tuck away her disappointment.

“If not for the poor timing, I’d have been over the moon, having a wedding like this land in my lap.” Lori’s scowl reflected in the glass. “It’s the sort of wedding that practically plans itself. With a budget like his, how could it not?”

Olivia frowned. If Lori was trying to make her feel better, it wasn’t working. “I’m sorry?”

Lori clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth. “And the *Seattle Times* coverage? That has the propensity to be *huge* for business. Granted, the wedding would have to go off without a hitch . . .” Lori looked at her askance. “What I’m saying is, don’t fuck this up.”

Her jaw dropped. “Wait. What? Are you—*Lori*.”

Olivia’s eyes stung from all of this emotional whiplash.

The thin gold bangles on Lori’s wrist jangled when she batted at the air. “I beg you, please don’t get mushy on me. My nerves are shot. If you start to cry, *I’ll* cry, and I *loathe* crying.”

Olivia pressed her lips together, stifling a laugh.

Lori rolled her head to the side and smiled. “You’re right. You *are* good at this. Which is why I’m going to give you the Lowell wedding.”

Lips still pressed tight together, her squeal escaped as a high-pitched *meep*. “Thank you, thank you, thank you—”

Lori lifted a hand, cutting off Olivia’s effusive thanks. “You pull this off, and consider the word *assistant* scratched from your position, okay?” Lori rounded her desk and reached for her glasses, sliding them up the bridge of her nose. “We can discuss a raise in your salary later.” Lori lifted her head and smiled. “Sound good?”

It sounded freaking *fantastic*. “Perfect.”

“Great.” Lori tore a sheet of paper from her notebook and held it out for Olivia to take. “Monday. Six p.m. sharp. Brendon and his fiancée, Annie, would like to tour The Ruins.

Fabulous hidden gem in Queen Anne? You remember it, right? We had an event there a few months ago. It was for—”

“The Martins’ golden anniversary.” Olivia nodded. “I remember.”

Lori arched a single brow, one corner of her mouth rising simultaneously, looking pleased. Olivia warmed faintly at the unspoken praise. She had a sharp memory, necessary in a profession like this.

“Good.” Lori pointed at the paper in Olivia’s hand. “Brendon’s and Annie’s cells are listed at the top. Backup numbers for the Maid of Honor and Best Woman are below those. Just in case.”

Listed on the paper beneath B. Lowell and A. Kyriakos was D. Lowell and M. Cooper.

M. Cooper.

Olivia traced the inked name with the tip of her finger. In a city of nearly four million people, what were the chances of *this* M. Cooper being the same M. Cooper Olivia knew from high school? Her face warmed; the rest of her, too. Slim. The chances were slim.

“I’ll forward you his email with details on budget and guest list. Lucky for us, we already have a head count.”

Lucky was right.

“Well, go on.” Lori shooed Olivia out of the office. “You’ve got a lot work ahead of you.”

* * *

“I’m just saying, maybe it’s time to put some feelers out, start the hunt for a new roommate. It’s been six months since the last one moved out.”

As if Margot Cooper needed the reminder of how long it had been. It was the longest she’d lived alone, a fact of which she was painfully aware. “I *know*, Elle.”

“Doesn’t the quiet bother you?” Margot’s best friend frowned and leaned her shoulder against the crosswalk pole.

“It would bother me.”

Elle didn't have to worry about coming home to an empty apartment. A little over a year ago, she'd moved out of the place she and Margot had shared and in with her girlfriend, Darcy, at the same time Annie—Darcy's best friend—had moved in with Margot. *That* arrangement had lasted a brief two months before Annie had moved in with her now-fiancé, Brendon, Darcy's brother.

None of it would've happened had Margot and Elle, the voices behind the astronomically successful social media-based astrology business Oh My Stars, not partnered with Brendon's dating app, One True Pairing, to incorporate astrological compatibility to the app's matching algorithm two years ago. Not only had it been a smart career move, beneficial for both OTP and Oh My Stars, but Margot had also lucked out, finding a close friend in Brendon. And thanks to Brendon, Elle had met Darcy. Wins all around.

Except for the part where Margot was down a roommate and now came home to an empty apartment, ate dinner alone more nights than not, and had started saying good night to her plants. An admission she could kick herself over confessing to Elle, the reason behind this whole conversation.

“Maybe I'll get a cat,” she mused, stepping out into the street when the light turned green.

Elle snorted. “Except for the part where you hate cats.”

“I do *not* hate cats.” She sniffed. “I have a . . . healthy respect for anything that could rip my face off.”

It was common sense. Self-preservation. Survival skills.

Elle bumped Margot with her hip. “Healthy *fear*, more like.”

“Call it what you want.” Margot shrugged. “I'm strongly considering adopting a cat.”

Elle whipped out her phone, eyes flitting between the screen and the building up ahead. “And I think you should strongly consider getting a *human* roommate. You know, someone you can actually talk to.”

Margot opened her mouth.

“Someone who can actually talk *back*.” Elle nibbled on her bottom lip, footsteps slowing to a stop in front of the entrance to the venue. “I know you’re a little gun-shy after your last roommate.”

More like last *string* of roommates.

Margot snorted at Elle’s tact. “I’m not gun-shy. I’m being selective, and for good reason. I’ve already put feelers out, Elle. I’ve got my ear to the ground. I *know* I need a new roommate.” She huffed. “Preferably one who doesn’t have a habit of taking Ambien, sleepwalking into my closet, and popping a squat over my shoes at three in the morning.”

Elle cringed.

That wasn’t even taking into consideration the roommate who’d stolen Margot’s credit card or the one who’d owned an ant farm. An ant farm Margot had known *nothing* about until she’d woken up to the floor *moving* on one memorable Sunday morning.

Margot’s recent luck with roommates wasn’t just bad, it was abysmal.

Elle stared, eyes wide and full of sympathy, and it made Margot’s skin itch. The perks and pitfalls of having a best friend who knew her so well that she could hear what Margot *wasn’t* saying.

“Look, can we just . . . put a pin in it and circle back around?” Margot flipped her wrist over, checking the time on her Fitbit. Five ’til. Now wasn’t the time or the place for Margot to throw herself a pity party. “It’s almost six.”

Elle stole another peek at her phone and smiled. “Darcy texted. They’re already inside.”

Stepping through the door, Elle led the way down a winding hall lined with doors on each side, the sound of Brendon’s boisterous laugh growing louder as they approached. Margot ducked her head inside an open door and cringed at the decor. Between the heart-shaped, glitter-filled balloons floating aimlessly along the perimeter of the room and the pink confetti

littering the floor, it looked like Cupid had jizzed all over the reception space.

At the end of the hall, Elle drew to an abrupt stop and gasped. “*Wow.*”

Margot hurried to catch up before following Elle’s gaze up to the ceiling. “Holy shit.”

The ceiling of the ballroom was stunning, painted in shades of lilac and lavender, bleeding down into periwinkle and pink, all the softest shades of dusk, when twilight descended into night and the stars came out to play. Little pinpricks of silver and champagne dotted the ceiling, and the glow of the chandeliers made everything ethereal and dreamy. *Perfect* for Brendon and Annie.

Across the room, Brendon beamed. “It’s great, isn’t it?”

Tucked into his side, Annie smiled up at him. “I like what I see.”

Elle greeted Darcy with a quick kiss before lacing their fingers together. “It’s like something straight out of a fairy tale. If you guys don’t get married here, *I* will.”

Darcy stared at Elle as if she were the source of all the light in the room.

A bittersweet pang struck Margot in the chest, stealing her breath.

She didn’t always feel like a fifth wheel—her friends were good about keeping the PDA to a minimum, and even then, a little PDA didn’t bother her—but it was happening more often lately.

A wedding was a party, marriage a piece of paper and permission to file your taxes jointly; Brendon and Annie, Darcy and Elle, they were already coupled up, wholly committed, and madly in love. It was silly to let an event that was, more than anything, symbolic mess with her head, but Margot couldn’t help but feel like her friends were all forming a club and she wasn’t invited.

Not unless she brought a plus-one.

“Elle’s right,” Margot said, trying to echo her enthusiasm. “I think this place might be it.”

Brendon laughed. “You’re just saying that so you don’t have to tour another venue.”

Is *that* what he thought? Jesus. “I know I’m not always sunshine and rainbows, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

Of *course* she cared. Flowers and first-dance songs weren’t her favorite topics, but Brendon and Annie cared about it all, so *she* cared about it. She was the Best Woman. Caring about Brendon was pretty much what the role dictated. But even if she weren’t the Best Woman, she’d have still cared because he was her friend. He was stuck with her.

“Trust me,” he said, eyes still crinkled with laughter. “No one expects *you* to be sunshine and rainbows.”

Her brows knit. What was *that* supposed to mean?

“It’s not an indictment,” Brendon tacked on, eyes widening in alarm as if he’d realized he’d said the wrong thing. “We like you exactly as you are.”

Annie nodded briskly in agreement, but Margot couldn’t help but feel like maybe it wasn’t true. That maybe her friends would like her better if she *were* a little more sunshine and rainbows.

Margot dug inside her bag for her lip balm. She’d just have to try harder, lay it on thicker. “Who are we waiting on?”

Brendon fished around inside his pocket. “The facility manager had to step out to make a call, and the wedding planner texted a couple minutes ago and said she’s trying to find a place to park. She should be here—”

“I’m so sorry I’m late.” Breathless laughter came from behind their group. “Parking was a pain.”

The lid to Margot’s ChapStick slipped out of her fingers and bounced against the floor before rolling a foot away. Great. She crouched, shuffling forward to snag it from beside Darcy’s foot.

Brendon grinned. “No worries. Olivia, right? I’m Brendon.”

“It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. This is my fiancée, Annie; my sister, Darcy; her girlfriend, Elle.”

“Hi,” Elle chirped.

Margot stood, dusting off her knees.

“This is my friend and Best Woman—”

“*Margot?*”

All the air left Margot’s lungs in a punched-out exhale as soon as she locked eyes with the statuesque blond across the room.

Olivia Grant. Holy shit.

Olivia’s pouty, lush lips parted, mirroring Margot’s shock. An abundance of tawny hair spilled out from beneath her dark red beanie, tumbling down her back in soft waves, longer than Margot remembered. For a moment, Margot was too tongue-tied to speak.

Elle’s forehead furrowed, and Margot coughed.

“*Olivia.*” Her voice actually cracked. Kill her now. “Right. I thought you looked . . . familiar.” *Familiar.* Ha. *Familiar* was for acquaintances. Not whatever the hell they once were. “It’s, um, Olivia Taylor now, right?”

Not that Margot had looked Olivia up online or anything. Not that she’d specifically *not* looked, either. *Maybe* she’d taken a peek at her Facebook profile, but only because it had popped up under *suggested friends*. Margot hadn’t sent her a friend request or anything like that. They weren’t friends. Not anymore. Olivia whatever-her-last-name-was was just someone Margot used to know.

Someone Margot had once spent the better part of a week with naked, tangled up in the sheets of Olivia’s childhood bed, wringing multiple orgasms out of, until Margot’s jaw had ached and Olivia’s voice had grown hoarse. Five days that were, arguably, the best of Margot’s life, full of toe-curling sex and laughter that made her stomach hurt. The start of *something*, a new chapter between them, one where Margot

didn't have to spend another second secretly pining for her best friend because all her feelings were returned.

Or so she'd thought.

"It was." Olivia coughed and clasped her hands in front of her for a brief moment before dropping them back to her sides where they dangled loosely, like she didn't know what to do with them. "It's Grant again."

Margot's eyes dropped to Olivia's left hand, her ring finger bare.

Huh.

Interesting.

"Wait." Brendon pointed between the both of them, looking confused. "You two know each other?"

Color rose in Olivia's cheeks, and Margot remembered tracing the southward spread of that blush with her fingertips, tasting it with her tongue, Olivia's skin soft as satin and hot beneath Margot's lips. For a split second, Margot went dizzy, blood rising to the surface of her skin, mimicking Olivia's flush.

Know each other. Margot swallowed hard. You could say that.

"Olivia and I go *way* back." Back to Girl Scouts and slumber parties and double-dog dares and pinky promises made beneath the stars. Promises that had been long since forgotten, broken. "It's been, what, eleven years?"

Olivia's hazel eyes rounded as she met Margot's stare across the room. "Give or take. We, um, we went to school together," she said, words rushing out of her in a jumble. "In Enumclaw."

"Damn." Brendon's eyes darted between them. "Talk about serendipity, right?"

Margot forced out a chuckle.

The universe was playing a cosmic joke on her, that was for sure.

Chapter Two

Contract signed and deposit placed, Olivia quickly updated the Google Sheet itemizing Annie and Brendon's wedding budget—*hello*—filling in the field beside *venue*. The rest of the column auto-adjusted, doing the math for her. Olivia saved then toggled over to her calendar, blocking out a time slot for a cake tasting with a local bakery ECE and Lori had worked with many times and who was willing to accommodate the tighter timeline. Immediate tasks accomplished, Olivia cast a quick glance around the venue's courtyard. Annie and Brendon had wandered off a few minutes ago, hand in hand, stating their desire to *get the lay of the land for the photos*. Across the courtyard, Brendon's sister blushed when her girlfriend whispered in her ear, both of them lost in their own little world. Olivia made another sweep, craning her neck to peer past the fountain and through the glass-paned door. She frowned.

Margot was missing.

Margot Cooper.

Olivia fought the urge to shiver, fingers curling into fists at her sides as a flush inched its way up her jaw without her permission.

She'd call this *fate*, if she weren't unsure whether she still believed in that sort of thing. Four million people in this city and *M. Cooper* and her Margot turned out to be one and the same. Olivia swallowed hard. Not *her* Margot. Not anymore.

Olivia puffed out her cheeks, her exhale measured. Now was not the time to lose herself in the past, in old hurts that should've healed. She had a wedding to plan. Lori was counting on her to pull this off. Olivia's future was riding on the success of this wedding, on her ability to put her skills to task and pull this off. Screwing up was not an option.

Flipping the cover over the screen of her tablet, Olivia tucked it away inside her purse and left the courtyard in search of Brendon and Annie.

They weren't in the dining room or the ballroom, either. Olivia hiked her purse higher on her shoulder and made a left down the winding hall, which more closely resembled a maze, what with the sheer number of intersections and doors to choose from. It was a place she could easily get lost in if she wasn't careful, her memory of the exact layout a little hazy from the anniversary party she'd assisted Lori with months ago.

From the outside, the venue was unassuming, plain brick like any other warehouse in the area, not a place anyone would look at twice. Stepping inside was like falling through a looking glass, like entering a whole new world, a wonderland of glitzy chandeliers, ornate murals, creeping vines, and old-world exposed brick. It was achingly romantic, like something out of a fairy tale, the sort of place where Olivia had dreamed of getting married when she was little.

Olivia's thumb brushed the bare skin beneath the knuckle of her third finger as she ducked her head through an open door. She drew up short, heart rate ratcheting, and cleared her throat. "Hi."

Margot spun toward her, dark eyes wide behind the lenses of her cat-eye glasses. "There's an elephant in this room."

A laugh bubbled up inside Olivia's throat. "You *think*?"

Margot's face turned red, matching the color of the plaid shirt she wore unbuttoned over a black crop top so tight it might as well have been a second skin. The bare strip of her stomach was pale and flat, and Olivia's own skin pebbled with goose bumps.

“Funny.” Margot gestured toward the life-sized and lifelike elephant, wrinkly and gray with huge ivory tusks, stationed in the corner of the room. “Who the fuck puts a fake elephant in a dining room?”

Olivia stepped inside the room, leaving a healthy distance between her and Margot as she lifted a hand, curling her fingers around the elephant’s right tusk. “It was built in 1931 for the Paris Colonial Exhibition.”

Margot’s eyes followed her, watching her like a hawk. “Since when did you become a fount of obscure knowledge?”

“Eleven years is a long time,” Olivia said, hating how that was meant to come out like a joke but her voice cracked halfway through, earnestness seeping out like blood from a wound.

Olivia regretted leaving her coat in the car. What she wouldn’t have done for one more layer, another defense against Margot’s unflinching stare that managed to strip Olivia down and leave her feeling naked despite her sweater. She glanced down and winced. Her sweater that was covered in cat hair. *Cute.*

“The, um, facility manager, Chris, mentioned it at the beginning of the tour,” Olivia explained, trying to surreptitiously brush away the cat hair. “I guess you weren’t paying attention.”

Margot’s throat jerked. “Maybe I was distracted.”

Olivia ducked her chin, fighting a losing battle against the upward twitch of her lips. *Distracted.* That was . . . *something.* “You cut your hair. It looks great.”

Margot ran her fingers through her lob, causing her plaid shirt to open further and reveal more of her bare stomach. “Thanks.”

She’d dyed it darker, too, black instead of brown. It barely brushed her collar when she moved her head.

Olivia uncurled her fingers from the elephant’s tusk and dropped her hand, crossing her arms under her chest. “How’ve you been?”

Margot shrugged. “You know.” No, not really. “Fine? And you? How are you? How’ve you been?”

“How much time do you have?” Olivia joked.

Margot braced her shoulder against the wall. “So you and Brad, huh?”

Leave it to Margot to dive directly into the deep end. Never afraid of charging in headfirst. “Divorced. Last spring.”

“My condolences.” Margot’s brows rose over the black rim of her glasses. “Or congratulations? I’m never really sure what’s appropriate.”

Olivia was over the split, but talking about it usually didn’t make her laugh, not like it did now. Divorce wasn’t funny. Most people treated it like something to be ashamed of, like *she* should be ashamed of herself. “We, uh, we just wanted different things.”

She could say more. Start at the beginning instead of the end. She could tell Margot all about dropping out of college when Brad had suffered a football-career-ending injury. About how she’d followed him back home to Enumclaw and how they’d gotten married because he’d asked and that’s what she’d always wanted . . . right? About years spent giving and giving and giving, handing over pieces of herself until Brad had asked her for the one thing she wouldn’t give him.

But she’d rather not say all that. There was no point.

Margot was just someone Olivia used to know, and now Olivia was planning her friend’s wedding. It would be in both their best interests to keep things strictly professional.

As professional as possible when she knew exactly how to touch Margot to make her babble and beg.

“How’d you meet the groom? Brendon,” Olivia asked before Margot could pry harder.

“Elle and I, we created Oh My Stars.”

“I follow you guys on Twitter.” And Instagram, too. She’d been following Oh My Stars since its inception years ago, back when Margot had still been at UW and Olivia had only

just become Mrs. Brad Taylor. “You were always interested in astrology.”

The skin between Olivia’s shoulder blades itched, a memory of Margot tracing constellations into the bare skin of Olivia’s back surfacing.

Margot nodded. “We partnered with his app, OTP, a couple years ago to add astrological compatibility to their matchmaking algorithm. Brendon introduced Elle to his sister, Darcy, and he and I became friends.”

“That sounds really great, Margot.” Olivia smiled. “It sounds like everything worked out the way you wanted.”

Like all her dreams had come true. Good for her.

Margot dropped her gaze, tracing the mosaic tile floor with the toe of her boot, expression giving nothing away. Margot had always been too good at that, locking everything up, impossible to read. Olivia had tried, *God*, had she tried, but every time she thought she’d figured Margot out, Margot would do something to make her second-guess everything she thought she knew. Everything she believed to be certain.

“How long have you been in Seattle?” Margot asked, changing the subject.

“Since last summer.”

Not even a year.

“There you are.” Brendon poked his head inside the room and grinned. “We were wondering where you two wandered off to.”

He stepped further into the room, Annie by his side. Elle and Darcy followed.

Margot pushed off the wall, tucking her thumbs inside her front pockets. Her black denim rode lower in the front, revealing another inch of smooth, pale skin and the barest hint of black ink curving around her hip. Olivia’s mouth ran dry. That was new. “You all set?”

“Sure are. We were thinking dinner. Maybe that Indian place we like since we’re not far from Darcy and Elle’s,”

Brendon said. “Olivia, you should join us.”

Olivia blinked, long and slow, forcefully tearing her eyes from that bare expanse of skin, gaze lifting and landing on Margot’s face. A knowing smirk played at the edges of Margot’s mouth. Heat rose in Olivia’s cheeks, creeping up to her hairline, her skin likely matching the color of her burgundy beanie. She swallowed hard and smiled apologetically. “I wish I could, but I should really be going. I need to email the florist and—”

“It’s nearly seven,” Annie said, looping her arm through Brendon’s. “What are the chances the florist is going to email you back?”

“Annie’s right.” Brendon smiled. “Come on. I’m sure you and Margot have plenty of catching up to do.”

She met Margot’s eyes. One of Margot’s brows rose as if daring Olivia to . . . what? Say yes? No? Olivia bit her lip. Margot was more of a mystery than ever.

Dinner. Brendon and Annie would be there, too, at the very least, as a buffer, and at the end of the day, all of this was about the two of them. Their wedding. As long as she kept that in mind, she should be fine.

“All right.” Olivia slipped the strap of her purse down her shoulder, where it caught against the crook of her elbow. She reached inside for her phone, wanting to, at the very least, set a reminder for herself to email the florist first thing in the morning. “Let me just . . .”

She’d missed a call, having set her phone to silent during the tour. Mrs. Miyata, her landlady, who lived three doors down, had left a voicemail.

Olivia bit back a sigh. Considering the time, Cat was probably kicking up a fuss. If she didn’t get her dinner by seven, she’d start yowling as if she were dying, little drama queen. Luckily, Mrs. Miyata had the spare key, so she could pop open a can of Friskies to keep the monster at bay. She’d done it before and hopefully wouldn’t mind doing it again.

“Let me just make a quick call.”

* * *

Olivia was barely out the door when Brendon zeroed in on Margot, sporting a shit-eating grin. “*So.*”

“*So* what?”

Brendon shook his head slowly, eyes narrowing minutely, studying her with intent. As if she were a puzzle he planned to solve. “Olivia seems nice.”

Great. Margot should’ve seen this coming: her friends—lovable bunch of nosy assholes that they were—giving her the third degree. Except, no. Call it kismet or fate, serendipity or just a damn coincidence, but Olivia had appeared without warning. Nothing could’ve prepared Margot for *this*.

“She is.” Margot crossed her arms, fighting against the urge to shift her weight from one foot to the other. “Or she was, I guess. I don’t know. A lot can change in eleven years.”

Clearly, it had. Olivia had married Brad and divorced him in that time. *We just wanted different things.* What a pat answer that told her *nothing*. It was like when celebs split over irreconcilable differences and it later turned out to be because someone had cheated or their finances were fucked. Who pulled the plug? Olivia? Did it even matter?

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk about high school,” Brendon said. “Not once.”

Elle nodded. “You hardly even talked about it when we were in college.”

“Because it was high school,” Margot said. “High school in *Enumclaw*. Not exactly riveting stuff. There’s really nothing to tell.”

Nothing she wanted to or had any intention of telling, at least.

“You know”—Brendon’s lips quirked—“when someone says there’s nothing to tell, there usually is.”

Brendon was perceptive. Sometimes a little *too* perceptive. His tendency to stick his nose where it didn’t belong made for a dangerous combination.

“We were friends.” Margot shrugged, throwing Brendon the smallest, least likely to bite her in the ass, of bones. “We drifted apart after high school. Plenty of people do. I went to UW and she went to WSU. End of story.”

Brendon stared, scratching his chin.

“Leave her alone, Brendon,” Darcy said, cutting in, saving Margot the hassle of having to do it herself. “If Margot doesn’t want to talk about it, she doesn’t have to.”

Margot sighed. Finally someone who saw reason.

“Besides, have you *met* Margot? When have you ever known her to do something she doesn’t want to?”

Margot frowned. “I mean—”

“She’s locked up tighter than Fort Knox.” Darcy ignored her. “If Margot doesn’t want to talk about something, good luck wheedling it out of her.”

“Me?” Margot jabbed her thumb at her chest. “When have you *ever* known me to shy away from speaking my mind?”

And that was rich, coming from Darcy, considering how tight-lipped she’d been about her feelings for Elle at the beginning of their relationship.

Darcy turned to Brendon. “See, stubborn.”

Annie snickered and Elle’s lips twitched, like she was trying not to laugh. The effort, while quite clearly in vain, was noted and appreciated.

“Wow,” Margot intoned. “Really feeling the love here, guys.”

Brendon opened his mouth.

“Margot’s right.” Elle met Margot’s eye and smiled. “If she says there’s nothing to tell, there’s nothing to tell, and that’s all there is to it.”

Margot’s shoulders relaxed, the tightness in her chest replaced with warmth. Elle got it. Margot mouthed a quick *thanks*, and Elle winked.

Three weeks. As the Best Woman, how often would her path cross with Olivia's, really? Margot had to get through tonight, and then there'd be . . . what, the rehearsal and the wedding itself? They both had a vested interest in making sure this wedding went off without a hitch. They could set aside their past for one month. One month and Margot could forget all about Olivia Grant. Out of sight, out of mind.

Olivia was probably out in the hall, thinking the same thing.

Speak of the devil. Olivia returned, looking pale-faced and wan, her phone clutched tightly in her right hand. She stopped just inside the room and cleared her throat. "Hi. I'm really sorry, but I'm going to have to bail on dinner. Something came up, and I have to go take care of it."

Margot frowned at the way Olivia's voice quivered. She opened her mouth to ask if Olivia was okay, but stopped before she could voice the question. It wasn't her business.

Brendon didn't have the same reservations. "Is everything all right?"

Olivia started to nod before the move morphed slowly into a shake, her head swerving. "I just got off the phone with my landlady. Apparently there was a—a problem with the plumbing in the unit directly above mine that caused the bathroom to flood. My ceiling is . . . The damage was pretty extensive, I guess, and they're going to have to bring in fans so mold won't set in, and after, they'll have to replace the joists and the . . . I guess the drywall or plaster or . . ." Olivia shut her eyes. "I'm not even really sure. It was a lot to take in."

"Jesus," Margot muttered. That sounded like a nightmare.

"I'm imagining you'll have to find somewhere else to stay," Darcy said, face pinched with concern.

Olivia nodded. "I guess the integrity of the ceiling is questionable. It's leaking and . . ." She laughed, frazzled. "It's a mess."

Annie pressed her fingers to her lips. "Oh, shit."

Brendon raked his fingers through his hair. “Did they say how long the repairs are going to take?”

“No. My lease is month-to-month.” Olivia’s bottom lip started to tremble, and she quickly pursed her mouth, a dozen little dimples forming in her chin. “I have a feeling I won’t be moving back in any time soon.”

A sharp twinge of sympathy shot through Margot’s chest.

“I’m sorry,” Olivia blurted, batting at the air. “Geez, you don’t want to hear about this. This is—this is *not* your problem. I’m, um, I’m just going to go—”

“Do you have somewhere you can stay?” Brendon’s eyes flitted to Margot, then back to Olivia. “A friend’s place, maybe?”

What.

No.

Shit.

Olivia’s eyes went glossy, welling with tears. “I’ll figure something out.”

Margot’s stomach dropped.

Fuck.

Brendon turned, his brows rising pointedly, managing to communicate plenty without him having to open his mouth to say a thing. *I’ll figure something out* wasn’t an answer. Or, it was, just not the one Margot had been hoping to hear.

Clearly, whether Olivia was willing to admit it or not, she was in need of a place to stay and Margot . . . *fuck her life* . . . Margot had a spare room. All her friends *knew* she had a spare room. And as far as they also knew, she had no reason *not* to offer it up to Olivia . . . the girl she knew from high school.

An old friend.

Nothing to tell was swiftly coming back to bite her in the ass.

Margot swallowed a groan because, *fuck*, she was probably—no, *definitely*—going to regret this. It was a catastrophe waiting to happen, but she couldn't *not* offer, not when Olivia was standing there, close to tears but refusing to let them fall, putting on a brave face instead.

It was so typical of her, of the girl Margot once knew. Olivia was so quick to blot everyone else's tears, to serve as a shoulder to cry on, but never to let anyone see *her* fall apart.

The ache in Margot's chest grew sharper, harder to ignore. She wouldn't be able to sleep at night if she didn't at least extend the invitation.

"Hey." She crossed her arms, standing straighter even though Olivia still towered several inches over her. "If you need a place to stay, you can crash at mine. If you want."

Olivia's lips parted, hazel eyes rounding. "That's kind of you to offer, but I wouldn't want to impose."

Annie tugged on Brendon's arm, leading him across the room. Elle and Darcy followed, giving Margot and Olivia some semblance of privacy. Except for the part where they were conspicuously quiet, eyes averted but clearly listening in.

Margot focused on Olivia and tried to tune out her well-meaning-but-nosy-as-fuck friends. "You wouldn't be. Imposing, I mean. I've got two bedrooms and no roommates, which I've been meaning to do something about."

Margot hadn't anticipated the universe giving her a big ole kick in the pants, but hey. *Unexpected*.

Olivia stared at Margot with big, unblinking eyes.

"*Roommate?*" she asked, sounding unsure.

"I'm not suggesting it has to be permanent. Not that I'm *not* suggesting ..." Damn it. Why was this so difficult? With anyone else, Margot had no problem saying exactly what she meant. "It could be on a trial basis. Or if you just need a place to crash for however long it takes you to find somewhere else, that's chill, too." Margot's throat narrowed, more words creeping up without her consent. "It's not like you're a stranger. We—we know each other. I mean, I think my parents

honestly tried to claim you as a dependent on their taxes one year.”

A smile played at the edges of Olivia’s mouth, and Margot . . . was staring at Olivia’s lips. Margot didn’t know where to look. She crossed her arms, but that felt defensive, so she dropped them to her sides, where they hung, aimless. Margot had no idea what she was doing.

Olivia’s eyes darted to where Margot’s friends stood, and Margot followed her gaze. Brendon whipped around and stared up at the ceiling, honest to God starting to *whistle*. Olivia huffed out a quiet laugh and dropped her voice, whispering, “Are they always like that? Your friends?”

Margot arched a brow. “Are they always . . . what? Nosy?”

“No.” Olivia’s lips quirked. “Well, yeah. That, too. Are they always so bad at hiding it?”

She smiled fondly. “The trick is to let them think they’re stealthy. That way they never try to improve.”

“Clever,” Olivia praised. Her throat jerked, and her smile waned. “Look, I didn’t mean to imply that I didn’t want to—to take you up on your offer.” A faint blush rose in Olivia’s cheeks. “I’m surprised you’re offering. That’s all.”

Margot frowned. She had zero desire to rehash their past, not ever, but certainly not here, where her friends were listening.

“It’s ancient history, Liv,” she murmured, scratching her nose so Brendon—snoop that he was—wouldn’t try to read her lips. “How about we leave the past in the past?”

So what if they’d had a week-long fling while Olivia and Brad were broken up over spring break senior year? Brad had returned from Mexico, skin tanned and hair bleached from the sun, and when he’d begged Olivia to take him back, she’d said yes.

Sure, Margot had thought their week together had *meant* something, but clearly it hadn’t, and now it was nothing but a chapter in Margot’s past. No, a *footnote*. Time healed all wounds, yada yada *whatever*. Margot wasn’t carrying a

grudge, she wasn't carrying a torch, and she didn't need to talk about it.

Olivia tugged her beanie down over the tops of her ears and gave a short, sharp nod. "Right. I can do that."

Of course she could. *She* wasn't the one who'd had *feelings*.

"Cool." Margot cleared her throat. "So?"

"Are—are you sure about this?"

No, not one bit. But she wasn't about to back out. Not after offering, not with her friends standing by. Not when Olivia wasn't just someone Margot used to know, but Brendon and Annie's wedding planner.

She'd show Brendon sunshine and rainbows.

"I wouldn't have offered if I weren't."

Olivia's lips curved upward in a tentative smile. "Thanks."

Margot shoved her hands inside her pockets and jerked her chin at the door. "We should probably head out and grab your stuff before it gets too late."

"Packing. *Joy*." Olivia heaved a sigh. "I swear I feel like I only just got settled."

"Packing?" Brendon rocked back on his heels. "Did I hear you say *packing*? Because we can help with that. I'll order pizza."

Olivia's eyes sparkled with mirth, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. She shot Margot a look, nothing more than a brief flicker of her eyes, but it put a weird lump in Margot's throat because it was the start of something new, even if it was only a shared understanding that Brendon wouldn't know subtlety if it bit him on the ass.

Margot rolled her eyes and took a step in the direction of the door. Olivia reached out, cool fingers brushing the back of Margot's hand. Despite being a whisper of a touch, it made Margot's pulse roar inside her ears.

A soft pink blush crept up Olivia's jaw as she dropped her hand to her side and smiled sheepishly. "You're not allergic to

cats, are you?"

Chapter Three

Olivia hovered in Margot's foyer, Cat mewling softly from the carrier at her feet. Poor thing was probably confused, not understanding why she'd been shoved inside a carrier, put in a car, and driven across the city. Olivia crouched down, slipping her fingers through the plastic grate. Cat leaned in, sniffing her fingers before rubbing her face against them. "I know. It's been a long day."

And it was nowhere close to being over.

Margot stepped out into the hall, Elle trailing after her. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "I didn't know where the best place was to put to the litter box. The bathroom's too small, so I set it in your room."

Olivia's room. Her room in the apartment she now shared with Margot, for the foreseeable future. Somebody pinch her.

Olivia stood, earning an aggrieved-sounding meow from Cat, who was probably sick of being cooped up in her crate, roomy though it was. "Thanks. I've got a mat that goes under it so she won't track litter."

Elle ducked low, peeking inside the carrier. It was difficult to see inside, with Cat tucked up in a tight little ball of dark, fluffy fur and glinting green eyes. "What's her name?"

Olivia blushed. "Cat."

Elle cocked her head, clearly confused. "How long have you had her?"

“Um.” She did the math. “Almost eight months.”

Elle frowned. “So . . . it’s not just a placeholder? *Cat*?”

Margot huffed out a quiet laugh and Olivia’s stomach somersaulted at the sound. “It’s from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Holly Golightly names her—well, it isn’t *hers*, that’s the whole point. She names the cat *Cat*.” Margot’s lips twitched. “I’m assuming that’s where you got the name.”

It was Olivia’s favorite movie. No matter how many times she watched it, that kiss in the rain still made her shiver and Paul Varjak’s speech about belonging putting an ache in her chest that persisted long after the credits rolled. It was the same ache she’d felt when she thought about Margot over the last decade.

Olivia wasn’t surprised Margot caught the reference. She’d forced her to watch the movie a dozen times, easy.

“I found her by the trash outside my apartment the week after I moved here.” They were both alone in the big city, and Olivia had figured they could be alone together. “It seemed fitting.”

Margot’s lips quirked. “You can let her out of the cage, if you want.”

Olivia cast a glance at the open door that led out into the main hall. Brendon, Annie, and Darcy had made one final trip out to the parking lot, offering to grab the last of Olivia’s boxes, most already stacked in her new bedroom.

“Here.” Margot flattened her palm against the door, shutting it with a soft *snick*. “No chance of her making a run for it.”

“Thanks.” Despite her squat little legs, Cat was wily. She had a tendency to explore, no space off-limits as long as she could fit. But even that was open to interpretation because Olivia had once found her wedged between the refrigerator and the wall. Cat was better at getting herself into trouble than out of it. Olivia could relate.

She dropped to her knees and unlatched the door to the carrier. Cat unfurled herself and crept closer. She stuck her nose in the air and sniffed, then sneezed. The smell of

patchouli was faint, a stick of ashed incense poking up from a ceramic holder shaped like a lotus. Cat took a tentative step into the living room, appraising her new surroundings.

“This is where we live now.” Olivia stroked the fur between Cat’s ears. “You like it?”

Cat mewed softly and circled Margot’s ankles before slinking deeper into the apartment. She leaped onto the sofa and batted at a bright blue beaded accent pillow.

“I hope that’s okay,” Olivia offered belatedly, cringing slightly. “It’s hard to keep her off the furniture.”

More like impossible. Cat did what Cat wanted to do. Olivia could fuss, but Cat had no keeper.

Margot shrugged. “It’s fine with me.”

The front door swung open and Brendon stepped inside, cardboard boxes stacked two high in his hands. Annie followed, carrying Olivia’s vase of flowers. Olivia had drained the water, but the purple variegated carnations were fresh, purchased just yesterday. It had seemed a shame to throw them away. Annie set them atop the breakfast nook and smiled. “That’s the last of it.”

“Thank you so much.” Olivia tucked her hair behind her ears. “I—I really appreciate you all helping. You didn’t have to.”

“You’re helping make the wedding of our dreams happen, and in under a month.” Brendon shook his head. “Hauling a few boxes a couple of blocks is the least we can do.”

“I mean, that’s my *job*.” She laughed. They were paying her to help. Well, they were paying *Lori*, and Lori was paying her, but same difference.

“Still.” Brendon rocked back on his heels. “Any friend of Margot’s is a friend of ours.”

Margot averted her eyes.

Friends. So that’s the story Margot was going with. All right. Nice to know.

“Well, thank you.” She drummed her fingers against the outsides of her thighs. “Really.”

Brendon smiled, eyes crinkling. He turned to Margot. “We should probably get out of your hair. Let you settle in.”

“It’s been a long day,” Annie said, nose wrinkling softly in sympathy.

“You have lots of catching up to do,” Elle added. “Even more so now, considering . . .”

They were roommates.

Funny how years ago—before they’d grown apart and *long* before they’d fallen into bed—they’d talked about what it would be like, living together. It had been the plan. Graduate and move to the city, together. Margot had painted a pretty picture with her words. Late nights and libraries and watching the sunrise from rooftops, of all-night diners and coffee shops, parties that offered more than beer and Everclear. A city where all their dreams could come true. Olivia still had a corkboard hidden away in her closet back home, covered in purple-and-gold UW paraphernalia.

Olivia had never dreamed they’d live together under circumstances like these. It would’ve required her, at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, to have imagined a future where she didn’t get that scholarship she needed, where she went to WSU instead so as to not burden Dad financially, where she and Margot stopped speaking, where she married Brad and spent a decade stuck in neutral, spinning her wheels before divorcing him, moving back home—a million bad decisions she tried not to beat herself up over because the past was the past.

Everyone slowly migrated in the direction of the door.

“See you for the cake tasting,” Brendon said.

Olivia nodded. “Looking forward to it.”

Elle waved as they disappeared down the hall. Margot shut the door, fingers lingering on the lock, her back to Olivia. Reality set in, and along with it, an oppressive shroud of silence. For the first time in eleven years, she and Margot were

alone together. Really, truly alone. No one to barge in, no interruptions.

Olivia cleared her throat. “Thanks for letting me stay here.”

“No big.” Margot slipped past her, arms brushing. “You want something to drink?”

She could use a margarita the size of her head right about now, but she wasn’t about to make requests. Hard alcohol was probably a bad idea. It might’ve taken the edge off, but the last thing Olivia needed was to feel more unsteady than she naturally did around Margot. “Sure.”

Olivia hovered in the doorway of the kitchen while Margot ducked inside the fridge. Margot shut the door with her elbow, a beer held in each hand. “Here.”

Olivia stared at the bottle of proffered beer, its neck dangling from between Margot’s fingertips, her nails short and neat, painted a shade of red so dark Olivia had first thought they were black. If her hand shook when she reached out to take the bottle, it was only because it had been a long day and the adrenaline was wearing off. “Thanks.”

Margot lifted her own beer to her mouth, tipping it back, throat jerking when she swallowed. She lowered her bottle, tongue darting out against her bottom lip. A smudge of ruby lipstick lingered on the mouth of the brown glass.

Margot jerked her head to the right, hair swishing against her jaw as she disappeared around the corner into the living room. Olivia followed, stumbling on the tangled fringe of a threadbare rug that bore a single singe mark near one corner. She clutched the sweating bottle between her palms and made a sweep of the apartment, taking in the details she hadn’t noticed when she first walked in.

Like the embroidery hoop on the sliver of a wall by the kitchen that contained a cross-stitched phrase she had to squint to read. *Behold! The field in which I grow my fucks. Lay thine eyes upon it and see that it is barren.* Funny. She chuckled under her breath and turned on her heel, cocking her head,

studying the framed paintings hanging from the exposed brick wall. Her jaw dropped.

Wow. Georgia O’Keeffe’s flowers looked downright subtle by comparison. These drawings were . . . realistic and—Olivia squinted harder, face flaming. She considered herself pretty darn flexible, but her body didn’t bend *that* way. Olivia perched on the couch beside Cat and pressed a hand to her cheek, trying to cool it off, her fingers damp with condensation from her beer bottle.

Margot’s brows ticked upward, the corners of her mouth twitching as she watched Olivia.

“Your art . . . it’s really . . .”

Margot smirked.

Olivia flushed, floundering for the right word. “*Erotic?*”

That was it. *Erotic*. Broad black brushstrokes kept the art from veering into vulgar territory.

“They’re a relatively new addition. I bought them to make Brendon uncomfortable after Elle moved out and Annie moved in.” She shrugged. “You stop noticing them after a while.”

How much sex did someone have to have to become desensitized to paintings of *other* people having it? More sex than Olivia was having, clearly. She ducked her chin, trying to will her blush away, her cheeks so hot she could’ve sworn there was steam coming off of her. Olivia stole a surreptitious peek at Margot from the corner of her eye, watching as she tilted her head to the side, considering the series of sketches on the wall. Margot’s slender fingers skimmed the front of her throat, lingering on the hollow between her collarbones, dark nail polish and the sharp cut of her hair stark contrasts against her pale skin, making her look a little like one of those canvases come to life.

Margot turned, catching her staring, and Olivia’s heart tripped over the next beat, speeding, sending another wave of blood rushing to the surface of her skin.

“So.” She wheezed out a laugh. “This is awkward.”

The proverbial elephant in the room had tripled in size.

“Don’t see why it has to be.” Margot set her beer on the table, sans coaster, and kicked her feet up beside it, ankles crossing, the picture of chill. Everything Olivia wasn’t. “Like I said. It’s ancient history, Liv. I’m over it.”

Over it. Olivia frowned. What was *that* supposed to mean? Over *what*? What did Margot have to get over in the first place? Olivia was the one who’d had her hopes dashed and her heart broken by Margot, not the other way around.

Or maybe it *was* her fault. After all, she’d been the one to kiss Margot.

Olivia couldn’t say with any degree of certainty when exactly her feelings for Margot had changed. It wasn’t like she’d woken up one morning and suddenly found herself wanting her best friend. There was no grand movie moment where their eyes locked and Olivia’s breath caught and a lightbulb went off inside her head. It had been gradual, so slow that her own feelings had crept up on her. Little touches had started to make her blush and then Margot’s gaze had gained a new dimension. It wasn’t something Olivia could touch but she could certainly feel it traveling along her skin, tickling the space between her shoulder blades, raising the hair on the back of her neck, narrowing her throat and damming up words that before had always come so easy. *Awareness*. Followed by confusion and uncertainty, not only that it was Margot but that, *wow*, Olivia was significantly less straight than she’d previously thought. She’d driven herself crazy questioning whether the way Margot’s hand lingered on her leg was intentional, reading into every look, every touch, every text. Wondering if just maybe what she felt was mutual.

But Margot—who’d been openly bi since ninth grade, two years later clarifying that if she had to stick a label on herself, *pansexual* was a better fit—had never said anything, and Olivia had been too afraid to say something, to risk ruining their friendship.

Until spring break senior year.

Brad had broken up with her before he left for Cancún—one of the many offs in their on-again, off-again relationship—and Margot had come over with junk food and a bottle of vodka she'd swiped from her parents' liquor cabinet. They'd had the house to themselves, Dad out of town on a fishing trip. Emboldened by a few too many sips of liquid courage and the way Margot's eyes lingered on her lips, Olivia threw caution to the wind and kissed her and—Margot had kissed her back. One kiss led to another led to their clothes coming off led to sex. Great sex and laughter, and for the first time Olivia hadn't had to stop herself from doing all the small things she'd ached to do, like tangling their fingers together or brushing her lips against the ball of Margot's shoulder. She could stare at Margot openly, happily, *hungrily*, without fear of what would happen if she got caught. If there was such a thing as a perfect week, that had been it.

But reality had come crashing down on her the following Monday. Brad wanted to act like their breakup hadn't happened, that it was more of a *pause* than a full-stop split. When she didn't immediately fall into his arms, he'd had the audacity to seem confused. She'd texted Margot. *Can you believe it? What should I tell him?*

Olivia had expected Margot to tell her that Brad could go fuck himself. That he was delusional. She'd wanted Margot to tell her Brad couldn't have her.

Don't worry about me saying anything to anyone. What happens on spring break, stays on spring break, right? ☺
Margot had texted instead.

After that, they didn't talk about it, what happened between them that week, but Margot always had an excuse when Olivia asked to hang out, usually that she was too busy studying for finals. Brad hadn't let up, blowing up Olivia's phone with a constant barrage of texts, begging her to take him back. Two weeks later, she did, and a week after that, she received a letter from the financial aid department at UW notifying her that her scholarship application had been rejected. Graduation came and went, Margot moved to Seattle, and the rest was history.

In the end, it was Olivia's fault for assuming their week together had meant something. Regardless, Margot was right. That was then and this was now, and rehashing old hurts wouldn't help. It would only make her feel sorrier for herself. "Right. You're totally right. We should leave the past in the past. Let sleeping dogs lie." She tucked her hair behind her ear and laughed. "We had sex. Big deal."

As soon the words were out, Olivia cringed, heat wrapping around her neck and spreading up her jaw. Okay, so maybe there was such a thing as being *too* candid. At least she hadn't tacked on the bit about it being the best sex of her life, true as it would've been.

"No big." A muscle in Margot's jaw ticked when she smiled. "*Trust me.*"

Olivia's whole body burned. Okay, ouch. "Right."

Margot lifted her beer by the neck and tipped it back, draining it in one swallow. She stood, perfectly steady, and stretched, her pants riding indecently low, and Olivia was treated to another hint of that ink creeping up Margot's hip. She backed up a step before turning and heading in the direction of the kitchen. The sound of rummaging and then a drawer sliding shut followed. Margot returned, brandishing two shiny keys. She set them on the coffee table, side by side. "Silver one's for the door to the building, and the brass key is for the apartment."

Olivia reached forward and ran her finger along the teeth of the closest key. Something about having her own key made this real. "Thanks."

"No problem." Margot tucked her thumbs in her pockets and cast a sweeping glance around the apartment. "I'm going to head to bed, but we should find a time and . . . I don't know, talk about . . . Jesus, I don't know. *Logistics.*"

Right. Logistics. If they couldn't keep this strictly professional, it would at least be best to refrain from bringing their past into play. To limit their interactions to their shared interests—Brendon and Annie's wedding—and communal

space. Boundaries. No more bringing up their week together, Olivia's feelings. Keep it polite and distant.

Distance was absolutely paramount.

Olivia bobbed her head. "Sounds good. Tomorrow?"

Margot nodded. "Sure. I've got a meeting in the afternoon, but I should be back in the early evening." She cast a glance in the direction of the kitchen. "Feel free to raid the fridge, if you want. We—Elle and me, and Annie, too—were pretty easygoing about sharing food and splitting the grocery bill, but if you have a problem with that . . ."

"No." She shook her head. "All good with me."

Margot cracked her knuckles. "The shower's kind of finicky. You have to pull the knob before you turn the water on if you want to take a shower. If you try to do it the other way around, the knob sticks."

"Good to know, thanks."

All she wanted right now was to fall face-first into bed. She'd only gotten a brief look at her room, but the mattress was a clear step up from the pullout she'd been ruining her back on for the last eight months. Her old apartment, while nearer to ECE's office, offered little in terms of space. Her living room tripled as a bedroom *and* personal office. Margot's apartment—hers now, too—was downright roomy by comparison.

"Tomorrow, then." Margot backed slowly toward the hall.

Olivia waved and immediately wished she hadn't. How utterly dorky. "Good night."

Margot's lips twitched upward in a barely-there smile before she turned and disappeared down the hall. Her door shut, and Olivia slumped back against the couch.

What a day.

Not that it had been all bad. It certainly could've been worse. She and Cat could've been sleeping in a hotel or a sleeping bag on her coworker Kira's floor. Even her car. She would've only been able to swing any of those options for a

few days while diligently hunting for a new apartment. Had that not panned out . . .

She probably needed to let Dad know that she was living somewhere new. Not that he was likely to mail her anything, but he might. Stranger things had happened.

“Livvy, hey,” he answered on the first ring.

“Hi, Dad.” She picked at the label of her beer. It was soggy, easy to peel at the corners. “Now’s not a bad time, is it?”

Dad huffed. “Never.”

A pleasant ache radiated behind her breastbone. In the background, she could hear what sounded like the television. Football, probably. “So. Do you remember Margot?”

“Margot?” He hummed quietly. “Used to eat all our food?”

“*Dad.*” She laughed.

He chuckled. “What about her?”

She nudged her beer bottle further from the edge of the table and leaned back against the couch, tucking her feet under her. “I’m kind of living with her now?”

“How do you *kind of* live with someone?”

She rubbed her eyes. “It’s a . . . It’s new. I was just calling to let you know I have a new address. I’ll text it to you, okay?”

“Is everything okay, Liv?”

Her throat chose the worst possible moment to grow impossibly tight. “Mm-hmm. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

Dad went quiet. “Are you okay on money, because I don’t have much, but I can send you—”

“No. I’m good. It’s just been a long day. There was a plumbing problem at my old apartment; that’s why I moved. I’m—I’m really fine. I promise.”

Dad *hmm*ed over the line. “You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” She forced a laugh. “I’m actually doing really well, otherwise. Lori’s letting me take point on a wedding, and it’s—it’s a really big deal, Dad.”

“Good for you, Liv. I’m sure you’re going to be great.”

Cat hopped off the other end of the couch and stretched, letting out a sweet, contented-sounding meow. At least one of them was feeling right at home.

“Enough about me. How are you? When’s your next doctor’s appointment?”

“Next Tuesday, I think. Or Wednesday, maybe? I’ve got it written down somewhere.”

Written down somewhere. All she could do was shake her head. “Speaking of writing things down, how’s your food diary going? You are still keeping up with it, right?”

Dad grunted. “Mm-hmm.”

Yeah, that sounded promising. “Dad.”

“I am. Honest.”

“And you’re filling it out *properly*?”

Left to his own devices, Dad would subsist on a diet of pork rinds and TV dinners laden with enough sodium to float a brick.

Dad chuckled. “It amazes me how you manage to hover from a hundred miles away. It’s a talent, really.”

“You’re exaggerating.” She smiled. “It’s only fifty miles.”

“I’m fine. I’m doing everything the doctor asked me to. And I’m even working fewer hours, okay? You worry too much.”

She worried the right amount. A heart attack was nothing to joke about, even a mild one.

“I’m glad you’re working less. That’s a relief. Stress isn’t good for you.”

Dad gave a soft grunt. “Why don’t you leave the worrying to me, okay? That’s *my* job. I should be worrying about you.”

“And like I said, you don’t need to worry about me. This wedding could be huge. If I pull this off, Lori’s going to promote me. That means a raise and more events and—this is what I came here for.”

Event planning. Turning other people's dreams into a reality, bringing them to life. *That* was what Olivia wanted.

"How's everything else going up there?" He coughed. "You, uh, meet anyone?"

"*Dad.*"

"I just want you to be happy, Livvy."

She could be—she *was*. She was doing just fine on her own. Just fine. "I'm good."

"Must be nice at least, having a familiar face around now," Dad said. "Margot."

Nice wasn't quite the word she'd pick. Dizzying, maybe. Definitely surreal.

"Mm-hmm." She pulled her phone from her ear and checked the time. "Look, I should I let you go. I'm pretty beat."

"All right. Love you, kid."

"Love you, too, Dad. Talk soon."

Chapter Four

What Cocktail Should You Order Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

ARIES—Dirty Vodka Martini

TAURUS—French 75

GEMINI—Long Island Iced Tea

CANCER—Old Fashioned

LEO—Espresso Martini

VIRGO—Gin and Tonic

LIBRA—Cosmopolitan

SCORPIO—Manhattan

SAGITTARIUS—Negroni

CAPRICORN—Vesper

AQUARIUS—White Russian

PISCES—Mojito

Bell and Blanchard Brewing Company, a small, locally owned and operated brewery, was the latest—and largest, save for OTP—partner Oh My Stars had teamed up with to date. In the past, Elle and Margot had diversified OMS's revenue stream by accepting sponsorships and paid advertisements from zodiac-centric brands they themselves liked enough to rep—perfume, astro-themed activewear—but this was a step above. Oh My Stars would be collaborating with the brewery to

launch a series of astrology-inspired beers, one for each sign, to be released during the corresponding season, beginning with Aries and ending with Pisces.

Margot was jazzed about the partnership. She was firmly in the *beer good* camp. What she was *less* jazzed about was spearheading the partnership sans Elle.

Not that Elle wasn't involved—this was an Oh My Stars venture after all, and Oh My Stars was and would forever be run fifty-fifty by them both—but as their business had grown, *boomed*, so had the need to delegate. They'd done some variation of delegation since day one; Elle handled the majority of the chart readings they offered by phone or Zoom, in part because clients responded better to Elle's outgoing, bubbly personality, and also because Elle genuinely enjoyed the one-on-one interaction more than Margot did. Margot preferred the behind-the-scenes work infinitely more—website maintenance, content creation for their social media channels, research, and now beer test tasting.

Margot was living the dream.

She just, you know, wished that she got to do it with Elle. These days, as busy as they both were, Margot was lucky if she got to see Elle outside of their weekly OMS planning chat ... once? Twice? More often if the whole group was getting together at Elle and Darcy's for game night, like they would be soon. So while Margot was meeting with brewers and discussing hops and yeast and IBU, sampling Bell and Blanchard's current brews while distilling each zodiac sign into traits that could be represented in beer, Elle was handling back-to-back sessions with clients.

Things were changing, and it wasn't *bad*, but it was taking some time for her to get used to it.

Margot juggled a complimentary six-pack of beer from the tasting she'd just attended—the first of many promised to her by the brewery—and flipped through the mail as she stepped inside her apartment. Credit card statement, phone bill, junk, junk, *more* junk, coupon to Sephora for her birthday next month. She tossed the stack on the entry table along with her

keys, set the beer on the floor, then reached down to unlace her boots and—

“*Jesus.*” Margot jumped back and gasped. Cat sat in the middle of the foyer, head cocked to the side, staring up at her with those peridot-green eyes.

That was *also* going to take some getting used to.

She cleared her throat. “Hi, Cat.”

The cat blinked at her.

Wait. Shit. Eye contact was a no-no. Then again, this was *Margot’s* apartment. Did she really want to demonstrate deference inside her own domain?

Cat opened her mouth and yawned out a meow that showed off her many pointy teeth and—Margot quickly averted her eyes. *That* answered that question.

She shuffled past, boots still on, and booked it down the hall to her bedroom, shutting the door once she was inside. Everything she’d told Elle about maybe adopting a cat? Total bullshit. Cats had terrified Margot ever since her great-aunt Marlina’s fluffy white Persian had fallen through the canopy of Margot’s bed, waking Margot up from a dead sleep by landing on her . . . claws out and yowling. They’d both been fine, but the scars—mostly only emotional, thank *God*—had lingered.

Maybe living in close quarters with a cat could be good for her. A form of . . . exposure therapy, desensitizing her over time. Either that, or Cat would claw her to death in her sleep. She couldn’t help but see it as an analogy for her and Olivia. Living together would either benefit them both or explode in Margot’s face. One or the other. Margot had never been very good at operating on anything but a scale of either/or, all or nothing, particularly when it came to Olivia.

