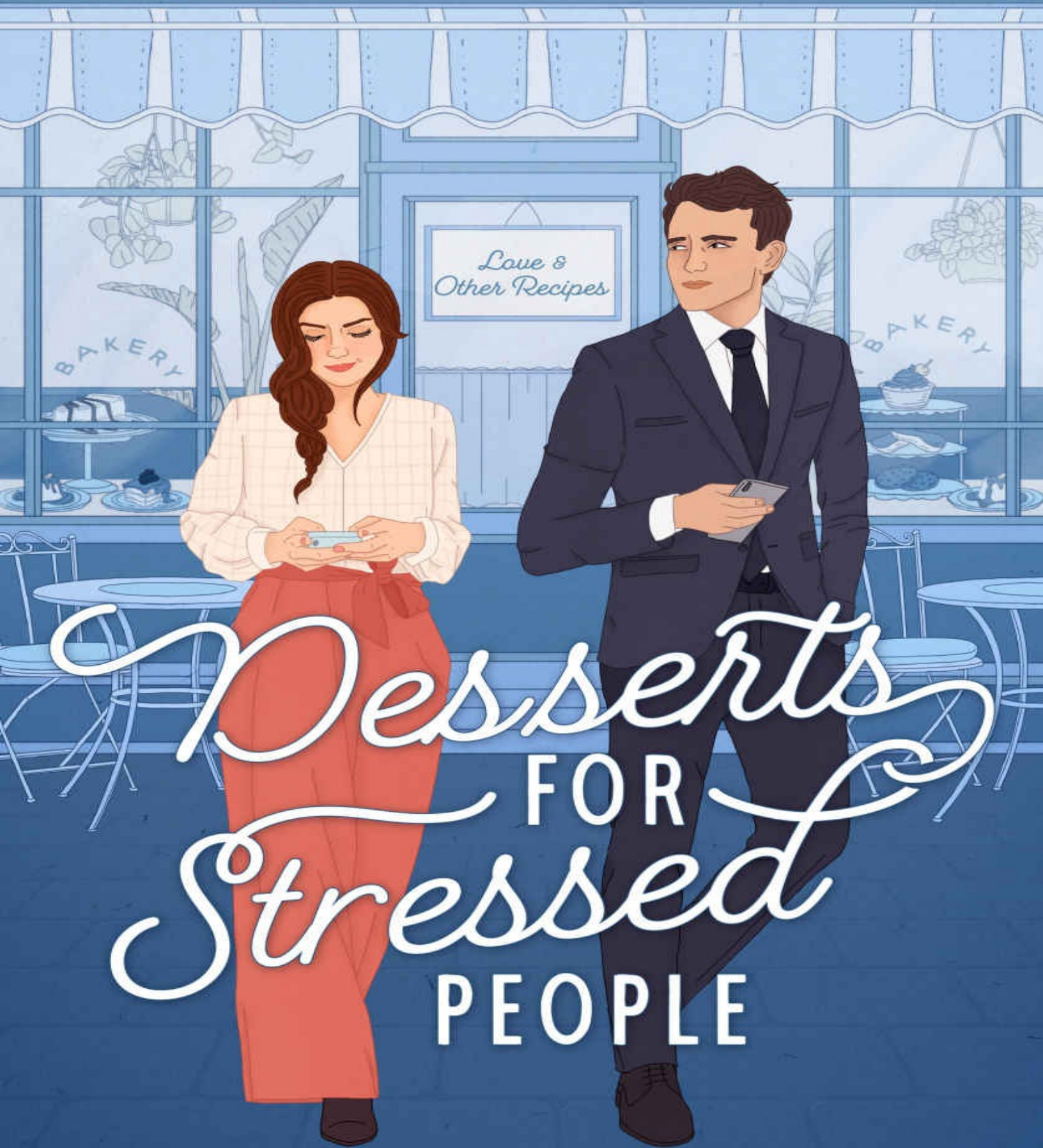


• • • • • LETIZIA LORINI • • • • •



Desserts
FOR
Stressed
PEOPLE

Desserts
FOR
Stressed
PEOPLE

LETIZIA LORINI

Copyright © 2023 by Letizia Lorini

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. To request permission, contact the author at letizia@letizialorini.com.

Ebook ISBN: 978-91-527-4695-0

Paperback ISBN: 978-91-527-4696-7

Cover Design by Sam Palencia at Ink and Laurel

Editing by Nicolette Beebe

Proofreading by Rebecca Prokop

Formatting by Letizia Lorini

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

To the wild, hopeful dreamers who won't settle and constantly chase the next goal.

Also to those of you who ask, "Why don't you write something more *substantial* than romance?" and come up with useful suggestions about what I should publish next.

Look, I'm going to be straight with you.
It's another romance.

Author's Note

This book contains on-page intimate scenes and mature content and is intended for mature audiences only. For more details on the content warnings for this novel, please visit:

www.letizialorini.com

Contents

1. [The Beginning of the End](#)
 2. [Undercover Agent](#)
 3. [The First Contact](#)
 4. [A Series of Events](#)
 5. [The Secret Spot](#)
 6. [A New Boss](#)
 7. [Fundamental First Impressions](#)
 8. [On the Road](#)
 9. [Deserve Your Dessert](#)
 10. [It Takes One Dick Pic](#)
 11. [The Sugary Bet](#)
 12. [Heaven Is Hot as Hell](#)
 13. [Two Non-Dates](#)
 14. [A Coffee Accident](#)
 15. [The Answer](#)
 16. [Nevaeh Strikes Again](#)
 17. [A Week as Enemies](#)
 18. [Admit Defeat](#)
 19. [Definitely Not a Date](#)
 20. [Reading Between the Lines](#)
 21. [The Ultimate Fight](#)
 22. [A Dirty Dessert](#)
 23. [Sweet Kisses](#)
 24. [Mr. & Miss Asshole](#)
 25. [Nevaeh with Hesitation](#)
 26. [The Date](#)
 27. [Home Sweet Home](#)
 28. [His Lie Over My Truth](#)
 29. [Thank You for Nothing, Nevaeh!](#)
 30. [No One Benches Heaven](#)
 31. [The Gratitude of the Aftermath](#)
 32. [Back to the Future](#)
- [Two Years Later](#)

[Want more?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter 1

The Beginning of the End



I READ SOMEWHERE that successful people adjust their perspective when life throws them a curveball, and I generally think of myself as a pretty successful person. But I guess, just this once, I'm okay with being a *complete* failure.

The skin of my face throbs between my hands, like a million needles are poking through each pore. Clutching my chest, I try to get my heart to slow down, or else I'll seriously feel sick. Actually, I'll probably vomit anyway.

Bringing a hand to cup my mouth, I inhale and exhale deeply. Uneaten food sits on my tray and people are eating all around me, the smells of beef, tomato sauce, and garlic mixing until my nausea hits a new peak.

"Drink some water," Emma says as she slides my glass closer. Though I grab it, I don't think I can force anything down right now, solid or liquid.

"Are you—are you sure?" I ask. If I had the strength to hold my head up to look at her, I know what I'd find. A reprimanding stare with a hint of derision and just as much hurt. Emma is my best friend, after all. Whatever hurts me tears her to shreds too.

"You saw it yourself, Heaven," she whispers.

The softness in her voice pushes me to meet her baby-blue eyes, and as soon as I do, tears threaten to fall down my cheeks with violence. I'm one wrong movement away from bursting into a sobbing mess in the office cafeteria.

She's right. I saw it. It was as clear as day in the screenshot she just showed me. Still, my brain struggles to make sense of it all, to put into focus my new reality. To accept that something happened—something far out of my control—and now, my life will never be the same again. All the plans, the

future I envisioned. It's all gone down the drain.

"Don't do that," she mumbles, tucking strands of sunset blonde hair behind her ears.

"Do what?"

She rolls her round eyes, then her lips tense and become such thin lines that I struggle to reconcile it with how full they usually are. "That. Wonder where it all went wrong. Whatever you did to turn your boyfriend into a jackass." She scoffs, looking around. "He was always a jackass. You just never noticed."

Maybe she's right. Maybe Alex was always scum, and I refused to see it. Maybe I was too blindly in love to acknowledge it. And maybe, at some point, that blind love turned into blind trust. Trust that was obviously misplaced.

"What do I do . . ." I whisper.

"You dump his sorry ass," she says. I could have seen it coming. "Then you run him over. Splat him like a bug over the crosswalk. Then you take his corpse and—"

"Em." I raise my hand to shush her. She's already in the anger stage, because she had last night to process it. But I'm still at the grieving stage. At the part of this in which all our moments together play in front of my eyes like a sad sepia-toned slideshow with sappy music in the background.

It just doesn't make any sense. Why would he do this? Except . . . except maybe it does make sense. Maybe it's what makes the most sense.

Alex is cheating on me.

The more I think about it, the more I realize I've been oblivious to what was right in front of me. How I've seen him pick up his phone and bring it with him, even if he was moving from the couch to the fridge, chuckling with a streak of blush emerging across his cheeks. All the late meetings he's been to, football that always lasted way too long on Friday nights, the lack of any physical contact between us over the last few months.

I glance at the screenshot on Emma's phone, still turned to me on the table. The piercing dark blue eyes looking back at me are the same I turned to last night in bed, when I wished my boyfriend sweet dreams.

Alex D., looking for one-time-only hookups.

That's what my boyfriend wrote on the internet. That, ladies and gentlemen, is what girls see when they swipe right on my boyfriend.

Apparently, that's how you express interest on this app. Swiping right.

My dating life has been exclusively off the internet, and most of it, with Alex himself, but Emma briefly explained it to me. RadaR is some revolutionary app for hookups she downloaded a couple of days back.

“Heaven?” Emma calls. It sounds far away, white noise in the background, and everything in my line of sight is blurred but her phone. Alex’s oval face, his shapely brows, the short sandy blond hair. The tiny scar over his left temple from his hockey years, the playfulness in his smile. They’re all reminders of memories, moments, of a person who no longer exists. He’s different now. Someone I don’t know.

“Heaven? Shit, maybe I shouldn’t have told you at work.”

When I meet Emma’s gaze again, she points at the glass of water. After I’ve taken a long sip, I’m even queasier, but at least my throat isn’t raspy anymore—it doesn’t feel like I’m chewing sand. “How could he do this?” I mumble. “Why would he?”

“Because you two have been unhappy for years.” She holds her manicured hand over mine, and with a sigh, sets her right fist on the table. “And he’s too much of a coward to just come out and say that he doesn’t love you anymore. So . . .” She shrugs.

So, he went behind my back and has been cheating on me. Who knows how long this has been going on for. Six months? A year? Was he cheating on me on our last anniversary, when we spent a weekend at that romantic spa? Had he already betrayed me when we went to his parents’ place a couple of months ago, and I withstood hours of his mom talking about babies?

For sure, it’s been going on for at least a month, because that’s when Emma told me she saw him come out of a hotel with a blonde woman. “Do you think that’s where he found that woman you saw him with? On RadaR?”

She shrugs. “Maybe. Does it matter?”

I guess it doesn’t. “I can’t believe I trusted him over you,” I mumble as I twirl a lock of hair around my finger. “It’s just . . . when I confronted him about it, he said she was a colleague. That the hotel will become their client soon, and they were there for a meeting. And I believed him.”

“It’s not your fault, H. He’s your boyfriend. You’ve been together for five years,” she comforts me as she lightly pats the back of my hand.

“But you told me. You told me that they were more than friendly with each other. That he had his arm around her shoulder and—”

“I know,” she cuts me off as she scoops up some tomato sauce with her spoon, then brings it to her lips. “Sometimes it’s easier to believe a lie than it

is the truth.”

Maybe. But I should have trusted her sixth sense—she’s always had a good one.

“Tell me you’ll break up with him,” Emma warns. It really is a warning, as proven by the furrows in her forehead, by the hostile look in her sweet eyes.

“Of course I will.”

When a few people from sales walk by our table, she lets out a puff of air. Then, her worried gaze is on me, as if she’s not entirely sure I will. But she’s wrong. I *have* to break up with him. There’s no other possible course of action. What am I supposed to do? Forget I know? Ask him? Alex didn’t confess to his cheating. He doesn’t deserve a chance to explain.

With a new wave of queasiness, I dry the sweat off my forehead. “I’ll do it after work. I’ll just go home and . . .” I’ll go home and break up with my boyfriend. The man I thought I’d marry one day. The man I love—or I thought I loved, because though shock is freezing me and there’s a certain disappointment over losing my relationship, it’s nothing like the anguish and pain that *should* squeeze my chest.

Maybe I *don’t* love him like I thought I did. Surely he doesn’t love me if he’s cheating. Yet it’s not him I’m mourning, but the time I invested in him. The relationship I thought we had, the future I pictured. Not *him*.

“All right. You can stay at my place if you need some time.” When my eyes don’t leave the phone, Emma sighs and locks the screen. Now that it’s off, the fingerprints all over it are much clearer, and the familiar, annoying itch at the back of my throat comes in earnest. “H, are you listening to me?”

I am, but I don’t want to stay at her place. Emma is more than messy, and compared to her apartment, mine is as clean as a hospital.

My heart sinks an inch deeper into my chest. The apartment. The beautiful place Alex and I rent together. We signed a lease for it, and it won’t expire for the next four months. “The lease.”

She squints, then nods as if she’s connected the dots. “Nah, don’t worry. He can’t refuse to pay. You’d both be held accountable.”

No, we wouldn’t. The realization falls over me like rain, drenching me in desperation and clenching my stomach so hard I might be giving myself an ulcer.

They’ll hold *me* responsible if we don’t pay rent, because I took the lease. We had no other choice, because when we moved in together, his credit was

terrible. “Oh, fuck. Emma, it’s in *my* name. Not his.”

Her shoulders sag. “Wha—why?” she asks, and before I can answer, she groans. “Can you afford the rent alone?”

I shake my head. There’s no way I can pay that amount. It’d be eighty percent of my wage, and I have close to no savings. Surely not enough to cover four months of such high rent in the city center. Probably not enough for one month either, courtesy of my school debts and the car lease, also in my name.

Clasping my face between my hands, I hold back tears. It’s not like he’d ever refuse to pay rent, right? *He’s* the one who cheated on *me*, and we’re adults. We spent five years together—not five days, five *years*.

He’ll ruin my credit score out of sheer pettiness, won’t he?

I tuck some loose, wavy strands of hair behind my ears and move my elbows off the table. It’s sticky, covered in fingerprints, scratched. If I had my cleaning products here, I’d make it so much better. Clean, neat. I’d fix it, make it shine. There’s something soothing about bringing order where there’s chaos. On fixating on something so easy to control as cleaning a table, rather than—

“Heaven?”

I know, I know. Looking at our colleagues sitting on adjacent tables, at the line by the cooks, at the groups of people chatting by the coffee stand, I nod. “It’s all right. He won’t refuse to pay. He’s not a bad person, just—” I shrug. “He’s not . . . evil.”

Emma scoffs, then mumbles a couple of words under her breath as she shoves some more food in her mouth and aggressively chews. “Sure. It’s not like he’s cheap. He always pays for dinner, showers you with gifts. He doesn’t suppress every aspect of your personality he doesn’t enjoy.”

“Em,” I say, taking the hint.

“And he’s so very honest and faithful. Just the kind of guy who’d never do something so petty.”

With a sigh, I slump back in my chair. “You made your point.”

“My point?” she asks, clasping her chest in fake surprise. “Oh, yeah. I guess I was describing the guy you *should* be with. Not Alex.”

Sometimes I think she has a notepad filled with all the ways in which Alex disappointed me over the years. It’s exhausting, though Emma’s hatred stems from the fact that Alex often objects to me hanging out with her. As if I’d need his approval. She is a free spirit, or as she puts it herself, she’s not

“pigeonholed by gender roles or intimidated by societal expectations.” Alex is just not happy with how she conducts herself around men, thinking she’ll somehow influence me to do the same.

How ironic.

Fuck. I certainly don’t need more debts, maybe even legal repercussions. What if they sue me? And with a bad credit score, would I even be able to buy a house one day?

I take two Oreos out of the box in my bag. I did nothing to deserve dessert today, but this situation certainly calls for an exception to my rule.

“Okay, look,” Emma says as she inhales. Her nostrils flare as a determined look turns her warm blue eyes a shade darker. “Just hold on, all right? We’ll find a solution. You can’t mess up your life over that apartment—not because your boyfriend is a piece of shit. We’ll think of something.”

What solution? I know I could ask for help from my parents or Emma herself, but drying out their savings doesn’t feel like a better alternative. It’d take me years to pay them back. “Maybe I should just try and talk to him. Explain—”

“No.” Emma grasps my wrist in her tiny hand and squeezes. “No, Heaven. I know he’s your boyfriend and you think you know him, but trust me, my dad’s told me all sorts of horrific stories. Once you break up, the person you thought you knew is gone.”

Oh, I’m aware. Her dad, a divorce lawyer, gave us *the speech* plenty of times as we grew up. You never know a person—not even after decades, not even if they love you. If love were enough to keep things civil, there wouldn’t be messy divorces. Built-up resentment, pettiness, and revenge get in the way. People become nasty.

“All right, I’ll wait,” I agree. “The lease expires in four months. Worse comes to worst . . . I’ll break up with him then.” Turning to my bag again, I grab the box of Oreos and take two more out, then set the rest beside me on the table.

When Emma sighs, I shrug. “What? My boyfriend is cheating on me!”

Her eyes narrow. “Heaven, *this* is what I’m talking about. You like cookies? Eat the damn cookies!” She grabs the box, dumps its content on my tray, then sets it on the side. “You used to enjoy life. You used to eat a whole box of cookies in one sitting.”

I swallow, looking down at the crumbs that came out of the box and are now infesting the table, then begin wiping.

“And that!” she exclaims. When I ignore her, she slaps my hands away. “Stop it, Heaven, I swear to God. Stop cleaning, stop trying to exert control over the last remaining ounce of freedom you have and get your *life* back.”

Defeated, I stare at the crumbs. Hundreds of little dots against the white surface of the table. Up until half an hour ago, I wouldn’t have known where to start to do that. How to get my life back. But now . . . now I know.

Getting rid of Alex. That’s where I’ll start.



THE FACE STARING BACK at me in the mirror is sickly gray. Rebellious strands of brunette hair frame my ghostly reflection, escaping my work ponytail. My eyes are sunken back, and a shadowy hue of black and purple encircles the amber I’m accustomed to. My plump lips are slightly cracked, my nose red. I look like a mess.

At least not being asked to stay late at work was a blessing, because Alex isn’t home when I get there. Before I hear the front door open and close, I have time to hole up in the bathroom—peeling, hydrating, scrubbing, and doing a billion other things I wouldn’t normally waste my time on. Sure, it’s a temporary hideout, but I’ll take whatever I can get.

I wish I could vomit all my anger at Alex, or that I could cry and tell him he ruined our life together, the plans we made. Buying a house, having kids—it’s all destroyed now. If it were up to me, he’d be dodging furniture and plates. But I can’t. Emma is right. I need to figure out what to do if he turns out to be a petty, evil human being.

“The food is here. Why are you taking so long? Are you getting ready for a wedding?”

His voice blasts from the other side of the door, and I glance at it. Maybe it’s because I can’t see him, but I don’t feel angry. I feel nothing at all. But I also can’t hide in here forever, or he’ll get suspicious. That might lead to questions, and I’m not sure I could keep it together if he were to ask the right one. “I’m coming.”

Wrapping a towel around me, I sprint out of the bathroom as he goes downstairs to pick the food up. I have a narrow window of time to enter the bedroom and get dressed—God forbid he should get any ideas if he sees me naked. When he’s back, I’m wearing my most unsexy orange sweatshirt and

a pair of leggings, and my hands are shaking. Should I just say I'm exhausted and I'm going to sleep?

"I got you a burrito bowl," he shouts from the other room.

I clench my fists, hiding in the darkness of the bedroom. My tremors won't stop, and he's going to find out something's wrong the minute he lays eyes on me. But at some point, I'll have to face him, so I take a deep, calming breath and enter my white-on-white living room. He's eating already, and he doesn't acknowledge me, too entranced with his true crime show.

Throwing a concerned look at the white couch, carpet, and coffee table, I pray he'll manage to keep the salsa in his burrito. I think of saying something, but he'll call me a nag. He'll say that I'm too tense, that a little dirt never hurt anyone—with that derisive tone that usually makes me boil with rage—so I stifle the prickle of anxiety in my chest. "Thank you."

When he barely nods, his eyes still glued to the TV, my gaze settles on my boyfriend. Half a decade is a lot of time to waste on someone who's looking for hookups online. He's not much different from five years ago, and though I've seen him in his work clothes a thousand times over, this feels like the first time. I used to adore his sandy blond undercut, the way a couple of locks always fall onto his forehead. I loved his eyes the most. They're a deep cobalt blue, and the hues in them remind me of the sky. I always told him there's a storm in his eyes.

I cross my legs on the couch cushion by his side and open my burrito bowl, digging in with the plastic fork that came with it. Glancing at the meat and vegetables sitting on a bed of white rice, I munch on a piece of broccoli as he mumbles something about the cop on the TV show.

My eyes move to him again. To the shape of his jaw, the straight line of his nose, the burrito in his hands. The tall man I spent the better part of my twenties with is a complete stranger. And I hate him. *He* made me hate him.

I hate the way he sits, his knees spread open like he needs all the space in the world to accommodate his average-sized manhood. How he chews his food and the wet noise of his saliva irks me. Everything he does feels like nails on a chalkboard now that I know he's *looking for one-time-only hookups*.

My body refuses any nourishment for the second time today, so I wait for him to finish, deciding on my excuse to disappear quickly after dinner. Fortunately, I don't need to use any. Once he's done with his food, he glances at me, says he needs to get some work done, then strides toward the home

office. But the expression in his eyes is imprinted on my mind. The indifference, the coldness.

I can't say I haven't noticed before that he doesn't look at me the way he used to, though I can't figure out exactly when it first happened. But for a while, I've known this isn't how it's supposed to feel. And I have doubted myself too, thinking that it happens to all love. It dies at some point or turns into something else. Affection, maybe. Somewhere down the road, familiarity replaces lust and desire.

Maybe I'm right, and that's what happens to everyone, but I didn't expect it to happen after only a few years together. Whatever changes our relationship has gone through, he's not supposed to cheat. My boyfriend isn't supposed to look for hot dates online. *I'm* supposed to be his hot date.

With the food containers out of the way, I wipe the coffee table. I take the single mug sitting in the sink and wash it, dry it, then move it next to the set of identical white mugs with black stripes on top of the sink, twisting it until it's in the exact same position as its duplicates. Only once it perfectly matches the others does my heart flutter with contentment. I walk into the bedroom and, after straightening the linen duvet and puffing up the pillows, I drop myself on it with a sigh.

Why can't I sort out my emotions? I feel a mix of sadness and anger, but not enough of either. I should be furious, planning to spit in his coffee or do some other petty, small act that'll give me satisfaction. I should cry, scream, gasp for air, clutch my heart where the pain should be most prevalent and physical, but it's not and I don't.

Maybe it's because it's easier to pretend it didn't happen. Or maybe it's because his cheating remains nothing but the screenshot of his profile Emma sent me after our lunch earlier today.

I open up the image, and there's no doubt it's him.

Alex D., looking for one-time-only hookups.

In his profile picture, he's at his cousin's wedding. I know because I took it. The one he uses to pick up random girls is a picture *I* took. He's smiling at the camera with the storm in his eyes, and his white shirt and brown jacket are unbuttoned. He knows I love that picture—he looks like one of those runway models you see on billboards for perfumes. Maybe that's why he chose it. He figured other girls would like it too.

As a single tear escapes my eye and rolls down my cheek, I wipe it with my finger, not sure of what to make of it. A glimpse of sadness shakes my

heart, like a drop of rain plummeting into a puddle and creating ripples before the water flattens again.

I need more proof of his betrayal. Not that I don't trust Emma, because I learned my lesson with that, but I want to see his profile with my own eyes. I'll get all the information I need before I confront him.

Without giving a second thought, I close the chat with Emma and download RadaR.

When a pink heart in flames on a red background appears on my screen, it feels like for the first time in years, the box I've been shoved into is just too constricting. Like I need to stretch my muscles, let my lungs fill with air. Like I need to fill with energy and explode. For the first time in years, I feel unhinged.

My fingers clench around the phone and my jaw sets so tightly that painful waves spread from my back teeth right to my brain.

"One-time-only hookups, huh?" I mutter under my breath. "You got it, Alex."

Chapter 2

Undercover Agent



I WALK through the gray halls of Emma’s building, my fingers typing out a message to my boss at the same time. Though I work with the most easygoing people in the marketing industry, my role as a project manager has me slaving away well over nine to five. And on Saturdays, like today.

Her apartment is by definition the very opposite of mine. Warm, indie. Colorful trinkets crowd the space, and most of them come with a story, like the green porcelain cat we bought after we got a little too merry on sake at one of our favorite restaurants.

“Hello?” I call, making my way through her living room and entering the kitchen. There’s the usual frustrating mess everywhere. Two fingers of dust on the blue shelves, plates accumulating in the sink. Maybe she’ll let me wash them.

“Hey!” She pops up behind me and squeezes me tight. “How are you?”

As she walks past the table, her long blonde hair swings with every step. She pulls the fridge door open and shoots me a look over her shoulder. An “I’m sorry your boyfriend is cheating on you” look.

“Fine. I did something . . . stupid.”

She takes out a pitcher containing an orange-reddish liquid and her big, light blue eyes flare. I can almost see her tail wagging at the awareness I came bearing some gossip.

“I downloaded RadaR.”

She plunks the pitcher on the table, the fluid sloshing over the rim and sending my brain in alert mode. “H, that’s amazing! You should date and have fun, not pine over that vermin. You know what *I* did last night?” When I shake my head, she grabs her phone and shows me a picture of a tan guy with

blond dreads who looks like he lives on a beach and works as a coconut cracker. “Him. He took me ice skating, then to a little food truck where I ate the best tacos of my life, then he *ravaged* me.” She looks breathless at the thought as she pours the liquid into the glasses, her full lips bending into a pleased smile.

“That’s”—I pause, trying to think of the right word—“wonderful, Em. And as much as I’d love someone like”—I squint my eyes at the screen—“Juan, to ravage me, that’s not why I downloaded the app.”

After fitting two pink straws into the glasses, Emma slides one to my side of the table. “Then why?”

“To catch him in the act.”

“Alex?” she asks, and when I nod, she stomps her feet on the floor. “Oh, I love this new old-Heaven!”

I shake my head with a laugh. A good friend would tell me this is the worst idea ever. How I should end things with him in a friendly manner and move on. But Emma isn’t a good friend. She’s my best friend.

“Seriously, H. It’s great. What’s the plan?”

“I’ll create a fake profile and match with him.” The next steps are pretty easy to guess. I’ll get the proof I need and the revenge I deserve.

She slurps from her straw. “Or you could skip on the virtual vengeance completely and just put foot cream in his yogurt. Even better, we could cut every single one of his suits in tiny stripes.” Her eyes sparkle. “Or we could plant a couple of bags of cocaine in his suit, then—”

“Oh my God, Em. No. And remind me never to piss you off.” When she rolls her eyes, I fidget with an abandoned piece of paper. “I’ll set up a meeting, and I’ll show up instead of his hot date. Then I’ll break up with him.”

“What about the apartment?”

With a shrug, I take the first sip, quickly realizing I’m drinking sangria as the tangy, sweet liquid takes over my tastebuds. “I’ll wait for the lease to expire to set up our date. But at least I won’t be his helpless victim in the meantime. I’ll make *him* my victim.”

Her eyes wander, her cute nose wrinkling as she churns. She must be picturing the scene, because she smirks. “Again, I totally get it.” She tilts her head to the side, her hoop earring popping up from under her beachy waves. “I guess I’m just surprised.”

My finger traces the edge of the long-stemmed glass. “I always thought I

was doing the right thing with Alex, Em. I thought that's how it works—that at some point, you need to compromise and stick with someone even if things become . . .”

“Horrible?”

“No, just—”

“Borderline abusive?”

I roll my eyes. “Just . . . dull.”

Emma squeezes my hand on top of the table when my chin wobbles. “I think it's great. Therapeutic. You used to be a bull with a red flag, and Alex kind of stole that part of you. It's time to go back to your bad bitch days.”

With a hesitant nod, I pass her my phone. “You set it up. If I do it, I'll rethink this halfway through creating the profile.”

“All right,” she says with a sigh. I grab a barbecue chip and stare at her fingers, angry-typing on my phone. “Email added. Now, we need a name.”

Cleaning my hands on a blue two-ply paper napkin and avoiding the splinters that infest her older-than-life table, I stare into the living room. My eyes focus on the intermittent red light of the TV on standby as doubt creeps into my veins, dipping its spiny fingers into my bloodstream. What am I doing? This isn't the right way to go about it. Setting up a profile on a dating app to catch my boyfriend in the act is the stupidest thing I could do.

Emma hums, stretching her long legs on the chair next to mine. “It should be something poetic.”

“Poetic . . .” I mumble as Emma nibbles at her pink straw, her eyes still stuck onto the phone in her hands.

“Yes. This is a pivotal moment for your life story. You're getting rid of the man who hands you an envelope with cash on every birthday.”

After a soft laugh, silence settles. Emma's eyes flip from one side of the room to the other, her forehead creased and her lips lightly twitching. When she snaps her fingers, her eyes go wide and bright. “Got it. We'll make her your exact opposite. Name included.”

Sure, it makes sense. If Alex wanted me, he'd be with me. He wants something else. “The opposite of my name.” I set my glass on the table. “So my catfish name is Hell.”

She rage-types something and turns my phone around.

“Nevaeh,” I read out, my lips curving into an involuntary smile. “Is that a name?”

“If Apple and Siri are acceptable names, so is Nevaeh.” She presses

something else on the screen. “Now, we need a picture. Random supermodel?”

My heart sinks. Whose picture am I supposed to use? Isn't that a crime? Identity theft, maybe? “No, that's messed up. Ugh, oh my God, Em. What am I doing?” I ask as I hide my face between my palms.

“It's fine. Let's just give a makeover to his video games with a hammer.” She drops the phone, and my stomach feels coated with black paint as I stare at it. Is this what being in a relationship means? Losing your edge? I've never been impulsive, but in the last years, I've turned into a parasite—much too comfortable in my cocoon of familiar sadness to enforce change. Always choosing the safe alternative over the frightening one.

Grabbing the small device, I stare intently at the dark screen, hoping it'll give me an answer, and when I turn to Emma, her brows are arched up. “How about Olivia's pictures?”

“Haven't they met before?”

I shake my head. “You know I haven't seen her in years. The last time she visited, Alex and I were out of town, and before that . . .” With a sigh, I quickly scan through my memories. “We weren't together yet.”

“Aren't they friends on social media?” Emma asks, then immediately rolls her eyes. “Oh, right. He's a conspiracy theorist.”

I stifle a chuckle. I wouldn't go as far as to call him that, but he *does* hate social media and can go on endless rants about privacy and the government. He clearly doesn't think the same applies to RadaR, the hypocrite.

“She's one hundred percent your opposite,” Emma says with a mischievous grin, staring at the screen. She turns it to me, and Olivia smiles back from my phone.

I love this picture of her. I took it the day of her graduation, eight years ago. She is wearing a red cocktail dress, holding a bottle of champagne ready to pop, and laughing at something off-camera. That was one of the last nights the three of us spent together before she relocated to Sydney for her fancy new job.

There is no doubt Alex will find her attractive. Olivia is gorgeous. For the longest time, I wished I had cocoa-brown curls like hers, which bounce in all directions as she walks, her tanned skin and her captivating, cat-like eyes.

Maybe I should ask Olivia if I can steal her pictures to get my boyfriend on the hook, but there's a fourteen-hour time difference between us, and she's probably sleeping. Plus, Emma, Olivia, and I have been friends since

forever. I know she won't mind me telling her tomorrow. Actually, if she were here, she'd encourage me.

"Go for it," I say in a firm voice.

"Okay. How's this?" She shows me the screen of my phone, and I glance at the words she typed in Nevaeh's description.

Looking for fun, no serious commitment. Hit me up if you're also taking a break from your life!

"Subtle," I comment with a glare.

"I wasn't trying to be subtle."

With a pointed look, I tap my fingers on the edge of the table. "What now?"

Emma shrugs. "Now, you add some more pictures and start swiping until you find your couch-potato of a boyfriend."

I drink the rest of my sangria in a gulp, my stomach twisting as I contemplate what a terrible idea this is. Assuming we'll match, how will I text with my boyfriend without him figuring out it's me? And how can I flirt with him, knowing he's a cheater and a liar? Maybe Emma should do it instead. "How long will it take to find him?" I ask, moving toward the fridge for a refill. "Isn't there like a million people on these apps?"

"We'll put some filters. His exact age, and a small mile radius. I can't guarantee it, but you should find him."

I take a deep breath as I sit back down.

"Plus, you never know. Maybe you'll meet someone too."

I sputter a weird, high-pitched noise, and when Emma greets me with a raised brow, I scoff. "You mean *Nevaeh* will find someone too."

Emma shakes her head with a soft laugh. "Oh, right. Well, take it as practice. If there's anything you like in here"—she points at the phone and shrugs—"you can come back as yourself."

I roll my eyes as she finishes setting up the profile, and my stomach tightens once she hands me back the phone. I'm officially a casual-fun, no-commitments brunette.

Nevaeh.



I STUMBLE through the door to my apartment sometime after ten, my nose

scrunching at the plates pile on the kitchen table and Alex's socks and shoes, abandoned near the couch. It becomes difficult to swallow the saliva my mouth suddenly fills with.

He knows mess triggers me, and he takes my obsession with tidiness as an excuse to leave his stuff around. "You like cleaning anyway," he always says, and he's right. Yet it unnerves me that he's taking advantage of it.

It didn't bother me *this* much. Not until yesterday, at least. Not before I found out he's on the lookout for hookups. But now—now it kills me a little.

With a sigh, I pick up the socks and throw them in the laundry bin. As I'm walking to the sink with the plates in hand, he enters the kitchen and goes for the fridge.

"Hey, you're back."

I give him a stiff nod.

"Were you with Emma?"

"Yes."

His lips purse. "Was someone else there?"

Unbelievable. Is he *seriously* asking me this question? "Why? Are you afraid I might cheat on you?"

His jaw drops, his eyes flaring. "What? Why would you say that?"

Because *you're* cheating. *You're* being dishonest, and you have no right to ask *me* this question.

I want to say it. But my apartment, my savings, my reputation. I just have to resist for a few months. "Sorry," I mumble, shifting my focus to the bread crumbs on the plate I'm holding. "There was no one else. Emma made sangria, and we just chatted at her kitchen table."

He turns to me with a beer in his hands, eyes narrowing as he tilts his head. "Are you drunk?"

He knows I am. According to him, whenever I have a few drinks, my eyes glaze and my cheeks get a specific shade of red. "A little tipsy."

Setting the beer down, he stalks closer. "Nice. Do you want to . . ."

The plates drop from my hands into the sink when his hand cups my ass, making a horrible clinking noise as they tumble onto forks and knives. Turning to him, I swallow away the dryness in my mouth. "What?" I ask in a breath.

He takes another step, and I'm too shaken to speak. It might be the simple fact that he's making a move on me, which hasn't happened in months. But it's more likely the awareness that he thinks me being drunk increases his

chances of getting some. What have I done to make him think that's the case?

He grabs my hand, and with his free one, he unzips his jeans, then pulls his briefs down. I stare at him, once again, too befuddled to do anything. My gaze moves onto his soft penis, hanging out and drowning in short, curly hair, and his jeans crumpled down his thighs.

"Heaven?" He smiles as if he doesn't notice the shock written all over my face. If he does, he doesn't seem to care. "Come here." He tugs me closer, and when his hand pushes my shoulder down, I almost comply. I'm that numb. My body bends, my mind unable to process what's happening.

He's done this before, many times. But never so abruptly, never so . . . disrespectfully. Like I'm here to give him a blowjob whenever he feels like. Wherever he feels like. Like the only thing standing between my mouth and his penis at any given minute is his underwear or how much I've had to drink.

But he's wrong.

"Stop," I command, slapping his hand away.

"Why? What's wrong?" he asks with a glower. The fact that he looks upset makes me hate him more.

"I don't want to give you a blowjob while I'm washing the dishes. That's what's wrong."

He scoffs and buttons up his jeans. Once again, there's surprise etched on his face, and the worst part is that I get it. I've never said no before, so he thinks I'll do whatever he asks me to. "Whatever." He leaves the kitchen, and the next thing I hear is the door to the home office slamming shut.

Scrubbing the plate in the sink, I watch my tears mix with the water and soap, my eyes stinging as mascara clumps in my lashes.

I might not have said "no" before, but I'm starting now. And that's not the only thing I'll be doing.

Once everything's clean, I sit on the couch, make sure that the door to the home office is still closed, and open RadaR. It looks quite simple and I'm tech-savvy enough. "On the RadaR" shows me the first picture of a man that fits my settings, and the other two categories are "Matches" and "Profile."

My eyes dart to the home office door again before swiping left. I figured this would be the most excruciating part, but the profiles I encounter have me smiling, then chuckling.

Robert K. has uploaded five pictures of himself, and there isn't one shirt in sight. Julian B. must be a health freak. He's climbing a rope in the first

picture, and in the second, he's flexing in a gym mirror. My favorite yet is Trevor S. In the first picture he's holding a baby tiger and his bio reads *Enjoy life. Party. Beach. Beautiful women only.*

Wondering how human beings aren't extinct yet, I swipe left and freeze.

"Shane H.," I read out. A dark-haired man fills the screen, and my eyes go to his irises, the same color as cocoa. He has one of those looks that can move mountains. Deep and unforgiving. But his smile is so genuine and contagious that the last thing he looks is unfriendly.

I glance at his midnight blue suit, then scroll to the second picture. He has nice lashes. Long, dark. And in this picture, there's a little stubble on his face. It looks great on him.

I move to the third one, and it's as good as the first two. He's taller than the group of people around him and has wide shoulders. Based on a quick peek, he also frequents the gym more often than Alex does.

Shane H. 30 y.o. Type A personality. Control freak, overworked, stressed out, and extremely competitive. If you're still reading, you know most of what's wrong with me. From now on, things can only get better. Looking for something casual, but open to business deals too. #HateHashtags

A chuckle bursts out of my lips.

His description of his flaws feels like staring into a mirror. Type A personality? That's my job description. I lost count of the number of times Alex called me a control freak over my cleaning habits, or that my mom pointed out I'm always stressed. I might be overworked, but I'm a workaholic, and there's hardly a moment in which it feels too much. And Shane H. saying that he's extremely competitive makes me want to prove to him I'm much more competitive than he is. *That's* how competitive I am.

I stare back at his pictures, and now that I know his flaws, he looks more handsome, if possible. If our flaws are oh-so similar, are our strengths the same too? Is he nice to a fault, like me? Is he smart and intuitive, someone people count on?

What happened in the kitchen with Alex comes back to me. For a second, the mix of alcohol and anger makes my finger hover over the "Match" button. But I release a deep breath and shake my head like a dog does its fur. Letting my emotions cloud my judgment isn't something I allow myself to do often. I can almost hear Emma scream in my ear that I should stop overthinking everything and live a little, but the mistake was probably to open RadaR after four tall glasses of Sangria.

Putting my phone away, I walk to the bathroom and begin my night routine. It's early, but when I drink, I need a few extra hours of sleep. By ten, I'm under the blanket. Alex joins soon after, saying something about driving up to his parents' place in the morning. I can barely stand to look at him, and what's more aggravating is that he looks upset with me.

Once he lies down next to me, his fingers tighten around my shoulder. "Are you sure you don't want to?"

I stare at him for a few seconds, and I hate him with such an intensity that it almost scares me. "Positive."

With a sigh, he rolls to the side. "Good night."

When the lights turn off, I'm sure there's smoke coming out of my ears. I stare at the ceiling, but I can't sleep as every one of the horrible things he does daily piles up in my head, anger spilling out of me like hot lava. Tears fall down my cheeks, and I wipe them away with the sleeve of my shirt.

Alex is an asshole. I've let him be an asshole, and that's who he is now.

For a moment, I wish I could escape, but there's nowhere I can go. Sure, I could hide in Emma's place or run to my parents' house. But this is my apartment. My safe space. My home.

So I don't leave. I don't scream at Alex as I want to, nor do I kick him out. Fear paralyzes me. What if he refuses to pay his part of rent? What if I end up covered in debt, sued, homeless? I can't let him have it yet, but I can think of just the right act of defiance I need at this moment.

I turn to my bedside table, grab my phone, and open RadaR. Then, staring into Shane's eyes, I swipe right.

Game, set, *match*.

Chapter 3

The First Contact



SHANE:

Want to hang out tonight?

I STARE at the message on the screen, the only thing I can see in the pitch black of my bedroom. The whole day has come and gone, and the end of the weekend is upon me. However, it looks like Shane H. is still looking to have a fun Sunday night.

With an eye roll, I groan into my hand. I'll kill Emma. Actually, I'll torture her, *then* I'll kill her. And I know this isn't her fault. It's mine. But she pushed buckets of sangria down my throat and didn't feed me anything but barbecue chips. So, it *is* her fault I went home and swiped right on the most gorgeous man I've ever laid eyes on. And that he matched with me and texted me. Well, not me. Nevaeh.

I grab my phone and reread his text as my hands quiver with apprehension, causing the words to dance. What the hell am I supposed to do now? Okay, I guess it isn't that difficult of a decision. I'll just ignore his message. He'll get a clue and slide into someone else's DMs. But my trembling fingers tap on the message until the chat between us opens, then on his profile picture. Even if I won't answer, entertaining the thought for a few seconds is exactly what I need to cheer me up tonight.

Staring at his smile only confirms what a stupid thing I did, because I *want* to answer. I wish I could tell him yes. That I'll meet him tonight. That he can come over and we can have what I imagine will be the best sex of my life.

But he texted Nevaeh, not Heaven. He finds her attractive, not me. And

I'm not letting Alex turn me into a vengeful person. I'll just make do with staring at his photo like I did as a teenager with my poster of Johnny Depp.

I scroll through the three pictures on his profile until I have them seared into my memory, studying them for so long that when I let my lids drop, I picture his matte black watch or the view of the city behind him down to the smallest details.

With a sigh, I lock the screen and toss my phone onto the duvet. This is pathetic. I am mourning my dying relationship, and although this guy is undoubtedly handsome, I am one hundred percent projecting. Imagining that he'll be able to rock my world, or that he's the type of man who'll appreciate my obsessions, support me and be a partner to me like I'd be to him. Imagining he'll be nothing like Alex.

Dragging myself to the kitchen, I fill a glass of water and drink it in a few sips. When I glance back at the bedroom, a small rectangle on top of the bed is lighting it up.

My reaction to the possibility of another message from Shane is frankly embarrassing, considering I've never met the guy, and he thinks I'm someone else. But this knowledge does little to stop me from bolting into the bedroom, nervous energy bouncing off me in little sparks. I lunge at my phone, sitting right in the center of the sheets, and I've barely caught my breath when I check the screen. It's him.

SHANE:

Nah, don't leave me on read. It's worse than actual rejection.

"This thing has a read function?!" I yelp, dragging my hand across my face. Turning on my belly, I hit my head on the mattress again and again, and when I finally stop, strands of my dark hair cover a good part of my face.

Okay, he said that rejection is better than silence, so I'll politely let him down.

I open the chat, swallowing as soon as I read his two messages. I type, *Hi*, then stop. My heart is racing—I can't tell whether it's fear or adrenaline. After all, this is the most exciting thing that has happened to me in, well, years.

I type again, but delete everything. I can't tell him I'm busy tonight. He'll just propose to meet later this week. And I can't say that I am not into him, because why would I have swiped right if that were the case? I could tell him I'm looking for something serious, but my profile says otherwise, and from

Emma's descriptions, this app isn't the place for finding love.
My phone lights up again.

SHANE:

Damn. Double read?! You're heartless!

I whimper. I can't help it—it bursts out of me like the cork off a champagne bottle. Opening the chat, I type without a second thought.

NEVAEH:

I wasn't planning to leave you on read. I was trying to figure out what to say.

Before I have time to read the message, I've sent it.

"Oh my God," I whisper, staring at my phone. Have I seriously answered? And . . . is that what I chose to say? What a dork.

SHANE:

Oh, so you do have a heart. Any luck?

No, no luck whatsoever. Luck wouldn't know my address, should she ever choose to visit. Luck would be if Shane didn't match back with me, and we weren't having this conversation. Luck would be Alex not cheating on me after a five-year relationship to begin with.

I cross my legs in the center of the bed, staring at my phone, clueless about what to say. My whole body throbs, and I know I need to answer with *something*, but I can't think of a single thing. Saving me the trouble, he texts again.

SHANE:

What are you up to?

I drop my phone, eyes flaring. Is he making conversation? He asked me to meet, and I haven't accepted. Why hasn't he lost interest?

NEVAEH:

Going to sleep.

I should ask what he's doing—it'd be the polite thing to say. But I don't, because I don't want to open the door for him to propose to meet again. The three dots jumping up and down on the screen tell me he's typing.

SHANE:

I can never fall asleep before two or three in the morning.

It's dangerous what this does to me. To have the first piece of the puzzle about this man. I know something about him, and the information reverberates through me. Does he have insomnia? Is he a workaholic? A night owl?

Maybe I can ask.

NEVAEH:

Why?

SHANE:

I'm not sure. If you ask my mom, she'll probably say I fucked up my sleep cycle when I was a teenager. My guess? Stress.

A smile twists my lips. Problem, though. I want to know more. Typing again, my fingers shake with adrenaline. I recognize the tingling in my body, my muscles tensing like I'll jolt to the other side of the room.