Margot grabbed her phone and fired off a quick text to her oldest brother, Cameron.

MARGOT (5:14 P.M.): Cats—what do I need to know about them?

As a veterinarian, Cameron had to possess some wisdom worth her while. Tips, tricks, warnings, *anything*.

ANDREW (5:16 P.M.): why are you asking

ANDREW (5:16 P.M.): you hate cats

She screwed up her face. *Great*. She'd clicked on the wrong message thread, texting the family group chat instead.

MARGOT (5:17 P.M.): Sorry, I meant to just text Cam.

MARGOT (5:17 P.M.): And I don't HATE cats, I have a healthy respect for them.

ANDREW (5:18 P.M.): "respect"

MARGOT (5:19 P.M.): ☹️

CAMERON (5:20 P.M.): What kind of cat are we talking about?

Margot frowned.

MARGOT (5:21 P.M.): The kind with black fur, a smushy face, and squat little legs? You're the expert.

CAMERON (5:22 P.M.): ☐

CAMERON (5:22 P.M.): Sounds like a Scottish fold.

CAMERON (5:23 P.M.): Male or female? Spayed/neutered? Age? Indoor or outdoor? Is it a stray? Feral?

Margot's head spun. Another message appeared before she could type out a response.

ANDREW (5:24 P.M.): you still never answered why you're asking

MARGOT (5:25 P.M.): I'm sorry, did you ask a question? I didn't see a question mark

She answered Cameron's questions one by one.

MARGOT (5:26 P.M.): Female, idk, idk, indoor now, not anymore, and I sincerely hope not.

CAMERON (5:27 P.M.): ☐☐☐

CAMERON (5:28 P.M.): I'm with Andrew on this. Why the sudden interest in cats?

MARGOT (5:30 P.M.): I'm thinking about getting one?

ANDREW (5:31 P.M.): was that a question????

Jesus. *Brothers*.

MARGOT (5:32 P.M.): My roommate has a cat.

"No, no, *no*." Margot cringed, wishing there was an *unsend* button she could press. It was too late. The knowledge was out there for her entire immediate family to see.

ANDREW (5:33 P.M.): roommate

ANDREW (5:33 P.M.): ?!

MOM (5:33 P.M.): I didn't know you had a new roommate, honey.

Margot palmed her face.

MARGOT (5:34 P.M.): Can we please focus on the cat?

CAMERON (5:35 P.M.): What's their name?

Margot didn't see why *that* mattered, but okay.

MARGOT (5:36 P.M.): Cat.

CAMERON (5:37 P.M.): No, the roommate.

ANDREW (5:38 P.M.): or the cat

CAMERON (5:38 P.M.): □

ANDREW (5:39 P.M.): what

ANDREW (5:39 P.M.): excuse me if i want to know the cat's name
too dude

Margot sighed. This conversation was quickly devolving into *who's on first* territory.

MARGOT (5:40 P.M.): No, the cat's name IS Cat.

She chewed on her lip.

MARGOT (5:40 P.M.): The roommate's name is Olivia.

ANDREW (5:41 P.M.): who names their cat CAT

CAMERON (5:42 P.M.): Olivia, clearly. Keep up, Andrew.

Margot stared up at her ceiling, regretting her whole life.

CAMERON (5:43 P.M.): Where'd you meet her?

ANDREW (5:44 P.M.): i'm guessing cam means the roommate not
the cat 🤔

MARGOT (5:45 P.M.): You know, nvm. All I wanted was to know
how to avoid being eaten in my sleep but it's fine. I'll be fine. If you
don't hear from me, just assume I died and went on to become
dinner.

ANDREW (5:46 P.M.): circle of life 🌀

MOM (5:47 P.M.): That reminds me: do you ever hear from Olivia
Grant?

Margot swallowed hard. No one, not even her family, knew the specifics of her relationship—or *nonrelationship*—with Olivia. Mom *maybe* knew about her crush, but as far everyone else was concerned, she and Olivia had only ever been friends.

Best friends. Margot had never seen the point in telling them otherwise. There wasn't anything worth telling.

MARGOT (5:49 P.M.): Funny story actually. My new roommate IS Olivia Grant.

MARGOT (5:49 P.M.): Small world, huh?

ANDREW (5:50 P.M.): whoa weird

CAMERON (5:51 P.M.): I thought she was married to Brad Taylor?

DAD (5:52 P.M.): No, they split up last year.

Margot shut her eyes. Okay, that was enough family time.

MARGOT (5:53 P.M.): Sorry got to go! I have plans. Talk soon. ♥

ANDREW (5:54 P.M.): "plans"

CAMERON (5:54 P.M.): Avoid petting her stomach and hind area.

ANDREW (5:55 P.M.): what the fuck

ANDREW (5:55 P.M.): boundaries bro

MOM (5:57 P.M.): I think Cameron was talking about the cat, honey.

Margot threw her phone down on the bed and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes until a kaleidoscope of bright colors and funky shapes danced behind her lids. *Avoid petting her stomach and hind area.*

And *awesome*, now Margot was thinking about touching Olivia, how Olivia liked to be touched, *where* Olivia liked to be touched.

This was wrong. Olivia was right next door. Margot had no business thinking about how impossibly soft Olivia's skin was or how her blush spread all the way to her belly button when Margot undressed her. It was wrong to think about the way Olivia's bottom lip trembled when she whispered the word *please* or how her breath had stuttered when Margot had put her mouth at the crease of her thigh. How her fingers had tangled in Margot's hair, not afraid to pull, and how her voice had cracked on Margot's name when she came. How she bruised so easily, imprints of Margot's mouth left behind on the soft curve of Olivia's stomach and hips and the sides of her breasts and how Margot had wondered if, days after, Olivia had gotten herself off, one hand pressed against those marks and the other buried between her thighs.

Down the hall, the bathroom door shut. Margot dropped her hands, blinking into the brightness of her room.

Fuck.

So much for not thinking about it.

Margot pressed her thighs together, heat rising in her face, a miracle her glasses hadn't fogged. The throbbing between her legs was persistent and hard to ignore, harder because she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to ignore it.

Things were awkward enough between them without having to look Olivia in the eye over a bowl of breakfast cereal with the knowledge that she'd rubbed one out to thoughts of her. Not years ago, but *now*.

There was a line and that was certain to cross it.

Even if Margot didn't care, if she threw caution to the wind and said *fuck it*, that thoughts were thoughts and they didn't mean anything unless she allowed them to, the walls were paper-thin.

She glanced at her phone. She could do what she'd done in the past and put on music to drown out the sound of her vibrator or—

The bathroom door opened, the sound of some Taylor Swift song carrying down the hall before shutting off. A second later, Olivia's bedroom door closed.

Margot drummed her fingers against her bedspread. *Or* she could kill two birds with one stone and take care of herself in the shower, where the water would muffle her noises. That sounded like a much better plan.

Reaching into her nightstand, Margot dug around, searching for—no, not that vibrator, she wanted . . . that one. No bells or whistles, just a tried-and-true, waterproof bullet vibe.

Margot carried it over to her dresser, quickly shuffling through her drawers for a pair of sweats, a tee, and some underwear. Margot bundled the vibrator inside her fresh clothes and made it halfway across the room before doubling back, snagging her phone and swiping open her Spotify app.

Clothes cradled to her chest, Margot opened the door and stepped out into the hall—

“*Oof.*”

She and Olivia collided with enough force to knock her off balance, causing her to drop everything in her hands as she steadied herself against the wall. Her glasses slipped, and Margot quickly slid them up the bridge of her nose.

Olivia was barefoot, her toenails painted a pale lavender, her big toes a deeper shade of purple. Her long legs were bare, too, her towel barely covering the tops of her thighs, the edge of the towel straining against her breasts. Margot’s gut clenched, her mouth going dry at the unexpected sight of Olivia standing in the middle of the hall, mostly naked.

“Sorry.” Olivia blushed, hugging her arms around her body. “I left my, um, my clothes in . . .” Her eyes, already averted, widened to the size of saucers. “In my bedroom . . .”

Margot frowned and followed Olivia’s gaze to the floor where her own bundle of clothing had fallen, and beside it, her bright blue vibrator.

“Um.” Margot puffed out her cheeks, a wicked flush winding its way up her jaw.

Words failed her. There was no mistaking the vibrator for anything other than exactly what it was and—she wasn’t *ashamed*. She masturbated, big fucking deal. Margot was the friend her other friends came to for sex toy recommendations. She was *happy* to talk about sex, solo or otherwise. But there was a distinct difference between telling Elle that buying a vibe with suction-magic technology would be a life changer, and Olivia—*Olivia*—knowing Margot had concrete plans to get off, not at some indistinct point in the future but *right here right now* in the shower they now shared.

Shit. If she couldn’t speak, she should at least *move*. Pick it up. Do *something* other than stand there staring at her vibrator like it was going to sprout legs and hightail it back into her bedroom. Huh. That *would* be a nifty feature.

Right. *Moving*. Margot cleared her throat and stepped away from the wall she'd plastered herself against. Olivia's eyes darted further down the hall, before widening even more.

"*Cat, no!*"

Margot followed Olivia's gaze just in time to witness Cat crouch low, her butt wiggling from side to side, once, twice before she propelled herself through the air, pouncing on Margot's vibrator.

A low buzz filled the hall as the bullet whirred to life. Cat hissed, as if surprised, before wrapping her front legs around the vibe, contorting herself into a tight little ball, bunny-kicking her prey.

Olivia clapped her hands together briskly. "Cat, stop it. *Stop.*" She clutched her towel to her chest and approached Cat with caution. "Let it go. *Bad kitty.*"

Cat froze, curled up in her ball, pointy teeth pressed against the silicone.

"Go." Olivia made a shooing gesture. "*Go.*"

Cat let out an indignant meow before sprinting down the hall at breakneck speed, fleeing the scene of the crime. Margot's bullet vibe skittered atop the hardwood floor, buzzing louder, yet somehow not as loud as the blood roaring inside her skull.

"Um." Olivia bent down, hand faltering in the air for a split second before she scooped Margot's vibrator off the floor. She turned it over, biting her lip as she studied the base, making a soft "*Aha*" as she found the *power* button and pressed it. She cleared her throat and held the now-silent toy out for Margot to take. "You, uh"—she winced—"might want to wash that?"

Margot was pretty sure her soul had left her body. There was a strange lightness to her limbs as she reached out, taking her vibrator, clutching it awkwardly. Wash it. Right. There was black fur stuck to the silicone, not to mention cat spit.

She stared at Olivia, words continuing to fail her.

Olivia stared back, face flushed neon, her lips twitching. She jerked her chin at the vibrator. “I guess it’s safe to say that’s . . . pussy approved.”

Olivia snorted, and that was just—Margot crunched forward, convulsing with laughter.

She couldn’t quit. Each time it felt like she could stop if she could just get a breath in, she’d glance at Olivia, red-faced and shaking, and it would start all over again, the laughter building and building and building on itself. She wasn’t even sure *why* she was laughing, only that she was, wheezing and sputtering and gagging on her own spit, and it felt like she couldn’t breathe.

“I—I can’t believe you *said that*,” Margot sputtered. “That was so bad.”

Everything ached from the soreness in the back of her throat to the burn in her stomach muscles, but it wasn’t *bad*. Once she could breathe again, her chest unknotted and it was almost refreshing. Cleansing.

Olivia slumped against the wall, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. “*I* can’t believe my cat tried to kill your vibrator.”

The chances of Margot ever being able to use this vibrator without thinking of this moment were slim. Besides, there were tiny teeth marks in the silicone. The toy was pretty much done for.

But she didn’t say that. She didn’t say much of anything, words dying in her throat when Olivia shifted, towel parting, revealing the bare curve of her hip, silvery pink stretch marks on display. Margot had never wanted to trace someone’s skin with her tongue so terribly in her life while simultaneously wanting to melt through the floor, residual mortification leaving her dizzy.

Olivia’s laughter petered off, her face pink and her eyes bright. Her tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip, chest rising and falling a little faster as she met Margot’s stare.

“Well.” Margot averted her eyes and rolled her lips together. “I’m going to go and . . . I don’t know . . . crawl inside a hole.”

Olivia ducked her chin, doing a shitty job of smothering her smirk. “I don’t know.” She shrugged and looked up through her spun-gold lashes. “You’ve got to admit, this was one hell of a way to break the ice.”

Margot scoffed out a laugh. “Fair enough.”

“If you aren’t busy”—Olivia’s eyes dipped to the vibrator, and another wave of heat crashed over Margot—“did you want to have that talk?”

“Talk?” Margot echoed.

Olivia’s brows rose. “You know. Logistics.”

Right. *Logistics*. She nodded briskly. “Sure. Meet you in the living room?”

Olivia smiled. “Let me get dressed and I’ll be right there.”

Chapter Five

Olivia took a seat on the free cushion beside Margot, tucking her legs under her. On the television, an old episode of *Three's Company* cut to commercial.

Margot held her laptop steady atop her knees as she leaned forward, grabbing the remote off the coffee table and muting the television. "One sec. Let me tweet this . . . and done."

"If you're busy, that's fine," Olivia said. "We can talk later."

"It's all good. See?" She swiveled her laptop so Olivia could see the screen. Her browser was open to Twitter.

Olivia took a closer look.

What TV Show Should You Watch with Your Roommate Based on Their Zodiac Sign?

ARIES—*2 Broke Girls*

TAURUS—*Broad City*

GEMINI—*Two and a Half Men*

CANCER—*New Girl*

LEO—*Friends*

VIRGO—*The Odd Couple*

LIBRA—*The Golden Girls*

SCORPIO—*Don't Trust the B— in Apartment 23*

SAGITTARIUS—*The Big Bang Theory*

CAPRICORN—*Will & Grace*

AQUARIUS—*Mork & Mindy*

PISCES—*Three's Company*

“Content creation for Oh My Stars,” Margot explained.

“I always kind of wondered how you came up with these.”

“It’s basically distilling whatever the list items are to their main properties. So, with television shows, it would be the theme or the relationship between the characters or . . . vibe.” Margot cracked a smile. “It’s not an exact science.”

Olivia grinned.

“Then I match them to the zodiac signs based on their most significant traits. I’m not saying if you’re a Gemini your favorite TV show featuring a roommate relationship is *The Odd Couple*, I’m just positing that it’s the show that most closely captures the traits of that sign.” Margot shrugged. “And if it doesn’t feel like a good fit, you should check your rising sign. Same goes for horoscopes. You’re actually better off checking your rising sign since that’s what determines the houses in your chart. Your horoscope for the day or week or month or whatever time frame takes into consideration the transits of the planets and how they move through the different areas of your chart. Your rising sign gives you a more complete picture.”

She scanned the list, stopping at Libra. “*The Golden Girls*. Fair enough.”

For some reason, Margot laughed. “Sorry. That’s just, um, a very Libra reaction. *Fair enough*.”

She’d missed Margot’s laugh, how it started in her chest and seemed to burst from her lips, throaty and smoky. “Question—I’ve always wondered, how does compatibility work? With astrology?”

Hopefully that was much smoother than *what’s your sign?* Besides, she already knew Margot was an Aries.

Margot's brows rose. "Synastry? That's . . . Well, there are a few aspects you can look at. Aspects are the angles between planets and other celestial bodies and points of interest in a chart. There are hard aspects, which can pose a challenge, and easier aspects, which are . . . harmonious, I guess is the right word. With synastry, you can overlay the charts or there's software that does it, and you can see how person A's planets aspect person B's and what houses of the chart they activate and vice versa."

Olivia kept her eyes on the screen. It felt like her heart was going to punch through her rib cage, but hopefully her voice wouldn't warble. "So, say, Aries and Libra? What kind of aspect do they make? Are they, um, compatible?"

Margot shrugged. *Shrugged*. Olivia bit off her sigh before it could escape her.

It wasn't so much that she cared about their astrological compatibility but that she'd hoped the question might serve as a stepping-stone of sorts. That Margot's reaction might give Olivia a hint at what was going on inside Margot's head, not just now, but years before. Why everything between them had been so good, brimming with possibility, a whole future ahead of them, until Margot had pushed her away.

All Olivia wanted was a little clarity. She'd call it closure, but something about that word put a terrible taste in her mouth.

"They're directly opposite to one another, which can bring balance to a relationship since each sign possesses qualities the other lacks. But it's a bit more complicated than that. Everyone thinks of sun-sun compatibility, but that's a tiny, *tiny* piece of the puzzle. There's sun-moon, moon-moon, Venus-Mars, moon-Venus—it all depends on what you're looking for. Good communication, similar values, interests. The seventh house is where we tend to look for information on partnerships like marriage, but the fifth house is about passion—not just sex, but that, too—and the eighth house rules sex as well, but in a transformational, even transactional sense? There's a lot to look at." Margot pursed her lips. "But compatibility isn't my

area of expertise.” She cringed. “*Astrological* compatibility isn’t my area of expertise.”

Olivia crept even closer to the edge of the couch until her knee gently butted up against Margot’s right arm. “You explained it really well.”

Margot turned her head, and, without makeup on, Olivia could make out the tiny spray of freckles on the bridge of her nose. The left corner of her mouth rose in a half-hearted smile. “Thanks.” She lowered the screen on her laptop before setting it on the coffee table. “All right. Roommate logistics.”

“Right.” Olivia nodded. “I made a list.”

Margot’s brows rose. “You made a list?”

“Just to organize my thoughts. I didn’t want to forget anything.” Olivia smoothed the edges of the paper against her bare thigh. “I haven’t had a roommate since freshman year of college—I lived with Brad, but that was different—so this is all kind of new.”

Margot folded her arms atop her knees. “Feel free to tell me to fuck off, but can I ask you a personal question?”

Something about the way she’d phrased that, straddling the line between bluntness and propriety, made Olivia laugh. It was so perfectly Margot. “I think we passed *personal* a while ago, don’t you?”

It was only after the words were out that she realized how Margot might take them. Olivia had only meant with the whole *plucking Margot’s vibrator up off the floor after her cat had tried to maul it* thing. Not *I know what face you make when you come* personal. But that, too.

Margot’s tongue swept against her bottom lip. “You and Brad wanted different things. What does that mean?”

Olivia dragged her eyes from Margot’s mouth before she got caught staring. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Margot’s expression shuttered. “If you don’t want to talk about it—”

“No, that’s not it.” She didn’t relish talking about it, no, but more than that she didn’t know where to start. It was a mess. A drama-filled mess. “Long story short, Brad wanted a baby and I didn’t.”

Children had never been and would never be what she wanted, and she’d told Brad that from day one, but then she’d turned twenty-six and he’d started dropping hints. He’d called them jokes at first, and she’d rolled her eyes and laughed—her mistake. But it kept happening. And then one day Brad had asked her point-blank when they were going to start a family. The saddest part was that all along, she’d been under the impression they already were a family.

Margot frowned. “You never wanted kids.”

“He thought I would change my mind, I guess.”

Olivia had budged on practically everything else; Brad had assumed this—a baby—would be the same.

“Brad thought you would change your mind.” Margot’s eyes narrowed. “Or he thought he could change it for you?”

Olivia forced a laugh past the lump in her throat. “Am I really that transparent?”

She’d always admired Margot’s quiet confidence, how Margot knew what she wanted and she didn’t let anyone stop her from going after it. How easily she could tune out other people’s opinions of her or her dreams. Olivia wasn’t built that way, wasn’t brave like Margot was, didn’t know how to live by *do what you love and fuck the rest*. It took Olivia forever to make decisions, and she cared too much about what people thought. It wasn’t anything for her to be proud of, but she’d never felt quite so ashamed of it as she did now, Margot looking at her like she felt sorry for her.

“I guess I just know you.” Margot rested her head against the back of the couch. “Or I did.”

Did. Olivia hated that, that the entirety of their friendship existed in the past tense. Back when they were in school, she never would have imagined the possibility that a *week* would go by without her speaking to Margot, let alone *years*. But of

course she wouldn't have. No one ever dreams of their problems when they think about the future.

"Anyway, Brad wanted a baby and I didn't, and when I made it crystal clear he seemed to accept it. Or I thought he did." For a split second, her chest constricted, making it difficult to breathe. "I hadn't told my dad the specifics, but he knew things between Brad and I weren't great and I wasn't happy. He suggested we go to couples counseling, which we did, *once*. It didn't do much because Brad was different there . . . more open, but less honest? If that makes sense."

Margot nibbled on her lip, listening intently.

"After that didn't work, Dad finally told me if I wasn't happy, I should . . . consider my options. Which was surprising, because Dad always got along with Brad. I mean, they still get along, which is good. I'm glad Dad has someone in town who he could call if he needed something. Anyway, I didn't want to. Consider my options. I made a commitment. I figured every couple has a rough patch." Olivia picked at her nails. How was this *still* difficult to talk about? "Then Emmy Caldwell—you remember her from school, right?—showed up at my front door to tell me she and Brad had been sleeping together for the past six months and she was pretty sure she was pregnant with his baby."

"Jesus, Liv," Margot murmured. "That's . . . *shit*."

Olivia sniffled then laughed, even though it wasn't funny. It was either laugh or cry and she'd cried enough over Brad to last a lifetime. "It was pretty awful. I was shocked? I don't—maybe I shouldn't have been. There were probably signs, and the fact that I'd missed them speaks to how bad things between Brad and me had become. Anyway, I moved back in with my dad and I filed for divorce and we didn't have many assets—we were renting the house from his parents—and he didn't contest the filing, so it all moved pretty quickly. Within six weeks, we were divorced."

"Damn, Liv. I don't really know what to say." Margot reached out and squeezed Olivia's shoulder.

Olivia didn't mean to, but she swayed into Margot's touch, into the warmth of her hand seeping through the thin cotton of Olivia's T-shirt.

She'd received plenty of warnings and advice before moving to Seattle, from Dad and from the internet. No one had ever warned her of the very specific loneliness that came with living in a city where you knew no one, how easy it was to become touch-starved. *Of course* she leaned into Margot's touch. She was honestly surprised she didn't climb into Margot's lap and *purr*.

"There's nothing *to* say, really. It was a mess." She snorted. "Want to know the real kicker?"

Margot dropped her hand and cringed. "Do I?"

"Turns out, Emmy wasn't even pregnant. Total false alarm. She found out and didn't say anything to Brad because she was worried he'd . . . I don't know, change his mind or something." Which he had. He'd called and left voicemails and finally knocked on Olivia's front door, begging her to come back, alternating between issuing apologies and being irate when she didn't swoon. It was too late for that. "Long story short, I married the wrong guy. Wrong person."

Her heart stuttered when all Margot did was stare.

"Anyway, enough about me." Olivia curled her fingers around the edge of the list of roommate logistics she'd compiled, leaving damp fingerprints behind that turned the paper translucent. "I'll just start at the top here. Laundry."

"It might help if I told you where that was, huh?" Margot rolled her eyes at herself. "It's in the basement, which is significantly less creepy than it sounds. Promise. You've got to use your key—the one for the outside door—to get inside, so it's pretty secure. The lighting's a fluorescent nightmare, but they put in new washers and dryers last year. Everything's high-efficiency, so you don't have to worry about wasting umpteen quarters to make sure your shit's dry."

She was just happy there was laundry on-site. "I think I might run a load of darks before bed. I can throw yours in with

mine, if you want.”

For some inexplicable reason, the tips of Margot’s ears went pink. “It’s fine.”

“Are you sure? Because I don’t mind.” Laundry was one of those tasks she actually enjoyed, unlike washing dishes, which she did, but not without massive amounts of internal grumbling.

Margot nibbled on her lip for a moment before laughing under her breath. “You know what? Sure. You handled my vibrator, like, ten minutes ago. I guess touching my underwear is pretty tame by comparison.”

Handled wasn’t quite the word Olivia would have used. In a perfect world, her ideal scenario of how she might handle Margot’s vibrator would’ve included far less clothing.

“All right.” She forced herself to focus back on the list instead of the fantasy playing out inside her head. “Let’s see. I, uh, kind of googled a list of crucial conversations to have with a new roommate, but some of these sound silly since ...” Her tongue darted out, wetting her bottom lip. “Like you said, we know each other. Unless you developed any allergies I don’t know about ...”

“It would be news to me.”

Olivia smiled. “I guess we don’t really need to talk about pets, since you’re already *well* aware I have a cat.”

Margot snorted. “I don’t know. I asked Cameron what I needed to know about cats. He didn’t give me much to work off, but something tells me *nothing* could’ve prepared me for what happened in the hall.”

At least she was able to laugh about it. This would’ve been painfully awkward had Margot been pissed.

“How are your brothers, by the way?” she asked. “Cameron’s working as a vet, right?”

If Margot’s earlier statement hadn’t been a clue, Olivia was pretty sure she’d seen his name added to the sign outside the animal clinic a few years back.

“Mm-hmm.” A soft smile crossed Margot’s face. “He is. And Andrew’s down in San Diego, working on his master’s in marine biology. They’re both good. My parents, too.”

Even if they’d spent more time at Olivia’s house growing up, Olivia had always liked Margot’s family. They were loud and expressive and had always made Olivia feel welcome. “I’m happy to hear that.”

“My mom actually asked if I’d heard from you. I told her you were living here now.”

Not for the first time, Olivia wondered whether Margot had told her family, *anyone*, what had happened between them. Even leaving out the specifics, just that *something* had happened. It was unlikely. “Bet that took her by surprise.”

Margot shrugged. “Kind of? I think she thought you were still married. I know Cam thought you were. Dad knew.” Margot’s nose wrinkled. “He’s such a damned gossip.”

Olivia chuckled. “Is he still teaching?”

“Nah. He retired . . . two years ago? Being home all the time is driving him nuts, so says my mom, at least. So what does he decide to do? He joins the HOA and this local book club full of grannies. I swear, you can’t sneeze in that town without my dad knowing about it.”

Olivia clapped a hand over her mouth. “I think I know the book club you’re talking about. Brad’s grandmother—the one who actually liked me—is a member.”

She was pretty sure they didn’t even *read* the books they selected, they just got together to drink and dish the dirt.

“And *that* would explain how he knew about you and Brad.” Margot shut her eyes and laughed softly. “Leave it to my dad.” She opened her eyes, hair sweeping against the sharp curve of her jaw when she tilted her head to the side. “How’s your dad doing, by the way?”

“He’s good.” Olivia swallowed hard. “I mean, he’s doing better now. He, um, he had a heart attack at the same time I was going through the divorce. So, almost a year ago?”

“Jesus, Liv.” Margot’s brow puckered. “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

Talking about this put a lump in her throat she hadn’t expected, but maybe she should’ve. Margot was the first person she’d told, the first person she’d talked about this with outside of doctors and nurses and hospital staff and Brad. Her friends from school had all moved away, and the ones who had moved back or never left had all acted like divorce was contagious. They’d all been polite, but that was it. An act.

Margot had never been like that. With Margot, what you saw was what you got, and Olivia had *always* been a fan of what she’d seen.

“Thanks.” Olivia tucked her hair behind her ears and scratched the side of her neck. “It was mild. As mild as a heart attack *can* be, I guess. I had planned on moving to Seattle right after the divorce was finalized, but then *that* happened, so I stuck around for a few more months until Dad practically pushed me out the front door. Told me I was hovering and driving him nuts.” She picked at her cuticles. “I wouldn’t have dreamed of leaving town had his bloodwork been anything less than stellar.”

Even then, a tiny voice in the back of her mind that sounded suspiciously like Brad still whispered that she was selfish for leaving, for putting herself first, even though Dad was fine.

“I’m glad he’s okay,” Margot said.

“Me too.” They shared a smile before Olivia dropped her eyes, scanning the list again. “Communal spaces. How do you want to handle the vacuuming and that sort of thing?”

“I try to vacuum and Swiffer at least once a week. Same with cleaning the bathroom.” Margot ran her hand down the front of her shin, tugging the fabric of her leggings smooth. “We could trade off?”

“I’ll clean the bathroom this week and you can do the floors and then next week we’ll switch. Does that work?”

“Sure. Sounds good to me.” Margot drummed her fingers against her legs. “Also, I’m sure you already saw, but there’s a

whiteboard on the side of the fridge in case we're out of something. Milk or whatever. I mean, we can text, obviously, but sometimes it's nice to have a reminder right there in the kitchen."

"Perfect." Olivia snagged a pen off the coffee table and jotted down a quick note. "Whiteboard for notes. Got it. Okay, let's see . . . trash. Is there a chute or do we need to haul it down to the dumpster?"

"There's a chute. Down the hall, to the left." Margot rested her chin on her knee.

Olivia dropped her gaze back to the list. "Do you have any pet peeves I should know about?"

"That you don't already know?" Margot huffed out a laugh. "I don't know. None come to mind."

"Nothing? Nothing at all?"

Margot shrugged. "I work from home—well, sometimes I'll go to Elle's, but usually I'm here—and I'm not very easily distracted. I don't need complete silence to focus or anything. I do occasionally record for our video series and sometimes I'll hop on Instagram Live for Q&As, but I do that in my room, so as long as you don't crank your music ridiculously loud, it's fine."

"No blaring music, got it."

"How about you? Any pet peeves I should know about?"

Olivia smirked. "Somehow I don't foresee you leaving the toilet seat up, so not really."

Margot cringed. "I feel like there's a story behind that."

Unfortunately. "Brad was constantly forgetting to put the seat down. I got up to pee in the middle of the night and fell in. I'm talking legs up in the air, ass all the way down in the bowl."

"Oh, shit."

"It was awful. I had one of those Ty-D-Bol cleaner tablets in the tank, you know, the ones that turn the water blue? It

stained my skin. I walked around looking like a Smurf from the waist down for two days before I got to the store and bought a better loofah.”

Margot clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling her chuckle. “It’s not funny. It’s just . . . the visual.”

“It’s a little funny,” Olivia conceded.

“Not that I picture it being a problem, but note to self, never leave the lid up. Anything else?”

Olivia folded her list in half and ran her nail down the seam, forming a sharp crease. “Should we talk about bringing people home?”

Margot fumbled her phone. “What?”

“If I wanted to have a couple friends over.” She didn’t have many close friends, not anymore, but she’d had Kira over for drinks once or twice, and Margot obviously had a tight-knit circle of friends.

“Friends.” Margot nodded quickly. “Oh yeah. That’s—that’s totally fine.”

“Cool. I would text you first, if you weren’t home. You know, so you wouldn’t walk in and wonder who these strange people were in your apartment.”

“Same.” Margot blew out a breath that ruffled her bangs, the flush along her cheeks not quite fading. “I’d, um, do the same. If I have my friends over.”

She kept underscoring that. *Friends* as opposed to some alternative—

Wow. Okay, Olivia could see where her initial question might’ve been open to interpretation. Not that she planned on having dates over. Olivia had done *casual* exactly once, and look how well that had turned out for her. Not that she’d known it was casual at the time. Not that it mattered. The point was moot.

She wasn’t going to be bringing anyone home unless they were friends, and what Margot did was her business. Olivia didn’t need to know, and she wasn’t about to ask.

Chapter Six

“It’s open!”

Margot let herself inside Darcy and Elle’s apartment for game night, leaving her boots at the door. *No shoes inside* was Darcy’s rule, not Elle’s, but one Margot was happy to follow. As much as she enjoyed *playfully* ruffling Darcy’s feathers, Margot had zero desire to discover what Darcy would do if she were to track dirt on the impeccable—if not impractical—cream-colored carpet.

Sitting on the floor with her back to the door, Elle didn’t so much as lift her head when Margot entered the living room. “There’s wine in the kitchen. Don’t worry, it’s the good stuff.”

By *good stuff*, Elle meant *of the boxed variety*, as opposed to Darcy’s favorite wine, the price as difficult to stomach as the name was to pronounce. *Good* was a bit of an overstatement in Margot’s book, but she’d take Franzia any day over a glass of wine so expensive she’d feel guilty drinking it.

“You do realize I could be anybody, right?” Margot veered to the right, careful not to slip as she stepped from carpet onto the kitchen tile, her socks offering no grip. “I could’ve been a murderer for all you knew, and you invited me in.”

“Murderers don’t knock, Margot,” Elle said from the other room.

“You don’t know that.” Margot searched the cabinet for something sturdier than Darcy’s thin-stemmed wineglasses.

Game night called for durability, not delicacy. “I’m sure that’s what they want you to think. Lull you into a false sense of security all while hiding in plain sight.”

“You’ve been watching too much true crime again, haven’t you?” Elle sounded amused.

“It was a true-crime podcast, actually.” Margot grabbed a stemless glass from the back of the cabinet and filled it with rosé before returning to the living room.

“I thought I heard voices.” Darcy stepped out from the hall. “Brendon and Annie still aren’t here?”

Elle shook her head. “Not yet. They had to stop by the nursery, remember?”

“Excuse me?” Margot must’ve misheard her. “Did you just say *nursery*?”

Darcy snickered. “I’m going to finish this report. If I’m not out by the time they get here, come get me.”

“Um, hello, can we please address what you just said about Brendon and Annie stopping by a *nursery*?”

“A *plant* nursery, Mar.” Elle giggled. “Oh my God. If you could see your face.”

“Okay, color me confused. It’s game night. What do we need plants for?”

Elle gestured to the coffee table, and for the first time, Margot actually examined everything Elle had laid out, beyond the gel pens and Sharpies. A spool of twine rested beside a pair of scissors, two differently sized hole punches, and a stack of cobalt-colored card stock. Two boxes of flat-bottomed glass globes had been shoved beneath the coffee table beside a folded plastic tarp.

This didn’t look like game night. This looked like Margot was about to get suckered into her three least favorite letters—DIY.

Margot groaned. “But it’s game night.”

And she'd been looking forward to this for weeks. Letting loose with a little wine and trouncing her friends at board games. It was supposed to be the highlight of her week.

"We'll totally have time for charades after," Elle promised. "Annie's swamped with work, and she asked if we could help her with the wedding favors."

"They couldn't, I don't know, hand out mini bottles of booze instead?"

Elle gestured to the spread atop the coffee table. "They're buying mini succulents so every guest can have their own little love fern."

It was a bit of an inside joke between Brendon and Annie, a play on the love fern in *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. Brendon had gifted Annie with a miniature succulent, dubbing it their love fern, hard to kill.

"Cheesy, yet adorable," Margot conceded.

Elle leaned back, resting her weight on her hands. "A little *cheese* never hurt anyone." She wrinkled her nose. "Unless you're lactose intolerant like Darcy, but that's only if you're being literal."

Margot snorted. "True."

"Come on, Mar." Elle snagged a handful of markers and spread them out like a fan. "It's arts and crafts! What's not to love?"

"What's not to love?" She set her wine on the table atop one of Darcy's fancy marble coasters and lifted her left wrist. "I'm pretty sure I got carpal tunnel from addressing wedding invites, because I couldn't climb for over a week." She schooled her expression in an attempt to unequivocally express how serious this was. "I couldn't masturbate without my elbow twinging, Elle."

"Oh, boo-hoo."

Margot took back every good thing she'd ever said about Elle, who was not actually a ray of sunshine but instead a

heartless monster. “Excuse me, Miss *I have a girlfriend who will make me come whenever I damn well please.*”

“You know, you, too, could have a girlfriend who gives you orgasms whenever you want, if you’d ever actually—”

“No.” Margot held up a hand. “Thanks.”

Margot liked her life the way it was. *Exactly* the way it was. Uncomplicated. She had her friends, her business with Elle was solid, and if she needed to scratch an itch she could either do it herself or find someone to do it for her, no strings attached. Nothing needed to change.

“Okay. Backing off.” Elle frowned. “Do you really not want to help with the wedding favors? Because the four of us could probably get together another time if you’d rather skip it.”

Margot puffed out her cheeks, shoulders slumping. No, she didn’t want that, to be left out. “No, of course I want to help. You know me. I just have to bitch about it first. Get it out of my system, you know? I promise I will be nothing but sunshine and rainbows when Brendon and Annie get here.”

“*No one* expects that of you, Margot.” Elle stuck out a socked foot—they were toe socks, fuzzy and bright blue—and nudged Margot’s leg. “We like you exactly as you are.”

“Brazen and bitchy?” Margot chuckled under her breath, only halfway joking.

Elle smiled. “Bold and no bullshit.”

Margot ducked her chin. “Shucks, Elle. You’re going to make me blush.”

Someone knocked on the front door.

“Come in!” Elle shouted.

Annie stepped into the living room, Brendon close behind, each carrying a small pallet containing easily four dozen succulents.

“Hey.” Annie beamed. “Can I set these down somewhere?”

As if summoned by the mere idea of dirt winding up on her carpets, Darcy appeared. “There’s a tarp under the coffee

table.”

Elle snagged it and shook it out, laying it flat atop the floor so Annie and Brendon could set the plants down.

After making two more trips out to the car to retrieve yet *more* succulents, Brendon clapped his hands together and, with a zeal that Margot usually reserved for happy hour and BOGO shoe sales, said, “Let’s get this party started.”

* * *

Tongue poking out from between his lips, Brendon finished tying off a twine bow with a quiet little *ha* of delight. He wiped his hands on his knees and reached across the table, making a grab for Margot’s Reese’s Pieces.

She smacked his hand aside. “Excuse you.”

Brendon laughed. “You’re so weird about sharing food.”

“You try growing up with two brothers and talk to me about sharing food.” Margot popped a Reese’s Piece in her mouth. “I swear if it wasn’t glued down, they’d tried to eat it. It’s a dog-eat-dog world.” She grinned. “Every man for himself.”

Elle snickered. “There’s more in the kitchen, Brendon.”

Brendon stood and saluted Elle before disappearing around the corner.

“So, Margot,” Annie said. “How’s the roommate situation working out? You and Olivia getting along?”

Did an immense amount of—what she was pretty sure was mutual—sexual tension count as *getting along*?

Work seemed to keep Olivia busy. Whether that was a regular thing for her or Brendon and Annie’s last-minute wedding required overtime, Margot wasn’t sure. Either way, Olivia had been out of the apartment all day yesterday, coming home after Margot had already crawled into bed. Margot had only seen her briefly this morning. Olivia had smiled sleepily, dashing out the door with a travel mug of coffee in hand, offering a soft *have a nice day* over her shoulder.

Margot had wandered into the kitchen for her own cup of coffee, drawing up short at the sight of a smiley face scribbled on the refrigerator whiteboard and fresh flowers in a vase—an actual one made of glass, not the plastic pitcher that pulled double duty on the rare occasions Margot got flowers—on the breakfast bar.

It was taking a little time for her to get used to coming out of her bedroom to find Olivia curled up on the couch, Cat purring away innocently from the windowsill, but it wasn't *bad*. A little stiff and stilted still, but getting better. Margot actually liked it.

“She hasn't stolen my credit card, let her ant farm loose, or gone on a hallucinogenic bender and peed in my closet, if that's what you're wondering.” Margot fixed the bow on her last globe. No matter what she did, it came out crooked, hanging sad and lopsided, nothing at all like Darcy's impeccable bows, with their pristine symmetrical loops. Oh well. Done was better than perfect. “Her cat did try to kill my vibrator, though. So that was fun.”

Silence followed for a beat, two beats—

“Is that a . . . metaphor?” Darcy asked.

Annie bent forward laughing, slapping her knee. “Her pussy killed your vibrator. Holy hell, what's it made of?”

Darcy snickered. “Her vagina or the sex toy?”

“Either!” Annie wiped her eyes. “Wait, better question—what's her kegel routine? I am *impressed*.”

“Is no one going to address the question of *why* Margot's sharing sex toys with her new roommate?” Elle frowned. “Not judging, but I think there are more appropriate ways to make someone feel welcome.”

Annie waggled her brows.

“Filthy minds, all of you.” Margot huffed, sidestepping her history with Olivia. “I meant her actual cat. *Cat*. She pounced on it. Tore up the silicone. I had to toss it.”

“This isn't awkward at all,” Brendon muttered.

“Oh, please, I’ve seen your bare, freckled ass doing unspeakable things to Annie in the middle of my kitchen, unspeakable things that required me to metaphorically bleach my brain so that I could continue to look you in the eye,” Margot said.

He smiled sheepishly. “Fair point.”

“So yeah, aside from my vibrator’s premature death, things are good.”

“You should’ve invited her,” Brendon said. “Tonight. That would’ve been fun.”

Everyone nodded.

Margot let herself imagine what it would be like if she were to bring Olivia along to a game night. They might have even numbers for a change. Margot’s eyes swept the room, lingering on Annie’s head propped against Brendon’s shoulder and Darcy’s hand resting on Elle’s thigh, the way they seemed to naturally gravitate toward one another without even thinking about it.

She sucked in a shaky breath. Even numbers might be nice.

“Maybe next time.”

Margot shifted, crossing her legs the other way, frowning when something poked her in the hip. She leaned back, wiggled her hand inside the pocket of her jeans, the tips of her fingers brushing up against—what was that? Folded paper? Odd. She didn’t remember leaving anything in her pockets, and she’d just washed these jeans yesterday.

The paper gave, slipping free. In Margot’s hand was a folded rectangle of notebook paper, the kind torn free from a composition notebook, blue lines bisecting the page. It had been folded meticulously, with care, the creases clean, the flap tucked just so, a perfect miniature envelope. Margot flipped it over. A heart, drawn in pink gel pen, adorned the front. There was no name, not that it needed one. There was no doubt who it was from.

Careful not to rip the paper, Margot unfolded the tiny origami envelope by pulling on the tucked flap. The paper

gave easily, opening in her hand.

Have a great day ☺

The way her lips curved in a replica of the smiley doodled on the paper was completely involuntary.

Margot hadn't done laundry yesterday. *Olivia* had, and she'd left Margot a note, the exact kind they'd stealthily passed each other during class.

Suddenly warm, Margot folded the paper back up, returning it to her pocket the way she'd found it. When she lifted her head, Elle was staring at her, head cocked to the side curiously. Margot shook her head and mouthed, "*nothing*," even though it felt like something. Something she didn't understand. Something she didn't want to try to explain.

She turned her attention to the TV. The movie they'd had playing in the background had ended, the Netflix home screen auto-playing a preview of a movie she hadn't seen.

"What do you guys want to put on next?"

Annie yawned. "I think I've got to call it a night, guys."

Margot double-checked the time. "It's not even eleven."

And they hadn't ever gotten to charades like Elle had promised.

Darcy stood, stretching her arms over her head. "Annie's right. I'm beat and we've got to wake up early."

Elle groaned. "Five a.m."

"What in God's name do you have to get up at five for?" Margot asked.

She was pretty sure, in all their years of friendship, that she'd never seen Elle awake at seven, not unless she'd pulled an all-nighter.

"Yoga class," Annie said, gathering the glasses from the table.

"Oh." Margot nodded slowly. "You guys are taking a yoga class. Together."

Without her.

Elle frowned. “We’d have invited you, but you hate yoga.”

“I never said I *hated* yoga.”

“You said the class I took you to *wasn’t for you*,” Darcy said.

True. Darcy had dragged Margot to a Slow Flow yoga class, and the instructor had gone on and on about *focusing on her flow* and *quieting her mind*, and all Margot had been able to think about was how she wasn’t supposed to be thinking, chastising herself for thinking *about* thinking, wash, rise, repeat.

“Well, okay. Maybe I said that.” Margot stood. “But you still could’ve asked.”

One of Darcy’s brows rose. “Even though you’d have said no?”

Margot crossed her arms. “Okay, when you put it like that, it sounds stupid.”

She just wanted to be included. If she was going to opt out, she wanted it to be on her terms. Was that really so much to ask?

Elle smiled softly. “We’ll definitely invite you next time.”

“Thank you.” Margot turned and nudged Brendon with her elbow. “Want to go climbing tomorrow?”

Brendon ran his fingers through his hair and winced. “Uh, I would, but see—”

“It’s a couples’ yoga class,” Annie said, biting her lip.

Oh.

Margot dug her toes into the carpet. “You could’ve just said.”

Preferably before she’d made a fool of herself, but whatever.

“Sorry,” Elle blurted, blue eyes wide and apologetic. “We just thought—”

“It’s fine.” Margot waved her off with a breezy smile. “Like you said. I hate yoga anyway.” Not as much as she hated being left out, granted.

Elle frowned. “You could still come.”

“To *couples’* yoga?” Darcy arched a brow.

“Sometimes people show up without partners,” Elle argued. “It’s like on roller coasters when they put two single riders together. Or a single rider with two people. We could trade off poses like we do teams on game night.” Elle smiled brightly. “Or the instructor could partner with you.”

Margot would rather die. “Really. It’s fine.”

Elle’s lips twisted to the side. “If you say so.”

Margot quickly changed the subject. “We’re still on for cake tasting, though, right? Saturday?”

Everyone nodded, slowly migrating in the direction of the door. Margot trailed behind Brendon and Annie, letting them go on ahead.

Elle leaned against the open door. “Are you sure everything’s good with you and Olivia?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know.” Elle shrugged. “Just, you never mentioned her, and I was . . . wondering if there was a reason for that.”

Not one that Margot wanted to discuss.

Rather than fib, Margot sidestepped Elle’s question altogether. “We’re fine, Elle. If something happens and that changes, I promise you’ll be the first person I tell.”

Chapter Seven

Incoming call: Brad

A pit formed in Olivia's stomach, somehow hollow and heavy at the same time.

Her thumb hovered over the screen. It would be so easy to swipe the call away, send Brad to voicemail. But knowing Brad, he'd just keep calling, even though it was after ten p.m.

Almost a year after their divorce had been finalized, and Brad still called her when he'd had too much to drink, and other times when he couldn't remember the name of the electrician they used or which company to call to service the heater. These were all things he should've known or been able to find out on his own, but he came to her instead, acting as if they were merely on a break, one more *off* patch in the history of their on-again, off-again relationship.

She took a deep, bracing breath and lifted the phone to her ear. "Brad."

For a second, there was nothing but heavy breathing and then, "Livvy? Hey."

She cringed at his co-opting of Dad's nickname for her. "What are you calling for, Brad?"

More heavy breathing. "I miss you."

Six months ago, Olivia might have felt a pang of . . . *something*. Bittersweetness. Nostalgia for what they'd had, a remembrance of early days, when Brad had still acted like he

cared and she had believed they would grow old and gray together.

Now she was just annoyed. Not as annoyed as Brad would be when he woke up, hungover, but still pretty damn annoyed.

Brad wasn't happy when he'd had her, and now he wanted what he couldn't have.

"How much have you had to drink?"

"Not that much, Livvy," he slurred.

She rubbed her eyes. "You can't keep calling me like this. Drink some water and go to bed."

"I miss you, though. I just—I need someone to talk to. You're the only one I can talk to."

A spike of irritation ratcheted her pulse. She should just block Brad. Block his number and spare herself this frustration. But she couldn't. Not when there was always the chance that Brad would be calling because something had happened to Dad. Because Brad was a lot of things, selfish and arrogant and moody and not the person for her, but he'd always liked Dad, always gotten along with him. And he'd promised. Promised to let her know if anything happened. Olivia was obviously Dad's emergency contact, but he was so tight-lipped, so reluctant to make her worry. He'd driven himself to the damn hospital when he'd started having chest pains at work, and she'd only found out when she had because a nurse had called her.

Despite thinking Brad was a piece of work for what he'd put her through at the end of their marriage, Dad was still friendly with Brad's parents, was still polite when he ran into Brad around town. If something happened . . . Dad might not come right out and tell Brad, but maybe he'd let it slip. Or maybe Brad would hear something through the grapevine. He was Olivia's best connection—last and only connection, save for Dad—to the town.

"You've got to find someone else you can talk to, Brad. Call your mom or something. I'm sure she'd love a call from you."

"I don't wanna," Brad groaned petulantly.

The knob on the front door jiggled, and Olivia saw an out, an escape from this cluster of a conversation, a reason to end the call that wouldn't weigh on her conscience. "Look, I'm sorry, but I have to go. Drink some water and go to bed."

Olivia ended the call as the door swung open. Margot pitched her keys into the bowl on the entry table and shut the door, slumping against it, eyes closed.

Olivia set her phone down on the coffee table beside the shoebox full of keepsakes she was sorting through, screen side down. She cleared her throat. "Hey."

Margot jumped, elbow slamming into the door. She hissed through her teeth, cradling her arm, and Olivia cringed in sympathy. That had to have hurt.

"Hey." Margot stepped into the room and gave a self-effacing chuckle, massaging her elbow. "It's going to take me a second to get used to that, living with someone again."

Olivia smiled. "You're home early."

Margot had left a note on the whiteboard that read *game night*, and Olivia had assumed she'd be home late, midnight at the earliest. It wasn't even a quarter past ten.

"Everyone has an early morning, apparently. Everyone *except* me." Margot pressed the heel of her hand into her eye and sighed. "Sorry. Ignore me. Didn't mean to rope you into joining my pity party." Margot dropped her chin and laughed softly, staring at the floor. "Probably not the sort of party planning you had in mind, huh?"

Margot didn't need to apologize, not to Olivia and certainly not for having feelings.

"Do you . . . want to talk about it?"

For a split second, it seemed like Margot might take Olivia up on her offer. She opened her mouth, then sighed and shook her head. "Nah. It's nothing."

"You sure?" Olivia prodded. "I'm happy to listen."

Margot raked her fingers through her hair and offered Olivia a tired smile. "I'm sure. I'll just sleep it off." She squinted.

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Olivia followed Margot’s bleary gaze to the coffee table. “Oh. I was just going through my boxes. Finally.”

Margot stepped closer, surveying the explosion of photos smudged with fingerprints, lucky pennies, and ticket stubs. Olivia’s corsage from junior prom, dried and brittle, rested atop a stack of notes scribbled in gel pen, once passed between her and Margot during class. The tassel to her graduation cap was knotted, tangled up with a macramé friendship bracelet. Margot’s hand hovered over the stack of folded notes before she shifted, lifting a picture from the table with a smile. “I didn’t know you kept all this stuff.”

“Of course I did.” The idea of the alternative, getting rid of any of it, had never even crossed Olivia’s mind. She nodded at the bookshelves against the wall. “I noticed you had some spare shelf space out here, so I put a few of my books on the bottom shelf. I hope you don’t mind.”

She mostly read on her phone these days, but she had amassed a collection of paperbacks she couldn’t bring herself to part with, novels she loved so much she reread them, new releases from her favorite authors, and well-loved classics with cracked spines and yellowed pages that had come loose from their glue.

“Course not.” Margot crossed the room and kneeled in front of the shelf, tilting her head and studying Olivia’s contribution. She brushed the spines with her fingers in a sort of delicate reverence that reminded Olivia of how Margot had once touched her. “That’s what they’re there for.”

“Brad didn’t like the books I read,” Olivia confessed, chewing on the edge of her thumbnail while Margot plucked a book off the shelf, skimming the back blurb before replacing it, repeating the process with another and another. “So I kept them under the bed.”

For years, she’d kept them stacked neatly out of sight because Brad hadn’t wanted them on the living room shelves, visible to visitors. He had made fun of them, deriding the covers, scoffing and calling them shallow, predictable, poorly

written. On several, memorable occasions, he'd cracked them open, folding the covers back roughly, reading from them aloud, making her blush. He would hunt for the sex scenes and laugh while he read, and too many times she'd laughed along with him, shrugging when he called them trashy, downplaying her interest. Brad had accused them of giving women unrealistic expectations. Eventually she'd gotten tired of his jokes that weren't funny, of him glaring at her while she read, all his pointed huffs and none-too-subtle sighs. She'd tucked most under the bed, the rest split between the attic and her childhood bedroom, only reading them when he wasn't around and sticking mostly to e-books so he couldn't see what she was reading when he was.

Margot hugged the book she was holding to her chest and scowled. "Are you serious?"

Olivia drew her knees up and ducked her chin, feigning interest in the purple polish on her toes so Margot wouldn't see her blush. "Unfortunately."

She knew how it sounded, how it made *her* sound—pathetic. That this was Margot she was talking to only magnified her shame. Margot had always been so self-assured, so confident, so *what you see is what you get, and if you don't like it, tough*. Olivia had wished she were like that, that she cared less about what people thought of her. She was trying, but it wasn't easy, and with Brad, she'd never stood a chance, their relationship broken for so long there'd been no fixing it.

Giving in had been easier than pushing back, less exhausting than arguing. When she was in it, too close to see the forest for the trees, it was easy to convince herself that *giving* was natural, that it was what made a marriage work, last. It took Brad asking for the one thing she wouldn't give for her to realize her concessions didn't count as compromises, not when she was the only one ever giving. Brad never met her in the middle, never even came close.

Margot's cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and her scowl furious. Her jaw ticked, her nostrils flaring delicately. "He didn't deserve you, Liv."

Olivia's tongue felt thick in her mouth. Maybe not, maybe Brad hadn't deserved her, but he'd wanted her for longer than a week, which was more than Olivia could say for Margot. "I don't know if it's about *deserving*, but thank you."

Margot turned the book over in her hands, scowl softening as she read the back. "Mind if I borrow this one?"

Olivia's mouth popped open. "No. No, go for it. Help yourself."

"Thanks." Margot traced the swooping letters that made up the title. "I saw someone talking about it online. I guess it's getting adapted?"

The tension knotting her shoulders loosened. "I heard that, too."

She should've known Margot wasn't going to judge her for what she liked or ask her to tuck away parts of herself like Brad had. Just like she should've known Margot wouldn't call her weak for putting up with Brad and his bullshit for too long.

She should've known she was safe with Margot.

Margot crawled across the carpet on her knees and set her borrowed book down on the edge of the coffee table before dragging one of Olivia's half-unpacked boxes closer, two fingers tucked around the edge of the cardboard. She peeked inside. "You've got more books in here."

Olivia's heart crept inside her throat. "Those aren't—"

Too late. Margot had already reached inside, plucking one of the books from the depths of the box, brows inching their way toward her hairline as she scanned the cover. "*Hole-Hearted to Whole-Hearted: Moving On and Starting Over.*"

Heat licked at the sides of Olivia's face. "That's not mine."

Margot stared.

"Okay, it's mine," Olivia amended, squirming under Margot's curious stare. "But I didn't buy it." She coughed. "My, uh, my dad bought it. For me. He thought it would be helpful or something. He's supported all my decisions, but he only understands not being married anymore from the

standpoint of . . . grief. And there is that, but for me it's all tangled up with relief, too."

Margot flipped the book over, skimming the back, just like she had Olivia's romance novels. "Was it?"

"Was it what?"

Margot looked up. "Helpful."

"Oh." She tucked her hair behind her left ear and shrugged. "I guess? It talks about setting boundaries and looking to the future instead of wasting time playing the blame game. That just because your ex wasn't the right person for you doesn't mean that person isn't out there." She smiled. "Nothing I didn't already know."

Whether she believed it was a different story. Or if they were out there, what were the chances she would be the right person for them, too? Life was far from fair; it would be just her luck that her perfect person would find her wanting.

Margot set the book back into the box before she reached out and plucked her old friendship bracelet off the table, rolling it between her fingers. The knotted ends were frayed, the black letters on the pastel rainbow beads faded from wear. Her lips quirked at the corners. "Watch out using that phrase around Brendon." She huffed gently. "*Right person.*"

Brendon had created a dating app, sure, and the way he looked at Annie with total moon eyes certainly supported his reputation as a hopeless romantic. But Margot made it sound as if there was more to it than that. "Why do I get the feeling there's a story there?"

"Brendon, Brendon, Brendon." Margot laughed and shook her head, managing to look both fond and exasperated. "He loves his job. He takes it *very* seriously. *Very personally.*" Margot rolled her eyes. "He thinks it's his mission in life, his *calling* practically, to help everyone around him find love." Her nose scrunched on the last word. "The fact that he successfully set up Darcy with Elle only made him more dogged about it, more . . . confident that he's meant to be this—this matchmaker."