NEVAEH:

What's stressing you?

SHANE:

At the moment, not knowing if and when you'll leave me on read. But normally, work. My crazy family.

I don't know if he's joking. He isn't using any emojis, and I can't make out his tone from a text. But somehow it feels like he's smiling as he types that, and I do too.

NEVAEH:

I promise I won't. I can't have your sleep cycle on my conscience.

SHANE:

I'm already much more relaxed . . . And here comes the first yawn.

Is he lying in bed like me, staring at his phone in the silence of his bedroom? Maybe he's out clubbing or taking a walk. Suddenly, I need to know.

NEVAEH:

What are you doing?

SHANE:

I'm watching an old movie on channel five. It's almost over, but a good one's starting soon.

He's watching TV. The thought fills my heart with childlike excitement, because in all his pictures, he's wearing suits, so that's how I imagine him. In a fancy blue suit, sitting on his couch and watching a movie.

When the three dots blink again, I lunge at the remote. I click five, and a black and white movie appears on the screen. The entire scene is awash with a sepia effect, the yellow image is grainy, and the sound effects are terrible.

Pressing on the information button of my remote, I scoff. *The Western Code*. I love old movies, but this might be just too old.

SHANE:

Did you put it on?

With a giggle, I type back that I did, pressing more buttons until the schedule appears on the TV screen. Once it does, I gape, eyes flaring. The next movie is my absolute favorite. A classic. *Back to the Future*. I've watched Marty and Doc try not to mess the timeline up hundreds of times. Every time I am sick, sad, celebrating, and everything in between.

NEVAEH:

Are you kidding? The next movie isn't just good. Back to the Future is the best movie in the universe!

SHANE:

Wait a minute, Doc. Are you telling me you built a time machine . . . out of a DeLorean?

My jaw drops. Does he know the lines by heart?

NEVAEH:

The way I see it, if you're going to build a time machine into a car, why not do it with some style?

SHANE:

You're awesome.

I'm awesome.

I squeal and slide down until my head is resting on the pillow. It's stupid and I'm overreacting, but I'm definitely watching this movie tonight. And it's to celebrate the fact that I'm awesome.

SHANE:

Watch it with me?

As I read the words on my screen, my excitement dissipates. I forgot what's happening—why he's talking to me. He wants me to go over to his place and watch a movie. But I'm not Nevaeh.

NEVAEH:

I can't.

That's all I can say. I don't have the right to be disappointed, but I am. This daydream lasted ten minutes, and it was so exhilarating that I'm in withdrawal already. I want the rush back—the butterflies flapping their wings in my stomach. I want him to think I'm awesome. I want to watch my favorite movie with him.

SHANE:

Marty, the future isn't written. It can be changed. Anyone can make their future whatever they want it to be.

I smile, but this time, it's bittersweet. He keeps quoting my favorite movie, trying to convince me. But I can't make my future, not with this. And although I promised I wouldn't leave him on read, I frown and stare down at the phone without answering.

The cowboy movie is over, and a commercial pops on the TV screen as I get another message that has my heart beating faster.

SHANE:

Five minutes. Just enough time to make some popcorn and watch BTTF with me.

Oh. He wants us to watch the movie . . . like this? Through text?

NEVAEH:

Are you eating popcorn?

Instead of the dots, a little icon of a photo appears, and my phone jolts out

of my hands, landing on the bed.

Oh my God, he sent me a picture. What if it's a shot of his face? Or . . . what if it's a shot of his . . . junk?

I grab the phone back and peer at the screen, but I don't press on the icon. Instead, I type.

NEVAEH:

Will I regret opening this pic?

SHANE:

Not unless you're craving desserts.

He gets it. A gal has to ask these sorts of questions in this day and age, especially online.

Deciding on a leap of faith and hiding behind the fingers of one hand, I whisper, "Okay, here goes nothing," then tap on the icon.

My heart goes numb for a second as I stare at the picture. It's him, and he's gorgeous. He isn't wearing a suit. Oh, no. It's better, much better. He has a black t-shirt on that reads *Harvard University*, and there's a little faded basketball next to the text. The big window in the background makes me think he lives on the top floor because I can only see the dark sky and a few city lights. He's holding a plate with a few brownies stacked on top of each other, and they look absolutely delicious. Did he bake those?

My eyes roam over the screen, taking in every detail. His face is—

The picture automatically closes after five seconds, so I open it again, and there he is.

A lazy smile curves his lips, and he looks tired. There are no dark circles around his brown eyes, and he's clean-shaven. His wavy, short hair looks perfectly styled, though he's at home watching a movie. Yet I can sense he's tired. Maybe it's the way he's looking at the camera.

He's so freaking gorgeous it hurts, and I'm hardly done staring at him when the picture closes again. I tap to open it a third time. I'll probably keep doing it as Marty and Doc travel to the past, and I won't be done before they're back to the future.

SHANE:

Are you new to RadaR?

His message pops up as I stare at his picture for the fourth time.

NEVAEH:

Yes. Fresh as of yesterday.

SHANE:

Then I should tell you that I get a notification every time you open the picture.

“Fuck!” I shriek, passing a hand over my face. Shame heats my cheeks, making my ears pulsate like they’ll fall off.

But please, don’t let that stop you. Fifth time’s a charm.

“Kill me!” I yelp again, staring at my phone from behind my fingers. I’ll never answer again. Seriously, I’m done. This is so pathetic. I want to erase this whole thing from my mind and go to sleep.

But a minute passes, and he texts again.

Oh, come on. If I knew you’d ghost me, I wouldn’t have said anything. Don’t I get any credit for being honest?

“No. No, you absolutely do not. You mortified me!” I half scream, half laugh at the phone. When a familiar music plays, I glance at the TV, drawing a deep breath. The movie has started, and I don’t want to watch it alone. Nor can I go to sleep, with my heart throbbing the way it is. Fuck shame. I’ll never meet this guy, anyway.

NEVAEH:

I was trying to understand if you went to Yale.
#BetterShamelessThanShaneless

I guess humor is all I have left.

SHANE:

They wish. Yale sucks. But #NevaehrSayNevaehr

So? Is your popcorn ready?

I waltz through the living room and into the kitchen. There’s no popcorn left, but I have something better: a box of brownie bites I bought at the supermarket a few days back.

For a couple of seconds, I stare at it. I know I shouldn’t, but Emma’s words come back to me, and the exhilaration I feel at talking to Shane tempts

me too much. I snap a picture of the box and send it to him.

NEVAEH:

I am craving brownies after all.

SHANE:

No, no, no. Don't do this to me. You can't eat that.

NEVAEH:

Why can't I?

SHANE:

Boxed pastries?! Dessert is a whim. If you indulge, you have to do it properly.

I laugh, fitting a whole brownie bite into my mouth. It seems good enough to me as I chew and the chocolate swirls on my tongue, but I love that he's so intense about dessert. What does it say about him? I doubt that an Ivy League student who wears as many suits as he does is a baker, but who knows?

NEVAEH:

They're not that bad. They're filled with little chocolate chips.
#ReclaimingFreedom #HatersGonnaHate

SHANE:

Ugh. I'll make you some real brownies, and you'll never get close to that stuff ever again. #ThereAreNoChocolateChips
#InBrownies

I suck at my finger and grab the box of sweets, moving toward the bedroom. I could watch the movie on the couch, but it'd feel too close to what Alex and I have done plenty of times, and right now, I don't want to be reminded of him.

And with the same spirit of denial, I refuse to focus on the fact that Shane will never bake for me. But it creeps back into my mind as I pull the covers over my legs and catch sight of Marty talking to Jennifer on the TV.

I need to give myself a limit. A deadline. That way, I'll know I can indulge in my fantasy for a while, and then I'll go back to my very real problems and my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. No more Shane.

Just for tonight. Tonight, I'll text with a handsome guy who wants to bake

brownies for me. Tomorrow, it's done. It's over. I'll never think of Shane H. again.

NEVAEH:

Yours look much better than mine. I'll have to get the recipe.

SHANE:

This is one of the best scenes. And I'm not just changing the topic because my recipes will die with me.

I'm increasingly convinced he's a baker, but I don't ask. The less I find out, the more the fantasy can endure. If I ask, he might say he's a divorce lawyer or an insurer, and I don't need another failed expectation. So, I decide Shane is a baker who works somewhere in the city center, in that part of town I hardly visit, where there are vintage boutiques and cute little bakeries.

NEVAEH:

Keep your secrets then. You'll never guess my favorite scene.

SHANE:

You tell me yours and I'll tell you mine.

NEVAEH:

You'll know mine only if I get that recipe.

SHANE:

You'll get the recipe if you give me your number.

I gasp and stare at the screen, my stomach twisting with something new that I struggle to recognize. Especially because it doesn't last long enough. Shane-the-baker wants my number, and I can't give it to him. If I do, he'll call or text. He'll have a way to contact me after tonight. And tonight is all I'm giving us.

Anxiety digs a hole through my thorax as the movie plays in the background, until my phone vibrates with an incoming message.

SHANE:

Is it when he creates the skateboard?

My belly settles a little, heat flooding back to my cheeks.

NEVAEH:

No. When they send Einstein to the future.

SHANE:

Damn. Of course. That's a classic.

NEVAEH:

Yours?

SHANE:

When he creates rock' n roll. We owe him a great deal of debt.

That's a brilliant scene. I settle the pillow against the headboard and watch with a smile as the DeLorean comes out of the truck. When I grab the phone to tell him that's another remarkable part, he's already texted the same.

We continue, scene after scene. We talk about the movie, about the sequels, about dessert. That's all, and yet it's the most interesting conversation I've ever entertained. He tells me he makes a mean crème brûlée, and I'm increasingly convinced that he's a baker, but I don't ask. I keep the illusion going until I drift off with my phone tight in my fist, when it's too late for me to fall asleep and too early to wake up.

And Shane's at the very core of my thoughts.

Chapter 4

A Series of Events



I MOVE YET another item from the “to-do” list to the “review” one on my board and sigh. Sometimes it feels that’s all project management is about—moving tasks from one spot to the other.

Glancing down at my white desk, I stare at a little stain of coffee. I fetch the cloth I keep in the second drawer and rub it until it’s spotless again. Only then, the irk in the back of my throat is gone and my heart feels at peace.

“Are you coming to lunch?” Kimberly asks as she strides past me, leaving a trail of flowery perfume.

“No, today’s a circus. I’ll eat something at my desk,” I say, pointing at my bag. If I take half an hour to eat lunch, I’ll have to stay half an hour late. Though I love my job, I’d rather eat a mouthful of wasps today.

“Okay, see you later.”

Her red hair and pink pantsuit disappear down the stairs and my gaze flies to the many glass walls in the office, covered in hand smudges and fingerprints. I’d love to pass my squeegee over them.

With a sigh, I grab what Emma calls my SSS, or Super Sad Salad. It’s my standard lunch, though I usually eat it in the cafeteria. While I munch on the first piece of lettuce, I move to the next task. I need to talk to the web developers about the landing page for the campaign, and that will not be a pleasant chat. Aside from the language barrier, they’re always late. And the editor has an ad copy ready for me to read through.

By the time I’m done with my SSS, I send the editor an email, then walk to the restroom. My heels click-clack on the marble floors, and I wave at my colleagues in their offices, also surrounded by glass walls.

Dirty glass, but I try to push the thought away.

On my way back to the office, Julia calls out my name. “Do you have a minute?” she asks, flipping her long dreads back.

I don’t, but she’s the director’s assistant and probably just being polite by asking. Whether or not I have that minute, she’ll just tell me what she needs and I’ll have to do it. “Sure, what’s up?”

“Billy wants to see you.”

Essentially-Billy, like he’s known around these parts, wants to see me, which probably means the clients complained we are two days past our deadline. With a pitiful squeeze of my shoulder, she walks away, and I follow her to the last office to the right. The only one that isn’t a glass box, because Billy likes his privacy.

When I knock on the wooden door, he waves me in. He’s on his phone, and as I take my place on the opposite side of his desk, he rolls his eyes. “Yes, she’s actually here right now. I’ll let you know.”

While he mumbles a series of “okays” on the phone, I notice the sweaty pit stains on his shirt and the dark green leaves of the plant on the side of his desk that are turning yellow. Pressing my lips tight, I breathe through my nose, trying to soothe the growing itch. I’ll mention the ficus to Julia on my way back.

Essentially-Billy ends the phone call and claps. “Phew. What a shitty day. How are you, Heav?”

I show him my best smile, but I hate it when he does that. My name is ridiculous, but *Heav* just sounds like the verb *have*, which is worse. “I’m fine. Lots of work to do.”

“Yes, that’s why I wanted to see you,” he says, fixing his tie. Since we started working together, he’s gained some weight, and his black hair is now salt and pepper, just like his beard. “I’ve spoken to the client, and they canceled the project.”

I take a few seconds to process his words, but they bounce from one side of my mind to the other, like they’re in a language I don’t understand. “What? We have been working on this project for months. We’re a week away from launching.”

He shakes his head. “They don’t have the money for it, or for anything else, really. *Essentially*, they’re closing.”

I’m so shocked, I can’t even enjoy the fact that he said the first of many *essentiallys*. In five years of working here, this has never happened. “What now? We just . . . stop working on it?”

“Pretty much,” he confirms.

“Oh . . .” My eyes stick to his desk. I can’t say I hate the news, because this campaign was utterly boring, but I’ll also have to make a thousand different calls. “Will they pay everyone for their job? Freelancers and consultants?”

“Of course. You can submit their invoices. *Essentially*, get everyone to stop working on this as soon as possible.”

I wet my lips, trying to shake the shock off. “Okay. When will I be assigned to the next project?”

When he fidgets with some papers on his desk, I get chills to my bones. “That’s actually why I wanted to talk to you.”

Oh my God. He won’t fire me, will he? There’s no way that they blame me for the project cancellation, and I’m one of his best managers. He’s told me multiple times.

He rubs his hands together. “We’d like you to join a team on the sixth floor. Temporarily.”

“The sixth floor?” I ask as I cock my head to the side. “Isn’t that events?”

“It is. They’re planning a fashion show, and the project manager that has been working with them has been . . . well, *essentially*, a letdown.”

A fashion show? How the hell am I supposed to plan a *fashion show*? I shake my head. “I’m afraid I won’t be of much help, Billy. You know I’ve always worked on web campaigns.”

He gives me a *tsk* and moves his hand around to dismiss me. “You’ll do just great. They need someone like you up there. The whole thing is getting out of hand, and the director is desperate.”

Someone like me. A compulsive personality, he means. Anal, organized to a fault. “Like a dog with a bone,” the CEO defined me as when I single-handedly saved a product launch campaign that went rogue.

I am about to protest again when he turns the screen of his computer to me. “Look, they’re halfway done. They already have a list of potential locations, most of their suppliers, and a date.”

My brows arch up. I’m no events expert, but I’m pretty sure that having set a date doesn’t qualify as “halfway done.” But stealing a look at the messy board they’ve been working on makes my resistance whittle down, and my heart squeezes for those tiny items scattered around a messy white background. Where’s their to-do list? Where’s the “urgent” column?

“For how long?” I inquire.

“Six weeks. Once you’re back, there’ll be a nice promotion waiting for you. Senior project manager. *Essentially*, you should thank me for getting you this gig.”

Essentially, I won’t thank him—God, he can be so condescending. He can phrase it however he wants, but he’s shipping me off to another department because they can’t deal with their own stuff. You’d think event managers would be organized enough to plan an event.

Even so . . . He’s talking about a promotion, and I want that. Senior project manager. Not only because I should be a couple of years away from it, and this would speed up the process. But because with promotions come raises. With the right pay raise, I’d be able to pay rent for the rest of the lease and endure only six weeks of Alex, until the event is dealt with, instead of four months.

“Can I think about it?”

He grins, and he looks victorious at my half-hearted answer. “Think about it. But I need you to say yes.”

Though I force myself to smile, he can probably tell I don’t mean it. I enjoy working with my team. I know how to get them in line. Some of them I’ve hired personally, and I have a set of freelancers and consultants I can turn to when need arises. Agreeing to join this project would mean starting from the very beginning. New office, new colleagues, new boss. For one-and-a-half months. I can do it, but do I want to? Not really. Especially not with everything that is going on in my personal life.

Billy sets me free, and I leave his office feeling deeply conflicted. I didn’t ask many questions which are now crowding my mind. Who would take my place? And what would my responsibilities be? Who would I work with?

I saunter back to my desk and take a deep breath. I have to inform everyone about the project being canceled, and that’ll take a few hours of work. Then, I’ll think about this again.



“WHAT’S UP?” Emma asks as she joins my table at the Watering Hole. Yep, that’s what this bar is called. We always come here, and by “we”, I mean everyone in our company, IMP. Which means that this bar is where the office gossip truly flourishes.

With a quick glance, I take the space in. There aren't too many colleagues here tonight, which bodes well for me because this conversation needs to remain private. Still, I scout the white tables and chairs around us and the silver stools at the counter. Excluding Ruth from accounting, there's no one else I recognize.

"Essentially-Billy called me into his office today," I say.

Her brows wiggle as she sips on her white wine. "Uh-huh. Is a promotion afoot? Remember to negotiate on the wage. Always ask for more."

Emma is part of the sales department, of course. If I'm a dog with a bone, she's a shark. No, worse, she's a tarantula. Sneaky and small and dangerous. She'd convince a vegan to enter a McDonalds, a priest into a strip club. Against her, even I know to give up.

Nightmares from the last time she coached me on negotiations flood my mind, but shaking them off, I continue, "The sixth floor is in a pickle. There's a fashion show one-and-a-half months from now, and they need a project manager."

"What happened to the last one?" she asks, shoving a couple of peanuts in her mouth.

With a shrug, I say, "They weren't up to the task."

She squints, mulling something over. Emma knows everyone at IMP and is always up to date with the latest gossips. I'm sure she'll give me intel about the events office that will help me decide.

"Events management is challenging. Really hard work. You know Stephen, the guy who quit after he had a nervous breakdown?"

I shake my head as my stomach twists. That's not promising.

She rolls her eyes. "Of course you do. He slammed his chair into the glass wall, then he peed all over his desk. It was wild." She chuckles, her eyes brimming with joy at the juicy gossip.

I *do* remember Stephen, but I had no idea he worked on events. "Shit," I mumble with a grimace.

She gives me a one-shoulder shrug. "You can handle high-pressure situations. Plus, you need something to distract yourself from that awful parasite living in your home."

She bats her lashes, but I strike her with a murderous look that I hope will dissuade her from saying more. I am not here to discuss Alex. "How are the people there?"

"Well, the director is a looker. Definitely better than Essentially-Billy.

He's probably the hottest dude I've ever seen in my life, honestly. At the last company softball match, I considered transferring. After the game, he took off his shirt—"

"Emma," I whine, trying to get her to concentrate. She knows this isn't relevant, and though she's almost constantly thinking about men, it feels like she's stalling. "Just tell me."

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, he's a little bit of an ass. And I'm not sure who you'll work with, but pretty much everyone in that department is neurotic."

I sip my ginger ale in thought. A shitty boss and neurotic colleagues. Who wouldn't jump at the idea? "How much of an ass?" I inquire.

"Well, let's just say that Mr. Hassholm isn't what the department calls him."

I tilt my head as my eyes squint.

"Mr. Asshole. They call him Mr. Asshole."

Chapter 5

The Secret Spot



I GET out of the Watering Hole and slip into a cab, the fastest way to go home. I'm not exactly looking forward to being in the same room as Alex, but hopefully, he has work to do and we won't stand in each other's way.

Once I relax on the comfortable leather seat, I'm welcomed by some of the strongest AC I've ever experienced, and I take out my phone with a shiver.

When I'm at work, I *become* work. That's probably why my bosses love me so much. You won't see me checking my texts, gossiping, or slacking off, *ever*. I like to think that's a wonderful trait to have. That I can compartmentalize my life. At least, I like it, especially with my boyfriend being a lying cheater and all.

But now, I'm out. I'm finally off the clock, and to no one's surprise, there's nothing interesting going on with my phone. There are two missed calls, one from Alex, one from my mom. I send a text to the latter, asking if everything's okay, because I'm usually the one to reach out. Then, pushing a hint of guilt deep down into my stomach, I ignore Alex's call.

I can do that, right? I don't owe him the same respect as before. After all, he doesn't respect me at all.

My fingers scroll to the last page of apps on my phone, organized alphabetically. Weird, maybe, but oddly satisfying. All but the latest app I've downloaded, right at the bottom of the last page. A heart and a flame, pink and red. RadaR.

I open it and glimpse at the first man of many—really, too many—men, then I immediately click on the chat bubble. There he is. I do a quick search online before I give in to temptation. *Can RadaR users see it when you view*

their profile? No, they can't.

Grinning, I open his profile.

Shane H.

I study his first picture and sigh.

He looks charming in that light gray suit. So freaking yummy, I have to check I'm not drooling. I scroll to the second one before I'm done slobbering over the first. I'll get back to it later. In this one, there's a cherry tree in the background, and he's sitting on a white garden chair. It looks like an outdoor party, maybe a wedding. Third picture, my favorite. There's a wonderful grin on his face, and his expression would melt the underwear off anyone.

I sigh and start again. First, second, third picture. I take a break to read through the last texts we sent to each other. I promised myself that I'd only text him last night, but I sent him a quick message this morning. It's fine, though, because before that I had also promised I wouldn't leave him on read, and that's what I did when I fell asleep. It's a known fact that you can't break one promise in favor of another. There's even a saying about it, isn't there? Yeah, I've definitely heard it before. *The first promise is by default the most important.*

NEVAEH:

Sorry! I fell asleep. Thank you for last night. I had fun.

That's all I said to him. But until I clocked in, and right after I clocked out, my stomach was jittery. Last night was so fun. He's a nice texter, if that's a thing.

I pull my jacket tighter, trying to disappear inside it, then I look out the car window. I'm almost home, and once I'm there, I don't know how much time I'll get to ogle Shane's face, so I open up the pictures again and drown in my fantasy.

How would last night have been if I said yes to his proposition to meet up? We would have eaten brownies together, and . . . well, maybe I would have seen him in his birthday suit. I bet it's the suit that fits him best.

"Would you like me to lower the AC?"

I jerk my head to look up at the driver. The sound of my teeth clattering probably gave me away. "If it isn't too much trouble."

He presses a few buttons on the car dashboard. When I look back at the phone, the screen's off, and I tap on it to unlock it. There's a text on RadaR.

A text from Shane.

“Shit!” I shout, my voice etched with surprise as the phone slips out of my hands and falls somewhere around my feet. After a questioning look from the driver, I smile apologetically. “Sorry—my hand cramped.”

Grabbing my phone, I stare at the RadaR notification with wide eyes. My heart is already racing. When he didn’t answer my text this morning, I thought little of it. I was glad, even. It made things easier for me. But now that he has, there’s that same jittery feeling as last night, making every inch of my skin tickle and my heart rate go through the roof.

SHANE:

I figured. But you left me on read, so you owe me one.
#NevaehrBreakAPromise

Bringing the phone to my chest, I close my eyes as I smile. I can’t. I can’t answer, but most importantly, I can’t crush on this guy. I’m not *yet*, but the way my stomach twists at seeing his text isn’t okay. Shane thinks I’m someone called Nevaeh and I look like Olivia. Neither thing is true, so . . . I can’t.

“Is here okay?”

“Yes, it’s perfect,” I lie as I notice the park to my left. My apartment is a couple of blocks down the road and I’m wearing the most uncomfortable heels, but the driver already thinks I’m crazy, and although he turned off the AC, the car is so cold my nipples could probably cut glass. “Keep the change,” I say with a grin as I hand him some cash, open the door and step onto the sidewalk.

On the plus side, walking for a few minutes means I get to drool over Shane for a little longer, and delaying seeing Alex isn’t bad either. I stroll down the road, taking as much time as possible. My hair’s already sticking to my face, and I’m regretting the pantyhose I wore this morning more than my failed relationship. But I never take walks anymore, and it’s nice to be out. Walking is comforting. Only the repetition of the same movement, again and again, and my paced breathing to keep me company.

Until my phone vibrates with another message from Shane.

SHANE:

Can you guess what I’m doing tonight?

I can try. He’s probably going to eat my favorite food, drink my favorite wine, and cozy up on the couch with cheese-flavored chips, the best kind.

With a half-hearted chuckle, I come to a halt. What if karma is playing a joke on me? I decided to catfish my boyfriend, and my punishment is to meet someone great, and he's out of reach.

Because there's just no way I could ever tell Shane I'm catfishing him—it'd be way too humiliating.

When my phone vibrates again, it's a picture, and I can't resist. Groaning, I tap on the notification, and I wish I could say that there's a genuine struggle within me, but it'd be a lie. I'm that fickle.

As the butterfly mosh pit grows in my stomach, I tap on the image.

My heart drops, and this time, it's with disappointment. It's not a picture of him. There's a black marble counter and a plethora of ingredients on it. Flour, eggs, chocolate chips, something that looks like vanilla. He's baking. That's what he's doing tonight. Shane-the-baker is baking.

I imagine him in an apron, blue as the suit he's wearing in his profile picture, and the lazy smile of yesterday's photo on his lips. Damn, I wish I could open it. I search online, *Do RadaR users see it when you screenshot their pictures?*, and the answer is disappointing. It pulls my lips into a frown, because his other pictures are for everyone to see. That one's only mine, and I can't see it again.

I go back to the chat before he reminds me that I promised not to leave him on read, thinking hard.

NEVAEH:

Brownies?

SHANE:

Nope. No cocoa.

I tap on the picture again. I've learned the hard way that he'll get a notification about it, but hey, we're playing a game. Studying the ingredients, I consider the possibilities.

NEVAEH:

Chocolate chip cookies?

SHANE:

Similar ingredients, I'll give you that. But what would I be using the bananas for?

Bananas? I check the picture again and . . . damn. Bananas are hiding

behind the flour.

NEVAEH:

Banana bread!

I'm confident about my answer this time. I literally can't think of another dessert that can be done with bananas. But, hey, I only *buy* desserts.

SHANE:

Close. I'll send you a picture when it's done.

That makes me sigh. I shouldn't be making plans to chat with Shane. I'm indulging in something that can't possibly have a positive outcome. But I don't protest, nor do I tell him what I should—that I'm not interested.

I grin, send him a thumbs-up, and make my way home.



“HOW WAS WORK?”

I glance at Alex and hold my fork in midair. This is the first sentence he's spoken to me since I arrived, after a wave of his hand and a distracted grunt to welcome me home.

“Good. They might want me to join a new team for a while. Events,” I say, setting the fork down. “What about you?”

“The usual shitshow.”

With a nod, I look down at my food, and his phone buzzes. It's on the coffee table, but the vibration makes a horrible noise against the wood, and we both turn to it.

He gets up, checks it, then walks back to the table, turning it face down. “I'll be out of town for a week. We're meeting some new potential clients and we have a series of appointments lined up.”

Face down. He put his phone *face down*. Because he's waiting for a message he doesn't want me to see.

My fists clench as I glance at the half-eaten food on my plate. Food I no longer want. Getting up, I leave my plate in the sink. I don't think I've ever done it before, not without rinsing it and drying it, but I'll do that later. Right now, I just need to be somewhere else, or I might smother him with the cauliflower leftovers.

“Are you done eating?” he asks.

I take a deep breath before turning around. “Yeah. I think I’ll go for a walk.”

“Okay,” he says unconvincingly. “Did you even hear what I said?”

“Out of town for a week. Got it. I’ll see you later.” I leave the kitchen without giving him the chance to say anything. At this point, I don’t even care if he notices something’s wrong. I swiped on that damn app before work and during my lunch break, and I still haven’t found him. Maybe I never will. Treating him like the shit he is might be the only way for me to ever avenge myself a little. And who knows? If I do it enough, he might break up with me himself. He’d pay rent in that case, right?

I put on a pair of sneakers and leave with my earphones in. I’ll listen to some music and stroll along the canal like we used to do when we first moved here. Doing it alone tonight floors me with sadness.

How did I get here? What exactly went wrong?

Goosebumps cover my skin with the chilly gusts of wind, and I’m glad I’m wearing a thick jacket, because the air smells familiar—like blooming jasmine and baked goods from the pizzeria down the road—and I plan to spend some hours here.

The water of the canal is dark—the reflections of lamp posts wiggling on the surface—and a small group of ducklings sleeps on some rocks. When the muscles of my legs feel jelly-like from the quick walk, I sit on a green bench. It’s freezing against my leggings, but I nestle into my jacket and open RadaR.

No point in opening my chat with Shane. He hasn’t texted, or I would have gotten a notification. Instead, I scroll. Left, left, left. Cute jacket. Left. Left. It goes on forever, and I simply can’t find my stupid boyfriend.

Maybe it’s my settings.

Men, 27, and the radius is the smallest possible. Everything’s right. Unless . . . With a gasp, I call Emma.

“Yo,” she answers, music blasting in the background.

“What if his info doesn’t match my filters? What if he lied about himself?”

“Who’s this?” she asks with a dramatic gasp, and it’s good she’s such a great saleswoman because she is a sucky actress.

“I’m serious, Em.”

She sighs. “Then he won’t appear in your matches.”

Maybe I should just go through his phone, but the idea of it makes me

tremble. I'd have to get it and guess his password, which already feels icky enough. But if I managed to do that—and it's unlikely considering he never leaves that damn thing unsupervised—I'd have to go through his RadaR profile. I'd see the chats he has with women. Women he slept with. "What if I try to change my filters?"

"Well, you saw the screenshot. Your filters match his profile. Maybe you just need to wait—"

I gasp, standing in an instant. "Oh my God, Emma. I got it."

"What do you mean?"

"You're right, my filters match his profile. If I haven't found him yet, it must mean that *his* filters don't match Nevaeh's profile." The only problem is, Emma found him. How did she? "What information do you have on your profile?"

There's a bit of silence, then she clicks her tongue. "Oh—of course. The age filter! He didn't lie about *his* age. I lied about mine! On my RadaR profile, I'm twenty-two instead of twenty-eight."

"Twenty-two?" I don't even try to hide my surprise. We both know Emma can't pass for twenty-two. "Why would you do that?"

"Because being our age often means wanting to settle down. As a twenty-two-year-old carefree woman, I find many more hookups."

I sigh. I'd normally give her my condescending "Oh, Emma," but I don't have the moral high ground, do I?

"Don't judge me," she says. "It's my sales training. It's not a lie, more like . . . an embellishment."

Maybe she would be a superb actress after all, because it sounds like she believes that. I hold back my amusement and ask, "Okay, so, you think he's looking for . . . younger women?"

"I mean . . . yeah? Maybe it's just because he figured any of your friends could find him. So he put filters that would keep him off your friends' feed."

I close my eyes shut. There isn't an actual reason for it, but in my head, this new piece of information makes it worse. Like I'm some old wife, and he's out looking for perkier breasts or less cellulitis. My boobs are just fine. Aren't they? Peeking down at my chest, I roll my eyes. "So what if I change my age?"

"Yes. Do that. From now on, you're twenty-two."

I nod. Yes, from now on, I'm twenty-two. I like pilates, drink frappuccinos with soy milk and no foam, and receive tweet notifications from

a self-affirmation account. I am young, carefree, and ready to wear anklets and go backpacking in Australia.

When I end the call five minutes later, there's a message waiting for me.

SHANE:

There. If you have the packaged version of this, please refrain from showing it to me.

I open the picture he sent me with a playful bite on my bottom lip, and as my mouth fills with saliva, I don't know what to look at first. The light brown, chocolate-chip-infused banana bread, or the firm hand that's holding the white plate on which it rests. His fingers are long, thick and there's some flour on his wrist, right below his matte black watch. Hot.

Before I'm done staring, the picture's gone. "Damn." I stop myself from tapping on it again and stand, then snap a picture of the canal and send it.

NEVAEH:

No boxed desserts tonight, I promise.

SHANE:

You're out and about. Sorry, go back to your night.

NEVAEH:

I'm by myself. Taking a walk.

SHANE:

I love that area of town. If you walk down the canal, then turn right at the marble fountain with the horses, there's a nice hidden spot.

My brows rise. Is he serious? I've lived here for years—Alex has parked in front of that fountain a billion times. What's on the right of it, though? I can't remember for the life of me.

Of course, I walk there. Skip, really. I want to see what this secret spot is, and two minutes later, I'm looking at the fountain when my phone vibrates again.

There already?

I bite my lip and look up at the sky. The man doesn't know me, so how does he *know*? Stepping closer, I look at the horses—water pouring from

their mouths and into the pool underneath. There are coins at the bottom, which I've always found annoying. They look messy, and some of them have turned green. I fight the instinct to walk right inside, pick them all up, then give them to the first clochard I find.

To the right, there's a wall, nothing else. And as I squint my eyes at it, it dawns on me that he might have set me up. What if he's looking at me from one of the many balconies surrounding the small square?

My head bobs up, but if someone were there, I wouldn't be able to see it so late at night. My heart palpitates. I'm pretty sure he got me, and I'm just waiting for him to tap on my shoulder and shout in my face about what a deceiving person I am.

I stay still for a while, but the water keeps roaring out of the horses' mouths, the song blasting in my earphones, and people walk by me, throwing curious looks my way. Nothing else. When my phone vibrates again, I glance at it discreetly.

SHANE:

Oh, fuck. You fell into the canal, didn't you? I'll give you five minutes, then I'm calling the fire department.
#911EmergencyCall

A smile curves my lips. No one's here. I'm being paranoid. Maybe he's on his couch, enjoying a slice of chocolate chip banana bread. Which reminds me, I'll have to ask him how he keeps in shape, and the answer better not be "the gym" because I don't need that type of negativity in my life.

NEVAEH:

It's the back wall of an apartment complex. #ShameOnShane

SHANE:

Do you see the graffiti of the girl?

The spray-painted figure of a young girl in a pink dress sits on the wall. She's holding a yellow umbrella, and as I walk closer, I notice the expression of wonderment on her face. She's pointing to her right, but there's nothing there. The wall turns, and—oh. There's a narrow passage between the wall and the banister of the canal that runs along the side of the building.

Okay, this is a little too adventurous for me. I mean, at least while I'm alone and this late at night. There's barely space to step, and I'd have to walk sideways. But curiosity pummels me. I want to see this place he's talking

about. And I'm aware there's a good chance he's looking at me from a balcony and laughing his ass off as he sees me almost fall into the cold water, but I take the first step.

I slide alongside the wall, carefully placing every footfall on the most stable-looking ground. Some parts are covered in rocks and mud, and I almost slip twice, but I keep my hands flat against the concrete wall. After a while, it ends.

To the left, there's an arch. I step into the larger—but equally scary—passage, and poke my head through to see a garden with apartments on all sides across four floors. Turning around again and again, I take in all the details. The redbrick walls and the three elevated corridors above my head, leading to empty apartments. Weeds hang from the wrought-iron railing and intersect with bright-colored wildflowers. The stone pavement is riddled with cracks. Nature has sprouted through, reclaiming what's rightfully hers, with tall bushes coming out of it. It's hauntingly beautiful.

It should be darker here, and when I look up, I notice there's a large hole right at the center of the roof, and the moonlight is shining down, coloring everything with a pale and silver hue.

This place looks like it's about to crumble, like the first puff of wind will blow it to the ground. But by some miracle, it stands. And it's majestic. I kind of wish I could buy the whole thing and spend the rest of my life fixing it up, cleaning it until it's a grandiose mansion, like I'm sure it once was before it was turned into apartments.

I'm still gaping and twirling when my phone vibrates.

SHANE:

What do you think?

NEVAEH:

It's beautiful. I can't believe I never knew this was here.

SHANE:

Very few people do.

NEVAEH:

Thank you for showing it to me. I needed somewhere to hide out tonight.

SHANE:

See the white column by the right of the entrance? There's something behind it.

I walk to the column—my eyes drawn to the writing on it. There's the communism symbol, a slew of penises, and a few tags I can't read. I walk around it, trying to read all the other markings people have left over the years when my foot kicks a red metal box, no bigger than a cellphone. I shouldn't touch it, not without at least five pairs of gloves on, but knowing that's what Shane wants me to see, I pull the lid up.

“What the . . .”

There's a key chain. No, it's a golden, heavy key, attached to a white key chain that's become gray with dust and dirt. I grab my phone and type.

NEVAEH:

What does it open?

SHANE:

Well, a door. Duh!

I chuckle, and before I can answer back, I get another message.

The door behind you. #GreatNameForAHorrorMovie

Just as he said, there is a green door on the opposite wall that I didn't notice before. It must be the entrance to this place because there's no way people had to go in the way I did when it was inhabited. Where the heck did he find the key for it, though?

NEVAEH:

Is it yours?

SHANE:

It's yours if you want it. In case you need to hide out again. I have a copy.

My shoulders slump. He wants me to take the key that opens the door to his secret spot? This place obviously means a lot to him. Sure, I could come here without it as I did tonight, but the fact that he wants to make it easier for me warms my heart. I'm basically a stranger, yet he's sharing this with me. Is it because of the connection between us, or is it what I said about needing to hide out? I don't know which would please me the most.

I wish I could ask him a million questions. About where he got the key and why this place was abandoned. Mostly, I want to know why he wants me to have it, but I don't ask, because I want it. It feels like I have a piece of him, and it's a precious one too.

NEVAEH:
Are you sure?

SHANE:
Yes. It's a nice place, and I shouldn't be the only one enjoying it.

He's generous—I love that. Yet another similarity he does *not* share with Alex.

NEVAEH:
Okay. I'll take it.

SHANE:
Good. You can use it to leave. Once, on the way in, I ended up a few inches from the canal.

I chuckle, picturing a big man like him, in his blue suit, stumbling down the precipice and almost ending up with his loafers in the water.

I'm about to close the red box when something makes me hesitate. I kind of want to leave him something of mine too. Maybe one day he'll open it and see what I left for him. I fish into my pockets, but there's nothing. My bag is at home, and truth to be told, there isn't much of value in there. I could leave him my earphones, but it took me forever to find a pair I like, and it's a horrible gift anyway. Something that goes inside your ears. I shake my head when the best thing I can come up with is my hair tie.

With an exhale, I take out my keys and fit Shane's key in the metal ring. And that's when I see it. My key chain. It's almost too perfect—I don't know how I didn't think of it before, though it's probably because the thought of separating from it pains me.

I bought it for myself on a random day, in this little shop I never went back to in the city center. When I saw it in the window, I couldn't help myself.

After holding it tight in my hand, I weaken my grip on the silver DeLorean sitting on my palm. I free it from the metal ring, then hesitantly let

it fall inside the box. It's not like he's ever going to give it back to me—this is goodbye. But glancing at the red bricks on the walls, at the pink flowers that stand proud out of the veiny crevices in the pavement, I know he's given me an important gift too. I will be back here many times. I've fallen in love with every detail, and I'll want to see this place again when the daylight allows me to grasp more. Maybe when it's raining, to see the water pour down the hole in the roof, or when the sun is setting, and everything looks orange and summery.

I trace the shape of the little wheels, the doors and the top, and with a smile, I snap the lid closed.

Chapter 6

A New Boss



“IT’S HIM! I found him. It’s Alex!”

Emma’s eyes widen, and a normal person would remind me we’re in a café, and I screamed like a lunatic before eight a.m. Thankfully, Emma isn’t normal. “Oh my God, let me see!” She grabs my phone and sighs. “Are you gonna swipe right on him?”

People stare at me with different degrees of annoyance, but I focus on the marble table and sip my coffee. I must look crazy. I *am* crazy. But a teeny tiny part of me is buzzing with adrenaline.

I can’t believe I found Alex. Changing my age did the trick, and I feel so stupid for not thinking of it before. Of course he’d think of a way to avoid matching with any of my friends.

With an annoyed pout, I scroll through his pictures. There’s over ten, and I recognize most of them, including a couple of shirtless selfies he sent me before. Yes. He uploaded his shirtless selfies, taken in *our* bathroom.

“So? Are you gonna?” Emma insists, her legs bashing mine under the table as they jump up and down.

I scowl. “Aren’t you the one who’s always looking for the poetic side of things? This is a pivotal moment. I’m enjoying it.”

“You’re stalling, that’s what you’re doing.” She tilts her head. “Come on, after he lied to you some more last night, you can’t tell me you’re still doubtful.”

It angers me that Emma doesn’t get it, but she’s never had a long-term relationship. Ever. She doesn’t understand that though I want to end things with Alex, it’s still difficult to reconcile the person I thought he was with the one he actually is.

“I’m not. It’s just . . . we’ve shared five years of our lives. I *am* breaking up with him as soon as possible, and I want to do it this way. But it’s still difficult and stressful.”

When my voice comes out in a whisper, Emma sighs, reaching for my hand on the table as her knees halt. “H, I love you, but no. He was a horrible human being way before cheating. And I’m glad this finally opened your eyes, but think about the way he treats you every day. *Really* focus on it, and it’ll be easy. I promise.”

“What do you think he’ll really be doing this week?” I ask. Assuming he lied about his work trip, where will he be?

Emma shrugs, biting her Danish. “Maybe he has a few hot dates planned. He’ll get a hotel room in town and have his skanks over. Or he’s planned a satanic orgy. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

I chuckle, but it feels like someone ran me over with a tractor. I can’t wait for breakfast to end and to clock in. Work-me can handle everything. Instead, I feel as fragile as the place Shane showed me yesterday.

Speaking of, I tap on our chat and check the last messages we shared. We texted so much last night. For hours. Once I got home, I didn’t even notice Alex. And I felt no guilt when I curled up in bed, texted with Shane and laughed at his witty texts. I did that a lot.

SHANE:

This was nice, but I think you’re in dreamland. Looks like you owe me twice. #LeftOnReadAgain #GoodnightNevaeh

That’s the last text he sent me after I stopped answering. For the second time, I fell asleep with his texts.

“What are you doing?” When Emma glances at the screen of my phone, I close the chat and move back to Alex’s profile. I didn’t tell her about Shane because she’d say I should come clean and enjoy a passionate romance with him. It sounds just like her. But I can’t—not in a million years. He’d think I’m a lunatic, a liar. I’d be alone *and* humiliated.

“Nothing,” I say. She averts her eyes, clearly struggling not to snap the phone out of my fingers and swipe right herself, so I put it on the table and take a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

She perks up and swallows the bit of pastry she’s chewing. “All right. Time to kick ass.”

I nod, move my fingers to the phone and swipe right on the past five

years of my life.



ENTERING THE OFFICE, I look around as people wave my way, my stomach churning. I'm meeting *Essentially-Billy* again, and he'll want an answer. As of now, I don't have one. Emma said little more about Mr. Asshole. That he's hot, everybody who knows him well enough hates him, and he keeps mostly to himself, which explains why I haven't met him before.

He sounds like a proper delight, and so do the rest of the people working there. Emma gave me a whole cheat sheet, but I've already forgotten most of the details. All I know is that of the people she described, there wasn't a single one who sounded half as nice as my current colleagues.

I push through the glass doors that separate the corridor into two sections and knock on the only wooden door. "Come in," Billy says. With a deep breath, I make my way into the office.

"Heav! Great to see you. You look wonderful today."

Ugh. Billy is the type of man who I can't picture having any sexual drive. Like a big, libidless teddy bear. He has kids, so I guess that isn't the case, but his compliments are just as annoying as if they were sincere. He's buttering me up.

I offer him a little smile and sit. "Please, Billy. We've worked together long enough."

Which also translates to "I won't fall for any of it." His ability to grease his way through most conversations makes him a wonderful director. He can convince clients to agree to basically anything. But I've also seen it happen too much to fall for it.

He straightens his tie as he sits. "Okay, okay. Listen, I know it's a lot to ask. But the big boss won't take a no."

I sigh. *The big boss*. The guy who owns IMP simply because his dad did. I don't think he's worked one day in his life, and most of his decisions actually come from the board of directors that Billy is also part of.

"I get it, Billy. But isn't there someone better qualified than me? I've never dealt with events," I insist. I have the feeling that instead of a promotion, these six weeks will lead to my head on a platter. After all, what the hell do I know about fashion, or event management?

“Trust me. You wouldn’t be our first choice for the role if we didn’t think you could handle it. It’s an important client.”

“And you can’t tell me anything more about this project?” I ask, although I know he can’t. I haven’t signed the NDA yet. How can I agree to this without knowing what I’m getting myself into?

“*Essentially*, you’ll be doing what you already do. But for some snooty fashion people.”

Yeah . . . with neurotic colleagues and Mr. Asshole.

I know I won’t win this. And I’m pretty sure neither Billy nor the CEO truly know whether I’ll be able to pull this off, but they don’t care. They know I’ll make it work because I’ve always delivered the desired results. I’ve always given them anything they asked, never said no, and they’re taking advantage of it.

But it doesn’t mean I can’t take advantage of it too.

“Fine,” I mutter with a sigh.

Billy claps his hands. “You are the *absolute* best, Heav! You won’t regret this, I promise. You’ll be back in six weeks with a new office and a fancy new title.”

“And a big raise,” I say.

Billy tilts his head, but I keep my gaze on his eyes and my chin up until he nods. “Well, Heaven, I can’t—”

“A *big* raise, Billy.” If I’m supposed to work with a bunch of arrogant stuck-ups, then I’ll make sure I can solve the other issue in my life and get rid of the cheating scum parked in my living room. And a small raise won’t be enough for me to handle the apartment without Alex. “Think of an exorbitant number, then multiply that by another absurd and unrealistic number.”

I know I’m stretching it, but no one else would agree to get involved with this sinking ship—not so close to the deadline anyway—and they can’t force me. They need me, and I know what I’m worth.

He rubs his chin with a chuckle, seemingly thinking it through, then passes me the NDA. “You got it. Work your ass off Heaven-style, and if the event goes as it should and Mr. Hassholm is happy with your contribution, I’ll make sure you get a raise so big, you’ll wonder if it’s expecting twins.”

Reigning in my excitement, I give the papers a quick read and sign. If my raise is dependent on the quality of my work, I’m sure I have nothing to worry about.

“Wonderful,” he says, holding them up. “I’ll let the sixth floor know, and

someone will come meet you and explain everything.”

With a wave of dread in my stomach, I get up and take the hand he offers me.

“We’re forever grateful.” It looks like he means it. Except he doesn’t.

“Yeah, yeah. A fat, *fat* raise.”

“It’ll need its own corner office,” he shouts as I close the door.

Damn right it will. And if everything goes as I want it to, Alex will be needing a new apartment.



I SHARE a coffee with my team and deliver the news. Dalton is the most upset I’m leaving, and I’m pretty sure it’s because I look the other way on how often he takes a cigarette break. He’s quick with his work and delivers nothing wrong, so I have no reason to complain.

“Come on, guys. It’s one-and-a-half months.”

Lucy nervously twirls a lock of her hair around her finger. “Will we get a new manager?”

“Yes. He’s a consultant, but I’ve been promised he’s great.”

Her nose scrunches up. “We’ll have to take orders from a man?”

Dalton asks why that’s so bad, eliciting a debate over gender differences in management. With a smile, I watch the people I’m sure I’ll come to miss over the next six weeks and sip my coffee.

“Heaven?”

We all turn to whoever the woman at the door is, and there’s no doubt whatsoever that she’s from the sixth floor. She’s looking at us like we’re a group of stray cats with twelve ears each. Her legs must be longer than the highway, and her hair is so perfect it almost looks plastered. Not one rebellious hair in her ebony bob, not one wrinkle in her short white dress.

“Yes?”

She focuses her disgusted glare on me. “I’m here to brief you about the Devòn project.”

All my colleagues have similar annoyed expressions on their faces. Understandably so, because this woman is anything but friendly or warm.

“Okay. I’ll see you guys at the Watering Hole.”

Everyone waves, and I can read the sympathy in their eyes. They don’t

have it nice, but I have it much worse.

After silently following the grumpy woman into the elevator, I turn to her. "I didn't catch your name."

"Marina."

Marina. Even her name sounds like it belongs to fashion magazines. "What's your role?"

She tilts her head, her hair bouncing from one side to the other, then immediately going back in place as a fruity perfume invades my nostrils. "Assistant to the director."

Huh. She's Mr. Asshole's assistant. Also, I should probably stop calling him that before it settles in my brain and I say it out loud by mistake.

We get out of the elevator, and as far as the eye can see, this place looks exactly like my floor. Except for the people in it, roaming from one side of the office to the other like worker ants.

They're in a rush. They're beautiful. They don't smile.

I purse my lips and try to fix my hair. Though it's in its usual braid, I don't need a mirror to know there's a crown of frizz that has escaped it like it always does in humid weather.

"This way," Marina says, pointing to an empty office. She turns to the shelf, grabs a folder, and drops it on the desk with a thump. "This is everything you need. You also have virtual copies on your computer, and as we speak, the tech office is setting up your account."

"Is it not the same as the one I have on the fourth floor?"

She shakes her head with a smirk, but her voice remains flat. "No. We use something better than your free trial software."

I stare at her and say nothing. Not only do we not use a free trial of anything, but I was the one who suggested we use Dawnty, the project management software the entire fourth floor relies on. "Okay."

She walks away without looking back, leaving me alone in the bleak, empty office. At least the glass walls here are so clean you could easily walk into them if you're not careful enough, and everything smells like disinfectant, which soothes my nerves a little.

With a sigh, I turn on my computer, finding the files I need. It'll take me a couple of days to go through everything, and considering the event is in six weeks, I'm going to assume we don't have those two days.

I start anyway, scrolling through endless documents.

There's a list of requirements for the space we still need to find and the

top ten choices available. I can already see issues with three of them, so I make a note that I'll show Mr. Ass—Mr. Hassholm when I meet him.

Then, potential menus. Shane comes to my mind. I don't know if a baker has enough knowledge to plan a menu, nor do I know if he's a baker, but I wish he or someone else could help me because there's sweat running down my scalp and damping my hair. This is so much stuff—so much *foreign* stuff. How am I supposed to plan this event?

Guests, music, lights, a catwalk, furniture, and decorations. Nothing's done, and I wish I knew who their old project manager was so I could strangle them with my bare hands. I'm deep into the invitations, which should have been sent about a month ago but haven't been selected yet, when the door to my office opens.

"Mr. Hassholm is ready to meet you," Marina says as she pops her head in.

With a steep breath, I stand. I straighten my dress and flatten my hair as she observes me with an amused expression, like none of what I'm doing will ever fix the mess I am.

Walking before me, she takes a turn right and one left until we're down to the last office. The walls of it are entirely made of glass, which means my new, temporary boss doesn't care about his privacy like Billy does. It also probably means Mr. Hassholm doesn't play silly games on his phone nearly as much.

Marina opens the door, on which there's a big golden tag that reads Mr. Hassholm, and I follow her as I glance at him—well, at his back. I can already tell he's handsome, like Emma said. He's wearing black pants and a white shirt, and he's as tall as a tree. I'm no shortie either, but he must be half a foot taller than me.

"Yes. It'll be done today," he says. His voice is husky, deep, almost bone-chilling. It's as cold as Marina's. The fact that he hasn't acknowledged we've entered the room also seems to confirm he's just as big an asshole as everyone says.

He looks out of the window and continues to talk, resting his right hand on his hip. This might be a habit of his, because Marina simply stands and waits. Everyone's so still that for a moment it feels like being at a wax museum.

"Okay. I'll update you tonight. Sure, bye." He ends the call and turns around, his eyes landing straight on mine.

And the floor crumbles beneath me.

Those cocoa-brown irises, those lips. His wavy, dark hair. His shoulders are as wide as I figured, his suit the right type of fancy. And although there's no flour on his wrist, nor desserts around him, there's no doubt.

Shane isn't a baker. He's Mr. Asshole.

Chapter 7

Fundamental First Impressions



“SHANE . . .” I whisper.

His eyebrows twitch for a second as Marina scoffs behind me. I can feel her gape burning through my skull, but I couldn’t stop staring at him if I tried.

He’s leaning against the window in front of me, so handsome it hurts, but I can’t even enjoy that, because he’s my boss for the next six weeks. He’s Mr. Asshole.

“I mean, I—” Shit. I have to recover—I just said his first name. “Mr. Asshole,” I continue, to my horror. Wiping my sweaty forehead with the back of my hand, I try again. “Mr. . . . Hassholm, I—nice to meet you.”

Oh, God.

His face barely moves, like he’s completely unimpressed at my showcase of awkwardness and insults.

“Well done, Fourth Floor.” With a snort, Marina turns around and leaves the office.

My throat goes dry, and I can’t stop staring, though I know I should. I should look down because he can probably see my face is past being flushed. It’s tomato red, blood red. *Earth open up and swallow me right now* red.

His brows pinch together. “Who are you?”

“I-I’m the new project manager for the Devòn—”

“Right. From the . . . web campaigns.”

I nod.

He doesn’t sound too pleased—in fact, it sounds like he had to settle for me. And there’s not a hint of the man I spent last night chatting with. Where’s his wit? By text, he called me *awesome*. Well, he called Nevaeh

awesome. It doesn't look like he feels the same about me at this very moment.

"Have you read through the material?"

I swallow. Not all of it, but I sense he won't like that answer. "I've scrolled—"

"When can we start? How long do you need?"

My head jerks back. Why does he keep interrupting me? If he's not interested in the answer, he might as well not ask the question. "It'll take me a couple of days, I believe. However—"

"Fine. Ask Marina to introduce you to the team. They'll clear all doubts." He sits at his desk, focusing on the screen of his computer. When I don't move, he sighs. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes. The invitations should have been sent a month ago, but they haven't been selected yet."

His eyes flip to his matte black watch. "I'm aware."

"We should start with that. Also, the locations I've seen—"

"Start with whatever you think it's best."

My heart throbs in my ears, the muscles of my neck stiffening. I beg my lips to shut, my tongue to stay still, but the words come out in a rush. "Excuse me, I wasn't done talking."

His eyes shoot to my face, and I am surprised I don't explode right here on the spot. His glare could freeze the sun.

Stretching backward, he draws in a deep breath. "On this floor, we do things a little differently than what you're used to. We aren't..."—he opens up his hands—"artists."

Artists. Why does it sound like an insult? We're not artists either—not that there'd be anything wrong with that. And sure, we mostly focus on design, on video editing and graphic work, but we're hardly drawing stick figures with crayons, which is what the word *artists* sounds like from his beautiful, rosy lips.

I cross my arms, a deep scowl on my face. "Well, on the fourth floor, we believe in each other's contribution. It looks like you need me, not the other way around. I'm more than happy to go back to my floor of *artists*, if that's what you want. Or you can let me speak."

He freezes for a few seconds, and in the glimmer in his eyes, there's a glimpse of the man I've met online. "Your name?"

Oh, shit. What if he connects the dots? Why did I let Emma talk me into

doing something poetic?

When I hesitate, his brows rise. “Did you forget?”

“My name’s Heaven.”

“Heaven.”

“Yes, Heaven.”

His eyes squint as if he’s considering something, and there’s sweat dripping all the way to my ass. After the longest silence ever, he waves his left hand. “Speak.”

I take a moment to breathe, and noticing the way he exhales, I force the words out. “Three of the locations aren’t suitable for the event. I’d explain the reasons, but I’m sure the middle of my sentence would end up interrupting the beginning of yours.”

His lips quirk up for the briefest of moments. There’s still a lump stuck in my throat, but it looks like he’s enjoying my comebacks, and it makes my chest inflate with pride.

“How about you send me an email about it? I can’t interrupt written text.” When I nod, he does too. “Anything else?” he asks.

“No. I’ll have a full report for you as soon as I’ve gotten through the rest of the materials.”

“Great,” he says, keeping his dark, hooded eyes on me.

It’s so unsettling to see him move. For days, I’ve been staring at pictures of him, and now he’s in front of me. He’s horrible, true. But his eyes are even more magnetic than they look in pictures, and his hair looks softer than wool.

When he squints, I know he’s wondering why I haven’t left yet. So I turn around and walk away, my throat burning with annoyance and a few unsaid curse words.



“WAIT A SECOND.” Emma chuckles while tearing a bite off a sandwich from the deli across the street. “You’ve catfished a guy, and you’ve been texting for a couple of days.” Her smile widens. “You’ve watched a movie together, and last night you blindly trusted him, getting into a place where he could have potentially murdered you.” She dips her chin. “Shane Hassholm.”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

She bursts out laughing, not stopping even as I hit her shin with the side

of my shoe. “Emma, I need help. What the hell do I do?”

“What do you mean?! There’s obviously a spark between the two of you. Ghost him as Nevaeh, and invite him out as yourself.”

I snort. “Oh, you must have missed the part of the story in which he was extremely unpleasant.”

“No, I didn’t. There’s a reason they call him Mr. Asshole. But if you get along by chat, maybe you’ve tapped into the secret soft side of the big, scary boss.”

Maybe. It seems much more likely that he has a twin somewhere around the city with his same name. “Well, even if that were the case, I’m not exactly looking for a relationship. Should I remind you I’m still in one?”

“No, you’re not,” she says, then nibbles another bite. “You’re single. Your boyfriend just doesn’t know it yet. It’s only fair, considering you’re in an open relationship and you weren’t informed.”

I shoot her a don’t-be-ridiculous look. “Emma, he’s my boss.”

“Your boss for the next six weeks. Use them to get to know him.” She winks. “Try to break through the heartless façade. Once he’s not your boss anymore, you make your move.”

She’s suggesting I manipulate him, isn’t she? I feel icky only at the thought.

“Just don’t answer his messages anymore. You’re on RadaR to catch that lying piece of shit.”

She’s right. I can’t text with him as Nevaeh. It’s stupid, but it makes my heart feel heavy. After last night, I’ve been looking forward to clocking out and seeing if he’d text again. Now, it doesn’t matter.

“I can’t believe you have the hots for Mr. Asshole.” Emma wheezes, barely containing herself as she holds onto her belly and shakes with laughter.

At least *someone* finds it amusing.



ONE WEEK into the new project, and I have a hold of what’s happening. It’s been a grim week, though. Alex has been away, officially on a business trip, but probably sleeping around, and my new colleagues aren’t what you’d define as friendly. Or chatty. Or nice. I have Emma to thank for not feeling

completely alienated.

In their defense, however, the members of my team are extremely professional. They haven't delivered a single assignment late, and everything's always so perfect that it makes my heart melt with satisfaction. I get what Shane meant when he called the people on my floor "artists." My usual colleagues aren't as precise, not by a mile.

"Here are the invites," Asha says as she enters my office. I take the folder she passes me, then she's gone. There's no "please" and "thank you" on this floor.

With a sigh, I open it. The invites look nice, but what do I know? I'm used to web design, not paper. The clients have approved the draft, and hopefully they'll like the final version too.

However, there's something else weighing on my chest now. Inspecting the glass wall, I purse my lips. I'll have to take this to Shane so he can send it to the clients.

That's another thing that's different in this department. On the fourth floor, Billy and I work side by side and meet multiple times a day to discuss one thing or another. Not Shane. He wants emails. I've sent him over two hundred in the last week, and no, the irony hasn't escaped me. Whether as Nevaeh or as Heaven, our relationship remains online.

Everything else about our communication is different, though.

The last email he sent me said, "Ok." I've gotten about fifty look-alikes. The longest one he sent is, "The clients are happy with it." It referred to the catering company, on which we settled two days ago. The other emails are a series of "Sounds good," "I agree," and a few "No, that won't work."

I don't know what he studied at Harvard, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't communication.

I get up and walk to his office on the opposite side of the floor. Halfway through the corridor, I pass Marina, and I might as well be a ghost because she doesn't so much as glance at me. The more I *don't* know her, the less I like her.

And since I've joined the team, I haven't seen much of Shane either. He passes through the corridor a few times a day, but I guess most of the time people go to him. Whenever he walks in front of my office, he still doesn't look in my direction. It's like I don't exist.

Once I turn the corner, I see his deep brown locks past the pristine glass walls of his office. He's at his desk, with his brows furrowed and creating

creases on his forehead as he gazes at his laptop. When I knock on the door, he moves his hand to motion at me to come in, but doesn't look my way.

"Good afternoon," I say as I enter. Shit, why is my voice all squeaky like a teenager? "How are you?"

No answer.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, I walk to the desk and hold the folder out. "These are the invites. All done. We just need the clients' okay."

His gaze is absent-minded as he turns to me. "Hm? Who are you?"

I swallow, hesitating. What does he mean? He can't possibly have forgotten me. We've been emailing all week.

When I don't answer, he squints. "Are you the new intern?"

"No," I say, and I sound out of breath, because I am. "I'm . . . I—" I try to make my voice sound more stable. "I'm the project manager for the Dev'òn event."

"Oh. Right," he says, grabbing the folder.

Speechless, I stare at him as my heart throbs and my legs shake. I can't stop blinking, and it might be because I'm about to cry, though it seems unlikely since I never cry at work. But he forgot me, and there's a ball of fire pressing on my chest. Am I that irrelevant? That . . . unimpressive?

"They look good," he says after barely throwing a look at the two cream-colored cards. "I'll get them to the clients." When I remain still, he faces me. "You can go."

Here we go again—I can feel the words spilling out. Though I can't exactly get mad at my boss for not remembering me, I can't walk away either. He's so rude. "We've met, you know."

He draws in a deep breath. "Yes. I know."

"Did you forget what I look like?"

His back rests on the chair, his fingers linking over his stomach. "I didn't mean to offend you—err . . ."

I scoff. "Really? You forgot my name?"

"No, I remember. It's . . ." As he purses his lips, I wish I could punch him. Not only is it extremely disrespectful that he'd forget my name, but it's highly unlikely. No one ever has, which might be the single perk of being the only person in the world with it.

"Heaven," I spit out.

He snaps his fingers, his head slowly rocking up and down. "Right. Heaven."

I spin in anger and storm out the door as the word “sorry” hangs in the air. Even in that deep, warm voice of his, it takes zero of the sting away. One thing is for sure. Never has a nickname ever been more deserved.



I ENTER my office and drop in the chair. New day, new never-ending list of to-dos. I haven’t seen Shane after yesterday’s blow-up, and I don’t exactly want to either.

Since I’ve started working here, he texted Nevaeh three times. The first message was a generic, “Doing anything fun tonight?” With the second, he proposed we could watch *Back to the Future* two together. That one was difficult to pass on. The third one, even more so. “Tired of me already?”

God. I am not tired of him at all. I am *exhausted* of office-him. But not chat-him. And it’s shitty that I disappeared right after he gave me the key to his favorite place, but there isn’t much I can do about it.

I turn my computer on and check my emails. Fifty-three. I almost want to hit my head against the glass wall, but I open the one from Shane.

From: Shane Hassholm (shane.h@imp.com)

To: Heaven Wilson (heaven.w@imp.com)

Location must be set by the end of the week, Heaven.

Shane Hassholm

Events Director at IMP

Huh. He added my name. He never did that before. It’d be a horrible waste of time, which on this floor is a capital sin. Is he making an effort? If so, why?

I sigh and move onto the next email when I get a text.

EMMA:

Met Mr. Asshole today, yet? He came to sales half an hour ago, and I almost walked into a wall.

HEAVEN:

No. But then again, if we did meet, he’d forget.

EMMA:

Focus on the real enemy. And if Shane forgets you again, flash him. You have glorious boobs.

HEAVEN:

Boobs that for the moment belong to another man. Still no match with Alex. Maybe he left the app? Em, am I making a huge mistake?

EMMA:

Maybe. Or maybe not. Flash Mr. Asshole.

With an eye roll, I set my phone down, and just as I turn to the computer, Shane walks through the hall's door and into the corridor. He takes my breath away. He's wearing a dark blue suit, which is by far my favorite color on him, and he's staring down at his phone. A second after he types something, my phone lights up. *Shit*. I'm watching him text me. Well, Nevaeh.

He looks up, and once our eyes lock, he begins walking. Just as he opens the door to my office, I hide my phone behind me. "Hi, Heaven Wilson, new project manager from the fourth floor," he says in an upbeat voice.

A stiff grin settles on my lips. "Mr. Hassholm."

"Please, let's not be formal." As my brows furrow, he leans against the door frame with a smirk. "Call me Mr. Asshole."

Great. Now he's making fun of me. Eyes narrowed, I fake a smile. "So you remember *some* things."

"I do."

Marina appears by his side in a tight red dress and speed-talks about another project the department is working on, until he interrupts her with an, "Okay." She doesn't seem to mind as she struts away, and he stares back at me. "The locations?"

"I have appointments set throughout today. I've restricted the field to three of them and—"

"When will you—"

I hold my finger up. "Still talking," I say as he purses his lips. "Corinne and I will make sure they're up to standard. If that's the case, I already have an estimate of the costs and a presentation to send to the clients."

There's a beat of silence as he studies me. "You talk a lot."

A scoff bursts out of my lips. "I believe in the power of communication."

"I believe in the power of time efficiency."

My arms cross. "Was something that I said not time efficient? I could cut

out the prepositions next time.”

When his lips bend into an amused smile, it’s as if the sun is in my office, the light of it shimmering over the white surfaces until it’s all I can see. Light and a line of pearly white teeth. “This conversation isn’t very time efficient.”

“Then why are we having it?”

His eyes squint, and the smile on his lips mellows. Now, only one corner is lifted in a pleased smirk. Is it me, or does this man make no sense? “Tell Corinne to focus on the guest list. I’ll come to the locations with you.”

“What?” I sit straighter, my voice coming out in a shrill, panicked tone.

“We’ll take my car. When do we need to leave?”

“Why do you . . .” I begin to ask, the words dying in my mouth when his eyes roll and his foot taps impatiently. “Half an hour.”

“I’ll meet you by the entrance,” he says before closing the door and walking away.

I study my phone, then the door—my lips still parted. He’s coming with me. We’ll spend the next several hours together. Much of them in a car, alone. I dread it, and at the same time, I can’t wait.

He’s Shane and Mr. Asshole. I’m Nevaeh and Heaven. And this promises to be a disaster.

Chapter 8

On the Road



“SEATBELT ON?” Shane asks, and when I confirm it is, he starts the engine, hurrying out of the parking lot in his dark silver Mercedes-Benz. “We should be there in about forty-five minutes.”

“Yes, great.” Gripping onto the light brown leather seat, I keep my eyes on the road, but my pocket is almost burning. Inside is my phone with his message to Nevaeh.

He clears his voice. “So, how’s—” His phone rings, and with a sigh, he presses a button on the steering wheel. “Hi, Dan.”

Dan, whoever he is, starts bombarding Shane with information until his fists tighten around the steering wheel, his chest slowly rising and falling. Dan is clearly flustered—apparently, there’s a problem with a sponsorship event—and Shane’s hand keeps reaching for his neck.

This man doesn’t have a moment of peace, does he? I guess one day that could be my job, and I think about that saying, *Be careful what you wish for.*

“Why don’t you move the products into the other storage room?” Shane asks, and Dan informs him that it’s been rented out and isn’t available anymore. The one they have, however, is completely unusable after it flooded overnight because of some faulty pipes.

Shane and Dan swap suggestions, and each time, they discard them. I’m thinking about it too. I can’t help it—it’s the project manager in me. And I think I have a solution, but I keep my mouth shut and let them figure it out themselves. I’ll be part of the team for less than two months, so it’s not my place to intervene.

Fifteen minutes into the conversation, Shane is leaning with his elbow to the window and rubbing his chin. He’s really frustrated, and if there’s

something I can do to help, then I probably should. When I clear my voice, his eyes find mine for a second. “Yes?”

“I—I have a solution.”

The left corner of his lips curves in a curious smile as he studies me. “Okay. Let’s hear it.”

I straighten in my seat. “We have a storage room for the Devòn event. The sponsorship will be over long before it starts. So . . . use it.”

“And where do we put the stuff for our event?”

“There isn’t any. There was a problem with transportation, and it’ll be delivered tomorrow.” I sent him an email about it yesterday and received a swoon-worthy “Ok.” response.

Shane sighs. “Yes, but the sponsorship is tonight. There won’t be time to get everything packed and out of the warehouse before our stuff is delivered.”

My chest flutters every time he says “our event” and “our stuff.” Like the Devòn event is *our* baby, something that he and I share. Ignoring the jittery feeling in my stomach, I shrug. “There is enough time for everything. It comes down to hiring enough people and spending some money. Dan, how are you doing with the budget?”

Dan seems hesitant as he says, “We’re good. About five percent below.”

My palms face up. “Sounds like an excellent investment to me. And you won’t have to pay for the storage space, because we already did. Use that five percent to find some movers who’ll work through the night.”

When Shane turns to me a third time, I point at the road. I don’t want to scold him in front of his employee, but I’m not trying to die either.

“Mr. Hassholm? What do you think?” crackles out of the car speaker, and the thumps of my heart quicken dangerously.

Shane takes an entire minute to answer, and I can almost hear the cogs in his brain rolling and mincing. “I can’t see a problem with it.”

I beam, a fuzzy feeling of satisfaction warming up my insides. I bet he’ll remember me now. Heaven, the project manager who saved the day. Heaven, who could find a solution when he couldn’t. Heaven, the *awesome* woman who came to his rescue.

Dan releases a long-awaited breath. “Great. God, thank you . . . whoever you are, thank you!”

Shane rests one elbow to the car door, his finger rubbing his bottom lip. “Heaven. Her name’s Heaven.”

“Thank you, Heaven, then.”

I barely notice Dan's chuckle. I'm too intent on staring at Shane, and I still can't tell whether his sudden obsession with my name is due to him genuinely being sorry, or if he's messing with me.

"Keep me updated," Shane says, and as Dan says goodbye, he hangs up. How rude. I lightly shake my head, but if he notices, he says nothing.

He drives for a few minutes, eerily silent, my heart in my throat as I sit still beside him. Before Dan called, he was about to ask me something, and I desperately want him to do it. Whatever it is, just ask. *Ask me, ask me, ask me.*

"What were you saying?"

The words come out of me when my chest finally feels like it's going to explode, and his eyes dance to me for a second. "Excuse me?"

"Before Dan called. You were asking me something. 'How . . . ?'"

"Right. How's it going?"

"Great," I say, straightening my dress even though it's as straight as it gets.

"No, I mean, in the office. You've been through your first week. How was it?"

All right. It doesn't take the first prize for originality, but at least, he's attempting to make conversation. "It was good. I think I'm getting the hang of things. But you're the boss. You tell me how I'm doing."

"You're doing something right for sure, or we wouldn't be driving to see locations right now."

I nod. "And I wouldn't have solved Dan's problem."

Laughter bubbles out of his lips, and it's so cute I have to keep myself from raising my fist in victory. I made Mr. Asshole laugh, and more importantly, I made Shane laugh. It's not the first time, because some texts we exchanged were hilarious, and last time he said he almost choked on a slice of apple pie. But it is the first time I see it, and I'm immediately addicted.

"Yes. You're very good at your job, Heaven. But I was talking about the colleagues, the pace. It's quite different from what you're used to. How is that going?" When I gape at him, his brows furrow, his eyes shifting from the road to me repeatedly. "What?"

"I don't think I've ever heard you use so many words together."

His shoulders relax as little wrinkles appear at the corner of his eyes. "Okay. And will I get a lengthy answer?"

I pause, and when he tilts his head, clearly frustrated that it takes me so long, I fight the instinct to stick my tongue out. “It’s different. You were right. Compared to you people, we *are* artists. But I think I’m handling it pretty well. I just don’t expect Marina to invite me to her birthday party any time soon.”

“I don’t think she’s ever invited me to that party, and I have worked with her for close to ten years.”

That’s sad. I’ve been at each one of my team members’ birthday parties since we’ve worked together. “Why is everyone on the sixth floor so…” I don’t know which word to choose. I don’t want to insult him, but the term I’d like to use is “cold,” maybe “distant.” Definitely “unpleasant.”

“We’re there to work. We make friends in our free time.”

Yet he’s making an effort with me. How is that different?

Before I can ask, he continues, “It works. I’m Mr. Asshole, and they do their job. As long as no one gets fired and we get things done, I don’t see the problem.”

“Well, for starters, it’s tense.”

“Tension is a great motivator,” he says, switching hands on the steering wheel.

“No. Tension is tense. Motivation is a great motivator.”

He grins. I don’t know what’s making him so happy, but seeing him relaxed works wonders on me. “So you think you can do my job better than me.”

“I know I can.”

A flicker of AC ruffles the locks of hair beside his hooded eyes as he bobs his head up and down, like he’s impressed by my confidence. And I have plenty to sell when it comes to my work. I’m great at what I do. More than great—I’m *awesome*.

I’m about to speak again when my phone beeps. It’s a weird noise, some sort of “ping” I don’t recognize. But Shane does, because his eyes shoot to me.

Oh, God. Is it RadaR? It must be.

My face sizzles. I don’t have any reason to feel ashamed, of course. Shane doesn’t know I technically still have a boyfriend, and he is on that app himself. Plus, it looks like he definitely doesn’t know that Nevaeh and I are the same person. Nonetheless, I am mortified. So much so that it takes me an entire minute to realize that if Shane is sitting next to me and I got a

notification from RadaR, it means it's Alex. I haven't swiped right on anyone else.

My boyfriend is a few steps closer to proving he's the horrible man that I already know he is.

At the second ping, panic spreads through me, paralyzing all my muscles. Then the nightmare continues.

My phone pings again and again. At the third one, I reach for it. At the fourth, I have it in my hands and I'm frantically trying to turn the sound off. By the fifth, the volume's gotten as loud as a ship's horn, and I'm sweating profusely. When the sixth comes, I wonder if there's a possibility Shane's suddenly gone deaf and missed the unmistakable RadaR text notifications.

"Interesting . . . ringtone."

Apparently, he can hear just fine.

Is it dramatic to hope for a car crash? Yes? How about a tiny pothole to deviate the conversation a little?

I meet Shane's eyes right before he turns his focus back to the road. "Oh, y-yeah. Just . . . a new phone model."

"Is it?"

I tuck the betraying device in my pocket. "Uh-huh."

"What brand?"

Well, to say my lie was shit would be polite, but I'm in too deep now. "Oh, just—a new brand. Makes really cheap phones. Terrible notification sounds. You wouldn't know it."

"Right. Gotcha."

We remain in the most uncomfortable silence known to man, and it feels like my phone is digging a hole through my pocket, but I don't take it out. We just say nothing more for the rest of the trip, the same smile curving his lips. Once again, I think he's making fun of me.

Karma really is a bitch.

Chapter 9

Deserve Your Dessert



“AND THIS WILL BE the backstage of your event. As you can see, there’s plenty of space for all your models and pretty dresses.” The woman turns to me, her eyes and nose crinkled. She has no idea how many *pretty dresses* we’ll have to fit in here.

My eyes flick to the windows. We’re planning to have a little apéritif outside before the event starts, and the garden surrounding this place is outstanding, so that’s one checkmark off my list.

Shane is still on the phone, pacing up and down as he follows us. He’s not paying any attention to the woman’s words, and he has gotten one call after the other since we got here. I can’t say I’m complaining, because after the RadaR incident in the car, I could use a breather, but I wonder why he bothered to come.

“Shall we wait for your colleague?”

I turn to the woman, a kind smile smoothening her features and her hair in a low bun. “He’s my boss,” I explain before glancing at him again. Still pacing, still stressed. “No, let’s go.”

I follow the woman out of the room and into the main one. It looks big enough for the event, and it’s grandiose, for sure. Crown moldings decorate the walls, and the ceiling is so high I wonder how they clean that gigantic chandelier hanging in the middle of it. I almost feel undeserving just by being here without an evening dress.

“Are there kitchens on the premises?” I ask after I’ve taken some notes.

“Yes, on the lower floor. Would you like to see them?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

She waves around and continues describing the history of the mansion as

she leads me through a billion corridors. Everything in here is a classy shade of cream, maybe beige. You'd think it makes this place look like an old, boring villa, but that's far from the truth. Instead, it feels dipped in luxury.

We get to the main stairs and pause. This must be the most impressive part of the mansion. Two staircases mirror each other, one on each side of the room, with carved banisters and hundreds of renaissance-looking paintings hanging on the walls. It reminds me of movies about the English Monarchy.

“. . . and of course, we'll remove any item if requested.”

The woman points at a half-bust sculpture by the doors, but I can't think of anything that needs to be removed. The big white vases at the entrance, the sculptures along the corridors, the golden-framed mirrors. The space isn't cluttered, and each object looks like it belongs, but I make a mental note to request a list of items to go through with the interior designer.

Once we reach the kitchens, I count eight stoves. I am not sure if that's too many or not enough, so I inspect the stainless-steel counters and enjoy how spotless they are. It's my level of cleanliness, which isn't the simplest thing to achieve.

Shane, like he's been summoned, appears at the kitchen entrance and looks into my eyes. “How are we doing?”

“Good. We're taking a look at the kitchen.”

His gaze flies over the room.

Is he thinking it's a place where he'd like to bake? I still struggle to believe Mr. Asshole is the same man who spends his evenings baking and watching old sci-fi movies.

As the woman talks—she has barely stopped since we arrived—he bobs his head yes, but his eyes ping-pong from one point to the other. When he turns to me, he studies me, as if waiting for a verdict. Funnily enough, I was expecting the same from him.

“Looks good,” he comments. “What do you think?”

Arms crossed, the woman's mouth pinches as she shuts up. He *really* needs to stop interrupting people.

“This mansion is marvelous. Really, it's one of the most gorgeous places I've ever seen,” I tell her with an apologetic smile. If Shane ever wondered what might have gained him his nickname, I have plenty of clarifications for him.

Before she can start talking again, he interjects, “We need to leave soon.”

“Yes. Can we get back to you with an answer?” I ask the woman as she

steps toward the corridor.

“Of course. Take your time. And come visit us again whenever you’d like.”

We leave the kitchens and make our way back to the ground floor, where I take one more look at the stairs before we walk to the car.

Looks good. That’s all he said about this place, and I try to guess whether he thinks it’s suitable for the event. I’m half-convinced he’ll want me to decide what to propose to the clients, and I need to make the right choice. Damn. I shouldn’t be trying so hard to impress him.

“The next location is a twenty-minute drive from here. Would you like to stop for coffee somewhere?” He opens the car door, and when he notices my shocked expression, his brows rise. “We don’t have to.”

“No, no. Coffee sounds good. We’re booked for the tour forty minutes from now anyway.”

He slides inside the car. “Okay, then. Let’s get coffee.”



WHEN I BRING the tray with our two coffees to the table, Shane is still on the phone, with a frown on his squared face, one fist clenched over his mouth and his dark brows bent over his eyes.

“Marina, wait.” He moves his phone down to his chest and whispers, “Do you know anyone who can design five different flyers today?”

Yikes. I sit and cross my legs. “Yes, I have a guy.”

“We have a guy too, but he laughed in our faces. We need more than one guy. We need a whole goddamn team.”

I pour some sugar into my coffee and stir. “If this week has taught me anything, it is that your guy probably hates you. My guy *loves* me,” I taunt, and even as he rolls his beautiful brown eyes, his lips lift upward.

“Does he, now?”

I blow over the dark liquid and sip. “Yet another perk of being nice to people.”

He stares at me for a few seconds, so deeply that goosebumps cover a good portion of my skin, then he moves his phone back to his ear. “Marina. Heaven knows someone who might help. Let me get back to you.”

It might be all in my head, but there’s a certain spark flickering from his

gaze to mine. I can almost see the golden twinkles shooting between us.

“Oh, and . . . Marina?” He pauses. “Thank you.”

Did Mr. Asshole thank one of his employees? I wouldn’t be surprised if I got out of this café, and instead of the warm sun, I found a snowstorm.

Biting my lip, I call Nevil, a freelancer we often use for graphic materials and the only one I’ve worked with that always gets what I’m picturing without too much explaining. He’s some sort of sorcerer.

Shane sets the phone down and stirs his coffee. “I think Marina might have fallen off her chair.”

“I’m about to join her. This must be an alternate dimension.”

When Nevil answers, I explain what we need and pass the phone to Shane, but not before asking him to *please* be nice. I can’t make an enemy of the people I work with.

Ending the phone call, he inhales deeply, a relaxed smile on his lips. “Thank you. Second time today you’ve saved my ass.”

I shrug. “It’s my job.”

“No, it isn’t,” he says with a pointed look before gesturing toward the counter. “Don’t you want to eat anything? I’m not sure if we’ll have time to stop for lunch.”

Behind the glass panel is an abundance of pastries, but it doesn’t look like there’s any lunch food here. And though those muffins look appealing, I’ve had three cookies this morning. “Uh—no, thanks.”

“Really?” His brows arch, then he turns to the counter. “You don’t like dessert?”

My eyes flare as I frantically shake my head. If there’s something I don’t want is for him to think I hate the thing he’s most passionate about. “No, I love dessert. Love it. Adore it. Maybe . . .” I swallow, trying to reign in the crazy. “Maybe I like it a tad too much.”

“I don’t think there’s such a thing,” he says as he rests his back against the chair. “Unless you’re trying to lose weight, which”—he points at me—“shouldn’t be your case.” His head jerks back, and widening his eyes, he shakes his head. “Oh. That was . . . unprofessional. I’m sorry.”

He’s sorry for saying I’m skinny? I’ve been called worse. “No, it’s all right,” I reassure him.

Silence settles as we both stir our coffees, and once my eyes run over the pastries again, he clears his voice. “So . . . how does one like dessert too much?”

“Oh, it’s just—nothing. It’s stupid.”

“Come on,” he teases. “I’ll decide if it’s stupid. I’m Mr. Asshole after all.”

Studying his curious gaze, I inhale deeply. Now it’s just going to look weird if I don’t tell him, so I might as well hope he finds my quirks endearing. “I . . .” I bite the inside of my cheek. “I have this habit of—I only eat dessert as a treat.”

His brows furrow. “A treat?”

“Yeah.” My cheeks burn, but I stare at my coffee and continue, “Like a prize. If I do something good, or . . . if I *deserve* it.”

He says nothing for a while. When I look into his eyes, he looks distracted, but quickly smiles. “Well, you’ve fixed two difficult situations for me today. I’d say that’s worth a prize.”

“True, but . . . I had cookies for breakfast.”

He tilts his head. “As a prize for . . .”

Oh, boy. “Last night, I finished the book I said I’d read by the end of the week.”

“Right. So . . . totally different reasons. You’ve earned plenty of dessert since then.”

His gaze burns on mine as if he expects me to agree, so I do. To be honest, my mouth filled with drool the moment I saw all the pies and cakes behind the glass counter.

With a smile, he stands and walks to the pastries. Apparently, he’s choosing for me.

My head shakes as he studies a tray of donuts. I wonder what the hell is going on in his mind. Is he trying to guess what I might like? Is he checking for the quality of the desserts? Can you tell if they’re good by looking at them?

Leaning back in the chair, I exhale.

He’s so handsome. Every new angle I get of him makes it excruciatingly obvious. Now that he’s leaning forward with his hands in his pockets, his pants fall loosely down his legs. His shoes are shiny and untarnished, like he just bought them, his arms thick and muscular.

When his eyes squint, a little pout blossoms on his lips. Then the waiter approaches him, and he speaks, pointing at the pastries. I can’t hear what he’s saying, but the way his jaw moves, how his lips open up and close, is entrancing.

He suddenly turns to me, making me flinch as I pretend to go through my bag. Shit. How long have I been staring at him for?

“Here.” I peer at the plate he sets down with a slice of what looks like chocolate cheesecake and a blueberry muffin. “I thought we could share.”

Oh. Sharing pastries with Shane.

“Sure, sounds good.” I try to sound casual, but it’s painfully obvious I’m not. Sharing dessert with Shane will surely skyrocket to my top ten moments of the last—hell, of a long while.

Ignoring the light fluttering of my heart at the sight of pastries, I fix a lock of hair behind my ear and take the fork he’s offering me.

“So . . . how long have you been at IMP?” he asks.

“Five years. You?”

“Eight. When I started, there were only twelve other people.”

Considering there were a hundred when I started, that’s quite impressive.

I point at the cheesecake, barely able to stifle a moan. It’s so buttery and sweet. It’s one of those uncooked ones, with tons of heavy cream and sugar.

“Wow, this is good.”

“It’s all right,” he says in a flat voice.

My mouth falls open. “All right?”

“Yeah. All right. I make a much better cheesecake. This one’s way too sweet,” he whispers.

A tingle spreads over my cheeks, and I can only hope I’m not turning a deep shade of red. Shane can’t be that much of an asshole if he’s making sure no one can hear him. Or maybe as a baker he knows how sad it is to have your desserts criticized. Either way, it’s cute.

When he notices my stare, he shrugs. “I bake a little.”

He bakes more than a little, and I won’t pretend like I don’t know, nor will I use what he said to Nevaeh to stir up the conversation. Both feel like I’m manipulating him. So I ask something that I truly don’t know. “How did you get into it?”

Licking his lips, he swallows and looks up. “I started when I was thirteen. My grandparents owned a bakery, and they taught me.”

“What’s your favorite dessert?”

He passes a napkin over his lips, and though I can’t say for sure, it looks like he’s doing it to hide a smile. “That’s a good question. People’s favorite desserts tell you a lot about them.”

My brows quirk. “How so?”

“Let me give you an example.” He points his spoon at me. “Would you say Marina’s favorite dessert is a s’more or a macaron?”

I guess I see his point. She’s snooty and obnoxious in most things she does. Chances are that her favorite dessert fits the picture. “So . . . Can you guess it?” I question, wondering what kind of dessert my personality has earned me.

“Your favorite dessert?”

I shrug. “Anyone’s. If you know someone, can you just tell which dessert they’ll like?”

“I’m not a fortune teller, but I can take an educated guess.”

I beam. “Guess mine, then.”

Our eyes lock, and his lower lip disappears into his mouth. It looks like he’s thinking about it, and I raise my brow in challenge. I know he won’t back down, because I never would. I never do—and I remember his bio on RadaR.

Control freak, overworked, stressed out, and extremely competitive.

“What do I win if I do?”

We’re flirting. I’m pretty sure. Or are we? Shit, I wish Emma was here. I haven’t done anything like this in years, and I’m not sure if this is us playfully flirting or becoming friends. Maybe the only difference between the two is whether he finds me attractive.

I move my hair to the side and stir my coffee. If this is flirting, then what can I say to that? I guess if Emma were here, she’d say something forward, like “a night you won’t forget” or “whatever you want from me.” I’m not Emma, though.

“What do you want?” I ask.

His gaze pierces me as he scoops up some cheesecake and eats it. “I’m not sure. How about I decide what I want once I win?”

“Or I’ll choose what I want once you lose.”

He shakes his head with a laugh. “Yeah, sure.”

“How much time do you have to guess?”

“Until you go back to your chaotic little department.”

So four-and-a-half weeks. I’m pretty confident I’ll win. My favorite dessert is so unimpressive he’ll never think about it. “Perfect. That gives me enough time to decide what I want.”

“Nah, it’ll also give you enough time to think up a backup plan when I win, and you *don’t* get what you want.”

I suppress a chuckle and grab one half of the muffin. I'm not big on blueberries, but I will not give myself away that easily.

"Do we have a deal?" he asks.

I stare at the hand he's offering me and hesitate for a second, not because I lack the confidence to win, but because when we met, we didn't shake hands, and as I passed him one file or another, our fingers never grazed. This is the first time I'll get to touch Shane.

"If you're worried about the degrading things I'd ask you to do, don't. I'll keep it respectful enough. We don't want to give HR a headache."

I can feel myself blushing as I fixate on his mischievous eyes and dark lashes. Then I grab his hand and shake it, ignoring what the contact of his skin against mine does to my stomach. "Okay. We have a deal."

Chapter 10

It Takes One Dick Pic



KICKING THE APARTMENT DOOR SHUT, I inhale the smell of the sea-breeze aroma diffuser I got last week. I'm exhausted. Not only did Shane and I walk a lot today, which in my heels wasn't all too pleasant, but being around him makes me tense. It's difficult to explain. He makes me feel safe and comfortable, like a familiar song or a comfort movie. Yet my knees buckle every time he smiles at me.

I fit the shoes neatly on the side of the other heels I often wear for work, the ones permanently stained with my blood on the inner part, then I enter the bathroom and wash my face. There's something that I've been avoiding the whole day, but I can't ignore it anymore. My phone. Or rather, the two people who texted Nevaeh. Shane and Alex. I didn't check either text on my way back home because Shane drove me here—after we were done with the third location, it was way past office time.

At least I feel like I know which we should choose. I still wish Corinne had come, because, as expected, when I asked Shane his opinion, he said he trusted my judgment. *Yeah, right.* The man is even more of a control freak than I am. And I am pretty sure there is only one correct answer in his mind, and he is testing me.

Grabbing the makeup remover, I scrub my face.

"I didn't hear you come back."

The small plastic bottle flies out of my hands, my heart tumbling. "God! You scared me," I say to Alex, who lazily smiles.

"How are you?" He comes close and kisses my lips.

I haven't seen him in a week, and I'm so shaken by the sudden affectionate gesture that I temporarily lose the ability to speak. "I'm good," I

finally say. “How was your trip?”

He shrugs. “It was okay. Work.”

I grab the pink bottle lying on its side on top of the carpet. “Right.”

“What’s for dinner?”

There’s a pout on my face as I turn to the mirror. Of course that’s the first thing he’d say to me. Because that’s what I’m here for. To give blowjobs, clean, and cook. “Can you get a pizza? I’m exhausted.”

Once he nods and leaves the bathroom, I stare at the mirror. I am so tense my hands are shaking. Grabbing my phone, I shout that I’m taking a shower and lock the door behind me with a renewed sense of purpose. I need to see what he told Nevaeh.

I check my notifications, immediately freezing. As I imagined during the car ride, Alex matched with me, then texted me. What has me squinting at my screen, however, is that the last messages he sent are pictures.

Each of my heartbeats grows more painful, but I open our conversation and notice the green dot next to his name. With a gasp, I bring a hand to my mouth and drop the phone onto the washing machine.

He’s online right now, when he should be ordering his pizza. While I’m in the bathroom, a wall away from him.

It takes me a couple of minutes to recover from the nausea squeezing my belly, but when I do, my heart still goes a thousand miles an hour.

The pictures. No, it can’t be—it’s not what I’m thinking. Alex is a human pile of garbage, and I had no idea until a week ago. But there is no way that he’s that type of man. No. Yet I can’t find another explanation. It has to be nudes, or dick pics, or some other horrifying surprise.

I sigh and grab my phone—only one way to know. I open the conversation again and scroll up. “Hey” the first message says. “Wanna see how hard your pictures made me?” says the second. Then, pictures.

He’s that type of man.

I probably shouldn’t feel as violated as I do. It’s my boyfriend who’s sending me pictures of his genitalia. I should open them, take screenshots and save them on my phone to threaten him later. But tears stain my cheeks in an instant. I don’t know if it’s because of the pictures, because he’s online, or because everything became real, but I enter the shower and cry until my fingers are pruny.



“YOU’RE EATING SO LITTLE, LATELY.”

I don’t think I can muster the strength to look at Alex, and I’m surprised that when I do, he doesn’t turn into dust. But he doesn’t, and I lightly shrug. “I’m not hungry. I might be getting sick.”

“You should sleep early, then. You don’t look so good.”

I nod. I don’t care about the fact that he thinks I look bad. Maybe I do. After all, knowing your boyfriend sends nudes to another girl will do that to you. Nor do I care about the honesty in his words. If he wants me to get out of the way so he can chat with his next hot date, he can be my guest. “Yes, I think I’ll go to bed. Sleep on the couch tonight. Will you? I don’t want to get you sick too.”