He sounded well-meaning, but she could see where that could get old fast. Joining a dating app and searching for love was one thing; having potential love matches foisted on you when you weren't interested was something else altogether. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that you've been the . . . victim? Of one of his matchmaking schemes?"

Margot's face did something complicated, scrunching as if she'd sucked on a lemon, before her brows rose and she sighed, shoulders slumping. "He's tried. I'm usually pretty good at putting him in his place, gently yet firmly, but I've been known to cave on occasion. I've never let him set me up with someone, but I go through the motions if we're out somewhere and he introduces me to a friend of his. When Brendon inevitably wanders off to give us time to chat, I make it clear if I'm not actually interested."

Not actually interested in the friends Brendon tried to set her up with, or not interested in dating, *period*? "So you aren't seeing anyone?"

Olivia held her breath. That was probably something she should've asked before, when they were having their roommate chat. She'd had the perfect opening when she'd asked about having people over, but she'd flustered too easily. *Margot* made her fluster too easily.

"No." Margot's tongue darted out, wetting her bottom lip. "I'm not."

Do you want to be? sounded like a cringe pickup line even if that wasn't how Olivia meant it. But when Margot didn't tack on a helpful adjoiner, she had to ask *something*. She wouldn't be able to sleep otherwise, her curiosity niggling at her. "Are you interested in finding someone?"

Had it been a question of *wrong time, wrong place* when they were younger, or was Olivia just the wrong person?

Margot slipped her fingers beneath her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "I'm not *not* interested. I just don't feel like I *need* someone. Like I'm lacking without my *special other half*." Margot scoffed softly, brow knitting harshly, her scowl returning. "I'm a whole person. And the idea of needing to

find someone to make you complete seems like bullshit to me. The right person shouldn't *complete* you, they should love you the way you are. And it's cool if they make you want to be better, but they should never make you feel like you're too much or not enough exactly as you are." Margot took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Sorry." She chuckled. "Soapbox. I have a lot of feelings, I guess."

"I like your feelings," Olivia blurted, face heating. "I mean, your feelings are valid."

Margot blushed, the tops of her ears turning a darker shade than her cheeks. She laughed under her breath. "Thanks. As much as I love my friends, sometimes I feel like they don't get it. They're all in relationships and so happy and I'm happy *for* them, but based on how they talk sometimes I get the feeling they wish I were in a relationship because it would be easier *for them*. Like it would tie our friend group up into a nice little six-way bow. No loose strings."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. No one should ever take your friendship for granted."

Not any friendship, but certainly not Margot's. Margot had been the most loyal friend Olivia had ever had, and she knew from experience what it was like losing that, missing it, wanting it back.

It was funny. Well, perhaps *funny* wasn't the right word. Ironic, maybe—Olivia always used that word wrong—how she hadn't regretted sleeping with Margot, but she'd absolutely regretted the aftermath. How, without meaning to, it had complicated everything, something she'd *thought* had brought them together instead adding distance between them.

Margot wrapped the ends of her friendship bracelet around her narrow wrist and shrugged. "I'm not saying they're taking me for granted, but it just sucks to think that they potentially rank our friendship lower than their relationships when they aren't comparable, you know? Love isn't supposed to be quantifiable, relationships held up against one another, *pitted* against one another. That's a shitty thing to try to do, like

asking someone to compare their love for their mother to their love for their partner or their best friend.”

When Margot frowned at her wrist, unable to knot the ends of the bracelet together with one hand, Olivia reached out to do it for her.

“It’s like, I don’t care about you less because I don’t want in your pants, you know?” Margot paused and lifted her eyes, a low creak escaping her parted lips. “General *you*. Not you specifically. Not that I’m *not* saying . . .” She turned her head to the side and chuckled. “Wow, I’m going to shut up.”

Olivia bit her lip, smothering her smile at how flustered Margot sounded. Whether Margot had wanted in Olivia’s pants had never been the question. Or it had been, but only until it had been answered. It wasn’t the prevailing question now. “I know what you were trying to say.”

“Do you?” Margot laughed, a flush creeping down her neck and disappearing where her slouchy crewneck sweater draped beneath her collarbones. “Because I think I got lost somewhere in there.”

Olivia finished tying the bracelet, but let her fingers linger, adjusting the way the braided rope and beads sat. Olivia’s thumb grazed the fragile skin over the inside of Margot’s wrist, making her shiver, and Olivia could’ve sworn she felt Margot’s pulse skip. “You value your friendships. It’s—it was always one of my favorite things about you.”

Margot’s throat jerked. “Yeah?”

Olivia nodded and went for broke. “I feel like a dork, but no one really teaches you how to make friends as an adult. Would you . . . maybe want to be friends? Again?” She laughed. “God, I feel like I should write this down on a piece of paper. *Check yes or no.*”

Margot rolled her lips together. “I don’t know.”

Olivia’s heart stalled, then sank.

“It’s not like we aren’t living together. I mean, hell, you’ve gotten acquainted with my, uh, my sex toy collection. I have

some friends who can't say the same." Margot's lips quirked and, *whew*, okay, *joking*. Relief flooded Olivia's veins.

She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead and laughed. "This is true. Although"—her lips twitched—"acquainted is kind of an overstatement."

And if they were going to discuss qualifiers of intimacy, there was the fact they'd slept together.

Margot's teeth scraped against the swell of her bottom lip, her brows rising. Her flush had yet to fade. If anything, it had deepened, turning her dark pink from her hairline all the way down to where her soft-looking sweater met equally soft-looking skin. "Fair. I guess *collection* might be a bit of an overstatement, too." The front of her throat jerked when she swallowed. "You've only seen one."

God. Okay. It wasn't like that was an invitation. Even if Olivia wished it were—*no*. She had no business going there, down that path. She'd been down it before, and look where it had gotten her. She'd literally *just* thought about how she'd regretted the complicated aftermath of their coupling, the consequences. "True."

Margot smiled, all dark eyes and flushed cheeks, and Olivia tried to ignore the throb between her thighs, how everything south of her navel was suddenly hot and ached.

"So." Olivia blinked hard and pasted on a cheery smile. "Friends?"

"Sure." The left corner of Margot's mouth tipped up in a smirk, erasing Olivia's efforts at ignoring the ache between her legs. "Friends."

Chapter Eight

What Wedding Cake Flavor Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?

ARIES—Peanut Butter Cup

TAURUS—Dulce de Leche

GEMINI—Marble

CANCER—Lemon Poppyseed

LEO—Red Velvet

VIRGO—French Vanilla Bean

LIBRA—Pink Champagne

SCORPIO—Coffee Cream

SAGITTARIUS—Tiramisu

CAPRICORN—Carrot Cake

AQUARIUS—Coconut

PISCES—Funfetti

The Sweet Spot, a perfectly innocent bakery with a very naughty name—or maybe Margot just had a dirty mind—usually closed at six, but had been willing to accommodate Brendon and Annie’s schedules, staying open late for their cake tasting.

A sampling of petit fours had been presented on pedestal stands, five of each of the six flavors Brendon and Annie had

selected for tasting, flavors ranging from a traditional vanilla to lavender honey. Margot picked at the ultra-thick, sugary-sweet fondant covering a coconut—*gag*—mini cake and stared surreptitiously across the table while Olivia went to town on her pink champagne petit four.

A fleck of edible gold leaf clung to the center of Olivia's bottom lip. Her tongue darted out, only managing to nudge the shiny fleck closer to the corner of her mouth. Olivia either thought it was gone or hadn't realized it was there in the first place, because she scooped up another forkful of cake, bringing it to her lips. Her mouth closed around the fork, and her lashes fluttered softly against the smooth skin beneath her eyes. The tines of her fork made a gradual reappearance and a soft hum of contentment slipped from her lips as she chewed slowly, savoring the bite. Eyes open but lids low, Olivia lifted the fork back to her lips, lapping at the frosting that clung to the space between the tines.

A breathy groan filled the air, more desperate than satisfied.

Four curious sets of eyes locked on her.

Motherfucker, *she* had made that noise, all pleading and pornographic and—*ugh*. The tips of Margot's ears burned so badly she feared they would pop right off like little turkey timers signaling she was well past done. She coughed, as if doing that could *possibly* pass that groan off as . . . congestion and not a desire to get up close and reacquainted with Olivia's tongue.

She shivered. Nope. Bad Margot.

"Mar?" The corners of Brendon's eyes crinkled with concern. "You feeling all right?"

"Mm, yep." She reached out, knuckles knocking into her glass of ice water, skin slipping against the condensation. A drop of water slipped down the back of her hand and circled her wrist as she took a long drink, studiously avoiding looking anywhere near Olivia. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Annie frowned. "You're looking kind of flushed."

Christ on a cracker, couldn't a girl be horny in peace?

"It *is* a little warm in here," Darcy said, earning herself top billing on Margot's list of favorite people. "I think they've got the heat set a touch too high."

Darcy's eyes darted from Margot to Olivia and back to Margot, a dimple forming at the corner of her mouth when she smirked. That was, without a doubt, a look to file away for closer inspection later.

"So." Brendon set his napkin beside his plate, eyes focused on her. "What do you think, or do you not care?"

"I care," Margot blurted. "I totally care."

Brendon's face twisted, half frown, half smile, one hundred percent amused. "Okay . . . so, thoughts?"

Margot winced. Shit. "Um, what was the question?"

Everyone chuckled, Olivia included, her laughter ringing out like a bell, pretty and sharp. Margot's heart stuttered then sped. It was difficult to get up in arms about being made fun of when Olivia's smile made her eyes brighten.

"You care, but you don't know what it is you care about?" Darcy's brows rose.

"I personally think it's a testament to my boundless capacity for caring, that it's not even a prerequisite knowing what it is I care about."

Darcy grinned. "And I personally think it's a testament to your ability to bullshit that you were able to say that sentence with a straight face."

Across the table, Olivia pressed her fingertips to her mouth, stifling her smile.

"Fine, you caught me. I spaced out for a second."

Margot tossed her napkin down beside her plate and slouched back in her chair, ankle accidentally brushing against Olivia's beneath the table. Olivia's whole body twitched at the contact, her eyes flitting up, gaze locking on Margot's. *Whoops*. Margot slid her foot away and Olivia broke eye

contact, dropping her eyes to the table. A few seconds later, Olivia's foot bumped up against Margot's and didn't move.

Margot swallowed hard. Okay. She was officially Victorian-era-level horny if a—potentially?—accidental game of footsie was making her sweat.

None the wiser, Brendon smiled. “Cake flavors, Mar. You got a preference?”

“They were all pretty tasty,” she hedged, not wanting to put her foot in her mouth and perform a repeat of the time she'd told Brendon—gently—that “At Last” by Etta James wasn't, in her opinion, the right choice for his and Annie's first dance.

That was the song you dance to when you're ... you're fifty or on your second marriage. Brendon was younger than Margot, only by a year, but still. At last his love had come along? Sure, he'd crushed on Annie *long* before they got together, but come on. He hadn't waited *that long*.

They'd selected a different song, a song that was a much better fit for them in the end, but Brendon had been bummed. The last thing Margot needed was to inadvertently insult his or Annie's favorite flavor in the name of being honest.

Margot shrugged. “Can't go wrong with any of them.”

Unless they picked lavender honey or coconut or—ew—pistachio. Cake was supposed to taste like cake, not like the ingredients in a DIY face mask or potpourri. But, hey, it wasn't her wedding, and the last thing she wanted was for someone to accuse her of being anything but supportive. She'd force down a whole slice of lavender-pistachio-coconut grossness with a smile on her face if it kept her friends happy.

Across the table, Olivia stared at Margot dubiously.

Brendon shrugged. “Huh. Okay.” He turned and looked at Annie. “Um—”

“Margot likes the peanut butter chocolate,” Olivia said, smiling. “She's always been a sucker for that combo.” Her eyes dropped to Margot's empty plate, the one where the peanut butter–chocolate petit four had been before Margot had devoured every last crumb, almost licking the plate before

ultimately deciding that would've been rude. "I guess some things don't change."

Her body didn't know what to make of that; her chest went pleasantly warm, touched by the sentiment, but a tendril of heat slithered down, pooling low beneath her belly button, affected by the way Olivia's voice had lilted, almost flirtatious.

"Yeah?" Brendon sat up straighter. "You liked that one?"

Margot nibbled on the edge of her lip. She had . . . but not as much as she'd liked watching Olivia enjoy the pink champagne cake.

"Maybe you should stick with something less likely to pose an allergy risk," Margot said. "I liked the pink champagne cake, too."

"That's a good point," Annie said. "About possible allergies. I wasn't even thinking that, but you're completely right."

"You could do extra cupcakes," Olivia suggested. "One layer cake, so you have something to cut for photos and so you can save the top tier for your anniversary, if that's a tradition you want to follow. Or, instead of cupcakes you could have a separate groom's cake."

Brendon cringed. "No groom's cake. It makes me think of the red velvet armadillo cake in *Steel Magnolias*."

Margot shivered. "Please, no."

"No red velvet, either," Darcy said, wrinkling her nose. "It's pretentious chocolate."

"And you *don't* like it?" Margot teased. "Color me surprised."

Darcy's eyes narrowed, lips twitching at the corners. "Cute."

"I try." Margot flipped the ends of her hair.

Olivia grinned, eyes flitting around the table. "No groom's cake. And no red velvet. This is good. We're narrowing our options down."

“Cupcakes do sound nice,” Annie mused. “We could have more flavors that way, too. Make picking a little easier.”

“So, peanut butter chocolate for some of the cupcakes,” Olivia said. “And—”

“Pink champagne,” Margot blurted, the image of Olivia tonguing her fork baked into her brain.

Annie nodded. “I liked that one.” She picked up her fork. “I think I’m going to need to taste a few of these again.”

Darcy snorted. “*Make picking a little easier.*”

“Shut up.” Annie laughed and elbowed Darcy.

Brendon leaned his elbows on the table. “So, Olivia.”

She still hadn’t moved her foot from where it was pressed snug against Margot’s. “Mm-hmm?”

“I forgot to ask this the last time I saw you—*first* time I saw you.” Brendon’s smile went lopsided. “What made you want to go into event planning?”

Margot could answer that. Growing up, Olivia had wanted to be a professional mermaid, an ice dancer, a paleontologist, and an event planner, in that order. All but the last had been phases, short-lived. Event planning had stood the test of time, Olivia the first to volunteer to plan sleepovers and camping trips, later joining the student council and spearheading everything from spirit week to bake sales to prom. Olivia had an eye for detail, a hard-on for checklists, and the patience to bring her exact vision to life. Margot couldn’t imagine a more perfect job for her.

“I can’t really remember a time when I *didn’t* want to be a party planner,” Olivia said. “I’ve always enjoyed planning events. Birthday parties for myself when I was little, school dances when I was older.” She smiled and shrugged. “I guess I just really love the idea of bringing a vision to life and maybe making someone’s day, or, when it comes to weddings, making someone’s dreams come true.”

Predictably, Brendon looked completely sold, his smile bright and his eyes huge. “I love that. That’s why I started

OTP.” He laughed. “Not the first part, but making someone’s dreams come true.”

Margot smothered her smile with a sip of ice water. She hadn’t ever thought about it until now, but she had a habit of surrounding herself with altruistic optimists. First Olivia, then Elle, then Brendon.

“I’ve heard only wonderful things about OTP,” Olivia said, shuffling her plates to the side, clearing room to rest her hands on the table. She nudged her chocolate–peanut butter petit four toward Margot with a quick wink.

Margot flashed her a smile and slid the plate closer, reaching for her fork. She mouthed a quick *thanks* before digging in, swallowing a bite of cake and, with it, a moan. Shit, that was good stuff.

Brendon shrugged, somehow striking the balance between casual confidence and humility. There wasn’t a disingenuous bone in Brendon’s body, which helped keep his words from toeing into humblebrag territory. “I like to think we’re doing a good thing.” His brow furrowed softly, eyes narrowing as he chewed on his bottom lip. “Say, Olivia, are you seeing anyone?”

“No, no.” Margot set her fork down, shaking her head brusquely. “Do not answer that question, Liv.” She turned to Brendon, leveling him with a hard stare. “We do not ask strangers if they’re single. It’s invasive.”

Brendon held up his hands, face the picture of innocence, all wide *who me?* eyes and lips parted, ready to spout an excuse. “Olivia’s not a stranger. She’s our wedding planner, and she’s *your* friend.”

“It’s not your business, Brendon,” Margot said, jaw clenching. “Butt out.”

“It’s fine.” The shiny gold hoops in Olivia’s ears danced against the sides of her neck when she shook her head. “I’m not currently seeing anyone, no.”

Brendon smiled. “Would you like to be?”

“Jesus,” Margot muttered.

Annie bumped Brendon's shoulder. "Babe, maybe ease off?"

Brendon's lower lip jutted out.

"You're giving off *we saw you across the bar and really like your vibe*, energy," Annie said.

He frowned. "We *do* like her vibe."

Annie whispered something in Brendon's ear that made him blush.

"For the record, that was not a proposition," Brendon clarified, scratching his jaw. "It was a general question."

Olivia tucked her hair behind her ears. Her face had turned a soft shade of pink, her neck slightly darker, her flush working its way north. "I—"

"You do not have to answer. Plead the fifth," Margot said, rolling her eyes. "Brendon, as much as we adore him, hasn't quite grasped the concept of boundaries."

"I think he understands boundaries perfectly well," Darcy said. "I think he simply chooses to ignore them."

Brendon clutched his chest, expression wounded. "I came here to have a good time, and I'm honestly feeling so attacked right now."

"2014 called and they would like that joke back." Margot softened the jibe with a smile.

"Olivia." Brendon turned to her, still clutching his chest. "Do you see what I go through? These people call themselves my friends."

"I'm your sister," Darcy said, tapping away at her phone, probably texting Elle, who hadn't been able to make it to the cake tasting, having agreed to babysit last minute for her older sister. "I'm stuck with you."

He turned his puppy-dog stare on Annie. She patted him on the cheek. "You know how I feel about you."

Margot grinned and gestured at her plate. "I'm just here for the food."

Olivia chuckled. “It’s fine, Brendon. If I didn’t feel comfortable answering, I’d tell you precisely where you could stick your question.” Her smile went impish. “Politely, of course.”

Brendon, Annie, and Darcy burst out laughing, Olivia’s frankness clearly taking them by surprise. Margot grinned, well aware of how clever Olivia could be. It was nice to see her opening up, shaking off the stiffness Margot wasn’t used to, relaxing and settling into her skin the way Margot had remembered. She’d missed Olivia’s easy smiles and raunchy jokes and—she’d missed Olivia.

Missed her, full stop.

“Good to know,” Brendon said. “So . . . ?”

Olivia clasped her hands together atop the table. “I just got divorced last year. And while I’m not heartbroken—I’m over it—I *was* married for almost ten years, so I’ve been enjoying having some time to myself. Getting my career off the ground has been my number one priority.”

Brendon nodded along. “All good points.”

Margot narrowed her eyes, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“But if the right person were to come along, would you be open to dating?” Brendon asked.

“I mean . . . I guess?” Olivia shrugged. “If it was the right person at the right time, I wouldn’t say no to, um . . .” She rolled her lips together as if searching for the right word. “Seeing what could happen?”

Brendon grinned. “What would you say your type is if, on the off chance this person were to come along, so, you know, I could send them your way?”

Margot rolled her eyes and shoved her chair away from the table. “Bathroom,” she explained when everyone looked up at her.

It wasn’t so much that she needed to pee as she wasn’t in the mood to hear Olivia describe her *perfect person*. Some

clone of Brad, only better, without the douchebag personality. Not Margot. Margot was good for a week, for a rebound fling, nothing more.

She shut herself in the single-stall bathroom in the back of the bakery and locked the door. Jesus, did she sound bitter. She closed her eyes. Eleven years later, and she should've been over this. She *was* over this—at least, last week she was—and then Olivia had tumbled back into her life and there were all these *feelings* she could've sworn she'd worked through rising to the surface.

Maybe Margot hadn't worked through her feelings about what happened in high school as much as she'd buried them, pushing them away via repression and self-recrimination. Not the healthiest of coping methods, admittedly, but Margot was nothing if not a work in progress.

So, maybe she wasn't as *over it* as she'd claimed to be. Thinking about how she and Olivia had ended, grown apart, *whatever* put a bitter lump in her throat and an ache in her chest, and Margot didn't know what to do with this, this *feeling*.

Only that she needed to do *something* because her friends weren't stupid and neither was Olivia and sooner rather than later someone was going to pick up on the fact that Margot was less fine than she was letting on.

The timing was shit, that was for sure. She couldn't exactly hole up in her room with a wedding to plan, a wedding to *attend*, and Olivia living right down the hall. Margot would laugh if she weren't so entirely screwed by circumstance.

She set her glasses beside the sink and splashed cold water on her face, avoiding her eyes, her liner actually even on each side for once. An odd twist. Her life went belly-side up, and she managed a perfect cat eye. Go figure.

Having stalled for long enough, she slipped out the bathroom, footsteps slowing to a crawl as Brendon's voice carried down the hall.

“... Margot like in high school?”

Margot tiptoed closer, wanting to hear what Olivia said when she wasn't around. When Olivia didn't know Margot could hear her. Maybe it wasn't the most virtuous thing to do, listening in, but hey, *work in progress*.

"What she was like in high school?" Olivia laughed. "Gosh, Margot was . . . pretty quiet, actually."

"*Margot?*" Annie sounded incredulous. "Are you sure we're talking about the same person?"

Everyone laughed, and Margot rolled her eyes, creeping a little closer and stopping just at the inside of the hall, tucking herself behind a ginormous rubber fig.

"She wasn't a wallflower or anything like that. Margot was just always really comfortable in her own skin. She had this quiet confidence I always admired, and I guess she never felt like she *needed* to be the loudest voice in the room in order to be taken seriously," Olivia explained.

Margot's face warmed.

"And she was always intensely loyal. You should ask her where she got the scar on the backs of her knuckles from." Olivia laughed and Margot ducked her chin, smiling at the floor.

Brendon chuckled. "Sounds like Margot."

"She was—she was my best friend," Olivia said softly.

Margot swallowed hard and pressed the heel of her hand into her sternum as if she could massage away the ache inside.

"I'm sure you're happy that your paths crossed," Brendon said.

"I am," Olivia agreed. "I count my lucky stars, that's for sure."

Margot dropped her face into her hands. *Damn*.

"Margot?"

Margot jumped, clapping a hand over her chest. Beneath her palm, her heart thundered. "Darcy. Fuck. You scared me."

“What are you doing hiding back here?”

“Hiding? Psh. I’m not hiding.”

Darcy’s lips quirked. “You’re crouched behind a potted plant.”

Margot crossed her arms. “I will have you know that I was . . . was . . .”

One of Darcy’s brows arched.

“I was about to . . . to . . .”

Darcy’s left eyebrow rose, joining the right. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

Margot’s cheeks burned. “Shut up. Did you come back here for a reason or just to call me on my shit?”

“I *did* want to talk to you. If you have a minute.”

Margot made a show of tilting her head from side to side in mock consideration. “I’m in high demand, but I guess for you, I could spare at least that.”

Darcy braced her shoulder against the wall. “I wanted to talk to you about Elle, actually.”

Margot waited.

“I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

Margot sputtered, choking on air. Darcy frowned.

“I’m fine. Just swallowed my spit funny.” She flapped her hand in front of her, waving off Darcy’s concern. “I could’ve sworn you just said you were going to ask Elle to marry you.”

“I did.” Darcy laced her fingers, wringing her hands. “What? Do you think it’s too soon?”

“Um.” Margot scrambled for a slightly more diplomatic answer than her gut response of *fuck yes*. “I mean.” God, she was drawing a blank. “You’re hardly U-Hauling it.”

Darcy nibbled on her bottom lip, looking less than reassured.

“If you’re worried whether she’s going to say yes, don’t.” Margot nudged Darcy with her elbow. “Elle will absolutely say yes.”

Darcy smiled, small and wobbly but a smile nonetheless. “You think?”

“I’m sure of it.” Margot scratched the side of her neck. Did this bakery sell alcohol? “Have you thought about how you plan to ask? I know Elle’s partial to Ring Pops. *Or*, hear me out. Prize in the bottom of her cereal box. She’d love that.”

“I was thinking I’d take her up to the observatory at UW. It’s where we had our first *real* date, under the stars. I thought it was fitting.”

Margot didn’t know what to say because *damn*. Darcy had put *thought* into this. This wasn’t a hypothetical. She had plans. Hell, knowing Darcy, there were probably checklists and spreadsheets and risk assessments involved. She was serious. *This* was serious.

Margot shifted on her feet, feeling out of her depth and underprepared. This was like one of those stress dreams she still had about college. Nightmares where she’d realize she’d signed up for a class, completely blanked, and never attended or turned in any of the assignments, and her entire GPA hinged on acing a final on organic chemistry or astrophysics, something so advanced she had zero chance of bullshitting her way through. “That’s . . . *Wow*. When do you think you’re going to pop the question?”

“I *was* thinking after Brendon and Annie get back from their honeymoon.”

Next month. Holy shit.

“But then I decided I don’t want to wait and, besides— Brendon would probably consider me getting engaged to be a wedding present to *him*, considering he’s the one to thank for introducing me to Elle in the first place.” Darcy wrung her hands together and smiled. “I want to do it before we head up to Snoqualmie for the bachelor-bachelorette party.”

They were leaving in four days. *Four. Days.*

“It—*wow*. It sounds like you’ve got it all figured out, Darce.”

Like she didn’t need anything from Margot at all.

Darcy shrugged. “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t completely deluding myself, hoping that she’ll say yes.”

“Trust me. I’d be the first person to tell you if you were delusional.”

“That’s what I was counting on.”

Margot cleared her throat. “Well, I think it’s great. I’m—I’m really happy for you. You and Elle . . . I couldn’t hope for a better person to have fallen in love with my best friend.”

Darcy ducked her chin, her smile small and aching fond. “Thanks, Margot. That means a lot to me.” She coughed lightly and blinked fast before tilting her head to the side, brown eyes scrutinizing as they danced over Margot’s face. “So. You and Olivia.”

Margot’s throat went dry. “Me and Olivia what?”

Darcy stared at her like she could see all the little cracks beneath Margot’s skin. “Margot.”

Fuck. Margot palmed her forehead, a frazzled laugh slipping out, too loud in the narrow hallway. “Am I that obvious?”

Darcy bobbed her head from side to side. “Obvious? No, not really. Can I tell there’s something you aren’t saying? Yes.”

Margot puffed out her cheeks. That wasn’t quite so bad. At least she didn’t have her feelings stamped across her forehead for everyone to see. “I’m, uh, working through some . . . *things*. Feelings and shit.”

Darcy’s lips twitched. “Feelings and shit?”

If only Darcy knew what Margot was dealing with, she wouldn’t give her grief over her ineloquence. “Shut up.”

“No, no, now I’m curious.” Darcy grinned. “Are these *pants* feelings or *chest* feelings?”

Margot was in hell. “Elle is seriously rubbing off on you if you’re using the words *pants feelings* unironically.” She sighed. “And yes, I realize I just said *rubbing off*. My life is ripe with innuendo.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Darcy agreed. “Cats and vibrators and rubbing off. It’s a gold mine.”

“I’m dealing with a blast from my past and all the many, varied emotions that have reared their head thanks to it. Cut me some slack if I’m not on top of my game.” She raked her fingers through her hair, tugging at her ends until her scalp stung.

Darcy sobered. “Look, if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. Unlike my brother, I won’t push.”

Margot nodded, shoulders lowering from where she’d had them hiked defensively by her ears.

“But if you *do* decide you want to talk about it, you know where to find me,” Darcy said. “Or Elle. You know she’d listen.”

Elle would probably tell Margot all of this was fate and that everything would fall into place if Margot just followed her heart. Only, following her heart had fucked everything up once; Margot would be damned if she let that happen again.

“Thanks, Darcy,” Margot whispered. “I appreciate the offer. I’m not . . . there yet, but maybe I’ll take you up on it some other time. But only if there’s wine involved.”

Darcy batted at the air and scoffed. “Obviously.”

“Good.” She narrowed her eyes. “Until then—”

“My lips are sealed. I heard nothing.” Darcy mimed locking her lips and throwing away the key.

“Good.” Margot nodded decisively. “Because if you do go and blab—”

“You’ll what? Break into my apartment and move everything three inches to the left and fuck with my flow?” Darcy laughed, reciting a threat Margot had made when Elle

and Darcy had first started dating. “Your bark is a whole lot worse than your bite, you know that?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Margot grumbled. “Not that this heart-to-heart hasn’t left me feeling all warm and fuzzy inside, but we should probably head back out there.”

Margot shoved away from the wall and made it two steps down the hall.

“Word to the wise, Margot?” Darcy called out quietly. “If you don’t reckon with your feelings, sooner or later your feelings are going to reckon with you. Just something to keep in mind.”

Chapter Nine

Margot tossed her keys on the entry table and made a beeline for the couch, where she threw herself down and stared up at the ceiling.

Married.

Elle was getting married.

On a logical level, Margot knew she wasn't losing Elle. She wasn't losing any of her friends. But Elle was going to be someone's *wife*. Even if Margot wasn't technically losing anyone, it was still the end of an era, the beginning of a new chapter.

All her friends were settling down, and Margot? She had yet to find a brand of shampoo she liked well enough to commit to, let alone a whole person.

Olivia wandered into the living room, barefoot and soft-looking in her chunky cashmere cardigan and pink pleated skirt that barely brushed the tops of her knees. She nudged Margot's feet aside and took a graceful seat, fingers skimming the skin of her thighs as she smoothed her skirt down with a brush of her hands. The pleats splayed open, the hem of her skirt rising several inches.

Margot tore her eyes away before Olivia could catch her staring.

"Are you all right?"

Margot lifted her head. "Why wouldn't I be?"

“I don’t know.” Olivia frowned. “You’ve been quiet since we left the bakery.”

“Oh.” Margot let her head fall back against the arm of the couch. “No, I’m fine.”

Olivia nibbled on her lip. “If you say so.”

A beat of silence passed, then another, and another.

If you don’t reckon with your feelings, sooner or later your feelings are going to reckon with you.

Margot sighed. “Darcy cornered me coming out of the bathroom. She’s planning to propose to Elle.”

A bright smile graced Olivia’s face. “Really? That’s fantastic. Did she tell you when she . . .” Her words trailed off, smile faltering. “Wait. Is it *not* fantastic?”

Margot groaned and slipped her glasses off, setting them down on her stomach. She rubbed her eyes, pressing hard until colors burst behind her lids. “No, God no. That’s not—of course it’s fantastic.” She exhaled harshly and lowered hands, blinking into the brightness of the living room. Her vision blurred softly at the edges until she slipped her glasses back on. “I’m happy for Elle—and Darcy—but it’s just . . .” She swallowed twice, throat aching. “It’s nothing. Forget I said anything.”

Margot’s eye burned, her lids itchy, like the skin was too tight. *Fuck.*

Olivia’s fingers curled around Margot’s ankle, thumb brushing the bare skin along the inside of her foot. “It doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“I’ll sound like a bitch.” Margot choked out a laugh. “Scratch that, I *am* a bitch.”

A good friend would be doing a fucking happy dance when their best friend got engaged, and here Margot was, sinuses burning, signaling the impending rush of tears.

Olivia made a soft sound of dissent. “You aren’t a bitch, Margot.”

She took a deep, pained breath and pinched the bridge of her nose, eyes scrunching. “I’m happy for Elle. I *am*. But—fuck.” Her stupid chin quivered. “There shouldn’t be a *but*. I should be happy, full stop, no qualifier. Just over-the-moon thrilled that my best friend is going to be marrying the love of her life.”

“You’re allowed to feel more than one emotion at a time,” Olivia said, squeezing Margot’s ankle gently. The sweep of her thumb back and forth was soothing, soft without tickling. “It doesn’t make you a bitch.”

“I feel like it makes me a bad friend,” Margot confessed.

“You’d be a bad friend if you decided to take your feelings out on Elle or Darcy, if you let your feelings change your friendship with them.”

“I don’t want to do that,” she agreed. “That’s the last thing I want.”

For Elle to think Margot was harboring anger or resentment about her good news. To let her feelings get in the way of their friendship, to push Elle away.

“I guess that’s the thing,” Margot whispered. “I *don’t* want my friendships to change.”

“And you’re worried they will?”

“I don’t see how they won’t.” Margot sniffed. “Elle’s going to be someone’s wife, *Darcy’s* wife. And that’s—I *am* happy. They’re perfect for each other. Darcy’s everything Elle ever talked about wanting.”

Despite being total opposites, neither ever asked the other to change, to be someone other than exactly who they were. They loved each other, flaws and all.

“I’m just so used to being Elle’s go-to, you know? The person she calls when she needs someone to talk to, a shoulder to cry on, her best friend, and now . . .”

“You’re worried you won’t be that person anymore.”

“I don’t want to lose her,” she confessed.

Margot didn't want to lose *any* of her friends.

"You're right," Olivia said. "Elle's going to be Darcy's wife, but you're still going to be her best friend. It's apples and oranges. No one else can bring to the table what you do." Olivia's lashes swept against her cheeks when she lowered her face, smiling softly. "No one can replace you, Margot. You're one of a kind."

"One of a kind, huh?" Margot's voice shook, heart rising into her throat. "Like one of those imperfect pieces of produce in that subscription box?"

Olivia's bright bark of laughter made Margot's heart swell further. She shook her head, earrings dancing against the sides of her neck. "What are you talking about?"

"You know." Margot scooted back until she was sitting, propped against the arm. She wedged her toes under Olivia's thigh. "The ugly produce no one wants but there's nothing wrong with it, so they created a subscription box to reduce food waste. Watermelons with weird scars and funky-shaped squash and curly carrots. Bell peppers with extra little offshoots, appendages that look awfully phallic." She shrugged. "You said apples and oranges and my brain kind of ran with it."

"You are *definitely* one of a kind," Olivia teased, smile as soft as the fingers now tracing the tops of Margot's feet. "I mean it. You're irreplaceable, and I can promise you that your friends don't want to lose you anymore than you want to lose them." Olivia's eyes locked on Margot's, the intensity of her gaze sending a shiver skittering down Margot's spine. Olivia's shoulders rose and fell, her full lips parting as she exhaled, and for a split second Margot could've sworn a tiny fleck of gold foil still clung to her bottom lip. "Trust me. I'd know."

Fuck. Margot's chest throbbed like at any second she might bust open like a piñata, feelings pouring out of her like candy. "I missed you, too, Liv."

Olivia's lower lip wobbled, her teeth trapping it. Light from the corner lamp caught on—sure enough, a small piece of shiny foil.

“You have gold foil on your mouth,” Margot said, swallowing thickly when Olivia’s teeth scraped against the swell of her lip, leaving it plump and dark. “It’s from the cake, I think.”

Olivia ran her fingers along her lip line. The foil didn’t so much as budge. She looked at her hand and frowned. “Is it gone?”

“No, just—come here.” Margot leaned forward, hand shaking as she reached out, dragging the pad of her thumb along the satin swell of Olivia’s bottom lip. Lips still parted, Olivia’s warm breath tickled Margot’s knuckles and made her insides clench, heat pooling between her thighs.

The foil flecked off, transferring to Margot’s skin, and she quickly dropped her hand.

“All gone,” Margot panted.

Olivia’s throat jerked, the high crests of her cheeks flushed crimson. “Thanks.”

Margot’s pulse pounded in her head, at the base of her throat, between her thighs.

“Popcorn,” she blurted.

Olivia frowned. “Popcorn?”

Margot hopped off the couch, stomach swooping when she tripped on the fringed edge of the rug. She righted herself and wiped her clammy palms on her thighs. “Do you want some? Because I’m going to make some.”

Olivia worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “Sure. I guess.” She stretched forward for the remote. “I’ll find something on TV.”

Margot escaped to the kitchen and braced her hands against the counter. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. She needed to pull it together. Get a grip. Her feelings for Olivia had fucked everything up for her once; she refused to let that happen again, no matter how badly she ached to press Olivia down onto the couch and feel Olivia tremble beneath her fingers, *around* her fingers. *Fuck*.

Margot clenched her eyes shut, but all that did was superimpose a hundred fantasies on the back of her lids. A running reel of memories. Her fingers curled around the kitchen counter until her knuckles turned white.

Olivia had always been tactile and a little bit of a flirt. It didn't *mean* anything. Just because she'd wanted Margot once, for that one week eleven years ago, didn't mean she wanted Margot again, wanted her *now*.

Friends. Margot sucked in a deep breath, air shuddering between her lips. She held it until her lungs ached and her heart kicked at the wall of her chest, then let it out slowly, shoulders dropping and heart rate slowing to something approaching normal. *Friends.* Margot could totally do friends. She was *great* at doing friends. Oh, Jesus. Great at *being* friends.

Reaching inside the cabinet beside the stove, Margot pulled out a bag of extra-buttery movie-theater-style popcorn. She ripped off the plastic, unfolded the bag, and popped it in the microwave, adding an extra thirty seconds because there was nothing she hated more than anemic popcorn, pale and with the kernel unpopped, the center hard enough to break a tooth.

When the microwave beeped, Margot divided the popcorn into two bowls, one for her, one for Olivia, no chance of buttery fingers brushing when they both reached in at the same time.

A little less hot beneath the collar, Margot wandered back into the living room, a bowl in each hand. "Find something? We can always look on Netflix."

Olivia took her bowl with a smile, gesturing to the TV with the remote. "TMC's running a Shirley MacLaine marathon."

Margot curled up on the opposite cushion. Right now, the channel was on a commercial. "What's on?"

Olivia finished chewing before answering, "*The Apartment.*"

"That's a good one." Margot sifted through the bowl, picking out the darkest pieces, little kernels burnt to

perfection.

“You remember when you had mono?”

“Oof. Don’t remind me. I thought I was going to die that summer.” Margot cringed.

Olivia bumped her shoulder and when Margot turned, her eyes brightened. “It wasn’t *all* bad. We stayed in bed, remember? That part was nice.”

“You practically moved in with me.” Margot’s chest squeezed, hot and tight. “You even skipped cheer camp.”

Olivia had surrendered her spot on the varsity squad sophomore year just so she could spend the summer marathoning Turner Classic Movies from Margot’s bed. In between spells of feverish fatigue and moments of feeling like run-over shit, Margot was pretty sure she’d thanked Olivia. Now she wasn’t sure.

“Worth it.” Olivia grinned and slipped a fingerful of popcorn in her mouth, her lips already glossy with butter. Margot swallowed a pitiful mewl. She’d never wanted to suck on something so badly in her life.

The commercial ended with a jingle, and Margot faced the screen, heartbeat drowning out the sound of Shirley MacLaine bantering with Jack Lemmon.

Not even five minutes later, Olivia nudged her arm. “Here.”

Margot blinked. Olivia held out her bowl of popcorn. She’d scavenged for the extra-dark pieces, burned and black, pushing them to one side and leaving the pale, golden kernels on the other.

“I know you like the burnt pieces best.” Olivia swayed close, bumping their shoulders together. “Or, you did.”

Something fluttered in her chest, quickly followed by an *ache*, like pressing on a tender bruise. It hurt, but she couldn’t leave it alone.

“I do.” Margot swallowed hard. “I—not much about my taste has changed.”

Olivia stared, gaze flickering between Margot's eyes and her mouth.

"Same," she breathed.

Margot's heart thundered inside her head, drowning out the sound of the television until it was nothing but static, senseless white noise. She clutched the bowl of popcorn to her chest, the plastic rim pressing into her sternum. "Is there something on my face?"

Olivia's eyes dipped, her lids lowering and her lashes casting a shadow against the skin beneath her eyes. The perfume of her hair, honeysuckle sweet, clouded Margot's senses as she leaned in and—since when had Olivia gotten so close? Close enough to make out the blue veins on her eyelids, and admire the slightly crooked line of her nose, the finely formed bow of her lush lips, and the dimple in her chin.

Margot held impossibly still, arms all but vibrating, shaking around the bowl of popcorn in her lap. She couldn't make herself move; it was the closest to an out-of-body experience she'd ever had, watching as Olivia crept closer, the distance between their faces dwindling.

Olivia exhaled, breath blowing buttery and sweet against Margot's mouth, a prelude to the press of her lips. Goose bumps broke out along Margot's skin as Olivia's lips pillowed against hers, soft and so brief. Before Margot could even shut her eyes, Liv had drawn away, lashes fluttering open, looking into Margot's eyes, gaze dreamy and—

"Fuck."

Olivia laughed, and something about that sound cracked Margot wide open. Before she knew what she was doing she had one hand wrapped around the back of Olivia's neck, her bowl of popcorn toppling to the floor. She drew Olivia close and kept her there, sealing her mouth over Olivia's, swallowing the little gasp that escaped her lips.

This was a bad idea, but Margot was—fuck, she was weak and she wanted. Wanted Olivia's hands in her hair and Olivia's mouth on her neck and Olivia's body pressed snug against

hers. She wanted and she craved and fuck it, maybe she was greedy, too.

But it was hard to remember all the reasons why wanting was wrong when Olivia's mouth opened under hers, tongue sneaking out and dragging against the seam of Margot's lips in the slowest, sweetest torture, offering herself up for the taking.

Chapter Ten

Margot's hand slipped under Olivia's sweater, thumbs skimming the skin of Olivia's waist then brushing the very bottom of her rib cage, making her shiver. A muffled moan escaped her parted lips because, God, it had been *years* since a kiss had made Olivia feel this way, this hot, this achy, this desperate and out of control like she had to have more. Not a want but a need, up there with breathing.

Palms dragging against Olivia's skin, Margot squeezed her hips and pulled her closer until their knees bumped, and Olivia was forced to clutch at Margot's shoulders for balance. Margot tore her mouth from Olivia's, lips skimming over her chin, her jaw, trailing kisses to the sensitive patch of skin right beneath her ear, making Olivia shiver and squirm atop the couch, her nails biting into Margot's sweater.

Olivia swallowed hard, breath coming in fast, shallow pants. "Should we—should we talk about this?"

"You want to talk?" Margot nipped the lobe of Olivia's ear, and she whimpered. "Right now?"

Margot pressed a kiss to the hinge of Olivia's jaw, tongue darting out to taste her skin.

"I don't—um." Olivia's breath shuddered from between her lips. "Maybe?"

This felt like something they should address. Something they should talk about. Make sure they were both on the same page. But it was so hard to think with Margot touching her,

Margot's mouth on her neck, fingers grazing the skin of her stomach, thumbs flirting with the underwire of her bra before dragging down, down, down, and slipping beneath the waist of her skirt, teasing as they dipped under the lace band of her panties. *Close.*

"I can talk," Margot whispered against her skin, nose sliding along Olivia's jaw. "I can tell you about how last night, I got myself off thinking about spreading your thighs and taking you apart with my tongue. How wet I got remembering how you taste and how when I slipped my fingers inside myself I pretended they were yours." Margot's right hand slid out from under Olivia's cardigan and ghosted over Olivia's wrist, where her pulse stuttered and sped, tangling their fingers together. Margot's thumb brushed the back of Olivia's hand, a gentle sweep along the back of her knuckles. Olivia's breath caught in the back of her throat. "I can tell you about how hard I came, clenching around my fingers, thinking about how I made you soak your sheets."

"Fuck," Olivia whimpered, pulse throbbing between her legs, heavy and insistent.

Margot's lips curved, a hot puff of air escaping, damp against Olivia's neck. "Want me to keep talking?"

This was so far from the talking Olivia had meant, but she couldn't bring herself to mind. Not when Margot was whispering hot and dirty in her ear.

"Please," Olivia murmured.

Margot hummed, fingers of the hand still beneath Olivia's cardigan sliding higher, curving around the side of Olivia's body, over her ribs, brushing the bottom of her breast. Margot's thumb grazed Olivia's nipple through the thin lace of her bra. Her teeth nipped at Olivia's ear at the same time as she pinched her nipple, making Olivia gasp, her thighs clenching together. "Is this okay?"

She pinched harder and Olivia whined, squirming. Olivia lifted a trembling hand from Margot's shoulder and tangled it in her hair.

“*God*, yes.” She panted. “Please. Don’t stop. Keep talking.”

“You’re so soft, Liv,” Margot whispered, hand still cupping Olivia’s breast. “And you’re wearing too many clothes.”

“Yeah?”

Both Margot’s brows rose as she leaned back, fingers drawing teasing circles over Olivia’s lace-covered skin, causing Olivia to openly shiver. The corners of Margot’s mouth curled in obvious delight. “Yeah.” Her tongue darted, wetting her bottom lip, and her dark eyes swept over Olivia’s face, a flash of something that looked like insecurity flickering within them. “Do you want to go to my room?”

Olivia’s tongue was thick, stuck to the roof of her mouth. “Yeah. Yes.”

One hundred percent, absolutely, unequivocally *yes*.

A shy smile tugged at the corners of Margot’s mouth, her face flushed pink. “I had my annual appointment last month. Everything came back negative, and I haven’t been with anyone since.”

Olivia’s heart thudded hard against her sternum. “Um, same. I mean, not last month. I got tested after . . . you know.” She didn’t want to talk about Brad right now. “And I haven’t been with anyone since, either.”

If Margot thought it was strange that she hadn’t slept with anyone since Brad, she didn’t say. Fingers still laced with Olivia’s, Margot helped her off the couch, letting go to steady her when she swayed softly, legs wobbly and knees weak. Margot’s hands slipped under Olivia’s cardigan, fingers curling around her hips, pressing close, walking Olivia backward.

“Keep talking,” Olivia whispered.

Margot crowded Olivia, pressing her back against the hallway wall. Margot’s breath puffed against her mouth, a prelude to the tender brush of her lips.

“You want to know what I want to do to you?” Margot whispered against Olivia’s mouth, one hand sliding out from

Olivia's sweater to cradle the side of her neck, Margot's thumb brushing against Olivia's chin, skimming the front of her throat.

Olivia's whole body prickled with heat. "Mm-hmm."

Margot crowded closer, brushing her lips along Olivia's jaw, tracing the path her fingers had just made, only with her lips. Margot's tongue darted out, licking the hollow above Olivia's collarbone, teeth gently scraping her skin, making her shudder. Olivia's head fell to the side as she bared her neck.

"God, Liv." The hand on Olivia's hip inched lower, sliding beneath the waist of her skirt and between Olivia's thighs, cupping her over the damp lace of her underwear. "You have no idea how badly I want to put my mouth on you. *No idea.*" Margot nuzzled at the side of Olivia's throat, whimpering softly. "Jesus, just the thought of you riding my tongue has me fucking soaked, Liv."

"Please." Hips canting into Margot's hand, Olivia sought friction, *something*. "Touch me."

Margot's hand slid higher, fingers slipping beneath the lace of Olivia's underwear and lower, sliding over Olivia's trimmed curls, fingertips circling her clit, making the muscles in Olivia's stomach jump. "Like this?"

Olivia clutched at Margot's upper arms and arched into her touch, hips dancing, back bowing away from the wall.

"More," she rasped.

Lips dragging up Olivia's throat, Margot slid her fingers down Olivia's slit. A hiss escaped Margot's mouth. "Fuck, you're dripping."

Two fingers sank inside her with ease, and Olivia clenched around them, heat unspooling slowly inside her belly when Margot crooked them forward. What started as a slow drag quickly stole the air from Olivia's lungs as Margot's fingers sped, pressing hard and fast.

Olivia's thighs trembled, her hands sliding down Margot's arms to curl around her elbows, clutching hard, feeling shaky,

like she was going to fly apart, like she wasn't quite sure where she'd land. "*Fuck.*"

Margot laughed, breath damp and hot against the side of Olivia's neck. "You're so pretty like this. Shaking and desperate." Her teeth nipped at the sensitive skin of Olivia's earlobe, drawing a high whine from the back of Olivia's throat. "And so wet. You're dripping down the back of my hand, Liv."

Her face burned, heat rising to the surface of her skin at the slick sounds coming from between her thighs each time Margot curled her fingers. "*Please.*"

Margot pressed a kiss to the side of Olivia's jaw, sucking at her skin. She ground the heel of her hand against Olivia's clit and—Olivia's knees buckled, unable to support her weight, the pleasure too sharp, too good, her legs too weak to withstand it and hold her upright.

Margot caught her around the waist and laughed. "You're so sensitive. I forgot."

Olivia dropped her head forward, burying her face and muffling her whimper against Margot's neck. "I was so close."

"Shh." One hand stroked the back of her head, fingers tangling in her hair, Margot's short nails raking gently against her scalp. "I'll get you there."

Of that, Olivia had no doubt.

Other than Margot, Olivia had only been with Brad, and he had never asked what she wanted, had never seemed to care. Sex with Brad hadn't been *bad*, sometimes it had actually been *good* or something close enough, but what she wanted, her pleasure, had never been his primary concern. It had definitely never been the objective, and she wasn't stupid—she knew that was wrong and not fair and sure as hell problematic, but there were only so many times she could move his hand, literally place his fingers where she needed them, before she gave up, trying more trouble than it was worth.

Talking about it hadn't worked; all Brad had done was look bruised before snapping that there was nothing wrong with the

way he fucked her, that it had worked just fine for other girls, implying that there was something wrong with her. It had probably never even crossed his mind that *just fine* was a sad, sad bar.

Sex with Margot was different. Margot had actually cared if Olivia got off, cared about what she liked, gave her what she wanted. Getting off hadn't seemed to be Margot's primary concern. Getting Olivia off—several times—seemed to have been what Margot cared about most.

There wasn't a doubt in Olivia's mind that Margot would get her there, probably more than once.

Margot tugged on Olivia's hair gently, drawing her head back until they were face-to-face. Margot's cheeks were flushed pink, the tips of her ears a fiery shade of red, undoubtedly hot to the touch. Eyes bright, Margot trapped her lower lip between her teeth and smiled. "Bed?"

Yes. Olivia bobbed her head. "Bed."

Hands biting into the curve of Olivia's waist, Margot herded her further down the hall, reaching around her for the doorknob, nudging her into Margot's bedroom, where it was dark. Margot flipped the light switch, bathing the room in an amber glow. Her hands returned, ushering Olivia deeper into the room until the backs of her knees hit the mattress and she tumbled down, bouncing softly. Margot followed her, bracketing her with a hand on either side of her head, caging her in with her body as her mouth descended, crashing down on Olivia's, making her head spin.

Just when Olivia's lungs started to burn, needing air but not wanting this to end, Margot drew back, leaving a trail of kisses down the front of Olivia's throat. Like she couldn't get enough.

Margot smiled against Olivia's skin and tugged at the hem of her sweater. "Help me get you naked."

Shoulders pressed to the mattress, Olivia arched her back. Hands neither coordinated nor graceful, they managed to rid her of her sweater. Margot's lips twitched, one finger flicking

the tiny decorative gold bell between the floral lace cups of her bra. “Nice.”

Olivia laughed. “Shut up.”

Hands pressed against Olivia’s shoulders, Margot urged her to lie back. She followed Olivia down, mouth fastened to her neck, sucking a mark against the side of Olivia’s throat.

“I didn’t say I don’t like it.” Margot kissed away the sting and smiled. “It’s pretty. I just think I’d like it better on my floor.”

Margot moved lower, lips scraping the surprisingly sensitive patch of skin drawn taut over Olivia’s collarbone, and lower still, skimming the swell of her breasts. One of her hands slid up Olivia’s back, short nails dragging along her spine on the way to the clasp of her bra, nimble fingers separating the hooks and eyes expertly.

Margot’s fingertips tickled the backs of her arms as she dragged the straps downward, tossing Olivia’s bra across the room. The air inside the apartment was warm, and her blood must’ve been about a million degrees, but something about having Margot’s eyes on her made her skin prickle.

Margot’s hair trailed across Olivia’s flushed skin as she ducked her head, lips fastening to the peak of Olivia’s right breast. A keen escaped Olivia’s lips as she threw her head back against the pillow, eyes scrunching shut as Margot’s tongue laved her skin.

Olivia’s hands scrambled against Margot’s back, squeezing, slipping beneath the hem of her sweater and dragging it upward, nails digging into the skin beneath her bra strap when Margot’s teeth scraped against her nipple. Her hands shook and her back bowed, hips bucking as Margot walked her fingers down the center of Olivia’s stomach, finding the zipper at the side of her skirt. The sound of the zipper’s teeth was loud as Margot lowered it, fabric falling apart, air cool against the side of Olivia’s hip and upper thigh.

She lifted her hips so Margot could slip the skirt down her legs and over her feet before dropping it to the floor. A ragged

whimper escaped her lips. “Please.”

Margot’s lips were red and wet, and her cheeks were full of color, her eyes dark and bright. “Please *what?*”

She tugged at the hem of Margot’s sweater. “Touch me.”

Margot’s fingers skimmed Olivia’s sides. “I am.”

Olivia bucked her hips. “*Margot.*”

Margot surged forward, mouth covering Olivia’s as she ran her hands up the inside of Olivia’s legs, stopping at the crease of her thighs, fingers making maddening little swirls against the edge of her underwear. Teasing. Jesus. Olivia buried her hands in Margot’s hair, nails scraping her scalp as she rolled her hips.

Margot’s fingers hooked around the crotch of her panties, tugging them to the side, and *God*, Olivia was going to faint, she knew she was. It was going to happen, an inevitability, the tension too much, the lace of her underwear biting against the crease of her thigh, the air cool against her where she was hot and aching, riding the edge of desperation, her body still strung tight from almost coming in the hall.

All of it was too much, and yet somehow, not enough. It was maddening, the way Margot’s other hand stroked a circuit from her knee to her hip. Finally, *finally* Margot took mercy on her, fingers brushing her clit and sliding through her folds, making her whole body jolt, just as sensitive as Margot had said.

“Fuck,” Margot muttered, and Olivia was pretty sure that was *her* line, because *Jesus*.

She exhaled harshly and stared up at the ceiling where a faint crack shot through the plaster.

“What do you want, Liv?” Margot pressed a wet kiss just above her hip bone.

Articulating her desires was kind of beyond the realm of possibility at this point. She moaned instead.

“Just tell me what you want.” Margot kissed her again, a little lower. “Tell me and I—whatever you need, Liv, just tell

me and I'll give it to you." She sounded wrecked. "I want to give it to you."

"*You.*"

Margot nuzzled the crease where her leg met her body, her hands wrapping around Olivia's thighs as she settled between her spread legs. "You want my mouth?"

Olivia opened her mouth to answer in an affirmative, but her simple *yeah* died a sudden death in the back of her throat as Margot ran the flat of her tongue up Olivia's center.

Good was an understatement. Her back bowed, nearly jackknifing off the mattress. A shudder wracked her body, her fingers curling, and her nails biting into the bedspread beneath her when the tip of Margot's tongue flicked against her clit.

A jumble of nonsense sounds spilled from her lips as Margot made her thighs quake and her body tremble like a plucked string, two fingers crooking up inside her, that brilliant tongue lapping at her gently.

Close. She just needed a little *more*. She scrunched her eyes shut and slid her hand down her belly, fingers making fast and firm circles over her clit the way she liked best.

Wet heat engulfed her fingertips as Margot's tongue ran between her fingers, sucking them between her lips. Olivia pried her eyes open, breath catching in her throat as she glanced down. Even though Olivia was the one shaking and a breath away from falling apart, Margot's pupils were blown wide, only a thin ring of dark brown iris remaining. Her tongue, shiny and pink, was wrapped around two of Olivia's fingers.