He accepts way too quickly, and once again, I don’t care. I hole up in my bedroom, lie under the fluffy, thick blanket and rest my head on the pillow. I’m numb. All I can focus on is the scent of the new detergent I bought—it’s jasmine or something. For a second, it makes me feel better.

Five minutes later, *Back to the Future* is on. I swear this isn’t the only movie I watch, but only the comfort Marty and Doc provide can soothe the tight bite at my stomach. Unfortunately, halfway through the movie, I don’t feel better. Emma called, Olivia texted—I ignored them both.

When my phone lights up for the third time that night, I huff and peek at it with a scowl. Except it’s Shane. Oh, God. It’s Shane texting me on RadaR.

Dropping the phone, I hop off the bed and watch it like it might attack me any minute now, then attempt a few steps toward it.

I didn’t check his last message, but I can see this one in the notification.

SHANE:

I don’t like it as much now that I know it was a goodbye gift.

In an attempt to catch up with my heart jumping out of my chest, I sit. He’s talking about the key chain. He must be. He went there, he took it. And now he has it.

I can’t resist. I need to see what he said about it before, and I am the most impulsive and immature person in the world, but I open the chat. And when I see the previous message is an image, I click on it.

It’s him. I smile because he is smiling. His cocoa brown eyes sparkle with

joy, and his fist is by the side of his lips, holding the key chain. The small silver DeLorean dangles next to his face.

He's so handsome. As Heaven, I've only seen him in suits, and to say he looks born in them is an understatement. But as Nevaeh, I've had the luxury of seeing him in casual clothes, like the gray hoodie he's wearing in this picture.

My eyes move frantically from one side to the other, trying to take in as many details before it'll close, but when it does, I've barely even started. And now that my insatiable thirst and counterproductive curiosity have been satiated, my stomach twists.

I promised him I wouldn't leave him on read. The picture was definitely worth it, but now I have to text him. And I know it's a terrible idea.



SHANE:

You must like other movies.

NEVAEH:

I do, I swear. But this one is my absolute favorite. #MartyAndDoc4E

SHANE:

What minute are you on? #MovieNight

I GRIN TOO MUCH, way too much. Then I press pause and type that I'm on minute seventy-six. The movie is almost over, but I hope he doesn't mind and he'll join anyway.

Okay, give me a minute.

I bring the phone to my chest and groan. How can I feel so happy? I shouldn't. I should be obsessing over Alex's texts. But, God, I'm not. Shane takes over my brain completely.

It doesn't make the fact that we've been texting for over twenty minutes now less of a bad idea. Yet I can't stop. It's the only thing that keeps me floating above the water. If I stop tonight, I'll drown.

SHANE:

Ready?

I react to his message with a thumbs-up.

3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .

When the next message says *Go*, I press play, and once again, we're watching my favorite movie together.

So . . . how was your day?

I sigh. My day with him was exciting, tense, emotional, lovely. It was a million different things, and I wish I could tell him, but I can't.

NEVAEH:

Long and interesting. How was yours?

SHANE:

Good. Even better now that Marty is about to save the present as we know it.

My chuckle quickly turns into a sigh. I can't pretend I'm not enjoying this as much as I am, but there is something that I can't find an explanation for. When my fingers itch and I can't hold them back, I type.

NEVAEH:

Why do you keep texting me?

SHANE:

Whatever do you mean?

Now that we've spent some time together, I know his eyes are probably two thin lines on his face. I still imagine him in the blue suit he's wearing in his first profile picture, sitting on his leather couch and staring intently at his phone.

NEVAEH:

Your profile says you're not looking for anything serious. But you keep texting me, and you never ask me to meet.

I stare at the screen and struggle to believe I've actually sent that message. What if he says he knows it's me, Heaven? That the whole reversed

name gimmick isn't quite as clever as I thought? Or what if he says he wants to meet?

He doesn't answer. I wait, but he's always fast in texting back.

Sweat dampens my armpits. Did I offend him? Is he going to leave me on read? Is he angry? I sit up straighter and move my head around, trying to stretch the muscles of my neck, and when I look back at the phone, the three dots are flashing.

"Oh, thank God." My head's almost spinning, and now I'm a whole different type of nervous. What is he going to say?

SHANE:

I could say the same thing about you.

And before you point out that I'm the one who always texts you, let me remind you of the fact that you answered.

And before you point out that you've ignored me several times, let me remind you of the fact that at some point you've always answered.

My cheeks tingle as I bite my lips. These texts can't feel that good. They aren't for me, not really. But, man, they warm me up like a fireplace.

NEVAEH:

I guess you could say the same thing about me. How about you give me your reason and I give you mine?

SHANE:

Your proposition seems reasonable.

NEVAEH:

It's a deal.

SHANE:

Ladies first.

We could go on for hours, I think. Shane is a stubborn man, and in some ways, we might be too similar for our own good. I never give up, though. And I won't start now.

NEVAEH:

Don't make me take out the boxed brownies. #NothingToLose

SHANE:

Fine. You win. And you're a witch.

I throw my head back with a grin, then I wait for his message. He agreed to go first. But once again, nothing comes, and I'm pathetically staring at the screen.

When my phone vibrates, I get on my knees, on top of the blanket as my hand covers my mouth. He sent me a voice message.

This moment, the awareness that I'm about to hear his voice, is almost as good as actually hearing it. The rush, the anticipation, the mystery. I can almost taste the sweet mix of it on the tip of my tongue as my body tingles. My muscles tense, my eyes are a little dry because I can't blink. I just keep staring. Then, I press play.

"Hi. Since you've gone all existential on me, I thought I'd take it to the next level. I hope you don't mind." He pauses, and in the background Marty tells Biff to leave Lorraine alone.

Though I swallow, the lump in my throat doesn't budge.

"So . . . you want to know why I keep texting you. That's a fair question. I guess . . . I enjoy your company. Virtual company, that is." He chuckles, dark and raspy enough to make me jittery. *"You might think it's a line—I probably would if I were you—but when my phone lights up with your name . . . I just smile so effortlessly. If that makes sense."*

He clears his voice, and my heart hangs on a thread. His voice is so warm. So relaxed. Completely different from Mr. Asshole.

"But," he says, in a cheerful tone, *"it's not cool of you to say I haven't asked you to meet. It was literally my first message to you. Which, as I recall, went unanswered. Hashtag-rude."*

I grin, though I shouldn't. I mean, this puts me in a very uncomfortable position. But I'm so in denial, I can't help but press my pillow on my face and shriek. His voice makes my chest flutter, and the fact that he wants to see Nevaeh in some ways is mine to treasure. After all, it might not be my picture that he looks at, but it's me he's talking to. And he likes me. I can tell.

I revel in that awareness, holding the blanket in my hands and pondering whether I should replay the message or if he'll get a damn notification. Of course, I can't send him one. He might recognize my voice. It's different by phone, I guess—his sounds even deeper—but I can't run the risk.

I'm still taking deep breaths and smiling at the ceiling when the door of

the bedroom opens, and Alex enters. “Hey, did you wash my jeans?”

My grin disappears, but I’m afraid he noticed it anyway. I look down and try to act casual, but I cringe at how flustered I sound as I say, “Uh—no. Not yet.”

“What are you doing?” he asks, taking a peek at the TV.

“Texting with Emma.” My heart is going a thousand beats a minute, but I force my hands to stop shaking. “You?”

“Watching TV. I’m going to sleep—I’m exhausted.”

When he leans down to kiss me, I turn so that his lips press on my cheek and squeeze his hand before he can ask what’s wrong. “I don’t want to get you sick.”

He straightens and shakes his head at the TV. “I still don’t understand why you like this movie so much.”

Yeah, well—I don’t expect him to. And there’s plenty I don’t understand about him, like why he sends pictures of his weiner to strangers on a dating app. “Good night.”

He waves, closing the door behind him.

Taking a deep breath, I let my shoulders relax—I didn’t notice they got this tense—and unlock my phone. I don’t want to let Shane wait, not after he’s been so honest in his voice message.

NEVAEH:

Yes. It makes perfect sense.

SHANE:

Your turn now.

For a couple of seconds, I ponder what to say. I search my heart for an honest answer, but one that doesn’t sound too pathetic, like, “I have a huge crush on you” or “Butterflies? I feel the whole zoo when I’m with you.”

NEVAEH:

Every time we text like this, it feels like reading a book and thinking, “Damn, this chapter is so good.”

You say that dessert is a whim. I guess you are my whim, and I’m indulging.

SHANE:

I’m your dessert. Got it. #HotFromTheOven

I chuckle. Yes. He is my tray of brownies, my slice of cheesecake, my favorite brand of cookies.

Up for a marathon? I don't think I can sleep yet.

Chapter 11

The Sugary Bet



YAWNING, I enter the corridor and walk toward my office. It's only two doors away, yet I manage to meet Marina, who ignores my wave as she speeds past me.

God, I'm craving coffee. Though I met Emma for breakfast this morning, I couldn't even stomach a sip of my latte as I told her about Alex's dick pics and went down the rabbit hole of "whatever have I done to turn him into this." Thankfully, she mostly pulled me out of it.

As I set my bag down, I notice a little blue paper box on my desk, right in front of my keyboard. I move closer to examine it and untie the white ribbon on top, letting it fall onto the desk. If it's a bomb, it's the prettiest one I've ever seen.

The box unfolds, and there's a pastry inside. I can't be sure, but I think it's an éclair? It looks delicious, and I haven't had any breakfast, so there's almost drool on my lips.

The door to my office opens and Shane appears, smiling wide and looking gorgeous with his hair styled back and in a total black suit. The devil, but with an angelic smile.

"Good morning," he says. I'm pretty sure he's never said that in the last eight years.

"Good morning."

"I see you got my guess of your favorite dessert."

My chin jerks down. "I didn't realize this would involve actual pastries."

He holds the door, half in and half out of my office. "Well, you can't know if it's your favorite if you don't try it."

"I'm pretty sure I already know what my favorite dessert is, Mr.

Hassholm.”

As I cross my arms and push my chin up, his smile widens. “Well, Miss Wilson, this is my first attempt, and I worked hard on it. Please get back to me at your earliest convenience.”

He almost slides out of the door, but I put a finger up. “Hmm . . . Excuse me? First attempt?”

“We agreed on four weeks.”

“Four weeks to think about it. One attempt.”

He threads a hand through his dark hair. “You should have set clearer terms. The way I see it, I have unlimited attempts and four whole weeks to bake your favorite dessert. And I’m your boss.”

I scoff. He heard what I said yesterday about desserts, right? “So you suggest I *roll* back to my floor? I can’t live off pastries for a month.”

“Unlimited attempts. Dessert isn’t a prize, Heaven, and you shouldn’t play the unhappiness game.” He gives me a light smile. “From what I can tell, you could use some dessert in your life.”

“But what makes it special is that I only get it when I deserve it,” I complain.

His head shakes. “What makes it special is that I baked it for you.” He points at the little box on my desk. “There’s my passion, my time, my efforts in there. Trust me, it’s special.”

He knows that’s not what I mean.

Staring down at the pastry, I swallow the extra saliva in my mouth. God, it looks amazing. “Fine. But—”

“No ‘but’, Heaven. You know, I could have you fired with a phone call. Killed with an email. Really, when Mr. Asshole says you should eat dessert, you eat damn dessert. You don’t want to mess with my assholiness.” When I burst into a fit of laughter, his whole face lightens up. It changes his features, makes him look younger, happier. *Shane-er*. “For me? Try it? Or even better . . . for you?”

For him? Yes. I’ll eat this delicious pastry for him. “Okay. Thank you.”

He nods, a victorious smile on his lips. “I’ll wait for your email. And get me an answer about the location to recommend to the clients.”

Before I can react, he’s out of the door and out of sight. Just me and this crunchy eclair with a brown glaze and the delicious filling I know it contains.

I switch the screen on and eye the box. I should probably grab a cup of coffee to enjoy with it, but I lack the self-control or the decency. Within

seconds, I'm biting into my surprise breakfast. And, I mean—what can I say? His desserts live up to expectations.

I don't know what's better. The chocolate coating and friable dough swirling on top of my tongue, or the awareness that Shane baked that for me. It's creamy, buttery, crunchy, sweet and rich. All the adjectives you'd want to use about dessert. And it's *for me*.

When we matched, I thought I'd never get to try Shane H.'s desserts, and here I am. I just ate the best éclair—hell, the best dessert—of my whole life, and he baked it for me. Not Nevaeh. Just plain old me.

Comes to think of it, the next four weeks might prove to be the best ones of my life.



ONCE THE MEETING with my team ends, I prance back to the office, barely noticing the usual sting my heels conjure in my soles. I'm still more than exhausted since yesterday, but I can't help my good mood.

I check the screen, and Shane has answered my email. A squeal explodes out of me as I click to open it.

From: Shane Hassholm (shane.h@imp.com)

To: Heaven Wilson (heaven.w@imp.com)

Glad you enjoyed it. Not as glad I haven't guessed right. Fortunately, I have unlimited attempts.

Still waiting for your answer about the location.

Tick, tock.

Shane Hassholm

Events Director at IMP

Glancing at the presentation of the locations, I sigh. I've included all three mansions we saw yesterday, but I'm still not sure which to recommend. Corinne said she'd choose the third one, but after all, she wasn't there.

I scroll from one page to the other, and when I still can't decide, I focus on the rest of my to-do list—longer by the minute. We've selected two caterers, and the clients have sent Shane a list of songs they'd like the band to play. There's also going to be a DJ—I am not sure why. There are two of

those to be vetted too.

Once I'm done answering a billion emails, an entire hour has gone by, and I've received five more in the meantime. With a groan, I open the first one, but before I can get to answering, my phone beeps. It's RadaR.

Shit.

I grab it, waiting to see what Shane has sent Nevaeh now. It's unusual, because he rarely texts me during the day, but I can't say it doesn't make my body tingle. It happens every time I receive one of his messages. I unlock my phone and check the notifications, my mirth disappearing immediately when I notice it's Alex.

ALEX:

You now.

That's all his text says. *You now*. As in, it's my turn to send pictures of my genitalia. Seriously, you'd expect someone to bother with a whole sentence when they're asking a stranger for nudes.

My nails dig into the palm of my left hand as I resist the temptation to call his mother and tell her what her precious son has been up to. I open the chat in a rush, my brain hazed with fury, then type that I will not send him anything of the sort, and that frankly, I could have done without his dick pics. But instead of sending it, I delete the message.

And type something much worse.

NEVAEH:

I won't send you any nudes. Let's meet and I'll show you everything.

Closing my eyes, I pass both hands over my face as I'm hit by a wave of nausea. I've officially lost my mind.

I know this is why I've done all of this to start with. To catch him in the act and show him how it feels to be played. To have someone stomp on your trust, to be betrayed by the person you counted on the most. But I wasn't supposed to do it now. I was supposed to wait until I got my raise and I could kick him to the curb. Am I seriously not surviving the first two weeks?

As I stare at the phone, the three dots appear.

I'm officially catfishing my boyfriend.



“WAIT. You’ve agreed . . . to meet—morrow . . . night?” Olivia asks, her voice coming out all weird from the speakers of Emma’s computer.

I grab a piece of sushi, dip it into the soy sauce and bring it to my lips. “Yes,” I say as I chew.

Emma’s smile disappears, and Olivia’s shocked gape, taking up most of Emma’s screen, morphs into a similar frown. “Oy, Heaven. This is such a bad idea.”

“What?” I ask with a bitter smile. “Catfishing my boyfriend with your pictures or agreeing to meet him, knowing I’ll likely be homeless soon?”

Emma huffs. “Olivia, you don’t know this guy. He has it all coming for him.”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t. I’m sure he does. But what will you do with the apartment?”

I lean back against the chair as I study my best friends. We always do this—well, as often as we can. We have sushi and chat. Emma and I here at her apartment, and Olivia all the way in Sydney with a video call. When she used to live here, we would go to a new sushi restaurant every week, so we’ve kept the tradition going as best as we could.

“I don’t know. To be honest, I wasn’t thinking straight. Come on, guys. Dick pics.” I shake my head, and both my friends follow suit.

“What’s the plan?” Emma asks.

I go for another piece of sushi, this one with tuna and mayonnaise. “He suggested that we meet him tomorrow night at ten in a bar in the center.”

“What bar?” Olivia asks.

“Red Cube.”

Emma taps her chin. “Red Cube? Isn’t that the one by the Silverton Hotel?”

Olivia gasps. “Wait—the hotel you saw him at, one month ago?” she asks Emma.

When Emma nods, I focus on Olivia again. “With that woman he said was his colleague. Yes, that’s the one.” Maybe that’s his MO. He meets the girls at Red Cube, then invites them to his room.

“Where did he tell you he’ll be?”

“He didn’t say anything, but he’s always out on Fridays. Playing football

until two in the morning.” I scoff. What an idiot I’ve been, believing him blindly when he said he and the boys just stayed out for a few drinks after every game.

“So you’ll go there and . . . what?”

That’s the question I’ve been trying to answer since I proposed we meet. “I’ll go there, and he’ll expect to see you,” I say as I point at Olivia. “Instead, I’ll be there in my sexiest dress. I’ll join him at his table, confidence pouring out of me, and he’ll stutter an apology. I’ll tell him to send someone to get his stuff, that he lost me and that he’ll regret it for the rest of his life.”

It’s like a movie in my head—the wind blowing through my dark locks as I walk away from Alex in slow-motion with a triumphant tune in the background. I just don’t know what will happen after. But I can’t share my apartment with him for the next four and a half weeks. I can’t pretend I don’t know, act as if it isn’t a big deal that he’s been cheating on me all this time. Let him kiss me and sleep in the same bed as him.

When Olivia mumbles, “Your expectations worry me,” Emma rolls her baby-blue eyes.

“What do *you* think will happen?” Emma asks, turning her focus to the screen.

“Well, I think it’ll be awkward. You’ll both make a scene inside the bar, and he’ll try to come up with a million excuses. You’ll leave, and he’ll call you, text you. Maybe show up at the apartment.”

That sounds much less impressive than the movie in my head, but it *is* a possibility.

Emma shakes her chopsticks, waving a salmon roll around. “Look, Olivia and I talked about this.”

My eyes bounce from one to the other. What does she mean by that? “Okay.”

“We both think Alex is the human equivalent of one of those thick, hairy spiders, and it’s unfair you should be subjected to his douche face for a whole other month, let alone be forced into a bed with him.” Emma clears her voice, a tiny smile puffing her cheeks up. “So we’ll lend you the money to pay for the rest of the lease. You can officially break up with him.” Before I can open my mouth to object, she moves her palm up to stop me. “You’ll pay us back whenever and however you can. And don’t bother saying no, because we’ve decided already.”

I sigh. Surely, I know better than to argue with Emma. “Guys—”

“Just say thank you, H,” Olivia says with a light chuckle.

I hesitate, but Emma’s warning look is telling enough. “Thank you, I’ll think about it.”

It sucks. No, more than that. It’s horrible and unfair. I know how hard they work on their savings. Olivia wants to save for a solo trip around the world, and Emma plans to apply for a mortgage. But I also can’t deny knowing I have a safety net under my ass releases a load of stress off my shoulders.

I look at the solitary rice grain floating in the soy sauce, my hunger long gone. Maybe Olivia is right, and this is all a big mistake. It won’t be triumphant. It’ll be sad, awkward, and the beginning of a tough breakup.

“Guys, I have to go. My break is over,” Olivia says, and we both wave and say goodbye before she hangs up.

When it’s just Emma and me, she points at the sushi. “Huh-uh. You won’t let that douchebag ruin your appetite.”

I grab an edamame, but I’m not feeling it. My mind is spiraling, and the more I think about my plans for tomorrow, the less reassured I feel.

“And how are things going with Mr. Asshole?” she asks in an obvious attempt to distract me. It works, and at my dreamy expression, she squeals.

Damn. I can’t help it. Every time I think about Shane, there’s the same stretched grin on my face. Ear to ear. “Actually, we spent the whole day together yesterday. And we have a sort of bet going on.”

“Are you kidding?! Why didn’t you lead with that?” she asks, letting the salmon roll fly somewhere on the floor. “Tell me *everything!*”



EMMA and I spend the next hour overanalyzing every aspect of my day with Shane. According to her, the fact that he proposed we get a cup of coffee means he’s interested. As does the fact that he paid for everything. I protested, insisting it’s because he’s my boss, but she won’t change her mind.

When I walk back to the couch, Emma is texting with someone—judging by the corny smile on her face, a new crush.

Sitting, I grab my phone. No new texts, not that I’m expecting any. I half-heartedly open my inbox, noticing I got eleven new emails since I last checked. This is cruel by any definition, but I scroll through them anyway.

Catering company, modeling agency, a couple of journalists. Then, my finger freezes on the screen. Shane. There's an email from Shane. My heart hammers in my chest, but I take a deep breath and open up the email.

From: Shane Hassholm (shane.h@imp.com)

To: Heaven Wilson (heaven.w@imp.com)

We're having dinner with the clients. Seven p.m. tomorrow.

Shane Hassholm

Events Director at IMP

"Emma!" I call out, and the desperation in my tone probably alarms her because she appears by my side in a second.

Grabbing the phone out of my hands, she gasps. "Oh, shit. Oh, shit!"

"What are you doing?"

She looks at me with hearts in her eyes like a cartoon as I pace after her.

"What clients? Where? What are you wearing?"

"Step away from the phone, Emma. Put it down, and no one gets hurt."

With a chuckle, she dramatically sets it onto the table and takes a step back.

"Very good." As I stare at the email, she joins my side. "Why does he want me to go?"

"Because he likes you, of course."

I bite my lips. There must be a reason he's asking. A *proper* reason, a work-related one. And Emma, acting like he's asking me out, isn't helping. He isn't—he's just asking me to go to a dinner with clients. Actually, more than asking, he's demanding.

I press on *Reply*, ignoring Emma's gasp, then her mumbling as she grabs a cup of coffee, though I grasp something about me finally showing my worth to a man.

Shane does this to me—he makes me want to show him I'm at his level. And maybe that's what's drawing me to him so much. That he acts like I am too.

From: Heaven Wilson (heaven.w@imp.com)

To: Shane Hassholm (shane.h@imp.com)

Dear Mr. Hassholm,

I'm happy to accompany you to whatever dinner you have planned. May I ask for a ride? Oh, and a "please" or a "thank you" wouldn't hurt either. I don't dare to dream of both, but aim for either one or the other.

Yours truly,
Miss Wilson
Heaven Wilson
Junior project manager at IMP

When I show the email to Emma, she says we're flirting, that she can't believe I've sent him that email. I have to admit it is a little playful, but that's the type of relationship we've established. At least I hope so—unless . . . shit, was I too flirty?

My phone beeps with another email a couple of minutes later, and Emma throws herself in its direction, but I snatch it first. We both read Shane's answer, our heads pressed close together as we stare at the screen.

From: Shane Hassholm (shane.h@imp.com)

To: Heaven Wilson (heaven.w@imp.com)

Dear Miss Wilson,

I'm positive I've never met someone who talks as much as you, by email or otherwise. What's with the chitchat? Also, no pressure, but I'm still waiting for your decision about the location.

If we're done with the correspondence, my list of dreadful tasks for today is very long, and I need to find time for my second of unlimited attempts.

Please come to dinner with me on Friday. Thank you.

I'll pick you up at six-thirty. We'll try out the menu for the event. Formal attire, please. And thank you.

Bye, and please and thank you.

Yours indeed,

Mr. Asshole

Shane Hassholm

Events Director at IMP

"Oh my God . . ." I breathe, steadying myself against the armchair.

"Did he say yours *indeed*? Yours *indeed*!"

I chuckle, and Emma jumps around like a frog on cocaine, ignoring me as

I repeat that he's messing with me.

“Oh! We have to get you a dress! And please, *please*, a new pair of shoes!” She blabs about doing my hair some way or another, and I know tomorrow I'll be grateful she's all over my look. But right now, all I can do is stare at his email.

Mine indeed, Mr. Asshole.

Chapter 12

Heaven Is Hot as Hell



“HOW DO I LOOK?”

Emma is short of weeping, her round eyes glimmering with what I’m sure are wildly inappropriate thoughts about Shane and me. “Heaven, you’re hot as all hell.”

I tilt my head at the mirror. I don’t know about *hot*, but this is the best I’ve looked in a while. Maybe ever. “Are you sure it isn’t too much?” I ask, grazing my fingers on the red fabric. It’s thin, very thin. And there isn’t too much of it either. The cleavage dips all the way to my stomach, and I’m not wearing a bra. Instead, Emma slapped my boobs to see if they stay in place. They do.

“Too much? No, it’s not *too much*. Have you seen the restaurant he’s bringing you to?”

He’s not bringing me anywhere, but every time I point that out, Emma snorts and rolls her eyes.

As I twirl to the right, the gown follows my movements, the two deep splits showing so much of my legs that I was forced to use nude underwear. When I tried it inside the dressing room, I felt confident. Plus, Emma and the shop assistant were persuasive. Damn saleswomen. Now that I have to wear it in front of people, especially Shane, I’m regretting my very expensive and inappropriate purchase.

“I don’t know . . .”

Emma steps to my side, glaring at the mirror. “Oh, stop it. You look amazing, and you want to impress him, don’t you?”

“I do, but—”

“No ‘buts.’ You came here in jeans and a t-shirt, so you don’t have an

alternative. It's either this or bare nipples."

She's right. I asked him to pick me up at Emma's place—I'll take any excuse not to see Alex right now—and I have nothing else here. Emma, with her five feet three inches, and I definitely aren't the same size, so . . . This is what I'm wearing.

I'm strategically thinking of excuses that would allow me to keep my coat on through the entire dinner when my work phone beeps.

"Oh my God! Is it him? Is it him?" Emma asks while looking out the window at the headlights pulling up to her apartment complex.

I laugh and grab the phone while she shrieks, hopping around me like a bunny. "Hello?" I say after telling Emma to shut up and pressing the answering button.

Shane's warm, husky voice says, "Hi, Heaven. I'm outside."

Oh, God. Goosebumps, nausea, self-awareness. Man, do I wish I had another dress.

"Okay, I'll come down."

When I hang up, I face Emma. I probably look about as panicked as I feel because her fingers grip my arm in an encouraging squeeze. "It's going to be okay. You'll see. You'll have a great time, and he won't keep his eyes off you for a second."

Or he'll think I look like an escort. Hopefully Emma is right, and he'll just think I look hot.

I turn to the mirror and retouch my red lipstick. I check my eye makeup, but the eyeliner hasn't smudged around my almond eyes, nor has the mascara. And my brown hair is in beach waves, bouncing all over my shoulders every time I move. She's right. I look great.

"Come on, I'll walk you downstairs."

"No, no," I immediately say, grabbing my bag, but Emma's in the hall before I can stop her. "Shit," I mumble, closing her apartment door.

Though I try to keep up, but my heels make it difficult to run after her down the stairs. "Stop it, Emma! Stop!" I half-scream as she keeps laughing and rushing to the ground floor.

"You're crazy if you think I'll miss the moment in which his eyes first land on you." She joins her hands and brings them under her chin, batting her lashes dramatically.

"Promise you won't say anything. Do *not* embarrass me."

"I'll do my best," she says with a motion of her hand as we reach the

entrance of the building. She gives me a quick hug, then a slapping noise echoes off the walls as she spans my butt. “Go get him.”

Chuckles are still bubbling out of my lips when she opens the door.

He’s parked on the other side of the street, pacing and looking at the ground as he speaks on the phone. He’s wearing a dark blue suit with a striped gray tie—does he know it’s my favorite color on him, or is it yet another coincidence? It’s like he’s inside my brain.

I hesitate for a couple of seconds before finally advancing toward him, still walking and mumbling at the phone.

Crap. He is so handsome, I think my jaw fell off a few steps back. What if he sees me and has no reaction whatsoever? What if he doesn’t even notice my dress?

Once I’m halfway across the street, his head turns to me. My heart beats dangerously fast, and I fight the urge to cover up as his gaze roams down my body. “Hi,” I say.

I somehow manage to take the final steps to reach him, and now we’re standing in front of each other. His lips are ajar as he looks down—maybe at my obscene décolleté, or at my legs, which he can see a good portion of. A few seconds pass, and I can hear the person on the phone calling his name. But he’s still gaping at me, definitely distracted.

“Shane?” I whisper.

“No—yes. Hi.” It takes him more than a little effort to speak, or maybe to look into my eyes, and I try to hide how pleased I am as gushes of laughter explode behind me.

We both turn to Emma, who’s waving goodbye.

“Have fun!” she shouts.

I’ll murder her as soon as I get the chance.

“I’ll have to call you back,” Shane says to whomever he’s talking to on the phone, and the person is still speaking when he hangs up.

I tilt my head. “Bad habits are hard to kill.”

“I think I forgot how to breathe for a second there,” he says, his eyes quickly drifting down again. I can’t tell if he’s surprised or pleased, but I tuck some hair behind my ear and ignore the fluttering of my heart. “You look beautiful—more than beautiful.”

Well . . . “Beautiful” is better than “hot.” Much, much better. Or maybe it’s that *he* said it.

“You look beautiful too.” I point at his dark blue suit, my nose

scrunching. “I mean, handsome. Handsome.” I shake my head with a sigh. “You know.”

“Who was that?” he asks, nudging his head toward the door.

“That’d be Emma. Sales department. We’ve been friends since we were kids.”

He lifts his gaze in contemplation. “I can see why.”

I wonder why he says that—maybe because we’re so different, we kind of complement each other. “We’ve always been really close. The first few years of high school, she tried to get people to call her Paradise, so that we’d be Heaven and Paradise. She refused to answer to anyone unless they called her that, teachers included.” I pause to breathe, words rolling out of my lips in a haze. “But it didn’t stick. Everyone kept calling her Emma, and one day she had such a big fit about it that she was sent to the principal’s office.”

I stop yammering and inhale. Why am I info-dumping him? Once I muster the strength to look into his eyes, trying not to look as embarrassed as I feel, there’s a smirk on his lips.

“Well . . . the question begs to be asked. *Why* is your name Heaven?” When I grin, he does too. Excruciatingly so, because his cocoa-brown eyes stick to mine, and I can’t look away, and my answer doesn’t come. “Is it a secret?”

“No, not a secret.” I shift from one foot to the other. “I’m just considering which version of the truth to give you.”

“The only version I’m interested in is the true one.” He chuckles as I hum, pretending not to be sold on it. “Is that how it is? After I shower you with desserts?”

“More like you shove dessert down my throat.”

“I saw you eat that cheesecake today. It might not be your favorite, but you were hardly forcing it down.”

After a quick laugh, we approach his car. He’s right, the slice of forest fruit cheesecake I found on my desk this morning was *not* hard to swallow. “Okay. I’ll give you the *OG* version. But I’m warning you, it bums most people out.”

He opens the car door on the passenger side and offers me his hand. “My expectations are at an all-time low.”

My fingers find his, and once I’m sitting, I wish I didn’t have to let them go, because my skin tingles in the spot where it touches him. But I reluctantly do, as I’m forced to hold my dress together so that I don’t accidentally flash

him.

“Okay. Underwhelm me,” he says once he’s sitting next to me. The engine roars to life, and soon, we’re on the road.

“My parents had issues conceiving, and when my mom finally got pregnant, they were thrilled. But the due date came, and I didn’t show up.”

When the screen on the car dashboard notifies someone is calling him, I pause. He presses a button to reject the call and nods. “So you weren’t born a stickler.”

Trying to hold back a smile, I turn my attention to the road. “Do you want to hear the story or not?”

“Of course, but I’ve never pegged you for a straggler.”

I slap his shoulder with the back of my hand, set on ignoring just how *firm* it is, and when he chuckles, I do too. “Anyway, the doctor scheduled my birth, and my dad forced my mom to go though she refused to. She always says it felt like walking the plank.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“During the birth, there was a complication, and my mom had to be sedated so that the doctor could perform a c-section. And while she was asleep, she . . .”

Though he should be focusing on the street, his eyes dart to me, his lips parted as if he depends on my next words. “She . . .”

“She had a vision.”

“A vision?”

“Yes. She says she saw some entity. I don’t know, God, if you will. But she isn’t religious, so—I guess ‘entity’ is the right term.”

“Okay,” he says. He sounds skeptical.

I would be too, but I’ve heard and told this story a hundred times, and I’ve seen most reactions to it too. “This entity told her it’d save us both and would be my guardian angel. That it would protect me and assist me in every struggle, through every obstacle.”

“As long as your mom named you Heaven.” He gives me a side look, then focuses back on the road.

I can’t tell what he’s thinking. Does he think my mom’s a lunatic? People have before. Others just felt awkward when I told them the story. Like they were trying to find a way not to offend me.

“Do you believe it’s true?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I believe her brain was simmering in a lot of entertaining

drugs,” I say with a grin. “But she believes it, and it’s her story, so it’s good enough for me. Plus, it makes it sound like I’m special. I have this extra layer of protection that helps me through life.”

He keeps nodding, and when a second call comes, he quickly rejects it. “Well, I expected your mom to be a fan of Beyoncé or a religious fanatic. A vision from the underworld isn’t exactly underwhelming.” Stopping at a traffic light, he shrugs. “I think it’s true, her story. You *are* special.”



WE GET out of the car, my breath worked up—maybe because this dinner is making me nervous, but probably because of what Shane said as we drove. That I’m *special*.

“Ready?” he asks, joining my side.

“I guess.” I straighten my dress and pull it down a little, but it’s stretched tight on my skin and I don’t achieve any tangible results.

His gaze is tender on mine. “You can’t be that nervous.”

“Is it so obvious?”

“Yeah, you’re almost shaking. What’s the problem?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I’ve never shown him this side of me, I guess. At work, I’m much more confident than this. But as much as I try to convince my brain tonight’s a work event, it doesn’t stick. “I feel like a fraud. What if they ask questions I can’t answer? I’m not an event manager—I’ve never done this before.” My head shakes left and right. “I don’t know anything about fashion. I don’t know who these people are. I’ll say the wrong thing, and everyone will laugh, and I’ll embarrass you and the company and —”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Shane grasps my shoulders. “Breathe, Heaven.”

Easier said than done. And it isn’t exactly helping that he’s touching me, his hands firm and warm on my skin. “There’s so much that can go wrong. What if I’m in way over my head?”

He huffs, like such a ridiculous thought deserves no attention. “You’re not. You’re handling it all like a pro. Much better than any other event manager I’ve ever worked with. I don’t know if it’s because you’re so likable and people can’t say no to you, or if you’re the best multitasker in this world. But this event will be a success because of you.”

I give him an unconvinced shrug. I know he's trying to calm me down, so I don't point out that he's working twice as hard as me, and that my work of coordination wouldn't be worth half a penny if it wasn't for all the talented people who'll play a part in the event.

"Hey. Why don't we take it one step at a time?" His thumb strokes the spots below my shoulders. "Tonight, it's all about tasting pretentious food and impressing some clients."

"I don't know how to impress clients," I protest.

"You don't need to do anything. You're impressive as it is."

I look into his glimmering eyes. This is the second compliment he's given me tonight, and I feel like I should reciprocate. Tell him he's much more impressive than me. How having him around feels magical, maybe like I've won the lottery. Or how I love his desserts. How I wish I could eat nothing else but the delicious pastries he bakes for me. How, since tasting his desserts, every boxed pastry I've eaten tastes bitter.

But I get lost in the endless brown of his irises, and while I am, I can't put two words together. Instead, I dream of him leaning his head forward. Of his lips grazing mine and his stubble scraping my skin. I almost convince myself he'll do it when we keep staring at each other in silence, and his hands still squeeze my arms.

"You'll do great."

His hands retreat, and the lack of his warm skin on mine almost floors me, but I force the corner of my lips to rise. True, he didn't kiss me, but he tried to make me feel better. He still thinks I'm impressive.

He walks, but I hold his arm. "Wait."

"Yes?"

"What if they ask about the location? You never told me your thoughts about my choice."

He grins. "It doesn't matter what I think."

It surely matters more than what I think. As he strides away, I hurry by his side. "So which one will you send them?"

"I've already sent them my recommendation."

"You did?" I gasp. "What is it?"

He reaches for the restaurant's door, then nudges his head toward it. "Let's find out."



WE WALK toward a long table—ten, maybe fifteen people sitting around it. I almost want to turn around and leave because I can feel all eyes on me, even if they probably aren't. And Shane maybe *is* a fortune teller because as soon as that thought crosses my mind, his hand clasps my elbow, and we keep advancing.

“Shane, boss man!” A blonde, middle-aged and utterly gorgeous woman walks up to us and kisses both of Shane's cheeks. “How are you? How is everything?”

He grins, and I can almost see him dial the charisma up a notch, as if he's wearing his clients-only mask. I bet if I had half his experience with this, I'd have one too, but I never deal with clients, and I'm like a fish out of water.

“I'm doing great. How about you?” he answers.

Her eyes shift to me. “Oh, I didn't know your wife was joining us. Nice to meet you.” She offers me her hand to shake as my cheeks redden.

“No, no. She's not—” Shane quickly tries to recover from the obvious shock written on his face. “She's the project manager in charge of the event. Not my—no.” He turns to me. “No. I'm not married. No.”

Geez. Did I count five “nos”? I try not to let the fact that he looks appalled by the idea sink in and smile instead, though I give him a murderous glare. He needs to keep his shit together for me tonight. “Nice to meet you. Heaven Wilson.”

“I'm Therese,” she answers, still sending amused glances at Shane. “Did you say Heaven?”

“Yes, Heaven. Like . . .” I point my finger up.

Bringing a hand to her chest, she chuckles. “Oh, wow. That is a particular name.”

“I never noticed,” I say with a playful smile.

After locking arms with me, she drags me to the table. “She's funny, Shane! Better than that scared little thing you worked with last year.” She focuses her cutting gaze on me. “Come, let's introduce you to the crew.”

We make our way to the rest of the people, and there's a quick general introduction and a whole lot of handshaking that leaves me flustered. I hope I won't need to remember these people's names, especially because, aside from Therese, they're all older white men with receding hair in different shades of

gray.

Once we sit side by side, Shane is back to his impenetrable self and holds everyone's interest as he explains the progress we're making with the event. Words confidently roll out of his lips, and I stare in awe until the waiters bring us a selection of wines.

Pinot, Verdicchio, Porto wine . . . They seem to be all here. I've chosen them—together with the caterer's sommelier—based on pairings, fruitiness, notes and hints, and a bunch of other things I understand close to nothing about.

When the first comments pop up, there's a consensus that the wines are all amazing. We all fill the preference forms I've prepared beforehand and give them to the caterer. They'll help me establish which items will actually make it to the final menu and which won't.

I keep silent, sipping white wine and listening to the conversations taking place around me. Though I get a few looks from the men sitting at the table, no one interacts with me, so I relax. It looks like tonight, it's Shane's turn to save my ass.

The waiters move around the table in perfect synchrony and lay plates with multiple appetizers in front of each of us, as one of them explains what we're about to eat. I know each of these weird-looking finger foods too—I could go as far as to recite their ingredients. I had to include everything in a folder, then cross-reference it with the guest lists and their food allergies or restrictions.

“Questions?” the waiter asks, but everyone looks entranced by the appetizers, so Shane shakes his head with a, “Thank you.”

We dig in. Or rather, I do. My opinion, tonight, doesn't matter, and I enjoy the sweet and sour flavors marrying over my taste buds as I take in the clients' comments.

“Which ones are vegan?” A bald man on the far end of the table asks Shane, who glances down at the food, his eyes darting from one side to the other. He doesn't remember.

Clearing my throat, I point at each of the vegan hors d'oeuvres. “Savory stuffed mushrooms with vegan sausage, cucumber spring rolls, spinach fatayers, and vegan baba ganoush.”

When everyone stares at me, Shane grins. “Right. Heaven has personally dealt with each of the aspects of the event for the past two weeks.”

Therese gasps, her full lips bent up. “Oh, so all the lovely improvements

of the last few days are your doing?”

I shake my head, because they aren't. I'm not one to be humble about my work, and when I deserve praise, I take it, but this has been a team effort.

Shane speaks before I have a chance to. “Yes. Our previous manager had a personal situation to take care of, and Heaven was transferred from another project to help us out.”

His words don't feel like Billy's, nor does his beaming expression. Maybe it's that those plump lips are involved with both or how his sweet eyes light up as he speaks, but it's not just that. It's that he means it—he really is grateful.

“How wonderful. And you'll be at the event?”

I turn to Therese. “You bet. I'll be there at least twelve hours before you arrive and twelve after you've left.”

One of the men—the one with a big mustache and a puffy red face—lets out a grunt of approval. “Good. Work is important. I can't listen to all that nonsense about overtime and shorter work days. It's good to see some young women, like yourself, still work hard.”

I force my lips shut, although his comment is about as ancient as my dad's old Fiat, when Shane shoots me one of his dazzling, stomach-churning smiles. Almost like he's proud of me for not reacting to it. Please. He knows how much patience it takes in our job not to snap at the incompetence and ignorance of some people. I was born for this.

“Shane is a hard worker too, you know?” Therese says as she leans forward, almost like she's sharing a secret.

“I *do* know. Working with him isn't for everyone,” I say, immediately regretting my words, but Therese bursts out laughing, and Shane's eyes gleam as he takes a sip of wine.

“Men like him aren't for everyone,” she whispers, and when she winks at me, I quickly look back at my plate.

Whether she's matching us up out of her own volition or she picked up on the vibe between Shane and me, I almost want to drag her to the bathroom and ask her if he likes me. Unfortunately, that'd be wildly unprofessional, so I eat my hors d'oeuvre and keep my mouth shut.

Chapter 13

Two Non-Dates



“HEAVEN, have you seen the models for this year’s event?”

I swallow the ceviche and turn to Therese. “Oh, yes. They’re all so beautiful. And the dresses . . .” I nod, like I have any idea what I’m talking about, and my cheeks heat up.

“This is Heaven’s first experience in the fashion world,” Shane explains. At my murderous look, he casually grins. “She usually works with marketing campaigns.”

“Wow! I imagine that’s quite different.”

It feels like everyone’s focus shifts on me, and I gently bow my head. Freaking Shane. Why did he have to put me in the spotlight? “Oh, very. I’ve never dealt with suppliers, menus, and locations. My work mostly remains online.” Faces scrunch around the table, and I make eye contact with each table member. “But there’s also a lot that’s similar. I monitor everyone’s work and make sure nothing’s left behind.”

Therese takes a bite of her bruschetta, like she’s already lost interest in the topic. “Oh, I meant to tell you, Shane. I absolutely love the location.”

Shane’s face twists with amusement, and I seriously consider kicking him under the table. He’s kept the mystery going long enough. If Therese asks something about the location, I won’t be able to answer, because I still don’t know which one it is.

“Those stairs . . . Oh, I can picture all the guests walking down with their beautiful gowns and tuxedos. You know, I think we should station a couple of photographers down there. Those would be some beautiful shots.”

I take a mental note to tell the photographers, and she keeps shaking her head with a sparkle in her eyes. Two of the three places Shane and I saw have

beautiful stairs that lead to the upper floor, so I'm still not sure whether he has recommended they choose the first or third location.

"And the crown moldings," she continues. "I have to say, you have outdone yourself. It's even better than last year's villa."

Shane's amusement hits me in waves, but I refuse to look back at his smug face. He knows this is killing me, and he should really try to do a better job at hiding how pleased he is.

"I'm so very glad to hear you say that, Therese." He brings his glass to his lips and takes a sip. "What did you think of the main room?"

"Oh, that's the best part! Those high ceilings, and that beautiful crystal chandelier cascading right in the middle of the room. It's just marvelous, isn't it?"

My head turns to Shane, who's smirking. He knows I know. "You chose the first location."

Slowly shaking his head, he purses his lips. "No. You did."

"But you've seconded it."

He shrugs. "It was the best option."

It was. I know it was. It had the biggest kitchen, which we'll need, considering the amount of food to be served. And it also had the most gorgeous garden, with beautiful flowers and a large space by the pool where we'll be able to serve appetizers. Plus, it was by far the most luxurious, at least to my inexperienced eyes. So it shouldn't surprise me. Yet it does. Once again, he trusted my judgment with something I don't have too much experience in. Once again, he treated me as his equal.

When he notices the shocked expression on my face, he cocks his head to the side. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes—yes, it was."

He leans closer to my ear and whispers, "Great work, Heaven."

Great work. I've heard it plenty of times, even if it's never been whispered into my ear. But it has a whole other meaning, coming from him. I've impressed him, which means much more than it should. And I'm pretty sure that isn't the reason the hairs on my neck spike at the soft tone of his voice.

"Will it be possible to change the curtains, though? That tone of red is a little too gruesome for my taste."

We both turn to Therese. Either she didn't pick up on the moment going on between us, or she's done playing Cupid.

“Yes, of course. We’re working on a series of changes in the interiors. The curtains and carpets will be removed. Instead, we’ll choose more soothing greens, in line with the theme of the event,” I explain.

Her brows raise, and she picks at the food on her plate. “Oh. That’s great. That’s really great work.”

See? Not the same thing. Shane’s “great work” rolls differently in my ear.



WE WALK to the front of the restaurant. We’ll need to stick around five minutes longer to discuss with the caterer the general feedback we’ve received, which was positive. Aside from a couple of appetizers that didn’t sit well with a few of the men—probably because they’re a little too flamboyant for their old-school taste—the dinner was very well-received.

“Your first dinner with clients,” Shane says, joining me at the counter by the entrance. “How was it?”

“It was good. I almost shot myself twice, but all in all, this was very educational.”

Arms crossed, he hums in thought. “Let me guess . . . Was it when Charles talked about the decline of the fashion industry?”

“Huh,” I say with a tilt of my head. “I guess it was three times.”

He gives me a half-laugh, then motions at me to speak.

“When Charles talked about the decline of the fashion industry, when Therese went on a rant about the models’ diets, and when the bald guy with the weird eyes complained about the pasta not being cooked properly for twenty minutes.”

“Oh, yes. That was truly insufferable.”

As we chuckle, a blonde woman with the greenest eyes I’ve ever seen struts out of the kitchen. “Hi, I’m Linda.” She walks directly to Shane with a suggestive smile, as if we haven’t spoken on the phone plenty before. I’m pretty sure he has no clue who this woman is.

“Nice to meet you. Shane Hassholm.” He motions toward me. “You’ve probably spoken to my colleague, Heaven Wilson.”

Linda acknowledges me with a disgusted jerk of her head, then focuses back on him. “How did you like the dinner, Mr. Hassholm?”

Oh, okay. Is that how she wants to play this?

Shane throws me an awkward look, promptly returned by me. I can't say for sure why this woman is pretending I'm not here, but if I have to take a guess, she likes Shane's broad shoulders and chin dimple more than she likes my thin waist.

I get it, but it doesn't make it less rude.

As if to prove a point, her forest green eyes study him from head to toe, and a wider grin appears on her lips when he mumbles that dinner was excellent.

With an eye roll, I interject, "I've collected the feedback from our clients, and I should get you an answer by tomorrow morning. But I can already tell you that the bacon-wrapped dates and the mini-tacos were not much appreciated."

I'm only halfway through my thought, and Shane might just be onto something when he tells me I talk too much, because Linda, who hasn't bothered looking at me while I spoke, continues, "And will you be at the event, Mr. Hassholm?"

Wow, how subtle. I cup my mouth, trying to hide my amusement, as Shane takes a step back. "Yes. Well, terrific to meet you, Linda. Heaven will send you the final menu, and, uh . . . we'll see you at the event."

There isn't an ounce of excitement in his voice, but Linda bats her lashes and twirls her pretty sunset blonde locks as she walks us to the door.

I have to give it to her, she knows how to show what she wants. I almost envy her confidence. She's beautiful, but she's coming onto him so bluntly. How the hell does one do that?

Shane's hand moves between my shoulder blades, and I wince in surprise as I follow him out of the restaurant. It's almost fun to see how quickly he gets out of there. Like a scared animal.

Linda-the-predator walks us out of the restaurant and waves goodbye—she's short of a sign saying "Linda hearts Shane Hassholm," honestly. We walk through the parking lot, and I madly want to mess with him over Linda, but I'm also quite aware he's my boss and don't want to overstep. After all, we're friendly, we're not *friends*.

"Cold?" he asks, and it's so casually forced that I can't hold back my chuckle. He closes his eyes, slowly shaking his head. "That woman terrified me."

"She scared the crap out of me too."

"Yeah, well. It wasn't you she was after, was it?"

He looks back, and he seems genuinely concerned, so I pat his arm. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll see you to your car and make sure you get home safely.”

“Why, thank you, Miss Wilson. I believe that’d be appropriate.”

He opens the car door for me, and once again, his hand holds mine until I’m sitting. When I turn to thank him, I notice his gaze, fixated on my exposed thigh.

I quickly pull the satin fabric over me, and he closes the car door, making his way to the driver’s seat. “Okay. The clients are happy, and we both survived. I think we’re doing good.”

And I think he’s changing the topic. “We’re doing great.”

We make our way out of the parking spot, driving through the dark streets in comfortable silence until he clears his voice. “Am I making any progress?” When I turn to him, he shrugs. “With the desserts.”

Oh, that. I stare at the road. “I don’t remember any clause in our deal about giving you hints.”

“I don’t remember asking for any hint.” He puckers his lips. “I am confident I’ll figure it out before you go back to your little floor.”

My little floor. “Maybe that’s what I’ll ask you to do when I win.”

“What?”

I shrug. “Spend the day on *my little floor*, make small talk with all the *artists* roaming around our plebeian offices. Use plenty of words to say very little. That type of thing.”

He shakes his head like he’s not that terrified at the prospect. “I can think of worse punishments.”

“Well, now, give me some credit. This is only what I’ve come up with on the spot.”

With a chuckle, he keeps driving toward my apartment, and silence settles again. Only, this time, I’m not that comfortable. All of a sudden, the awareness that the fun portion of the night is over grips my stomach and squeezes me. The joy of being around Shane is sucked out of me, and I can only focus on what happens next.

Nevaeh has a date to go on.

“Is everything okay?” he asks. I turn to him, terrified he’s actually reading my thoughts or something, and he observes me for a few seconds. “You looked upset for a minute.”

“I’m not,” I say, much too quickly, then I inhale deeply. “I just . . . I promised to meet someone tonight and I don’t feel like it.”

“I could keep you busy for a couple more hours if you’d like. Give you an excuse to get out of it.”

I think I can barely hide my surprise, because he looks away. “I can try to guess your favorite dessert. Or—err . . . There’s a lot of work to do. We could stop by the office.”

I peer down at my legs, but I don’t know how to react. His first proposition seems . . . interesting. Stopping by the office, though? He’s work-zoning me. And I’m not going to make him spend two hours at the office on a Friday night to get me out of something that I know I have to do.

“No, that’s all right,” I say. It doesn’t matter what his intention was, after all. As much as I appreciate his attempt at getting me out of tonight, this is when I get my revenge. Tonight, I’ll get to walk out of Red Cube and know I’ve repaired some of the hurt that Alex has caused me. “I need to do this.”

“Okay.” He pulls over, and I notice we’re under Emma’s apartment. “I’ll see you at the office, then.” He rests back on the seat, his body slightly turned to me.

Moving my hand to the door handle, I shoot him a quick smile. “Thank you.”

“You helped me. I’m the one who should thank you,” he says as he looks away.

“That’d be an awful waste of perfectly good words, and I know you’re all about efficiency.”

“That I am,” he confirms. “Thank you, anyway. Tonight was . . . less boring.”

Less boring. Hell, I’ll take it. After telling me I’m special and impressive, it’s a bit of a downer, but it’s a compliment nonetheless. “No problem. I’ll see you around the office.”

“Good night, Heaven.”

“Good night, Mr. Hassholm.”

I leave his car, careful not to show him too much of my boobs, legs, or ass, but I’m pretty sure I flash him a little. When Emma lets me in and I enter the building, I turn to him with a wave and watch him drive away.



I GET out of my cab, then walk beside the Silverton Hotel and toward the bar.

Once my eyes land on the “Red Cube” sign shining across the street, my heart squeezes. Alex told me he’d be playing football with his friends tonight, so this is happening. He lied to me, to meet with, well . . . me.

Drying my hands on my jeans, I try to relax my shoulders. I know I planned on wearing a stunning dress and leaving him wondering what the hell is wrong with him for cheating on such a hot bitch like me, but after thinking it over, I decided it might be overkill. I don’t need to impress him with my looks. First, because he’s quite familiar with them, after five years. And second, because there are much more important reasons I hope he’ll come to regret tonight.

When I reach for the door of the bar, my hands are trembling. Really, they’re shaking so hard that I’m unable to perform simple actions like sending Emma an SOS. text.

Maybe I should have let her come—she begged me to, but I refused. I thought having her here, pressuring me to go in and make a big scene, would just make me nervous, but maybe it would have made me feel a little more confident, and not having time to think would have actually played in my favor.

“Excuse me?”

I flinch when someone speaks, and I move to the left to let the girl behind me in. This is my moment—it’s now or never.

I cross the entrance and glance around. My heart is so loud in my ears I can barely hear the chattering of people inside or the music in the background. It’s all a big blur of white noise that dies under the quick and noisy thumps.

As I scout the room, I feel suspended in space and time. It’s a weird sensation, almost like the next beat will either be the most painful one yet, or the one that finally allows me some relief.

After all, he might have backed off at the last minute. Maybe he created the profile, and he chatted with girls, but this is the first time he’s actually agreed to meet one of them. And maybe he realized it’s a mistake and left, deleted his RadaR profile and is home waiting for me with an apology and a bouquet of roses. It wouldn’t fix things, but it’d be better than the alternative.

My heart flutters, waiting. But he’s nowhere to be seen.

A mix of relief and disappointment washes over me. I’m already late, so he should be here, right? Unless—did he change his mind? Maybe this *was* the first time, and he couldn’t go through with it.

I take out my phone, and a red notification with a bright orange flame tells me I have a message.

Can't make it. Next time?

So . . . he did change his mind. He's not coming. Does this mean he loves me? Maybe that he wants to fix things? And why does that sound even worse than the alternative?

Chapter 14

A Coffee Accident



WHEN I GET HOME, Alex isn't there. And I don't know what to think. Maybe he *is* playing football, and he planned to meet Nevaeh, but changed his mind. All I know is that I don't think I'll be able to sleep until I see him, so I can try to make sense of this situation.

I sit on the couch and read. Hours go by, and I can hardly focus on the words. Finally, I give up and turn the TV on. When that doesn't distract me either, I begin pacing. It's been a long, emotionally exhausting week, and the tension is finally getting to me.

My head throbs with pain by three a.m., when the door of the apartment opens and Alex comes in. "Oh," he says, dropping the keys on the entrance furniture. "You're awake."

He looks distraught, his jaw taut and his eyes tired. Maybe it's guilt—God, what if I'm right and he changed his mind? What if he confesses to everything? The thought of it makes me sick, because he might suggest we work through our differences and make up, and that's not what I want anymore.

Not after everything he's done, and definitely not since Shane.

"I was waiting for you. It's so late—what happened?"

A hand over his tired face, he mumbles, "There was a problem at work."

"At work?"

"Yeah. My boss called me the moment I stepped out of here. I had to go in and calm a lot of people down." With a bitter chuckle, he sits on the couch and brings a hand to his sandy blond undercut. "Like I don't have better shit to do with my time."

Oh. So . . . he didn't change his mind. He just couldn't be at the date he

set because of work. In the text, he did say “next time,” so I guess he wasn’t just saying. There *will* be a next time. And I just spent half of the night waiting for the jerk. “Yeah? Did you have fun plans?” I mutter. Without waiting for his answer, I stride away. Unfortunately, the sound of his steps echo behind me.

“What the fuck? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I fit under the blanket, then turn the other side. Whatever, as long as I don’t have to look at him.

“Heaven?” He sits by my side. “Stop being controlling all the time. I didn’t have time to text.”

Inhaling deeply, I close my eyes and search for the last ounce of strength I have to pretend I don’t know. It’s somewhere in my brain, but everything else is so soaked in anger, I struggle to find it.

Remember what the stakes are, Heaven.

“You’re right,” I mumble through gritted teeth. Four more weeks. My credit score. He’s my problem, not my friends’. I can do this. “I’m sorry.”

He cups my shoulder and gives me a gentle squeeze. “That’s okay. I could use a load off, though, it was a shitty night. Do you want to suck me off?”

It’s like a kick to my stomach that leaves me breathless. Setting aside the fact that he’s only asking because he couldn’t see his original date, once again, the way he asks gives me the wrong type of goosebumps. Once again, he behaves as if I’m just here to please him. To tend to the apartment, cook his food, empty his testicles.

I struggle not to recoil from his touch, but I lie still. All my muscles are tense—my whole body is begging me to go. I don’t. But I also know I can’t continue like this. I can’t spend the next month feeling uneasy in my home, having to withstand his hands on me, his kisses, his requests. “No.”

With a sigh, he stands.

“Alex, my company’s sending me to a seminar,” I burst, quickly sitting up.

He opens the wardrobe. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. For a week. It’s out of town.”

He nods. “All right.”

Complete disinterest. He doesn’t care whether I’m around—frankly, it’s almost insane he believed my lie to start with. He knows about the Devon event. I told him it’s last minute and he can see how overworked I am. But he

doesn't notice, he doesn't question. Because he doesn't care. Instead, he's probably thinking about all the dates he can line up.

Lying back down, I breathe in relief. At least, I can hole up in Emma's apartment for a week. And once I'm back . . . that's a problem for the future. As of now, I just need to get away from him.



THE MARBLE HORSES look at me, and I at them. The water pouring out of their mouths must be dirty and cold, but I've been sweating for long enough that it's appealing nonetheless.

I drink a sip of iced tea from my aluminum bottle, then set it back inside my bag. When my phone beeps with a text from Emma, I quickly check it with no intention of answering. It's been eight days since my almost-date with my almost-ex-boyfriend, and I've been staying at her place ever since. I'm unfortunately about to go back home, but before I can, I need some alone time to process everything.

A kid screams, rushing beside me, and a few more follow. On the other side, a couple chats and giggles as they hold some shopping bags. The kids reach the white ice cream truck, and a group of teenagers sit by the benches at the center of the square.

I think I could stay here all day. Take it all in. Which is what I try to do, but my mind keeps going *there*. To the prison I'm about to go back to.

At least Emma welcomed me with open arms and hasn't insisted on me taking the money. We've had a fun week. Lots of ice cream, pizza, terrible movies and laughing. Shane hasn't texted Nevaeh once, but I haven't had the chance to miss him, because we've been spending a lot of time together at the office. It's been good.

Though I thought I'd probably never use the key he gave me, when I arrived at the girl's graffiti a couple of hours ago, there were too many people for me to slide along the back wall unnoticed, so I had to go through the door. I spent the longest time in his secret spot, thinking.

With the light of the day, I've noticed many more details. For example, I'm pretty sure the roof fell down because it gave in to the weight of weeds growing on it. They're still cascading from the roof down into the hole, hanging several feet above the ground. And the graffiti of the little girl

pointing at the secret passage? There's one in the internal garden too. The girl is wearing the same dress and has a similar surprised expression, but she's throwing her hands up in victory. I wonder who spray painted those and why. Was it Shane? Or did he find that entrance because of the graffiti?

A girl walks beside me and turns with her back to the fountain in a cloud of laughter.

Oh, no, she'll throw a coin. A coin that will soon turn green and disgusting together with the hundred similar ones already there.

I glare as her friend takes a video of her chucking the small metal disk into the fountain, then twirling around. Ugh. Teenagers. Don't they have TikToks to make?

"Are you going to push that girl in?"

I jump up at Shane's voice and turn to him much quicker than I should. "Mr. Hassholm," I say as he fits his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

His smile is pleased as his eyes land on mine. It's like there's melted chocolate in his irises. "Heaven. What are you doing here?" He points at the fountain. "Besides glaring at teenagers?"

Shit. He could have caught me inside his secret place. He could still figure out something doesn't add up. Especially if I don't lose my panicked expression and answer. "I live a couple of streets from here."

"That's right. You do." He nods. "It's a nice neighborhood."

"Do you live nearby?"

"No. I'm ten minutes away from the office."

Silence stretches between us. This is the first time I've seen him in a t-shirt and jeans, if you exclude the pictures he sent Nevaeh. He's model-worthy. Godlike in a tight white shirt with a bright red breast pocket that's just so gorgeous on him, I have to assume it's been draped around his perfect muscles, adapted to his wide shoulders and torso. Which reminds me that . . . crap, I'm wearing my worn-out leggings and an old, oversized t-shirt I use as a dress. There's also no makeup on my face, and my hair is up in a messy bun. This must be quite a different image from last week's inappropriately revealing dress.

"The clients loved the table setting. I got an email this morning. Did you hear from the construction guys?"

I cock my head to the side, disappointed work is all he wants to talk about when my head is spinning from the deep and earthy smell of soap coming from him and his dazzling smile. "I don't think I'm paid enough to work on a

Saturday.”

His hand moves to his nape, and I can't help but stare at his biceps flexing. “Of course, sorry. It's—uh . . . force of habit, I guess.”

We keep smiling politely, and I can't explain the tension between us. It's almost like we're aware there's no real reason for us to talk any longer, but neither of us wants to stop. Or maybe it's just me.

“Do you want a coffee? Or, I don't know . . . lunch?”

It's ten in the morning, so lunch isn't really an option. But I'm too flustered at the awareness that it isn't *just me* to point it out. He wants to spend time together. “I'd love a coffee.”

“Yeah? There is this nice café a couple of streets from here.”

“The one with the big bookshelves?”

He grins. “You know it? They make the best cookies.”

“They totally do! Emma and I go there all the time. The owner loves us. She calls us Hemma because we're always together.”

We walk toward the café, casually chatting. Being in his company is easier now—I don't feel as tense. And he's completely different from how he is at the office. He could even fool some people into believing he's a friendly guy. He keeps talking, and I'm sure what he's saying is interesting, but his relaxed grin distracts me. There's dark stubble over his cheeks—considering at work he's always clean shaven, it can't be more than a couple of days old. Either way, it fits him.

His brows bend, bounce, pivot. They're the most expressive part of his face as he speaks, and for the first time, I notice a little scar right below the right one, above the warm brown of his eyes.

I wonder if he looks as enthusiastic as he does right now when he bakes those delicious desserts he's been feeding me. I can't choose which one I liked the most—it must be the apple cake I found on my desk on Wednesday, or the lemon bars waiting for me yesterday morning. But every other sweet treat he baked for me over the last two weeks has left me speechless. What will wait for me on my desk on Monday?

“What is it?” he asks when he notices my insistent stare. “Come on. What?”

“Nothing. I was thinking about your desserts.”

He points at a store on the other side of the street. “You see that shop?”

“The shoe shop?”

“That's where my grandpa and grandma's bakery was,” he says, fitting

his hands into his pockets.

Does it make him sad that the bakery is gone? That now there's a run-down shop that sells hiking boots?

He keeps walking, and when he notices my inquisitive gaze, he shrugs. "I'm used to it. Before this shop, there was an internet café, and before that, a pizza place. It's been a while."

"Why did the bakery close?"

Nostalgia etches into his beautiful, dark eyes. "My grandpa passed, and my grandma continued working at the bakery until she died too. She used to say it was the only way she could still feel her husband with her."

"I bet they spent more time there than at home."

"For sure. When my parents left me with them, which was most of the time, they'd wake me up at four in the morning and we would all go to the bakery. I'd sleep on the couch in the back, and they would wake me up for school with dessert every day."

A smile transfigures his gorgeous face with joy, and I can almost see a kid version of him, sleeping on a tiny couch with a blanket on, waking up to sweet old faces and the smell of butter and sugar.

"Did your parents sell it when they passed?" I ask.

When his grin flattens, I almost wish I didn't pry. "Yes. My dad is in politics. My mom worked as a dentist, so sticky treats weren't her thing. They had no time, or interest in keeping the bakery open, so they sold it. But my grandma worked there until the day before she died. She was eighty-eight."

"Oh my God!" I shriek.

"Yeah, the woman was impressive. Hard worker. My mom says I took after her in more ways than she can count. I'm pretty sure it's the best compliment she's ever given me."

He opens the door of the café, and I'm welcomed by the wooden floors and wall panels as the rich aroma of coffee envelops me. I love this place. There's a gigantic tree in the center of the room and off-white columns divide the space. Every wall is filled with books. All of them. The one behind the counter too, but I suspect those books are probably stained beyond the salvage point.

"Heaven!" I turn to the old lady who owns the café. She's the smallest human being I've ever seen, with puffed up cheeks and a mass of wild caramel blonde hair tied up over her head—a little ball of energy as she

sprints to me. “Oh, dear. Where’s Emma?”

Shane and I share a smile before I focus back on Mrs. Powdy, whose brows are bent with concern. “Emma is at home. I’m here with a . . .” My hand points toward Shane, but I freeze. Should I call him a friend? Colleague? Boss?

“Shane Hassholm,” he says, offering Mrs. Powdy his hand to shake.

She shoots me a proud look, her thin lips bending in a knowing smile.. “Oh . . . So no more Hemma? Is it Shaven, now?”

Oh, crap. Although I can’t see them, my cheeks must be closer to crimson red than my usual pink. “Yeah, anyway,” I say, trying to change the topic, then I widen my eyes, “I mean, no. I’m—”

“This place is wonderful. I’ve been here before, but I don’t think we’ve had the chance to talk,” Shane turns to Mrs. Powdy, saving me from the awkwardness again.

“Come, come,” she says, clapping her hands excitedly as her apron flaps left and right. “I’ll show you our wall of history while Heaven takes care of your order.”

Mrs. Powdy doesn’t wait for his agreement before dragging him away, and I can’t help but giggle at the way his brows furrow. I bet that’s the first time someone touched him that aggressively without signing a legal form first.

I walk to the counter, waving at the barista. “Hi, Jill. Two coffees, please.”



“MRS. POWDY! Can I get Shane back?”

The short woman spins around, telling us to enjoy our coffee and not to even *think* about paying. But she always says that, so I’ve already paid.

“Does everybody love you?” Shane asks as he follows me through the café with a curious gaze.

We sit at a small white table—my favorite, because it is terrazzo-style, with little colorful mixed stones peeking through the white material. “Mrs. Powdy loves everyone.”

Stirring his coffee, he shakes his head. “It’s not just her. Your colleagues, the people who gave us the tours of the locations, everyone at the dinner, Mr.

Thompson.”

“You mean *Essentially-Billy*?” I ask with a smirk.

His shoulders shake with laughter. “Yes. Appropriate nickname. You should hear how *Essentially-Billy* talks about you.”

I shrug. “He is a real suck-up. The master of ass-kissing.”

“No, Heaven. It’s you. You’re a nice, considerate person, and people like you.”

Okay, he’s right. I enjoy being liked, even if I don’t take shit from people. I make an effort when I can because it feels good. “You know who people like?” I ask, and he tilts his head. “Bakers. Why don’t you have your own bakery? You obviously love it.”

He grins—like he knows I’m changing the topic. “It’s a hobby. Often, when your hobby turns into your job, it stops being fun.”

I get that. If he were to open a bakery, baking would only be a small part of his job. But it’s not like he can’t handle stress or doesn’t like managing. I’d say he likes it a little too much. “Are you sure that’s the reason?” I tease.

“Yes?” His right brow perks up. “What do you think is the real reason?”

I give him a single-shoulder shrug. “Maybe you’re afraid of failing.”

“I’ve never failed at anything in my life, Heaven.”

“Which is why the possibility of failing at what you love the most terrifies you,” I insist, and when the corner of his lips lifts, I shrug. “Just a guess.”

“Okay, you’re right. Your appreciation for my desserts flatters me, but I’m not sure you’re qualified enough to deem them sale-worthy. Or to recommend I base my livelihood on cheesecake.”

He takes a sip of his coffee, and with a pointed look, I answer, “I’m not qualified enough to manage the Devòn event either, yet here we are.”

“You’re almost as cocky as me, you know that?” he whispers, leaning forward.

Mirroring his position, I click my tongue. “I’m much cockier than you.”

He offers me a wide grin, his eyes shooting to my lips for a second as he rests his back on the chair. My heart is fast in my chest, the cloud of sexual tension between us so thick that I’m surprised my bra hasn’t snapped open on its own volition.

“Well, if you ever change your mind, I’ll be your manager,” I mumble, trying to regain some sort of control over the situation. “You bake, and I’ll take care of everything else.”

“Manager, huh? That’s your position in our business?”

“Yes. Head chief manager of the board of directors and kings.”

With an amused smile, he threads his fingers through his hair, styling them back. “Okay. What’s mine?”

“Well, you’re the baker, of course.”

I take a sip of my coffee as he leans with his elbows on the table, resting his chin on his hands. “Of course. And are we going into this fifty-fifty?”

“If you mean profits, yes. Investments . . . absolutely not. Your dream, your investments. I’ll be everyone’s boss, that’s my contribution. Plus, I’m *really* nice.”

When he laughs, I playfully hit his arm. Slowly, his smile softens, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down repeatedly as his eyes roam over my face. “I—I was thinking . . .” He looks to the right, then focuses back on me. “Maybe we could—there’s this nice place by the canals.” He scratches his head and shrugs. “Can I bring you out for dinner sometime?”

Oh. My body winces. Shane’s asking me out. Me. Not Nevaeh. Me. I stare at him, and he swallows again as his jaw tenses. Sure, it isn’t easy to ask someone out, even if that someone is me.

He seems to remember something and moves his hands up. “Don’t—don’t feel you have to say yes. I know I’m your boss right now, and, hmm . . .” He rubs his jaw. “I wanted to wait for you to go back to your department. But—I guess it just felt like the right . . . moment.”

I move my hand up. “No, I know. I don’t feel—”

“I won’t fire you if you say no,” he says with a nervous chuckle. “Sorry, I interrupted you. I know you hate that.” He purses his lips, as if to stop himself from rambling. It doesn’t work. “But you don’t have to worry about anything. If you’re not interested.”

I am. I really am. And he looks so nervous, he’s making me anxious too. I wish I could say yes. But what about Alex? Can I accept before officially breaking up with him? I guess I can. I can say yes, then go home and break things off with him, screw waiting for the raise. It feels icky, though. And dishonest.

Threading my fingers through my hair, I knock over the napkin holder. My eyes widen in terror as it slowly falls forward, hitting Shane’s coffee, and once the liquid sloshes up in the air, I almost live an out-of-body experience, and see the scene as if it’s playing in slow motion. Shane’s coffee lands back, spilling all over the table and drenching his clothes.

“Oh—shit! Shit, I’m so sorry,” I wail as he moves back to avoid being soaked more. There’s coffee all over his very white shirt. Grabbing the napkins, I furiously start mopping up the coffee on the table. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he says, squeezing his shirt in his fist to get out some of the dark liquid. “But you could have just said no.” My eyes shoot to his, and I must look pretty concerned because he shows me the palms of his hands. “Whoa, I am joking. Trying to lighten up the mood.”

I go back to cleaning, ignoring the scorching heat over my cheeks, and Mrs. Powdy joins with a sponge. She wipes the table and floor, even though I tell her I can do it, while Shane and I remain seated in an awkward silence. Well, Mrs. Powdy is speaking, but I’m not paying attention. My heart is hammering, and I’m trying to figure out what to do, what to say should he ask again.

When Mrs. Powdy leaves, I look up at him. “Mr. Hassholm, I’m so sorry.”

“You said that already. Everything’s fine, Heaven.” He dabs his damp shirt with a napkin. “And—call me Shane. I just asked you out, after all.”

“Right, Shane. Can I buy you another coffee?”

“No, really. I’m okay.”

I don’t know if he’s upset because I haven’t answered yet, or if he’s annoyed about the coffee. Maybe he’s as mortified as me, and he wants to leave. But I can’t let him go—not after he asked me out, and I attempted to melt him. “Do you want to stop by my apartment? You can clean up a little. I can try to get the stain off.”

“There’s no need. It’s an old shirt.”

“No, no,” I insist, getting up. My place is close, and Alex won’t be there until later today. I’ve called a cleaning company to come tidy up while I was away, since he seems unable to do it himself, so the apartment should be tidy too, and with my slightly obsessive minimalism, he won’t be able to tell a man’s living there. “It’ll take a minute. Wash up a little before you go home. Please, it’ll make me feel better.”

He stands too, drawing in a deep breath as he settles his deep gaze on me. “Okay, sure. Will you give me an answer, then?”

“Yes, I will,” I immediately agree.

I just . . . I don’t know what it’ll be.

Chapter 15

The Answer



AS SOON AS we step into my apartment, I point Shane to the bathroom. He told me not to worry about it a thousand times already, but I feel guilty anyway. I've drenched him with coffee. Thankfully, it didn't burn him.

And I don't want to think about what he said right before that. He asked me out. He asked me out on a date, and I spilled coffee all over his clothes.

Now, he's waiting for an answer that I can't give him. Is there a way I can ask him to ask me again tomorrow? There's no doubt in my mind that I want to say yes, but I technically still have a boyfriend.

As he enters the bathroom, I cup my face and wish I could disappear. What can I do to make it up to him? I could make coffee, but I don't think he wants me anywhere near hot beverages right now.

The noise of water coming out of the faucet is audible despite the closed door, even with the way my heart's beating out of my chest. With a frustrated groan, I drop myself onto the couch and grab my face between my hands when the front door opens.

Crap. Crap, crap, *crap*. That's Alex. What's he doing at home?

He enters the apartment and kicks his shoes off in the entrance, abandoning them on the welcome mat. "Hey, you're back early," he says, and when he hears the water going, he points at the restroom door. "Emma?"

Ignoring his displeased tone—he has no right not to like Emma—I try to get my tongue to move, words to come out of my mouth. "No. No, it's—my boss."

His head tilts. "Billy?"

I swallow. "No, the new boss."

"What happened to Billy?"

My arms cross over my stomach, anger quickly squeezing my chest. “I told you I’ve joined a new team. Events?”

“Oh, yeah,” he says, his eyes squinting like he doesn’t remember. “Why is he here?”

I fidget with the trim of my shirt. “I met him, and—we got coffee, but I spilled his on him so, I—he’s cleaning up.”

God, I sound so guilty.

His brows furrow, likely wondering why I am so flustered. It’s not like I’m worried about his reaction—I couldn’t care less about it, to be honest. But I can’t have him make a scene in front of Shane. Nor can I fathom how he’ll react when he sees Alex. He just asked me out, and I never told him I have a boyfriend.

“Why are you—” Alex spins around when Shane comes out of the restroom.

Straightening his stained shirt, Shane glances at him, then at me. “Hi,” he says, and he sounds as confused as he looks.

Alex walks to him, my stomach clenching hard as their hands meet. I guess my obsession with cleanliness also applies to someone’s soul, and Alex’s soul is filthy. I don’t want him to taint Shane with his horribleness.

“Nice to meet you. Alex.”

“Shane Hassholm.”

Shane’s gaze darts to me, and Alex must notice it, because he walks closer and wraps his arm around my shoulder. “Heaven tells me things are going well with your project.”

I never told him that, but I keep my gaze to the floor, only stealing looks at Shane. The beats of my heart are so loud in my ears I can barely hear the conversation taking place.

Shane’s brows hunch over his eyes, the beautiful lips I dream about kissing pulled into an unforgiving line. “Yes. Heaven has been a great addition to the team. Sorry we’re overworking her.”

He sounds so cold. So professional. So Mr. Hassholm.

“She’s a hard worker.” Alex affectionately kisses the side of my head, my whole body stiffening. He’s pretending to be proud of me, but he’s clearly just making a statement. That I’m his girlfriend. “Were you at the seminar too?”

Oh . . . fuck. The lie I told Alex about where I have been for the past week. I can almost feel the blood flow stopping in my veins. My heart does

too—something between not beating at all and much too fast. And Shane’s face . . . God, his face. Shock takes over his beautiful eyes for a matter of seconds, then he nods.

“Yes . . . yes, I was at the seminar too. The whole team was.”

I wiggle out of Alex’s hold as casually as I can and force myself to speak. I’d like to apologize, to explain. God knows what this must look like to him. Instead, in a weak voice, I say, “Your shirt—Can I . . .” I don’t know what I’m offering. I can’t wash it for him, he doesn’t have another one. And I can’t pay for the dry cleaning because it’s a t-shirt. He’ll toss it in the washing machine. Nor can I offer him one of my boyfriend’s shirts, obviously.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just a stain,” he says through gritted teeth.

We stare at each other. There’s plenty I’d like to say—from the looks of it, he has a few words he’d like to tell me too. Unkind ones.

“Was it hot coffee? Did my girlfriend maim you?” Alex asks.

How fucking cringy. He said it, like the show he’s been putting on wasn’t transparent enough.

Shane pats his shirt. “No. It was me. I’m really clumsy. There’s no damage, though.”

“I thought you said you spilled your coffee on him.” Alex sets his accusatory gaze on me.

“Oh, well. I was trying to be—hmm, chivalrous.” Shane smiles stiffly. “I didn’t want to . . .”

“He didn’t want to embarrass me.” I try to swallow away my nervous tension. “Thank you, Mr. Hassholm. And I’m sorry again for the shirt.”

I follow him as he strides toward the door, my all-of-a-sudden clingy boyfriend only a few steps behind. When Shane reaches for the door, he turns to Alex. “Nice to meet you,” he says, then he throws me the coldest smile I’ve ever seen. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

I hold the door in my hand as he walks across the hall. Before he turns the corner, his eyes land on me, and I beg him to forgive me. To understand. To wait before he decides he hates me.

But he lightly shakes his head and disappears down the stairs.



“WHY WERE YOU BEING SO WEIRD?”

I don't have a chance to recover from the shock of what happened before Alex begins questioning me. Funny. It looks like he doesn't share the same nonchalance about me around other men as he does about himself around other women.

Turning to him, I cross my arms. "Because you were making a show. Touching me, kissing me. You called me your girlfriend."

He scoffs. "Well, you are. What's wrong with touching you and kissing you?"

"You did it to show him I was with you."

His brows furrow. "Well, it looked like I needed to show him you were with me. He seemed pretty surprised."

I strut into the kitchen and yank the top of the coffee machine open, placing a filter inside and filling it with the brown powder. I don't want a coffee, but I need to keep my hands busy and I never ended up drinking the one I bought with Shane.

"Why didn't you tell him you have a boyfriend?"

I try hard not to lose it. I don't want to bring up RadaR now, because it'll look like I'm justifying my crush on Shane with his cheating. "Because he's my director, not my friend—he's not friendly either. I didn't tell him I have a boyfriend like I didn't tell him anything else." I hate my words as I say them, but they're partially true. I'm pretty sure they will be truer from now on.

"And why were you getting coffee with him on a Saturday morning?"

I snap the machine closed. "I was in the square. He saw me, came to say hi, then invited me for a coffee. I don't know, maybe he was trying to be nice since I'm new."

"More like he was trying to be nice since you're hot and he wants to do you."

I gape at his scowling face and immediately stare at the cabinet. "Well, even if that were the case, your little show made it clear I'm taken." Grabbing a cup, I open my mouth to ask if he wants coffee when he wraps his arms around me, and his chest is pressed against my back.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"It's been a while." His lips brush against my neck, in the way he knows I like. Taking a deep breath, I can feel my heart shrinking at every new peck against my skin, and all the anger I've felt toward him shifts into pain. Now that he's being his old self, I remember all that he threw away. The last five years of our lives together, how he tainted them.

When his arms tighten around my belly, my mind goes to all the times he's done this before. I don't think I've gone one day washing the dishes without him interrupting me like this for the first six months we lived together.

I drop my head to one side, and his kisses move to my ear.

He spins me around and kisses my lips, his hands traveling up my sides. It's awkward, his tongue much too intrusive in my mouth and his hands too rough under my shirt. Lightly pushing him away, I lean back to stop the kiss. "Alex, I'm not in the mood."

He stares back, eyes narrowed, as I wait for him to take his leave. He probably has a lot of cheating to get to and not enough time to do it anyway. "Would you have been doing this with your boss if I hadn't come back when I did?"

My lips part, but no sound comes out. Is it that obvious I like Shane?

"Of course not," I say. And I mean it. There is no way I'd taint what's between me and Shane by involving him in an affair. Not when I've already complicated everything with Nevaeh.

"Okay." He bites his upper lip. "I guess I'm a little jealous. He was looking at you—I don't know. I don't like that guy."

"He'll be my boss for a few more weeks. That's all."

He scratches his head and walks out of the kitchen, throwing a doubtful look my way.

Once he's gone, I look down at the empty cup I'm holding and sigh deeply, releasing tension off my shoulders. I feel just as hollow as this cup. There's a little brown spot on the bottom—it looks like a coffee ground. I grab the sponge and scrub, stronger and stronger, until my hands are covered in foam and the cup's filled with it.

After I wash the soap off, it's spotless, but I scrub some more. And then again, and again. Like this sponge could scrub the pain I feel, the awareness that I'm weak. That I'm letting Alex win.

I dry the cup, then set it next to the others on the shelf, observing the shiny ceramics in a straight line. They're all equally distant, with the holder to the right. White and squeaky clean. My hand reaches for one, but I hesitate. Instead, I grab the coffee pot and tilt it to the side, watching the hot liquid pour all over them.

I need something else to wash.



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN THEY MET?” Emma’s voice blares through the phone.

Alex is still on the couch, focused on the TV, so I lean against the balcony railings and look down at the people and cars populating the street below.

“They met. I went to the square this morning and ran into Shane. He asked me out on a date, and I spilled a whole cup of coffee on his shirt. I invited him over to clean up and so that we could talk, when Alex came home. And they met.”

I’ve already told her all of this, and I don’t know if she’s not paying attention—I can hear her steps on the treadmill as she runs—or if she’s too shaken by the information to process it. “Oh, what a crapfest. How did Shane react?”

“Not well. He said nothing, of course, but he gave me a look.”

“An ‘I’ll win your heart over this idiot you’re dating’ look?”

I scoff and glance back at the apartment. Alex is typing on his phone.

“An ‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you have a boyfriend’ look. Or maybe a ‘you’re dead to me’ look.”

“You’re being dramatic. He’s your boss. You don’t have to disclose your relationship status with the entire office.”

Yes, he technically has no reason to be angry at me, but we’ve also been flirting for the past few weeks. I know it, he knows it, even Emma knows it.

“Plus, it’s not like you said yes. He can’t blame you for anything. Just explain the situation on Monday.”

I grab the watering can and open up the water pump, filling it. “And what should I tell him? ‘Oh, yeah. I have a boyfriend, but he’s cheating on me. I’m catfishing him to catch him in the act and as soon as I get my raise and can afford our rent alone I’ll be breaking up with him’?”

After a few beeps, I hear her sigh. “No, but maybe you can tell him that your boyfriend is a fuck trumpet, and you’re breaking up with him. And that’s why you didn’t immediately accept to go out for dinner with your super-hot boss.”

I close the water pump and rub two fingers over my eyes. She’s right, that’s the only thing I can say. Hopefully, he’ll listen.

When I make the mistake of telling her I almost had sex with Alex in a

moment of weakness, I spend the next ten minutes receiving all sorts of insults and recommendations not to fall for it. Though I guess I deserve them. I water all my plants and take out some weeds that have grown out of the vases, then she makes me promise it'll never happen again before we finally hang up.

I yank the door to the balcony close and enter the living room, and Alex's face is still stuck to his phone. "Did my mom send you an email about the tax form?" he asks in a bored voice.

I'm about to answer when my own phone vibrates, and my heart sinks. There's a notification from RadaR, and it's not Shane. It's Alex.

ALEX:

When can I see your pussy?

I stare at the screen, unable to answer either Alex's question or his text as the temperature of my body drops and little droplets of cold sweat accumulate over my forehead.

"Heaven?"

"No, she said she didn't find the right one yet." The words drag out of my mouth before he faces the TV with a, "Hm," his phone still tight into his hands.

"Remind her next time you talk to her."

"It's your mom. Your tax returns. *You* remind her."

He twists on the couch, his lips pouting like I've offended him. "What's your problem?"

My problem. He wants to know what *my* problem is. "My job is to coordinate a million things, to make sure everything is taken care of at the office. I don't want to do it at home as well."

"Where is this coming from?" he asks as he stands.

I put my phone away and push my chin up. It's coming from him. His ungratefulness, his lies. "I don't think it's out of line for me to suggest you speak with your own mother."

His mouth opens, and when no sound comes out, I storm to the bedroom and grab my computer from my work bag, ignoring his quick steps after me.

"This is about that guy, isn't it?"

I scoff. "Are you asking me if I'm refusing to remind *your* mother about the document *you* need for *your* taxes because I have a crush on my boss?"

Letting out a gigantic sigh, he passes a hand over his face. "I'm asking if

you have a crush on him.”

“And what if I do?” I ask, aware this is the most we’ve talked in a long time. Especially about our feelings.

“If you do, then—well, stop it.”

With a bitter chuckle, I march out of the bedroom and into the home office.

“Do you?” he asks as he still follows me.

I drop the computer on my desk and connect it to the plug. I’m not sure why I’m picking a fight with him. I know this isn’t what I’m supposed to do. But I can’t take it any longer. I’ve been back for a few hours, and I feel completely trapped. I’m restless, unhappy—to be honest, I’m just done. “Maybe I do.”

Silence settles in the room—the only noise is the tip-tapping of my fingers on the keyboard. I don’t look at him. I can’t. Right now, I need to be office-me. Work-me. I can’t deal with both Shane asking me on a date, then immediately finding out about Alex combined with a breakup.

“Okay, listen.” He clasps his hands and moves them onto his lips. “You have a crush on some guy. It’s fine. We’ve been together a long time, and it’s okay to have crushes as long as you don’t act on it.”

I study his face, trying to remember something about it I like, but there’s nothing. I don’t know what’s worse. His disinterest in my crush or the fact that he’s such a hypocrite. “You’re right. Acting on it would be a mistake,” I agree.

He swallows. “Just stay away from him. It’ll pass.”

My hands ball up in fists, and although it feels like my voice will crack, I need to get the words out. They’re bubbling out of my lips, thick and dense like hot lava as they move up my throat. “Alex, I know that you’ve been—”

“Sorry,” he says as he takes out his phone, ringing in his pocket. His head drops forward, then he shows me the screen. “My boss. Hold that thought.”

I blink a handful of times, and as soon as he’s gone from the room, I slump into my chair, once again defeated.

Chapter 16

Nevaeh Strikes Again



SUNDAY IS A LONG DAY. Though I guess most people actually think it never lasts long enough. Soon, it's Monday again and we're all back to work. I agree with the concept, in theory. Except that I don't want to stay home today, and the office is where I'll see Shane. God, do I need to see him. This Sunday sucks.

Since he left my apartment yesterday, I've sent him fifteen work-related emails. He usually answers immediately—weekend or not—but that wasn't the case yesterday. I'm guessing it won't be today either.

Alex, on the other hand, went out last night. I guess when Nevaeh didn't answer, he went to bark up another tree. And since this morning, he's been at his dad's house. Or so he said.

Not that I truly care. All I can think about is Shane. Getting Shane to speak to me, getting him to forgive me. Getting him to look at me as he did at dinner last week.

Rubbing a finger over my temple, I focus on the email I'm sending him.

From: Heaven Wilson (heaven.w@imp.com)

To: Shane Hassholm (shane.h@imp.com)

I've spoken with the construction company. The catwalk will be ready by Wednesday. Let me know you got this email.

Heaven Wilson

Junior project manager at IMP

He won't answer. He's furious, and he has every right to be. Except that

he didn't let me explain, and once I do, everything will be much, much better. At least, I hope so.

After I'm done with some work and there's nothing else I can possibly do, I clean. The white marble of the kitchen and the white wooden floors in the living room accumulate dust fairly quickly, and it's noticeable enough that I vacuum every other day.

When half of the afternoon is gone, Alex is still out, Shane still hasn't answered, and I don't have any extra work to focus on. The apartment is clean, and I wonder if I should go to the square, by the horses fountain. Maybe I'll stumble into Shane again.

When the noise in my brain gets so loud I can hardly think anymore, I grab my phone and open RadaR. My eyes land on a green round icon next to Shane's name, and my heart almost cracks. It feels as if someone kicked me in my stomach, bruising my ribs, and now every breath stings.

He's not talking to me, but he's online.

That's never happened before, and I've checked plenty of times. He's obviously talking to other girls. Does what happened yesterday have something to do with this?

I can't stop myself. I open our chat and type.

NEVAEH:

Hi, there. How's your weekend going?

I stare at the screen and groan when I realize what a stupid thing I'm doing. He's not talking to me, so I'm tricking him. What the hell is wrong with me?

Once the three dots appear, I take a deep breath. I can't help the relief I feel. I haven't talked to him in twenty-four hours, and I miss him.

SHANE:

Whoa! A non-instigated message from the one and only Nevaeh. I'm flattered.

NEVAEH:

You could have said, "My weekend is wonderful #FeelingBlessed" like everyone else.

SHANE:

My weekend is wonderful #FeelingBlessed #YOLO. How's yours?

His weekend isn't that good, I'm afraid, but I won't insist and use my alter ego for evil purposes. I'm already fucking up my karma for the next twenty years.

NEVAEH:

A little boring, I have to say.

SHANE:

Another marathon?

I bray like a mule. Has this handsome, successful man nothing better to do on a Sunday afternoon than watch sci-fi movies and text with me?

NEVAEH:

Your favorite movies this time.

SHANE:

Sure. The Lord of the Rings trilogy. #PutARingOnIt

NEVAEH:

Are you serious?

I'm half-convinced he's just saying that. It's a safe bet to impress me—he knows I'm into sci-fi and fantasy movies because we've discussed it at length.

SHANE:

As a heart attack. I can quote first and second to the letter.

NEVAEH:

The third one sucks. #SméagolDeservedBetter

SHANE:

Did I already mention how awesome you are?

I immediately tell him I'll prepare a bucket of popcorn. *The Lord of the Rings* saga is long as heck. Even if we're watching only the first two, we'll end up spending the entire afternoon texting.

That awareness makes me so happy, it's pathetic.



SHANE:

If you think about it, it's crazy how good this movie is. When it came out, I was nine years old.

NEVAEH:

You're right. Next movie marathon, we're watching the Matrix trilogy.

SHANE:

Sure. Then it's my turn to choose? I say #MenInBlack

I CHUCKLE, stretching my legs across the couch. *Men in Black* is another one of my comfort movies. God, how I love that he gets it.

I'm about to text back when Alex sends me a message. Me, not Nevaeh. It says he's having dinner at his friend Glenn's house and asks if I want to join. It's probably a lie—he knows I don't get along with that guy and will say no to having dinner at his place. Also, I don't think that's ever happened before. I ignore him when I get another notification from Shane.

SHANE:

I lied before. My weekend sucked. I'm glad you showed up.

His weekend sucked, and I'm pretty sure it's my fault. My chest feels heavier, but I sigh and text back.

NEVAEH:

I'm sorry. Glad I could help.

Then, realizing that's what a virtual friend would say, I type again.

Do you want to talk about it?

I expect him to say he thought there was this girl who liked him, but he found out she's in a relationship, and I'm already cringing. How will I answer something like that? I don't want to manipulate him, to cheat. I want him to give me a chance because I convinced him to, not because Nevaeh did.

SHANE:

It's not worth thinking about.

My throat closes up, but I won't take it personally. I know he's just angry, and in his position I'd probably feel the same way. Even so, my heart shrinks

at the idea he might not want to hear me out. What will I do then?

NEVAEH:

Then don't. Think about something else.