Margot's teeth nipped at Olivia's fingertips before she nudged her hand aside.

Desperation drew a groan from her lips. "I'm so close."

"You want to come?" Margot continued to fuck Olivia with her fingers.

Olivia nodded, breath escaping her in shallow pants. "Uh-huh."

Margot curled her fingers hard and Olivia's muscles went taut. "Beg me for it."

Heat pooled between her thighs, her body burning, face on fire as the sound of Margot's fingers sliding into her grew louder, bordering on obscene. "*Please.*"

"I know you can do better than that, Liv." Margot chuckled, tongue darting out, giving a quick kitten lick to her clit.

Olivia whimpered. "*Please. Fuck. Margot. Please don't stop. Please, please, please—*"

Margot's lips wrapped around her clit and sucked, tongue flicking hard and fast against the bundle of nerves.

It hit Olivia like a lightning strike down her spine, ripples of pleasure curling her toes and snatching the air from her lungs, the pleasure so sharp, so good it hurt. Her back bowed against the bed, her eyes snapping shut as she shook, coming apart at the seams.

Margot didn't let up. If anything, she doubled down, fingers curling a little faster, a little firmer, pressing against the spot inside her that she could never seem to reach by herself.

Olivia crunched forward, legs drawing up reflexively, fingers tangling in Margot's hair. "I—I can't—"

Before Olivia could finish telling Margot that it was too much, too good, that there was no way, she *couldn't*, Margot nudged her over the edge for a second time.

Her first inhale almost hurt, chest stinging as everything between her thighs continued to pulse in time with her heartbeat. Margot gentled, fingers no longer curling and thrusting, instead giving Olivia something to clench around as she came back to Earth. Tiny aftershocks made her tremble, and Margot's kisses turned into soft little licks as opposed to precise swipes.

The spots behind her lids disappeared as Olivia's breath evened out, her heart rate returning to normal, no longer frenzied like it was trying to escape through the wall of her chest.

Slowly, she pried her eyes open, blinking as the room came into view, reminding her that while it might have felt like Margot had sent her to outer space, she hadn't. Not literally, at least.

Margot had her chin resting on the soft swell beneath Olivia's belly button, her fingers tracing idle abstract shapes on the skin of her stomach and hips, little circles and lines that made Olivia shiver and—those weren't abstract shapes, they were letters. An *O*, an *M*, a heart. Margot drew their initials, re-creating the doodles she'd once drawn in the margins of the notes they used to pass in class.

Olivia's heart squeezed.

Margot was watching her, eyes so dark they almost appeared black, her smile a dizzying combination of fond and smug, and it made Olivia's core clench even though she was the dictionary definition of spent. She reached down and with shaking fingers tucked an errant strand of hair behind Margot's ear.

"Good?" Margot asked, turning her head, lips skimming the inside of Olivia's wrist.

A laugh escaped her. "Understatement."

Margot dropped her hand and sat up on her knees, reaching for the hem of her sweater and dragging it up and over her head.

Olivia rested her weight on her elbows. "Come here."

Margot balled her sweater up and tossed it on the floor before crawling closer, knees bracketing Olivia's hips as she dipped her head, kissing Olivia softly. Tempted by the new skin available to her, Olivia gripped Margot's waist. She was hot and felt like silk under Olivia's fingertips.

Olivia dropped her hands to the button of Margot's jeans, then lowered the zipper. Margot broke the kiss, smile going crooked, almost shy as she leaned back, shimmying both her tight jeans and underwear down her thighs, leaving them in a heap beside the bed.

And Margot had called *her* pretty.

She was all smooth, pale skin and dark hair, black ink winding up the side of her hip, accentuating her curves and— Olivia’s breath caught in her throat. Wrapped around Margot’s wrist was her faded, frayed friendship bracelet, the one Olivia had held on to for the years, the one Margot had plucked from Olivia’s keepsake box. She was still wearing it, and now, not much else.

A pretty pink flush crept up Margot’s chest when she wrapped her fingers around Olivia’s left wrist, sliding it down her stomach, guiding Olivia’s hand between her legs. The curls between her thighs were dark and glistening with arousal, her inner thighs damp. Margot dragged Olivia’s fingers through her wetness, a tiny gasp escaping her lips as their fingers brushed her swollen clit.

For a moment, Margot was all soft sighs and circling hips, bitten-off whimpers and throaty moans, her eyes slipping shut as she rocked against Olivia’s hand. Despite having come twice, want prickled low in Olivia’s belly. The sight of Margot with her head thrown back, undulating over Olivia’s hips, her wetness coating Olivia’s fingers, was enough to make her want more.

“Come here,” Olivia repeated, tugging Margot closer, one hand on her hip.

Margot leaned forward, hair spilling around her face.

“No.” Olivia wrapped both hands around Margot’s thighs and wiggled a little further down the bed until she was completely flat, save for the pillow beneath her head. She licked her lips and craned her neck slightly, raising up and meeting Margot’s eyes. Olivia arched both brows. “Up here.”

Margot’s jaw fell open. “You want me to . . .”

Olivia nodded, heart hammering in her throat. “Mm-hmm.”

That endearing shade of red crept higher now, up Margot’s throat and along her jaw. Even the tips of her ears turned neon. “Oh. Fuck.” Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips. “Okay. Just . . . gimme a sec.”

Careful of her where her limbs were, Margot crawled higher up the bed, higher up Olivia's body, until her knees bracketed Olivia's head. Margot curled her fingers around the headboard, holding herself up, and straddled Olivia's face.

Olivia wrapped her hands around the backs of Margot's thighs and drew her closer, lower, breathing her in, before turning her head and pressing a kiss to the inside of Margot's trembling thigh.

Margot's breath stuttered from between her lips. "Pinch me if you need to breathe or—*fuck.*"

Olivia ran her tongue up the center of Margot's slit all the way up to her clit, moaning softly at her taste. Margot's body jerked, hips pressing down, rocking against Olivia's mouth.

"Fuck." Margot panted.

Olivia smiled at the stuttered, labored breaths escaping Margot. She lapped at Margot's clit, long strokes with the flat of her tongue, before gaining speed, flicking faster with the tip.

Margot's arms trembled as she clutched at the headboard. "Inside."

Fingers squeezing Margot's ass, Olivia dragged her tongue down to Margot's entrance, slipping inside, but just barely.

Sliding a hand between Margot's thighs, Olivia ran her fingers down Margot's slit, pushing two inside with ease, her own core clenching when Margot fluttered around her, a choked-off whimper falling from her lips.

A mottled flush crept up Margot's neck as she panted into the quiet of the room. Her thighs trembled as she rode Olivia's face, head flung back and spine arched. Her breasts swayed, dark hair swishing against her neck as she bit her bottom lip, turning it red. Margot's flush spread down her chest, even her stomach and the skin of her inner thighs turning a peachy shade of pink.

Sweat dampened the space between her breasts, and the air was thick with the scent of her arousal. All Olivia could smell was sex, sweet and musky and so perfect. She worked her

fingers a little faster and wrapped her lips around Margot's clit, sucking hard. Margot keened, body shaking, clenching hard around Olivia's fingers as she fractured.

Margot slumped over, falling against the bed face-first with a frazzled laugh, their limbs jumbled, one of Margot's legs draped across Olivia's torso, Olivia's arm wedged beneath Margot's body.

Margot's skin was tacky, damp with sweat, her hair halfway in her face as she lay spent. Olivia's heart stuttered. *She'd* done that. Turned Margot into a soft and messy thing, loose-limbed and satisfied. Undone and all the more beautiful for it.

Margot's breathing slowed, and she lifted her head, her eyes opening a fraction. "Hi."

Olivia smiled, heart floating up like a helium balloon, rising into her throat. "Hey."

Margot rose up onto her hands and flipped over, staring up at the ceiling. A ghost of a smile graced her lips. "That was . . ." Her brows rose. "Wow."

"Wow," Olivia echoed in agreement, laughing softly. Sweat began to cool on her skin and she sat forward, looking for a blanket, a sheet, something to cover up with.

On the other side of the bed, Margot stood and stretched, arms rising over her head, back popping. She bent down and swiped her sweater off the floor, slipping it over her head, flipping the ends of her hair free from the collar.

Olivia frowned. Margot didn't so much as look her way once as she gathered the rest of her clothing off the floor. She slipped her underwear up her legs and tossed her jeans into the laundry basket beside her closet before crossing her arms, wobbling as she scratched the back of her calf with her opposite foot, still avoiding Olivia's eyes.

"So." Margot cleared her throat. "This was fun."

Olivia nodded. "Yeah."

"We should, um, do it again sometime." Margot gave a sharp, decisive nod, her eyes flickering over to Olivia's before

she looked away. “If you want.”

Olivia held her breath, waiting for her to say something else. Something . . . *more*. Anything, really. Proof that this meant as much to Margot as it did to her. That it wasn’t just scratching an itch, sating the absurd sexual tension that had simmered between them since she’d moved in.

Silence stretched between them and the back of her throat ached.

God, Olivia was so *stupid*. Getting her hopes up . . . over what? Sex? She should’ve learned her lesson the first time. That sex didn’t mean everything, didn’t necessarily mean *anything*. Eleven years later and she was none the wiser, repeating history.

Margot didn’t *want* her, not all of her. And Olivia couldn’t even be angry. Margot hadn’t promised her anything. Olivia had just assumed. And she couldn’t say anything. Margot was her roommate, they lived together, and Olivia was planning her best friend’s wedding. All complications that should’ve kept her out of Margot’s bed, but Olivia had wanted her so desperately she’d thrown herself at Margot, thinking—

Wrong. She’d thought wrong, and now she had to suck it up.

She *needed* this wedding to pan out. She *needed* this apartment. She—*God* . . . she wanted Margot.

She knew what it was like, not having Margot in her life. She’d lived that and—she didn’t want to go back, didn’t want to go through that again. Olivia refused to erase the progress they’d made, sacrifice their friendship all because what? Because she couldn’t have everything she wanted?

Everything she wanted. Olivia swallowed hard. Now *that* was a fairy tale. No one ever got everything they wanted, certainly not her, at least not in her experience.

She couldn’t have everything, but maybe she could still have *this*. Margot as a friend, maybe something more, and maybe *one day*—

No, Olivia wouldn’t indulge that desire. If she let it blossom, bloom, she’d get her hopes up and . . . this was *good*.

This could be enough. She could be happy.

Something with Margot would always be better than nothing.

Chapter Eleven

ELLE (9:57 P.M.): MARGOT

ELLE (9:58 P.M.): !!!!

ELLE (9:58 P.M.): 🙄🙄🙄

MARGOT (9:59 P.M.): Are you okay?!

ELLE (10:00 P.M.): <image attachment>

Oh.

Oh, *wow*.

Margot's breath caught as she stared at a slightly blurry selfie of Elle and Darcy beaming at the camera. In it, Elle had her hand held up in front of her, displaying a dazzling round-cut diamond that gleamed brightly from her ring finger.

Margot's phone rang, and she took a deep breath, smiling when she answered because she'd read somewhere that people could pick up on that sort of thing in your voice. "Hey—"

A piercing screech made Margot wince and tug the phone away from her ear.

"Did you see? Did you see it?" Elle demanded. "*Margot!* I'm engaged!"

A genuine laugh escaped her. "I saw it, Elle. Congratulations!"

Elle let loose a softer, slightly more subdued but equally as joyful squeal. "Darcy took me up to the observatory and it was—*God*, Mar. It was perfect. And this ring! Oh sweet Saturn. Darcy said she wanted to get me my birthstone, but apparently

amethyst isn't very durable. Something abouts a Mohs' scale? I don't even know. But then she found this! The halo's shaped like a *star*, and get this—the band is inlaid with actual meteorite. From fucking *space*.”

Margot chuckled at Elle's out-of-control enthusiasm. “It sounds perfect, Elle.”

“It is, it *really* is.” Elle gave a happy-sounding sigh. “Darcy's on the phone with Brendon right now, and I know I should've probably called my parents but . . . you're the first person I wanted to tell.”

A knot formed in Margot's throat, the backs of her eyelids stinging. “I'm glad you called.” She swallowed before her voice could crack. “I'm—like I said, I'm so happy for you.” She laughed. “*Fuck*. I mean, *damn*, Elle. You're engaged.”

Engaged to be married. Holy shit.

Margot's bedroom door inched open and Cat peeked inside. She inspected her surroundings with curious sniffs as she wandered further into the room, detouring to Margot's closed closet door and smacking it with her paw. When it didn't budge, Cat headed over to Margot's bed. Margot tucked her feet up under her and frowned when Cat let out a demanding little trill.

“Margot?”

“Sorry.” She cringed. “I, um, got distracted. You were saying?”

“I asked if you'll be my Maid of Honor, silly.” Elle laughed. “Darcy's making faces at me—hold on.” The line went muffled, Elle's voice distant. “Sorry, Darcy says I should've asked you in a note or a gift box or something.”

“Oh!” She pressed the heel of her hand into her chest as if she could massage away the ache inside. “I, uh, don't need a gift box.”

“I could buy you a box of wine?”

Margot laughed. “I won't say no to wine.”

“*So?*” Elle asked, sounding impatient but mostly just eager.

“So of course.” Warmth bloomed between her ribs. “I’d be honored.” Her lips quirked. “*Ba-dum-tss.*”

Just like she’d hoped, Elle chuckled. “I’m glad. Oh, this is going to be so great. It’s March, and obviously nothing’s set in stone, but Darcy and I were thinking about a winter wedding, so that would mean . . .”

Cat crouched low and leaped onto Margot’s bed, landing gracefully on all fours, the duvet barely depressing beneath her weight, which was made of mostly fur and sass. She stomped around, pawing at Margot’s pillows before stopping directly in front of Margot.

And staring.

“Mar? Are you still there?”

Margot sighed. “Yeah, I’m so sorry. I am. I’m just—this cat keeps staring at me and I don’t know if it’s a friendly stare or an *I want to eat your face* look.” Margot had woken up at four in the morning to the unsettling feeling of being watched. She’d rolled over, and sure enough, *somehow* Cat had found her way into Margot’s room, Margot’s *closed* room, hopped up onto Margot’s bed, lain down, and proceeded to purr like an engine. Whether that meant Cat was warming up to her or simply studying her, lying in wait for the right moment to attack, Margot had no fucking clue. “But I’m totally listening.”

Elle went quiet before clearing her throat. “Are you sure you’re okay? You sound a little . . . off.”

Off. Fuck. Margot dropped her head into her hand and swallowed a sigh. The last thing she wanted was for her—her *weirdness* and messy, all-over-the-place feelings to get out. She was dealing, working through them. Talking to Olivia had helped, but Margot wasn’t going to magically feel less like her friends were leaving her behind, and it definitely wasn’t going to happen overnight. It was going to take time and, honestly, seeing proof that just because everyone was getting married didn’t mean everything would change.

For Elle's sake, for the sake of their friendship, Margot needed to pull her head out of her ass, *stat*. "You want to know the truth?"

Elle sucked in a sharp breath. "Hit me with it."

"Darcy already told me she was planning to propose. She pulled me aside and told me after the cake tasting, so—so that's why I sound off. I was trying to act surprised, and you know me, I can't act for shit."

Elle laughed, obviously relieved. "You had me worried for a second. Geez. Okay, I can see that happening. So you've known since Saturday?"

"Mm-hmm." Margot scratched her jaw, eyes flitting to Cat and away. Cat kept staring, little head cocked slightly to the side, her small body forming a squat triangle as she sat. Her front paw reached out, patting the bed in front of Margot's knee, and she meowed. Margot frowned. "Look, I absolutely want to chat more about this, okay? Maybe when we're up at the lodge tomorrow for the bachelor-bachelorette trip, yeah? We can sip spiked cider and you can tell me all about it. Right now, I've got to figure out what this cat wants."

"Good luck." Elle snickered, then gasped. "Wait! Do you think Olivia could help with our wedding?"

Cat meowed louder, stomping closer, getting all up in Margot's space, stepping on Margot's socked feet with her front paws.

"Um, I don't see why not. You should definitely ask her."

"Okay, you go take care of your *catastrophe*." Elle chuckled at her own joke. "I'll talk to you later, 'kay?"

"Later." Margot ended the call and tossed her phone down beside her with a groan. She looked at Cat and frowned. "How do you think I sounded? Pretty convincing?"

Cat sneezed.

Huh.

"Okay, whatever that's supposed to mean." Margot sighed. "I *am* happy for Elle, you know? I'm just . . . conflicted.

Which is normal, I guess. I just need to—to get a grip. Pull it together. Because that’s what good friends do.”

Cat cocked her head, whiskers twitching. She patted at Margot’s leg—claws mercifully retracted—and meowed.

If only she knew what the cat was saying—*oh, wait*. She’d downloaded an app, the one that apparently translated cat-speak into English. It sounded suspect, the science behind it pretty much nonexistent, but there was no harm in trying.

Margot opened up the app and hit the *record* button.

Cat stared at her, silent.

“Meow?” Margot tried.

If she wasn’t mistaken, she could’ve sworn Cat’s eyes narrowed, judging her.

“Come on. *Now* you want to be quiet?”

She closed the app with a sigh.

Almost immediately, Cat gave a soft, kittenish-sounding mewl.

“You’re kind of an asshole, you know that?” Margot smiled. “It’s okay. I can be a little bit of an asshole sometimes, too.”

Cat’s tail swished from side to side. She stood, stretched, then hopped off Margot’s bed, sauntering across the room. She stopped just shy of the door and looked back over her shoulder, giving a sharp, insistent meow that made it clear she wanted *something*.

Margot sighed and stood. “What is it? Did Timmy fall down the well?”

Cat’s eyes narrowed into green slits.

Yeesh. Tough crowd. “Okay, to be fair, I’ll admit that a dog joke might’ve been in poor taste. But most of my cat jokes are in *equally* poor taste, so it was kind of a lose-lose.”

With a swish of her tail, Cat left the room, looking back once, as if making sure Margot followed.

Instead of turning left toward the living room, Cat went right, turning the corner into Olivia's room. Margot's footsteps faltered.

Because of Cat, Olivia kept her door open at all times, even when she wasn't home. Like now. Olivia was downstairs in the basement, doing a load of laundry.

Cat gave another sharp screech, looking at Margot as if wondering what was taking her so long. *Assuming* that's what that cat wanted. Margot didn't know. It was all a guessing game.

"You need to wait until your . . ." She trailed off. Cat mom? Handler? *Human*? Hell if she knew. "You've got to wait 'til Liv comes back, you little monster."

Margot couldn't just waltz inside Olivia's bedroom, even if the door was open. There were boundaries. Having sex didn't automatically negate their need for their own space. *Privacy*. They'd never said bedrooms were off-limits, but wasn't it implied? Margot couldn't just—

Cat wailed like a banshee, hitting a pitch that shouldn't have been possible. Margot cringed and—fuck it. If ever there was a time to throw caution to the wind, it was now, her eardrums practically bleeding as Cat freaking caterwauled. It wasn't like she'd be snooping through Olivia's belongings. All she wanted was to figure out what the hell was wrong with this cat and make her stop screaming. Olivia would understand.

Margot stepped inside the room and flipped the lights. She cast a glance around the room, gaze stutter-stopping at the corner near Olivia's closet. Cat sat beside her litter box with a subtle yet discernible frown on her already scrunchy face. Her ears were down and flat, and she wailed once more.

Margot held her breath and stepped closer and—

"Are you *shitting* me right now?"

Cat blinked, utterly unrepentant.

Margot pulled her shirt up over her nose. Cat hadn't bothered to cover her business. Just left it there, bold as could be, in the center of the litter box.

“I’m not cleaning that,” Margot muttered. “You can wait until Olivia comes back.”

Cat looked up, doing her best damn impression of Puss in Boots, all wide, innocent eyes. A sad little mew escaped her. Margot shook her head, turned on her heel, and—

Another one of those banshee-like screams filled the air.

Margot shut her eyes.

This was her life now. Being led around by a cat, a cat who had destroyed her favorite vibrator, and now demanded she clean up her poop. Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

Margot huffed and spun on her heel. “Okay, fine. Just this once. This is not going to become a habit, you hear me?”

Cat stared.

Pooper scooper . . . pooper scooper . . . where would Olivia keep a scooper? Margot checked beside the litter box, finding a stash of lightly floral-scented bags for depositing Cat’s business in. But no scooper. She crouched low and checked under Olivia’s desk. Squat. Beside the door. Nope. Unless it was right in front of Margot’s eyes and she’d missed it, the pooper scooper was nowhere to be seen.

Cat let loose another aggrieved-sounding meow as if this was taking too long.

Margot took a deep, bracing breath and shook open one of the pastel pink bags. A sweet lavender scent filled the air, masking the odor coming from the litter box. Margot shoved her hand inside the bag and crouched in front of the box.

“I can’t believe I’m actually doing this,” she muttered.

Cat stood and circled the box, taking a seat directly beside Margot, watching. Inspecting. *Judging*.

Hand encased in a thin layer of plastic, Margot carefully reached inside the litter box, fishing out the piece of poo.

“This is degrading,” she muttered under her breath. “And demoralizing.” She glanced at Cat, who had her little head cocked up at Margot, eyes wide, whiskers twitching. “Wipe

that self-satisfied smile off your face.” Cat leaned in and bumped Margot’s arm with her head, starting up a low, rumbling purr. Margot’s insides melted. “Oh, Jesus, you’re too cute. You played me like a fiddle, didn’t you? Ugh. I bet you’re laughing inside, aren’t you? *Ha, humans have thumbs, but look at you, shoveling my shit. Who’s the smarter species now?*”

“Margot?”

Oh, shit.

Margot shuffled on her knees, pivoting to face the door. Olivia stood, laundry basket propped against her hip, a frown furrowing her brows.

“Um.” Margot lifted a hand, the one protected by a thin layer of plastic, holding Cat’s poo. “This isn’t what it looks like?”

Olivia pressed her lips together, looking like she was trying not to laugh. “Honestly? I don’t even *know* what this looks like.”

Margot dropped her chin and chuckled. “Okay. Your cat kept whining and she—she pulled a Lassie and led me in here and there was”—she waved her hand and, okay gross, that was a bad idea—“*this*. I couldn’t find your litter scooper, so I . . . improvised?”

“You improvised.” Olivia’s shoulders shook with silent laughter.

“People pick up their dogs’ droppings with little plastic bags all the time. This isn’t any different.”

Except for the mortification. That was exciting and new.

Olivia set her laundry basket down and crossed the room. She stepped on the foot pedal of the trash can against the wall and pointed at a handy-dandy compartment tucked inside the lid, where the pooper scooper was hidden out of sight. “It keeps everything nice and odor-free.”

“Right.” Margot’s face warmed as she stared at her hand full of cat poo. “This isn’t awkward at all.”

Olivia laughed. “I, um, appreciate the effort.”

Carefully, Margot slipped the plastic down her arm and over her wrist, turning the bag inside out. She tied it off and tossed it in the open can, Olivia’s foot still depressing the pedal for her.

“I’m going to go scrub my hands,” she mumbled, slipping out into the hall and into the bathroom.

Olivia followed a few seconds later, Cat cradled in her arms like an overgrown furry baby. She leaned against the doorjamb, watching as Margot pumped hand soap into her palms, coating them in a liberal lather.

“I really do appreciate it,” Olivia said, hiking Cat a little higher. “You could’ve waited until I came back.”

Not really, with Cat practically howling her displeasure.

Margot shrugged and turned off the tap, flicking excess water from her fingers before reaching for the hand towel. “It’s fine. I hope you don’t mind I went into your room.”

“Why would I mind?” Olivia bent down and set Cat on the floor when she started to wiggle.

Margot turned and leaned her hip against the sink. “I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want you to think I was invading your . . . I don’t know, privacy or something. I wasn’t in there snooping. Strictly shoveling poo.”

Olivia stepped closer, stopping when their toes bumped, both wearing socks. Olivia’s were white with a pink stripe across the toes, Margot’s basic black. Olivia smiled. “It’s not like I have anything to hide. And besides”—she rested a hand on either side of the sink by Margot’s hips, boxing her in—“I trust you.”

Margot’s heart bungeed into her throat. “Cool. That’s . . .”

Olivia’s lips twitched, eyes roving over Margot’s face.

She swallowed hard. “I trust you, too.”

A broad smile lit up Olivia’s face. The hands on either side of Margot closed in, sliding over the sink, settling against

Margot's hips and squeezing softly. Olivia's fingers skimmed the highest point of Margot's ass, and then she leaned in, head tilting to the side, the tip of her nose brushing Margot's, breath wafting warm and sweet against Margot's mouth.

It was almost embarrassing how weak her knees went from such a chaste kiss. A sigh escaped her as she gripped Olivia's arms, losing herself in the softness of Olivia's mouth and the sweet, subtle perfume of her skin.

Olivia drew back, ending the kiss before Margot was ready, a tiny wrinkle between her eyes. "Was that okay?"

"Yes? I mean, a little brief for my taste, but—"

Olivia ducked her head and laughed. "No, I meant kissing you. Is it okay if I do?"

Color her confused. "Why *wouldn't* it be okay?"

"We didn't really talk about it."

No, no, they hadn't.

As soon as the sweat had started to cool against her skin and her heart rate was no longer racing, Margot had—in what wasn't one of her finest moments—panicked.

The *one* thing she wasn't supposed to do, a line she wasn't supposed to cross, and what had she done? She'd taken a running leap and hurled herself over it, headfirst.

But then again, it wasn't sex that had complicated everything between them the first time. It was that Margot had had *feelings*.

The only reasonable solution was to take *feelings* completely off the table. Prevent them from forming in the first place. To keep things between them casual.

"I don't want to overstep or do anything that makes you uncomfortable," Olivia added.

Short of pushing Margot away or leaving, there was nothing Margot could imagine Olivia doing that would make her uncomfortable.

"You won't," Margot said.

“So, I can kiss you?”

Margot nodded. “You can kiss me whenever you want.”

Olivia’s lips curved. “Careful. I might get greedy.”

Please do.

Margot laughed. “Somehow, I don’t see myself complaining.”

“Good.” Olivia leaned in, pecking Margot quickly.

“You have plans tonight?” Margot bit her lip and snuck her hands under the back of Olivia’s tee, trailing a finger up her spine and biting back a smile when Olivia shivered.

Olivia’s hips jerked forward, a soft, sweet laugh escaping her lips. “Other than folding laundry?”

“Screw laundry.” Margot reversed the course of her hands, tucking them under the waist of Olivia’s jeans. Her thumbs traced circles along the dimples at the base of Olivia’s spine, touching sensitive skin that made her press even closer. Olivia’s grip on Margot’s hips tightened, fingers biting into Margot’s ass, making her grin at how easy it was to elicit a reaction from Olivia.

Or maybe Margot was just that good at it. Yeah, she liked that option much better.

“Mmm. Aren’t you supposed to say something like *why do laundry when you can do me instead?*”

“You know me so well.” She leaned in, pressing her lips to the velvety-soft skin just beneath Olivia’s ear.

Leaning her head to the side, Olivia bared her neck, giving Margot more room to work with, more skin to worship. A soft hum escaped her throat before the hands grasping Margot’s hips squeezed and Olivia stepped back, her hum of content morphing into a regretful groan that Margot couldn’t help but echo. “Before I forget. Brendon texted me.”

“Okay?”

“He invited me up to Snoqualmie for his and Annie’s joint bachelor-bachelorette trip,” Olivia explained, thumbs inching

under the hem of Margot's shirt. "Is that okay?"

Olivia's fingers made maddening little circles against Margot's sides. Goose bumps erupted across her skin, and for a split second her brain went fuzzy, lost in the sensation. "Um. Why wouldn't it be?"

Olivia shrugged. "They're your friends." And Margot was ninety-nine percent sure Brendon was trying to adopt Olivia into the fold. "I don't want it to be weird."

"Zero weirdness," Margot said. "At least not for me?"

Olivia drew her lip between her teeth. "Have you, um, told them . . . ?"

About what? Saturday? Or years before?

Margot shook her head. She was going to assume Olivia meant the former, otherwise she probably would've brought it up before now. "It hasn't really come up. With the wedding and everything."

"Right." Olivia nodded quickly. "Makes sense."

Plus, there was that whole thing where Margot didn't know how to begin explaining this to her friends. The past, the now, none of it. Knowing Brendon, he'd probably get it in his head that *casual* was a pit stop on the way to falling in love. He'd take it upon himself to play Cupid, to make their relationship into *more*.

He'd hassle her, his heart in the right place, but the road to hell was paved with good intentions. *This*, her and Olivia, felt precarious enough without added meddling. Even if it was well-meaning.

"This is kind of a weird ask, but . . . do you think we could keep this quiet?" Margot winced. "That sounds terrible. Jesus. It's just, you've met Brendon. You've seen how he can be, and that's only in the handful of interactions you've had."

Olivia nibbled on her bottom lip, staring over Margot's shoulder into the mirror. "They're *your* friends, Mar. You can tell them or not tell them whatever you want." She flashed

Margot a smile and shrugged. “I’m just their wedding planner.”

And the wedding was in under a week. Olivia would no longer be *just* their wedding planner. Hell, she was already more than that. Margot’s roommate, Margot’s friend, Margot’s—*something*.

“It doesn’t have to be forever,” Margot said, her stupid voice cracking on the last word. Forever. Wow, way to imply that this thing between them had longevity. Fuck. Margot’s stomach knotted. Something else to talk about.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to, um, keep things under wraps until after the wedding,” Olivia said. “Keep things focused on Brendon and Annie.”

“Right.” Margot nodded quickly. “And, um, we can decide to tell them or not after.”

“Sure.” Olivia smiled and resumed tracing shapes into Margot’s skin. “The grocery store down the street is open twenty-four hours, right?”

“No. Only until midnight. Do you need something?”
Something that couldn’t wait?

“Cat’s out of food. I thought I had another can in the pantry, but I don’t.” Olivia’s lips twisted to the side. “That, and I know Annie and Brendon said no gifts at the bachelor-bachelorette party, but I don’t want to show up empty-handed. I was thinking I’d bake cookies, and you have no sugar.”

Typical Liv, needing to bring a hostess gift. Margot smiled. “You know, most people bring alcohol or . . . I don’t know, a dip.”

Olivia’s brows rose. “A dip?”

“Yeah. You know, sour cream or hummus or—I don’t know. *Dip*.”

Brendon was the first of her friends to get married. The whole of her knowledge of bachelor and bachelorette parties came from movies like *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids*.

Olivia smiled. “I guess I’m not most people, then.”

“No,” Margot agreed, warmth spreading through her chest. “You aren’t.”

Olivia ducked her head, but there was no mistaking the way her smile began to curl. “If I’m baking cookies, I need sugar. A few other odds and ends, too.”

“We’ve got break-and-bake dough in the fridge,” Margot said, erring on the side of simplicity. That, and it was hard, though not impossible, to fuck up premade dough.

Olivia wrinkled her nose. “I want to make *real* cookies. My grandma’s cookies.”

Oh, shit. “You mean the chocolate cookies with—”

“White chocolate chunks?” Olivia nodded. “Yup. My grandma’s tar cookies.”

Margot’s mouth watered. She stepped away from the counter and fished her phone out of her pocket. “It’s only after ten.”

Olivia cocked her head. “Want to go with me? Keep me company?”

Margot shrugged. She wasn’t doing anything. “Sure. Let me grab my jacket.”

Three minutes later, they were out on the rain-splattered sidewalk. Margot tugged her hood over her head and crossed her arms against the chill, setting off down the street in the direction of the QFC.

A blast of heat blew her hood back as soon as they stepped through the automatic doors and into the grocery store. Bypassing the carts, Margot paused in front of the bank of registers. “I’m going to head to the freezer section. Meet you by the self-check?”

Olivia nodded, already shuffling in the direction of the aisle marked *pet care*. “Sounds good.”

Margot meandered toward the ice cream, stopping to snag a bag of Reese’s off the endcap of an aisle, grabbing a box of Sour Patch Kids, too, because Olivia had an affinity for things that were sour and sweet and—*huh*. A snort escaped her,

earning her a sideways look from a woman wearing a fur coat pushing a cart full of mayonnaise. Thirteen jars of Kraft mayonnaise and not a single other item in her cart, though it looked like she was seriously considering the bag of Pop Rocks in her hand.

Capitol Hill after dark was an interesting place, that was for sure. Margot loved it here.

Ooh, Ben & Jerry's had a new flavor featuring peanut butter cups *and* peanut butter swirls. Margot cracked open the freezer, a chilly blast of air nipping at her face as she bypassed the closest pint and grabbed the second out of habit. She was still bitter that they'd discontinued her favorite flavor, sending it to the flavor graveyard, because apparently *some* people had no taste and couldn't appreciate a good thing. *This* was a small concession, one she was eager to try.

"Hey." Olivia ducked her head around the aisle, arms laden with sugar, cocoa powder, chocolate chips, and several cans of Friskies cat food in delightful flavors like—Margot squinted—*chicken griller* and *cheesy ocean feast*. Yikes. Margot would stick with peanut butter swirl, thanks. She smiled ruefully. "I forgot a basket." A smile played at the edges of Olivia's mouth when she spotted the Sour Patch Kids in Margot's other hand. "Are those for me?"

"These?" She wrinkled her nose. "Oh, I was about to put these back on the—"

"Shut up." Olivia laughed and stepped closer, crowding Margot up against the glass door of the freezer, earning a glare from the woman with the cart full of mayo and, now, Pop Rocks, who was perusing the Magic Shell fudge sauce at the end of the aisle.

Margot pressed her lips together, muffling a snicker. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Look at her cart. Think she has big plans for tonight?"

Olivia's eyes darted to the left, doing a double take at the contents of the cart. "Holy—okay, I don't want to yuck anyone's yum, but some things aren't okay."

“Right?” Margot muffled another laugh when the woman grabbed every single jar of fudge sauce, easily six, off the shelf and added them to her cart.

“I mean, *Kraft*?” Olivia tutted. “Hellmann’s or bust.”

Laughter bubbled up Margot’s throat and past her lips. “*Liv.*”

Olivia beamed at her, hazel eyes crinkling. She leaned closer, breath warm against Margot’s mouth. The very tip of her nose brushed Margot’s once, twice, three times before she pressed a kiss to the corner of Margot’s mouth.

“Tease,” Margot muttered, breathless, practically vibrating from holding still, letting Olivia come to her.

“Not if I follow . . .” Olivia frowned. “I’m buzzing.”

Margot chuckled. “You give me tingles, too, *Liv.*”

Olivia burst out laughing. “No. I mean, *yes*, but I meant my butt’s buzzing.” She stepped back and turned, looking at Margot over her shoulder. “Could you grab my phone? My hands are full.”

Oh. Margot wiggled her fingers into the tight back pocket of Olivia’s jeans, prying her phone free. The name on the screen caught her eye. “Why the hell is Brad calling you?”

Saying his name put a funny taste in Margot’s mouth, bitter like she’d drunk coffee that had gone cold and stale. Admittedly, she’d never been Brad’s biggest fan, and not only because he’d dated Olivia. When he hadn’t ignored Margot, he’d called her *Cargo*, a childish taunt that had butchered her name and implied she was Olivia’s sidekick, her *baggage*, all in one fell swoop. Of course, he’d only called her that when Olivia wasn’t around because he was also a coward of the highest order, but *whatever*. The past was the past, and that was the whole point.

Olivia’s eyes widened. “Um. I don’t know.” She juggled the cans in her arms, dropping one. It clattered against the floor, rolling down the aisle and under the freezer. Olivia frowned at it. “He just . . . does sometimes.”

Margot goggled at her. “As in, he does this on what? A regular basis?”

Olivia’s throat jerked. “Define *regular*.”

“Jesus,” Margot murmured. Olivia’s phone continued to vibrate against her palm. “You answer?”

Olivia cradled the remaining cans, eyes flitting between Margot’s face and that lost can. “I . . .” She cringed sharply and gestured to the phone with her elbow. “Could you just . . .”

“Are you serious?” Margot stared at her. “You want me to answer it?”

Olivia cringed. “I’ll be so quick. Just . . . hold it up to my ear?” She stared at Margot with wide eyes and—*ugh*, Margot couldn’t believe she was doing this. A testament to how little she wouldn’t do for Olivia.

She swiped at the screen and held the phone against Olivia’s ear.

“Brad?” Olivia rolled her lips together and shifted her weight from one foot to the other, looking as uncomfortable as Margot felt. “Now isn’t a good time.”

Margot bit down hard on the inside of her cheek.

Olivia shut her eyes. “No. It’s in the junk drawer.” She sighed, forehead creasing in irritation. “The junk drawer, Brad. The catch-all drawer in the kitchen. The one below the coffee maker. The one that sticks when you—yes, that one. It’s in there. Check in the back.” Olivia’s shoulders slumped, and Margot was tempted to hang up the phone for her. “No, Brad. I have to go. Good n—”

Margot ended the call with a little more gusto than strictly necessary, jamming her finger against the screen. She reached around Olivia and slid the phone back into her pocket, then stepped back, crossing her arms. “How often does Brad call you, Liv?”

One of Olivia’s shoulders rose and fell, too jerky to be casual. “Sometimes. I don’t . . . It’s not like I’m keeping track. It’s enough to be a nuisance, but not enough to be a problem.”

A nuisance *was* a problem. Anything that put a frown that severe on Olivia's face was a problem, and she shouldn't have to put up with it.

"What's he even calling you about at"—Margot dug inside her pocket for her own phone—"eleven at night, anyway?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "He was looking for the spare garage door opener."

"And he called *you*?"

A can of cat food teetered, stacked precariously atop the rest. Margot snatched it just as it fell, holding on to it for Olivia.

Olivia nibbled on her lip and nodded. "It's—it's always stupid little things, Mar. I just shrug it off. It's not worth getting up in arms about. Trust me."

"Why haven't you told him to fuck off?" Or, better yet . . . "Why do you even take his calls? Just block his number."

"I asked him to stop."

"You *asked* him." Margot's tongue bulged against the side of her cheek.

Olivia blew the hair out of her face with a weary sigh. "It's not that simple."

Margot bit her tongue against the urge to blurt out that it sure sounded simple to her. Cut-and-dried. *Fuck off*. Two little words, but . . . she wasn't in Olivia's shoes. "Help me understand what makes it complicated, then."

Olivia stared at her for a second, eyes flitting over Margot's face as if weighing the sincerity of Margot's request. After a moment, her gaze dropped to ground between them, her voice quiet but steady. "It's not like I *want* to take his calls, but I can't just block his number." Her jaw ticked, a muscle beneath her ear jumping. "I've asked him not to call me unless it's about something serious."

Margot was trying to understand, but it didn't make sense. Olivia and Brad had been divorced for a year, and from the sound of it, they didn't share close mutual friends. They didn't

have pets or kids to shuffle from one house to another. And they hadn't exactly ended on the best of terms, what with Brad being a cheating ass. The longer she puzzled through this in her head, the less it made sense and the more frustrated she got on Olivia's behalf, her blood pressure rising. "Okay. What would possibly be serious enough for Brad to need to contact you?"

Olivia shrugged, sending another can tumbling. It rolled across the tile floor all the way to the end of the aisle, stopping against the wheel of the cart belonging to the woman with all the mayo. The woman nudged the can back toward them with a kick. It stalled out midway down the aisle, and Margot left it there. She'd pick it up later.

"I told you about my dad. About his heart attack last year," Olivia said, staring down the aisle at the can. "He's doing okay, but . . . I know he doesn't like me to worry. But it's not like I worry for no reason. Dad's not always the most forthcoming. He drove himself to the hospital when it happened. He only let the nurse call me when he found out he was going to be admitted overnight." Her voice cracked and she sniffed hard. "When he tells me he's fine, I can't help but worry that his definition of *fine* and mine aren't the same." Olivia gave another one of those bone-weary-sounding sighs that made Margot want to bundle her up and take her back home. It had only been a couple weeks, but already Margot's brain had made the transition to thinking of the apartment as *theirs* and not just *hers*. "So I asked Brad to let me know if he hears anything. Dad's still friendly with Brad's parents. He and Dad run into each other sometimes. They go to the same football watch parties. It's a small town. People hear things I don't from fifty miles away."

"Do they ever," Margot muttered under her breath. "My dad's the resident busybody, apparently, remember?"

Olivia cracked a smile, the first in too long.

Margot inhaled deeply and nodded slowly. "Okay. So you asked Brad to keep you posted if something happens to your dad." She couldn't say she agreed with that plan, but she could

understand where Olivia was coming from. “But he calls you out of the blue. About garage door openers?”

“Stupid things,” Olivia agreed, head bobbing. “Like I said, I’ve asked him to stop, but it’s not worth getting upset over. I answer, I try to keep it brief. You heard. Then I let him go.” Olivia’s lips flattened. “It’s irritating, but I can’t block him. What if he calls and it’s actually something important?”

A throat cleared. The woman wearing the fur coat with the cart full of mayo stood, brows raised impatiently as she stared at the freezer behind them. “You’re blocking the frozen yogurt.”

“Shoot, sorry.” Olivia offered a smile and stepped out of the way. Rather than merely shuffling to the side, she nodded toward the front of the store. Margot followed after her, swiping the can off the floor on the way to the checkout.

“I’ll get it.” Margot waved Olivia off, paying for the cat food in addition to the ice cream, candy, and ingredients for cookies.

Olivia tucked her wallet away with a smile. “Thanks.”

It wasn’t until they were back out on the street that Margot circled back around, not ready to drop the subject. “It sounds to me like you’ve requested a boundary and Brad continues to ignore it. That’s not okay, Liv. I know you care about your dad, I . . .” Margot swallowed, the next words out of her mouth almost *I love that about you*.

Margot’s heart skipped a beat before crashing hard against the wall of her chest. All the blood in her head seemed to drain south, leaving her dizzy. Where the hell had *that* come from? She didn’t *love* Olivia. No. If Margot loved anything, it was Olivia’s endless capacity to care about people, strangers and friends and family and stray cats alike.

She sucked in a lungful of air. It wasn’t anything worth freaking out over. Even if she did love Liv, Margot loved lots of things. Ice cream. Tequila. Her air fryer. Her friends. No big. Olivia cared, and so what if Margot loved that about her?

It wasn’t like she was *in* love with her.

“It just pisses me off,” Margot said, picking up as if she hadn’t stopped midsentence and gone silent for a beat too long, too telling. “I am—I am *incensed* on your behalf because . . . damn it, Liv. You deserve better than Brad trying to con you into talking to him for whatever bullshit he calls you about. He is a grown-up. He can find a garage door opener without having to resort to calling his ex-wife. The ex-wife he took for granted. I guarantee you he *knows* why you answer, and he’s counting on that. He’s counting on you being kind. Counting on you wondering and worrying, and if on the off chance he *isn’t*? If he’s just selfish and oblivious? That’s not any better. That’s not an excuse. Your boundaries and your feelings and what you want matter. You deserve better, Olivia.”

By the time she’d finished speaking—*ranting*—she was practically panting on the street corner, her face flushed so severely that she was surprised the misty rain falling around them didn’t turn to steam against her skin.

Olivia blinked, spun-gold lashes clumping together. Light from the streetlamp reflected off her eyes, bringing out the flecks of gold in her irises and turning the center ring of deep forest green that hugged her pupil into a brighter, brilliant shade of emerald.

The smooth column of Olivia’s throat jerked as she stepped forward, resting her hands on Margot’s waist. Margot held impossibly still as Olivia leaned in, pressing an achingly sweet kiss against Margot’s bottom lip. Olivia drew back but didn’t go far, staying close enough that Margot could make out the tiny drops of rain clinging to her lashes. “Thanks, Mar.”

It took a second to make her muscles move, to nod. “No need to thank me. I was just being honest.”

“What did you think I was thanking you for?” Olivia’s lips tipped up at the corners, and Margot’s heart stuttered. “What you said—all of it . . . that means a lot to me. That you feel that way.”

Swallowing took effort as did her shrug. “Just—think about what I said.”

“I will.”

Chapter Twelve

Olivia dropped the grocery bags on the kitchen floor and began unpacking them, setting the sugar and cocoa powder down on the counter.

Circling her feet, Cat mewed, ignoring the bowl of dry kibble beside the fridge, demanding wet food instead.

“I’ll get it.” Margot slid behind Olivia and swiped a can of Friskies off the counter. She cracked open the metal pull-top lid and dumped the pâté on a plate. “Come on, you little monster. Time for food.”

Olivia laughed. “Little monster?”

“She *is*,” Margot said, snagging her Ben & Jerry’s and carrying it over to the freezer. “The cat screams like a banshee. I swear, half the time she doesn’t meow, she *howls*.”

Margot wasn’t wrong. Cat could reach a screeching pitch Olivia had never heard prior to adopting her. “She is a little bit of a hellion, isn’t she?”

Cat’s green eyes flicked up, ears twitching as if she knew she was being talked about. Her tail swished, and she lowered her gaze to the plate, focus returning to her food.

Margot laughed and shut the freezer. “Understatement.”

Cat sneezed in Margot’s direction. Olivia laughed before setting her hands on her hips, running through the recipe in her head.

Butter, sugar, eggs . . . shoot. Before leaving for the store, she'd grabbed the butter out to soften, but had forgotten about the eggs. "Could you grab two eggs for me?"

Margot nodded and ducked her head inside the fridge.

Vanilla extract, flour, cocoa powder, white chocolate chunks, salt, baking soda . . . Olivia gathered the ingredients one by one, placing them on the counter, separated into wet and dry. Margot set the eggs down on the counter, using the sticks as a barricade so the eggs wouldn't roll.

All she needed now was a bowl, a rubber spatula, and —"Where do you keep your mixer?"

Margot stared. "My what?"

"You know?" Olivia spun her finger in a circle. "Your hand mixer."

"Oh, right." Margot scratched her jaw. "Um. Let's see . . ." She crouched down and rifled through the cabinet beside the stove. Something fell, clattering loudly, metal on metal. Margot grunted and fell back on her butt against the kitchen floor, wearing a triumphant grin. Cradled against her stomach was a KitchenAid stand mixer, scuffed from age. Likely a hand-me-down, but still, absolutely a step up from a hand mixer. "Will this do?"

"Thanks. You want to cream the butter and sugar for me?"

Margot looked at Olivia like she'd lost her mind. "Me? You're trusting *me* in the kitchen? Me, who almost burned down your kitchen boiling water?"

Olivia flushed at the memory of Margot leaving a pot of pasta water boiling on the stove that memorable spring break. How she'd forgotten about it, how they'd both gotten distracted. How the pot had boiled dry and the smoke detector had beeped shrilly, the caustic smell of the burning plastic pot handle drifting up the stairs to Olivia's room, sending them both scurrying into the kitchen half-dressed. "I'm sure your culinary skills have undergone *some* amount of improvement over the last eleven years."

“Don’t be so sure, Liv. I think you’re underestimating my ability to survive on packaged foods and takeout.”

Olivia tucked her hair behind her ears and shrugged. “It’s butter and sugar. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Margot shrugged and reached for the KitchenAid’s power cord. “Famous last words.”

Olivia reached inside the cabinet for a bowl and began measuring out the dry ingredients from memory. Margot, struggling with the wrapper on the butter, noticed. “You don’t follow a recipe?”

Olivia shook her head, leveling off a cup of sifted flour with the back of a butter knife. “They’re my go-to cookie. I could probably make them in my sleep.”

“Brad’s an idiot,” Margot grumbled, frowning at the KitchenAid in concentration, studying the buttons. As soon as she flipped the on switch, butter spewed at high speed, splattering the kitchen backsplash. She shut it off and frowned. “Huh.”

Olivia laughed. “Speed switch?”

Margot turned bright red.

This time, the mixer was much smoother, whipping the softened butter instead of obliterating it.

“You were saying.” Olivia dumped the cup of flour into the bowl and grabbed the baking soda. “Something about Brad being an idiot?”

Margot’s eyes flittered to Olivia’s and back to the bowl where the KitchenAid was turning the butter and sugar into one homogeneous mixture. “What? Does the statement *Brad’s an idiot* really require further explanation?”

Olivia pressed her lips together, trying in vain not to laugh. “Add this.”

She nudged the bowl of dry ingredients toward Margot.

Margot reached for the bowl and tilted it, too much, too fast. A cloud of cocoa powder poofed in the air, making her cough.

“Margot.”

“Sorry!” She reached for the speed switch and flicked it the wrong direction because the mixer made a loud whirring noise, whipping a violent splatter of chocolate dough around the room. A thick glob of it landed against Olivia’s cheek and she shrieked, ducking for cover.

Margot swore loudly and powered the mixer off altogether.

Laughter bubbled up behind the tight press of Olivia’s lips, bursting out in a sharp snicker.

Margot’s face was dusted in a fine layer of pale brown powder, and there was a streak of gooey dough along her jawline. She stood, frozen, staring at the KitchenAid as if it had gone rogue and personally wronged her. “What the ...”

Olivia’s stomach ached, her knees wobbling, finally folding under her as she slid down to the floor. The tile was cool under her thighs as she lied back, laughing up at the ceiling. The *ceiling*. Her eyes watered. There was batter on the ceiling, a starburst splatter of brown and yellow, the butter not quite mixed with the cocoa powder. An ominous stalactite of dough oozed down, not yet dripping.

Her head thunked back against the tile, her chest burning and her eyes streaming as she chortled.

She could barely make out the sound of Margot’s approaching footsteps over her laughter.

“Rude.”

Olivia cracked open an eye, laughing harder at the batter that dripped down Margot’s forehead.

Margot crossed her arms. “You’re just going to lie there and laugh?”

Olivia covered her face and nodded, struggling to breathe.

The batter fell from the ceiling, splattering wetly against the floor, startling Cat, whose fur fluffed up, standing on end. She darted out of the kitchen, abandoning what little remained of the food on her plate, and took cover under the living room

coffee table. Probably not a bad idea to steer clear of the kitchen for the foreseeable future.

Margot surveyed what was left in the bowl with a frown. “Break-and-bakes?”

Olivia pressed her palms against the floor, heaving herself up onto her knees before using the counter for leverage. “We’ll just start over.”

“Start over? Do you really think that’s a—” A blob of batter splattered against the top of Margot’s head, dripping down from that oozing stalactite as she reached for a rag. It ran down the center of her forehead, between her eyes, sliding down her nose. Her tongue darted out, swiping batter off her upper lip. “Sure. We’ll start over. *What’s the worst that could happen?*”

Olivia pressed her fingers to her mouth, stifling a laugh. “Second time’s the charm?”

By the time Margot had scrubbed the ceiling and scraped what was left of the dough into a separate bowl and Olivia had finished wiping down the counters and floor, the new sticks of butter had reached room temp and were ready for creaming.

Olivia gestured to the KitchenAid. “Do you want me to—”

“No, no.” Margot waved her off, glaring at the mixer through narrowed eyes. “I started this. I’m going to finish it.”

This time, Margot managed to start the KitchenAid on a much more sedate speed setting, slowly creaming the butter and sugar together before adding in the eggs and vanilla. When it was time to add in the dry ingredients, Margot lowered the speed further, stirring everything together slowly and without splatter.

Olivia dusted her hands off over the sink and leaned her hip against the counter. Hands braced on her hips like she was ready for battle, Margot stared intently at the mixing bowl, narrowed eyes locked on the paddle attachment as it churned and whirred, incorporating the chocolate chunks into the batter. She was so focused, so—

Margot raised her head, eyes meeting Olivia’s. One of her brows rose, a smudge of batter bisecting it. Olivia’s lips

twitched.

“What?” Margot demanded. “Is there something on my face?”

Her lips twitched as if even she couldn’t keep a straight face at her own question.

Olivia laughed. “What would give you *that* idea?”

Margot reached up, wincing as she swiped a glob of batter from the shell of her ear. “Bets on how long I’ll be finding batter in places it doesn’t belong?”

“Hold still.” Olivia reached out and thumbed the smudge of batter from Margot’s forehead. “Look on the bright side. You’re wearing clothes, which limits the exposure zone.”

“Naked baking?” Margot frowned. “Don’t get me wrong—I like to live dangerously, but that sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“*Ba-dum-tss.*” Olivia drummed her fingers against the counter. “Punny. At least it would be *baking* and not *bacon.*”

Margot recoiled, hands rising to cover her chest. “I’ve never once, in all my life, been tempted to fry anything in the nude. Never.”

Two cocoa powder handprints outlined Margot’s breasts through her white shirt when she dropped her hands.

Olivia laughed and took a peek inside the mixing bowl. All done. She flipped the power switch and disengaged the locking mechanism on the bowl, pulling it free from the base. “Brad fried bacon shirtless once. Never did it again.”

“Yuck.” Margot stuck out her tongue. “Like I said, *idiot.*”

That’s right. She’d mentioned Brad before the batter had splattered, distracting Olivia from finding out what Margot meant. “You said that earlier.”

Margot hummed and pinched off a piece of cookie dough. She popped it in her mouth, eyes immediately falling shut, a moan escaping her mouth that made Olivia flush for reasons completely unrelated to the oven’s preheat cycle. “Damn,

that's just as good as I remember." Margot slumped against the counter, eyes fluttering open. "You're telling me Brad had you *and* regular access to these cookies and he *still* took you for granted?" Margot's lips curved upward. "Clearly, he didn't know how lucky he was."

Olivia's cheeks burned hotter. Heat spread down her jaw and the front of her throat, an ember of warmth flaring to life inside her chest.

Margot couldn't just say things like that. Not if she didn't want Olivia to get the wrong idea.

"Well." Olivia ducked her chin, staring at the kitchen floor, as if that might do something to disguise how Margot's words affected her. How *much* Margot's words affected her. Olivia's face was probably a neon-pink sign practically screaming *look what you do to me*. There was nothing casual about this feeling. "Now *you* get cookies."

Margot's socked feet entered Olivia's line of vision, her cotton-covered toes curling against the tile as she reached out, one hand with dark red-painted nails rising to settle against Olivia's waist. Her other hand rose, too, before sliding down, both hands tucking into the back pockets of Olivia's jeans. Warmth from Margot's palms seeped through the denim, causing Olivia to shiver as she stepped closer.

Olivia's heart thundered, her pulse pounding in her temples and at the base of her neck as Margot leaned in, lips grazing the corner of Olivia's mouth. One hand slipped free from Olivia's back pocket. Margot's fingers danced all the way up Olivia's spine, her palm cupping the back of Olivia's neck. Margot tilted her own head to the side, her lips pillowing Olivia's bottom lip in a tender kiss that caused Olivia's breath to catch in the back of her throat, her stomach suddenly full of butterflies.

Margot stepped back, dropping her hands, palms opening and closing like she didn't know what to do with them. The skin from her collarbone up to the crests of her cheeks was mottled with a pink flush, and the front of her throat jerked

when she swallowed, her breath escaping in a shaky exhale, her smile even shakier. “Lucky me.”

Chapter Thirteen

Rain splattered against the windshield, evergreens blurring past as Olivia drove down I-90, heading east to Snoqualmie.

Annie and Brendon's joint bachelor-bachelorette *extravaganza*—Brendon's word, not Olivia's (*extravaganza* made her think of the annual mattress sale at the furniture store off State Route 410)—was taking place at Salish Lodge & Spa, a resort getaway half an hour outside of Seattle, halfway between the city and the ski summit. They'd be spending two nights—Wednesday and Thursday—at the lodge, before heading back to the city in time for the rehearsal dinner on Friday night and the wedding the following day.