SHANE:

I am. Right now, I'm thinking about Keanu Reeves.

NEVAEH:

I often think about Keanu.

SHANE:

Huh. Looks like I need to dust off the old leather, ankle-long jacket.

NEVAEH:

Please do. I'll be waiting for a selfie.

As I move toward the kitchen to grab a glass of water, my phone vibrates.

SHANE:

Tell me something you'd never tell a date.

I gape at the screen of my phone, but I don't know what to make of his request. Maybe it's my ego, but it feels like it's connected to what happened yesterday. He wants Nevaeh to be brutally honest because I wasn't. And I don't question it. I almost owe it to him to give him this piece of truth in all the lies that Nevaeh is.

Opening up our chat, I stare at the letters on the screen, but my mind is blank.

SHANE:

Too unconventional?

I pass a hand over my face and lean with my back against the counter.

NEVAEH:

No. It's harder than it sounds. I'm thinking.

SHANE:

When I was in high school, I slept with two best friends. It broke their friendship, and I still regret it today.

With chuckles bursting out of my lips, I wait for the next text he's typing.

See? Not that difficult! However, it might cause some second-guessing.

I tap my fingers on the cooktop—God, my life is too vanilla, isn't it?

NEVAEH:

When I was fourteen, I stole a lipstick from the mall. My friend and I did, simply for the fun of it.

When the three dots appear, I shriek and make my way back to the couch.

SHANE:

I'm not sure I'm comfortable chatting with a criminal, Nevaeh . . .

NEVAEH:

I'm not sure I'm comfortable chatting with a friendship-breaker, crook!

SHANE:

Fair enough. My turn.

As the hobbits meet Aragorn for the first time, my phone vibrates again.

SHANE:

Most of the people I work with hate me. They call me Mr. Asshole. #AndTheyAreRight

After a glance at my screen, I gasp. This is the first time that Mr. Asshole and Shane-the-baker's lives intersect, and it makes my chest tighten.

I wish I could tell him they don't hate him. They fear him, but they also know he's great at what he does. If he only stopped barking orders and actually made an effort, his employees would one hundred percent love him. But I guess it's my turn, so I focus on the TV and choose a piece of self-deprecating information to share with him.

NEVAEH:

I haven't been happy in years.

SHANE:

Why not?

I click my tongue.

NEVAEH:

I might need to check the rules of this game . . .

SHANE:

I'll find them while you type out the answer. They're in one of these drawers, it won't take more than a minute.

I chuckle, hesitating for a second before typing.

NEVAEH:

Because I settled. I decided what I had was enough and didn't look for anything better. Turns out it was not enough.

I lie on the couch and gaze at the ceiling, waiting for his answer. When my phone vibrates, I expect him to ask more questions. He doesn't.

SHANE:

My dad was shit to my mom, and we have a horrible relationship. I can barely stand to see him, so . . . no family dinners for me, I'm afraid.

NEVAEH:

Are they still together?

SHANE:

Yes. She never left him, which is part of the reason things are tense. If they had broken up when their love died out, we'd probably have a different relationship.

Can I ask him more about it? I don't know if it's part of the rules I never got to learn, nor do I want to upset him with a sensitive topic. Shaking my head, I think of how I can contribute. Nothing comes to mind.

SHANE:

This has taken quite a depressive turn. Let me fix that. Once, my mom had to pick me up and bring me home from elementary school because I soiled myself. She made me lie on my back so I wouldn't dirty the car seats. #MrDirtyPants

It's good that I'm not drinking water anymore, or it would come out of my nose. Laughter shakes me until I'm almost rolling off the couch, and now I wish I could ask for further details, but it's my turn to humiliate myself, and

I have a perfect one.

NEVAEH:

Once I was visiting my grandma over the summer, and I got so drunk that I vomited on her while she slept. And she didn't wake up. #ProjectileVomit #TheExorcistRippedMeOff

SHANE:

Damn. And here I thought my poop story was unbeatable.

The sweet awareness that I won settles in my chest. Even when it comes to humiliating myself, I'm a competitive mess.

The three dots indicate he's typing, and I start thinking of the next horrible thing to share. After all, this promises to be a much better Sunday than I envisioned.

Chapter 17

A Week as Enemies



WHEN I WAKE up on Monday, I don't feel ready to face it all. To face Shane. He has yet to answer any of my emails, and I'm pretty sure he'll continue the silent treatment. So I email the team, letting them know I'm working from home today. I know it'll slow things down a little, but cry me a freaking river. I'm a coward.

A spoiled one at that, because I'm already annoyed that today I won't start my morning with one of Shane's pastries. But I try to make myself feel better with a frozen croissant. I throw it in the oven, fill a glass with orange juice, then grab a couple of slices of bread to spread Nutella on. This would have been a fancy breakfast for me a month ago, but I guess anyone would change their mind if a gorgeous, inscrutable man had been serving them pastries for breakfast for a while.

"No work today?"

I turn to Alex, who's wearing a dark blue suit. Not the same dark blue as Shane, and in any case, it doesn't look as good on him. "I'm working from home."

He fixes the sleeves of his jacket, throwing me a stern look. "Thank you. It makes me much more comfortable."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Your crush. I'm happy if you stay away from that guy."

Unbelievable.

"I am not staying away from Shane. And whether you're comfortable or not isn't my concern. I'm working from home today, and I'll be back at the office tomorrow." I turn around before he says anything else, releasing a deep breath only when the front door closes behind him.



TUESDAY GOES SOMEWHAT SIMILARLY. I wake up intending to go to work, but I give up before breakfast. I still don't have it in me.

I'm back to the office on Wednesday, and immediately walk to my desk. It's empty, of course. I didn't expect there'd be a dessert waiting for me, but my stomach clenches anyway. The door to my office opens, and I don't have time to get scared, because I immediately notice Marina.

"Fourth Floor, you're back. We thought you two had eloped."

"Excuse me?" I ask, sitting at my desk. Is she talking about Shane?

"Mr. Hassholm is gone. You were gone too. We figured you were together."

I swallow, my cheeks heating up. "I don't know why you'd think that."

"Oh, please. You've been flirting for weeks."

"We haven't been—"

"Yes, you have," she interjects. "It makes *no* sense. You're the least attractive person on this floor." When I gape at her, she shrugs. "What? You're also smarter than most of them."

I turn my chair to the desk. "Is there anything you need, Marina?"

"The clients are thrilled with the centerpieces. Therese asked Mr. Hassholm to let you know. Now you know."

She slips out of the door and disappears—I'm surprised she doesn't leave a little puff of smoke behind her like a cartoon. And I'm left looking at the white, barren wall.

Shane has been getting my emails. He has been communicating with the clients too. He's deliberately not responding to *me*.

I step out of my office and walk to his. I know he's not here, but I'm looking for Marina. She's sitting at her desk, right outside of Shane's office. "What if I need to communicate with him?"

"Send him emails. Did you start yesterday?"

He doesn't answer my emails, but she obviously doesn't know that. He's acting like a child. I get that I've hurt him, but he's my boss, and I'm here to help *him* save *his* event—I can't do that if he refuses to speak to me.

"He must have missed the last one and I can't get him on his work phone. Can I have his personal number?" I ask Marina.

Keeping her icy-blue eyes on a portable mirror, she spreads a layer of

cherry-red lipstick over her plump bottom lip. “Didn’t he give you his number?”

“No.”

She rolls her catlike eyes—like she doesn’t believe me and thinks I’m trying to keep up appearances. Which, considering I haven’t really tried to call him, isn’t too far off the truth.

“We’re not flirting, Marina,” I say with a groan. “I don’t have his number.”

Threading her fingers through her perfect black bob, she shrugs. “I’ll ask.”

I guess that means I won’t have his phone number.

I stomp back to my office, cursing myself and him for this situation. There’s only one solution. Push all my feelings down and enter work mode.

And that’s exactly what I do for three hours. A few journalists are waiting for a press release, and I answer those emails. Once that’s done, I look at videos of the bands the team has selected. It all sounds the absolute same smooth jazz to me. The DJ . . . that’s possibly worse.

When my work phone blinks with a call, I pause the video and pick it up. “Heaven Wilson.”

“Hi, Heaven.”

I stand, my chair rolling back and hitting the wall. It’s him. I recognize his voice, similar to the voice message he sent me that one time. It’s colder than that, but my body simmers in the sound of him. “Hi, Mr.—Shane. Thank you for calling, I’m sorry—”

“Marina said you needed something.”

I guess we’re back to super-effective communication and constant interruptions. “You didn’t answer any of my emails. I don’t know what the clients think—”

“If there’s a problem, I’ll let you know. Otherwise, assume it’s fine. You need to make a decision about the band and the DJ. And we need a list of whatever equipment is needed for that.”

I grip the edge of the desk. I want to talk to him, to explain. But he’s going to cut me off, and I refuse to play the game of whose voice is the loudest. “Shane, can we talk?”

“There’s nothing we need to talk about, Heaven.”

He still says my name, even if he’s angry. And that gives me the courage to insist. “But there’s an explanation. Let me talk to you.”

“Bye.”

When he hangs up, I locate my chair and sit again. This isn't going as it should.

I eye the glass wall, but it's clean. The desk is so white it almost hurts to look at. There's nothing I can possibly clean, and I'm not about to pour coffee on my computer. Instead, I turn to the entrance every time the door opens, craving a glimpse of him that I won't get for the rest of the day.



THURSDAY'S AFOOT, and I am not sure if Shane will be at the office. At some point, I guess he'll have to come back. That point might not be today.

When I hole up in my office, I don't check if he's here. If he is, I guess I'll see him. But by lunchtime, I need to know if the clients have chosen the staff's outfits, and I venture to his side of the floor.

He's there—sitting at his desk. He looks up, and when he sees me, he takes a deep breath, then turns to his computer. But now he's here. Now he has to listen.

I knock on the door, taking a steadying breath when he motions at me to come in. “Good morning,” I say, walking up to his desk.

“Good morning, Heaven.” He keeps his gaze on the computer. “How can I help you?”

“The outfits for the waiters and other staff.”

He nods. “They have promised me an answer by tonight.”

“There's also the band I've selected. We need to see them perform, and —”

He links his fingers over the desk. “I'll go see them play tomorrow.”

And the subtext of that is that I'm not invited. “Okay, sure.”

“Anything else?”

I sit in the chair in front of him. I'm saying my piece—it's now or never. “Shane, I can explain.”

“Heaven, is he your boyfriend?” he asks with a voice so cold it cuts through me.

“Yes, but—”

He motions me away. “Then there's nothing to talk about.”

Oh, hell no. He has to let me speak—at the very least, he owes me the

respect to listen to my explanation. “Shane, I’m breaking up with him.”

He erupts into a loud laugh. “Good for you.”

When Marina sits at her desk and gives us a curious look, I curse the glass walls of Shane’s office. It’d be awfully nice if they were wooden walls, like Billy’s.

Ignoring the feeling of dread in my stomach, I turn my attention to the angry man on the other side of the desk. “I mean it. You might be Mr. Asshole, but he’s King Dickhead. The only reason I didn’t say yes to what you asked is that I’m not a cheater. He is. And I wanted to say yes more than . . . anything.”

He lightly shakes his head as his hand abandons the mouse. It looks as if every word I utter just increases his disappointment. When his gaze sets on me, he asks, “And the seminar? Where were you while your *boyfriend* thought you were away for work?”

“At Emma’s. I needed a break from Alex, from the situation.” I grip onto his desk and lean forward. “Shane, I swear, I’m not lying.”

“Yeah?” He smiles, though he’s anything but joyful. “What about RadaR?”

As I blankly stare at him, his eyes shrink.

“Yes. The dating app. I have it too, and I’ve heard the notification on your phone. You have a boyfriend you don’t cheat on, yet you’re on a dating app. And you flirt with me.”

I wish I didn’t look as flustered as I feel, but I didn’t think about that stupid app and the fact that he heard it on my phone. “I’m on RadaR . . . because he’s on RadaR.”

“And how is that better?”

I fix a lock of hair behind my ear. “Because—because I’m not on RadaR to hook up.”

“Then why are you on it, Heaven? Is it to make new long-lasting friendships?” He’s whispering, but his voice is hard as cement.

“No. I’m . . .” I stutter, trying to find the right words. “I wanted to match with him and catch him in the act.”

His brows furrow, and after a few seconds of silence, he sighs. “Okay. You know what? I’m glad it went as it did. Forget I’ve asked you out. I take it back—no more flirting, no more hanging out. Just work.”

It feels as if he’s punched me in the face. He doesn’t need a minute to think about it, does he? Just like that, it’s all over. “Wow. That’s how much

this is worth to you? One minute and you're out?"

His eyes shoot to mine. "Is there anything else?"

"I'm going to see the band tomorrow. This is my project."

"No. You have no experience with events," he says as he takes out his phone and dials a number.

"I am perfectly prepared to deal with this task."

He scowls at me. "I'm your superior. I'll deal with the band. End of the discussion."

When my head feels like a teapot about to whistle, I storm away. I wish I could slam the door behind me, but it's one of those that closes at its own pace no matter how strongly you pull it. So I rush back into my office and sit in my chair, pressing my fingers on my temples.

There might be nothing I can do to change his mind about me, and after his reaction, I'm not sure I want him to. But he won't cut me out of this project. I need that promotion, and I'm *not* letting him win.

I immediately contact the band, and within half an hour, I know where I need to be and at what time. He'll have me there tomorrow night whether or not he wants me.



FRIDAY. This week has been insufferable. No one in the office really talks to me—or to each other—and now that Shane and I are on non-speaking terms, I've gone back to eating at the cafeteria with my old teammates to get some human contact. They're working on some marketing campaigns for a local celebrity, and they got tickets to go see her show.

Though I knew I was going to regret this sixth-floor adventure, I had no idea it'd be this much.

At least, I've barely seen Alex too. His startup is trying to reel in a new partner from somewhere in Asia, and he's been having meetings at the most absurd hours. Dinner-at-breakfast-time type of routine, which would be perfectly fine if he didn't leave a mess all over the place.

Still better than being forced to withstand his company, I guess.

I grab my bag, making sure I've actually remembered my Super Sad Salad and my box of Oreos—sometimes I'm so tired in the morning that I forget them on the kitchen counter—but as I'm making my way out, Marina

calls my name.

“Meeting.”

“I’m on my way to lunch.”

She shoots me a look I interpret as “I couldn’t care less,” so I reluctantly follow her into the meeting room. The whole team is there, with Shane at the head of the table.

When we glance at each other, I’m not sure who turns around first, because it happens *that* fast. Then I sit and wait.

“We haven’t met as a team for a while, so I thought it might be worth catching up,” Shane says as the last people enter the meeting room. Tapping his fingers on the glass table, he continues, “Catch me up.”

That’s my cue, so I perk up in my chair. “Everything’s under control, we —”

“David, how are we doing with the budget?”

As David takes out his tablet and starts pouring out numbers like a calculator, I slump back in my chair. I glare at Shane so hard that he could catch on fire, and he must feel it because his eyes shoot to me, radiating as much disdain as mine.

“Great,” Shane says as soon as David is done speaking. “Willow? An update on social media?”

“Oh, hmm . . .” Willow, who has less to do with social media than I do with aeronautical engineering, shoots me a desperate look, and I interject.

“We’re in line with the goals—”

“I asked Willow, not you,” Shane barks.

I look down at the table with a huff. He is being such an asshole. He’s angry, I got it loud and clear, but he seems to forget I’m here because he needs me.

When my heartbeat muffles my colleagues’ voices and my hands are shaking, I get up and walk toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

Turning to Shane, I force my shoulders to square. “I’m obviously not needed at this meeting, so I won’t waste my lunch break on it.”

“Heaven, you’ll leave when the meeting is over.”

There’s a staring competition going on, and we all know how I feel about winning. I won’t let him treat me this way, no matter how hurt he is. If he’s going to bring our problems to our workplace, then I won’t respect him as my boss.

With a glare, I turn around and open the door, leaving him and the stupid meeting behind me.



I PICK at my SSS with a frown, listening as Dalton and Lucy talk about last Friday at the Watering Hole.

Interrupting Dalton mid-sentence, Lucy whispers, “Woah. What the hell . . .”

I turn in the direction she’s staring, and Shane is striding toward me. The reason she sounds like she just saw a ghost, however, is the way he’s glaring at me as he stalks with his fists clenched. Like he’s going to murder me.

When he’s in front of the table, he slams his hands on it, not loud enough for people sitting at other tables to notice, but enough to make my colleagues and me flinch.

“Is that how it is? You don’t get your way, so you leave?” he hisses.

Pretending not to be scared senseless, I lazily chew on a cherry tomato. “I left because you kept interrupting me and refused to let me do my job.”

“Your job is to follow my directions.”

My chair screeches against the floor as I stand so we’re facing each other. “No. My job is to take care of your stupid event because the people working for you can’t seem to do it right.”

“Is that so?”

The fury in his deep, dark eyes destabilizes me for a second. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear you say that, because we need someone to contact all parties at play to let them know the event has been pushed by a couple of hours. Everyone. Guests, suppliers, providers.” His lips purse. “I was going to ask Marina to do it, but I think you should take care of it instead. Make sure the people working for me don’t mess it up.”

The chattering that usually populates the cafeteria is gone, so I must assume everyone is taking note of the staring match taking place between us. Even so, I wish I could jump over the table between us and . . . I don’t know, what’s something in between kissing and murdering someone?

“Fine. You want me to do menial tasks on the phone instead of my *actual* job?” I chuckle. “I’m the most capable person on your floor. But, hey, suit yourself. I’m sure Marina has it covered.”

I sit, and as he turns around, he answers, “Make sure it’s done today.”
Oh, bite me.



I SPEND the rest of the afternoon on the phone or sending emails to let everyone know the event has been moved. As I go through the list of contacts for the millionth time, I still get the feeling that I might have forgotten someone. I will not give Shane the satisfaction.

Stupid, handsome, sweet Shane.

He texted Nevaeh twice this week, but I haven’t answered, because I can’t pretend to like him when he’s behaving like this. Alex, still busy with his Asian venture, texted Nevaeh too, proposing yet another fuck-date. He must not be so busy, I guess.

I shouldn’t take it so personally that the two men in my life like my alter-ego more than they like me, but oh, I do. As I do mind that it’s eight at night, and I’m still bent over my desk, trying to finish up the tasks needing to be done today. The twelve hours of almost uninterrupted work are heaving on my sore back, and the throbbing thumps in my temples tell me I’m mentally exhausted too.

“How is it going?” Shane asks in a stern voice as he appears at my door. “Did you save the company yet?” He stands with his arms crossed, looking cocky and excruciatingly handsome in yet another suit, this one almost silver with a light pink shirt underneath. It must be his most elegant outfit yet, and it’s definitely not the same from this morning.

“Do you have nothing better to do on a Friday night than pester me?” I ask as I bring the pen I’m holding to my lips.

“I do. I’m actually on my way out.”

“Don’t let the door hit you where the Good Lord split you,” I say with a disingenuous smile on my lips.

He tries really hard to remain serious, but his body eventually shakes with laughter, and soon, I chuckle too. I don’t know if he feels the same, but being angry at him is exhausting me.

“Oh, Heaven . . .”

“Oh, Shane . . .” I mock, attempting a smile.

When his phone beeps, he takes it out of his pocket. “My date’s waiting

for me. Apologize to Alex for me, will you? Don't mean to keep the two of you apart." With a wink, he closes the door of my office and disappears into the corridor, then the stairway.

"You—a date?" I scoff, frozen in my seat.

What an asshole.

Chapter 18

Admit Defeat



A SMALL BUT rowdy crowd welcomes me into the bar, a run down place mostly in wood and isolated from everything and everyone. It wasn't easy to get here, because it's forty minutes out of the city, and, once again, Alex has the car. So after four hours of sleep, eleven hours of work, and two trains, my soles throb, and my eyes burn every time the stage lights shine a bright purple. But I'm here to see the damn band.

Shane's nowhere to be seen. Only dirty, sticky-looking floors, walls covered in posters, and a few drunks enjoying the music of a guy with a ukulele on stage.

I sit at a free, and mostly clean-looking, table and wait. I swear to God, if the band isn't here tonight, I'll properly lose it.

As I order a glass of white wine, an old man in a white cowboy outfit comes onto the stage to introduce the band. Thank God. Maybe I'll be lucky enough and Shane won't show up. After all, he did say he has a date. Maybe he forgot about the band.

I don't see it happening, because someone needs to show up. Plus, I guess it wouldn't be as satisfying to tell him at the office I was here. I want him to see that he has no control over me, and that the more he fights me, the more I'll fight back.

"You gotta be kidding me."

The sweet embrace of victory puffs up my chest even before I turn to look at him. He stands a few steps behind me, his eyes two unforgiving slits . . . and a gorgeous brunette with a sweet smile and heart-shaped lips is by his side.

He brought a date. Oh my God, he brought a date. He wasn't just messing

with me—he’s really here with a girl.

My eyes blow wide as I stand in an instant. “Are you serious?”

“Excuse me?” he asks with a flat tone and a horrible scowl.

“You brought a date?”

His face softens as he wraps an arm around the girl’s shoulders, her light brown, upturned eyes darting from Shane to me as we speak. Her dark hair cascades in soft, messy curls on her bare shoulders. Her perfect skin peeks from the crop top she’s wearing, the same color as sand or gold. She’s gorgeous, just like him. “So? What if I did?”

“So—” My heart is like a jackhammer in my chest, and my neck tenses up. “So . . . this is a work event!”

“A work event?” He shakes his head. “You weren’t even supposed to come.”

“But I did, and you’re not here to make a move on your date. You’re here to listen to the band and decide if it’s the right one for our event. Do you think it’s appropriate to bring a girl along? Can’t you date in your free time, like normal people? I mean—unbelievable.”

I huff and puff, short of whistling like a train, and the smile on his face stretches until it’s from one ear to the other. He’s loving it. He loves that I’m flustered and scrambling for a reason to justify my outrage.

The girl clears her voice, offering me her hand to shake. “Hi, I’m Riley. Shane’s *sister*.” She glances at him and grins. “And this must be Heaven.”

Oh. Oh, sweet Jesus.

“Hi.” I take her hand in mine with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I—I just assumed . . . We’re kind of—”

“We’re at war,” Shane explains.

Yes, we’re at war, and he might be winning this battle, but Riley knows my name, and considering he didn’t know I was here, he had no reason to talk to her about me. But he did. What did he tell her?

“You didn’t mention she was so pretty,” she mocks him.

Wait, is that—it is. That’s Mr. Hassholm *blushing* as he shoots her a deadly glare. “I didn’t tell you anything at all.”

Pinching his cheek, she leans with her elbow over his shoulder. “Oh, you’ve said *some* things.”

Some things? Which things? “There’s a girl I like and I want to kiss until I consume her lips” things? Or, “a horrible woman tricked me and I’m now determined to ruin her work life” things?

Shane points at the door, ignoring his sister's giggles. "Anyway, the band's about to start. And we're here, so . . . you can go, Heaven."

I almost fall to my knees to beg her to spill the beans. "I'm not going anywhere," I say instead, crossing my arms. "It took me an hour to get here."

Shane's jaw drops open. "An hour?"

"Yes. I don't have my car. I took two trains and a cab."

Quickly turning away, Shane bursts out laughing.

"What!" I exclaim, shoving his arm.

"I can't believe that you'd spend your Friday night taking two trains to this place after you've worked, what, twelve hours a day for the past week?"

He bursts into another laugh. "What point are you trying to prove, Heaven?"

Riley is short of eating popcorn as she enjoys the show we are putting on, her gaze dancing from him to me like she won't miss a second of this movie.

Pushing my chin up, I flip my attention to the stage. "That I'm perfectly qualified for this task, despite you seeming to be convinced otherwise."

"And how are you planning on getting back home?"

"None of your concern, Mr. Hassholm."

"How, Heaven?"

Cocking my head, I shrug. "Well, I won't be swimming back. I took a train to come, I'll take one back to the city."

His eyes thin up, a wide smirk stretching across his face. "I think you just missed the last one," he says with a previously unheard level of joyfulness in his voice. "The next one is at six a.m."

Fuck. How does a control freak like me miss out on such a fundamental detail? And what does he know about it anyway? Does he have all train schedules imprinted to memory?

I purse my lips, trying to find a plausible answer that won't make him win, but short of, "I have my own train," I can't think of anything.

And he bursts out laughing again.

"I'll take an Uber."

He nods. "Sure you will. You'll find a whole caravan of them at this hour, so far out of the city."

"Oh, Shane. Stop it." Riley waves him off, then points at the seats in front of us for him to sit. "He'll drive you back, Heaven."

I'm not driving back anywhere with him. Not after the way he's treated me the whole week, and especially not after he laughed at me twice in five minutes. But we all sit, Shane sliding onto the chair between his sister and me

—I have a feeling that’s not by chance.

“I’d be happy to drive Heaven back, as soon as she admits defeat.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Are you fourteen years old?” she scoffs.

“Defeat?” I glare. “I won’t admit defeat over anything at all. I’m here, am I not? The only one who’s been defeated is you.”

When Riley mumbles something about us *actually* being fourteen, Shane’s so smug even his pretty face looks punchable. “You’re basically homeless until tomorrow morning, unless I drive you back.”

“I’ll just call someone to pick me up. You’re not the only person in the world with a car, you know?” I mumble with an eye roll. “Save your hero complex for someone else.”

“Well, then, problem solved. Maybe your *boyfriend* will spare you some of his.”

That shuts me up as I look at the stage, praying my tears won’t come. Now, I wish I didn’t come here at all. Instead, I’m stuck with him for the next two hours, listening to some boring jazz band.

And so it starts. A lot of saxophone, bass, and light drums. All it does is almost cradle me to sleep, but the rest of the people in the room seem to appreciate the band. I am not even sure how they know when one song is over and the other one’s starting. To me, it all sounds the same, like a lullaby. After the long day and little sleep I’ve had, Shane’s shoulder is looking like the perfect place to rest my head and close my eyes for a minute.

“Do you want something to drink?” Riley taps my arm, raising her voice over the music and dragging me away from my daydreaming.

In a second, I perk up. This is my chance. “Sure, I’ll come with you.”

Shane moves his sister’s arm away from mine. “No, no, you’re not. I don’t need you alone with my sister. Riley can’t shut her trap.”

Riley gasps, and they start bickering. I can’t hear too much of it because of the music, but I hear a “dramatic” and an “immature” being thrown around, and with a pout, his sister finally walks to the bar alone.

Shane and I remain in an uncomfortable silence. Well, if you exclude the loud music. It feels like silence anyway. Placing my chin in my hand, elbow on the table, I close my eyes.

“Are you ready to admit defeat?” Shane asks as he leans closer, his voice overpowering the music without needing to shout.

My eyes snap open. “I’ve already found a ride back home. So I believe you are the one who needs to roll over and show your belly.”

He rubs a hand over his jaw, whispering something I can't understand.

I don't know if he believed my lie. Maybe he noticed I didn't even take out my phone. But I need to turn it into the truth before the band is done, or I'll have to admit I need his help.

No. That would be too humiliating. I'd much rather sleep in the bathroom. Which, judging by the state of this room, must be pretty freaking disgusting.

When Riley comes back, she passes me a glass of white wine, and I thank her, saying I'll get the next round. And that's it. We remain in complete silence until the band is done playing, and I still have no ride home.

I know Emma is on a date, and I don't want to spoil her Friday night by asking her if she'll come to pick me up. And I could text Alex, but the idea of sitting in a car with him for forty minutes gives me a headache.

Worst comes to worst, I could ask my dad to pick me up. He struggles to fall asleep, so he's probably watching TV. But my parents live on the other side of the city, and it'll take him almost two hours to get here.

By the time the band is packing up, I know I'll have to either choose who to call for my rescue mission, or admit I lost. Finally, I give in, because I'm just that proud, and text Alex. Hopefully, he's not busy with one of his lovers.

We get up with the rest of the audience as Riley sends Shane horrible glares, but he still has that annoying smirk on his face. He's already tasting the moment in which I'll cave in and ask him for a ride. Well, that moment won't come.

"Hi! Mr. Hassholm?" We turn to the sax player, who shakes Shane's hand. "How is it going?"

"Impressive performance," Shane comments.

Does he really think that, or is he just saying it? It's honestly hard to tell.

"Thank you. Do you have five minutes to discuss some details?"

"Of course. This is Heaven Wilson. She's the project manager in charge of the event." Shane turns to me, his work-mask so tightly wrapped around his face I can't even tell he's angry anymore. "Shall we?"

"No," Riley says, locking her arm with mine. "You got this, Shane. Heaven and I will wait for you outside."

Shane's expression turns murderous. "Heaven *really* wants to be included in this decision, Riley. She traveled an hour to be here."

He stares at me, and if I've ever seen a terrified man, this is it. His nostrils

are flared, his jaw tense. I'm pretty sure his teeth are gritted so tight he's broken a few.

Locking my arm tighter into Riley's hold, I barely fighting a laugh. "Hmm . . . I think I'm good. You didn't need me today at the meeting, and I'm sure you can manage without me tonight."

Shane hesitates, then walks away, only after glaring at his sister once more. His message is clear: do *not* say anything. My guess is, his message is also useless.

"Take your time," Riley says with a wave. "So you and my brother?" she continues, literally as soon as he turns around.

"I think he is still in earshot."

She scoffs. "If there's someone my brother can't control, it's me. Well . . . and you." She drags me out of the bar until we're in the chilly night, walking through the parking lot. She talks about how good the band was, and that we should definitely hire them, and once we're far enough from the bar, she lets my arm go, facing me. "You and my brother."

"I'm not sure what you've heard . . ."

Her thin brows tighten over her eyes. "That he asked you on a date, then found out you have a boyfriend."

Yikes. That doesn't sound too good. "Well, yes. But I'm breaking up with him," I say, my hands slimy with sweat.

"Shane said that too. That your boyfriend's cheating on you."

I nod, looking down at the gravel in the parking lot. Emma and Shane are the only people who know. Well, now Riley does too. But it feels weird to hear people say it out loud. Weird and real and humiliating.

"Heaven, listen," she says, patting her hand on mine. "Shane likes you a lot. I can tell. But my brother . . . he's a little sensitive about this stuff."

Oh. My heart throbs at the thought I might have opened some old scar. "Has he been cheated on?"

She shakes her head, the chirpiness in her brown eyes dampening. "No, nothing like that. It's . . . our parents."

Of course. He said something about it to Nevaeh. That he has a horrible relationship with his father because he wasn't good to his mom. And that she didn't leave him, which is why things between them took a turn for the worst.

"The point is"—she bends over to whisper—"break up with that idiot of a boyfriend, and I promise you, you'll see a whole new side of Shane."

I wonder if she's talking about his Shane-the-baker side or chat-Shane. Or

whatever I'm calling it. I know that sweet, fun, caring part of him. And I miss it. "Yeah, I think I got a glimpse."

Her whole face brightens, a contagious smile appearing on her lips. "And?" When I don't understand what she's asking, she grasps onto my shoulders. "Do you like him?"

"Oh . . ." My cheeks thrum with heat as I stare at the ground. "I—I'd rather not . . ."

She shakes my arm, hopping up and down as her long hair whips in front of her face. "Oh, come on!"

With a chuckle, I look away. I can't tell her, can I? She'll tell Shane as soon as they're alone. And then . . . wait. And then what? I want him to know I like him. I need him to know that I want to go on that date he asked me on.

After a deep inhale, I whisper, "I like him too much."

She shrieks, loudly and joyfully, just as Shane comes out of the bar, his head twisting left and right until he finds us. Drawing in a deep breath, he mumbles something, then he walks to us.

"You'll be happy to know we have our band for the event," he says as our eyes meet. "Did you talk about anything interesting?" he continues to his sister.

"You know women. Bags, shoes, *boys*."

I'm a million percent sure Riley will tell Shane what I said, but I can't begin to care. I miss him so much. I miss his pastries, his smiles, his suits, and I am tired of pretending I hate him. He angers me, yes. Especially when he acts like a controlling asshole in front of our colleagues. But I don't hate him. I opposite-of-hate him.

Just this once, maybe, I could let him win.

"Great," he says sarcastically, stealing a look at me, then focusing back on the parking lot. "What now?"

Now, I'm supposed to lie and say that someone is coming to pick me up. He'll leave and I won't have to admit defeat. But Alex didn't answer my text—God knows he ever will—and I'm done playing games. I'd rather spend forty minutes dodging Shane's glares than returning Alex's smiles.

"Can I have a ride back home?"

I expect Shane to gloat, or ask me to say the words, "I admit defeat." Instead, he silently observes me for a few instants, then gestures at the car. "We have to drop my sister off five minutes from here first."

Oh, thank God. Maybe we're done with this—these horrible, excruciating

six days I want to delete from my mind. Maybe we can go back to flirting and emailing and talking about desserts. I've dreamed of nothing else every night this week.

So I smile.

He smiles back.

Riley's own smile is so wide I think I can see all of her thirty-two teeth by the time we reach the car, but she remains silent. Only a couple of minutes into driving, she asks, "So, Heaven, how old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"No, just me."

"And what do you usually work on? My brother said you're only on his team for a couple of months."

Shane's lips purse in annoyance as I choke down a laugh. "Web campaigns. Marketing and such."

"Are you from around here?"

"Riley, quit interviewing her," Shane barks, glaring at her from the rear-view mirror.

"I'm hardly interviewing her. Just getting to know the girl you've been pining over for years."

"Oh, look. We're here," he almost shouts, pulling over.

What does she mean, "pining over for years"? We only met a few weeks ago.

"Fine. Well, Heaven, it was wonderful to meet you." Riley's smile is coy as she pats my shoulder. "I'm having a little party for my birthday on Tuesday. You should come."

I guess Shane wouldn't mind, because he says nothing, so I turn to Riley. "Thank you. I'd love to."

She hands me her phone and after I save my number on it, she tucks it in her pocket and waves. "Great. I'll text you the details!"

Shane's gaze shoots to me as the door closes behind her and he drives away—the only noise comes from the air conditioning and his hands sliding over the steering wheel. At this point, I'm kind of a pro at sitting in a car with him, and we've always talked to each other. We've always had plenty to say. I have even more to say now, but I'm still not sure he'll listen. And the silence is deafening.

The screen on the car dashboard lights up with a call. It's Dan—if I didn't

know better, I'd say he's made it his personal goal to interrupt Shane and me as soon as we enter a moving vehicle. Shane's finger flies to the green button, but before he presses it, he stops. He steals a glance my way, then opts for the red button instead.

I trap my bottom lip under the upper one to stifle a smile.

"I'm sorry about my sister," he begins, but all I can focus on is his squared jaw and perfect nose. I wish I could touch every bit of him until they become familiar. "And don't listen to her, she—she talks a lot and most of it is nonsense."

"She's lovely. You have nothing to worry about."

He dismisses my words with a gesture of his hand, but the crinkles forming on the side of his eyes speak volumes. Although he plays gruff brother with her, he loves her deeply. Like how he plays gruff boss, but he's actually a very thoughtful person.

Only now I realize I might be catfishing Shane, but he's catfishing everyone around him.

"What did she mean when she said 'pining over for years'?" I venture, though everything in me begs me to stop. Maybe she was talking about another woman, maybe it was just a trap for me to confess my feelings to him. Hell, maybe it was a hyperbole. Or maybe not. After all, we've been working in the same building complex for half a decade.

"Hm?" He swallows. "Oh, no, you misheard."

"Yeah?" I bite the inside of my cheek, my muscles hardening with tension. "What did she say?"

"Um, that I . . . was . . . hunting deers."

I blink.

"Whining about my fears." He side-glances at me. "Drinking a handful of beers?"

"Shane," I croon. "What did Riley say?"

"Just—I've been pining over some new..."—with the back of his hand, he slaps the shifter—"some new gears."

Pining over some *gears*? God, he looks adorable when he's flustered. His cheeks are pink, his tongue tied into a knot I'd love to undo with mine. Even the way his forehead twitches makes my heart flutter. "That's definitely not what she said."

With a sigh so deep I can breathe the light scent of wine on his breath, he turns to me. Setting his beautiful, cocoa brown eyes on me, he softly

whispers, “Yes, it is, Heaven.”

Oh, come on. “I—”

A loud thump interrupts my sentence. The car jolts, and his focus shifts back to the road as his arm protectively moves in front of me and retracts before touching me. “Shit. A pothole.” His arms strain as he struggles to hold on to the steering wheel. After a few seconds, with a click of his tongue, he pulls over. “Great. The tire is busted.”

He gets out of the car, and once I join him, he passes a hand over his face while staring at the right front wheel.

“Is it flat?”

He nods.

“Don’t you have a spare one?”

“No.” He rubs his forehead. “I got a nail last week and used the spare. I haven’t replaced it yet.”

There’s nothing around us but buildings, and road signs inform me we’re about to leave the small town the bar’s in. The city is too far to get there walking, and Alex never answered my text.

“I’ll call someone to pick us up,” I say. When he chuckles and walks away, I stride after him. “Where are you going?”

“There’s a hotel a minute from here. I’m going to sleep.”

“You’re unbelievable. Were you going to leave me alone by the side of the road at night?”

“Are you alone by the side of the road at night?”

“No,” I say, to which he shrugs. I roll my eyes and insist, “What about your sister?”

“My sister has a noisy toddler and a chatty husband I don’t dislike but can’t deal with after the week I’ve had.” Throwing a glance at me, he tilts his head. “Come to think of it, you two would get along.”

Am I really that talkative? With a sigh, I stalk after him. “So we’re just going to sleep at a hotel?”

He points ahead. “No, we’re not just going to sleep at a hotel. We’re going to eat a kebab at the place across the street from it, possibly drink a beer. *Then*, we’re going to sleep at a hotel. I don’t know about you, but I slept twenty hours in the last five days, and I’m not waiting by the side of the road for your boyfriend to drive across the city and drop me off at my apartment in two hours.”

I follow him until he turns right and we face a small white building with

gray smudges across the façade. The neon sign that reads “hotel” blinks to life then quickly dies again. If this place is as scary on the inside as it is from the outside, I’d rather take my chances with the jazz bar bathroom.

An old man at the reception welcomes us with open arms. “Shane! What brings you to these parts?” he asks from behind a wooden counter. I must say, this place isn’t as bad as one would think.

Shane squirms under my inquisitive look. “Hi, Arnold. We need a couple of beds for the night.”

“Oh, sure. Are your parents out of town?”

“No. I was passing by and got a flat tire. I haven’t seen them.”

Arnold talks Shane’s ear off, telling him how much his parents miss him and he should visit more often, and I take it all in. Shane is from here. This small town that I’ve probably been to twice in my life, simply passing through. His sister lives here, and so do his parents. That’s how he knows this place so well—probably how he knew about the train schedule too.

“We have a twin room. Separate beds.”

Shane grunts his disapproval. “No. Two rooms. Double, single. Sleeping bags. Penthouses. It doesn’t matter, but two of them.”

I doubt this place has penthouses, and I can’t help but feel offended he’s being so rude about this. Am I so repulsive that the thought of spending the night in the same room turns him back into Mr. Asshole? We won’t share a room, but I’m also not diseased.

“Sure, sure. I have the two rooms on the top floor available. The suites.”

“Sounds great.” Shane passes Arnold his card, and I take mine out, but he moves his hand to stop me. “Company account.”

As soon as Arnold gives us our keys, we make our way out of the hotel and across the street. We order a kebab and a beer, then sit at one of the white plastic tables out of the small food kiosk. Everything is dark and silent, except for a couple walking their dog and a little 24/7 supermarket whose neon light makes a buzzing noise.

“What’s your sister’s favorite dessert?” I ask, interrupting the silence.

Drawing in a deep breath, he looks in the distance. “Green cake.”

I giggle. “Green cake?”

“That was her favorite when she was a kid. Now, she says it’s strawberry shortcake, but I know it’s still green cake.”

When he bites at his kebab, I grin. There’s a glimpse again. A rare sighting of Shane-the-baker.

“What?” he asks, leaning back in his chair and rubbing a napkin over his lips. When I don’t answer, he insists. “Why are you staring, Heaven?”

“Nothing.” I pick at the meat poking out of the wrap. “Your sister mentioned that you and your parents don’t get along?”

His shoulders tense as he looks in the distance, and my heart cracks a little. I wish he was as open with me as he is with Nevaeh, as psychotic as that may sound.

“Me and my dad.” He fidgets with the cap of his beer, flipping it back and forth with two fingers. “My parents don’t get along. They always fought a lot, since we were kids. My sister and I argued more than once over whose fault it was that they were screaming.” He brushes some hair off his forehead. “When I turned fourteen, my mom told me we were moving out. Riley and I packed a quick suitcase and off we went.”

Oh, God . . . that must have been difficult, especially for a teenager.

“We had to leave everything behind. My sister cried for days over this silly pink dress she loved.” When a disgusted sneer twists his lips, he clears his throat. “So, one day, I decided to go get it. My mom didn’t want to leave her bed, and Riley missed our father. We were sad and confused and . . .” He shrugs. “I took my bike and went back home. Opened the door and . . . well. He wasn’t alone. Or wearing any clothes, for that matter.”

I stare down at the table, a lump forming in my throat.

“That first time we stayed away for six months. Then . . . it got shorter and shorter every time. Five, four, three months. Then a few weeks at the time.” He scoffs. “For years, I begged my mom to dump him—every time she caught him in the latest affair. I don’t know how many there were, but my guess is in the dozens. But they kept fighting and arguing until we both moved out. They still do.”

I look down at my kebab, my hunger long gone. “He still cheats on her?”

He balls the napkin in his hands. “Every once in a while, I get a call from my mom. She says she’s done. This time he’s really messed up, there’s no going back, he’s done one too many. She cries, she hates herself, she doesn’t eat, doesn’t speak. Then, she’s back with him in two weeks’ time. And it starts again.” As I peer at the table, he grabs his beer and takes a sip. “My father ruined my mom’s life, their marriage. And he ruined his kids.”

“It seems to me like his kid is doing just fine,” I whisper, “everything considered.”

He holds my gaze for a few seconds before shaking his head and brushing

off the heaviness of the moment. “Anyway . . . How’s the kebab?”

“Is that why you refused to let me explain?”

There’s a moment of silence. “Yes. Somehow, at this moment, you are both my parents.”

I’m a weak woman who’s been cheated on and doesn’t have the strength to let go, and one who’s cheating without a single concern for whoever gets hurt. That’s what he means.

“You’re wrong, you know?” I swallow, trying to find it in me to say the next words. “As soon as I found out about Alex, I knew it was over between us. And it is. Wanting to get revenge was stupid of me, but the only reason I haven’t dumped him yet is the lease of the apartment.”

“The lease of the apartment?” he echoes as his brows furrow.

“It’s in my name and it won’t expire for a few months.” Looking down at my crossed legs, I ignore the heat of shame moving up my neck. “I—I can’t exactly afford to pay rent alone, nor can I count on him to pay his share if I break up with him.”

His lips part, and for a second, it looks like he doesn’t know what to say. When he dips his chin down, I worry I’ve said too much. Surely, he doesn’t want me to dump my barrel of issues on him. “Heaven,” he whispers with more than a little sadness in his voice. “You should have told me. I’ll help you—whatever the amount.”

Cringing, I look away. “No, Shane—”

“Yes. Of course, yes.” He sighs. “Look at me.” His jaw is clenched, his brows set over his eyes. More than sad, now, he looks like he’s about to go on a murder spree. “You won’t be trapped in your own *home*. With that . . . *man*. Just tell me how much you need, and tomorrow—”

“Shane.” I smile. “Though I appreciate the gesture, there’s no way in hell I’ll accept any money from you. You’re my boss and . . .” Shit. And what, Heaven? “And I don’t want to complicate our situation any further. Besides, I should get my promotion and raise soon.”

He scoffs. “I’m not offering, Heaven. Don’t argue with me. I’ll—”

“My friends already offered,” I reassure him. He doesn’t need to know that thinking of accepting hurts me. That to them, it’s probably a much bigger sacrifice than it’d be for him. I can’t involve him in this. I won’t. “He’s barely home and I spend most of my time at Emma’s anyway. It’s just a few more weeks.”

His eyelids shut for a few seconds, as if absorbing the hit. As if he’s

personally failed me by refusing to hear me out earlier. Mostly, as if he's still sad, pissed, and more than a little doubtful. "Are you sure? If you're just saying . . ."

"I'm not," I insist. "They've offered, and I accepted at the beginning, but when it came to it, it just felt too wrong that he'd interfere with their lives too, and not just mine. He's my mistake, not everyone else's." I set the kebab down.

Passing a hand over his mouth, he grips the beer. He doesn't drink it, just holds it tight enough for his knuckles to turn white. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it all happened a few days before we met, Shane. And we didn't exactly start on friendly terms. I couldn't. When I tried, after Alex's petty show in my apartment, you shut me out completely."

He looks like he wants to object but thinks better of it, pressing his lips tight together. "I'm listening now."

"Good."

"So tell me. What you wanted to say."

I observe his irises, brown and deep and beautiful. The subtext is plenty clear. My next words are the ones that will make all the difference. That will decide whether we can put this whole Alex thing behind us. Or not. For a fraction of a second, I try to think of what would impress him the most. But I know already.

The only version he's interested in is one.

The truth.

"Shane, I would never want you to doubt my loyalty. Because you need to know I'm"—shaking my head, I exhale—"we are nothing like your parents." I venture a look at him, my heart racing in my chest, and his brows are sweetly arched over his delighted eyes. "That's the only reason why I didn't say yes when you asked me out."

I can do it. I can say it.

After a huge sigh, I continue, "Because the first time you kiss me, I don't want to be someone else's girlfriend."

Chapter 19

Definitely Not a Date



I CAN'T BELIEVE I just confessed my feelings for Shane to Mr. Asshole himself, but as proof that I did, he grins from ear to ear. Which also means I can't exactly regret saying it.

We exchange a shy grin, and once I look away, I fidget with the aluminum wrap around my kebab. I've never been so forward with a man before, but Shane is different, isn't he? Everything about him is. And when I'm with him, it's like I'm me, but in an intensified way. Like I'm back to my old self, maybe even something more.

After we peer at each other for a while longer, he leans backward and his hands lock over his stomach. His gaze turns into that specific one he uses to flirt with me, and with his legs crossed and his beautiful silver suit, he's the most perfect indulgence. "Let's say that I believe you."

I can't help but grin. "Let's say you do."

With a playful gleam in his eyes, he continues, "I'm still not asking you out. For the moment."

"I wouldn't say yes if you did. For the moment."

When he beams, I follow. It looks like we're back to teasing. He drinks a sip of beer and glances at a couple entering the kebab place. "So we agree, we're not going on a date."

"We definitely agree we're not going on a date."

He takes a sip. "Then what should we do tonight?"

"I thought you wanted to sleep," I say, glancing at the non-existent watch on my wrist. "Isn't it past midnight?"

A boyish grin springs over his lips. "I'm suddenly renewed with fresh energy."

Never have I related to something more. “In that case . . . Tonight we should do the opposite of a date.”

“So instead of dinner at a restaurant, we’ll have dessert in pajamas?”

I snap my fingers. “And instead of a movie in the theater, we’ll read a book on the couch.”

“And at the end of the night, instead of a kiss, I’ll...”—his tongue darts over his upper lip—“high-five you.” He stands, then peers down at me with an excited smile. “I guess we can do that. What do you say?”

I say that it sounds like the best non-date of my life.

He motions to follow him until we’re inside the small supermarket across the street. It looks like we’re not only *having* dessert. We’re baking it. My suspicion grows into certainty once he raids the supermarket for all the baking equipment he can find. Measuring cups, spatulas, a whisk.

When I inquire about his plans, he says we’re making something easy, and although it doesn’t look like it from the amount of stuff he buys, I follow him, unquestioning and blissful, as he points at all the different ingredients on the shelves.

We soon leave the supermarket and walk back to the small hotel. We enter his suite, right beside mine, and as we lay our loot on the small counter, he points at the bag. “Start separating the whites?”

I crack the first egg, but when two pieces of the shell fall inside the plastic bowl, I think I see a little part of him die. He grabs it from my hands, and with a patient smile, shows me how to do it. “Like this. Delicately. Pass the yolk from one half shell to the other and let the white part fall into the bowl.”

He shows me again, and again, and when it’s my turn, I do it pretty well too. Then he sifts the flour, the white powder quickly covering the wooden counter.

“Be careful,” I say as I grab a sponge.

“The bowl’s smaller than the sifter, there isn’t much I can do.”

Still, it’s getting everywhere. I pick the bowl up and wipe the counter, then clean the stove and notice there’s a little bit of egg white next to the other orange bowl we just bought, so I clean that too. Only then, I inhale, my heartbeat finally settling.

When I turn to Shane, he’s observing me with curious eyes. “Better?”

Shit. When we’re like this—us—I feel so comfortable I forget normal people find my obsessions weird. That they’re off-putting, and I need to rein

the crazy in. “Yeah—sorry.”

“Sorry?” His left brow quirks. “For cleaning?”

Moving back to the bowl, I wait for him to continue sifting. When he starts, flour falls all over the place again, but I stand still, unmoving, observing the little white dots covering the wooden surface as if it’s not a big deal.

“Do you want to clean up?” he asks once he’s done.

I shrug, feigning disinterest. Of course I want to clean up. It’s so annoying—I don’t get messy people, I really don’t. Whenever something’s not in the right spot, there’s an itch in my brain I can’t get rid of.

“Heaven?” Shane calls as he closes the small fridge. “Why did you apologize?” At my guilty look, he squints. “Come on. Speak up.”

“Fine. I apologized because . . .” I lick my dry lips and throw another look at the little white pile all around the bowl. “Because people hate it when I . . .”

“When you clean?”

“I can be a little obsessive about it.”

He comes to stand beside me and tilts his head down, his face close to mine. “So you’re a neat-freak. Nothing to apologize about. If people don’t like it, then they’re not your people.”

I think back to all the times Alex complained when I asked him not to leave his clothes on the bathroom floor, or when I begged him to hang the towels properly, and not chuck them on the holder in a ball. I see all the times he called me OCD, a control freak, a psycho, when I nagged him over using shoes inside the apartment or lowering the damn toilet seat.

But Shane doesn’t *know* how deep my obsession goes. “You say that because you don’t live with me. If you had to see it every day, you’d hate it. You’d beg me to keep myself in check,” I say with a chuckle as he adds some more stuff to the dry ingredients.

When he turns to me, the previous joviality in his face is gone. Instead, his expression is blank. “First, I’d never ask you to control yourself over anything. You are who you are, Heaven.” He pauses, scanning every inch of my face. “And besides, I could never hate anything about you. Not one single thing.”

Only once I nod does he turn his focus to the bowl of eggs and whisk.

One tentative step after the other, I walk to the sink, grab the sponge, and clean. It feels great. To see all the dirt disappear, the surface beneath it clean,

shiny, spotless. Perfection is just so satisfying—I wish I could be perfect too, not the mess I am.

“I keep all my mugs in the same position,” I whisper, venturing a look at him.

He nods. “So? How’s that hate-worthy?”

I sigh. “No, Shane, you don’t get it. I have a set of twelve mugs. They’re identical. White with black stripes. And I put them all in the same position over the sink, with the handle forty-five degrees to the right.” When he stops whisking to look at me, I swallow. “When one broke, I bought a new set on eBay, because they don’t sell them individually. And I keep the eleven new ones in the basement, because in my kitchen, I want exactly twelve cups, six on each side of the tap, in the same identical position.”

He stares at me for a few seconds, then nods. “Must be visually pleasant.”

With a tilt of my head, I continue, “I fold the last ply of toilet paper in a triangle.”

“Never have issues finding it again. You should do that with scotch tape, it can get very annoying.”

“I order my books by color.”

He waves me off. “Lots of people do that.”

“And my clothes, pens, food. Even my cleaning products.”

His chin jerks back. “You order the food in your fridge by color?” When I give him a nod, he grimaces. “Like, red meat next to tomatoes and corn next to cheese?”

“Exactly like that.”

“Well, that’s just wrong. In *our* fridge,” he says as he waves a finger between me and himself, “we’ll order food by group type. It goes dairy on top, ready-to-eat food in the middle, then meat. And vegetables and fruit, those go in the drawers. Regardless of colors.” He shoots me a side-look, then scrunches his nose. “Or . . . we could pretend I said something normal.”

Am I just supposed to ignore the fact that he mentioned *our* fridge? Because to share a fridge, we’d have to share lots more. Like a home, with a bed. A life. A relationship.

“So . . .” I decide to focus on the original message. “You’re suggesting we replace my obsession with yours?”

“It’s just good food storage practice, not an obsession.” He resumes whisking. “And I wouldn’t replace your obsession with anything. I don’t mind—no, actually, I like your obsession. All of them, if you have more than

one.”

Leaning against the counter, I draw little circles on it with my finger. “Well, there’s another thing.”

He turns to me.

“Whenever I leave a room, I need to ask permission from the voices in my head, or they tell me to do horrible . . . terrible things.”

His brows arch as his eyes widen. It takes him a couple of seconds, but finally he smiles as he awkwardly stands a little straighter, trying to hide his discomfort. “Re-really?”

Oh, I can’t hold it. I nod for an instant, then tumble onto the counter, hiding my face as I explode into laughter.

“Jesus—for fuck’s sake, Heaven.” He sighs, bursting into a fit of laughter as he lightly pushes me away.

Chapter 20

Reading Between the Lines



ONLY AFTER ALL THE dry ingredients are together and we're whisking the eggs do I realize I don't know what we're making. I don't ask, and instead, I try to guess. He's going to use the stove. There's a small kitchenette in the room, but no oven. And he bought honey. I think about pancakes or crêpes, but neither requires honey.

He mixes the wet and dry ingredients until it's all a smooth and liquid dough. He turns to the pan and makes sure it's warm enough, then he drops a little oil in it. As it sizzles, he moves back to the dough, whisking some more. Focused. He darts from one side of the counter to the other, his body moving like it's made to be in a kitchen, his silver suit perfectly fitting him.

"You're mesmerizing to watch when you bake," I say in a dreamy, not-subtle-at-all voice.

He smirks. "I'd be mesmerized too if you were actually helping."

How can I, though? And miss all this Shane-the-baker? No, I think I better keep to the sidelines, make sure he doesn't stain his gorgeous suit by keeping a very close eye on it. Maybe he should take it off, just to be on the safe side.

When he sends me a pointed look, I approach him with a salute. "What should I do, Mr. Hassholm, sir?"

"Make sure the oil covers every inch of the pan, Miss Wilson. Please. And thank you."

I rotate the pan left and right to spread the oil everywhere, and he appears by my side with a smirk and a red silicone kitchen brush. "Oh."

Once I use it to spread the oil, he joins my side and pours four little pools of dough into the pan. So he *is* making pancakes. Or crepes. Finally, my

curiosity is too much to ignore. “I don’t know what we’re baking.”

“Dorayaki. A Japanese dessert.”

“Oh, isn’t it the one from Doraemon?”

He turns with his brows raised. “Yeah, it is. Geek.”

“That I am,” I mumble, looking back at the pan. “Aren’t they supposed to be filled?”

“No. It’s like a sandwich with two of them.”

That explains why he bought three types of jam and a chocolate spread.

Fidgeting with a big, plastic spoon, I smile wide. “Is this all a ruse for you to understand if I’m a jam or chocolate type of girl?”

I regret my words as soon as I’ve uttered them. What if he’s done showering me with desserts? Maybe our bet is over.

“Well . . .” He flips the disks of dough with a playful shrug. “I’m not saying I won’t be counting how many of each you’ll eat.”

My heart tumbles, and I have to fight the instinct to press my body against him and hug him tight. I really want to, now that we’re back to being us. It’d be okay from behind. I could wrap my arms around his stomach, beneath his arms, then press my cheek to his wide back. I’d love that.

“Get a plate?” he asks. As I pass him one, he continues, “You’re staring at me again. You do that a lot.”

“Does it bother you?”

“No, it doesn’t. I stare at you too. I just have enough self control to do it when you’re not looking.”

Isn’t that the best thing I’ve heard the whole week? Yes. Yes, it is.

When the dough is cooked and the dorayaki are piled onto the plate, we sit at the table and start filling them. Chocolate, apricot jam, figs jam, strawberry jam. Repeat.

He points a spoon at me. “I think we’re doing pretty good with this non-dating thing.”

I spread chocolate onto the dorayaki, steaming hot against my fingers. “I think so too. We are mastering the art of platonic hangouts.”

“Hmm. Still, we are two highly competitive, chronically stressed people who live for challenges . . . It’s bound to get boring.” When my gaze shoots to him, he shrugs. “Since we’re so great at it.”

I can’t help but feel overtaken by his joy as he flashes the most charming smile at me. “I guess I see what you mean.”

“So . . . Maybe, at some point, I could ask you out again. If you think

you're ready for that." He stares at the dorayaki in his hands like that's who he's asking out. "We could try to master the dating arts too. Just . . . away from coffee and other warm beverages."

My heart beats so fast it feels like it's about to spread its wings and fly out of my chest, but I force my voice to remain stable. "Maybe at some point you could."

"And would you say yes?"

I can almost see Emma's head exploding. He's asking me out again, and I swear to God I will not mess it up this time. No coffee pouring, no Alex, no pauses either. "Yes. Yes, I would say yes. Yes. Yes."

His shoulders shake with laughter, and as he stops, his eyes narrow. "Did I count five yeses?"

"Yes," I repeat for the sixth time. I'll say it again if he wants me to. Ten times. Hell, a hundred times. I'll tattoo a big YES on my forehead if he doesn't get the message. Yes.

"Great. Then . . . I guess I'll wait for you to be single, and we'll take it from there."

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat.

Over the past week, I've been so focused on work and on my war with Shane, I've postponed deciding what to do about Alex, whether I should accept Olivia and Emma's help or wait for my raise. But the awareness that the only thing standing between me and Shane on a date is my boyfriend is swaying me in the right direction.

"Tomorrow. As soon as we're back home, I'll break up with him."

Shane's expression is much more serious now, but his smile remains warm and affectionate. "Good. That's good to hear."

I hope he believes me. That hiding Alex from him didn't shatter his trust in me and that he knows I'm not like his mom. I *will* break up with Alex, and I won't disappoint Shane.

"Of course, you could change your mind," Shane says.

He spreads a thick layer of apricot jam on the dorayaki in his hands, my heart warming. He's worried, which doesn't make me happy, but the creases in his forehead, the little pout on his mouth . . . they're all signs of how much he cares.

If there's ever been a moment I wished I could teleport like the characters in *Star Trek*, it's now. Live long and prosper, I'd tell Shane, then I'd skedaddle to my apartment and dump Alex so quickly he'd be left with a

headache.

“I won’t. It’s going to be a hard conversation, but there’s no doubt in my mind about what I want.”

“Great. You are not exactly one to be intimidated.” When my eyes bug out, he points at himself. “I don’t scare you one bit, and I scare everyone.”

After joining the two sides of the dorayaki, I drop it onto the plate. If he only knew how tense I feel around him, he wouldn’t be saying this. “How do you figure that?”

“For starters, when we met, you shut me up. ‘The way I see it, I’m here to help you, not the other way around. I can go back to the floor of *artists* I come from, or you can let me speak,’” he says with a high-pitched voice that almost grants him a fig-filled half dorayaki in his face.

I force down the roaring of anger inside me. “Yet I didn’t make much of an impression.” When he cocks his head to the side, I continue, “You forgot who I was.”

“I didn’t forget.” He spreads jam onto the little disk of dough, avoiding my stare. I clear my throat, and he rolls his eyes. “I didn’t. I just . . . You called me Mr. Asshole. It was the second thing you said to me. I knew your mind was made up already, and I guess . . .” He bitterly smiles down at his plate. “I figured I’d play the part.”

Wait, what? He can’t be serious.

Once he notices my unconvinced stare, he sighs. “I know, not my finest move. I guess I have a slight tendency to act like a”—he smirks—“an *asshole*, when I’m offended. Or hurt.” Looking down, he mumbles, “Sometimes I attack back when I’m hurt.”

I’ve seen that plenty, but the fact that he owns up to it feels like some sort of apology. Maybe for the past week too.

Clearing his voice, he grabs the jar of fig jam. “Either way, I expected you to get worked up like the first time when I interrupted you. I didn’t expect you’d get *that* angry.”

“Do you mean it?” I ask. After all, he could be trying to make up for his bad manners by pretending he knew. “Did you really remember me?”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me,” I protest.

He stops working on the dessert to stare at me. “You walked in with Marina. You were wearing a white dress, blue shoes, and a pair of silver earrings. Your hair was in that complicated side-braid you always have at

work.” When I smile, he does too. “I was on the phone. When I turned around, you said my name. Shane. Then, you called me Mr. Asshole. Only then did you mutter my actual surname. Your eyes were bigger than usual, like you saw a ghost, and you stared at me until I spoke.”

He does remember. Every detail.

I open my mouth, but he beats me to it. “You were the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my life. As beautiful as today. Impossibly beautiful, yet there you are, so it is, somehow...” he inhales, “possible. Shall I continue?”

I mean, it’s the most entertaining story I’ve ever heard. But I shake my head, and he blows out a long breath.

“Good. I couldn’t forget you if I wanted to, Heaven. In fact, I’ve experienced the very opposite problem.”

Is he saying he liked me since the first moment he saw me, when I entered his office and accidentally called him an asshole? I want it to be true so badly. Surely, I must have made an impression for him to remember so much. Does he know I value him too? That, like in his RadaR bio, I see “most of what’s wrong with him,” but I’m still reading?

Our gazes lock as we’re both quiet. This floor of the hotel must be deserted, because there hasn’t been a noise since we entered the room, and now too, there’s an unnatural silence. We don’t often experience it in the city. Pair that with Shane’s irises glimmering, the tension growing between us until his eyes roam to my lips, and there you have it. Total and utter peace.

“We should eat while they’re warm,” he mumbles, and as the tension wears off, I grab a fork and a knife. I plan to eat exactly one of each, though I hate fig jam. He can’t know.

When we’re done stuffing our faces with desserts, I’ve actually eaten five, and three more dorayaki I planned to eat sit on my plate. My stomach is so full I might explode, but there’s nothing this man creates that isn’t worthy of the best bakeries.

He has to yank me up by my hands to convince me to take the short walk to the couch, and once I settle on the comfortable leather, he gives me the e-book reader he fetched from his car. I’m an old-fashioned paperback type, though, and show him the romance always lodged in my bag instead.

“Uh-uh,” he says. He grabs the book out of my hands, then he lies down on the other small couch, across a glass coffee table. “We’re switching.”

“You’re going to hate that book.”

He opens the first page with a pleased smirk. “Wait until you see what you’re reading.”

I tap on the screen of the device, and his library shows up. I scroll through the pages. There are dozens of them, and it takes a while. But it’s like with the music in his car, once again I’m seeing into his soul. There are a few sci-fi books—I recognize them because my dad loves them too. Asimov, a few noirs, thrillers.

“You’re snooping, aren’t you?”

With a shrug, I scroll back to the homepage and read out the title of the book he’s currently reading. “Events management. How to . . .” When I look up at him with a dull stare, he bursts out laughing, and I join his merriment. “Are you serious? Do you ever not think about work?”

He looks back at the pink book between his hands. “Yes. I often think about you.”

I grin at the e-book reader, my heart close to bursting. “Well, seeing as I work with you, that’s still troubling.”

Though I am not looking at him, I feel his gaze. I almost hear his thoughts. “I don’t think about you in a work way.” He doesn’t say it, but it hangs in the air between us.

I stretch my legs on the couch and focus on the book—it must be the most boring thing to ever be written. It’s the most boring one I’ve read. But I go through it, page after page, and I get distracted every time Shane moves, grunts, or huffs.

When he sighs and mumbles something, I turn to him. “What’s that?”

“This book is ridiculous.”

“How so?”

He sits up. “They met two minutes ago, and she told him she loves him. That’s not how life works.”

Peering at the couple depicted on the book cover, I shrug. “He saved her from public humiliation during her father’s wake. She’s obviously going through a tumult of emotions.”

He throws his hands up. “That’s another thing. Would you be flirting with some guy at your dad’s funeral?”

“They’re not flirting!” I protest, also sitting up.

“Oh, please. She sees him look down at her dress and her...”—he scrolls through a few pages and reads out—“her whole body shakes with desperation at the need she feels for him.” My lips stretch across my face, and his do too.

“It’s ridiculous.”

“It’s romantic,” I correct.

“Oh, of course.” He slaps the back of his hand on the cover, like he’s made a terrible mistake. “Very romantic. Her father’s body isn’t even cold yet.”

Stifling a chuckle, I set the e-book reader on my stomach. “So then, how does real life work according to Mr. Asshole, the ice king?”

His nose twitches as he clearly fights to hold back a grin. “Well, in real life, even if you could fall in love with someone in two minutes, you couldn’t tell them. They’d run away without looking back—if they’re smart.” He pouts for half a second. “In real life, you need timing and a little luck.”

“Well, these two don’t have either,” I say as I point at the book in his hands. “But he sees her for what she really is. Behind the layers of mistrust and fear and issues, he just sees her and loves her.” When I meet his gaze, he’s staring at me so deeply that heat springs over my cheeks. “And she . . . she helps him overcome his limitations. She pushes him to become the person he was always meant to be before . . . well, life got in the way.”

He says nothing, but smiles widely as he studies me.

“Spoiler alert.”

“It sounds better from your lips than from the author’s pen anyway.”

I go back to my read, set on ignoring his continuous *hmpfs* and *tsks*. That book has sold millions of copies, and I don’t think I can say the same about this damn event management manual. So what if it’s not *super* realistic? I picked it up at the fiction section for a reason.

Once the brown leather cushion sticks to my legs, I move to the carpet and lie with my back against the base of the couch. I’m halfway through chapter seven when Shane joins my side with a flicker of mischief in his eyes.

“They had sex,” he says.

I slowly bob my head up and down. “Great scene.”

He snorts. “Really? That’s the first time he touches her, but he knows exactly how to make her orgasm, and it takes him”—he studies the page—“two paragraphs.” With a knowing stare, he arches his brow. “He reads her mind, doesn’t he?” I swallow as he keeps laughing, halting once he notices my shaken expression. “What?”

“You said ‘orgasm.’”

He briefly nods. “So? It’s a word.”

“A word you’ve never said.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve said it before.” His tongue wets his lower lip. “Just not around you.”

Yes. He’s never said the word “orgasm” in front of me. Nor the word “sex.” We’ve never talked about these sorts of things, and now that we’re shoulder to shoulder, it feels weirdly intimate. I’ve never been a prude, but Shane is my boss. And he’s... Shane.

“Maybe he’s very talented,” I say, pointing at the book.

“He must be. He made her come with his mind. Or it might be that he is an Adonis with”—he opens the book and reads out—“a bulging girth.”

“Oh my God,” I say, hiding my face behind the e-reader, and he cracks up, the notes of his raucous laughter hitting all the right spots inside me. I’m plenty aware that he’s laughing at the fact I’m reading this book, rather than at the book itself. “Fine. It’s a silly book, but it makes me happy.”

When he bumps his arm against my shoulder, I look at his face, so close to mine. As much as he makes fun of my steamy book, I get the main character. He could make me orgasm with a kiss. That’s all I wish for right now. His breath is on my lips, and I can smell sugar, honey. He’s like a gigantic dessert, and I need a bite. Just one.

His fingers graze mine, and at first, I wince, lightly backing away. It’s like the contact of our skin burns. He finds my hand again, and this time, our fingers entangle. My heart is thumping in my chest, and by now, we’ve had enough moments to know this is another one. Maybe the most intense yet. We’re holding hands, and that’s never happened before.

My breath works up as I stare at our fingers, tight in a warm hold, and when I look back at his face, the corners of his lips are curved up. “This feels a little date-like,” he whispers.

He started it, but my hand is holding onto his so tight, I can’t call myself blameless.

I let his hand go, but before my palm can actually separate from his, he tightens his hold. “I don’t want to stop.”

As I press my fingertips onto the back of his hand, he rubs his thumb on the back of mine, then focuses on his book, bringing my hand closer to his body every time he needs to turn the page, despite my complaints.

Our fingers only separate when he walks me to my bedroom and wishes me a good night, giving me the high-five he promised.



WHEN SHANE PARKS in front of my apartment complex, my stomach sinks. The last twelve hours have been so great, I have barely thought about what happens now.

When our eyes meet, we both look away.

He is thinking the same—he’s probably worried I won’t break up with Alex. That I’m stringing him along, and I won’t keep my promise.

I wonder that too, for a second, then I know it’s a nonissue. Because nothing will happen between Shane and me until Alex is out of the picture. And I desperately need something to happen between us.

“How are you feeling?” he asks as he presses the button to turn the AC off.

“I’m considering using an email for the next portion of this,” I say barely above a whisper as I study the door to the hall. “You’re an expert at those. Is there anything I should know about breakup email etiquette?”

“Just remember to add ‘You deserve this’ in the subject line.”

Alex deserves that and worse. Unfortunately, I’m better than an email breakup. “We’re having a meeting with the marketing team at ten on Monday,” I say, holding onto my bag.

He stares out of the window. “And there are a few journalists coming in the afternoon with some questions.”

We’re stalling. We both know what’s happening on Monday, but we don’t want to leave. I don’t, because spending the last twelve hours with him has been exactly what I imagined it’d be like. More. I’m not ready to have a breakup conversation with Alex, and I’m just as unprepared at the idea of saying goodbye to Shane after last night.

“And on Tuesday—”

“Heaven,” he says, twisting in his seat so that he’s facing me. “I just want you to know that . . . I understand the importance of what you shared with me last night. And I . . . I think you’re perfect.”

Looking down at my lap, I smile. Where is this coming from? I mean, not that his words aren’t like liquid gold over my soul, but . . . why is this happening now? “Thank you, but I meant it when I said that I’ll break up with Alex.”

“No, I know. It’s not that. It’s just . . .” He smiles as if he’s telling himself

a joke. “I see you. I see you for what you are, behind the layers of mistrust and fear and issues. I see you, and you’re—” He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

I smile, barely holding back tears. “I—”

“And I know I’m not”—he tilts his head—“I interrupted you again, didn’t I?” When I nod, he leans closer. “I know I’m not the best person I could be, and I know you could change that. Easily. You have already. I’d change anything for you, the very fabric of who I am.” He half chuckles. “It’s probably not very healthy, but . . . I would.”

“It’s okay,” I breathe. “You’re right, it’s unhealthy, but I’d never ask you to. I like the very fabric of who you are as it is. And for the record, you can always interrupt me to say things like that.”

He smiles, breaking our intense eye contact after a few seconds. “Noted.”

Gripping the handle, I move to leave, but Shane’s hand wraps around my wrist.

“Wait,” he says, panic etched into his voice. “Look at me.”

“What? What is it?”

He swallows, his chest rising and dropping quickly. He looks like someone just kicked him in the groin. “I was—maybe we should get a coffee. Before you go.”

A coffee? We drank two this morning, and I’m honestly one step too close to peeing my pants already. I glance away, trying to not freak out over the fact that he doesn’t want me to go.

“No,” he says, loudly enough to make me flinch. His shoulders relax when my eyes land on his again. “No, look at me. Let’s get a coffee.” He starts the car, and I’m still pretty damn confused. What’s wrong with him?

His eyes shoot to the right for an instant, and mine follow until I’m staring at a couple walking down the street and stopping in front of the entrance door of my apartment complex. The man grabs the girl’s ass and kisses her—I can almost see his tongue down her throat. They’re both smiling, happy. She fists his hair, and he struggles to open the door because he can’t take his hands off her—my *boyfriend* can’t take his hands off some other woman.

“Heaven . . .”

I hear Shane, but I pretend like I don’t and keep watching as Alex enters the building and disappears inside.

He’s bringing a girl to my apartment. He’s cheating on me in my own

bed.

“Hey, Heaven . . .” Shane repeats as his fingers squeeze mine, halting my tremors. “Everything’s okay.”

“It’s not. He’s . . .” I inspect the door. “He’s bringing her to *my* bed. My —my *things* are in there. That’s *my* home!”

Shane leans closer, pressing both hands on the sides of my face. “Let’s go to my apartment. I’ll cook some lunch for you. We can keep reading, have another non-date.”

Maybe I should. I definitely don’t want to walk into my bedroom and see Alex deep in some other girl. The man who said he loved me, the same one who took me to Paris. The one who kept me up nights at a time with his dreams and ambitions, who asked me to move in together during a very romantic picnic at the beach. He’s bringing another woman to our apartment because last night I told him I’d be back in the afternoon and he doesn’t expect me for a few hours.

Shane’s hands are soft and firm on my face as he grazes his thumb along my cheek with a sad smile. He’s keeping me rooted, and it’s not the first time I’ve felt like this around him. If he goes, I’ll drown.

So I move closer. I lean in. I forget about everything I said. That I will not be a cheater, even if Alex is. That I don’t want my betraying boyfriend to taint what’s happening between Shane and me. I push my face forward so that my lips can meet his, making me feel better for a second.

But when my mouth is but a few inches away, his hands abandon my face and he shifts to the side, pulling me in a hug instead.

Chapter 21

The Ultimate Fight



I'VE BEEN REJECTED TWICE in my life.

The first time happened during my early teen years. During many of my walks with Emma up and down the city center, I always saw this one guy, older. Blond, tall, with a real attitude problem. But I was obsessed with him. At some point, Emma decided she was done hearing me blab about him and stopped him on the street to ask for his number because her friend was interested.

He looked at me and said, "No, thanks." Harsh, but looking at it now, I would have done the same in his shoes.

The second rejection came from this guy I went to school with. I crushed over him for years and years until he told me his parents were moving, and I confessed my love. He said he only saw me as a friend, and he actually had a crush on Emma.

The point is, I'm not a stranger to rejection. But I don't think either of them felt as bad as this one.

It takes me a moment to recover as Shane holds me tight against him. Too tight. Almost like he knows I want to go. I can't believe I tried kissing him. I can't believe he rejected me.

I pull back, and he finally releases me, avoiding my gaze.

"I'll go," I say, and he attempts a word, but I interrupt him. "It's fine."

"If you don't want to come to my place, let me drive you to Emma's."

I shake my head no. I can't take one more minute in this car. My cheeks are flushed, and I can feel the rest of my body joining the same tomato color. "It'll be fine, Shane. I promise." I force my work expression over my face. The same one I offer Billy when he gives me some horrible news and

pretends to be happy about it, and the same I give Alex's mom when she asks when we are planning to get married and have kids.

He grimaces, and before he can insist, I get out of the car.

"Wait." He joins my side, my heels click-clacking on the sidewalk much faster than usual as tears burn behind my eyes. "Wait, Heaven, please."

"Shane, we're fine. We're—I'm fine. I need to go." My hands shake as I struggle to fit the key into the lock.

"I'm sorry," he says weakly. "Please, you know—"

Tears are threatening to come out, so I push the building door open and run up the stairs. I almost stumble twice, but I pick myself up and continue. I shove the thought of Shane away, as if it never happened. Compartmentalize, that's what I need to do. And when I halt, blood is thumping at my extremities.

Breathless, I glance at the door of my apartment, then at the stairs I climbed.

I can go back and face Shane, or I can go forward and face Alex. A third option includes calling Emma and having her sort out my mess, but as tempting as that sounds, I need to do this. I need to find the strength to fight for myself, and I'm doing it now.

Stepping toward the apartment, I don't let the erratic beats of my heart talk me out of this. I'm going in. I quickly fit the key into the lock and open the door, slamming it loudly behind me. He needs to know I'm home, I'm inside.

Whispers and movements travel to me from the bedroom. Evidently, they didn't lose any time.

With a deep breath, I try to keep the bugs crawling under my skin in check. I can't believe he's having girls over. Has he done it before? When I was at work, maybe, or when I spent that week at Emma's place?

After dropping my bag in the kitchen, I open the fridge and grab a bottle of water. I take a sip, then two. I'm not thirsty, but I'm waiting.

There's more whispering, and then an angry, "I don't want to be involved in this," followed by a much more muffled, "Please."

I can't believe he's trying to convince her to . . . what, exactly? Say she's a doctor and she's there for a home visit? Does he want her to climb down the fire escape?

Whatever he's asking her to do, she doesn't. Instead, she storms out of the bedroom and shoots me a look I can't really figure out. Maybe she's

embarrassed, or she hates me. She's holding her shoes, and on the way out of the apartment, she grabs her bag too.

"Your top is backward," I say. Or rather, it comes out of my lips. I have nothing against this girl, and she looks as uncomfortable as me.

With a sullen look, she leaves the apartment and doesn't bother closing the door, and neither do I. I'm waiting for him to come out of the bedroom. How much of a coward can he be? He has to know at some point he's going to have to face the consequences of his actions.

When an entire minute passes and he's still inside the bedroom, I drop the bottle of water on the kitchen table and stride to him. He's sitting on the bed with his face between his hands. His clothes are back on, and there's a condom on my sheets.

Without a word, I walk to the closet, grab the biggest suitcase I can find, and start throwing all his clothes in it.

"What are you doing?" he asks. His voice is gruff and broken, but I can't begin to care.

I move onto his t-shirts, shoving them inside. "You've never been good at packing. I'm doing it for you." When he gets up and grabs my wrist to stop me, I twist out of his hold. Hell will freeze before I let him put his hands on me again. "Don't you dare touch me."

I stuff pairs of jeans into the luggage, and it's completely full before I'm halfway done. The fact that all of it has been thrown in there doesn't help. I zip the luggage closed and drag it into the living room.

"Heaven, stop. We're gonna talk about this."

Anger pushes against my chest, trying to open me from the inside. Swinging around, I shout, "Now's the time to talk, Alex? Now? Why didn't you talk before?"

"You know this situation isn't only my fault. We've been drifting apart for—"

"No," I snarl. "If you had any interest in saving our relationship, you would have done something about it. Sleeping around isn't a solution. It's selfish and disgusting and horrible."

He passes both hands over his face and walks up to me, holding onto my shoulders. "I know, Heaven. I know. Please . . ." His cobalt blue irises glisten with tears, his nose twitching with a snuffle. He's about to cry, and that hasn't happened since his grandfather died four years ago. For a second, it freezes me. I am not used to seeing his emotions anymore. "I made a mistake, I

know. But I can make it up to you. I promise, it'll never happen again."

I shake my head and take a step back so that he'll stop touching me, but he takes one forward. "Let me go," I say, and when he doesn't, I slap both his arms away. "I don't want you to touch me, Alex."

He sobs—the first tears spilling out—and I cry too as we stare at each other for a few seconds.

He knows it's over, and it dawns on me that now it really is. This is it—the end. I've had plenty of time to get used to it, so why haven't I? Why does it feel like this is the first time I've thought about it?

"I can't be without you," he whines. It looks like he means it. We have been together for so long, he probably does. "You know I love you."

Drying the tears on my cheeks with the back of my hand, I sniffle. This might be the last time I hear his voice. Or at the very least, the last time he says he loves me. When I wake up tomorrow morning, there won't be the smell of fresh coffee or his aftershave. And I won't see him staring at his stupid crime series when I come home from work.

"You have to go," I insist.

He shakes his head. "I won't. We'll figure it out together. Please."

"I *need* you to go," I say, and it almost sounds like I'm begging. Maybe I am. I won't forcefully kick him out of the apartment—I can't. He's taller and heavier than me—besides, this is also his place. But I won't make worse of a show of our relationship. He has to give me this. After everything he's taken, I need him to give me this one thing.

"Heaven, please . . ."

"No," I insist. "You've lied to me." Bringing both hands to my face, I try to hide just how much it hurts. My voice isn't as sure as I'd like it to be, as stone-cold. "You've ignored me for months and you don't care about me. Jesus Christ, the only thing you want me around for are *blowjobs!*"

As his eyes shoot behind me, his expression hardens. Enough to make me turn around and meet Shane's gaze. Fuck. How much of this conversation has he heard? He must have heard the last part.

"Is this why you won't give me a second chance?" Alex asks with a spiteful expression on his face. His glare remains on Shane, dark and angry and definitely more violent than it should be.

I shake my head. "No. I won't give you a chance because you don't deserve it."

"Right. So the difference between you and me is that I got caught."

My chest vibrates with fury. I've never felt so aggressive in my whole life, and for a second, it scares me. But anger crashes into me again like a wave, and I'm short of growling when I spit back, "The difference between you and me is that I haven't cheated on you."

A bitter laugh rolls out of his lips. "And what were you doing last night? Not cheating on me? Or were you with him, acting like a fucking whore to get your promotion?" He sneers. "Remember to invoice all those hours."

"Enough," Shane says as he takes a step forward. "Heaven asked you to go. Give her time to work through things before you say anything worse."

He's so controlled, so composed. He's not trying to fight him, nor is he acting like I need his protection. To someone who didn't know better, he'd look like he's a friend to both of us.

"Oh, okay," Alex says, taking a few steps toward him as he clenches his fists. Next to Shane, his beer belly is more evident. He looks smaller, thinner, weaker than usual. He looks unworthy of the time I wasted on him. "You want me to go? So you can stay and fuck my girlfriend in my home?"

"I'm not your girlfriend anymore." When Alex turns to me with a grimace, I offer him his luggage. "And who I sleep with isn't any of your concern. Now, please, go, because I'm not staying under the same roof as you for one more night."

"Then you go." He drops the luggage, which falls onto the side with a loud thump, then points to Shane. "You can stay at his apartment."

Shane passes a hand over his face, and it looks like he's about to talk, so I put my hand up to stop him. I appreciate him being there, but I don't want him more involved than he already is. Especially not after he rejected my kiss back in the car.

But Shane Hassholm listens to nobody.

"Alex, is it?" he asks, joining my side but maintaining an appropriate distance. Alex's stare is intense and fevered as it settles on him. "Nothing happened between Heaven and me. I'm her boss, and I'd like to think we've become good friends." Alex's fists stiffen, but before he can interject, Shane takes a step toward him. "I won't stay here. And I know you have no reason to believe me, so . . . I'll come down with you. I'll help you with your suitcase. And then we'll both go." He glances at me, then focuses back on Alex. "I'm not trying to mess with you. Heaven needs to process everything, and staying will just make things worse. You need to respect her decision and leave."

Alex pushes his shoulders back and approaches Shane. “I don’t need to do shit. But if you tell me what to do again, I’ll need to kick your ass.”

Shane looks down at him. Calm, wildly unimpressed. As if he has no intention of fighting him, which I thank God for. “All right. Then how about this,” Shane whispers. “The lease for this apartment is in Heaven’s name, and if you don’t leave immediately, I’ll call the police and have you removed from her property.” With a light grin, he continues, “Your choice.”

I steady myself against the wall, feeling the cold, hard surface against my sweaty palm, and a brand new sadness fills my chest. Shane and I haven’t even been on a date yet, and now he’s seen this. Me at my worst, screaming at a man who was supposed to love me and instead betrayed me.

When Alex looks at me in question, I nod. Yes, I will call the police if he doesn’t leave. Seeing as I’ve had to suffer because of this lease, I might actually enjoy the perks of having it in my name. Whatever, as long as he’s gone.

He turns to Shane again, but when he’s met by the coldest of glares, he steps back. I think he can see the same thing I’m seeing—it looks like Shane’s another word away from snapping Alex’s neck.

“Fine. I’ll go to my parents’ house and give you the night to calm down. I’ll call you tomorrow, and you’ll pick up the phone,” Alex says, only glancing my way before focusing back on Shane.

I don’t want to talk to him tomorrow. But more than anything, I want him to leave, so I quickly nod.

Shuffling his feet, he studies me like it’s the last time he’ll see me. The storm in his eyes is duller, weaker than usual, as he grabs his luggage. Once he walks, Shane follows him to the door, then glances at me for a few interminable seconds. I don’t know what his look means. It might be concern, or it might be pity.

Maybe he can see my heart is broken.



“HIS CONDOM IS STILL ON MY BED.”

The first full sentence that comes out of my mouth, three hours later, gives me shivers.

Emma sits beside me, handing me a peppermint tea and rubbing her hand

over my back, trying to soothe my hysterical sobs. “Shit, H. I’m so sorry. I was on a date and my phone was lodged at the bottom of my bag.”

“Em, it’s fine.”

She offers me her hand and drags me up. After walking into the kitchen without a word, she grabs a trash bag from the second drawer and a pair of green plastic gloves from the sink. Striding toward the bedroom, she motions at me to follow. “Let’s go.”

I follow her, and when I reach the bedroom, she’s holding out bag and gloves with an encouraging smile. “Unleash your inner neat freak.” Standing closer, she narrows her vibrant blue eyes. “Let. Her. *Shine.*”

With a lopsided grin, I grab the cleaning equipment. The gloves wrap around my skin, the smell of latex soothing me incredibly. I stare down at the bed, and after a deep breath, I shake my shock away.

No more hesitation.

I chuck the blanket into the trash bag, then do the same with the pillow covers and the duvet I like so much. I probably could wash it, but who knows just how many bodily fluids it’s stained with and from how many people.

“Are you keeping the mattress?” Emma asks once my bed is completely naked.

A half-hearted laugh makes its way out of my lips. I’m not throwing out a perfectly good mattress only because my boyfriend used it to sleep with other women. “Of course.”

“Shall we flip it, then?”

I peer at Emma, then at the mattress. “Yes, let’s flip it.”

She hands me fresh sheets. We put them on the bed, and once she grabs the yellow duvet, I lay it on top. I hate that one—it makes my skin itchy. But I guess it’s better than gonorrhoea, so it’ll do for now.

When we’re done, she tells me to wait there, disappears out of the bedroom and comes back after a minute with another trash bag. As she opens the closet, she shoves in all of Alex’s stuff that didn’t fit into the suitcase.

“You don’t need to do that. He can come pick his things up,” I say.

She jams all his belts and hats into the trash bag. “He can, but they’ll be out on the curb. So he better come fast.”

I won’t leave his stuff on the sidewalk, but once again, she has a point. I don’t want him back in this apartment. So I open up the other wardrobe, the one with his suits, and fit them into the bag, making sure to crinkle them all.

That’s what we do for the next few hours. We go through the entire

apartment and fill four ten-gallon trash bags with all his belongings. His video games, the console, his deodorant. Everything but the screen he uses for his computer. Emma wanted to fit that in there too, but I might freaking keep it.

When we're done, we call Olivia and spend half an hour bitching and whining about him. Then, I'm done. I don't want to think about what a disgusting human being he is. I am done letting him poison me.

We sit on the couch with a pizza and watch a truly terrible reality show, like we've done plenty of times before. Yet it's the most unfamiliar feeling ever. The sense of relief I expected to feel isn't there. Instead, my heart feels blackened, struggling with each pump of blood.

This was supposed to feel like an end. A full stop at the end of a sentence. Instead, I sense it's the beginning of a period just as difficult as the one that ends today. And tomorrow, both Shane and Alex will want to talk.

I'm ready for neither.

Chapter 22

A Dirty Dessert



THERE IS a knock on the door, so I turn the light on and check the peephole. I'm not expecting anyone, and it's almost nine p.m. My heart falls into my stomach as soon as the hazelnut curls over his forehead appear.

Shane. Shane is here.

I haven't seen him since yesterday morning, and though I spent all day thinking about what happened with Alex, Shane's been stuck in my brain. How did he even get up here?

With a deep breath, I walk a few steps back to check my reflection in the mirror. My dark hair tumbles down my shoulders, and there's a rosy glimmer to my cheeks after my recent shower. Infusing confidence with a glorious look in my frightened amber eyes, I try not to cringe. As if the embarrassment of trying to kiss him right before breaking up with my boyfriend wasn't enough, now I need to face him in my polar bear pajamas.

I walk back to the door and open it, taking his light smile in. The side of his eyes crinkle with sympathy, the deep brown of his irises almost shimmering as he swallows. And he looks so good—his usual suit is gone and instead, there's a cozy, cream-white sweater that begs to be used as a pillow. His hair—a few shades darker than mine—falls freely down his forehead, so casually messy and soft-looking. He's a vision. A vision who rejected me.

"Hi," he says.

My throat tingles immediately.

Shit, I'm about to cry. The tone of his voice is so comforting, so sweet. He's Shane. There's no trace of Mr. Asshole anywhere. And after the loveliest non-first date to ever not be planned, I think I royally fucked up.

“Hello,” I whisper back.

His shirt moves up and down as his chest heaves, then he fits his hand into the back pocket of his black jeans. “I hope I’m not intruding. I wanted to see how you’re doing. Though I probably should have called.”

I hold my arm around me. “No, you’re good. Thank you for coming.”

If he’s here to deliver an apology for rejecting me, I definitely don’t want it. It’s not his fault, and he’s helped me plenty since then. But I can’t exactly tell him he doesn’t need to feel sorry for me, so I stand still, and we stare at each other for a couple of seconds.

“I—” He swallows. “I brought something.” He holds up the plastic bag in his hand and takes out a beautiful purple paper box decorated with white swirls and a coordinated ribbon.

He brought me sweets—I don’t need to open it up to know. That’s how he expresses his feelings.

“Thank you.” I take the box, then snap the lid open, the intense smell of cocoa making my mouth water.

“It’s brownies.” My heart stops as flashbacks of our first chat on RadaR sneak up on me. “There’s nothing better than chocolate for when you’re stressed. It’s supposed to reduce levels of cortisol and catecholamines.” He shrugs and rubs his ear. “I don’t know.”

“It’s great. I love brownies. Thank you,” I say again. It seems like I can’t think of anything else. I expect him to tell me we’ll meet tomorrow at work or something, but he keeps silently observing me. “Do you want to . . .” I ask, pointing at the room behind me.

“Yeah. Sure.”

I step to the side, and once he’s in the entrance, I close the door. As he takes a few steps into the living room, he slowly twists his neck left and right, looking around. After all, both times he was here, he probably didn’t pay too much attention to my furniture and was slightly more preoccupied with Alex.

I put the brownies down on the table, glancing at them as my saliva thickens. “Would you like something to drink?”

“A coffee would go well with those.”

Shooting a reprimanding look at him, I move toward the machine and point at the wall clock, which signals it’s almost nine p.m. “You know, you shouldn’t drink coffee at this hour.”

“I’m not big on sleeping. Coffee or no coffee.” He follows me to the kitchen and puts the bag on the table with a considerable effort. When he

notices my questioning look, he gently slaps the top of whatever it's inside. "I brought something else too."

I almost expect him to take out some gigantic folder about the Devòn event, but he motions at me to look inside. "Mysterious . . ." I say.

He nudges his head toward it. "Come on. Check it out."

I walk to the blue bag and peek inside. It's a plastic food container with a green lid, but it's enormous. Big enough that it must fit a whole turkey. "What is it?"

He takes it out of the bag and sets it on the table, his muscles flexing as he does. There's a brown, dense substance inside—a chocolate spread? Did he dump twenty containers of Nutella in this thing?

"Hmm. I'm . . . confused," I say as I fill the coffee machine with water. If that's chocolate spread . . . why does he think I need twenty pounds of it?

"You remember my sister invited you to her birthday?" He threads his long fingers through his hair. "Well, she asked me to bake a cake for her. Four layers with raspberry jam and chocolate ganache. Covered in more chocolate and stupid little flowers."

As he rolls his eyes, I stifle a laugh. "So . . . do you need me to help you bake?"

"I've seen your lunches at work. And the dorayaki debacle. You'll never touch food around me again."