In the passenger seat of Olivia's Subaru Outback—it had all-wheel drive, unlike Margot's Toyota Camry—Margot stared at her phone, rattling off facts about the lodge where they'd be staying. “Ooh, get this. Every guest room has a gas fireplace—fancy—a shower with dual heads, and an oversized soaking tub. And there's an on-site herb garden and . . . *ooh*, there's an apiary that provides honey for both of the lodge's restaurants and the spa.”

“Mm.” Olivia sped up, passing a minivan going ten below the speed limit.

“Let's see . . . award-winning spa . . . steam room, sauna, soaking pools are available by appointment,” Margot read from the site. “Fitness massage, tranquility massage, hot stone massage . . .”

That all sounded fantastic, but Olivia had too much to do to simply send the next two days relaxing in a spa. She needed to follow up with the vendors, make sure the final payments had been received by the suppliers, and deliver the final head count to the caterer for the rehearsal dinner and the reception. All of which she could do from the lodge, but she'd packed her laptop and double-checked the resort had reliable Wi-Fi for a reason.

"Hey." Margot waved her fingers, frowning softly. "Where'd you go?"

"Sorry." Olivia smiled and shook her head. "I'm just thinking about everything I still have to do with vendors and suppliers and . . . I don't know. I—maybe I shouldn't have agreed to come. There's just *so* much and—"

"Hey, whoa." Margot swiveled in her seat the best she could with the seat belt strapped across her body. "Brendon and Annie invited you."

"Right, and relaxing right now should be their number one priority," Olivia said, eyes flitting between the road and her rearview mirror as she changed lanes. "*My* priority is making sure their wedding goes off without a hitch."

"And you totally will," Margot said. "But I'm pretty sure you can squeeze in a massage, too."

Olivia hummed under her breath and rolled out her shoulders. "A massage *does* sound nice."

Margot looked over at her and smiled. "If you needed a massage, you could've just asked." Her brows wiggled. "I'm good with my hands."

Olivia's face heated at the memory of Margot using her hands to edge Olivia for what felt like an hour, driving her to the point of babbling and begging until finally Margot had wrung four orgasms from Olivia before relenting, leaving her a puddle of goo.

"That you are," Olivia agreed, voice a touch breathless.

Margot's smirked and turned her attention back to her screen.

Olivia reached for her bottle of water, suddenly parched. She flipped the rubbery straw up on her CamelBak and took a long drink, eyes flitting away from the road briefly to return the bottle to the cup holder.

On the center console, Margot's hand rested, slightly cupped, fingers curled toward her palm, facing up. Olivia had a sudden, jarring flashback to seventh grade, when she'd gone out on her first date to the movies with Michael Louis, a boy who'd had a sweet smile and an unfortunate floppy bowl cut that made him look like a cute mushroom, or Jim Halpert circa season one of *The Office*. They'd gone to see some cheesy action movie and sat dead center in the theater. He'd rested his hand on the armrest and stared, not at the screen, but at Olivia, until she'd gotten the hint and slipped her hand into his, his palm damp and warm and oddly sticky.

It wasn't a question that Margot was good with her hands or that she had clever, talented fingers that could drive Olivia to new heights of pleasure. It was a question of whether Olivia could hold Margot's hand.

Was that . . . something they did now? If Olivia slipped her hand inside Margot's, would she be pushing her luck?

Olivia held her breath, hand hovering above the cup holder, and—

A horn blared from the next lane over, the one Olivia had accidentally floated into. She gripped the wheel with both hands, careful not to overcorrect, and kept her eyes locked on the road, willing away her flush when Margot studied her from the passenger seat.

"They offer facials, too," Margot added.

Olivia bit the inside of her cheek. "That's nice."

A heavy electronic dance beat filled the car, and Margot groaned, chuckling at the same time.

Olivia only let go of the wheel for a brief second to crank up the volume until the bass thumped, shaking her seat. "Come on. You *know* you love this song."

“No.” Margot shouted over the music. “I don’t. And I still don’t understand how you thought they were saying *like a cheese stick*.”

“Excuse me for not knowing what a G6 was when I was seventeen.”

“How does *cheese stick* make even a modicum of sense? I think you need to get your ears checked.” Margot turned the volume down until they could speak without shouting. “Maybe if you didn’t listen to your music this loud, you wouldn’t be constantly hearing the lyrics wrong.”

“Constantly?” Olivia scoffed.

Margot spared her a quick glance, brows flicking upward. “You thought Madonna said *like a virgin, touched for the thirty-first time*.” Margot snickered. “How the fuck does that even work?”

“Shut up.” Olivia flicked her turn signal, taking the next exit. “I was nine when I thought that! I didn’t even know what that song meant.”

“Mm-hmm, *sure*.”

“I mean it, I didn’t—”

The song cut off abruptly and a soft chime came from the speakers, her phone connected to the speakers via Bluetooth.

Olivia glanced at the display screen. Dad was calling.

She glanced briefly over at Margot. “Do you mind if I take this? I’ll be quick.”

Ever since his heart attack, she made a point of answering when Dad called. Not that she hadn’t before, but . . . she didn’t want to risk sending him to voicemail if he needed her. Especially since she was usually the one reaching out, the one calling and checking in.

From the corner of Olivia’s eye, Margot shrugged. “No worries. Don’t rush on my account.”

“Thanks.” Olivia pressed her thumb into the button on the wheel to answer the call. “Hey, Dad. I hope that it’s okay

you're on speaker. I'm driving." Olivia licked her lips. "I'm in the car with Margot."

The line crackled for a second before Dad said, "Speaker's fine, Livvy. Hi, Margot."

Margot sat up straighter. "Hi, Mr. Grant. It's been a while. How are you doing?"

Her voice changed subtly, the pitch rising. Olivia's eyes flickered over briefly to discover Margot nibbling on her bottom lip, looking nervous.

"Hanging in there. Keeping busy."

"Hopefully not too busy," Olivia interjected.

Dad's sigh was exaggerated, heavily put upon. "Do you hear what I deal with, Margot? You don't hassle your folks like this, do you?"

Margot laughed. "They're usually the ones hassling me, sir."

Dad chuckled. "The way it's supposed to be. Livvy here worries too much."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "What's up, Dad?"

"Not much," Dad said. "Just hadn't heard from you in a few days."

A few days? That couldn't be possible. She'd last talked to Dad on . . . Oh God, it really had been a few days. At least four, whereas normally she tried to call every other day, if not daily, for at least a quick check-in.

"The wedding's been keeping me pretty busy, actually," she said. That and Margot, but Dad absolutely did *not* require details there. "The singer in the band we hired for the reception was rushed to the hospital yesterday with a ruptured appendix. He's fine, but we're obviously out a band, so I had to make a few calls to find a suitable DJ—"

"Livvy," Dad interjected. "It's fine. I just thought I'd check in with you for once. Make sure Margot's not getting you into too much trouble."

Margot snickered. “Only the best kind of trouble, sir.”

Dad barked out a laugh, and if Olivia weren't driving she'd have slumped down in her seat, mortified. She reached for the air vent, aiming it directly at her face.

“Good, good. That's what I like to hear,” Dad said. “Livvy could use a little fun in her life.”

“Oh, geez,” she muttered under her breath, still loud enough for Dad to hear through the speakers, apparently, because he only laughed harder.

And Margot, traitor that she was, joined in, laughing brightly and chiming in with, “I couldn't agree more.”

Margot slipped her hand off the center console and squeezed Olivia's thigh. She kept her hand there, casual as could be, like it was perfectly normal to rest her hand atop Olivia's leg while Olivia drove. Olivia still questioned her reality, that this was her life now, that Margot was in it and touching her. Maybe it was different for Margot, but Olivia had yet to build up a tolerance to Margot's touch. She wasn't certain she wanted to.

Olivia cleared her throat. “You had your appointment, right? With your cardiologist? How'd that go?”

“Everything's fine. My cholesterol, my blood pressure, all of it.”

Fine. Her nose scrunched. “What does *fine* mean? And what about your triglycerides, those were still—”

Dad cut her off with a laugh. “Livvy, relax. The doctor says I'm healthy as a horse.”

She pursed her lips. “Are we talking Seabiscuit, or the Red Pony?”

Margot clapped her free hand over her mouth, muffling her laughter.

“Jesus, kid.” Dad huffed. “You are something. I'm *fine*. I would tell you if I weren't.”

Olivia loosened her death grip on the steering wheel, working to swallow past the knot constricting her throat. “Promise?”

Margot’s grip tightened, squeezing her thigh.

“Promise,” Dad said, sounding sincere enough that Olivia was able to breathe again. “Look, I called to see how you were doing and also to let you know that a few of the guys from work and I are heading up to Nolan Creek in Forks to go fly-fishing. We’re driving up on Friday, won’t be back until Wednesday. I don’t know how my reception’s going to be, and I won’t have my phone on me when I’m out on the water. Just wanted to let you know so you don’t worry.”

“Be safe,” she said. “And have fun.”

Dad chuckled. “Thanks. Good luck with the wedding. I’m sure it’ll be fantastic.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Good talking to you, Margot. Make sure Livvy doesn’t work too hard.”

Margot grinned. “Will do, Mr. Grant. Have fun fishing!”

“Bye, Dad. I love you.”

“Love you, too, kid. Talk soon.”

Olivia ended the call with a press of her thumb against the wheel.

“It sounds like he’s doing good,” Margot said.

Olivia blew out her breath and nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

Margot’s thumb swept against the side seam of Olivia’s jeans, warmth from her palm seeping through the denim. “I don’t know, maybe it’s just me or maybe it’s the way you’re driving fifteen over the speed limit, but I’m getting a vibe that you’re not totally at ease.”

“Shit.” Olivia eased off the gas. “Sorry.”

Margot shrugged. “You want to talk about it?”

Olivia puffed out her cheeks. “I just feel bad that I didn’t check in. I normally do, but with everything going on, I spaced.”

“It sounds like he’s doing fine,” Margot said. “He definitely didn’t sound upset.”

“No, but—”

“No *buts*. Your dad wouldn’t want you to feel guilty for living your life, Liv.” Margot plucked Olivia’s phone out of the change holder. She shook it pointedly. “Pretty sure he specifically tasked me with making sure you have a good time. So that’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to have a great time this week, celebrating Annie and Brendon, and *you* are going to relax. Okay?”

Olivia breathed deep and smiled. “I can try.”

* * *

An hour later, Brendon met them in the lobby of the lodge with a warm smile. “You guys made it.”

“We hit traffic a few exits back,” Margot said. “Bumper-to-bumper.”

“I think there might have been an accident,” Olivia added, adjusting the strap of her duffel bag so it wouldn’t cut off circulation to her arm. “We saw flashing lights.”

“It’s all this extra snow,” Brendon said, gesturing for them to follow as he led the way through the lobby and down a long hall. “I’m glad Luke’s got snow chains, otherwise I don’t think they’d let us on Snoqualmie Pass.”

“Luke? Who’s Luke?” Margot frowned. “Do I even *know* a Luke?”

Brendon laughed. “My friend from college, Luke. I’ve mentioned him before.”

Margot’s nose wrinkled adorably, and she adjusted her grip on the case of beer she’d brought, her contribution for the weekend, courtesy of the brewery Oh My Stars was partnering with. “Hmm.”

“I *know* I’ve mentioned him.” Brendon’s expression faltered. “Wait, didn’t I?”

“The name sounds vaguely familiar . . .”

“We were roommates freshman year,” Brendon tacked on. “I think I told you the story about the time he accidentally shrunk all his pants in the wash and went to class wearing a three-piece suit?”

A flicker of recognition passed over Margot’s face, her eyes widening slightly behind her glasses. “Oh, *that* Luke. Okay, yeah, you’ve mentioned him.”

At least Olivia wasn’t going to be the only new addition on this trip, the odd man out, everyone already closely acquainted with one another. “He’s a groomsman, right?”

Margot did a double take. “Hold the phone. *Groomsman*? I thought it was just me and your coworker Jian?”

Brendon gripped the back of his neck, looking sheepish. “Shoot. Don’t tell me I forgot to tell you.”

Margot’s hair swished against the sides of her neck when she gave a sharp shake of her head. “This is the first I’m hearing of there being another groomsman.”

“I wasn’t sure he was going to be able to make it to the wedding. *He* wasn’t sure he was going to be able to make it. He’s been in Minsk for the past few months treating patients with drug-resistant TB.” He smiled over his shoulder. “Doctors Without Borders.”

Olivia’s brows rose. “Impressive.”

“Right?” Brendon nodded, stopping in front of a bank of elevators. “Anyway, he managed to swing the time off and let me know a couple weeks ago. I guess with the fire at the first venue and having to make all of these new plans, it slipped my mind. Even then, he didn’t think he was going to be able to fly in until Friday, but he found an earlier flight and managed to make it to town last night.”

Margot gave a thoughtful hum. “How long is he in town for?”

“A week,” Brendon said, thumbing the up button. “He’s got to go back to Belarus for a couple weeks to finish up his rotation, then he flies back home for good. It’ll be nice to have him back.” His gaze flickered between the two of them, his smile broadening, lingering curiously on Olivia. “I think you’ll really like him.”

Wait. Olivia looked at Margot then back at Brendon, pointing at her chest. “Me?”

Brendon held his hand against the open elevator door, allowing the passengers departing to step out first before gesturing for her and Margot to step inside. “Yeah. He’s great. Funny, caring, loyal.” His smile went crooked. “Single.”

Olivia’s stomach lurched, and it had nothing to do with the elevator rising. She looked over at Margot for help, but Margot was staring at her phone, scrolling, expression giving not even a single clue as to what was going on inside her head. Olivia swallowed. “Um.”

It was one thing to keep their relationship—she didn’t know what else to call it; *arrangement* sounded sleazy and *friendship* didn’t fully encompass the scope of what they were doing. A situationship, maybe? It was all a little fuzzy and undefined—under wraps. She didn’t like it, wasn’t a fan of having to pretend like she didn’t want to kiss Margot or hold her hand, to curtail any of her impulses. But she could understand where Margot was coming from, not wanting her friends, Brendon in particular, butting in.

But here he was, doing it anyway . . . just not the way either of them had anticipated.

And Margot was no help. Did she even care that Brendon was trying to set Olivia up? Olivia clutched at the elevator’s stainless steel handrail, head swimming, suddenly dizzy.

Was this situationship so casual that it wasn’t even exclusive?

“No pressure,” Brendon added, rocking back on his heels, hands tucked in the front pocket of his sweats, the picture of

nonchalance. “I promise this isn’t a setup. I just think you two might hit it off, that’s all.”

The elevator opened on the fifth floor. Margot was the first to step out, slipping through the doors as soon as she could fit through them. Olivia frowned and followed, itching to ask Margot what was going on inside her head.

But she couldn’t. Now wasn’t the right time, with Brendon beside them, footsteps slowing in front of the suite at the end of the hall.

He fished around inside his back pocket, pulling out the card to the room. The sensor on the door flashed green when he held the card to it, the lock making a soft whirring noise followed by a click.

“All our rooms are on the same floor, same hall, all adjoining,” he said, opening the door and, with a wave of his hand, gestured them through into his and Annie’s larger suite. They stopped inside a small entryway where several pairs of shoes lay heaped, as if kicked off and forgotten. Two coats hung in the closet, the sliding door left open. To the immediate right was a bathroom and to the left, another door left slightly cracked. Brendon nodded at the closed door and fished two more keys out of his pocket, glancing at each briefly before passing one to Margot and the other to Olivia. “Obviously feel free to keep your door closed, but for now we have them all open. Figured it would be convenient while we’re all still up. Darcy and Elle are right through there, then Margot, Olivia, Luke, and last we’ve got Katie and Jian.”

Margot blew the hair out of her face, lips remaining pursed even after her hair had settled. “Cool.”

“Katie?” Olivia asked, not recognizing the name.

“She and Jian got married last year,” Brendon explained. “They both work with me at OTP.”

Olivia nodded, filing all away the names and relationships. “Got it.”

Laughter carried from further in the suite. Brendon jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Everyone’s out on the patio.”

We've got the fireplace going and are about to roast marshmallows. Here, I can take those off your hands." He reached out, grabbing the case of beer from Margot, who gave him an appreciative smile. "We've got a bottle of champagne open, and Elle and Darcy brought wine, so this rounds our assortment of beverages out nicely."

"Please tell me there's food." Margot pressed her hand against her stomach. "Other than marshmallows."

"Oh, totally." Brendon backed away slowly. "We've got graham crackers and chocolate, too."

Margot frowned and Olivia felt her pain. Traffic had caused them to miss dinner. They'd done a number on the cookies they'd baked last night, but it wasn't *real* food.

"Kidding." Brendon grinned. "There's plenty of chips and finger foods, and if you guys want, you can always order room service." He nodded to their bags. "You guys can either drop your things here for now, if you want, or you can settle in first. We all got comfortable after dinner, but either way."

Brendon disappeared around the corner, leaving them alone in the entryway of the suite.

Olivia hiked the strap of her duffel higher on her shoulder and glanced down at what she was wearing. "I think I'm going to get out of these jeans."

Margot's lips twitched, and she cast a quick glance toward the hall before stepping closer, into Olivia's space, her body a line of heat against Olivia's side. "Need help?"

"Are you offering?" Olivia asked, heat wrapping around the sides of her jaw.

Margot hummed and hooked a finger under the waist of Olivia's jeans, right by the button, pulling the denim taut. It bit softly into Olivia's skin. Margot leaned in, lips brushing the shell of Olivia's ear, hot breath sending a shiver down Olivia's spine. "Maybe later."

Ugh. Olivia shut her eyes and groaned quietly. "You're so mean."

Margot pecked her cheek, lips lingering, dragging down to the hinge of Olivia's jaw. "Later," she promised, sliding her finger out of Olivia's pants.

Olivia opened her eyes and shook off the fog of lust that had made her head fuzzy in no time flat. She took a deep, cleansing breath and followed Margot through the door into the adjoining room, trying to ignore her sudden restless awareness of the space between her thighs.

Margot dropped her bag beside the queen-sized bed in her room and stretched, arms lifted over her head, the bottom of her sweater riding up, revealing a strip of her stomach. She smirked when she saw Olivia staring, then shamelessly grabbed the bottom of her top, drawing it over her head, leaving her in a sheer black bra that cupped her breasts and lifted them high, the lace pattern accentuating her curves and leaving little to the imagination.

Margot lifted her eyes, brows rising, a knowing little smirk curving her lips as she slid the straps of her bra down her shoulders before reaching back for the clasp. The fabric sagged in front of her body, her breasts falling subtly. There was a bruise in the shape of Olivia's mouth on Margot's left breast, right beside her nipple, put there last night.

Olivia almost swallowed her tongue. The noise that escaped her mouth was next-level mortifying, half gasp and half groan, one hundred percent reminiscent of a dying animal. Her eyes darted to the open door.

"Meet you in the other room?" Margot asked, digging through her duffel for a change of clothes.

Olivia tripped over her feet as she stepped backward. "You're terrible."

"The worst," Margot agreed with a smile. "Now go."

It wasn't until Olivia was in her room that she cursed softly. She'd had every intention of talking to Margot about Brendon's none too subtle attempt at matchmaking, but then she'd gotten distracted by Margot and her breasts and her flirting and her—everything.

Later, then. Unless there was nothing to talk about? She'd have to play it by ear.

Olivia dug out a change of clothes and set them aside while she wiggled out of her jeans. She tossed them on the bed and frowned. There was paper poking out of her back pocket. Paper. She couldn't for the life of her remember—

Wait. Olivia pressed her fingers to her lips and reached for the—yup, a folded envelope. It was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand with room to spare, a little crumpled from her having sat on it, but it was in the shape of a heart.

She turned it over before unfolding it. There was no note, nothing written on it, but Olivia was far from disappointed. The note didn't need to say anything. The very fact that Margot had played along, that she'd thought to tuck it inside Olivia's pocket, said enough.

Enough for now.

Olivia spared a final glance at herself in the mirror after changing quickly, shoving the sleeves of her oversized burgundy Henley up her arms. The sweater fell down to her thighs, a good thing because the leggings she'd packed were a little on the thin side, less opaque than she'd have preferred. Feeling like she'd struck the right balance of cozy and cute, she left the bathroom, padding out of her room and through the adjoining rooms on socked feet, following the sound of voices until she came to a sliding glass door someone had left open. She stepped out onto the patio, where the group of eight were gathered around the fire, one large U-shaped sectional eating up most of the patio.

“Olivia!”

All eyes turned to her. Okay, awkward. She smiled and waved. “Hey.”

Brendon hopped off the couch and crossed the patio, stopping beside her. “Everyone, this is Olivia, Margot's friend and our wedding planner. Aka, the person responsible for keeping Annie and I from losing it over the last two weeks.”

“Speak for yourself.” Annie winked at him from her spot beside the fire. “I would’ve been fine with eloping.”

Brendon groaned. “Annie, baby, we don’t use that word.”

She threw a marshmallow at his head, hitting him dead between the eyes, and laughed. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You wouldn’t have me any other way.” He reached down and snagged the marshmallow off the deck, tossing it back at her. Annie wrinkled her nose at the leaf stuck to it, ultimately tossing it in the fire. “Olivia, you’ve met most everyone.” He pointed at a man and woman cuddled up on the far end of the sectional beside Annie. “That’s Katie and Jian; they both work at OTP.” They waved. “And this is my friend I was telling you about, Luke.”

Brendon’s friend stood. He was attractive in a clean-cut way, blue eyes and dark blond hair closely cropped on the sides of his head, slightly longer on top. He smiled, all blindingly white teeth, and offered her his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Brendon’s told me you’re quite the miracle worker.”

She shook his hand, which was, thankfully, dry. There was nothing worse than a handshake that left you wondering why the other person’s hand was mysteriously damp. “That’s a bit excessive. I mean, God, you’re a—a *doctor*. I plan parties and you save lives. If anyone’s a miracle worker . . .”

Luke had yet to let go of her hand.

“You make dreams come true,” Brendon said, with an air of gentle correction. “I’m pretty sure Annie and I owe you our firstborn for the magic you’ve pulled off, putting everything together last-minute.”

“Firstborn?” *Yikes*. “Unless I read it wrong, that wasn’t in our contract.”

Across the patio, on one end of the sectional, Margot snorted.

“Point being, this wedding wouldn’t be happening if it weren’t for you,” Brendon said.

Luke finally released her hand and dropped back into his seat with an easy smile.

“It’s nothing. It’s what I do.” Olivia fiddled with the hem of her Henley. She’d far surpassed her quota of time spent in the spotlight for one day. “Speaking of, there *is* supposed to be in-room Wi-Fi, right?”

“No working tonight,” Margot said, brows rising. “Remember?”

Right. *Relaxing.*

“Margot’s right. Absolutely no working.” Brendon practically herded her toward the sectional.

“But I really need to make sure the new DJ has that list you ___”

“You can check in the morning. For now, you sit right here”—he led her to the empty cushion beside Luke—“and I’ll get you a drink.”

Chapter Fourteen

Not a setup, her ass.

Margot picked at the peeling paper label of her beer as Luke stood and patted Brendon on the shoulder. “I’ve got it.” Luke turned to Olivia and grinned. “What’s your poison?”

Olivia tucked her hair behind her ear. “Oh, um, I’ll just have a beer.”

“Coming right up.” Luke winked and headed straight for the snack table. He tilted the case of beer on its side, reading the label, chuckling softly. He looked over his shoulder at the group, eyes narrowing. “Okay, who’s the hophead here?”

The *what?*

Brendon pointed at Margot with his marshmallow skewer. “Mar brought the beer.”

Luke leaned back against the railing beside the table and crossed his ankles. He wagged his finger at Margot, tutting softly. “Ah, *you’re* the hophead. Should’ve guessed.”

What was *that* supposed to mean? “It’s *beer*. Nothing to get all *Reefer Madness* about, Officer.”

Luke threw his head back and laughed. “No, you misunderstand. It’s IPA. *Hops*, therefore you’re a hophead.”

Short of being told she was wrong, there was little more that pissed her off than a line like that. *You misunderstand*. Maybe he wasn’t clear. Margot smiled through clenched teeth. “Huh. Clever.”

“Now, I’ve got to ask.” Luke lifted a bottle from the case, holding it up to the moonlight as if that would do jack all. “Do you actually *like* IPAs, or is it just the first craft beer you tried and it stuck?”

Wait, did he just call her *boring*? Holy shit. Margot opened her mouth—

“We’re partnering with that brewery,” Elle said with a smile. “Margot and I. We’re the voices behind Oh My Stars.”

“Astrology, right?” Luke snapped his fingers in recognition, nodding quickly. “You know, I’d be interested in seeing a demographic analysis studying the correlation between people who prefer popular varieties of craft beer and those who buy into modern-day Western astrology.”

Buy into. Margot’s blood boiled. What a crock of condescending horseshit.

Elle’s left eye twitched, and Brendon gave a preemptive wince. Margot took a deep breath. She would not rise to the bait, she would not rise to the bait, she would *not* rise to the bait no matter how much this dude was just asking to fuck around and find out.

“If only Elle and I weren’t so busy,” Margot said, and from the corner of her eye, Brendon’s shoulders dropped in obvious relief that Margot hadn’t snapped back.

Look at that. Margot smiled. *Growth.*

Luke frowned. “I don’t think it would be that difficult. Two sets of a data and a simple t-test would tell you everything you need to know.” He crossed his arms. “You know, the t-test—well, actually, it’s the Student’s t-test—was named after William Sealy Gosset, under the pseudonym *Student*. And interesting fact—Gosset worked for Guinness. He developed the t-test to prevent rival breweries from discovering the statistics Guinness used for brewing their beer. Ergo, it would be rather apt to use the t-test when analyzing your own data around beer.”

“Speaking of beer.” Olivia smiled pointedly at the bottle in Luke’s hand.

“Right.” He laughed and studied the bottle briefly before narrowing his eyes in obvious contemplation. “Are you partial to IPAs or would you be up for something a little different? A little less bitter, maybe?”

Margot frowned.

Olivia shifted slightly, then shrugged. “I—”

“Would probably like something to drink sometime this century,” Margot muttered under her breath so only Elle could hear.

Elle pressed her lips together and elbowed Margot softly in the side, turning and staring at her with wide, laughing eyes.

“—don’t really have a preference,” Olivia said, shaking her head.

Luke set the bottle down. “I picked up a case of gose at Safeway. It’s not as good as the stuff you actually get in Goslar, Germany, but it’s close. Kind of a fruity, sour beer. You interested?”

“Um.” Olivia laughed and threw her hands up. “Sure, I guess.”

“Awesome.” Luke grinned and headed for the door. “I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

As soon as Luke was out of earshot, Brendon turned to the group and laughed, albeit stiltedly, raking his hand through his hair. “I think he’s nervous. Odd man out, you know?”

“We’ve all been there before,” Annie said, and Olivia nodded.

Conversations splintered off, Brendon drawing Olivia into a conversation with Katie and Jian, Annie and Darcy speaking quietly with their heads together, each holding a glass of wine.

Elle cleared her throat quietly and tucked her hair behind her ear, fingers lingering on the side of her face, the rock on her finger twinkling when the moon hit it just so.

“Oh, Jesus.” Margot slapped herself on the forehead. “Fuck, Elle, I’m sorry. Holy shit.” She grasped Elle’s hand, shifting it

side to side and *ooing* when the light caught on the facets, reflecting a sparkling rainbow against Elle's sweatshirt.

"Damn, go Darcy."

"Right?" Elle laughed and held her hand out, wiggling her fingers, and Margot kind of loved that Elle's nail polish was chipped, that she hadn't bothered fixing it just because she had a ring to show off. It was very Elle.

"I think you said something about a winter wedding?" Her eyes flitted to the patio door. Luke had a bottle of beer in each hand and was heading straight for Olivia. He handed her a bottle, leaned in and whispered something in her ear, then tapped the neck of his bottle against hers with a laugh that Olivia returned. "Did you and Darcy discuss . . . um . . ."

"Dates?" Elle supplied, eyes crinkled at the corners. "A little. Nothing set in stone. We're kind of torn—December carries a lot of significance for us, but it's also a hectic month, and do we *really* want to organize a wedding around the holidays?" Elle shrugged. "I don't know. Ideally, I'd like to avoid the month of January. Not that I have anything against the month, but Venus is retrograde from the first to the twenty-ninth, so . . ."

"Yeah, probably not a bad plan to avoid that if you can help it."

Luke took a seat on the empty cushion beside Olivia, close enough that their thighs touched. He snagged the bag of marshmallows off the patio deck and offered it to Olivia with a broad smile. "Marshmallow?"

"Thanks." Olivia beamed.

". . . *definitely* want to avoid the week of Christmas, you know?" Elle continued.

Margot nodded. "Mm-hmm."

Luke passed Olivia a roasting stick, holding her beer for her while she skewered her marshmallow and set it over the fire.

". . . not like Darcy or I have much family that would be flying in, but I do have my cousins over in New Jersey, and Mom would probably have a fit if I didn't at least invite them,

you know? And flights are going to be more expensive around the holidays, so *that* won't work . . .”

Luke said something that made Olivia laugh, this time so hard she threw her head back, golden hair spilling over her shoulders and down her back, her beanie slipping and her eyes shutting. Luke bit his lip, staring unabashedly.

Margot narrowed her eyes. So far the guy had done very little to ingratiate himself to Margot.

Olivia, on the other hand, seemed to be eating it up.

Literally.

When a tendril of inky smoke curled from the crusted black shell of the marshmallow Olivia accidentally burned, Luke whistled. “Here.” He handed Liv a preassembled smore, golden-brown marshmallow oozing out from between the graham crackers. “You can have mine.”

“Oh.” Olivia accepted it from him with a smile. “Thanks.”

“Hold on, you've got a little something . . .”

Seriously? Luke reached out, thumbing away a smudge of chocolate at the edge of her bottom lip.

Olivia wasn't a toddler. She could wipe her own mouth.

Luke smiled affably and popped his thumb into his mouth with a wink.

Olivia ducked her chin, cheeks turning a rosy shade of pink. “Um, thanks.”

“Happy to be of service.”

Margot rolled her eyes. Could this guy possibly *be* more textbook?

“Earth to Margot.” Elle snapped her fingers. She frowned. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Of course I was listening. You said the thing about the stuff, um . . .” *Shit.* Margot winced. “Sorry?”

Elle's brows pinched. “Are you okay?”

“Me?” Margot scoffed. “Why wouldn't I be?”

Elle dropped her eyes and twisted the stem of her wineglass between her fingers. “I don’t know. You’ve been acting kind of . . . *off* lately.”

“*Off*,” she repeated.

“Off.” Elle chewed on her thumbnail. “Look, I know weddings aren’t really your *thing*, so if you don’t want to be my Maid of Honor I can always ask—”

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa*.” Margot held up her hands, cutting Elle off before she could finish that truly absurd statement. “You could always ask *who*?” There was a tightness in the back of her throat that made swallowing painful. The thought of being replaced, of some random cousin of Elle’s taking her place and standing up there beside Elle on her special day, was so far outside the realm of acceptable that Margot’s whole body rejected the idea, muscles stiffening. “You don’t need to ask anyone else, Elle. I’m—I’m game. I’m *so* game.”

She’d be the most enthusiastic Maid of Honor Elle had ever seen. Margot would be Pinterest-level enthusiastic, queen of DIY hacks and rustic elegance—whatever the fuck that meant—and Ball mason jars and inspirational quotes with unattributable sources. She’d tattoo *live, laugh, love* on her ass if it would make Elle happy.

“That’s good, because I don’t have anyone else to ask, and even if I did”—Elle’s smile wobbled—“there’s no one I’d rather have as my Maid of Honor than you.”

Aw, *fuck*. Margot’s vision swam, eyes flooding with tears. She ripped off her glasses and tossed them on the cushion, quickly pinching the bridge of her nose. “Shit, Elle. You’re going to make me fuck up my eyeliner. Do you know how hard I worked to get these wings even?”

“Hey.” Elle nudged Margot gently with her knee. “I haven’t wanted to push, but . . . what’s going on with you, Mar?”

She opened her mouth—

“And please don’t say *nothing*, because there’s obviously something.”

Margot puffed out her cheeks. Well, there went *that* plan.

Elle leaned closer and dropped her voice to a whisper. “Does this have something to do with Olivia?”

Margot jerked back. “What?” In an attempt to cover the way her voice cracked, Margot laughed. “Why would this have anything to do with *Liv*?”

Elle stared at her, smile small and gaze knowing. The skin between Margot’s shoulder blades itched, and she rolled her arms back.

“I don’t know.” Elle’s lips tipped up in a wry smile. “Maybe because you keep looking at Luke like you’re imagining eviscerating with him your eyes or brainstorming new and inventive ways you might torture him.”

“There’s no need to reinvent the wheel,” Margot muttered under her breath. “Or rack.”

Elle stared.

“Joking.” Margot huffed. “One hundred percent not serious.”

Elle’s brows rose.

“*Fine*. Ninety-nine percent not serious, and that one percent only wishes he’d step on a Lego.”

Elle sighed. “Margot.”

“*Ugh*. Do we really have to do”—she gestured vaguely, tipping her beer bottle back and forth between them—“*this*? My feelings are—”

Margot’s heart seized, panic gripping her as she stared across the fire at Luke and Olivia. Their legs were angled toward one another, knees touching, and Olivia spoke with her hands, animated when she answered his questions, her flushed face lighting up each time she laughed.

Margot drew her bottom lip between her teeth.

Fuck.

Her feelings.

Feelings.

Margot wasn't supposed to *have* any feelings, not of the *chest variety*. God, her chest *was* doing all sorts of ridiculous things right now, clenching and fluttering, her heart pounding against her sternum like a battering ram.

Damn it, it was supposed to be *sex*. Supposed to be casual. Feelings weren't on the menu. Feelings were strictly prohibited; that was the whole point. Friends with benefits, satisfaction guaranteed, all gain no pain, reward with none of the risk, have her cake and eat it, too.

It wasn't like the sex wasn't great. Sex with Olivia was . . . Words couldn't do it justice. Mind-blowing, toe-curling, *amazing*. But Margot wanted more.

She frowned sharply when Luke said something that made Olivia shove his arm playfully. She wanted *that*. To sit beside Olivia and let her hand linger on Olivia's thigh, to be the person offering Olivia marshmallows off her stick, to be the person making Olivia laugh. To be *the person*. Olivia's person.

Not Luke, not Brad, no one else. *Her*. She wanted it to be her by Olivia's side.

She could picture it perfectly.

Waking up beside Olivia every morning. Falling asleep beside her every night.

How easy it would be to let these feelings grow, let herself fall in love with Olivia, fall in love with her *again*.

Too get in too deep.

How awful it would be, telling Olivia she wanted more, baring her brittle heart, offering up all her many messy feelings, only for Olivia to turn her down gently. For everything between them to become strained, sharing a seven-hundred-square-foot apartment, their lives entangled in new ways. To ache each time Olivia stepped through the front door, to hold her breath each time Olivia left, wondering when the time would come that Olivia would leave and never come back, Margot's feelings too big, eating up all the oxygen in the room, making it so the two of them couldn't coexist inside the same space.

How hard it would be to put herself back together.

History repeating itself and her the fool for letting it happen, believing that Olivia would ever choose her, ever want Margot as much as Margot wanted her.

Margot swigged her beer, bottle shaking slightly in her hand as she lowered it back to her side. “I just don’t . . . *vibe* with Luke, okay?”

Elle made a face, nose wrinkling. “You don’t *vibe* with him?”

“Yeah.” Margot crossed her arms and stared across the fire. “What do we really *know* about him? What if his real name isn’t even Luke?”

Elle laughed. “Okay, Margot. I’m pretty sure if Brendon—his college roommate and *friend*—thinks his name is Luke, it’s probably Luke.”

“It could be short for something,” Margot argued. “His name might actually be—I don’t know.” Her brain blanked. What the hell was Luke short for? “*Luketh.*”

Elle lost it, snorting so hard she dribbled wine on the deck. Darcy threw a napkin at her, lips twitching in fond exasperation.

Margot ached. She wanted that, someone to look at her with fond exasperation when she was being utterly ridiculous. Not someone. *Olivia.*

“You mean *Lucas*?” Elle pressed a hand to her stomach, trying and failing to rein in her laughter. Olivia’s eyes flickered across the patio, her lips tipping up in a smile when she met Margot’s eye.

Margot dropped her gaze to the deck, face burning in a way that had nothing to do with the heat from the fire pit. Her heart stuttered and her stomach swooped. How she hadn’t seen this coming was anyone’s guess. She hadn’t *wanted* to see it coming. If she’d have spared a moment to really think about it, she’d have known that this? This was an inevitability. From the moment Olivia kissed her—hell, from the moment Margot invited her to move in—this was always going to happen.

Casual was nothing but a weak safeguard against the inexorable; like waves beating against rock, it was only a matter of time before her feelings wore her down, weakened her resolve, until leaks started to spring and her feelings spilled out where they didn't belong. She could plug the holes up, but a new one would always appear.

Margot didn't know how to be anything but *all in* when it came to Olivia.

Elle's brows rose. "Do I have to tell you you're being ridiculous, or do you already know it and you're just being difficult?"

She sniffed. The second one. "I'm just saying, Luke's this . . . this Hallmark actor look-alike with perfect teeth and perfect hair and a job that literally involves saving people's lives and—and his *shoulders*."

Elle blinked. "You're upset that he has shoulders?"

"*Broad* shoulders."

"Ah. An important clarification." Elle nibbled on her lip. "You know you can talk to me, right?"

Margot looked at her askance. "I am talking. My lips are moving; sounds are coming out of my mouth."

"But you're not really *saying* anything," Elle said.

With that, Margot couldn't argue. Elle had a point.

"Okay." Margot glanced quickly around the patio to make sure everyone was sufficiently occupied with their own conversations, that no one was listening. This confession was for Elle's ears only. "Olivia's and my friendship might be slightly more complicated than I previously led everyone to believe."

"No, really?" Elle deadpanned.

Margot shoved her. "Hush. I'll tell you more later, okay? I don't—this trip is supposed to be about Annie and Brendon and, *hello*, your engagement. That's huge. And here I am, making everything all about me and my feelings."

“You never make *anything* about you, Mar.” Elle frowned. “I think I speak for all of us when I say—hey, Brendon.”

“Hey.” Brendon crouched down, resting his arms on the back of the sectional behind them. He jerked his chin toward Luke and Olivia and grinned. “Looks like they’re really hitting it off, huh?”

A pit formed in Margot’s stomach. “I don’t know.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

Margot lifted one shoulder, giving Brendon a tight shrug. “I’m not sensing it.”

“Hmm.” His frown deepened. “Really?”

Elle nodded quickly. “Totally. I’m getting super-platonic vibes.”

Across the patio, Luke leaned in, whispering in Olivia’s ear. Her face turned pink.

Margot felt like she was going to be sick, her stomach queasy, a sour knot forming in her throat.

Brendon, completely unaware of her inner turmoil, smiled smugly and stood. “I don’t know. Looks like some pretty stellar chemistry to me.”

He rapped his knuckles against the back of the couch and returned to his seat next to Annie, who curled into his side as soon as he sat down.

Stellar chemistry? Margot’s jaw ticked as she leaned forward, fishing her phone out of her pocket.

Maybe Luke had perfect hair and perfect teeth and a perfect job, all points in his favor, but he had questionable taste in beer, and Margot would be damned if she let some Ryan Gosling look-alike mess up what she *did* have with Olivia. It might not be everything Margot wanted, everything she craved, everything her greedy heart desired, but it was something.

And something with Olivia Grant would always be better than nothing.

Margot rested the mouth of her beer bottle against her bottom lip and swiped at her screen.

MARGOT (11:03 P.M.): What's my record, four?

Margot pressed her phone against her thigh, screen side down, and feigned interest in the conversation happening around her. Jian was telling a story about something that had happened at work, lightly roasting Brendon, who took it like a champ, laughing along with everyone else. Margot laughed when everyone else laughed, nodded when everyone nodded, not really paying attention, instead glancing at Olivia surreptitiously from the corner of her eye.

Olivia wiggled her phone free from her pocket and looked at the screen, eyes briefly flitting up, glancing Margot's way. Margot sipped her beer and pretended to be engrossed in the story. Her phone buzzed against her thigh.

OLIVIA (11:05 P.M.): Record for what?

Margot's lips twitched.

MARGOT (11:06 P.M.): Times I made you come in one night.

Across the deck, Olivia fumbled her phone, dropping it against the couch. Margot bit her lip, swallowing a laugh as Luke reached for it, handing it to her without looking at the screen. Olivia's face had turned a violent shade of red, her flush spreading down her jaw. Margot typed quickly.

MARGOT (11:07 P.M.): God, you're pretty when you blush. The best part is how you turn the sweetest shade of pink all the way down to your pussy.

Olivia must've swallowed funny because she started to cough.

"You should drink something, Liv," she said, biting the inside of her cheek when Olivia leveled her with a heated stare. Firelight caught on Olivia's blond lashes each time she blinked and turned the gold of her hazel eyes into a warm, cinnamon honey, only a thin ring of green hugging her blown pupils.

"I'm fine," Olivia gasped, waving Luke off when he tried to offer her his beer, barely even looking at him. A flicker of satisfaction flared inside Margot's chest.

A minute later Margot's phone vibrated.

OLIVIA (11:09 P.M.): Not fair.

MARGOT (11:10 P.M.): How am I not being fair?

MARGOT (11:11 P.M.): Am I turning you on or something? Making you think about last night?

MARGOT (11:11 P.M.): Because I'm thinking about it.

MARGOT (11:12 P.M.): You sound so sweet when you're begging me to let you come. When you're begging me to fuck you a little bit harder.

MARGOT (11:12 P.M.): I promise I'll be so fair, Liv.

Even across the patio, several feet away, it was obvious how Olivia's hands shook when she typed. How her throat jerked convulsively with each swallow. How her blush had yet to abate, how if anything, it had deepened into a scarlet flush. Olivia's tongue swept out against her full bottom lip, wetting it, and Margot had never wanted to bite something so badly in her life that she *ached*.

All the noise around her—the conversations, the laughter, the popping and cracking of the wood in the firepit—faded into the background when Olivia's eyes lifted and locked on Margot's face across the deck, expression intense and inscrutable, a precursor to the text that vibrated against Margot's thigh.

With great reluctance, Margot tore her eyes from Olivia's and looked at her screen.

OLIVIA (11:13 P.M.): Is it later yet?

Staring directly at Olivia, unwilling to even blink and miss one of the micro-expressions that flitted across her pretty, flushed face, Margot tipped her beer back and drained what remained in one swallow. Neck of the bottle dangling from her fingers, she stood and addressed the group at large. "I hate to be a party poop, but I'm going to call it a night."

Everyone wished her a good night's sleep, the conversation winding down as others expressed their desire to hit the hay and wake up bright and early to hit the slopes.

She made it to the patio door before her phone buzzed.

OLIVIA (11:16 P.M.): Don't lock your door.

Margot smiled.

Maybe she wasn't Olivia's perfect person, the one Olivia wanted with her whole heart and soul, the person Olivia ached for and dreamed about at night. But Margot could give her this.

Margot could be the *best* at this.

Chapter Fifteen

Olivia begged off ten minutes after Margot left the patio.

She'd have left sooner, had it not been for Luke trying to convince her to stick around and have one more beer with him.

Nothing against Luke. He seemed like a nice guy, friendly, charming, accomplished. But Olivia didn't want *nice*.

All she wanted was Margot. Margot's hands on her body, her mouth on her skin. Margot making good on her promises. Margot, Margot, Margot.

Her brain was on a constant loop, her body burning before Margot even touched her. The mere suggestion was enough to make her flush from head to toe. To make her want with a fierceness that verged on need. Like if she didn't have Margot's hands on her in the next minutes she'd spontaneously combust, which sounded a little extreme, but she wasn't exactly thinking coherent thoughts at the moment.

Everything she felt for Margot verged on extreme, too much, too fast, and nothing she felt was very sensible, but here she was. The smartest thing she could've done was probably walk away before Margot caught on that what Olivia felt was so much *more* than what they'd agreed on, but she couldn't. How could she walk away from Margot when she had everything she'd ever wanted . . . except what she *couldn't* have? Except what was off-limits?

Olivia was a lot of things, but greedy wasn't one of them.

By the time she made it inside and to the door that separated her room from Margot's, she was already buzzing, practically vibrating with need, her underwear uncomfortably damp. She'd been forced to suffer since Margot had teased her with the promise of *later*, and her suggestive texts hadn't helped.

She was beyond ready for Margot to make good on her promise.

No sooner had she rapped her knuckles gently against the door to Margot's hotel room, did it open inward. Margot reached out, dragging Olivia inside with a hand fisted in front of Olivia's sweater. The door slammed shut, and Margot pressed her up against it, covering Olivia's mouth with hers, no greeting necessary.

The kiss was bruising. More teeth than anything else. Margot nipped hard at Olivia's bottom lip, soothing the sting with a flick of her tongue. Margot's hands skimmed the sides of Olivia's waist before going straight for the hem of her sweater, breaking the kiss only so that she could drag the Henley over Olivia's head. Margot flung it somewhere behind her and immediately dove back in, burying her face in the side of Olivia's neck. She ran her lips along the edge of Olivia's jaw, leaving a trail of kisses down Olivia's throat, then biting at the skin stretched taut over her collarbone.

Olivia panted into the quiet of the room and gripped Margot's waist, fingers biting into the strip of skin left bare where her cropped sweater rode up. Below, she was already down to her underwear. "*God*, Margot. What—what brought this on?"

Margot lifted her head. It was late, fully dark out save for the silvery glow of the almost-full moon and the scattershot of stars sprinkling the sky like glitter. There was just enough light streaming through the window to make out the plains of Margot's face, most of her in shadow save for the tip of her nose and the center of her forehead, the crest of one cheek, and the bright gleam of her equally dark eyes. Margot's hand slipped between Olivia's thighs and cupped Olivia over her leggings, pressing hard against Olivia's clit with the heel of

her hand. Olivia hissed through her teeth and bit down on her bottom lip.

“Are you complaining?” Margot asked, pressing a little harder.

Lip still trapped between her teeth, Olivia shook her head.

“You sure?” Margot slid her hand higher, fingers teasing the elastic band of Olivia’s leggings before slipping beneath, lower, before pausing, the very tips of her fingers framing Olivia’s clit, not quite touching. Margot’s lips twitched. “Because I can stop.”

Olivia shook her head so fast she went dizzy.

“Good.” Margot dragged her lips back up Olivia’s throat and rewarded her with two fingers sliding along Olivia’s slit before sinking inside her. A stuttered gasp escaped Olivia’s mouth, and her head thumped against the door. “Because I’m just getting started.”

Olivia clutched Margot closer, fingers biting into the soft skin of Margot’s waist beneath her sweater. Another gasp spilled from her lips when Margot dragged her fingers against Olivia’s G-spot.

“You’re dripping, Liv.” Margot buried her face in the crook of Olivia’s shoulder and pressed her lips to the dip above Olivia’s collarbone in a kiss that was achingly sweet compared to what she was doing with her fingers below Olivia’s waist, in contrast to the words coming out of her mouth. “Were you thinking about this? Thinking about how good my fingers were going to feel buried inside you? Were you thinking about me fucking you while you were talking to our friends?” She raised her head and met Olivia’s eyes from beneath her lashes. “While you were talking to Luke?”

Margot’s fingers crooked forward, hard, tearing a moan from Olivia’s throat.

“Is that a yes?” Margot asked.

Olivia gasped when Margot pinched her nipple through the lace of her bra. “Yes.”

With one more kiss pressed to the hinge of Olivia's jaw, Margot removed her hand from Olivia's underwear, causing Olivia to whimper at the loss. Margot kept her fingers curled beneath the band of Olivia's leggings and used them to drag Olivia toward the bed, to the side of the room less bathed in shadows, turning and pressing her down against the sheets.

Margot grabbed the waist of Olivia's leggings and made quick work of stripping them down her thighs and over her feet, her underwear, too. There was an urgency to Margot's touch that wasn't always there. Eager, yes, but that was nothing new. This felt almost like Margot *needed* Olivia naked.

Like Margot needed *her*.

There was a sudden pressure in Olivia's chest that hadn't been there before, a pressure that crept up the back of her throat and made it hard to breathe until she had no choice but to drag a gasping breath in when Margot's fingers slid through her folds and back inside.

"Is this what you were thinking about?" Margot ghosted her lips over the skin along the inside of Olivia's thigh as her fingers sped.

Olivia's back bowed against the mattress, her fingers grasping for purchase against the sheets that she couldn't find, the bed still perfectly made, unrumpled until now.

"Fuck." She gasped, rocking down on Margot's fingers.
"Yes."

Margot sucked on the tender crease of skin where Olivia's hip met her thigh. She looked up at Olivia with dark eyes and lips that were full, shiny and red, her arm moving steadily between Olivia's legs. "Fuck, Liv. If you could see yourself. How pretty you look, all swollen and soaked, fucking yourself on my fingers."

Olivia's face burned and she shut her eyes, biting down hard on her lip to stifle the string of sounds coming from her mouth. One hand still gripped the tightly tucked sheets and the other

reached up, squeezing her breast, pinching herself through her bra the same way Margot had.

“That’s it,” Margot bit the crease of her thigh. “Take what you need.”

Tension built low in Olivia’s belly, the pleasure deeper and different than if Margot had been focused on her clit. Margot’s fingers sped, curling harder against that spot inside her, causing Olivia’s breath to catch and her thighs to shake uncontrollably.

Olivia slid her hand down her stomach to touch herself, but stopped just shy of her curls.

Margot hummed against her hip, sounding pleased at Olivia’s show of restraint. “You want to come?”

Her hips rocked, back arching. “*So bad. Fuck. Please.*”

Margot sucked another one of those bruising kisses into her thigh, this time on the opposite side. “Not yet, baby.”

Olivia pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and bit down hard on her tongue to keep from begging. A strangled groan slipped out, an echo of it ringing in her ears.

Margot’s fingers sped, stringing Olivia tighter, tighter—Margot’s thumb barely ghosted over Olivia’s swollen, neglected clit and the tension building inside her snapped and she clenched and shattered under Margot’s touch.

Olivia’s thighs snapped together, trapping Margot’s hand between them. Margot didn’t let up, didn’t even give Olivia a second to recover before she pried her thighs apart and pinned one leg down against the bed with her forearm, fucking Olivia through the aftershocks and straight into another orgasm that stole the air from her lungs and made her chest burn.

Too much. Eyes still shut, Olivia reached down and weakly pushed against Margot’s shoulder. Margot took the hint, backing off.

A sweet kiss against the skin beside her belly button made Olivia crack open an eye sometime after her heart rate had slowed to something close to normal. Margot was staring up at

her. A slow smirk tugged at the corner of her mouth that made Olivia's pulse flutter and caused her to clench around the fingers still buried inside her.

Margot bit down on the swell of her bottom lip, smiling, as she slipped her fingers free and prowled up the bed. Margot lifted her hand and brushed her damp fingers against Olivia's mouth, covering her lips in her own arousal. "Open up."

A ragged breath escaped her when she parted her lips and darted out her tongue, tasting herself on Margot's fingers, sharp and a little sweet. Margot matched her breathing, panting softly, eyes darkening. Her breath stuttered, catching loudly. She dropped her hand to the side of Olivia's neck, thumb brushing the hollow at the front of her throat as she leaned closer, covering Olivia's mouth with hers and grinding her hips down against Olivia's thigh.

Olivia slipped her hands under Margot's sweater, fingers skimming her sides, brushing the undersides of her breasts. She broke the kiss to help Margot yank the sweater over her head, then went back to touching Margot everywhere she could, unable to keep her hands still. She swept a path from the small of Margot's back up her sides, tugging down the left cup of Margot's bra and closing her lips around Margot's nipple.

Sweat broke out along Margot's skin, dotting the space between her breasts, the hollow of her throat, the small of her back, slick beneath Olivia's hands. She gripped Margot's hips, helping her grind down a little harder.

Broken sounds spilled from Margot's mouth as she rocked a little faster, chasing her own pleasure until her hips stuttered and she cried out against Olivia's shoulder, her whole body shaking as she came apart.

Once she caught her breath, Margot lifted her head and looked at Olivia, lids heavy and smile sweet, and for a heart-stopping moment Olivia couldn't get her lungs to work because Margot was looking at her like she was something special. Like she was something Margot wanted to keep.

Slowly, Margot leaned in and brushed her lips against Olivia's in a gentle kiss that curled her toes and made her heart flutter wildly inside her veins. It had none of the urgency of their earlier kiss, when Margot had pressed her up against the door, but it was no less passionate, still managing to rob Olivia of her breath. This time there was no teeth, only the gentle pressure of lips on lips, the sweet friction of Margot's tongue sweeping against the seam of Olivia's mouth.

She must've made a noise, a gasp, because Margot's lips curled, smiling against Olivia's mouth. Margot drew back, pressing one chaste kiss to Olivia's bottom lip in parting. She smiled, dark eyes shining. "Hi."

Olivia reached out, tucking a strand of hair behind Margot's ear before it could fall in her face. Her fingers lingered against the side of Margot's neck, stroking the skin over where her pulse still thundered. "Hi, yourself."

Margot shivered and reached for the covers, tugging them up around them, forming a little cocoon of warmth. Sweat had begun to cool against Olivia's skin, and she gladly burrowed beneath the comforter.

Olivia drew her feet up, tucking her toes beneath the underside of Margot's calves. A laugh erupted from her lips when Margot hissed, face scrunching in a way that was oddly—*adorably*—reminiscent of Cat. "Sorry."

Margot's bottom lip jutted out in a pout and Olivia couldn't help herself. She reached out, tracing the outline of Margot's mouth, the bow of her lips, the divot beneath her nose.

"Cute," she whispered.

A furrow formed between Margot's brows and Olivia immediately reached up, smoothing it away. "And to think, I was striving for sexy."

Margot fluttered her lashes.

Olivia snorted. "You look like you have something in your eye."

Margot laughed and reached up, snagging Olivia's hand and lacing their fingers together. She brushed her lips against the

inside of Olivia's wrist and grinned. "Is this when you tell me I'm sexier when I'm not trying?"

Olivia shut one eye. "Sure."

"Rude." Margot reached under the covers, pinching Olivia's side, making her squeal.

"Sorry, sorry." Olivia laughed. "You have to know by now I think you're *extremely* sexy." Her lips twitched. "Even when you pout and look a little like Cat. *Especially* when you look like you have something poking you in the eye."

Margot preened. "I guess I'll take it."

"So." Olivia burrowed deeper beneath the covers, rolling onto her side, facing Margot. "You never said what brought this on."

The texts. Margot's inability to keep her hands to herself. How she'd seemed determined to take Olivia apart, more determined than normal.

Margot stared at their hands, fingers still tangled together. "Am I supposed to have a reason? Isn't wanting you enough?"

Yes. No. Maybe? Olivia swallowed a sigh. She'd didn't know where her head was at, only that she'd hoped for Margot to have said something ... *more*. More revealing? More vulnerable? Something closer to what Olivia felt, that maybe she wanted to talk about it. Her feelings. If she had them. What they were. How deep they ran.

One thing was for certain. Olivia didn't want *enough*. When it came to Margot, she wanted everything.

She sat up, reaching over the edge of the bed, searching for her sweater, not because she was cold but because she felt vulnerable enough without being totally naked.

"Where do you think you're going?" Margot wrapped her arm around Olivia's waist, drawing her back beneath the covers. "I'm not done with you yet."

Olivia's heart squeezed, the line between pain and pleasure whisper thin.

Yet could never come, and it would still be too soon.

Chapter Sixteen

Someone knocked on her bedroom door.

Margot burrowed deeper into her pillow. *Too early.* She was warm, almost too warm, the arm wrapped around her waist—

Hello.

Margot's eyes shot open. This wasn't her bedroom. This was—

Last night came rushing back in one fell swoop. Arriving at the lodge. Hanging out on the patio. *Luke.* Texting Liv. Her thighs clenched. Everything that had come after, until the early hours of the morning.

Whoever was at the door knocked louder, causing Olivia to release the cutest little whimper before burrowing her face against the back of Margot's neck.

Pale gray light filtered through a gap in the curtains. It was too early for housekeeping.

“Hey, Mar? Everyone's already downstairs. Are you coming?”

Shit. Elle.

Eyes still adjusting to being open, Margot patted the nightstand, searching for her glasses. She slipped them on, then grabbed her phone to check the time. 7:06. Early, but not as early as she'd expected. She had two texts and a missed call, all from Elle.

ELLE (6:45 A.M.): we're all meeting for breakfast at 7

ELLE (6:57 A.M.): mar?

One missed call 7:00 a.m.

“Fuck,” Margot muttered, earning another whine from Olivia, whose arm tightened around Margot’s waist. She sighed and ran her fingers along the back of Olivia’s forearm. “Liv, I’ve got to get up.”

Carefully, Margot extricated herself from the bed, wincing at how cold the floor was under her feet. Picking up clothes as she went, Margot pulled yesterday’s sweater on over her head, grateful that it hit midthigh. She cracked open the door and poked her head out, the bed within direct view of the doorway.

Elle’s smile fell. “You aren’t ready yet?”

“Um, no. I—I overslept.” She winced. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Do you just want to meet us . . .” Elle’s eyes widened comically. “Um. Sorry.” She shut her eyes and shook her head, laughing under her breath. “Lost my train of thought. Do you just want to meet us downstairs?”

Margot nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll be down in fifteen, okay?”

“No rush.” Elle smiled brightly. “Take your time.”

As soon as the door was shut, Margot dropped her head and groaned. All she wanted was to crawl back into bed beside Liv and revel in this little bubble they’d built, an oasis of soft sheets and softer skin, the fireplace churning out heat they didn’t even need, not with the way she burned when Liv touched her, even in the most innocent places. The inside of her wrist or the back of her knee, the small of her back, a kiss against the top knob of her spine capable of undoing her completely.

“Is everything okay?”

Margot spun around. Olivia was sitting up, sheet wrapped around her, hair mussed and eyes sleepy, lips kiss-swollen and pink.

Margot jerked her thumb behind her at the door. “That was just Elle. We overslept, I guess.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “Wait, what time is it?” She swiped her phone off the nightstand. “Shoot. I still need to check my email.”

Olivia hopped out of the bed, stumbling and catching herself when the sheets tangled around her legs. She kicked them aside and bent down, snagging her clothes. She looked up, lips twitching. “You’re wearing my sweater.”

“Oh.” Margot ducked her chin and laughed. No wonder it hit so low on her thighs. Olivia was taller, longer in the torso than she was by several inches. “I guess I am.”

Olivia crossed the room on bare feet, bare *everything*, and rested her arms on Margot’s shoulders. She leaned in, ghosting a quick kiss against Margot’s mouth that made her shiver. “It looks good on you.”

The tips of Margot’s ears burned. “Thanks.” She dragged her eyes up Olivia’s body in a slow, exaggerated leer. “Maybe I’ll have to steal your clothes more often.”

Olivia bit her lip and blushed, color spreading down her chest. “I should probably go shower and get ready.”

Margot’s stomach chose that moment to give a vicious-sounding growl, rumbling loudly. She and Olivia both laughed. “Not a bad idea. We’re supposed to meet everyone downstairs for breakfast.”

Olivia stepped back, hands falling to her sides, and Margot immediately missed her warmth. “Okay, meet you back here?”

Margot nodded and headed for the bathroom, running through a record-fast shower. She didn’t bother with makeup, just brushing her hair and throwing on her clothes, a simple black sweater and pair of jeans.

Five minutes later, Margot was in the middle of fighting with the zipper on her left boot when Olivia returned, looking the part of an adorable snow bunny in a pair of pink insulated cargo pants and a cream-colored fleece. In her arms was a pink jacket that matched her pants.

Olivia's brows knit. "Is that what you're wearing?"

Margot tugged on her sleeves. "Yes?"

Olivia fiddled with the zipper pull at the top of her fleece, lowering it an inch before drawing it back up to her neck, distracting Margot with that tantalizing sliver of skin. "Okay. You ready?"

Margot patted her pocket, double-checking that she had her room key and cell before locking up. "I heard back from the DJ, by the way," Olivia said as they stepped inside the elevator. "He has the set list, along with the song requests from the RSVP Google Form—that's a relief."

"I told you." Margot kicked Olivia's shin lightly. "You were worrying over nothing."

Olivia blew out her breath. "You're right. I'm just—nervous? Everything has to be perfect."

"It's not even your wedding, Liv." Margot laughed.

"I know that." Olivia tucked her hair behind her ear, worrying her bottom lip. Margot itched to reach out and draw that lip from between her teeth. Giving in to the urge, she skimmed her hand along Olivia's jaw, cupping the side of Olivia's face, and rubbed the pad of her thumb along Olivia's bottom lip, gasping when Olivia's tongue darted out against her skin. Olivia smiled impishly.

Margot dropped her hand with a shaky laugh. "Tease."

Olivia's smile wavered at the edges. "Brendon's been a loyal client of my boss's for years, and she's trusting me to make sure this wedding goes off without a hitch. You have no idea how I had to actually *beg* for Lori to let me have this." Olivia scratched her eyebrow with her thumbnail. "That's not even taking into account that I actually *like* Annie and Brendon. Even if my career weren't riding on this wedding being a success, I'd still want everything to be perfect because they deserve it."

The fact that Olivia cared about Margot's friends, about the people *she* cared about, the people she'd do anything for . . . that pushed buttons Margot didn't even know she had. She had

to swallow twice before she could speak. “I know Annie and Brendon appreciate everything you’ve done. You’ve been . . . amazing.”

Olivia ducked her chin. “It’s nothing.”

It wasn’t nothing. Olivia’s selflessness, her endless capacity to care, made her so fucking *special*.

Margot’s heart made a new home inside her throat. “It’s not. You have no idea how—”

The elevator dinged, the doors opening, saving Margot from word-vomiting her feelings all over Olivia.

Olivia made no move to leave the elevator, instead staring at Margot with wide eyes. Her lashes beat against her cheek with every blink, seeming to match the frantic fluttering of Margot’s pulse at the base of her throat.

“I have no idea what?” Olivia whispered.

Margot gulped, the sound embarrassingly loud inside the small space, even with the elevator doors open. “How amazing you are.” *Fuck*. Too much. “You know.” Margot coughed. “At what you do.”

Olivia’s eyes darted over Margot’s face. One corner of her mouth rose. “Thanks, Margot.”

A throat cleared. A man stood outside the elevator, one hand braced against the elevator door, holding it open. He smiled tightly.

“Shit,” Margot muttered. “Sorry.”

She hurried out of the elevator, taking a second to get her bearings once she reached the lobby.

“I think the restaurant’s this way.” Olivia wrapped her fingers around Margot’s elbow, gently tugging her toward the left. Around the corner was a hostess stand, empty, a chalkboard sign proclaiming that visitors could seat themselves. Margot stepped through the door and glanced around looking for—

“Margot!”

At the back of the restaurant, occupying a long table, were her friends. And Luke. Elle stood partway, hovering over her chair, one hand braced against the table, the other waving them over.

Two empty seats remained, both together, Elle to one side, Luke to the other. Making a split-second decision she was likely to regret, Margot slid into the seat beside Luke, leaving the chair beside Elle for Olivia.

“First one to bed and last one awake?” Brendon grinned.

“It, um, took me a while to fall asleep,” Margot said, stealing a quick glance at Olivia from the corner of her eye. “I don’t know. I kept tossing and turning.”

Elle choked on her orange juice.

Margot frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Elle croaked, accepting a napkin from Darcy.

Luke leaned his forearms on the edge of the table, peering around Margot. “How about you, Liv? I, uh, knocked on your door this morning.” He smiled at her, adorably lopsided, and Margot’s chest clenched. *Liv?* Since when did anyone call Olivia *Liv*, but her? That was *Margot’s* nickname. *Hers*, not his. “You must be a heavy sleeper.”

Olivia blushed and nodded quickly. “I am.”

Margot reached for her glass of water at the same time Olivia did, their fingers brushing above the table.

“Sorry.” She slid Olivia’s glass toward her, taking a quick sip from her own before setting it to the right side of her place setting.

How ridiculous was it that she’d had her hands and mouth all over Olivia, had used her fingers to drive Olivia wild, and still the simplest touch made her jolt like she’d stuck her finger in a damn light socket?

Elle cleared her throat. “We all already ordered. Mar, I went ahead and ordered you your usual.” By *usual*, Margot was willing to bet Elle meant pancakes and bacon, Margot’s go-to no matter where she ate out. Elle flashed Olivia an apologetic

smile. “I would’ve ordered something for you, but I had no idea what you wanted. I told our waitress to—oh, here she is.”

Olivia swiped the menu off the table, eyes scanning it quickly. She turned to the waitress, “I’ll have the wild-mushroom-and-pesto omelet.” Olivia smiled and handed over her menu. “And can I get a cup of green tea? Thanks.”

Margot snagged the carafe of coffee from the center of the table and filled her mug.

“You’re not wearing that to the pass, are you?” Brendon asked.

“Wait, me?” Margot lowered her mug and frowned down at her outfit. What was with everyone asking about her choice of clothes? “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

Luke snorted out a laugh that immediately put Margot’s back up. “Those jeans are going to soak through in an instant.”

Margot recoiled, jaw dropping. “What the hell?”

They were at breakfast; that was gauche, even for her.

Brendon sputtered, laughing so hard tears welled in his eyes. “Oh, shit.” He laughed harder. “No. *Margot*.”

Annie rested her hand on Brendon’s shaking shoulder and smiled. “I think what Luke was trying to say is, denim isn’t water- or wind-resistant. If you wipe out, you’re going to freeze up on the mountain.”

“Cotton kills.” Luke nodded as if that was supposed to make sense to her.

Margot glanced around the table. Everyone, save for her, was wearing some version of what Olivia had on—insulated ski pants and plenty of layers. Margot frowned, her stomach beginning a slow descent toward her knees.

“I mean, we’re not *all* skiing, right? There’s a lodge at the summit where we can sip spiked cider and shoot the shit around a fire, yeah?”

Annie shrugged. “I think so? I honestly don’t know. I haven’t been skiing since I was in Courchevel with my

cousins, so I've been really looking forward to hitting the slopes."

Margot bit her lip. "Elle? You don't ski."

Elle wrinkled her nose. "I don't *often*. But I went to Whistler with my family every winter when I was younger. It's been a while, but it could be fun?"

She turned to Olivia, who winced. "Brad and I used to go to Stevens Pass. I'm not *great* at skiing or anything—"

"I was a volunteer ski instructor in high school," Luke said, leaning across Margot. "If you need me to show you the ropes, I'd be more than happy to." His lips twitched. "Ropes on the slopes."

Olivia laughed.

Doctors Without Borders, volunteer ski instructor . . .
"Where are you from?"

Pleasantville?

"North Lake Tahoe," Luke answered, smile broad and Chiclet white.

"Hmm." Margot sipped her coffee.

"You know, I think I'll be okay." When Olivia gestured to Margot, her stomach sank. No, no, no. "But maybe Margot might need a little instruction?"

"I'm fine." Margot tore the paper holder off her napkin. "Seriously."

"Nah, it's cool." Luke shrugged. "I'm used to teaching kids, so it's really not a problem."

Woo boy. Margot stole a deep breath in, nostrils flaring, and released it slowly.

The rational part of her brain realized that chances were, Luke was a decent guy. He'd have to be, in order to be Brendon's friend. Brendon, himself, was a golden retriever in human form, a six-foot-four-inch marshmallow encased in muscle. The chances of him associating with some smarmy

asshole were slim. Luke was probably an awesome, all-around great dude.

But jealousy *wasn't* rational.

She was self-aware enough to *know* why she didn't vibe with Luke, that her feelings had less to do with *him* and more to do with her. Her and Olivia, specifically her feelings for Olivia, feelings she didn't know what to do with, feelings that were very much unresolved because she didn't know *how* to resolve them without saying something to Olivia, which, *ha*, right.

She didn't hate Luke. She hated what he represented. The reality of her situation. That Margot had no right to feel the way she did, because Olivia wasn't hers. That Luke or anyone else could come along and sweep Olivia off her feet and ride off into the sunset and—

Pain radiated up her jaw from clenching her back teeth too hard. It didn't hold a candle to the sharp stab between her ribs that nearly stole her breath at the thought of losing Liv.

Insecurity *sucked*.

Knowing the root cause of her irritation didn't make her like him any more than she did, but hey, she wasn't in denial about it. Score one for enlightenment.

At least she could choose how to react. She could be cool. Completely relaxed. *Chill*. The last thing she needed was for her twisted-up, uglier emotions to get the best of her and put a damper on Annie and Brendon's wedding week.

She pasted on a smile. "Maybe I'll take you up on that, Luke."

Not. She'd be fine. If Elle—the least athletic person Margot knew—could ski, how hard could it be?

"We'll have to get you some proper ski gear, for starters," Luke said, eyeing her clothes with a frown. "Ski pants, ski jacket—you can rent the rest at the summit."

Elle perked up. "I think I saw some cute options in the gift shop. We can wander over after breakfast and take a peek?"

“Works for me.”

The waitress appeared, trays laden with food. “Denver omelet?”

Brendon lifted his hand. “That’s me.”

As soon as everyone had their food, the conversation turned to the wedding.

“I heard back from the caterer on your question about the vegetarian option for the reception,” Olivia said. “It *can* be made gluten-free, so your mom should be fine. I’ll make sure to remind the kitchen on the day of the wedding.”

Brendon nodded along with a grateful smile. “Thank you. Mom, uh, kind of blindsided us with this new, uh, diet she’s following.”

Darcy picked at her eggs and rolled her eyes. “I still have a feeling Mom’s going to do something dramatic like wear white to the wedding.”

“I don’t know,” Annie mused, tapping the tines of her fork against her lip. “My money’s on black. Full funeral veil and everything.”

Brendon cringed.

Olivia set her fork down, looking concerned. “Is that something I’m going to need to run interference on, because I don’t exactly have any firsthand experience dealing with parental conflict during—”

“We’re kidding,” Darcy said, smirking. “Our mother is a little . . . difficult, but she shouldn’t make a scene.”

“Whew.” Olivia pressed her palm to her chest. “I was a little worried there.”

“Don’t be,” Margot said, leaning into Olivia and jostling her lightly. “Even if something were to go down, Brendon’s already tasked me with running interference.”

His smile verged on a grimace. “We’re calling it *Plan G*.”

At Olivia’s frown, Darcy said, “Our mother’s name is Gillian.”

Brendon looked across the table, meeting Margot's eye. He gave his patented staggered blink, his inability to wink both charming and hilarious.

Margot buried her smirk in a bite of her pancakes.

Olivia nudged her before leaning close, breath ruffling Margot's hair when she whispered, "Why do I get the feeling that's not what it's really named for?"

Margot finished chewing and said, "No, it is. It's just a little more complicated than it sounds, me running interference. Because Gillian's a bit of a loose cannon." Margot shivered at the memory of Brendon's mother trying to crawl on top of the bar at his and Annie's joint shower. "She's got a bunch of personal hang-ups, and none of us are entirely sure how she's going to react on the day of the wedding, so Brendon and I have discussed several different problems that might arise and how best to solve them before they, um, blow up? Perks of being Best Woman."

Olivia smiled. "With great power comes great responsibility?"

Margot snickered into her napkin. "Hmm, I like that. Makes me sound *way* more important than I am."

Olivia cocked her head, staring, studying Margot closely in a way that made her stomach flutter. "I think you're pretty damn important, Margot."

She had to stop saying things like that. Giving Margot hope that maybe this *thing* between them could be more. That Olivia wanted more. Wanted Margot and not just the parts of her that were easy and sexy and fun, but the hard parts, too. The edges and the sandpapery bluntness and the parts Margot didn't always like about herself, but that were part and parcel to the whole package. Everything that made Margot who she was.

Margot ducked her chin and laughed. "So what? You're suggesting all I need is a flashy suit to round out this new superhero persona I've got going?"

Olivia pursed her lips and hummed as if pretending to think about it. “I don’t know. I’ve heard good things about the tux you picked out.” Her smile turned sly. “I’m looking forward to seeing you in it.”

Heat crept up the front of Margot’s throat. “You sure you don’t mean that you’re looking forward to seeing me *out* of it?”

“Hmm.” With a tiny shrug, Olivia reached for her tea. She cradled the mug between her hands, slender fingers laced together around the ceramic. “I don’t know. I happen to like unwrapping my presents.”

Margot bit back a whimper.

Olivia swiped a piece of bacon off Margot’s plate with a wink and smile.

Devious. Margot swallowed hard and tuned back in to the conversation only—no one was talking.

Almost everyone was staring at her with varying degrees of shock splashed across their faces, eyes darting between Margot, her plate, and the bacon in Olivia’s hand.

She frowned. “What?”

“You never share your food,” Brendon said.

“What?” Margot laughed. “That’s not true.”

Brendon’s face screwed up. “You went on an entire rant about growing up with brothers and—and you almost took my finger off when I tried to steal your Reese’s, Margot.”

Elle was watching her curiously, eyes narrowed and lip trapped between her teeth, like Margot was a puzzle and Elle was bound and determined to solve it. Her eyes darted to Olivia and back and—Margot’s stomach somersaulted. Unless Elle had already solved it.

“It’s just bacon,” Margot said, rolling her eyes. She lifted her plate and shook it at Brendon. “You want some?”

He waved it off. “Nah, I’m stuffed.”

Margot set her plate down and stretched across the table for the carafe to refill her coffee. She had her mug halfway to her mouth when, from the corner of her eye, she saw a hand sneak out from the right, heading directly for her bacon. Acting on instinct, an impulse to protect the food on her plate ingrained in her from years spent fending off her brothers . . . and okay, whatever, she wasn't Luke's number one fan. She snagged her plate and dragged it to the side, further out reach.

“Were you raised by *wolves*?” she demanded.

Luke lifted his hands up and laughed. “Geez, you *offered*.”

Yeah, to Brendon. She sniffed. Her bacon, her rules; she was under no obligation to share.

Only . . . everyone was looking at her like she'd lost her mind, including Elle, including *Olivia*. She stared at Margot, hands still cradling her mug of tea, her lips parted in apparent shock, and—

Margot flung a strip of bacon at Luke's plate. “Enjoy.”

She wiped her hands on her napkin and pushed away from the table. “I'm going to—”

Elle stood so fast her chair almost toppled over. “Come to the gift shop with me?”

She swallowed her sigh. No point in delaying the inevitable. “Sure.”

They made it out of the restaurant and through the lobby without speaking. By the time they reached the gift shop, Elle appeared to be practically vibrating out of her skin with the restraint it was taking to hold her tongue. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Margot, her lips a thin, pale line as she pressed them together. Elle's eyes might actually fall out of her eye sockets if she stared any more meaningfully.

“Stop looking at me like that.” Margot chuckled, slightly unnerved. “It's freaking me out.”

Elle held up her hands. “I can't *look* at my best friend? My best friend who should know she can tell me *anything* and I'll listen. Eagerly, even.”

Margot's eyes narrowed. "I'm on to you."

"What?" Elle feigned ignorance, her blue eyes flaring with faux innocence. "I didn't say anything."

"Elle."

Elle gave a tiny shrug. "Like I said, whenever you're ready to talk, I'll be ready to listen." She smiled guiltily. "So . . . are you ready to talk yet? Or do I need to dig deep for a little more patience?"

Heaven forbid.

"It hasn't even been twelve hours." Margot shook her head but wasn't able to churn up any true exasperation. *"Hours."*

Elle bit her lip, brows rising, expression eager. "That was before you smacked Luke's hand away from your *bacon*." Her brows wiggled.

"It's breakfast meat, Elle. It's not that deep."

Elle jutted out her lower lip.

Margot rolled her eyes, aiming for affectation and missing by a landslide when she swallowed, her throat suddenly parched to the point that her gulp was audible. Fuck. "I don't even know where to start."

"At the beginning?" Elle suggested, nodding in the direction of the ski apparel. There were several racks of options at the back of the shop, most in garishly bright colors that made Margot cringe at the thought of sliding down a mountain looking like a traffic cone.

"The beginning," Margot repeated, rifling through a rack of jackets. "Which beginning? The beginning eleven years ago? The beginning when Liv and I met in kindergarten? Or the beginning where we ran into each other last month?"

"Either? All?" Elle shuffled awkwardly on her feet. *"Or I guess I could tell you what I already know?"*

Margot froze, one hand wrapped around the hanger of an ostentatious coat in pea green. "What you already know . . . which is what, exactly?"

Elle bit her lip and winced. “Um, the walls of the hotel are thinner than you might think.”

“What.” Margot gripped the metal rack and stared.

“Um, was that a question?” Elle laughed through another sharp cringe. “I—yeah, so last night, Darcy and I sort of . . . heard some things. And this morning, when you answered the door, you were wearing the sweater Olivia had on last night. It was, uh . . . A lot of things suddenly made a lot of sense.”

The rush of blood to her head left Margot dizzy. “Ah. I see. That would be, um . . .” Awkward laughter burst from her lips. “Illuminating.”

“Oh my gosh. You’re blushing, Margot.” Elle giggled.

“Well, *yeah*. You just told me you heard . . .” She trailed off, making a vague gesture with her hand that didn’t mean much of anything but communicated plenty.

“We lived together for ten years. It’s not the first time one of us has heard the other”—Elle mimicked Margot’s hand movement—“*you know*. I mean, for goodness’ sake, my *mom* walked in on you freshman year.”

And to this day, Mrs. Jones wouldn’t look Margot in the eye. Margot maintained that if Mrs. Jones hadn’t wanted to see Margot naked, astride the RA, she should’ve knocked before entering the dorm room she and Elle shared.

“Yeah, well, I guess I just didn’t anticipate the cat being let out of the bag quite so . . . I don’t know—”

“Pornographically?” Elle supplied. “I mean, from the sound of it, *good* porn. The kind you have to pay for and where you know they’re actually treating the actors nice, you know? Quality stuff.” Elle cringed. “Not that we were *listening*, ew, it was just difficult to tune out. But we tried. Really hard. We, um, turned the TV on *really* loud.” Elle smiled sweetly. “But kudos, Mar. It sounded like you guys were having an A-plus time.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” Margot buried her face in her hands and groaned. “Kill me now.”

Elle bumped her with her hip and laughed. “Lighten up. Don’t worry, it’s not like Darcy and I are going to say anything. Clearly, this isn’t how you wanted anyone to find out about . . .”

Margot peeked through her fingers as Elle trailed off, brows lifting as she waited for Margot to fill in the blanks.

Margot lowered her hands from her face and sighed deeply, the sound coming from what felt like all the way down in her bones. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Elle. But I’m in so far over my head, it’s not even funny.”

Elle’s smile slipped. “Okay, not laughing anymore. Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

Margot glared.

“The beginning that makes the most sense to you,” Elle clarified.

Margot took a deep breath and just . . . let it all pour out.

“Like I said, Olivia and I were friends. We were *best* friends. Wherever she went, I was sure to follow. If you were looking for her, you’d find me.” She bit her lip. “I mean, there was one summer where Liv practically moved in with us, my family. I had mono and she skipped cheer camp and gave up her spot on the varsity squad just so I wouldn’t be alone.”

Elle smiled, and if Margot wasn’t mistaken, it was a touch sad. Grim. Expectant. Leave it to Elle to read between the lines, to hear what Margot wasn’t saying. “Sounds like you two were really close.”

Margot scratched her forehead. “Yeah, you could—you could say that.” She swallowed, the lump in her throat growing. “It doesn’t really take a genius to see where this is going. At some point—I don’t know exactly when, because whoever knows exactly when these things begin—I fell for her. Hard. I was ridiculously, stupidly, ass-over-heels in love with her, and I didn’t realize it until she started dating someone else. Brad. He was an ass.” She rolled her eyes. “Not just because he was dating her and I wasn’t.”

Elle nodded and, to her credit, waited quietly for Margot to go on.

“It was fine. I—okay, no. That’s a lie. It sucked. There were copious amounts of teenage angst, and lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling and listening to Ingrid Michaelson sing about fragile hearts, and journaling. So much journaling.” She ducked her head and scoffed out a laugh. “I’m sure I filled *several* diaries up with entries about how painfully unfair my life was.”

She’d yearned, pined, burned, perished. If it sounded painful and emotionally fraught, Margot had probably been there, done that.

Elle nibbled on her bottom lip. “Did you ever say anything?”

“Are you serious?” Margot snorted. “Of course not. Olivia was with Brad, and I didn’t want to ruin our friendship, so I kept my mouth shut.” Her lips twisted. “I managed to mess everything up without ever saying a thing.”

Margot glared at that atrocious jacket the color of pea soup. “Spring break senior year. Brad and Olivia were in one of the many *off* phases of their on-again-off-again relationship. He’d broken up with her that time. I did what I always did and came over with junk food and old movies and was prepared to be the shoulder Liv needed to cry on. But it didn’t happen like that.” Her mouth had gone dry, tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. She swallowed hard, trying to generate some moisture. “Liv’s dad was away on some trip with his friends. We had the house to ourselves. Suddenly we were breaking out a bottle of bottom-shelf vodka, and next thing I knew”—her voice cracked—“she was kissing me.”

Elle squeezed her arm.

“It was, um, everything I wanted right there, and I just ... I rolled with it. I didn’t ask questions. I mean, my best friend who I was stupidly in love with was kissing me, and I was eighteen and perpetually horny; what was there to question?” She laughed. To be that young and stupid. “One thing led to another, and we had sex. A lot of sex. I stayed the whole week

at her house and we weren't—we weren't drunk the whole time. After that first day, we didn't touch the vodka. But we didn't really talk about it, either? I mean, we *talked*. It wasn't like a constant sex marathon."

"I imagine there'd have been some serious chafing if it were." Elle snorted, immediately looking apologetic. "Sorry."

Margot waved her off. "We talked, we just didn't define it. And it was my bad, I guess, for assuming we were on the same page."

"You weren't?"

An iron fist gripped Margot's heart. If it didn't suck so badly, Margot would almost be amazed at how a decade-old wound could still hurt so badly. "No. Brad came back from his trip to Cancún." She rolled her eyes. "He and I had homeroom together. Someone asked about the breakup and he shrugged it off. Said he and Liv had talked the night before. That they were working it out. Getting back together." She swallowed over the knot swelling in her throat. "The first thing he did during passing period was head straight to Liv's locker, and he—he just kissed her and . . . Liv let him." The burn at the back of her eyes worsened with every blink, the ache in her chest growing larger until she feared her next breath would escape her as a sob. *Fuck*. Margot pinched her lips together, forcing air through her nose, getting a grip. She sniffed hard. "I told the nurse I wasn't feeling well and went home. Liv texted me that night. Something along the lines of, *Brad wants to get back together. Can you believe it? What should I tell him?* I told her she didn't need to worry about me saying anything to anyone about what happened over spring break. Because what happened on spring break stayed on spring break. And I, um, I told her she should get back together with Brad."

Elle frowned. "Why would you do that?"

Margot laughed even though the last thing she felt was amused. "What was I supposed to do, Elle? She asked. She shouldn't have *had* to ask. I thought—I thought a lot of things, and none of them mattered. Things were awkward for the next few weeks, but there was still a tiny part of me that hoped

maybe it would be different when we left for college. Brad didn't seem like the kind of guy who'd be down for long distance, you know?" She took a deep breath. "Right before graduation, Liv dropped a bombshell on me, telling me she was going to WSU instead of UW. She chose Brad over me, over all of her plans, all of *our* plans. *Again*.

"So Olivia left. She moved across the state to Pullman with Brad, and that was it. Eleven years pass, and I don't see or talk to Liv, and then one day I walk into a building in Queen Anne with my best friend to go meet up with my other friends and *bam!* She's the wedding planner, and she's . . ." Margot blinked hard and dropped her eyes to the floor, staring hard at her scuffed shoes. "She's just as beautiful as I remember, and she's standing right in front of me. And then she needed a place to stay and I gave it to her."

Without warning, Margot had an armful of Elle. Elle's hands cradled the back of Margot's head, and—ow, that was Elle's foot standing on the tender top of Margot's instep. Margot winced but hugged Elle back; the inevitable bruises would be worth it for this momentary comfort.

Elle drew back and blinked. "Okay. That's a lot."

Leave it to Elle to manage to make Margot laugh at a moment like this. "I know."

"How did I know *none* of this?"

"Because I didn't want you to? No offense, but it's really not the sort of thing you want to tell your brand-new college roommate. *Hi, my name's Margot. Would you like to hear all about my teenage heartbreak?*"

"I'd have listened," Elle said, sounding indignant. "If not then, I can't believe you never mentioned this. *Eleven years.*"

"Honestly? Not to be a walking cliché, but this is really one of those *it's not you, it's me* things. I haven't wanted to talk about this with anyone. No one knows. Not my brothers or my parents, not anyone. I could've gone the rest of my life without telling a soul, but . . . I don't know what I'm doing," she

admitted. “I thought I could do this, but I don’t know, Elle. I really don’t know.”

“What’s *this*?” Elle asked. “You’re, um, clearly . . .”

Elle trailed off, expression earnest as she made another one of those vague gestures with her hands.

“Having really great sex? It’s not a question of whether she wants me like that. It’s everything else.” Margot needed something to do with her hands, so she moved on to the next rack of jackets, these in far less offensive hues.

“Did you consider, I don’t know, asking her how she feels?”

Margot snagged a charcoal-colored jacket off the rack that looked like it had promise and, bummer. Not her size. It was beginning to look like her only option was the awful green number. “Sure. I considered it.”

And decided against it.

Elle stared, face twisted in disappointment. “Margot.”

“Olivia is living down the hall from me, Elle. She’s Brendon’s wedding planner. Do you realize how messy it would be if things between us went south?”

“She’s only Brendon’s wedding planner for the next week. Not even a week.”

“She’s still going to be my roommate,” Margot argued. The lump in her throat swelled. “She’s still going to be my friend.”

Elle frowned. “What are you actually worried about here?”

Margot drummed her fingers against her thighs. “I don’t—I feel like I just got Liv back and . . . I don’t want to lose her. I don’t want the same thing that happened before to happen again. Me wanting Liv and Liv wanting . . . *not* me. I mean, do you realize how awkward it would be, sharing an apartment, after pouring out my feelings and having Liv tell me she doesn’t want the same? That *this* is all she wants? There’s no way we could live together.”

She wasn’t sure their friendship could withstand the same blow twice. Her heart definitely couldn’t.

“You’re making a lot of assumptions, Margot. Don’t you think you should talk about it? About what happened then and what’s happening now?”

That sounded like the worst idea, the exact opposite of what Margot wanted.

Communication was the cornerstone to any relationship—yeah, she *got* that. Margot had read enough books and fanfiction, watched enough movies to know the pitfalls of miscommunication, the frustration of watching two people flounder simply because they failed to speak their minds. If she had a dollar for every time she’d wanted to reach through the screen and throttle someone, to scream and say *just fucking talk about it* or *just tell her how you feel*, she’d be able to afford those ridiculous leather boots she’d been eyeing in the window display at Nordstrom, praying for them to go on sale.

Reality was different. Talking, *sharing*, like so many things, was easier said than done.

“Look, normally I am totally on team *talk about it*. But it’s so much easier to tell someone to talk than to actually do it. The problem isn’t opening my mouth and saying the words—that’s the *easy* part. It’s—it’s what comes after. When the words are out there, and I can’t take them back. Right now, I’m living out the Schrödinger’s cat of relationship probability. I am half hope, half agony until proven otherwise.”

“How is living in relationship limbo any better?” Sweet, *sweet* Elle stared, eyes wide and expression guileless.

Margot raked her fingers through her hair, tugging on the ends. “It’s not.” She sighed. “You’re right. It’s sucks. I’m just —”

“Scared?” Elle smiled gently.

She slipped her hands beneath her glasses and rubbed her eyes. “Terrified,” she said, dropping her arms back to her sides.

Elle reached out and grabbed Margot’s hand, squeezing hard. The pressure in Margot’s chest lessened. “I promise that

nothing that will happen will be as bad as the worst-case scenario you've imagined."

Margot huffed. "Hate to break it to you, Elle, but that's less reassuring than you think. You underestimate my ability to catastrophize."

"I'm not going to say your worries are unfounded. I'm not inside Olivia's head. I don't know how she feels, but I see the way she looks at you and . . . I think you should just tell her how you feel. Let her know what's going on inside *your* head, because I love you, Margot, but right now what you're doing isn't fair to either of you. You've got to tell her what you want."

Once again, Elle was spot-on. What Margot was doing *wasn't* fair, saying she wanted one thing but acting like she wanted another. Margot's breath caught, and it hurt like hell to swallow. Olivia deserved better than *this*, being unwittingly caught up in Margot's emotional whiplash.

Elle was right. Margot needed to tell Olivia how she felt. That she wanted more.

After the wedding.

Elle could tell her she was worrying for nothing until she turned blue in the face, but there was no way for Elle to know that for sure. To know that Olivia wanted Margot in all the ways Margot wanted her.

For all Margot knew, everything could go sideways. That wasn't a risk she could take with Brendon's wedding days away. He was counting on her, and Olivia's career hinged on the success of the wedding.

If part of her reason for putting it off was because she was scared . . . that was her prerogative. Sue her if she wanted a little more guaranteed time with Olivia before she introduced the possibility of—of losing her into the equation.

It wasn't like she was never going to say something. Margot had *years* of practice hiding her feelings from Olivia. What was a few more days?

She swallowed hard.

That was somehow both too long and not nearly long enough.

Chapter Seventeen

“Okay, so you’ve got the wedge technique down. That’s fantastic. The next technique you’ll want to practice is the parallel turn, which is the complete opposite of the wedge. We call it the parallel turn because your skis are—”

“Parallel?” Margot arched a brow, the sharp shrewdness of her gaze tempered by the garish green puffy coat she had zipped all the way to her chin, making her look a little like giant pea. A cute pea. A cute pea Olivia very much wanted to kiss, but couldn’t because they were in public and this was *casual*.

God, for a word that Olivia usually associated with so many of her favorite things—her most comfortable pair of jeans, her favorite threadbare T-shirt that she’d happened to have *borrowed* from Margot years ago and never returned, the restaurant down the street that had the best crab Rangoon she’d ever eaten in her life—*casual* was beginning to grate. She’d ban it from her vocabulary if she could, scrap it altogether.

Screw *casual*. She wanted the opposite of whatever that was. Complex? She’d take *complex* any day.

“Yeah, exactly.” Luke nodded. “Parallel turns are kind of the bread and butter of skiing. It’s the ideal position for edging.”

Margot’s brows rocketed to her hairline as she met Olivia’s eyes over Luke’s shoulder. “Sorry, come again?”

Olivia lifted a gloved hand to her mouth, muffling her small snicker. Margot's lips twitched, eyes sparkling with mischief as she met Olivia's stare.

"Edging," Luke repeated, and Margot turned, staring at Luke agog, the tip of her nose turning red and small flurries gathering on her dark lashes. "It's how you control your speed. By scraping the edge of skis against the snow, you can slow down. The harder you edge—"

Margot snorted loudly.

"Is something funny?" Luke frowned.

Margot's lips pressed together and a bubble of laughter built in Olivia's throat, Margot's laughter catching. A tiny giggle escaped Olivia before she bit down on the inside of her cheek.

"Nope," Margot bit out, barely managing that one word before her chin quivered and her shoulders started to shake.

"Okay." Luke looked less than convinced, but shrugged, moving on. "Like I was saying, the harder you edge, the more in control you'll—"

Margot bent at the waist and burst out laughing.

A smile tugged at the corners of Olivia's mouth, the sound of Margot's unadulterated joy filling her chest with more than enough warmth to combat the freezing temps.

"Is she okay?" Luke asked Olivia, dropping his voice and leaning a little closer than strictly necessary.

Olivia nodded and shuffled back to put a bit of distance between them, her legs hampered by the skis attached to her feet. It had been over a year since she'd been skiing and even then, she could count on one hand the number of times she'd been in total. *Rusty* was an understatement. "Margot's fine. She's just—"

"Sorry, sorry." Margot flapped her hands in front of her face and exhaled sharply. "I'm good. You were saying?"

Luke frowned, staring at Margot like she'd lost her marbles. "Why don't you head back up the magic carpet and try a

parallel turn at the bottom of the bunny slope? Edge hard to stop, okay?”

The magic carpet was a conveyor-belt-style people mover that pulled passengers up a small hill so they could master the basics before moving on to more advanced terrain. The summit offered two such people movers—one that led up to a small bunny slope, and another that led to a slightly steeper hill for those looking for a more intermediary option. Still not advanced, by any means, but a longer descent perfect for practicing trickier turns.

The rest of the group had headed off to the ski lift, skilled enough to tackle the actual slopes. Luke had volunteered to hang back and help Olivia brush up on her skills and teach Margot the fundamentals. After two trips on the beginner magic carpet, Olivia felt pretty confident that she wasn't going to fall on her ass, or worse, faceplant into a snowbank.

Margot lifted her hand in a sassy two-finger salute before waddling over to the magic carpet, her skis spreading further apart with each step she took. Olivia cringed. “Shuffle, Mar. Don't lift. Push forward. Use your thighs.”

“Got it.” Margot waved a gloved hand.

“Liv and I are going to head up to the next hill, okay?” Luke said, resting one hand on the small of Olivia's back, guiding her toward the longer of the two magic carpets, the one that would take them slightly higher up on the mountain.

Margot's shuffled footsteps faltered, her eyes dropping to where Luke's hand rested on Olivia's waist. Her jaw slid forward and she nodded. “Sure. Meet you back down here.”

Olivia bit back a cringe, at the touch, the use of her nickname, *and* Margot's reaction. It wasn't that she minded being called Liv, it was that Luke hadn't bothered to ask. It grated, reminding her of how Brad had glommed on to the nickname Dad called her. For over ten years she'd suffered in silence, because at first she hadn't wanted to be rude or abrasive, and later because it was too late. She'd let it go on too long to say anything after he'd been calling her Livvy for over a year.

Now, she didn't want to make a scene. What did it matter if Brendon's friend called her Liv? The chances of seeing him again after this weekend were slim.

He was a nice guy, but that was just it. Olivia didn't want *nice*. She wanted Margot.

Olivia smiled as Margot waddled over to the people mover, shuffling awkwardly, looking a little like she had a wedgie. Olivia wanted *that*. Margot with her sharp laugh and sly smiles and dirty jokes and huge heart. Her quiet confidence and how fiercely loyal she was. Even her inability to ski—though she seemed bound and determined to figure it out—and her tendency to act first and ask questions later. Everything, even Margot's flaws, was endearing to Olivia.

What Margot wanted, *that* remained a mystery. It was hard to say, with how she blew hot one minute and cold the next, acting like this *thing* between them was casual before looking at Olivia like she was something precious, looking at her in a way that no one else ever quite had, not even Brad. Keeping a solid three feet between them when they were around Brendon and the rest of her friends but kissing her sweetly in the privacy of the elevator. Wanting to keep whatever this was between them quiet, keep it from her friends for the week—or so she said—but glaring at Luke from across the deck.

It didn't feel like she was imagining a shift, an intensity in Margot's gaze and an urgency in the way she touched Olivia that hadn't been there before. But a terrible, anxious little voice in the back of Olivia's brain whispered that Margot was only acting this way, acting like she wanted something more with Olivia, because someone else wanted her, too.

Olivia wasn't sure how much more of this whiplash she could take.

"So would you want to?" Luke stared at her expectantly as they reached the top of the slope.

Olivia winced. "Sorry? I missed that. Would I want to what?"

Luke smiled patiently and repeated himself. “Would you want to hang out sometime? You said you were relatively new to the city, and I haven’t lived here in a few years, but I’ve got a good grasp of the general lay of the land.” The right corner of his mouth lifted a little higher than the left, his smile going crooked. It was a credit to how intensely *gone* for Margot she was that her heart didn’t stutter at the sight of his dimple or his perfectly white teeth. Her heart didn’t even speed up. “I could show you around. Take you to some of my old haunts. If you’re interested.”

Internally, Olivia cringed. “Um, yeah. You know, last night was so much fun. Wouldn’t it be fun if we *all* got together again? As a group. I think *that* would be great.”

Hint, hint.

“Here.” Luke fished around in one of the many pockets of his cargo pants, pulling out his phone, pressing it into her palm. “Give me your number and I’ll text you mine. We can set something up sometime.”

“Sure.” She added her number to his contacts and handed him his phone back.

She breathed a sigh of relief when he simply pocketed his phone with a smile and didn’t push the issue, asking her to commit to a date. She adjusted her grip on her poles, leaning forward, bending her knees slightly in order to gain speed. As she approached the bottom of the slope, Olivia pointed her skis together, careful to keep the tips from crossing. Snow fluttered around her legs as she stopped fairly quickly, managing to keep herself steady, only wobbling slightly.

Luke sent a spray of snow up as he cut his skis hard to one side. “That’s it. You look like you’re getting the hang of it.” He slipped his goggles over his head and grinned. “You think you’re ready to head up to the lifts?”

“Um.” She raised her goggles and glanced around the base of the slope looking for Margot. Her pea-green jacket and matching ski pants were hard to miss and yet *zilch*. Margot was nowhere. Olivia licked her slightly wind-chapped lips and shuffled her ski in a semicircle. “Have you seen Margot?”

“Huh.” Luke lifted a hand to his forehead, blunting the glare from the sun, eyes squinting as he searched. “No. It’s not like she could’ve gone far or—”

“Hey!”

Olivia’s jaw dropped.

Wobbling slightly, knees too straight to balance properly, Margot careened down the hill Olivia and Luke had just skied, gaining speed. She lifted one of her poles and waved. “This isn’t so hard!” Margot laughed, shrieking when she hit a bump that caused her to veer slightly to the right. “This isn’t—*fuck.*” A flicker of fear flashed across Margot’s face, visible even from several yards away. Olivia’s gut clenched, her chest tightening. “How do I slow down? How do I stop?”

“Wedge!” Luke shouted. “Skis together!”

Oh, *shit*. In her panic, Margot brought her skis closer together, but not only at the front, causing her to pick up even more speed.

Luke swore under his breath. “Pizza, not fries! Pizza, not fries!”

“What?” Margot shouted.

“Did I forget to mention that analogy?” Luke gripped the back of his neck. “Shit.”

Shit was right. Margot was rapidly approaching the bottom of the slope, with no sign of slowing down.

Olivia cupped her hands around her mouth. “Wedge, Margot! Wedge!”

Margot bent her knees, the front of her skis coming together, her speed slowing as she skidded to the bottom of the slope and kept on sliding, beyond where Luke and Olivia stood, heading straight for the neon-orange plastic mesh barrier.

Olivia’s heart stuttered then seemed to stall out completely as Margot skied straight into the snow net, coming to an abrupt stop before toppling backward. Powdery snow flew up around her, raining down softly.

Luke started to shuffle forward on his skis, but Olivia wasn't willing to waste that much time. She crouched down and pressed on the heel levers at the backs of her bindings, stepping free from her skis. Leaving her poles and skis in the snow, Olivia sprinted across the clearing to where Margot lay, staring up at the sky with a dazed expression.

“Mar?” Olivia fell to her knees beside Margot, hands trembling as she patted Margot's snow-streaked face. “Are you okay? Say something.”

Margot's face scrunched and a terrible whimper escaped her lips, the sound piercing Olivia's heart and putting a lump in her throat.

“Mar?” she repeated, this time softer, more desperate, her voice cracking as a flurry of the worst what-ifs flashed through her brain. She cradled Margot's face in her hands. “Please say something.”

“Ow.” Margot coughed, lashes fluttering as she cracked open first one eye, then both, blinking dazedly up at Olivia.

Olivia's throat seized. She had to swallow twice before she could get another word out. “What hurts? Your back? Is it your back? Don't move. I'm pretty sure you aren't supposed to move.”

She'd read that somewhere. Heard it? You weren't supposed to disturb someone after a bad accident, falls and collisions and—Olivia gulped in a breath, needing air.

Margot groaned, then made the sweetest sound Olivia had ever heard in her entire life. She laughed, albeit slightly pained-sounding, her lips twisting in a grimace as she huffed softly. “My pride.”

“Your *what?*” Olivia swept her thumbs along Margot's cheekbones, fingers trembling softly.

Margot shifted, lifting up onto her elbows with a slight wince. Olivia let her hands fall to Margot's shoulders.

“My pride,” Margot repeated, face turning scarlet, and that was what Olivia had thought she said. Margot's lower lips jutted out. “And my ass.” Her eyes swept down her body,

lower lip jutting out in a pout as she stared at her feet. “And my pinky toe.”

Driven by a soul-deep sense of relief, Olivia clutched at the collar of Margot’s hideous green ski jacket and hauled her closer, sealing her mouth over Margot’s, swallowing the tiny gasp of surprise Margot made.

One of Margot’s hands rose, cradling the back of Olivia’s head, fingers threading through her hair. Her hand trembled, or maybe it was Olivia that was trembling. It was hard to tell, pressed so close, Olivia’s knuckles aching from the ferocity with which she clutched at Margot’s jacket, keeping her from going far. Keeping her from going anywhere.

A throat cleared from somewhere behind her, and with great reluctance, Olivia loosened her stranglehold on Margot’s coat. She lifted her head and froze.

Luke smiled, albeit awkwardly. “Looks like you fell pretty hard there.”

Olivia’s heart stuttered over one beat then sped, crashing against the wall of her chest as she met Margot’s eyes.

Yeah. She had.

Chapter Eighteen

Margot glared at the purple bruise mottling the side of her left foot. Her pinky toe was swollen, double the size it was supposed to be. It throbbed in time with her pulse, an annoyance more than anything, though when she put pressure on it, pain licked at the top of her foot, radiating all the way to her ankle.

A knock sounded against the door. Not the one that led out into the hotel hall, but the door adjoining her room to Olivia's.

Margot tried to swallow, her mouth suddenly dry. She stole a stuttered breath in, air whistling between her lips. "Come in."

Olivia poked her head into the room. In the time since they'd returned to the hotel, she'd changed into a pair of leggings and an oversized hoodie. The arms were too long, slipping past her wrists and over the back of her hands, hiding all but the tips of her fingers. She shoved her sleeves up to her elbows and shut the door, leaning against it, leaving the entire room between them. The space felt larger than it really was. "Hey. How are you doing?"

Awful. Better now that Olivia was here.

Margot sniffed and shrugged, dropping her gaze to the embroidered coverlet folded at the foot of the bed. "You know. Been better."

"Your foot?" Olivia shoved away from the door, approaching the bed where Margot lay, three pillows behind

her back keeping her propped up, another stack keeping her foot elevated. “How’s it doing?”

Margot pressed her lips together, offering a wry smile. “Hurts like hell. Looks even worse.” She sat up, adjusting the pillows, wincing at the sharp twinge that traveled along the side of her foot from her pinky to her ankle. “Gnarly, right? I took two extra-strength Advil and am hoping they kick in sometime this century.” She snagged a spare pillow from beside her and hugged it. “But I think Luke’s assessment was right. It’s not broken. I can move it, it just hurts like a bitch when I do. I guess it’s only badly bruised.” She bared her teeth in a grimace. “Same as my pride, apparently.”

Talk about feeling like a complete idiot. Not only had she wiped out, but she’d done it publicly, in full view of a dozen skiers. Olivia and Luke had had a front-row seat, and granted, she’d been more focused on the pain than anything else in the moment, but she had a vague recollection of several small children pointing at her. Yikes.

Olivia nibbled on her bottom lip. An hour after their kiss and Margot would swear she could still taste the buttery sweetness of Olivia’s vanilla-flavored ChapStick.

“Why would you do that, Margot?” Olivia asked. She shook her head slowly. “I mean, no offense, but you are *terrible* at skiing.”

“I—”

“The *worst*.”

Margot pursed her lips. It was on the tip of her tongue. *Not everyone can be perfect at everything like Luke*, but that would’ve taken bratty to a whole new level, even for her. Jealousy and insecurity had gotten her into this mess in the first place, leaving her with a swollen foot, bruised pride, and a tender heart.

Maybe it was time to try something new. Take Elle’s advice. Be honest.

“There isn’t a chance we could put a pin in this conversation and circle back around in, say . . . a few days?” she joked.

Olivia didn't laugh. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, no longer nibbling, but biting down on it outright. Her lashes fluttered with every rapid blink, the skin around her eyes turning pink. "Do you realize how scared I was?" Her voice broke and Margot's chest splintered open. "Watching you hit that barrier? Not knowing if you were okay or hurt or—"

"I was fine, Liv." She gestured to her propped-up foot. "A little bruised, and I'm going to have to limp down the aisle on Saturday—no heels for me, un-fucking-fortunately—but I'm fine."

Olivia sniffed hard and scrubbed the side of her hand under her eyes. "I didn't know that. How was I supposed to know you were fine? I saw you careen down a hill, collide with a barrier, and *collapse*. My mind went to the worst places, but can you blame me?"

Margot hugged the pillow tighter, chest panging with remorse, a sharp stab between her ribs that stole her breath for a split second. She hadn't meant to make Olivia worry, to give her any cause for concern. Hurting Olivia was the last thing she wanted, right up there with losing her.

Collapse might've been a bit of an overstatement, but what had Margot told Elle this morning in the gift shop? Not to underestimate Margot's ability to catastrophize? Margot could definitely relate, imagining the worst possible scenarios, watching them play out inside her head.

Contradictory to the ache in her chest, her stomach fluttered. The timing was completely terrible, but the proof that Olivia cared about her enough to get choked up made Margot hope that maybe all of *her* worst-case scenarios were as far-fetched as Elle had guaranteed they'd be. The way Olivia had kissed her at the base of the slope, trembling hands cradling her face, was the first sign. This was the second. Now all Margot needed was confirmation.

"I'm sorry, Liv. I didn't anticipate crashing. Who would? You can't see something like that coming." She swallowed hard, the analogy hitting a little close to home, making her pulse flutter wildly inside her veins, nerves turning her

stomach queasy. “You and Luke made it look so easy, and I was doing great on the bunny slope.” When Olivia’s brows rose, her expression calling *bullshit*, Margot amended, “I was doing *okay* on the bunny slope. I figured I knew how to stop at least.” But it was different, stopping after gaining that much speed. “I just . . .”

Saw Luke with his hands all over Olivia, watched her put her number in his phone at the top of the taller slope, saw red, didn’t think. Naturally, Margot was a competitive person. At the time, it had made perfect sense to push herself a little harder, put the skills—she was being generous, in hindsight—she’d acquired to the test. Prove that she could be every bit as athletic as Luke, as *desirable* as Luke. She wasn’t proud of it, but that’s where her brain had been at, what had driven her to ride that people mover to the taller slope before she was ready.

Olivia crossed her arms, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Aside from that small show of impatience, Olivia seemed content to wait Margot out.

Here went nothing.

“I was jealous, okay?” Margot clutched the pillow tighter. “I was jealous, and it’s stupid. I’m not proud of it. The opposite. I mean . . . *hell*, Liv. You think I like feeling this way? Because I don’t. I hate it.” She swallowed before her voice could crack. “Luke keeps flirting with you, and I thought I could handle it, but then I saw you give him your number—I mean, I *think* that’s what you were doing?—and I just . . . I didn’t think.”

She’d acted on impulse.

“So what?” Olivia crossed her arms, teeth scraping her lip, abusing it further. “You’re upset because someone else wants me?”

“No.” Her heart stuttered, her stomach dropping. “That’s not it at all. I’m halfway convinced the whole world wants you, Liv. You have no idea, the—the appeal you have. I don’t want you because Luke wants you. I want you because I . . .” Fuck. Margot took a deep breath in, air shuddering between her lips. “I’ve always wanted you. I have feelings for you, okay? I care about you. I’ve never felt this way about anyone. No one gets

me the way you get me. I've never felt like I'd die if I didn't touch someone. *You* make me feel that way." Margot's jaw clenched and slid forward in a bid to keep her tears at bay. "This isn't *new*. This isn't because of Luke. It just—it just is. It's how I feel."

Olivia crossed her arms and scoffed. "You're ridiculous. Do you realize that?"

Fuck. She'd known this would happen. Knowing didn't dull the ache in her chest. Her pulse pounded painfully in her throat, the ache worsening when she swallowed. "I'm sorry, okay? I can't help the way I feel about you. If you think I'm so ridiculous—"

"Shut up." Olivia laughed and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. "You are the most infuriating person I've ever known, Margot."

Margot hunched over her pillow, breath coming too fast. She sniffed hard, eyes burning and vision blurring. *Fuck*. "Got to admit, not the superlative I was aiming for. *Best at delivering a witty repartee* or *greatest at giving head*, but most infuriating. *Whew*."

God, she'd fucked up. Stepped in it. Crossed a line. Gone too far. All she'd wanted was to keep Olivia, but in trying, she'd pushed her away. How fucked up was that? Jealousy was never an attractive trait in a partner, and they weren't even that. They were friends—and Margot would be lucky if Olivia even wanted to remain that after her atrocious behavior. She steeled herself for rejection.

Olivia dropped her hands, letting them hang limply at her sides. "Luke is a really nice guy."

Shit. Here it was. Tension knotted in the pit of her stomach, her insides churning. She didn't need to hear the rest. "You don't need to—"

"Oh my God, Margot, please, for the love of all that's holy, be quiet." Olivia huffed, and her hair, gathered in a high ponytail, skimmed her shoulders as she shook her head.

Margot bit her tongue, all the words she wanted to say clogging her throat.

“Luke is a nice guy,” Olivia repeated, twisting the knife a little deeper. Her shoulders rose, and her spine straightened as if she was fortifying herself to deliver the final blow. Her gaze locked on Margot, and the look in her eyes—steely and determined, a flicker of something Margot couldn’t name flashing through them—snatched the air straight out of Margot’s lungs. “But I don’t want Luke.” Her throat jerked and a small smile tugged at her lips. “I want you.”

Margot’s heart rose into her throat like a helium-filled balloon.

Olivia wanted her.

Her heart stuttered.

Olivia wanted her *how*?

She clutched her pillow like a lifeline.

“I don’t think I can do *casual*, Liv,” Margot confessed, laying her cards and heart completely on the table. “I’m, uh, apparently not capable of keeping things casual. Not when it comes to you.” She laughed and scrubbed a hand over her face. “I’m really terrible at it. Almost as bad at it as I am at skiing.”

Olivia laughed, and the sound loosened the knots inside Margot.

“I don’t know how to be anything but *all in* when it comes to you, Liv,” she confessed.

Olivia took a slow, hesitant-looking step toward the bed, and then another, this one a little surer, faster. Every step caused Margot’s nerves to ratchet. Olivia sat on the edge of the bed and wiped her palms against her thighs. “All in, huh?”

“All in,” Margot confirmed, voice shaking. She tossed the pillow aside and shifted, facing Olivia as best she could with her foot propped up, elevated above her heart. *Doctor’s orders*. “Any time you want to, I don’t know, say something reassuring, feel free.”

She reached out and grabbed Margot's hand, lacing their fingers together. That gesture, in and of itself, gave Margot hope. People didn't often hold hands with someone they were planning on letting down gently. "*I kissed you, remember?*"

"How could I forget?" Margot teased.

"I don't . . ." Olivia blushed. "I've only ever been with you and—and Brad. I've never *done* casual." She smiled. "I guess, suffice it to say, it was never casual for me, either." Olivia squeezed her fingers and laughed. "We could've avoided this by talking about it. I'm going to blame your dirty mouth for distracting me."

Margot's ears burned, and a laugh bubbled up past her lips. "My bad?"

"If it wasn't what you wanted, how come you acted like it was?"

"I didn't know what *you* wanted, and I worried that if I told you what *I* wanted and we weren't on the same page, you'd . . . I don't know . . . feel weird about it and it would mess up Brendon's wedding. Or you'd feel uncomfortable and want to move out of the apartment. And I didn't want that. I *don't* want that. So I thought I'd play it safe. I thought I could keep feelings out of it." Her lips twisted in a wry smile. "Considering . . . you know, I really should've known better."

Hand still gripping Margot's, Olivia frowned. "Considering what?"

Margot dropped her eyes to her lap and huffed out a laugh. "I don't really want to rehash the past, Liv."

"Not to be pedantic here, but I think we'd have to have *hashed* it before we could *rehash* it."

Margot shut her eyes, cringing inside. "We slept together. Brad wanted you back. You got back together. End of story."

Olivia dropped Margot's hand, her face cycling through a flurry of expressions before she shook her head, jaw hanging open. "I'm sorry. *What?*"

“You were there. You know what happened.” *Please* don’t make her spell it out.

Olivia scoffed softly. “The way I remember it, I texted you, told you Brad wanted to get back together, asked you what—”

“You shouldn’t have *had* to ask,” she blurted, cringing almost immediately. God, she couldn’t believe they were really doing this. “We spent the week together. We—I thought it meant something. I thought—” *Fuck*. Margot exhaled harshly and met Olivia’s eyes. “You were my first, you know? And it’s not like I ever planned to put a lot of stock in that sort of thing.” She licked her lips. “Or, I didn’t, until it was you. So yeah, it meant something to me. And I thought you knew that. Then you text me telling me your ex wants to get back together and you ask me what I think you should do? I’d have hoped the answer would’ve been obvious, but the fact that you asked, that you asked *me* . . . fuck, Liv. How do you think that made me feel? How do you think it made me feel when a few weeks later when I found out—secondhand—that you weren’t going to UW like we’d talked about, like we’d planned? That, instead, you’d thrown all our plans away to go to WSU instead. To be with Brad. How do you think I felt?”

As if Olivia choosing Brad hadn’t been bad enough, Margot had felt like her best friend, the girl she loved, the person she believed would always be there . . . suddenly wasn’t. Like Olivia was abandoning not just their plans, but Margot, too. Like maybe Margot hadn’t meant as much to Olivia as Olivia had to her. Not if she was so easy to move on from. So easy to forget.

Olivia guppied, mouth opening and shutting before she blurted, “That’s not what happened *at all*.”

Margot crossed her arms. “I was there, Liv. I’m pretty sure I know what happened.”

Olivia pressed a hand to her forehead and sighed. “Okay, first, I didn’t follow Brad to WSU. The scholarship I applied for? I got rejected.” Her lips twisted and she dropped her eyes. “Even with the scholarship, UW was going to be more expensive than WSU. Without it?” She shook her head. “If I

had told Dad I had my heart set on UW, he'd have tried to figure something out, but I couldn't ask him to do that. I couldn't ask him to burden himself financially when I'd gotten into another perfectly good school that *was* offering me a scholarship." Olivia scratched the tip of her nose. "Did it help that Brad was going there, too? That we were back together and that—at the time—he wanted me? That I *knew* he wanted me? I won't lie and say that wasn't a perk, a point in WSU's favor. But it wasn't the reason, Margot."

Margot swallowed over the lump in her throat. "Oh."

She bit back the next words that almost came out of her mouth. *Why didn't you tell me that?* But she already knew the answer. They were barely talking back then, mostly because post-hookup, Margot had avoided Olivia, preferring to lick her wounds in private. To suffer in silence. Look how well that had served her.

"As for why I asked what you thought I should do, it's because I wanted you to *tell* me that. I wanted you to tell me you wanted me. That's *why* I asked. We hadn't talked about it. What it meant. How we felt. I'd hoped you'd tell me . . ." Olivia's teeth sank into her bottom lip. "All I wanted was for you to want me the way I wanted you."

She had. *God*, had she ever. "I did. I . . ." She shook her head. "That was eleven years ago, Liv. We were eighteen and —"

"We shouldn't waste time on what-ifs." Olivia's lips quirked, smile small and subdued. "You're right. Who's to say what would've happened? There's a million ways it could've gone right and a million more ways it could've blown up in our faces."

Margot nodded. As much as she'd wanted Olivia back then, she hadn't been ready for a serious relationship at eighteen. Clearly, her communication skills had needed some work—in all likelihood they still did, but she was a work in progress and she was trying and wasn't that half the battle, really?—and all that teenage angst had been a recipe for disaster. "But now?"

Olivia leaned in, lips brushing the corner of Margot's mouth in a kiss that was far too brief. She drew back and met Margot's eyes. "Now."

Chapter Nineteen

Olivia stretched an arm out toward the nightstand, rolling onto her side when her fingers skimmed nothing but smooth wood, her phone too far to reach.

“Mm, where do you think you’re going?”

One of Margot’s arms wrapped around Olivia’s waist, dragging her further into the bed, snuggling up close behind her.

“I was trying to check the time. We don’t want to be late to dinner.”

Margot burrowed even closer, like merely *close* wasn’t close enough, like any amount of space between them was unacceptable. Olivia could relate.

This was all so new.

Not just lying here, wrapped up in Margot’s arms, but actually having what she wanted.

For so long, everything she’d wanted had been unattainable, either by some huge, insurmountable margin, pie-in-the-sky dreams, or by a smaller gap, fingertips skimming, just shy of grasping. *Almost* was always worse, the hope it stirred leading to a harder letdown when it, inevitably, didn’t pan out. A scholarship to the school of her dreams. A relationship with Margot. All the little desires she’d given up here and there, incidents explained away as coincidences until the pattern became clear, irrefutable evidence stacking up against the

small measure of hope to which she'd held fast. Sacrifices she'd made thinking they were worth her happily ever after with Brad, bargains she'd made in the name of love that became lies she told herself because the truth was too grim. Only to discover that happily ever after, in and of itself, was a sham.

After a certain point, *wanting* became pointless when *having* remained hopeless. Why bother? Why continue to put herself through constant disappointment? Maybe some people just weren't meant to have what they wanted, to be happy. So she'd settled on the next best thing, little crumbs of contentment where she could find them. Never wholly satisfying, but enough to get by on, to subsist.

But now . . .

All in. Warmth flooded her chest. Margot wanted her.

Maybe disappointment wasn't an inevitability. Maybe everything in her life so far had happened for a reason, the way it was supposed to. All those little disappointments not the dead ends she'd thought, but turns she had to make, all leading her to something bigger, something better, something lasting, something real. *Hers*. A perfect convergence of being in the right place at the right time.

Margot pressed one chilly foot to the back of Olivia's calf, her other foot still elevated, the pillows beneath it slightly askew, one hanging off the edge of the bed, in danger of falling.

"I don't want to get up," Margot complained. One hand swept the hair away from the back of Olivia's neck, icy fingers sending shivers down her spine. Warm lips brushed against her nape, featherlight, and her skin prickled all over, Margot's touch giving her goose bumps. "I'm cold and you're warm and this bed is too comfortable."

It *was*, but she had a feeling she could've been lying on a cinder block and she'd have been equally as reluctant to move, her desire to stay in bed having less to do with the comfort of the mattress and warmth of the duvet and everything to do with having Margot wrapped around her.

“We skipped lunch.”

Margot’s mouth curved against her skin. “Debatable,” her voice lilted, sounding coy. “I ate.”

Laughter burst from between her lips. “*Margot.*”

“What?” Margot shifted, rising up onto an elbow, peering down at Olivia with wide eyes, a placid little smile on her lips, the picture of innocence, if Olivia didn’t know better. The left corner of her mouth twitched, eyes creasing in amusement, cracks appearing in her composure. “I *did.*”

“You’re ridiculous.” Olivia bit her lip, shaking her head slowly.

Margot smiled impishly and rested a hand on Olivia’s waist. “Don’t act like you don’t like it.”

Before she could answer, Margot leaned in, capturing her mouth in a kiss that curled her toes and sent a flood of warmth through her. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she sank into the kiss, surrendering to the feeling of Margot’s tongue tracing the seam of her mouth, her lips still tender from Margot’s teeth.

“Reservations,” she gasped out. “We can’t—”

Lips trailing kisses from her mouth to her chin and down along her jaw, Margot shushed her. “Brendon said reservations aren’t until seven thirty. We have time.”

The hand resting on her waist slid down her belly, cupping her between her thighs, Margot’s thumb strumming her still-tender clit. Her breath caught in her throat, her pulse jumping as her hips jerked softly, thighs falling open.

“That’s it,” Margot murmured against Olivia’s skin, forehead pressed to her cheek, staring down her body as she ran her fingers along Olivia’s slit.

Two fingers sank inside her, crooking upward, giving her something to clench down on, and—*God*, this was going to be over impossibly fast.

Margot pressed an achingly sweet kiss to the hinge of Olivia’s jaw.

“Close, aren’t you?” Margot nuzzled the side of her face, lips brushing the space beneath Olivia’s ear, teeth nipping at her earlobe. That subtle sting sent a bolt of pleasure straight to her core and made her clench. Margot smiled against her skin, fingers crooking harder. “Come on, Liv. Come for me.”

Her breath hitched and her chest burned as she tipped over the edge, thighs quaking and hips jerking as Margot’s fingers curled, drawing out the pleasure. When it became too much, Olivia shoved weakly at Margot’s hand, knees closing. Margot pressed another one of those sweet kisses to Olivia’s cheek and slipped her fingers free. Olivia bit down hard on her lip, swallowing a whine at how empty she felt.

Margot flopped back against the bed with a contented sigh. “Still think I’m ridiculous?”

Olivia snorted. “The fact that you’re still thinking about that proves how utterly ridiculous you are.”

“Utterly?” Margot laughed, bright and sharp and the sound did something funny to Olivia’s heart, not quite a clench, closer to a flutter. Like there were butterflies trapped inside her chest. “I’m been upgraded to *utterly* ridiculous as opposed to regular ridiculous?”

She pressed her lips together so they wouldn’t twitch or curve. “*Upgrade?*”

With a scoff, Margot rolled over, fingers digging into the soft side of Olivia’s stomach. She thrashed, squirming, feet tangling in the sheets as she tried to escape.

“Stop, no!” Olivia laughed, shoving at Margot’s arm.

Margot quit, fingers falling still, palm resting high on Olivia’s waist, just beneath her breasts.

“You’re in luck.” Olivia rolled over, careful to avoid Margot’s injured foot as she crawled between her thighs. “I happen to like ridiculous.”

Margot beamed at her and reached up, tangling a hand in the back of Olivia’s hair. Margot dragged her down, her neck arching to meet Olivia’s mouth halfway. Her knees fell open, allowing Olivia to settle between her thighs. Olivia’s lips

skimmed over the black lace encasing Margot's breasts, then lower, over the flat plain of her stomach, her tongue darting out against her belly button just to see what would happen. Margot made a high-pitched keening sound, her hands scrambling against the sheet and her hips rocking upward as she bit down on the swell of her bottom lip.

Olivia brushed her mouth against the skin between Margot's hip bones, the waist of her bikini-cut panties riding low, lower still when Olivia tucked her fingers beneath the elastic and tugged.

Fingers stroked the side of Olivia's face, skimming the bottom of her jaw. She lifted her head, resting her chin lightly on Margot's lower abdomen, careful not to dig in. Margot stared down at her from beneath low lids and pressed the pad of her thumb to the center of Olivia's bottom lip. "You look unbelievably hot like this."

Her face heated, warmth blooming in her chest at the compliment, as she licked the crease of Margot's hip where the black lace of her underwear scalloped in. She sucked a kiss into Margot's skin, drawing back when Margot hissed and her hips rocked upward. The skin faded from red to pink. If Olivia wanted to leave a mark, which she most definitely did, she'd have to try harder.

Atop the nightstand, something buzzed, rattling against the lamp. Either her phone or Margot's.

Margot huffed. "Ignore it."

Good plan. Olivia hooked her fingers around the band of Margot's underwear. The phone quit buzzing as she dragged Margot's underwear down her thighs and—

The buzzing started up again and Margot punched the bed in frustration, whining softly. "Damn it. I swear to God, if this is Brendon calling, I'm going to lose it. There's no way it's even after six." She huffed loudly and sat up, twisting at the waist to reach the nightstand. She frowned. "It's not me." Margot stretched further, fingers wiggling in a bid to reach Olivia's phone on the far end of the nightstand, and she

managed to drag it close enough so that she could read the screen.

Margot's brows drew together, a quick flicker of irritation sharpening her gaze before her expression smoothed, too neutral, too blank to be natural. A muscle in her jaw just beneath her ear jumped, as if she'd clenched her back teeth together and Olivia's stomach twisted into a knot.

"Here." Margot swiped the phone off the nightstand and held it out. She cleared her throat softly, eyes darting around the room, looking everywhere but at Olivia. "It's Brad."

Olivia traced the back of her teeth with her tongue, staring hard at Brad's name on the screen until the letters blurred together and the backs of her eyes burned, forcing her to blink. A reverse image of his name floated behind her lids, white on black. She'd answer and take care of it, whatever *it* was this time, tell Brad what he needed to hear, and—then what? She'd do it all over again the next time he called? The next? How long was this supposed to go on for?

In those minutes, no matter how brief, it was like she'd never left, still *giving* even from miles away. She dreaded seeing his name appear on the caller ID, hated knowing there was a ninety-nine percent chance he was calling for something innocuous, using her. But there was that one percent chance, that small part of her, that little voice in the back of her mind that couldn't help but wonder, couldn't help but worry, *what if?* What if this time he was calling for something actually important? What if the one time she sent him to voicemail Dad needed her and—

Margot's eyes dropped to the phone still vibrating in the palm of her hand. "Are you going to answer it?"

Maybe it was because she asked, giving Olivia the chance to make the decision rather than telling Olivia what she *should* do, that her heart swelled.

She took the phone from Margot, their fingers brushing. Margot averted her eyes and scratched her neck, fingers lingering in the hollow of her throat.

Olivia swallowed hard and swiped at the screen, sending Brad to voicemail. “If he has something important to say, he can leave me a message.”

Sending Brad to voicemail wasn’t merely satisfying, the absence of his name on her screen a relief. It was *necessary*, something she should’ve done a long time ago. She was doing it now, not to wipe the subtle frown from Margot’s face, but for herself. Because Margot was right. This pattern of being at Brad’s beck and call wasn’t healthy and it wasn’t fair.

Olivia deserved better.

Margot surged forward, pressing her mouth to Olivia’s. Her lips curved, and maybe Olivia hadn’t sent Brad to voicemail for Margot or because of her, but the way she smiled was an added benefit.

Margot drew back, fingers sliding against the shell of Olivia’s ear after she tucked a strand of hair behind it. “Okay?”

“Yeah, I’m—” Olivia’s phone vibrated, still in her hand. One brief buzz, a text. Olivia shut her eyes. “Damn it,” she muttered.

She swiped against her screen, entering her passcode with her thumb, tapping on the text notification at the top of her screen.

BRAD (6:03 P.M.): hey i called u

Enough was enough. The time for point-blank was now.

OLIVIA (6:05 P.M.): I’m busy, Brad. Unless it’s an emergency, you need to stop calling me like this. It’s not okay. I’m not your mother.

She stared at the message, chewing on the inside of her lip, reading and rereading until she had the whole thing memorized. She held her thumb down on the backspace key, deleting the last line before pressing *send*. Margot’s hands rested lightly on her shoulders, her touch reassuring. Her thumbs swept gently against Olivia’s collarbones in a soothing circuit. When Olivia lifted her head, one side of Margot’s mouth tipped up. “Okay?”

“I told him to stop calling unless it’s an emergency.” She lifted her brows and offered up a wry smile. “I’m not holding my breath.”

Her phone vibrated with another incoming text.

BRAD (6:07 P.M.): u don’t need to be a bitch about it livvy

Right. Because asking for a boundary made her a bitch. She rolled her eyes and flipped her phone around to show Margot the text. Margot squinted and brought the screen closer, tongue poking against the inside of her cheek.

“What a fucking ass goblin,” Margot muttered, sneering at the screen.

“A *what?*” Olivia snickered.

Her phone buzzed, sending another spike of irritation through her. Before she could turn her screen around, Margot leaned in, reading what he wrote.

“I don’t even . . . I think he sent you a link.” Margot wrinkled her nose. “I wouldn’t open it.”

As Olivia turned her phone back around, it buzzed with another incoming text. *God*, was he persistent.

BRAD (6:09 P.M.): <link>

BRAD (6:09 P.M.): u didn’t tell me your dad was moving

What did he mean Dad was moving? Moving *what?* The URL had been shortened, a Bitly link that provided zero contextual clues, no help. Without clicking, she wouldn’t know what he’d sent her or what it had to do with moving.

Fingers crossed that Brad hadn’t sent her porn—she wouldn’t put it past him—she tapped the link. A new browser opened, the site loading, loading, slow as molasses. The bar at the top of the page inched along, her screen white until suddenly it wasn’t.

Zillow? Brad had sent her a link to a Zillow real estate listing. A Zillow listing for Dad’s house.

Dad’s house, which was on the market, not only listed for sale, but had been on the market for *two weeks*.

A lump formed in her throat, making it nearly impossible to swallow. She pressed a hand to her stomach, able to feel her pulse against her palm. Her heart was beating too fast, and—she sat back, bouncing against the bed, drawing her knees to her chest, suddenly dizzy.

“Liv?” Margot rested her hands on Olivia’s knees. “What’s wrong?”

Without speaking, she passed Margot the phone. Margot frowned and shifted back, swiping her glasses off the nightstand. She scrolled back up to the top of the page, brows rising as she scanned the screen. “Brad sent you this?”

She nodded.

Margot pursed her lips. “Are you sure this is legit? Are you sure Brad didn’t send you a doctored web page or something?”

“I don’t think fabricating a real estate listing is really in Brad’s wheelhouse. Why would he even do that?”

“I don’t know.” Margot shrugged. “It’s Brad we’re talking about. Why would he bother sending you this? What’s in it for him?”

Olivia pressed her thumb beneath the ridge of her brow bone. A subtle throbbing had started behind her eyes. “I asked him to let me know if he heard anything about Dad, remember? I guess this is him letting me know? Either that, or . . . I don’t know, Margot. Maybe he’s being nosy? I don’t know.”

She knew nothing.

Margot glanced back at the screen. “It’s been on the market for two weeks?”

Apparently. In that time, Dad hadn’t mentioned anything about selling the house. Not once, not even a passing mention, or that he was considering putting it up for sale. Nothing.

Olivia reached for her phone. “I need to call my dad. I don’t—I don’t understand why he wouldn’t tell me if he was moving.”

It didn’t make sense.

Margot passed her the phone without a word, only a grim smile.

Olivia navigated to her recent calls, bypassed Brad's number, and tapped on the icon beside *Dad—Cell*. It rang once, and Olivia sucked in a stuttered breath. Twice. She exhaled harshly. *Pick up*. Three times. She held her breath.

Hey, you've reached Gary Grant. Sorry, I'm not available to take your call at the moment. Leave your name and number and I'll return your call as soon as I can. Thanks!

"No answer?" Margot asked when Olivia lowered her phone, ending the call before the line could start recording.

She shook her head and stared at Dad's contact page. "I'm going to call one more time."

Margot leaned over the edge of the bed and plucked her shirt off the floor. She slipped it on, flipping the ends of her hair over her shoulders, and leaned back against the headboard. She snagged her phone off the nightstand, fingers swiping against the screen.

Olivia hit *call* and held her breath.

One ring.

Two rings.

Her stomach sank.

Three rings.

Hey, you've . . .

She shut her eyes and huffed. Damn it, Dad. Of all times for him not to answer, when she needed to talk to him.

She waited for Dad's voicemail message to finish and stayed on the line this time, waiting to leave a message. Even though she was expecting it, the shrill beep made her pulse leap. "Hey, Dad. Call me when you get this." She wet her lips, weighing out whether to give her reason for calling. "Just—call me. Please. Love you."

Margot's hand wrapped around Olivia's thigh, thumb sweeping against the inside of her knee. When Olivia opened

her eyes, Margot offered a smile that didn't reach the corners of her eyes. "I'm sure he'll call you back when he has the chance."

Maybe he would, but . . . "I still don't understand why he's selling the house. And why he didn't tell me. He loves that house. I grew up in that house. He and Mom—" She swallowed hard over the lump in her throat that wouldn't go away, if anything swelling further. "He and Mom bought that house when they first got married. I don't—I don't understand. He's never mentioned selling the house before."

Dad loved his house. He—God, even the parts of it he didn't love, like the yellow toile wallpaper in the downstairs half bath, he'd kept unchanged because Mom had picked it out. It didn't make sense.

"I bet there's a logical explanation for this, okay?"

"The house has been on the market for two weeks. Do you know how many times we've spoken, how many chances he had to mention it? We just spoke yesterday."

"Hey." Margot reached out, cradling the side of Olivia's face gently. Olivia closed her eyes and leaned into Margot's palm, pressing her lips to the inside of her wrist. "Why is this freaking you out so badly?"

She opened her eyes and sucked in a rasping breath, throat raw. "What *else* hasn't he told me?"

How many times had he told her he was fine? That his blood work was good, that his doctors were happy with his progress, that he was taking care of himself, eating better, and working less? Was any of that true or was he placating her, brushing her concerns aside so she wouldn't worry?

"He'll call you back," Margot repeated herself, thumb sweeping against Olivia's cheek.

When? "He's going out of town tomorrow, remember?"

Even if he did call, who was to say he wouldn't do what he always did, blow off her concerns and tell her not to worry before changing the subject?

She wouldn't be able to sleep until she figured out what was going on. If Dad was truly okay or if . . . if . . .

What if Dad was selling the house because he was sick?
What if he wasn't answering the phone because he *couldn't*?
What if there was no fishing trip—what if he was back in the hospital and he didn't want her to know?

Even if she didn't have his health to worry about, this still would've struck her as odd. Unsettling. They talked, often.

But she did have his health to worry about.

God, what she wouldn't give to press rewind, go back to ten minutes ago when she and Margot had been tangled together in the sheets, the only fluttering in her gut from butterflies, a pleasant sort of squirminess. Not this awful anxious churning, her mind suddenly flitting to all sorts of worst-case scenarios.

Until she got to the bottom of this, her brain would try to fill in the blank that came after *if* with one terrible option after another. Not only would she not be able to sleep, but tomorrow was Annie and Brendon's rehearsal. Their wedding was the next day. She couldn't afford to be distracted, wondering, worrying.

Chapter Twenty

Olivia's tongue darted out, sweeping against the lip she'd chewed red. She crawled off the bed, swiping her sweater off the floor. "What's if he's not okay? What if he's—"

"Whoa, whoa." Margot slipped out of bed, wincing when a twinge of pain shot up the side of her foot from putting too much weight on it. Walking was going to be a real bitch. "You need to take a deep breath, okay? Breathe in with me."

Panicking wouldn't solve anything.

Sweater clutched in front of her, Olivia pinched her lips together and mimicked Margot as she inhaled through her nose. Margot held it, lifting a hand to make sure Olivia would do the same. She exhaled slowly, lowering her hand. Olivia's exhale was ragged, her shoulders sagging and curling forward. She scrunched her eyes shut, looking upset but no longer on the verge of hyperventilating.

"What if he isn't fine?" Olivia repeated, voice breaking.

Margot's heart clenched at the sound, at the way Olivia scrunched her eyes shut.

"He promised to tell you if he wasn't. I was there, remember? I heard your entire phone call. He told you he didn't want you to worry."

Olivia turned her sweater right side out and slipped it on over her head. Static caused strands of her hair to stick straight

up in multiple directions. “Exactly. He doesn’t want me to worry. All the more reason for him to keep me in the dark.”

“Don’t you think”—Margot winced, already anticipating Olivia’s reaction to what she was about to say—“if your dad says he’s fine, you should trust him?”

She swept her fingers through her hair, wincing when they snagged on a tangle. “I told you. He drove himself to the hospital when he had a heart attack, Mar. He only let the nurse call me when he had to stay overnight.”

Margot blew out her breath. “Okay, I can see where something like that might not engender a whole lot of trust. That’s—that’s shitty. I completely agree, and I—I can understand that your brain is probably going to the worst possible place right now.” Anxiety and fear weren’t always rational. Fuck, most of the time they were the complete opposite. Brains were assholes sometimes. “But, offering an outside perspective, I don’t think the fact that he’s selling the house necessarily means there’s something wrong with his health.” She cracked a smile. “Who knows? Maybe he’s selling because he plans to retire and wants to move down to one of those all-inclusive retirement villas in Florida. You know they have a huge nudist community right outside of Tampa? I watched this whole show on HGTV on it. Everyone carries a little personal towel around so when they visit they can sit on that instead of directly on the furniture. And they specifically cater to retirees. Maybe your dad wants to broaden his horizons.”

She wiggled her brows, managing to get Olivia to crack a smile.

“Dad hates Florida.” Olivia gathered her hair off her neck and swept it up into a bun, securing it with the scrunchie on her wrist. Several wisps of hair fell loose, framing her face. “We have cousins in Kissimmee. Last time we visited, all he did was complain about how hot and humid it was.” She sighed, shoulders slumping. “I just wish I knew why he didn’t tell me. I grew up in that house. I still have boxes in my old bedroom, clothes in the closet I didn’t bring with me—all my yearbooks are still on a bookshelf in the hall. I don’t get it.”

Margot hobbled around the bed until she could grab Olivia's hand. She tangled their fingers together and squeezed, drawing her closer so she could wrap an arm around her waist. Olivia ducked her chin, smiling down at their hands softly, expression subdued but no longer looking like she was on the verge of making herself sick with worry. Progress. "Until you talk to him, I think you're just spinning your wheels, Liv. You need the whole story."

She pressed her lips together, throat jerking when she swallowed, nodding slowly. "You're right. I—I need to talk to Dad." She huffed through her nose, a little agitated noise punctuated by an eye roll. "He's the only one who can answer my questions. Until then, it's all hypothetical and—"

"So you'll talk to him." Margot swept her thumb against the back of Olivia's knuckles, trying to soothe her the best she could. She lifted their joined hands, raising them high enough that she could brush her lips against the side of Olivia's thumb in a quick kiss. Her chest clenched when Olivia smiled and—God, why had she been fighting this? Caring about Olivia came as easy as breathing. Margot should've known resistance was futile, that she'd always wind up here. "You'll talk to him and he'll explain and it'll all make sense."

Olivia sucked in a shuddering breath. "Or he'll just tell me not to worry. You heard him on the phone. He's really good at brushing things under the rug and sounding okay when he's not."

Words of reassurance failed her. There were only so many times Margot could say that everything would be all right before the words lost their value. "Just wait and see what he has to say, okay? Take it from there."

Olivia's lower lip wobbled before she trapped it between her teeth, blinking fast. "Am I a terrible daughter?" she whispered.

"What the hell, Liv? Why would you think that?" That was absurd. "You're not. Jesus. If you're a terrible daughter, I don't even want to know what that makes me."

Olivia lifted a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "I don't understand why he wouldn't tell me something like this."

Maybe because he knew it would make her worry? “He probably doesn’t want to worry you. That’s the vibe I got from the call in the car.”

Olivia’s teeth scraped her bottom lip. She was going to bleed if she wasn’t careful. “If he doesn’t want me to worry, that means there’s something worth worrying over.”

Margot’s back teeth clacked together. That was *not* the direction she’d meant to send Liv’s thoughts. That was the *opposite* of what she wanted, to rekindle Olivia’s concerns. “Just wait until you talk to him, okay?”

Olivia sniffled. “I think—I think I need to talk to him in person. See that he’s actually okay and—it’s harder for him to fib to my face, you know?”

That made sense. Seeing was believing and all that. “Sure.”

“You think?”

Margot nodded. “Totally. You know, I haven’t seen my parents since . . . God, since Christmas. If you want, we can drive down together on Monday. Or Sunday, I guess, if we’re not too tired or hungover.”

Olivia’s fingers slackened around Margot’s, and she stepped back. “I was thinking more along the lines of, I need to talk to him in person *now*.”

“Now? Liv, that’s . . .” She swallowed hard, the next words out of her mouth about to be *ridiculous*, and that would’ve been a shitty thing to say even though a part of her *did* think it was ridiculous. “I think you need to take a deep breath and relax, and we can head down to dinner—”

“There’s no way I can relax until I talk to my dad. I’ll be no fun to be around. I’ll just be worrying, and Annie and Brendon shouldn’t have to put up with—”

“Hey, hey.” Margot settled her hands on Olivia’s waist. “No one’s putting up with anything, Liv. I know Annie and Brendon. Trust me, they would hate the idea that you’re more worried about their reaction to you stressing than what’s *actually* stressing you. I promise.”

Olivia took a step back, then one more, too far away for Margot to reach. Margot's hands fell to her sides.

"There's no way I'm going to be able to sleep tonight," Olivia said.

"It's early. Your dad could still call you."

"But—"

"You want to talk to him in person, I know." Margot sighed and slipped her fingers under her lenses, rubbing her eyes.

"But you can't just pick up and go to Enumclaw right now."

"It's not even an hour away. If I leave now, I could make it there before eight. I can talk to Dad and figure out what the hell is going on and why the house is for sale."

If I leave now. Leave. A pit formed in Margot's stomach, the word tripping a trigger in her brain. Olivia wanted to leave. Leave and come back . . . right?

"Look, I know you're concerned, but . . . the rehearsal is tomorrow. The wedding is on Saturday."

Olivia was already moving across the room, gathering up a sock from the foot of the bed and her leggings from the floor. She plopped down on the edge of the bed and slipped a foot into her pants. "Trust me, Mar, I am *well* aware of when the wedding is. I'm the wedding planner, remember?" She shot Margot a tight smile. "It'll be fine. I'll drive down tonight, talk to Dad, spend the night, and leave tomorrow morning. The rehearsal isn't until one, the rehearsal dinner not until later that evening. Setup starts at three. I'll make it back in time. Heck, there's a decent chance I'll beat you all back to town, depending on what time I hit the road."

Margot worried the inside of her cheek, weighing out a gentler way to say what needed to be said that wouldn't piss Olivia off. "Liv, don't you think you should maybe . . . sit on this for a second? Think it through. Call your dad again, text him. See if he calls you tonight, talk it out on the phone, and if you're still worried, we can drive down on Sunday. Together."

"And if he doesn't call?" Olivia smoothed the stretchy spandex leggings up over her knees, standing to tug them the

rest of the way on. She set her hands on her hips and frowned. “He’s heading up to Forks tomorrow. He said he might not have coverage, and he’s not always going to have his phone on him. Plus, like you said, the rehearsal is tomorrow, and me driving down tonight isn’t going to be a problem. I’m going to make it back in time.”

“It’s not a question of whether you’ll make it back or not, although anything can happen. It’s more a matter of you dropping everything to go check on your dad when just yesterday he told you he was fine and promised he’d tell you otherwise. He told you not to worry. He told you to have a good time and he made *me* promise to make sure you do.”

Olivia stared out the window, lips pursed. “He also conveniently left out the part about the house being on the market. I can’t exactly hang much on that conversation, can I?”

Margot buried her face in her hands and groaned. “You’re overreacting, Liv.”

Shit. As soon as the words were out of her mouth she wished she could take them back. Press rewind or Hoover them up, make them disappear. She peeked between her spread fingers.

Olivia turned her head slowly, eyes widening and lips parting. “Gee, thanks, Margot. Are you going to tell me I’m acting crazy next?”

“No, I’m just—*God*, you’re always thinking about what everyone else needs, but what about what *you* need?” Margot dropped her hands, letting them hang limp at her sides. “I know you love your dad, but it’s his job to take care of you, not the other way around.” Olivia opened her mouth, but Margot wasn’t finished. “I know you care about him, but there’s a difference between caring about someone and taking care of them, and right now you’re mixing them up.”

Olivia crossed her arms. Everything from the set of her jaw to the way she was standing perfectly still, her back ramrod straight, screamed *defensive*. “Really? Tell me—how, in your

expert opinion, am I confusing the two? Because the last time I checked, you aren't in my head, Margot."

"I never claimed to be an expert. I'm speaking as someone who cares about *you*." She couldn't believe she was having this conversation in her underwear. "In an ideal situation, would your dad have told you before he listed the house? Totally. But he didn't, and that's his prerogative. Maybe he had a good reason for not telling you. Maybe, Liv . . . maybe he doesn't think it's your business. Is it something you need to talk about? Okay, sure. But is it something you need to talk about *right now*? Maybe you make it to Enumclaw tonight and back in time for the rehearsal tomorrow, but where does it stop? Where do you draw a line? If Brad calls and he needs help finding a garage door opener, are you going to hop in your car and drive to Enumclaw to help him find it?"

Olivia scoffed and stepped back. "This has *nothing* to do with Brad."

Didn't it? Maybe not directly, but . . . "It's about you putting everyone's needs above your own."

How she'd been doing it for years. For so long that half the time, Margot was pretty sure Olivia didn't even realize she was doing it. It had become that ingrained in her.

"I don't understand why you would bring Brad up. I didn't answer his call, did I? I texted him and told him to stop calling me. I showed it to you. What more do you want from me, Margot? You want me to block Brad? You want me to act like he was never a part of my life? What can I do to show you that I don't *want* Brad? I want *you*."

Margot bit the tip of her tongue and counted to three so she wouldn't say something she'd regret, because she was *this* close to pulling her hair out because Liv might've heard everything Margot had said but she wasn't *listening*. "You're right. You did. And like I said, I think that's great. You setting a boundary. I just hope you did it for yourself and not because I was sitting there. Because it shouldn't be about me or what I want. None of this is about me, and I'm not asking you to block Brad or forget he ever existed." Though Margot sure as

hell wouldn't mind putting Brad out of her mind for good. "I'm not asking you to do anything except what's right for you. It should be about *you*. That's what I'm trying to say, and *you* saying what you just did is proving my point. You left Brad and you moved to the city, saying you were tired of making sacrifices for Brad, and—all I'm saying is, it's a slippery slope and it's easy to go from being selfless to being self-sacrificing. *Self-sabotaging*."

Olivia had a history of that, and if Margot was being completely honest, she'd benefited from Olivia's selfless nature a time or two or *twelve*. In the moment, she'd never stopped to consider it beyond thinking that Olivia was a great friend, but maybe she should've. Maybe she'd taken Olivia's selflessness for granted just like everyone else. Maybe she had, but she wasn't going to keep doing it. Olivia was always going to bat for everyone else; she deserved the same in return. Even if it wasn't fun in the moment. Olivia deserved that.

"I'm not self-sabotaging because I want to check on my dad," Olivia argued. "And I didn't send Brad to voicemail because of you, I did it for me."

Margot crossed the room toward Olivia, footsteps uneven as she avoided putting too much weight on her left foot. "I'm not trying to pick a fight with you, okay? Fighting with you is just about the *last* thing I want to do right now. Ever." When Olivia ducked her chin, Margot took a leap of faith and reached for her hand. She swallowed a sigh of relief when Olivia let her lace their fingers together. "I care about you, Olivia. I wouldn't be wasting my breath saying any of this if I didn't care. I'd throw you your car keys, kiss you on the cheek, and tell you I'd see you sometime tomorrow. And then I'd go downstairs and hang out with my friends and I definitely wouldn't spend the night worrying about you making it to Enumclaw safely or how your conversation is going to go with your dad. I wouldn't—" She sniffed at the unexpected burn in her sinuses, the blur at the corners of her eyes. "I think about you all the time, Liv." She laughed. "I think about you even when I'm not supposed to, when I *wasn't* supposed to, when I convinced myself I wasn't. I care about you, and I love—" Her

throat narrowed. “I love that you have such a big heart and that you care about everyone else, but it can’t be at the expense of yourself.”

If Olivia kept it up, she’d give everything away until she had nothing left. Burn herself out trying to keep everyone else warm.

A pretty pink flush colored Olivia’s cheeks. “It’s not.”

Margot nibbled on the corner of her lip. “Do you remember what you said when Brendon asked why you wanted to be an event planner?”

A tiny wrinkle appeared between Olivia’s tawny brows.

“You told him you wanted to make other people’s dreams come true.”

Olivia frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“There’s not.” Margot traced circles against the back of Olivia’s hand with her thumb. “I’m only saying, it’s okay to want things for yourself. You deserve nice things.”

The corner of Olivia’s mouth rose. “I kissed you, didn’t I?”

Margot chuckled. “Are you calling me a nice thing?”

“The nicest,” Olivia said, swaying close, knees bumping Margot’s.

Margot bit the inside of her lip, trying not to smile. “I’m not very nice.”

“No,” Olivia agreed. Her smile softened, subdued, but no less sweet. “But I like you anyway. I like you a lot. I—*like* sounds trivial for the way I feel about you.”

Margot’s heart squeezed. “Ditto. Which is why I’m saying all of this.” Still holding Olivia’s hand, she sucked in a deep breath. “Forget I brought up Brad. Let’s say you get home and your dad wants you to move back to Enumclaw. What would you do?”

Olivia jerked her head back and frowned. “What kind of question is that?”

Margot's teeth scraped against the inside of her cheek. "Just answer the question."

"Dad would never ask me to move back." Olivia argued, continuing to frown. "He's the one who practically pushed me out the door, remember?"

Margot stared, loosening her grip when Olivia winced. Without meaning to, she'd strangled Olivia's fingers. "And you seriously don't see how that's an issue you need to address? You don't need anyone's permission to follow your dreams. You don't need anyone's permission to be happy."

"*Issue.*" Olivia scoffed softly and tugged her hand free. "Gee, I didn't realize you were my therapist now."

Margot's jaw worked from side to side. A hot flush of frustration wound its way up her throat, making her dizzy. "I'm not trying to be your therapist, and that wasn't an indictment. Maybe this is novel for you, having someone who cares about *you* for once, but this is what it looks like. Maybe it's not always pretty or fun, but it's . . ." Real. "It's what it is. So just answer the question. Forget about your dad asking you; if you go home and you find out your dad isn't okay, what's your plan? What are you going to do?"

Olivia crossed her arms, frown deepening into a scowl. "I would . . ." Her lips folded together, shoulders rising in a helpless looking shrug. "I don't know, okay? The truth is, I don't know what I'd do. I can't just answer on the spot like this. I'd have to think about it. But I don't have time for this right now. I need to go."

"You can't." Margot blurted, immediately cringing at her volume. "You can't just leave."

Olivia froze, expression shuttering, the look in her eyes frosty. "I *can't*? No offense, but you don't get to tell me what I can or can't do, Margot. I got enough of that from Brad to last a lifetime, and I don't need it from you, too." Her nostrils flared. "Are you going to tell me what kind of books I can read next? The sort of company I can keep? What sort of job I can have?"

Margot pulse sped, white noise filling her ears. “Don’t compare me to him.”

“Don’t act like him, and I won’t,” Olivia bit out.

“I’m not telling you what you can or can’t do. I’m not saying you shouldn’t go see your dad if that’s what you feel like you need to do. Do I think it makes more sense to wait until he calls or to drive down on Sunday? Yes. But I’m not trying to stop you. I’m just trying to figure out where your line is in the sand. What happens the next time you think someone needs you? What if next time, it’s not the night before the rehearsal but the night before the wedding? Or the day of? At what point do you drop something big, give up on something that matters to you because you think what someone else needs is more important? At what point do you leave and not come back?”

Olivia pressed the heels of her hands against her forehead and groaned. “I’m not moving back to Enumclaw, Margot. I’m not going anywhere.”

Maybe not now, but could Margot count on Olivia to come back the next time? Could she count on Olivia *always* coming back or had she been right? Was it always only ever a matter of time before she lost her?

She bit down on the inside of her cheek, hoping that brief flash of pain would banish the burning at the back of her eyes, the sting inside her nose. She sucked in a rasping breath. “I just got you back, and I don’t want to always be worried about whether I’m going to lose you. Whether you’re going to leave.”

Olivia’s frown had softened leaving only a furrow between her brows. “You need to trust that when I say I’m coming back, I will. And if you can’t”—her throat jerked—“maybe that’s an issue *you* need to address.”

She pinched her lips, her eyes, too because—*fuck*.

“Not so fun to hear, huh?” Olivia whispered.

Margot clenched her jaw. “And there you go again, making the situation about someone else. Deflecting away from

yourself.”

Typical.

Olivia scoffed and stepped back. “Whatever, Margot. I should go pull my bag together.”

She hugged her arms around herself and dipped her chin. “You should probably do that.”

Rather than watch Olivia leave the room, she stared at the floor, tracing the whirls and knots in the wood with the tip of her toe, biting down hard on her tongue when her vision blurred and everything went soft and out of focus.

As soon as Olivia was out of the room, Margot stumbled back a step, the side of her foot throbbing from standing for too long. She lowered herself to the bed, fingers twisting in the sheets she and Olivia had been tangled up in not even half an hour earlier.

It couldn’t have been five minutes before Olivia returned, duffel bag bouncing against her hip with every step she took. She stopped a foot in front of Margot.

“You’re okay getting a ride back to town with someone else, right?” Olivia said, fidgeting with the strap of her bag.

“I’ll figure it out.” She’d ask Elle if she could catch a ride back with her and Darcy.

Margot blinked hard and fast. This was only a disagreement. Not the end of the world, even if it felt a little like it was.

The corners of Olivia’s mouth pinched, her lips flattening into a thin slash. Her throat jerked, and she adjusted the strap of her bag, hiking it higher on her shoulder. “Bye, Margot.”

Any iteration of *goodbye* felt too final, so Margot kept her mouth shut.

The floor creaked and the door shut with a soft *snick* and then—

Silence.

Margot was alone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Olivia gripped the steering wheel until the leather groaned, a pull in the cover's stitching biting into the side of her thumb. The *for sale* sign posted in the thatch of grass beside the mailbox wasn't a surprise, but actually seeing it with her own two eyes put an unexpected lump in the back of her throat as she pulled into the driveway beside Dad's Volkswagen and cut the engine.

It was real. Not that she'd honestly believed Brad had the ability or inclination to fabricate a real estate listing—not only did he lack the skills, but he was too lazy to go to such lengths just to . . . what? Prank her? Piss her off? Brad couldn't even bother to hunt down a garage door opener by himself—but there'd been a tiny part of her that hadn't wanted to believe it. That had *refused* to believe it on principle. Dad had always been a man of few words, never the most forthcoming, not even about the small things. But this? This wasn't small. This was big, and—why hadn't he told her?

Time to find out.

Olivia hopped out of the car, the door rattling when she slammed it with a touch too much force. Instead of heading immediately up the drive, she walked over to the *for sale* sign and flipped the lid on the attached plastic box full of flyers. There was only one left, and it was a little damp, the edges of the paper rippled from all the moisture. The ink was blurry, making the copy read as if the house had eight bedrooms instead of three. Paper clutched tightly in her fist, Olivia made

a beeline for the front door, pulse ratcheting as she took the porch steps two at a time. Little flecks of black paint stuck to her skin when she rapped her knuckles against the door.

The gauzy curtain beside the front window fluttered, Dad probably curious to see who was banging on his door.

“Livvy.” Dad’s smile fell at the look on her face. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be—”

Olivia shook the flyer in his face. “The better question is why I had to find out you were selling the house from Brad.”

“*Brad?*” Dad’s head snapped back, eyes widening. “Why are you talking to Brad?”

A flush crept up the front of her throat. To make up for it, she stood a little straighter, lifting her chin. “That is entirely beside the point. Were you ever planning to tell me you were selling the house or was I just going to be in a for a rude awakening the next time I came to visit?”

Dad heaved a sigh and gripped the back of his neck, ducking his head. “Don’t be ridiculous, Liv. You usually call before you visit . . .”

Her back teeth clacked together. She was getting really tired of being told she was being ridiculous or that she was overreacting when all she wanted was a straight answer.

“I called. I called twice. I left you a voicemail,” she said. “You didn’t pick up.”

Dad grimaced. “Ah, damn. I think I left my phone in the car.”

He still hadn’t answered her question, the big, overarching one, the one that had brought her here. “And the house?”

Dad scraped his hand over his jaw and gave another weary-sounding sigh before stepping back from the door, gesturing for her to come inside. “You want something to drink? I think I still have a box of that tea you like floating around in the cabinet somewhere.”

She wanted answers, not tea. But if she was going to drink anything, it needed to be a whole heck of a lot stronger than

chamomile.

“You know what?” She set her hands on her hips. “I think I’d like one of the beers you keep in the fridge in the garage you think I don’t know about. Thanks.”

Dad headed down the hall without a word, returning a minute later with an uncapped bottle in each hand. At least it was light beer, better for him than the regular kind.

She took her bottle with a tight smile. “Thanks.”

Dad nodded to the sofa before taking a seat in his recliner, the one that was older than she was. He took a long pull of his beer and she did the same, wrinkling her nose at the taste. She’d never been much of a beer drinker, but over the last few weeks, she’d gotten used to the flavor of the dark, bitter brews Margot favored. This tasted like water by comparison.

Dad must’ve seen her make a face because he snorted. “Weak, huh?”

“But doctor approved.” She settled back against the couch and tossed the flyer on the coffee table.

“Okay.” Dad heaved another one of those great big sighs and set his beer on a coaster before leaning forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. “I didn’t want you to find out like this. I was going to tell you, I swear, but—”

“Never once did you even *hint* that selling had crossed your mind, let alone that you were already in the process. I just . . .” Her eyes had started to sting, but if she blinked she was terrified she’d cry. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Honest to God, I was planning on it.” Dad scrubbed a hand over his face. “Look, Livvy, my insurance covered most of the hospital bills from last year, but there are still some out-of-pocket charges I’ve been paying off because of some rigamarole between the hospital and insurance company.”

Her stomach sank. This was the first she’d heard of Dad having to pay anything out of pocket. “Okay. But not a lot . . . right?”

Dad waffled his head from side to side. “My savings—”

“You had to dip into your *savings*?” She strangled her beer bottle so tightly the seam where the glass had been molded bit into the palm of her hand.

“Only a little,” he promised, holding a palm up as if to placate her. *A little* was still shitty when his savings were slim to start. “And I only had to do that because they’ve got me working fewer hours. Remember? I told you I scaled back.”

She nodded.

“I’ve got more money going out and less coming in and ...” Dad swept a hand out. “Too much house for one person. I don’t need this much space and, to be honest, things have been getting a little tight at the end of the month. Much more of this and something was going to have to give, and I’ve got too much equity in the house to lose it in a short sale.”

A little tight and short sale didn’t go together. “If money was tight, how come you didn’t say something? If you’d have told me, I could’ve—”

Her grip went slack and she nearly dropped her bottle, catching it around the neck. A dribble of beer ran down the back of her hand and she stared at it blankly.

She could’ve *what*? Offered Dad money she didn’t have? Volunteered to move back home and help with the bills? She winced. Maybe there was more truth to what Margot had said than Olivia had first been able—or willing—to acknowledge. Where *was* her line? Did she even have one? Something told her the fact that she didn’t know was a problem. An *issue* she needed to address.

“I’ve got it under control, okay?” Dad said. “This is the best solution all around. Your mom and I refinanced when you were a kid, which set the clock back on the mortgage, but the property values have really skyrocketed in the past five years. I can sell, get the equity out of the house, and downsize into something smaller, with a more manageable monthly payment. Or, hell, I might even be able to buy something with cash.”

Olivia nibbled on her lip and glanced around the living room. Pencil marks that had never been scrubbed away marred

the trim of the kitchen entry, each tiny tick capturing her height over the years. If she craned her neck, she'd be able to see into the bathroom, with its god-awful toile wallpaper that Mom had picked out. "But you love this house."

Dad's eyes swept the room, lingering on the photos hung on the wall, family portraits and her old school pictures. "I do love this house." He smiled softly and met her gaze steadily. "But, at the end of the day, it's just a house. What I loved about it most were all the things that made it feel like home." For a brief moment, the corners of his mouth tightened. He sucked in a deep breath and released it noisily, laughing while he did, scrubbing his hand over his face. "Your mom and you made it home, Livvy. It's too much house for one person."

Her eyelids felt hot and itchy, and there was a burn in the back of her throat that no amount of swallowing could relieve. This was the house she'd grown up in, the first home she'd known. But Dad was right; it was only a house, and it had been a long time since she'd considered it her home. If he wanted to sell, if it was the best solution—which it sounded like—she supported his decision. She just wished he'd kept in her in loop.

"Besides—I've been thinking of cutting my hours back even further." At her frown, Dad chuckled. "Retiring."

She laughed. "As long as you don't plan on retiring to a clothing-optional community in Florida."

Dad's brows rocketed to his hairline. "You know I hate Florida."

"And yet you have nothing to say about the clothing-optional community?" She narrowed her eyes, snickering when Dad merely looked confused. "I'm kidding. It's just something Margot said."

"Margot, hmm?" Dad leaned back in his recliner, crossing his ankle over his knee. He studied her for a minute, eyes narrowed and head cocked slightly to one side. "Must be nice, reconnecting with her after all these years. From what I heard on the phone yesterday, it sounds like you two managed to pick up right where you left off."

She dropped her eyes to her lap and picked at her thumbnail. He had no idea. “You could say that.” When Dad said nothing, she bit back a sigh. “We kind of had a fight, actually. Right before I came here.”

“You want to talk about it?”

She swallowed around the sudden ache in her throat. “Not really.”

Dad hummed. “Would you feel *better* if you talked about it?”

She dropped her face into her hands and huffed. Damn his Dad logic. “Maybe? I don’t know. We—we both said some things and . . .” She took a deep breath and started over from the beginning. “Brad called me. He—”

“Why is *Brad* calling you?” Dad’s face wrinkled.

She pressed her fingers to the space between her brows. “Are you going to let me finish?”

Dad grumbled something under his breath, words she couldn’t quite make out, and waved for her continue.

“I—okay, he calls me sometimes. About silly little things. I answer because . . . I asked him to keep an ear out.” She cringed, dreading Dad’s reaction. “If he heard anything. You know. About you.”

Dad frowned. “Why would you do that?”

“Because.” She wiped her palms against her legs and stood, needing to move. She stepped around the coffee table and stood in front of the fireplace, wringing her hands in the sleeves of her hoodie, which were too long. “You tell me you’re fine, but what does that *mean*? I worry, okay? And, I mean, clearly for good reason, since you decided to put the house up for sale without ever mentioning it to me.”

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t *want* you to worry.” Dad huffed. “And I had every intention of telling you, but then you mentioned this big wedding you were working on and I—I decided to wait until after.”

“We could’ve avoided this if you’d just *talked* to me. I worry because you leave things out and because you say things like *I’m fine*.”

Dad threw his hands up. “Because I *am* fine, Livvy. I am and—okay, I can admit, keeping you in the dark about the house was a mistake.” His brows rose, lips twisting in a wry smile. “Clearly. But when I say I’m fine, I wished you’d believe me. I have it all under control, okay?”

She knotted the excess fabric of her sleeves between her fingers and nibbled on the inside of her lip. “That’s what Margot said.”

Dad bobbed his head. “And I’m guessing you didn’t like hearing that.”

No, she’d hated it. Hated it even more now, because Margot’s points had been decent. But that still didn’t excuse the fact that Margot had told Olivia she was overreacting.

“Not particularly. Brad texted me the link to the property listing after I’d sent him to voicemail, and when I called you and you didn’t answer, I kind of freaked out a little. Margot thought I should wait for you to call me back or wait until after the wedding to drive down, but I was worried, okay? And she accused me of overreacting and told me I needed to stop putting everyone’s needs before mine, and *I* accused her of”—she cringed—“having a fear of abandonment, which was a pretty awful thing to blurt out, I’ll admit, but also may be true?”

Dad frowned. “Obviously I wasn’t there, so I don’t have all the specifics, but it sounds to me like you both said some pretty hard things you felt like the other needed to hear?”

That was a . . . fair assessment of the situation. “I guess.”

“Can’t say I disagree with her, Liv. You’ve spent enough time taking care of other people. And, just to offer some perspective, saying what she did probably wasn’t the easiest. Think about it. She probably knew you might react poorly, but she said it anyway because she thought you needed to hear it.”

Dad stroked his chin, looking thoughtful. “It sounds to me like Margot cares about you.”

“That’s what she said. That she said what she did because she cares.”

“It’s not always the easiest to let someone care about you, is it?” Dad’s brows rose pointedly.

God. Her chin wobbled, and she bit down on her lip to keep it from quivering. It really *wasn’t*. Despite being something she desperately wanted, it was hard to let it happen. To let herself have it and—*shit*. Margot really was right. Olivia didn’t need anyone’s permission to be happy.

Only her own.

Her teeth scraped her bottom lip. “She’s not the only one. I mean, I care about her, too.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least, kid.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why? Because I care about everyone?”

Dad chuckled. “Because it’s Margot. I might be your dad, and I might not always know the right thing to say or how to say it, but I’ve got two eyes, and it was obvious to anyone who looked at you two that you weren’t just friends.”

Her face burned at the insinuation that Dad knew more about their past—or at least her feelings—than he’d ever let on. She rolled her lips together, weighing out how much she wanted to share. “She was my *best* friend.”

Dad’s brows rose.

“She *was*. But fine. I had a crush on her, okay? And for a while I thought . . .” When Dad’s lips twitched, she set her hands on her hips, huffing softly. “You didn’t snoop through my diary, did you?”

Oh, Jesus. She pressed a hand to her cheek, skin on fire. Talk about mortifying. She’d never be able to look Dad in the eye again if he’d read even *half* of what she’d written.

“Your diary?” Dad guffawed, the recliner rocking with the ferocity of his laughter. “Jesus, no. I probably would’ve had a heart attack a decade before I did, if I had done that.”

Her jaw dropped. “*Dad!* That’s not funny.”

“Eh.” He seesawed his hand from side to side, nose wrinkling. “Come on. It’s a little funny. If I can’t laugh at myself, what the hell am I supposed to laugh about?”

Her lips twitched. “Nudist retirement villas, obviously.”

“Jesus.” He dragged his hand down his face. “And you said *Margot* put that idea in your head?” He tsked, shaking his head. “Consider me doubly glad I never read your diary.”

Her chest loosened when she laughed. “Me too, Dad. Me too.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled. “It’s good seeing you laugh, Liv. You haven’t done nearly enough of that in the last few years. It seems to me like moving to the city’s been good for you. And maybe . . . Margot’s been a part of it, too?”

A flicker of warmth flared to life inside her chest, catching, growing, spreading outward until her fingertips tingled. She pressed her fingers to her lips and nodded, sniffing. “I’m really happy, Dad,” she whispered.

Dad heaved himself out of the chair and wrapped his arms around her, enveloping her in a hug. Olivia buried her nose in his chest, breathing in the smell of his laundry detergent, the one he’d been purchasing for years because it was the one Mom had used. “I’m happy you’re happy, Livvy.”

When he finally released her and took a step back, his face was red and his eyes were suspiciously damp, or maybe they only seemed that way because her vision was downright blurry. She bit her bottom lip and sniffled. Dad rested one of his large hands on her shoulders, the heavy weight pleasant, grounding. “Are these happy tears, or . . . ?”

Using the sleeve of her sweater, she mopped beneath her eyes. “I’m just worried I messed up. What I said wasn’t great. I don’t know.”

Like Margot, everything Olivia had said had come from a place of care only . . . her words had been reactionary, in response to Margot pushing her out of her comfort zone. She didn't regret *what* she'd said as much as she regretted the way she'd said it, lashing out. Not fighting fair. Margot had made it clear she cared about Olivia, but had she?

"This isn't your first rodeo, kid. You know not every argument means it's over."

No, but sometimes all it took was one argument. And this was their first, their first *real* one, not a mere difference of opinion. It could be make-or-break. Besides . . . "Look how my first *rodeo*, as you call it, turned out. That's a shit—*crappy* example."

Dad snorted. "Fair point. But Margot's not Brad."

"Thank God," she muttered, making Dad laugh.

"What is it you said that you're so worried about? Something about Margot having a fear of abandonment?"

She nodded. "It's—not just me. It's with her friends, too, and . . . I stand by what I said. Just not *how* I said it."

Dad puffed out his cheeks. "And she wanted you to stay? To wait until after the wedding to drive here?"

She nodded.

"And you left anyway?"

"I had a reason," she defended. "And I'm coming back tomorrow."

Dad squeezed her shoulder. "Sometimes the things that trigger our fears don't make the most sense. Sometimes they aren't the most logical."

She winced. The same could be argued for her own actions. "True."

Except maybe Margot's fear *was* rooted in something logical. Not the truth, but Margot's version of it, her version of the past that she'd believed to be true up until only today. Believing that eleven years ago Olivia had chosen Brad over

her. That Olivia had thrown their plans out the window in favor of following Brad across the state.

“You want to know how you make it right?”

She lifted her head and blew out a breath, ruffling the strands of hair that never quite made it into her sloppy bun in the first place, others having escaped confinement since. “I am *all ears*.”

Dad chuckled and patted her arm. “You show up tomorrow and you keep showing up.”

Olivia nodded. Show up and keep showing up. She could absolutely do that. Prove to Margot that she was in this, *all in*. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Anytime.” He stepped back and tucked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. “You eat dinner yet?”

She shook her head and pressed a hand to her stomach. “No, I was too nervous to eat.”

Dad’s mouth twisted briefly before he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the kitchen. “I made chili. With ground turkey, don’t worry. I’m sticking to the heart-healthy diet.”

Her stomach growled. “Sounds good. Is it okay if I spend the night here?” She bit her lip, shrugging softly. “Maybe we could find a movie or something?”

As long as she hit the road no later than ten, she should make it downtown with time to spare.

“Sure thing, kid. You should know you’re always welcome wherever I live.”

She smirked. “I’ll withhold judgment on visiting you wherever you move, in case that whole clothing-optional community idea grows on you.”

“I don’t know. I’m starting to think Margot’s *not* the best influence.” Dad shook his head, lips twitching like he was fighting a smile. “I’ll go heat you a bowl. You want to find something on TV?”

“Sure thing.” She smiled. “Thank you, Dad.”

He winked and disappeared around the corner into the kitchen.

She collapsed onto the couch and yawned. The stress of the day—skiing, Margot getting hurt, her panic, their argument, the drive down here, all of it—plus the lack of sleep from the night before, seemed to be catching up with her.

Before reaching for the remote, she fished inside her pocket for her phone, swiping and pulling up her text thread with Margot. She’d promised to text, and she was going to keep her promise.

OLIVIA (9:08 P.M.): Hey. Made it to Dad’s safely. He’s okay. We had a good talk, cleared the air.

She stared at her screen. It was probably silly to wait for Margot to text back. It was the last night of Annie and Brendon’s bachelor-bachelorette trip. Margot should be spending it with her friends, not—her phone vibrated in her hand.

MARGOT (9:10 P.M.): I’m glad he’s okay.

MARGOT (9:10 P.M.): Are you still staying the night, or do you think you’re going to drive back?

Olivia winced. Getting back in her car and driving the forty-five minutes from Enumclaw to the lodge on little sleep, only to have to make a similar, if not slightly longer because of traffic, drive in the morning sounded unappealing. Even if she got right in her car, she wouldn’t make it to Salish until after ten.

OLIVIA (9:12 P.M.): I’m going to crash here and head out in the morning. I’ll see you tomorrow and we can talk more then. Okay?

Three little dots danced across her screen, starting and stopping, starting and stopping, almost hypnotic if not for how they caused her heart to race.

MARGOT (9:15 P.M.): Okay.

Her stomach sank. That was it? *Okay?*

Her phone buzzed.

MARGOT (9:16 P.M.): I’ll see you tomorrow.

MARGOT (9:16 P.M.): ☐

How silly was it that a simple heart emoji had the power to loosen the knots inside her stomach? She pressed her fingers to her smiling lips and typed back with one hand.

OLIVIA (9:17 P.M.): ♥♥♥

* * *

“Hey, Livvy?”

God, no. There was no way it was time for her to wake up. Hadn't she *just* fallen asleep?

“*Whattimeisit?*” she slurred, burrowing deeper into her pillow. She cracked one eye open. Through the gauzy curtains covering the window of her childhood bedroom, it was still pitch-black out.

Dad chuckled. “Early. I just wanted to let you know I was heading out. Fishing, remember?”

Fishing. Right. She nodded. “Uh-huh. Okay.”

“You're okay with locking up?”

She nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

Dad laughed again and leaned in, buffing his lips against her temple. “I'll call you. You drive safe, okay? And good luck tomorrow with the wedding. I'm sure it'll be great.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You go back to sleep.”

She did. Or something close to it. The blaring of her phone's alarm jarred her awake at eight thirty, and she dragged herself out of bed and down the stairs, in desperate need of a cup of coffee.

And the pot was empty. She shut her eyes. Figures that Dad would've filled a thermos for the road, but he couldn't have left her even one cup? She sighed and reached for a new filter to make a pot, checking the clock above the stove. She had time to brew a pot and slug down a cup before running through a quick shower and hitting the road.

While the coffee maker sputtered and hissed, the pot filling, she opened the refrigerator, surveying her breakfast options. Eggs, *bacon*. Dad had no business eating—oh, turkey bacon. That was better. Maybe he was taking his diet seriously after all. The produce bin was stocked, and there was a tub of Greek yogurt tucked behind a jar of applesauce. Kudos to Dad. The next time he said he was doing fine, she'd take his word for it.

After filling a bowl with yogurt and topping it with fresh raspberries and a handful of granola, Olivia perched a hip against the counter, spoon in one hand, phone in the other, studying her checklist for the next two days while she ate. The coffeepot beeped just as she set her empty breakfast bowl in the dishwasher.

Mug in one hand and phone in the other, Olivia padded back up the stairs, setting her favorite Spotify playlist to shuffle and running through a speedy shower. Her ancient blow-dryer—the one she had from high school that smelled more and more like burning metal with each use—conked out halfway through drying her hair, so she let the air do the rest while she rifled through her toiletry case in search of her mascara, which, in all likelihood, was probably buried at the bottom of the bag. Concealer, no. Lipstick, lipstick, lipstick—how many tubes did she *have*? More than she needed—but no mascara. Screw it. Olivia upended her bag, shaking the contents out atop the counter and—

No.

At the very edge of the counter, her phone teetered before taking a tumble and bouncing not against the tile floor but the open rim of the toilet seat.

Plop.

Oh, *fuck*.

Her stomach made a slow descent, sinking all the way to her knees, *further*. She palmed her face and groaned. *Gross*. Reaching inside the water, she snatched her phone up and grabbed a spare towel from the hook beside the sink. She dried it off, crossed her fingers that by some miracle the screen would still come on, and—*oh, thank God*.

The screen lit up and she pressed to enter her passcode and—everything went black.

Fuck.

Rice. She needed rice. That's what you were supposed to do when your phone wound up waterlogged, right? You were supposed to shove it in a bag of rice and it would soak up all the moisture over the course of a few . . . hours? *Days?* She didn't have that long.

She'd have to get a new phone later, once she made it back to town. She'd head to the apartment, meet up with Margot, go to the rehearsal, and pop into the Verizon store before the rehearsal dinner this evening. Solid plan. She was past due for a phone upgrade, anyway.

After tossing her phone inside a Ziploc bag and tossing that inside her purse, she snagged a thermos from the top shelf of the cabinet above the stove and filled it with coffee, shutting off the pot so the hot plate wouldn't stay on. Duffel over her shoulder, purse in one hand and coffee in the other, Olivia slipped into her flats and left through the front door. She dropped everything off in the car before heading back to lock the front door with the spare key Dad kept beneath the flower pot at the far end of the porch.

House secured, Olivia hopped in the driver's seat, fastened her seat belt, and stuck the key in the ignition, and—

It cranked, but didn't start. She swallowed hard and took a deep breath before twisting the key again. The starter clicked, clicked . . . and failed to stay engaged.

Sweat broke out along her hairline, dampening the small of her back, too.

One more time. Her car had to start. It *had* to. Swallowing past the sour knot inside her throat, she wrapped a trembling hand around the key. *Please start.* She scrunched her eyes shut and twisted the key.

It clicked, and the engine grumbled to life.

Thank God. Olivia let her head fall back against the headrest and sighed. She had no idea what she would've done

if the car had failed to start. That would've been a complete and total nightmare today of all—

A rapid knocking sound came from the front of the engine before it died altogether.

Olivia jabbed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

Fuck.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Silence greeted Margot when she stepped inside the apartment. “Liv?”

She dropped her bag in the entry and briefly poked her head inside the kitchen before limping deeper into the apartment. She frowned. No answer. Except for the gentle hum of the refrigerator, it was quiet.

“Liv? Are you home?” she called out again, hobbling toward the hall. Her foot didn’t throb quite as badly as it had yesterday, and most of the swelling had gone down overnight. Luke’s advice about rest, ice, compression, and elevation had been spot-on, and the extra-strength Advil hadn’t hurt, either. “Liv?”

The door to Olivia’s room was left ajar, as always. Margot pressed her fingers to the door, pushing it open the rest of the way, poking her head inside to—

A shadowy blur shot past, darting down the hall. Margot gripped her chest, heart clawing its way up into her throat. A high-pitched yowl came from the living room and Margot sagged against the door frame. *Cat*. Phew. She chuckled and—

She stopped laughing because she was the *only* one laughing. Olivia wasn’t here. Margot reached inside her pocket for her phone. *10:58 a.m.* She shot off a quick text.

MARGOT (10:58 A.M.): Hey, where are you? I just got back to the apartment and you aren’t here.

She tucked her phone into her pocket so she wouldn't be tempted to stare at it, waiting for a response, and ducked into her bedroom to change out of the yoga pants and sweatshirt she'd worn in the car.

The plan for the day was straightforward; the wedding party would meet up at the venue at one o'clock to run through the ceremony proceedings with the officiant to make sure everyone knew where they needed to be and when they needed to be there. From there, Annie and Brendon would head to the airport to pick up her parents. Setup for the pre-rehearsal dinner cocktail hour was scheduled to start at three, the cocktail hour itself was at five, and the dinner was scheduled for six thirty.

Bringing her phone with her, Margot wandered back out into the living room. Cat was curled up on the couch in a tight little ball that made it difficult to see where she started and ended. Two green eyes peeked out at Margot when she carefully—*cautiously*—sat. Her eyes shut, and she started up a low purr that made Margot smile.

11:12 a.m. She had over an hour to kill before she needed to leave, let alone before the rehearsal started. An hour to kill. That felt like an absurd amount of time to wait around, twiddling her thumbs, and yet . . . Olivia was cutting it close. *Awfully* close. Margot sighed, earning a serious side-eye from Cat. She reached for the remote.

The channel was still set to Turner Classic from the last time she and Olivia had curled up on the couch. Currently, the hosts of the cocktail hour-style intermission were sipping on flutes of champagne while discussing—Margot pressed the *volume up* button—*Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the film du jour.

Olivia's favorite.

The intermission ended, the movie picking up at the scene where Holly Golightly and Paul Varjak spend the day together. Margot glanced at the Kit-Cat Clock hanging on the wall, perpetually crooked no matter how many times she straightened it. *11:20.*

Leaving the movie on in the background, Margot opened up her Chrome browser and selected one of the many open tabs at random. One hundred and thirteen thousand words of angsty fanfic tagged *slow burn*, *hurt/comfort*, and *hate sex*, sure to eat up the hour and twenty minutes before she had to leave.

Except she couldn't get into the story no matter how hard she tried, couldn't lose herself in the distraction the way she needed to. Her eyes kept flitting to the corner of her screen, desperate to see how much time had passed. She navigated over to her texts and reread the last message she'd sent to Olivia before hitting *call*.

Each ring ratcheted her nerves tighter, her heart rate higher, until she reached Olivia's voicemail.

Hey, this is Olivia! I can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name, number, and a brief message I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks!

The line beeped, but when Margot opened her mouth, nothing came out.

What was she supposed to say? *Where are you?* She'd already texted. Leaving a voicemail saying the same thing she'd already typed out was overkill. *Needy*. She ended the call, praying she hadn't breathed too heavily during the brief three or four seconds before she'd hung up.

11:31. A pitiful little whimper escaped her lips as she let her head flop back against the couch. She couldn't do this. Another hour of sitting around and doing nothing, waiting and worrying, was going to drive her up the wall.

She needed to do *something*. Go *somewhere*. She hit the *power* button on the remote and stood. Cat cracked open one eye.

"I'll be back later, okay? Be good."

Cat blinked at her and—she definitely needed to get out of here.

Hobbling down the hall, Margot snagged her purse off the bed and checked that she had her wallet and phone while she made her way to the door. She snagged her keys off the entry

table and backtracked to the kitchen, stopping in front of the whiteboard on the fridge. Olivia had left a smiley face on the board days ago and Margot hadn't erased it. She *still* couldn't erase because—she didn't even want to think that maybe this could be the last little message that Olivia left for her.

Rather than erase, she wrote beside it.

Went to Elle's. Meet you at The Ruins at 1.

She clutched the dry-erase marker in her hand and added a heart beside her message. She cocked her head. It was a little lopsided, her hands unsteady, but it would do.

Seventeen minutes later, Margot knocked on Elle's door. A shadow passed on the other side of the peephole right before the lock flipped and Elle opened the door. One eye was lined and the other wasn't and she was wearing the polka-dotted silk robe Margot had given her for Christmas four years back.

"Hey, I thought we were meeting at . . ." Elle's face fell. She reached out, dragging Margot inside. "What's wrong?"

Nothing. Everything. Margot flicked her bangs out of her eyes. "I can't get ahold of Liv. I called and texted and—nothing." She cringed. "Sorry. I should've called before just showing up here and—"

Elle's grip tightened around Margot's wrist, cutting off her apology and her circulation. *Damn.*

"Don't even, Mar. It's fine." Elle tugged her over to the couch. "Olivia's probably just driving. Or maybe her phone died and she doesn't have her charger?"

Olivia had Bluetooth in her car, and she was far too organized to lose her charger. Even as rattled as she was yesterday, there was no way she'd have left it behind. Besides, Margot had done a quick sweep of Olivia's room this morning before checkout, just to make sure nothing got left behind. "Maybe."

Margot's chin wobbled and Elle frowned.

"Hey, no." Elle reached out and grabbed her hand. "You're not okay. What is it?"

Margot dragged in a breath, air stuttering between her lips. She held it until her lungs burned, then let it out slowly. “Liv and I, we had a fight last night. Before she left. Before I came down to dinner. It was . . .” She scoffed out a laugh, brows rising and falling. “Not fun.”

Elle squeezed her fingers and offered up a small, crooked smile. “Fighting with you never is. You always make good points, and it sucks when you’re right. And outside of the fight itself, the not-talking part is awful and—”

Margot threw herself across the cushion and flung her arms around Elle, burying her face against Elle’s shoulder, scrunching her eyes shut. Elle’s hair tickled her nose, adding to the burn inside her sinuses. She sniffed hard and tried to lean back, but Elle wouldn’t let her, only squeezing harder.

“How come you didn’t say anything?” Elle asked, leaning but not letting go, fingers wrapped around Margot’s upper arms. “Last night or this morning in the car? You just told us all Olivia had to leave. You didn’t say anything about a fight.”

She scratched the tip of her nose and shrugged. “I didn’t want to put a damper on the trip. Today. The weekend. I didn’t *want* to talk about it.”

Elle rubbed her arm. “Would it help to talk about it?”

Hell if she knew. She’d rather there not be something to talk about in the first place, something she felt like she needed to get off her chest, this weight, this—this *fist* wrapped around her heart.

“Come on,” Elle cajoled. “Talk to me.”

Margot took a deep breath. “Olivia, she’s generous, you know? She’s always putting everyone else first and—and I love that about her. But there has to be a point where she puts herself first, otherwise she’s going to give and give until she’s got nothing left. I basically told her that. Only, I also said she was overreacting. As soon as I said it, I realized it was a shitty thing to say, and now I’m worried that might’ve overshadowed my point. I don’t know. I just didn’t understand why she had to

leave *then*, and she told me I have a fear of abandonment, which—”

“Why would she say that?”

Margot gave an awkward laugh. “Because I kind of do?”

Elle continued to look confused, the furrow between her brows deepening. “*You?* Afraid of something? I’m sorry. I’m just . . . having a little difficulty processing that. You’re the bravest person I know. In my experience, nothing scares you. You’re the one who charges in headfirst.” Elle smiled, lopsided. “You always killed the spiders when I was too chicken.”

Spiders weren’t shit compared to opening up, making herself vulnerable.

Margot laughed. “Things scare me. I just don’t love talking about them, especially not this. And I haven’t exactly had a reason or a need to talk about it. But I guess a lot of old feelings and fears I didn’t realize I was still holding on to have sort of . . . floated to the surface. Fears about how I spent the last eleven years believing Olivia chose Brad over me and abandoned all of our plans when, apparently, there was more to it I didn’t know about.” Margot ducked her head and sniffled. “It’s just . . . everything is changing. Brendon and Annie are getting married tomorrow and you and Darcy are engaged and everyone is going to couples’ yoga and—I’m so happy for you guys. You have no idea how happy. But there’s a part of me that’s worried you all have each other and you won’t need me.” Like how Olivia hadn’t needed her because she’d had Brad. “That, slowly, you’re going to forget about me and move on with your lives because I’m just me and—”

“What did you tell me once? *Just Elle* is pretty great?” Elle gathered both of Margot’s hands in hers. “Well, *just Margot* is amazing. You’re my favorite person.”

Margot bit down on the tip of her tongue so she wouldn’t cry. “*Darcy’s* your favorite person. She’s your *person*. Your perfect person.”

“You also told me we can have lots of perfect people. You told me I was one of your perfect people and you’re one of mine, Mar. I mean, look.” Elle scooted closer until their knees bumped. “You care about me and you care about Olivia, and I’d never ask you who you care about more because you care about us differently and I believe love is one of those things that doesn’t run out.”

One of her favorite things about Olivia was her endless capacity to care.

“I’m not going anywhere, Margot. None of us are, okay? Change is inevitable, you know that, but that isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Okay, so we might not see each other every day, but I feel confident speaking for everyone when I say we wouldn’t know what to do without you. You’re *Margot*. You could never be a fifth wheel. If you’re worried we’re going to stop wanting to spend time with you, don’t. We don’t need you to change who you are or be sunshine and roses for us. You are the glue.”

Margot sputtered out a weak laugh. “Glue?”

“*Gorilla* Glue.” Elle pinched her lips together, the very picture of sincerity save for the twinkle in her eyes. “And don’t forget it.”

Being called *glue* wasn’t something she’d soon forget, and neither was the sentiment behind it. The next time she worked herself up with irrational worries about her friends ditching her as they entered a new chapter in their lives, she’d remind herself that they were just that—irrational. She was Margot Cooper, damn it, one of a kind. The *glue*. “Thanks, Elle.”

She nudged Margot with a knee. “You’re still worried about Olivia, aren’t you?”

Margot sucked in a shuddering breath and dipped her chin. “What if what I said went too far? I said what I did because I care and because I didn’t want to lose her and—what if I pushed her away?”

“If she said she’s going to be here, I think you have to trust her. Do you think you can do that?”

What other choice did she have?

Chapter Twenty-Three

“It could be your mass air flow sensor.”

Olivia wrung her hands together and stared over Mr. Miller’s shoulder as he poked around under the open hood of her car. Mr. Miller, Dad’s next-door neighbor, was a recently retired HVAC repairman, not a mechanic, but his brother apparently owned a garage and—Olivia hadn’t known who else to ask for help. “Is that bad?”

Mr. Miller huffed. “Well, it’s not good.”

Her stomach sank. “Oh.”

“But there could also be a problem with your fuel pump. A leak.”

She stepped closer. Beyond knowing where to check the oil and where the battery was located on the off chance she needed a jump, the guts of her car were a mystery. Everything under the hood looked confusing, coils and wires and metal all covered in a sheen of grease. Mr. Miller could’ve told her that her *thingamabob* needed a new *thingamajig*, and it would have made as much sense as *mass air flow sensor* and *fuel pump*. “Is *that* bad?”

Mr. Miller grunted and craned his neck, staring at her over his shoulder with a grimace that knotted her stomach. “That’s even worse.”

“Fuck.” She clapped a hand over her mouth. “Sorry, Mr. Miller. I just—whatever it is, can you fix it?”

Or did she need to call someone who could?

“In my experience”—Mr. Miller ducked back under the hood, did *something* she couldn’t see, and a low groan came from the belly of her car, making her wince harder—“you can fix just about anything.”

Olivia gulped. There was probably a worthwhile metaphor buried in there somewhere, a lesson to take away about the power of positive thinking or hard work or endurance or *something*, but she *really* just wanted her car to start so she could fix her *actual* problems.

“Do you know what time it is?”

Mr. Miller pointed across the driveway to where his chest of tools lay open. His phone rested atop a grease-covered rag. Olivia felt a little weird touching someone’s phone, but hey, he’d offered. She pressed the *home* button. *11:08*. A little under two hours before she had to be at the venue. The drive was forty-five minutes, an hour to be safe.

Olivia stepped back over to the car and leaned her hip against the front bumper, nibbling on her thumbnail. “I have a wedding rehearsal I have to be at in Seattle by one.” Mr. Miller said he could fix anything, but could he do it in under an hour? “Do you think you can have it running by noon?”

He gripped the inside frame of the car and gave a heavy sigh. He lifted his head and pinned her with a stare, one of his bushy white brows rising high on his forehead. “Olivia, I won’t be able to fix a damn thing with you hovering.”

Shit. He was right. She was absolutely hovering and in the worst way possible, standing right over his shoulder, doing nothing more than leaking anxiety all over the place. Literally. Her armpits were beginning to sweat and—it was March, for crying out loud. March in Washington. How in the world was she sweating *this* much?

“Sorry.” She offered him a contrite smile and stepped away from the vehicle. “I’ll just . . .” She jerked her head toward the opposite end of the driveway. “Go stand over there and let you work in peace.”

Hopefully quickly, because time was of the essence, but she had a sneaking suspicion that if she reminded Mr. Miller of her time crunch one more time, he'd toss in his grease-covered towel and tell her to find someone else to fix her car, and Olivia—

Had no one.

Her phone was a waterlogged hunk of plastic, *worthless*. Why she was still clutching it in her fist, holding it as if she had a shot in hell of resuscitating it was beyond her. Dad was long gone, probably halfway to Forks by now, and—could she even get an Uber to drive her from Enumclaw all the way to Seattle?

Olivia paced the end of the driveway, careful not to twist an ankle where the pavement cracked and dropped off abruptly, a pothole Dad had never bothered to fix because it was on the opposite side as the mailbox. That was the *last* thing she needed, an injury on top of everything else.

But that would be just her luck, wouldn't? Never had she wanted anything in her life as badly as she wanted her damn car to start so she could get to Seattle, to the rehearsal, to *Margot*.

Olivia shut her eyes.

"I figured out your problem."

Olivia rushed over to the car, stopping behind Mr. Miller, close enough to hear him explain, but not so close as to crowd him. "I am all ears."

He reached for the towel tucked inside the front pocket of his jeans and wiped his hands. "Your spark plugs aren't just corroded, they've started to erode." He pointed at the top of the engine. "See that green cast to the metal? You've got some severe oxidation going on, too. Your spark plugs are burned out. Probably causing a timing issue with the ignition. Have you noticed the car runs rough when you idle?"

"I—maybe? To be honest, I haven't driven it much in the past few months. I walk most places. It sits in a parking garage most of the time."

Mr. Miller grunted, acknowledging he'd heard her.

Olivia wet her lips. "So . . . corroded—sorry, *eroded* spark plugs . . . is *that* bad?"

Mr. Miller frowned. "Mm-hmm."

"But you can fix it."

She held her breath, crossing everything she could possibly cross. Fingers, toes, everything save for her eyes.

"I can."

Her breath escaped her all at once, and with it, a laugh of relief as she bent over, bracing her hands on her knees. Oh, thank God.

"As soon as I can get a replacement."

Her stomach fell away completely, and her heart stuttered, reminiscent of her stupid engine. "I'm guessing you don't have any of those lying around in your garage, do you?"

His lips twisted.

Swallowing required effort. It took two tries before she could force words up past the lump in her throat. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess it's going to take a little while?"

Mr. Miller grimaced and dipped his chin. "I can call AutoZone, see if they have them in stock, but . . ."

It was a fifteen-minute drive from Dad's to the other side of town, where the store was located—thirty minutes roundtrip. Accounting for the time it would take to actually pick the parts up and install them . . . she was looking at over an hour just to fix the car, easy.

She pressed her lips together and forced a smile. "It's fine. Thanks for, uh, trying. I appreciate it." The lump in her throat swelled, the backs of her eyes burning, because what was she supposed to do now?

"Sorry, Olivia," Mr. Miller said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I wish it would've been an easy fix."

So did she. She scrubbed a hand over her face and exhaled harshly. She couldn't believe she was about to ask this, but . . . "You wouldn't possibly be able to give me a ride into Seattle, would you? I'd be happy to pay for—"

Mr. Miller lifted a hand, cutting her off. "I would, gladly, no money necessary, if it weren't for the fact that Mae and I are down to one car." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. It had drizzled overnight, and a dry patch of concrete the size of a car stood out against the dark, rain-soaked drive.

"Right." She swallowed hard and pasted on a flimsy smile. "Thanks, anyway."

Mr. Miller lowered the hood and bent down to gather his tools. "You need me to call someone? Triple A? Your dad?"

She shook her head. There was no need to interrupt Dad's trip. It would take him longer than an hour to make it back. Pointless to bother him over something he could do nothing to fix.

Unless replacement spark plugs magically fell from the sky, there was nothing she or anyone could do to fix this. It was unfixable. Her phone was dead, her car was dead, and—

Margot was right.

If Olivia had just *waited*, she wouldn't be in this mess. But she hadn't listened, and now she was stuck an hour outside of town with no way to get back. Not only was she going to miss the rehearsal, a critical faux pas as the *wedding planner*, but what would Margot think? Olivia couldn't call her, couldn't let her know. *God*, she knew Margot's old number by heart, but her new number? There'd been no reason to memorize it with it programmed in her contacts.

Just show up.

Olivia had had *one* job, one means of proving to Margot that she was in, that she was *all in*, and she'd blown it. Sure, she could apologize, but would Margot even care to listen?

"Do you happen to have the Coopers' number? If not, I can give it to you."

Maybe she could ask Margot's dad for her new number.

Mr. Miller scrolled through his contacts and nodded. "Here you go."

Olivia took the proffered phone and hit *call*, raising the phone to her ear. It rang four times before going to voicemail. She handed the phone back to Mr. Miller and shook her head. "No answer."

"I, uh, could call the Taylor kid." His lips twisted. "Brad?"

Brad. God, no, Brad was the absolute last person on Earth she wanted to . . . *well.*

Asking a favor from her ex was just about the least appealing thing she could fathom, but not as terrible as missing the rehearsal. Not showing up. Letting Margot down.

If she was going to do this, she didn't have time to stand around debating it. If she was going to go, she needed to go *now.*

"It's okay, Mr. Miller." She hurried around the car, popping the door, and grabbing her duffel from the back seat. "But thanks, anyway."

Mr. Miller frowned. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, already moving down the drive. She waved. "I'm sure. I've really got to go. Tell Mrs. Miller I said hi!"

Brad's house, *her* old house, was two streets over, a ten-minute walk at a brisk pace. Olivia booked it, moving as fast as she could in a pencil skirt that kept her from being able to fully spread her legs. Her underwear were beginning to ride up, the lace chafing against the insides of her thighs while the outsides of her thighs and calves burned from this hybrid speed-walk/jog combo. Even though it was only in the midfifties, sweat dampened her hairline and the space between her boobs, leaving her sticky and gross. By the time she made it to Brad's, she was breathless, and her hair was stuck to her neck and forehead, but she made it.

Hustling past the god-awful bass-shaped mailbox, which was *definitely* new, she made a beeline to the front door and

pounded the side of her fist against it. “*Brad.*”

Her heart pounded, chest heaving with every rapid breath that burned the back of her throat. She waited less than thirty seconds and rapped her knuckles against the door, following it with a long, hard press of her thumb against the doorbell.

For a moment, she could’ve sworn she heard the sound of footsteps approaching, thundering down the stairs to the front door, but that was just blood thrumming inside her head.

Olivia whimpered and let her forehead fall forward against the front door. How *stupid*. It was Friday, midday. Of course Brad wasn’t answering the door. He was at *work*. She scrunched her eyes shut. Just like she needed to be in an *hour*.

For a second there, she’d honestly believed she could have everything she wanted. As if wanting badly enough could translate into having.

Olivia dragged a hand across her eyes, ruining her makeup. Not that it mattered. No one was going to see it because she wasn’t going to make it to Seattle, not on time. Showing up late was better than not showing up at all, but what would Brendon and Annie think? *Lori*? God, goodbye promotion, goodbye raise. And Margot?

Her heart clenched.

Olivia didn’t want to say goodbye.

She had *promised*. One simple thing: show up. She couldn’t even do that. With the way she’d left, how she’d left things between them, Margot might think Olivia didn’t *want* to show up, when that wasn’t it at all.

How ironic that the moment she decided to get out of her own way, life had to toss umpteen obstacles in her path. How the hell was that *fair*?

Olivia backed away from the door. Sunlight glinted off metal out of the corner of her eye. She sniffled and turned toward the side yard and—almost fell over.

The red Ford F-650 six-door pickup that she had failed to convince Brad he didn’t need—he’d had a perfectly good Ford

F-150 he planned to keep—was parked in the grass beside the house. Nine feet tall and with wheel wells higher than her hips, the truck had intimidated the hell out of her to the point where she'd never even *dreamed* of getting behind the wheel. Why would she when she had her efficient, reasonable, *reliable* Subaru that could get her everywhere she needed to go?

She pinched her lips together and threw one last glance over her shoulder at the front door before crossing the yard. Her flats sank into the grass, wet blades tickling her ankles. She stopped beside the truck and held her breath as she reached *up* for the handle on the driver's-side door. All she wanted was to see whether it was unlocked and—

The door cracked open, and her heart climbed inside her throat.

Holy shit.

She wet her lips and checked over both shoulders. The street was quiet, no busybody neighbors pattering around their yards wondering what Olivia was doing, breaking into her ex-husband's truck. It wasn't *technically* breaking into it if he left it unlocked, right? Brad had never bothered to lock his car at home, something he could get away with in a town like Enumclaw.

He also had a terrible habit of leaving the keys to his truck under the visor because—who would be bold enough to steal a truck like *this*?

Her pulse pounded in her throat as she threw her duffel to the ground. She gripped the door with one hand and rested the other on the leather seat. One foot braced on the footrail, Olivia levered herself up into the cab. The air was different up here. She snorted and with a shaking hand flipped the visor open.

Brad's keys clattered against the dash, gleaming in the sunlight streaming through the windshield. She snatched them up and hopped down, landing in the grass with a soft squish, mud squelching under her feet and running up the sides of her flats. The metal was cold against her skin, sharp, too, as she

ran the pad of her thumb idly over the teeth. Breaking into his truck was one thing; taking it was something else altogether.

You don't need anyone's permission to be happy.

All those years spent *compromising*, storing books under her bed, giving, giving, giving, answering his calls even after their divorce, so much time wasted trying in vain to please Brad at the expense of her own happiness.

How did that saying go? Better to ask for forgiveness than permission?

She reached inside her purse for a pen and a piece of paper.

Brad owed her one.

Chapter Twenty-Four

12:49 p.m.

Hey, this is Olivia! I can't come to the phone right—

Margot ended the call.

Elle winced. “No answer?”

Margot shook her head. No answer, just like the last five times she'd called. Four rings followed by voicemail and each time the pressure inside Margot's chest swelled a little further, squeezing her heart until it hurt to breathe.

“There's still time,” Elle said.

Right. Eleven—*no*, ten minutes until the rehearsal started.

Elle was right. Olivia was cutting it close, but she could still make it.

Unless Olivia wasn't coming.

Margot lifted a shaking hand, resting her fingers against the notch at the base of her throat. Her pulse fluttered wildly under her skin, her heart going haywire. She couldn't think that way. She couldn't *let* herself think that way. Olivia would be here. She *had* to be here. There was too much riding on this wedding, it mattered too much to Olivia for her to simply blow it off.

Unless . . . unless Margot was wrong. Unless Olivia had changed her mind. Made it home and talked to her dad and decided to do what Margot had feared she would, set what she

wanted aside to take care of whatever was going on in Enumclaw that she hadn't even let Margot know about.

Margot had never felt so utterly in the dark in her life, desperately wanting to believe that Olivia would show up, but not knowing. Not knowing where Olivia was, what had happened last night with her dad and his house and his health, if Olivia was on her way. A million terrible scenarios flashed through her head. That Olivia's dad wasn't actually okay. That maybe Olivia was there in Enumclaw, needing Margot and afraid to say so after their fight. That the reason she wasn't picking up her phone might not have been because it was dead like Elle had suggested but because she didn't *want* to pick up. Or worse, maybe she couldn't.

The pressure in her chest ballooned further, each breath she sucked in shallower than the last.

Or, there was always the possibility that she'd made it to her dad's and thought about everything Margot had said and had taken it all to heart, but instead of deciding that putting herself first for once meant getting in the car and coming back to Seattle, she'd realized that this—the city, this career, this life—wasn't what she wanted. That *Margot* wasn't what she wanted.

Margot set her jaw.

No, absolutely not. Olivia cared too much to simply blow off the wedding. She would, at the very least, show up to make this weekend happen, and then—

Only time and talking to Olivia would tell what would come after. What their future would hold.

Eight minutes.

"She'll be here," Margot said, sounding a whole hell of a lot more confident than she felt.

Elle smiled and reached out, squeezing Margot's hand, a brief show of support that made a tiny bit of the pressure in Margot's chest release.

"It's starting to rain," Elle murmured, and Margot turned her face up.

A light sprinkle, heavier than a mist but lighter than a drizzle, had started to come down. Margot hadn't even noticed. She shrugged and reached behind her neck, flipping her hood up over her head.

"Hey, you guys?" Darcy poked her head out of the door of the venue and frowned. "You can wait inside, you know?"

"Darcy's right," Elle said. "We can wait right inside by the window. You can see the street and stay dry. So when Olivia shows up you won't look like a drowned rat." Her lips quirked. "Though I'm sure you'd make an adorable drowned rat, Mar."

Margot snorted. "Nah. You go on. I'm going to wait out here."

Something about going inside the venue, even to wait by the window, carried a note of finality she wasn't ready for. Like if she walked through that door without Olivia by her side, she'd be accepting that Olivia wasn't going to show. That this thing between them was over. Over before they'd barely gotten the chance to begin.

Maybe it was silly and symbolic, but Margot was going to wait right here, on this sidewalk. Where she was standing gave her a perfectly unencumbered view down the street in each direction. Even if the clouds overhead opened up and unleashed a torrential downpour, Margot's feet were glued to the pavement. Nothing short of Olivia showing up would make Margot come inside before she absolutely had to. Until she had no choice.

"Meet you inside?" Elle gave Margot's hand one last squeeze before letting go.

Margot nodded. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Elle slipped away, and a moment later, the heavy door behind Margot shut with a *boom* that made Margot lurch, nerves shot from lack of sleep and spending most of the day on edge.

Despite being midday on a Friday, the street was quiet. This part of town was far enough away from the downtown market

to attract fewer tourists, but there was usually a little more action. Several cars zoomed down the road, and across the street a group of friends laughed before ducking into a coffee shop.

The door opened a minute later, and Margot shut her eyes. “I said I’ll be there shortly, Elle.”

A throat cleared and Margot craned her neck, looking over her shoulder. With one hand braced against the door, Brendon poked his head out from under the awning and frowned up at the sky for a second before lowering his gaze to stare at Margot. His lips turned down at the corners and—her stomach dropped. She knew that look. What it meant.

Her raked his fingers through his hair. “It’s, uh, one o’clock. The officiant’s already here and the facility manager has”—he winced—“*kindly* reminded us that we need to be out of here no later than two so they can start setup for the event they have here tonight.”

Right. The, uh, *show must go on*. Margot clenched her back teeth together and pasted on a smile. “I’ll be right in.”

Brendon stared at her for a moment before shaking his head and throwing the door open the rest of the way. He stepped out onto the street, rain be damned, apparently, and wrapped her up in a hug so tight that something in her chest cracked and her toes actually skimmed the ground. She buried her nose in his shirt, breathing in the smell of his aftershave and the faint smell of Annie’s perfume that clung to his collar.

She pressed on his shoulders and ducked her chin, sniffing hard at the sidewalk. “Just give me a minute, Bren. Just—one minute, please?”

One of his fingers lifted her chin. When she raised her eyes, he offered her a crooked smile. “I’ll stall for you, okay? I can ask a bunch of questions about . . . I don’t know . . . the timing of the dove release or something.”

She smacked him on the arm. “You *didn’t*.”

He snickered and shook his head. “No. No doves. But I bet if I ask, I can buy you *at least* a couple minutes. Sound good?”

She scratched the tip of her nose and nodded. “Thanks, Brendon.”

“What are best friends for?” He squeezed her shoulder before backing up toward the door. “You just take your time.”

As soon as Brendon was inside, Margot hugged her arms around herself. Take her time? There *wasn't* time.

But Margot had to trust that Olivia would show up. And if she didn't, she had to believe she had a reason.

She relaxed her death grip on her phone and stared at the screen.

1:01 p.m.

Four more minutes. Margot would give her four minutes before she sucked it up and accepted that Olivia wasn't coming.

Each second inched by. A horn blared from several blocks over, and across the street, that group of friends who'd ducked inside the coffee shop hurried back out onto the street, zipping up their jackets and hiding under their hoods, the rain falling heavier than before.

1:04 p.m.

One arm still wrapped around her stomach, Margot jammed the heel of her other hand against her breastbone—it was time to accept that, for whatever reason, Olivia wasn't—

An engine roared a split second before a bright red monster truck took the corner, tires—all six of them—squealing. Margot stared, dumbstruck. In Seattle, she saw Priuses and Subarus and Hyundais, small cars ideal for squeezing into tight spaces, street parking the norm. Even the parking spaces in garages were narrow, all but encouraging drivers to pick smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles than the gas-guzzler burning rubber as it ate up the pavement, coming toward her up the hill.

Holy shit. Margot leaped back as the right front tire of the truck hopped the curb, brakes screeching obnoxiously,

drawing the attention of every pedestrian in a two-block radius.

Who the fuck was this asshole, and where in God's name did they get their license?

Heart racing for an entirely different reason than before, Margot inched a little closer to the door to the venue, focus still firmly on the truck. She covered her ears when the driver's-side door opened, hinges screeching like nails on a chalkboard. The door slammed, and Margot froze.

One hand braced against the headlight, chest heaving, her dark blond hair a halo of frizz around her face, stood Olivia.

Mud streaked the sides of her calves, caking her feet, and there was a tear in the side of her skirt along the seam, too ragged to be a slit. Even filthy, totally disheveled, and standing beside a monster truck, Olivia had never looked more breathtaking because she was *here*.

Margot opened her mouth and gestured weakly to the monster truck parked partially on the curb. "Truck?" She huffed and tried again. "Since when do you drive a truck?"

Was this thing even street legal? Fuck it. Margot couldn't care less, because Olivia was here, and she was looking at Margot like she'd never been happier to see someone in her life. She was *here*.

Olivia stepped closer on wobbling legs, and when she laughed there was a frantic edge to it that made Margot's heart clench. She stumbled over the curb, and Margot rushed toward her, catching her with both hands around her waist, steadying her. Olivia melted against Margot, her whole body shaking as if there were a current running through her, clearly adrenaline and who knew what else. "I stole it."

Margot jerked back and her jaw fell open. "You stole a truck? *Olivia*."

She wasn't sure whether to be scandalized or proud or a little turned on or terrified or some dizzying combination of all of the above.

Olivia sputtered out another laugh and dipped her chin. “I stole a truck.”

That was—Margot didn’t have words. Or, she had words, but she wanted to hear what Olivia had to say. Needed to hear it. “Start from the beginning. Please.”

Olivia’s tongue darted out, sweeping against her bottom lip. “My dad is fine. You were right. You were absolutely right. He’s selling the house, but he’s okay and we cleared it all up. We’re fine. This morning I dropped my phone in the toilet while I was getting ready and now it’s a waterlogged hunk of junk and then my car wouldn’t start because of my plug sparks or *something* and I couldn’t call you because I don’t have your new number memorized and my neighbor was trying to work on the car but he couldn’t fix it and my dad had already left for his fishing trip and—and—”

“Hey.” Margot reached up, tucking a strand of hair behind Olivia’s ear. “Breathe.”

Olivia nodded and sucked in a rasping breath. “My car wouldn’t start. I didn’t know what to do. I was going to go to Brad and ask to borrow his car, which I didn’t exactly relish the idea of”—her lips twisted in a wry smile—“but I figured he owed me one.”

He owed Olivia several, but Margot held her tongue.

“He wasn’t home.” Her throat jerked. “I had no idea how to get here, and I couldn’t contact anyone, but then I saw his truck in the yard and he left the keys inside and I—I thought about what you said. About not needing to ask anyone’s permission to be happy, so ... I didn’t. I just took the truck.”

The pressure in Margot’s chest didn’t so much disappear as it was replaced with laughter that built until she couldn’t contain it. It burst from her lips. “You stole Brad’s truck.”

Olivia laughed. “I stole Brad’s truck!”

A throat cleared from behind them. Standing in the doorway, Brendon smiled crookedly. “Look, I’m really happy

for you guys, but maybe you should talk about your grand theft auto at a *slightly* lower volume.”

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” Olivia said, cringing sharply.

Brendon waved her off. “No worries. We’ve got a little cushion.”

“We’ll be in in a minute,” Margot promised.

He winked, both eyes shutting instead of just the one, and ducked inside.

Margot’s cheeks ached from smiling. “That’s kind of hot, you know.”

“Me stealing a truck?” Olivia’s eyes crinkled at the corners.

“You stealing *Brad’s* truck,” she clarified.

Olivia brushed her fingers against Margot’s wrist and goose bumps erupted on her arms. Her lower lip wobbled gently. “I should’ve listened to you. Instead I almost didn’t make it and—I don’t know.” She ducked her chin. “I was standing there on Brad’s porch and it just hit me, how badly I want *all of this*. To be here. My whole life is here, and I love it here, I love what I do, and I—I’ve worked too hard this last year to just give up on it all. To throw it all away. When I was standing there and I realized I might not make it on time, I realized how badly I wanted everything I’ve worked for and how far I was willing to go to have it.” She tangled their fingers together and squeezed. “How far I was willing to go to keep it.”

Keep it. Margot’s heart soared. “Keep it, huh?”

Olivia laughed, free hand skimming Margot’s waist and wrapped around her, palm settling against the small of Margot’s back. Her smile fell, and her eyes went serious. “I am so sorry, Margot. For what I said. I—you were coming from a good place and I reacted poorly. When you said I was overreacting, it felt like you were belittling my feelings, and I lashed out. It was no excuse.”

Margot swallowed hard and brushed her thumb along the curve of Olivia’s cheek. There was a mysterious smudge that might’ve been grease, maybe mud, but Margot didn’t care.

“I’m sorry, too. What I said about you overreacting was shitty, but everything else? Please tell me you understand that everything I said, I said because I care about you. You know that, right?”

Olivia sniffled softly and nodded. “It’s not the easiest, letting someone care about me.”

“Well, you’ll have lots of time to practice,” Margot joked, stepping closer until their knees bumped. “Because I’m not going to stop caring about you any time soon. Definitely not after one fight. I’m a lot harder to get rid of than that.”

Olivia’s laugh was watery, her smile bright. The hand resting on the small of Margot’s back traveled higher, tangling in the back of her hair. “So am I. I’m not going anywhere.”

Heat crept up Margot’s jaw, and the inside corners of her eyes prickled. “I know.”

“What were you doing standing out here?” Olivia asked.

“Everyone else went inside.” Margot lifted her free hand and rested it on the side of Olivia’s neck, her thumb brushing the hinge of Olivia’s jaw. “But I was waiting for you.”

Olivia smiled, and the hand in Margot’s hair tightened, drawing her close. Olivia dipped her chin and her nose slid against Margot’s, her breath warm against Margot’s mouth. Olivia’s lips brushed hers, a whispered tease of a kiss. Her hair smelled like shampoo and rain and her breath like toothpaste, and Margot *wanted*. She smiled and chased Olivia’s lips, gripping the front of Olivia’s blouse, dragging her in, and sealing their mouths together.

“I’m pretty sure a part of me has been waiting for you for eleven years. Just like I’m pretty sure, no matter what happens, I’m always going to be at least little bit in love with you, Liv. Waiting a few extra minutes wasn’t going to kill me.” A drop landed on the tip of Margot’s nose. A little rain wouldn’t kill her, either.

Olivia’s lips parted, hazel eyes widening. “Really?” she whispered.

Margot's heart raced from the confession, from Olivia's closeness, the warmth of her hand against the back of Margot's neck. The thumb of Olivia's other hand swept gentle circles over the inside of Margot's wrist, where she could probably feel Margot's pulse flutter wildly. "Really."

"Always?" Olivia whispered against Margot's mouth, seemingly as reluctant to drag herself from the kiss as Margot was.

"Always."

Epilogue

About Two Years Later

“*M*argot. You can say it. *M*argot.”

“*Buh!*” Caroline Lowell smacked her lips together. A bubble of spit dribbled from the corner of her mouth as she burred incoherently, staring up at Margot with wide brown eyes.

Margot jostled the baby on her lap and snorted. “My name isn’t *buh*, but I have the utmost faith in you, Care Bear. It’s simple. *Mar-go*. Margot.”

Caroline Lowell clapped her chubby little hands together and giggled. “*Buh!*”

“I’m going to cut you some slack because you’re not even a year old. Or”—she rolled her eyes—“sorry, twelve months. Why does everyone do that? I don’t go around telling everyone I’m . . .” She did the math. “Three hundred seventy-two months, do I? No, because that would be ridiculous.”

Caroline laughed and kicked her legs, bouncing atop Margot’s thighs. Beneath her dress—a sparkling silver number with a full crinoline skirt dotted with multicolored glitter—she sported dark blue leggings. Atop her head, her crown of evergreen sprigs and eucalyptus sat askew. One tiny tuft of hair had been scraped into the world’s saddest ponytail atop the center of her mostly bald head. The silver bow meant to

hold it in place kept sliding, her strawberry blond hair too fine, too sparse.

“You are great for my self-esteem, kid. I hope you still laugh at all my jokes once you can understand them.”

“Buh!” Caroline pointed at Margot’s half-empty bottle of beer. Not just any beer, but the recently released Aries brew from Bell and Blanchard Brewing Company in partnership with Oh My Stars. It was a hazy IPA with a slightly peppery bite that paired perfectly with the fruitiness of the Galaxy and Simcoe hops. Profitable *and* delicious. As far as Margot was concerned, it was the best business partnership she and Elle had made yet.

She glanced at the dance floor. *Second*-best business partnership.

“Yes, that’s beer,” Margot said, turning back to Caroline. “But you can’t have that for another . . .” She wrinkled her nose. “We’ll talk about it when you’re a little older, yeah?”

Caroline gurgled and lurched forward, smacking Margot’s cheek with damp fingers. *Why* Caroline had such sticky fingers was a touch unsettling. “*Buh buh BUH!*”

Margot nodded. “If you say so.”

Caroline dimpled and pressed her other hand to Margot’s cheek and—that hand wasn’t merely a little moist, it was covered in something. Something she smeared all over Margot’s cheek with undisguised glee, babbling excitedly, her fingers creeping closer to the edge of Margot’s mouth.

“What the fu—fudge is on my face?” she muttered, equally as horrified to find out what it was as she was to simply leave it there, ignorant. “This had better not be from your diaper.”

Reluctantly, she reached for her napkin and dabbed at her cheek. Caroline blew spit bubbles and watched with wide brown eyes. Margot sniffed and sighed in relief.

Frosting. It was the lemon buttercream from the wedding cake. Margot didn’t exactly want it on her face, but it could’ve been worse. It could’ve been *far* worse.

“How’d you get your hands on cake, Care Bear?”

Caroline gummed at her fist. More frosting seeped out from between her tiny dimpled knuckles.

“Okay.” Margot tossed her napkin on the table and stood, cradling Caroline to her chest, careful to keep her fingers from coming anywhere near her face. “Time to take you back to your parents, I think.”

The best part of being an honorary aunt? At the end of the day, Margot got to give Caroline back.

“Here.” Brendon was staring off into space, lids heavy like he was about to conk out at any moment, so she nudged him. He blinked blearily up at her, then smiled at Caroline. “I don’t know how, but she got into some frosting.”

He hummed softly and snagged the baby under the arms. “Curious Care Bear.”

“*Sticky* Care Bear,” Margot corrected.

Caroline cooed and Brendon cringed, one hand on her bottom.

“*Wet* Care Bear.”

Caroline pressed her face against his chest, wiping her spit on his shirt. “*Buh.*”

At first, Brendon looked disgusted, then resigned, before his face settled on a look of pure adoration as he pressed his lips to the top of Caroline’s mostly bald head. She had him wrapped around her pinky finger. To steal Brendon’s favorite word, he looked utterly smitten. “*Buh’s* right, baby. Let’s get you changed.”

“Have fun.” Margot snickered.

She left Brendon to it, making a pit stop at her table to polish off her beer and retrieve her clutch.

“There you are.”

Margot turned, heart fluttering as Olivia approached, one hand outstretched, reaching for her. She looked stunning in a pale green dress that brought out the flecks of gold in her eyes.

“Here I am.” Margot met her halfway, tangling their fingers together. “I was just about to find you. You left me all alone.”

It was an exaggeration. Olivia had only stepped away for a few minutes to make sure the airport car service was on the way.

“I’m all yours for the rest of the night.” Olivia’s lips twitched like she was trying not to laugh. “You have frosting on your nose.”

“Caroline,” she said, thumbing it away, not really caring. The party was winding down, the DJ playing slower songs. Half the guests—not that there were many—had retreated to their tables, chatting idly.

Olivia nodded and propped her hip against the table, eyes scanning the room. Margot could practically see her running down her mental checklist, making sure—even at the end of the evening—that everything was going according to plan.

After Brendon and Annie’s wedding, Olivia’s career had taken off, her boss at Emerald City Events promoting Olivia as promised. Word of mouth had spread, thanks to the article in the Vows section of the *Seattle Times* and because Brendon had listed Olivia, specifically, on the preferred vendors page of OTP’s website, referring her to all the happy couples who matched via the app.

Each wedding she planned got the time and attention it deserved, but Olivia had really poured her heart and soul into making this one special.

In the center of the dance floor, looking for all the world like they were the only people in the room, Elle and Darcy swayed slightly offbeat, like they were dancing to a song only they could hear. They were beautiful—Elle wore a strapless silver A-line dress that matched Caroline’s down to the glitter, and Darcy rocked the hell out of a winter-white fit-and-flare dress—and they looked over the moon, happier than Margot had ever seen them.

Olivia smiled and cocked her head, resting it against Margot’s. “Last dance.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, the song ended to scattered applause, and Elle and Darcy parted reluctantly, hands still entwined as they made their way off the dance floor. Annie trailed after them, holding both their bouquets. Elle's had tiny sprigs of cilantro tucked in amongst the eucalyptus and baby's breath, a subtle nod to an inside joke between her and Darcy.

The DJ said something about seeing the brides off, and most of the guests stood, following Elle and Darcy out of the ballroom and down the hall, shuffling out onto the sidewalk where the black town car taking them to the airport waited, the back door already open. Darcy whispered something in Elle's ear, and she froze, sputtering out a sharp laugh before looking up at the sky. Several snow flurries fell around them. Darcy's hatred for snow was no secret, but she didn't seem to mind it at the moment.

Elle chuckled and wrapped her fingers around Darcy's wrist, tugging her inside the car. She met Margot's eyes, flashing her a smile and an excited wave before the driver shut the door.

Margot's vision blurred softly at the edges as she gripped Olivia's hand, leaning up against her as the car took off down the road, taillights disappearing around the corner.

If this was what change looked like, maybe it wasn't so terrible after all.

"Hey. Are you *crying*?"

"I'm just really happy for them." Margot sniffed hard.

Olivia reached out, tucking Margot's hair behind her ears. Her fingers were warm against Margot's skin. "Sap."

Maybe she was. "You love me anyway."

"I do." Olivia smiled. "I really do."

I do. Margot's heart skipped a beat as she leaned into Olivia. "You really outdid yourself this time."

Elle and Darcy had gotten the happy ending they deserved. That's what Brendon kept calling it. A happy ending. Margot

was pretty sure it was only the beginning for all of them.

Olivia beamed. “It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it?”

Margot swept her thumb along the back of Olivia’s knuckles, lingering over the understated pavé engagement ring on her fourth finger. She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “Ours will be even better.”

Olivia leaned forward and brushed her lips against Margot’s, smiling into the kiss. “I think so, too.”

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ALEXANDRIA BELLEFLEUR is a nationally bestselling author of swoony contemporary romance often featuring lovable grumps and the sunshine characters who bring them to their knees. A Pacific Northwesterner at heart, Alexandria has a weakness for good coffee, Pike IPA, and Voodoo Doughnuts. Her special skills include finding the best pad thai in every city she visits, remembering faces but not names, falling asleep in movie theaters, and keeping cool while reading smutty books in public. She was a 2018 Romance Writers of America Golden Heart finalist. You can find her at alexandriabellefleur.com or on Twitter @ambellefleur.

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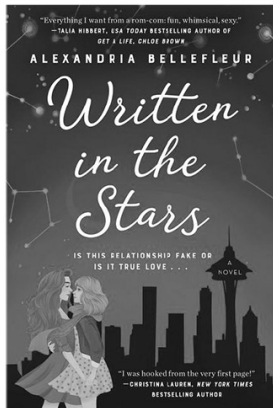
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