I place my hands over my hips with a puff. "Excuse me. I happen to be an excellent cook. Not a baker like Mr. Hassholm himself, but my poached salmon is delicious."

He studies my kitchen—judging it. "Okay. I guess we'll have to make a date out of it. You cook, I'll bake."

My smile weakens, and I move toward the coffee machine, though the coffee hasn't brewed yet. I set the mugs down and take out sugar and milk as he stands by the table in silence. Though I've dreamed of nothing other than a date with him for weeks, I'm much too embarrassed about what happened yesterday to enjoy this conversation.

"Do you want to know what this is doing here?" He points at the chocolate monstrosity.

"Yes."

"Well, the cake's baked, perfect. I've made the stupid pink flowers, and obviously, I'm all set with ganache." He points at the container. "And guess what? The party's canceled. Riley's kid gave her measles. And now I have a

hundred pounds of ganache, a bunch of sugar flowers, and a ridiculous cake.”

With a chuckle, I nod in understanding. “Well, as much as I appreciate fifteen gallons of chocolate ganache, I would have much rather eaten them with cake.”

“Nah. You might love my desserts, but that cake would have grown mold before you’d be able to eat the first half.” He passes a hand over his stubble. “I’ve given it to the soup kitchen.”

Oh, man. Why does he just keep getting better? “With the pink flowers?”

“No. No damn flowers. They’re practically inedible, and they look so dumb.” He takes out his phone. “I did something else.”

After he taps on it a few times, he shows me a picture. It’s his cake, and it’s beautiful. Like a wedding cake, but one of those modern, sleek-looking ones you find in magazines. There’s jam and chocolate ganache between the layers, but there isn’t any outside. Instead, red fruits and cream puffs cascade alongside it in a spiral.

“Wow,” I say, entranced. “Do you take pictures of all your desserts?”

His cheeks redden up. “Yeah, most of the time. Not if I’m doing something easy, like brownies or cookies. But more complicated stuff, yes. It’s my—I don’t know.”

When his lips bend up, mine do too. “Your art.”

My gaze melts into his, and our faces are quite close together. Enough that I can see all the shades of deep brown in his eyes, the long eyelashes around them, the little freckle next to his nose.

“Someone I know would say it’s my whim,” he whispers with an affectionate smile.

My heart squeezes with guilt as I recognize the words I told him as Nevaeh, and I move away, afraid he’ll notice my expression and find out that *someone* is me. “I think the coffee is ready.”

“Right. We keep getting sidetracked. The chocolate ganache.” He taps his finger on the top of the container.

“Yes. Why didn’t you donate that too?” I ask, pouring coffee in the two identical mugs—I don’t normally drink coffee this late, but it’s not like I have any hope of sleeping anyway.

“I thought it could have a better use.”

When I turn to him, his grin widens. “What’s that?”

“You said you like cleaning. And I imagine after what happened yesterday, you must be a little upset. Maybe . . . stressed.” He rolls up the

sleeves of his shirt, uncovering slender forearms sprinkled with short brown hair.

Entranced by his tan skin and perfect muscles, I abandon the cups on the counter and give him a doubtful nod. What the hell is he doing?

“Well . . . is there something in particular you like to clean?” he asks as he bends over the table.

We both laugh, and I don’t know why. Maybe he brought the container because he wants me to wash it? “How do you mean?”

He lifts the lid. “Do you enjoy cleaning the floors? Washing the dishes? Dusting the shelves?”

There’s not a hint of judgment in his voice. Most people think my obsession with cleanliness and order is weird or annoying, but not him. He just expectantly waits for an answer.

As he sets the lid of the monstrosity on the table, I look at the delicious chocolate ganache and shake my head. “I like all cleaning.”

He points at the ganache. He wants me to taste it, but I don’t. I’m terrified, because he’s obviously planning something, but I have no clue what that is. When he notices my hesitation, he dips his finger into the ganache, then brings it to his mouth as his eyes appraise me. They’re hungry enough to make my breath catch as the tip of his finger disappears behind his lips. If there’s something like eye-sex, I think we’re doing it. “There. It’s not poisoned.”

I raise my hand in defense. “People at the office *do* call you an asshole, so . . .”

He playfully shoves my arm, then points at the monstrosity. “You, now. I want to know if you like it.”

Oh, God. Did he put salt in it or something? And what does that have to do with cleaning?

I peer at the brown, velvety spread and swallow. I *did* eat a handful of candy after lunch, plus there were those two cookies I earned by cleaning the restroom. And if we’re about to eat those brownies too . . .

“You deserve it, Heaven,” he says with a tiny smile. “You’ve been strong, and I know it wasn’t easy.”

I press my lips together. “It’s just, today I’ve already—”

“It doesn’t matter.” He tucks some hair behind my ear, shivers spreading down my spine. “You always deserve dessert.”

With a nod, I dip the tip of my index into the cold cream and suck on it,

immediately letting out a moan, because it's that freaking good. Sweet, but not nauseating. The taste of chocolate is so rich, and the texture buttery and delicious. I almost wish he didn't donate the cake. "God, this is amazing."

A proud grin opens up his face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. We're lucky we have enough to fill a small cottage."

With a booming laugh, he shakes his head. "Man, you're going to regret saying that so much."

I'm about to ask why, when a flicker of mischief brightens his irises. He fits his hand into the container as I stare at him, wondering if he's lost his mind. Once he takes his hand out, it's covered in chocolate.

"What the . . . What are you doing?"

Chocolate drips down on the floor and his clothes, leaving huge brown stains all over the place.

"Well . . ." He steps back and shrugs. "As I said, this is a stressful moment for you. We need something to clean. Don't we?"

He bites his lower lip, his hand landing on the white cabinet behind him. My pantry.

My mouth widens as he drags his hand down until there's a long chocolate handprint all over the first cabinet door, then he freezes with his brows up and a nervous smile.

Only once I chuckle, he does too. He goes back to the container, fits his hand inside, then drags it all around my kitchen. On the plastic cover sitting on my white wooden table, on every single cabinet. He dirties the dishes, the sink, the stove, the oven.

"If this is triggering you, let me know," he says, going in for another dive.

Triggering? Seeing him stain my kitchen with chocolate must be the best thing I've ever witnessed. And tonight, I really need to laugh and clean. I point at the window. "Glass is my favorite."

He slowly closes his eyes and opens them again. "Of course. The most annoying part of home chores." He tilts his head. "I take the one on the right, you take the one on the left."

I glance at my light pink shirt covered in cute pandas, then at the chocolate ganache. "Okay," I say with a shriek, rushing to fit both my hands inside the container and giggling when I pull them out and chocolate falls on top of my blue, fluffy slippers. I walk to the window, leaving a trail of chocolaty footsteps, then position myself in front of it.

"Ready?" he asks.

I nod. “Ready.”

I look at the clean, shiny glass. There’s not a single fingerprint on it. I’ve cleaned all the dirt brought by the wind and used a product to make it brighter. But maybe mess isn’t *always* a bad thing. Sometimes, it might be better to make the wrong choice, to act before thinking, to do senseless things and be impulsive.

With my lips pressed tight together, I push my hands against the glass and drag them around until it’s so dirty the light struggles to filter in, and I’m almost out of breath. It’s not because I’m moving around, and it isn’t adrenaline either. It feels . . . liberating. Like I’m letting go.

Shane’s hand grasps my shoulder, and when I turn to him, he isn’t laughing anymore. Instead, his brows are pulled together. “Are you okay?”

He’s so handsome. I wish I could have him—all of him. “Yes, I am. This is so fun.”

“Want to continue?”

So much. I want to get this apartment filthy. I want the scent of chocolate to permeate the walls. I want to smell it for weeks.

We walk back to the container, bickering over who’s going to dip their hands in first. He shoves my shoulder away as I leave my chocolaty fingerprint over the sleeve of his sweater and erupts into laughter. I’m fairly certain that—chocolate or not—if someone from the office saw him now, they wouldn’t recognize him.

He isn’t stiff, straight as a pencil. Instead, he’s relaxed, moving frantically around the kitchen and meeting my gaze at every chance he gets with an exhilarated grin.

Once our hands are dipped in chocolate ganache, we come up with an action plan. I dirty all the walls of the living room. He focuses on the coffee table and the desk. We’ve probably stained the couch and the carpet forever, and chocolate drips from the painting right onto Alex’s computer screen.

My apartment looks like a dessert crime scene.

When we race each other to the container for another round, I slip on the chocolate and land on my ass. I don’t stop cackling, though my tailbone throbs with pain, and his look of concern quickly turns into a tear-jerking laughter.

“Oh, Heaven,” he says, pulling me up. Since I’ve met him, I’ve fallen in love with my name. He studies my face with a content smile and whispers, “You have some chocolate on your face.”

I'm not surprised, considering we've been acting like kindergarteners using chocolate as paint and my apartment as the canvas. "Where?" I ask, fighting the instinct to wipe it away. My hands are still covered in chocolate, I'll just make it worse.

He points at my nose, then drags his hand across my face until there's chocolate all the way to my nostrils. There must be some in my lungs too, considering the quick rush of air I inhale.

Taking a step back as chocolate sticks my lashes together, I growl, "Oh, you are so dead," then dip my hands into the container as he strides away from me to the other side of the table.

"*Please*, don't give me that! You knew it was coming," he says, not even bothering to try and stop his fit of laughter.

I didn't, but as I hop to one side and he moves quickly to maintain our distance, I smirk. "And you know what's coming for you now."

He shakes his head. "You have to get me first."

Oh, I'll get him. I'll get him in his car as he drives away if I have to.

We shift from one side of the table to the other, and I scream at him to give up and succumb, but he just won't. At every step I take, he moves away, and I'm considering jumping over the table and lunging at him when he puts his hands up. "Okay, okay. We're at an impasse."

"We won't be for much longer if you let me catch you," I say, sprinting to the right.

He rushes next to the fridge, slipping on the pool of chocolate by the container and causing us both to erupt into more laughter. I don't think I've had so much fun in years.

"I have a proposition," he says, putting his hands up as he stands on his feet again.

"I'll listen, as long as it involves me using you as human bread for all this chocolate I have on my hands."

He shakes his head. "That's not going to happen."

Yes, it will. I take a few steps, and he does too. "Fine. What's your proposition?"

"I'll buy you a proper lunch at work for the next month."

"Pff," I say. That's all I think of his proposition, though as I skip to the left, I make no progress.

"Okay. I—I'll bake for you. Whatever you want."

"But you'd do that anyway, wouldn't you?" I ask as I cross my arms and

quickly uncross them not to further stain my clothes. When he doesn't retort, I shake my head. "You won't get out of this."

His shoulders slump, a defeated look appearing on his face, but it lasts a little over a second. Then, with a new resolution in his eyes, he dips his hands into the chocolate ganache container, now almost empty. "Fine. But you're getting dirty too."

"I'm already dirty. That's the whole damn point, Shane," I half-scream, grabbing a sticky lock of hair with my hand. "There's chocolate in my hair!"

His beam makes me jittery. He looks so proud that he got chocolate in my hair, I almost forget how much I want to get my revenge. Especially as he slowly walks toward me, and I toward him, like predators waiting for the moment to attack.

We both know what's going to happen. We'll be drenched in chocolate, because neither of us will give in. Neither will back down, neither will give up. We'll challenge each other for as long as we can.

His eyes flicker with something that makes my stomach sink, and soon we're face to face. Neither moves. We just get lost in each other's gaze.

"Surrender?" he whispers.

My gaze fixates on his lips. I can't help it. The way they move when he speaks is mesmerizing. "Never."

He closes the last inches of distance between us, and my heartbeat picks up. Chocolate is all I can feel, smell and taste, and for a second, I wonder if this is all a dream. If I'll wake up alone in my bed, in a home that smells nothing like desserts and a lot like a lie.

I move my slimy hand to his cheek, and I'm not sure if I am doing it to get my revenge or simply because I want to touch him.

Before I can decide, he leans forward until his lips crash on mine.

Chapter 23

Sweet Kisses



OUR LIPS only brush against each other's before he leans back and looks into my eyes. There's everything I feel and more in them. The warmth, the sense of belonging, the marvel at what we just created with this kiss. What we are and how great this feels.

"You're kissing me," I say, my hand still cupping his cheek.

"I am." His lips move back onto mine, and this time, we use them to taste each other—and a lot of chocolate. His breath is scorching hot, his mouth tangling with mine until we're breathing loudly and my heart is hammering yet skipping beats at the same time.

When my knees buckle, I clasp his arms for balance. Every inch of my skin is covered in goosebumps, and I can feel this kiss with more than my tongue, teeth, and lips. I can feel it in my body, in my soul. Destroying and smearing me as he fixes it all at the same time until I'm whole. "Oh my God, Shane."

He takes a few steps back, dragging me with him.

"You're kissing me."

"Yes." He lifts my waist until I'm sitting on the kitchen counter. Once he fits between my legs, the rough fabric of his jeans grazes the sensitive skin of my inner thighs below the pajama shorts, then he moves his mouth on mine again.

My brain can't process it. This kiss is too good, his lips too warm. His hands shift to the small of my back, his breaths become even quicker than mine. Our tongues twist, and it's magical. More unrealistic than the book he made fun of me for.

My lips are made to kiss his.

Grasping his neck, I hold his face close to mine. My legs press onto his sides to keep him in place, and we kiss until he leaves my lips and moves to my cheek, then my neck.

Sparks move down my stomach as his teeth nibble my skin, then he drops sweet pecks on my shoulder. I gasp for air when his hold on me tightens, and he focuses back on my lips, suckling at the bottom one as I move my mouth over his.

“I’m kissing you,” he whispers.

When I moan in response, he helps me off the kitchen counter. Our lips find each other again and we stumble through the kitchen. He groans as his ass hits the table, and when his tongue slips through my lips and his hands squeeze my ass, I stop chuckling.

Making the wise choice not to let me go, he guides me across the living room, and when we’re at the entrance of the bedroom, there’s almost a kick at my stomach that leaves me breathless. I see the ghosts of the girls Alex brought there, the things that he did to them, the lies that he’s told. They color the room dark, and bringing Shane in there would feel like cheapening what’s so beautiful and pure between us.

Maybe I *do* need to buy a new mattress.

“Couch,” I say, pulling him back. He plods toward it, dragging me along, because I can’t stop kissing him any more than he can. When we’re finally in front of the couch, he lowers me on it.

“Shane,” I moan when he lies on top of me. A pool of heat has taken over my stomach, and my lips are still pulsating, vibrating with pleasure.

“Heaven,” he answers with glazed eyes.

I pull on his neck until our mouths are drowning in each other’s, and my hands wander to his back. They touch everything they can reach, like I’m trying to memorize his muscular shoulders, his solid chest. I still haven’t seen for myself all the goodies hiding under his t-shirt, and I can’t wait to feel his body on me, skin to skin.

He licks alongside my jaw, his tongue wet and warm and fucking delicious. It sends goosebumps raining down my body, arching against his, trying to get closer though we’re already in a knot. And he’s so hard, so big, so freaking tempting—chocolate-covered muscles everywhere—that I can’t help but rub myself against him.

When he grunts, it sounds like poetry wrapped in the most perfect melody. The best noise I’ve ever heard—throaty and guttural. Hot. So hot, in

fact, that I trail my lips down his neck, his throat. Lasciviously, adoringly.

“You taste like chocolate,” I whisper, almost out of air.

“You taste like...”—he cocks his brow dramatically—“heaven.”

I snort out a laugh. “Oh, that’s so bad—”

He nibbles my cheek until we both chuckle, and as soon as we stare at each other again, the tension crashes over us in full force. His hand moves under my shirt, gripping onto the small of my back until my brain shuts off. It’s big and warm. His long fingers that I’ve stared at more than I’d like to admit during our work meetings bury into my skin—hopefully leaving red, delicious marks on it.

He’s holding his weight on his elbow, but I pull him down to me. I want to feel all of him—need to, rather. And once his body is resting on mine, we both let out a sigh.

In the last hour, I’ve gone from cringing at the thought of seeing him again, to feeling his . . . *bulging girth*, as the romance book called it? And it feels different from Alex’s.

Everything about Shane is different from Alex. Shane is safety, care, trust. Shane is a whim. He’s the best kind of dessert—the one you don’t need to prove you deserve.

His lips trail down my neck again, and this time, he lowers the shoulder strap of my dress and kisses my chest. He does so reverently, like every new spot deserves twice the attention the last one got. It makes my body spasm up and down with shaky breaths as I struggle to keep still.

When his teeth trace down the skin of my chest, a hoarse noise comes out of my throat. I don’t know if my body is reacting the way it is because of him, or if I’m all of a sudden a mix of erogenous zones, just like the girl in the book.

“Take it off,” I say, grasping his shirt, and he quickly gets to his knees. The next thing I see is his shirt flying onto the chocolate-covered coffee table.

“Oh my God.” I stare at his chest as he moves down on me, then I push him back. My fingers trace down his defined pecs, following with his abs. “What is all *this*?”

With a chuckle, he holds his hand over mine as I discover every furrow of his upper body. He’s deceived me. I never knew all of this was underneath his neutral cotton shirts. *He’s* the Adonis. And he’s spectacular.

He moves his face closer, but I’m not done staring at his six-pack and push him back again. Only once he drawls, “I want to kiss you,” do I force

myself to look into his eyes. They're hooded, his breaths shallow. He leans down a third time, and as our lips dance on each other, I have to make do with touching his chest—it turns out to be even better than just looking.

His soft, dark hair tickles my fingertips, and his muscles tense under my touch. I trace his biceps, then his shoulders, all the way down to his lower back. I don't think I can get enough of him.

He holds onto the elastic band of my shorts, and my brain is a maze. It's much too fast, much too soon, but any rationalizing has gone out the window, and I can't find myself anymore—I'm completely lost. Everywhere around me is him, and the only way I'll find my way back is with this man.

Until it all crashes.

I don't know what it is. Maybe it's the fact that he cups my thighs, dangerously close to my underwear. Maybe it's that his finger dangles at the edge of my shorts, and no one has seen me naked in five years but Alex. Maybe it's because as he kisses my shoulder, I notice the model airplane Alex gave me on our third date staring at me from the shelf. I guess Emma and I forgot to trash some things.

But in an instant, I'm aware this is leading to sex, and I'm not ready for it. I'm not ready for Shane. Not on the same couch where Alex sat only a couple of days back, not when he's here to make me feel better about my breakup. All the different emotions I felt for Shane in the last twenty-four hours dawn on me, and I can't deal with it all.

"Wait," I whisper. "Shane."

"Hmm." His lips press gently onto my clavicle, almost like he hasn't heard me and definitely like he has no intention of stopping. "Yes?"

"We need to . . . stop. This is too much. It's all too much."

His eyes roam over my face, like he's trying to understand, trying to get his brain to focus. Mine can't either. It's too distracted by him, his smell of chocolate and man, and his perfect body.

"Okay," he says, his hand moving away from my leg. He cups my face and drags his lips to mine, slowly enveloping me with his mouth.

Before I know it, I'm softly biting his lips, rubbing myself on him as his fingers dig into my thighs. We can't help it, or at least, I can't.

"Hmm—wait," he whispers when I wrap my arms around his neck. I can't, though. He tastes so good. His tongue is so sinful, his lips so velvety. "Wait, Heav—"

I kiss him again, grinding on him until he grunts. The noise goes straight

to my soul, so I rock my hips back and forth again. Another grunt.

“God, Heaven,” he whispers, holding onto my hips to still me, and we stare at each other with a twinkle in our eyes, a smile opening up both our faces.

“You sound like a telegram from a priest.”

“It’s not my fault your name is ridiculous.”

I backslap his firm chest. “Shut up. You love it.”

With a sigh, he grazes his lips on mine again. “I do.”

I think we’ll continue making out like teenagers, but he stands and grabs his shirt. There’s chocolate in his ear and I’m sure there’s chocolate everywhere on me—I can see some on my toes.

When his shirt is on, he offers me his hand and pulls me up, then he wraps his arms around me as his lips press to my forehead. “I’m sorry things got a little—umm . . .”

“I’m not. It was really fun.”

He pecks my temple. “Yes. But I got carried away. I know you just broke up with that little shit, and this place . . .” He shrugs. “How about I officially ask you on a date?”

“Officially?”

His hands travel to the small of my back. “Officially. I’ll notify the HR department and all. I’ll even have Marina add it to my calendar.”

I press my forehead to his chest and shake my head with a giggle. “Please don’t.”

“Oh, but I will. And I’ll make everyone call you Miss Asshole.”

“Stop it,” I complain when his arms hold tight around my shoulders and he doesn’t let me pull away. “Maybe I’ll get everyone to call you Mr. Nice instead.”

He finally lets me go and shakes his head. “I don’t see that happening, Heaven.”

I walk back to him, regretting moving away from his hug, and when I do, he welcomes me back into his arms. His hands move back to the spot on my lower back that’s still tingling from his touch, and I’m once again pressed against his chest.

I want to know more about this date. Not about locations, logistics. What we’re doing or who we are telling. I don’t know and don’t care. I want to know *when*. When are we going on this date? How long do I have to wait?

Soon we’re kissing again. Maybe now that we started, that’s all we can

do, and I'm more than fine with it. So fine it's stupid.

When my fingers entangle through his hair, I'm sure. This is my favorite place in the world.



THE NOISE of the doorbell distracts us enough to stop kissing, both of us turning to the entrance.

“Are you expecting someone?” Shane asks, and I know where his mind is at. Mine is thinking about the same thing. Could that be Alex?

“No.” I sigh and move to the buzzer. “Hello?”

Out of the intercom comes a loud, bubbly voice. “Hello! I’ve got food and booze! Let me in!”

It’s Emma. I check Shane’s expression, and he seems relieved, so I press the button that’ll open the door downstairs and walk to him. “Hey, a word.”

“Emma’s completely unhinged?”

“Yes. Be nice?”

He pecks my lips. “Of course. Your friend is my friend too.” He walks into the kitchen and dumps the rest of the chocolate down the drain. Which reminds me of the state of my apartment, my face and my clothes. I check my reflection in the mirror and it looks like I haven’t showered in six weeks. Inspecting the hair that’s sticking together in brown locks around my face, I smile.

When there’s a knock at the door, I open it with a chuckle, widening my arms. “Hello!”

Emma’s expression shifts from cheerful to worried. “Oh my God, is that poop?”

My arms drop to my sides as she gapes at the apartment behind me, Shane’s laughter traveling to us from the kitchen. “No, can’t you smell it? It’s chocolate.”

Her mouth widens, and she points at the kitchen, then mouths, “Is Shane here?”

Almost soundlessly, I whisper, “We kissed.”

She shrieks, loud enough to make the whole mouthing exercise futile, then walks past me and into the apartment.

Once I join her in the kitchen, Shane’s offering her his chocolate-stained

hand, which she looks at with disgust. “Oh, right, sorry.” Moving to the sink, he washes his hands. “Nice to finally meet you. You must be *Paradise*.”

“Because I’m the answer to all your prayers?” Emma croons.

I think I see Shane’s brain explode as his face disfigures with horror. His eyes dart to me as his cheeks turn blood-red, waving his wet hands uncontrollably. “No—no, that’s not—I just meant—Heaven said—”

Oh, I can’t let him suffer like that. “She knows what you meant, Shane,” I reassure him, sending a warning look at Emma. “The one time someone calls you that. You’re not making a great case for yourself.”

Chuckling a little too much on the outside, she walks to Shane and pats his arm. “Nice to meet you too.” She stares down at Shane’s chocolate-covered body. “Would you like me to chuck that shirt in the washer for you?”

I groan. “Emma, behave.”

“Fine, fine,” she says, turning to look at the walls, then at the once-upon-a-time white couch. “What happened here? Did the chocolate factory explode?”

“I figured Heaven might have needed something to clean today.” Shane points at the kitchen, his cheeks turning back to their regular complexion. “Where do I find cleaning supplies?”

I point him to the right cabinet, and he walks to it then pulls out sprays and cloths. Would it offend him if I told him those are my good ones? If he uses them on all this chocolate, I’ll have to throw them away, and I got them specifically ordered online.

“What is it?” he asks.

Shit. He noticed my look. “Uh, nothing.”

He turns to the sprays. “Are these not the right . . .”

When my eyes dart to the cloths, he grabs them. “These? You don’t want me to use these?”

Emma’s head bounces from him to me.

“Those are microfiber,” I whisper, knowing full well I’m being weird in front of him, releasing the control-freak beast—as Alex calls it.

“Okay. How about these?” He takes out some dirty, old ones, and once my shoulders relax, he moves to the microwave and starts wiping. “Cool.”

Cool. That’s all. No eye roll, no snarky comments. He doesn’t care. It’s cool.

“We’ll be right back,” Emma says after a few seconds of silence. As she pulls me into the bedroom, I look over my shoulder, where Shane observes us

with a grin.

The door closes behind us, and once I walk to the closet, she appears by my side. “What the hell happened? Did you have sex?” she whispers.

Her whispers are way too loud.

“No, no.” I grab a pair of joggers and a t-shirt. “But we kissed.”

“That’s all?” She grimaces, then puts the shirt back and gives me another one instead.

“Yeah. It was just too fast for me with . . . well, with everything that’s happened.” I peer at Alex’s phone charger by the bed and sigh. “But he invited me on a date.”

“Oh my God!” she shrieks. “When? Where? What are you wearing?”

“Maybe let’s talk about it tomorrow, when he can’t eavesdrop?”

“Okay, okay. Tell me one thing,” she says as I take off my pajamas and fit into the gray joggers. “How was it?”

Kissing him? I think back to the taste of his lips, his light stubble pricking my skin. His hands moving up my thigh, his tongue flat against my neck. “Like I wish you weren’t here, so I could do some more of it.”

“If it makes you wish I wasn’t here, then he must be the God of dry humping.”

Playfully hitting her arm, I fit into my t-shirt. “I don’t know. It was . . . the most incredible kiss—kisses—of my life.”

“Did you see him without his shirt on? Didn’t I tell you?” she asks, and because we can’t stay in this room all day while I describe to her all his muscles—there’s too many—I quickly nod and refuse to give out any more details.

“I can’t believe how lucky you are,” Emma says as she shakes her head.

I’d like to remind her that to get here, I had to find out my long-term boyfriend was cheating on me, then decide to catfish him, get drunk, match with a stranger, be assigned to a random team of crazy people, and find out Shane’s my boss. But I don’t.

She’s right, and I can’t believe I’m this lucky either.

Chapter 24

Mr. & Miss Asshole



THE CITY LOOKS gorgeous from this glass wall. Tall buildings stand before me, but behind, hidden by a large mall, peek the canals. The water shines and sparkles with the sun's rays, like a billion tiny mirrors, and I can't help the wide grin that curves my lips. Somewhere east of there is Shane's secret spot.

Turning around, I mumble a curse at the elevator doors. I'm always quite excited to get to work, and that's been especially true since I started working on the sixth floor a month ago. But today reaches a whole other level. Today, it takes an entire minute more than usual for them to close.

"Hold it!"

I shove my hand between the closing doors, which open up again, and Shane enters the elevator in a rush, the musky scent of his aftershave filling the narrow space.

"Miss Wilson," he says, his fingers scrambling along the buttons of his jacket.

"Mr. Hassholm. I believe you're late for your first meeting today."

He straightens his tie and looks at his watch. "Hmm. You wouldn't believe the night I had."

"Wouldn't I?"

"No. I've spent hours cleaning up some girl's *very* dirty apartment and dodging her friend's *very* inappropriate questions."

I bite my lower lip, but before I can say anything more, his phone rings. I'm guessing it'll do that a lot, especially now that the event is getting closer.

"Fuck." He brings it to his ear. "Marina, I'm on my way. I know, I'm in the damn elevator—yeah, I know. Get them a coffee—I said I know, Marina." When I hide a smile behind the palm of my hand, he tucks the

phone into his pocket. “You’re laughing at my misery now.”

“No.” I stare down at my nails. “Okay, maybe a little.”

He turns to me and advances until I’m pressed between him and the elevator’s wall, the cold surface on my back balanced by the warmth of our bodies in contact.

I’m about to ask if he lost his mind, because someone could join us in here any second and I’m pretty sure there are cameras in the top corner, when he presses a button and the elevator comes to a sudden stop. “Oh my God—what are you doing?”

His fingers reach for a lock of hair that escaped my braid. “I don’t know. I must be inspired by your book. I figured you’d appreciate me stopping the elevator and stealing a kiss.”

I cup his hand with mine. “I do. And I’m waiting to panic, hoping you know how to un-stop it.”

“I’ll figure it out.” He tucks the lock behind my ear. “Good morning, Heaven.”

I inhale deeply. No more chocolate, but I can still get a hint of dessert. I wonder if it’s my brain playing tricks on me or if he passes some sugar behind his ears in the morning.

“Good morning, Sh—”

He presses his lips on mine, and once again, I don’t mind his interruption. My heart picks up, a helicopter in my chest, and I’m about to take flight when his tongue grazes mine, warm and demanding and freaking scrumptious.

“I’ve missed you,” he murmurs against my lips.

My stomach tumbles, squeezes, twists. “You saw me a few hours ago.”

“I know. That’s far too long. Let’s quit and open that bakery.” His lips trail down my neck, his breaths soft and scorching hot against my skin. “I’ll feed you desserts and spend my days kissing you.”

I drag my fingers along his flexed muscles. I know we’ve been flirting for a while, but saying he’s an intense guy doesn’t even begin to cover it. Since our first kiss yesterday, he has barely kept his hands off me. “It doesn’t sound like a killer business plan.”

“Hmm.” He nibbles at my neck. “That’s okay. We only need revenue to buy more desserts.”

When I giggle, he stares at my lips. After a second, his gaze hardens, as if a disturbing thought crossed his mind.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I won’t be able to kiss you like this today.”

“Oh, I know. Don’t worry, when we’re at work, we’re at work.”

“Yes. Work is work, and we can’t let our personal situation interfere with any of it.” He shakes his head. “But I wasn’t telling *you*. I’m trying to convince myself.”

“Ahh.” I peck the tip of his nose, then move my arms around his waist. “How about we share some dessert tonight?”

“Yes. But it’s still ten to twelve hours from now.”

“You’re a big boy. You’ll survive.”

He tilts his head, and I move my hand to his gorgeous brown hair, fixing it a little after I’ve pulled at it. When I adjust his tie, he presses a button, and the elevator resumes its ascent. “You’re right. I’m a big boy. It’s ten hours, no big deal.”

With a nod, we go back to our positions, each on one side of the elevator, with enough distance between us that no one could tell there’s more going on. “Or we could sneak out during the lunch break—”

“Yes. Definitely that,” he answers without skipping a beat.

I’m still chuckling when the doors open, and none other than our CEO comes in. After a quick nod to me, he talks Shane’s ear off. A hotel inauguration they’ve been working on for months is happening this Friday, so he has many concerns to share.

Once we get to the sixth floor, Shane excuses himself and walks to his office without so much as a glance at me. Looks like we’re officially back at work.



SHANE KNOCKS at my office door, and seeing him through the glass immediately cheers me up. It’s been twenty-four hours since our heart-stopping elevator ride, and we’ve both been too consumed with work to do more than glance longingly at each other.

Which we’ve done. Plenty.

The man I’ve been talking to on the phone says a quick goodbye before hanging up, so I wave Shane in.

“Hi,” he says. He looks well-rested, though I know for sure he left past ten last night. His suit today is a boring tone of beige that would make

anyone look like Mr. Bean, but on him, is spectacular.

Getting lost for a second in the squared pattern on his salmon-pink tie, I cover my mouth to stifle another yawn. “Did you just get here?”

His eyes squint. “No, it’s almost lunchtime. At what time did you get here?”

“I haven’t left.”

His full lips part and his brows rise. With the sun streaming through the window and brightening his dark brown irises, he gapes at me. “Since yesterday?”

Since yesterday. I told him I needed to work when he left last night, and I meant it. When I looked up from my computer again, it was three in the morning. No point in leaving the office, considering I wasn’t halfway done with my list of urgent tasks.

“Heaven, you’re going to give yourself a nervous breakdown. Actually, you might give *me* one if you don’t take better care of yourself.”

“I’m tougher than I look,” I say with a lazy smile. “I’ve talked to the security company. They’ll send me their quote for twenty-two extra guards.”

Inhaling deeply, he sets his harsh gaze on me. “You need to rest—”

“I need to do my job and do it right,” I insist, trying to reassure him with a smile. “I’m here to save your ass, am I not? This is what that looks like.”

He clicks his tongue, but before he can argue, Emma storms into the corridor and steps by his side. “Look who’s joined at the hip, now,” she says as she peeks into my office.

“Emma, sorry, sorry, sorry. I can’t come to lunch, I forgot to text.” I groan, pointing at the screen of my computer. “I have a ton of things to—”

“No, go to lunch,” Shane says as he walks to me and pulls me into a standing position. “You haven’t had a break in twenty-four hours. I bet you haven’t had a proper meal either. Go.”

I’m about to protest, but his fiery gaze tells me there’s no point. Mr. Asshole’s peeking through the cracks, and he’s daring me to disagree. “Okay, I’ll be back in half an hour.”

“One hour. Go. You need to eat if you’re gonna save my ass.”

“Fine. Bye,” I grumble as I grab my bag, but my pout does nothing to stop the smile across his face as I step by his side, nor does he move away to let me pass. Instead, I need to step sideways to make it out of the office as he takes most of the entryway. When I do, his eyes roll down my body, then back into mine, and he looks at me like I’m the best news he got today.

It's new, and quite frankly, spectacular. More than that, it's dangerous to think how easily I could get used to it.



AFTER A QUICK LUNCH and lots of swooning with Emma, I'm back in my office. A blue and white checkered dessert box sits on my desk, and it soothes my nerves better than any prescribed medication ever could. I open it, and there's more than a ribbon and a box for me to save this time. There's a note.

As I grab it, my heart tumbles, and joy flickers all over my skin like the gentlest of pinches.

*Dear Miss Asshole,
I didn't forget about our bet. This is your
favorite dessert. Whether I'm right or wrong, I
deserve a kiss for the effort. Come on a date
with me on Saturday?
Yours indeed,
Mr. Nice*

I rush to his office, ignoring the judgemental looks I get on my way. He's on the phone, but he motions at me to come in. "Yes?"

"Yes."

He grins, holding the phone to his chest. "Yes, it's your favorite dessert or yes, you're coming on a date with me?"

"Yes to the date. I don't know what that thing is. Looks yummy, though."

"It's a coconut truffle."

"Not my favorite, I'm afraid."

He runs a finger along the collar of his shirt. "Good. I can't wait to guess again. Raincheck on that kiss?"

"You bet."

Another phone rings, and with a sigh, he takes it out of his pocket. As

impressive as juggling two phones and a conversation is, knowing this job *isn't* his dream makes me sad. If I could, I'd open a bakery for him, then force him out of IMP. I'd make him follow his dream and soothe all his fears about it.

He stares at the small screen, notifications making it ping again and again and yet again. Though it doesn't stop, Shane sets it down as he focuses back on me, and my heart drops.

He put it face down. Face. Down. So I can't see who's blowing it up with a million texts.

"Heaven? Is everything okay?"

I can't stop looking at the small black device. I don't know if it's his personal phone or his work one, but it doesn't make much of a difference, does it? He could use either to talk to other girls, to be on RadaR. And if he's putting his phone face down when I'm around, then he must be.

"Heaven? What's going on?"

His entire face is tense. His jaw is clenched, and there are creases on his forehead. My guess is I'm looking just as distressed, because it feels like someone is stomping on my chest. "Are you still on RadaR?" I ask.

His lips part. His eyes roam over my face, but no sound comes for a while.

He is.

"I haven't deleted it yet. I didn't exactly have too much time to—and I didn't think about it." He drags a hand over his face when I blankly stare at him. "Hey, don't do this to me, okay? We can talk about anything you want, but the CEO is coming here for a meeting, I have clients on the phone, and you're kind of crumbling down on me."

He's right. I am. I told him work is work, and I'm proving myself wrong. But he put his phone face down, and I can feel sweat forming on my back. It *must* mean something, and I won't be fooled again as I was by Alex.

Even so, I try to smile, but it barely pulls up one corner of my lips. "You're right. We'll talk about this later."

"Wait," he says as I step back, and when I turn to him, there's a pleading expression on his face. "Please, give me a chance. I get that you're struggling, but I need you to trust me."

I nod, then quickly leave his office before he can say anything more.

Boy, do I want to trust Shane. But can I? Maybe it's just bad timing—maybe breaking up with Alex isn't enough, and I need time to heal. To not be

terrified by phones and dating apps. Or maybe I'm right, and he's lying, doing who-knows-what behind my back.

Before I turn the corner, I can't help but look, and my heart squeezes painfully in my chest.

He's staring down at the small screen.

Chapter 25

Nevaeh with Hesitation



I SET my heels down on the shoe rack and check the clock on the wall. It rudely tells me it's two hours past the time I should have been home, but it's going to get worse from here on out until this event is finally over. It feels like it never will be.

In the bathroom, I remove my makeup, then grab my phone and go through Alex's messages. He sent me seven today. They range from "I'm sorry" to "Are you with him?", and more frightening, "I'm coming over after work."

Work for him has been over for a while, so I don't think he came. If he did, I don't think he entered, because everything is in the right place, where I left it.

I text him back that we'll talk soon. That work is hard because the event is coming up and I'm doing overtime. Overtime is a euphemism, considering I haven't been home in over thirty-two hours.

I don't have the strength to either cook or order dinner, so I settle for some Oreos. Sitting at my empty table, in my empty apartment, I eat cookies right out of the box, in complete silence. After the day I had, that's all I crave.

My phone rings, and with a groan when I see it's Alex, I answer. It's better than having him come over. "Hello?"

"Oh, hey, Heaven—hi."

He seems surprised I answered—probably because it's the first time I have since the breakup. And my heart shrinks at the sound of his voice. "Hi, Alex. Listen, I just got home from work after—"

"I know, I know. I wanted to tell you that I'm working on it."

My face scrunches as I set the cookie down on a paper towel. "Working

on what?”

“On myself. I’m seeing a psychologist, and I’ll make amends. I’ll do whatever you want me to.”

Seeing a psychologist? He left merely days ago. I almost want to open RadaR and see he’s online, just to prove him wrong, but I’m too tired and too disinterested. “Okay.”

“I swear, Heaven. I’ll make it up to you. It’ll never happen again.”

“Alex, I don’t want to get back together.”

There’s a beat of silence. “Is it because of that guy?”

I set my elbow on the table and fidget with the corner of the cookie box. “I won’t lie and tell you there’s nothing between us. But he is not the reason I don’t want to get back together, no.”

He groans. “He is. Please tell me you won’t sleep with him. Oh, God. Tell me you haven’t already.”

“Are you listening to me?” I ask as my voice reaches a higher pitch. I have to give it to him, it takes some *audacity* to say that after I caught him sleeping with another woman in our bed only a few days ago.

“Yes. I am. Tell me you’re not sleeping with him.”

I ignore the sense of liquid anger boiling through me and try to keep a firm tone instead. “Alex. We’re over. I have all your stuff packed. Send someone to get it, please, and let’s move on from this.”

“No, no. It’s not over. Nothing’s over, Heaven. I love you,” he whines, followed by a loud thump. “Please, let me fix this. I swear I can fix it.”

God, I shouldn’t have answered the phone. He probably thinks if he keeps insisting, I’ll cave. “Alex, I’m sorry—I am. But it’s too late.”

When he protests again, I hang up. I know he won’t let go, and I can’t take any more of his begging. Not today. Today, I need to sleep.

Before I can bite the next cookie, I get an email from the catering company. I email them back immediately, and once I’m done, I relax back in my chair and close my eyes. I’ll fall asleep like this if I stay here for a minute longer.

My phone lights up again, vibrating against the table, and I grab it with no hesitation. I don’t know if it’s Alex or work, but I’ll sleep with it under my pillow to make sure I don’t miss any important calls. It’s neither, unfortunately.

With a thump, my phone drops onto the table as I bring a hand over my mouth. It’s RadaR. Shane. Shane texted Nevaeh on RadaR.

My eyes burn, and with the first blink, the screen in front of me blurs. Silence reigns in my apartment except for the ticking of the wall clock and the much quicker thrumming of my heart. Then tears give way to sobs, which only increase every time a new one comes. Louder and ever more painful.

I can't believe he'd do this. I can't believe he'd look for Nevaeh. We've been dating for—hell, we haven't started yet, and he's already reaching out to other girls?

Is it me? Seriously—is there something fundamentally wrong about me that just makes men need more?

Squeezing my chest, I gasp for air again and again, but it feels like none of it's coming in. It's anger, probably, but I just feel exhausted. Drained. Spent.

I'm done.

I grab my phone and press on the RadaR icon. I'm deleting this stupid profile, this stupid app. I'm done with this, I'm done with everything. I tap on the notification, and the chat with Shane opens. Though I don't want to read the message, I notice the green bubble covers my whole screen, and through the blur in my eyes, I read his words.

SHANE:

Hi Nevaeh. We haven't talked in a while, work's been busy. I'm not sure what I'm doing or if there's a point to this text, considering we've never met. But I also don't want to ghost you without a word. I think it's fair to say we shared a connection, though it didn't lead to anything romantic. So I wanted to let you know I'm deleting this account. I met someone, and if this were any other situation, I'd love to continue being friends. But I guess it wouldn't be easy to explain my friendship with a mysterious girl from a hook-up app. Sorry we never got to watch *The Matrix* together. To make it up to you, here's my favorite line. Ever had that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or dreaming? Shane

I gape at the message. Of course, I stopped sobbing. Now, I'm smiling and sad at the same time, which is possibly more idiotic.

His profile picture is gone, and if I click on his name, nothing comes up. The account disappeared. He's not thinking about deleting the app. If there are other girls, he didn't give them a chance to persuade him to stay. He just let them know he's out. He's mine. And he's quoting *The Matrix*, the movie he and Nevaeh never got to see together. Maybe we will, one day.

Pressing onto the little icon that brings up Nevaeh's profile, I scroll down

until my finger hovers on the button that reads “Delete.” I hesitate, trying to sear this moment into my memory. As silly as this whole thing was, I don’t think Shane and I would be here today if it wasn’t for the connection we shared thanks to Nevaeh. I wouldn’t have seen the dessert-sweet side of him I now adore. He would have remained nothing but Mr. Asshole to me.

With a final sigh, I tap on “Delete” and I’m logged out of the app. Nevaeh is out of my life. Gone.

Almost on cue, there’s a knock at my door, and I just know it isn’t Alex, Emma, or the neighbor who always asks for salt or sugar. It’s Shane. He left work and sent that message to Nevaeh on his way here, to me.

I run to the door and open it. I barely notice his tired eyes, the way his jaw is set and his shoulders are tense with stress, because I grab his face between my hands and kiss him, pulling him inside until he closes the door behind him.

“Hmm . . . hi,” he says when we catch our breath, but now I’m all good with oxygen, and I kiss him again. He’ll need to wait for the next break for me to greet him.

His hands move to the small of my back, and we stand in the middle of the corridor, tasting our lips like the combination of the two of us is our favorite dessert. I know it’s mine.

“Hello,” I say when we stop again. Before I can throw myself at him, he presses his thumbs over my cheeks, wet with tears.

“What’s going on?” I lunge at him, but he holds my shoulders. “Were you crying?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

With an inquisitive gaze, he drops a peck on my lips. “Can we sit and talk for a minute?”

I don’t want to panic over nothing again, but I know I haven’t been the best version of myself today, and a weight settles in my stomach, making it hard to breathe. It’s never good when men want to *have a talk*. Is it?

“Come,” he says as we sit on the couch with our knees pressed together. “I have something for you.” He takes a paper out of his jacket and puts it in my hands.

I glance at it wearily, but he urges me to open it up. “0347, 9628,” I read out. “Tell me they’re winning lottery numbers, because my boss is a real asshole.”

With a wide smile, he holds both his phones up, then puts them on the

coffee table. Oh, they must be his pin codes.

“Shane, no, I—”

“Heaven, listen to me.” His lower lip disappears behind his teeth. “I’ve deleted RadaR. And I understand you struggle with trust right now, so you have my pin codes. The work one changes every week, but I’ll give you the new one as soon as I have it. You can go through my phones whenever you want. You can answer them too, just . . . if it’s my work phone, you’ll need to pretend you’re Marina and pass the message along.”

When I look down, he uses his finger to tilt my chin up.

“Hey, I mean it. I just ask you one thing in return,” he says. “Promise we’ll try to build trust together. With time. And until you’re ready, my phones are there for you to use at any time.”

“Shane.” I take a deep breath and squeeze his hand in mine. Shane isn’t Alex, and I will not let my past relationship ruin what’s happening between us right now. I refuse to. Turning to the passwords, I rip the paper four times, until I don’t have enough strength to do it again, then set them down on the coffee table with a sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“We don’t need to rush it, Heaven. You can take your time.”

“No, I don’t want to.” I throw my arms around his neck and hold him tight. I know things aren’t solved just yet—it’ll take more than tonight for me to put my complete trust in another man. But I’m dead set on doing my best and doing it the right way. “I don’t need to check your phones. What concerned me is . . .”

He cups my cheek when I hesitate, scouting my eyes. “What is it?”

I grab his phone and turn it face down on the coffee table. “That’s what you did today. That’s what Alex did around me, because—”

“—he didn’t want you to see the texts he was getting.” He passes a hand over his tired face. “No, Heaven, I turned my phone because I didn’t want my eyes to go there if the screen lit up. I wanted to focus on you—I always want to focus on you. Especially if I’m at work, and I only get to be with you for four minutes.” My chest flutters as he scratches his head. “But, hey, this is good. Now that I know it bothers you, I won’t turn it over anymore.”

I move against him, pushing my lips onto his and dragging him into a deep, long kiss. “Nuh-uh. If that’s the reason, please, do it all the time.”

“Whatever you want,” he whispers, holding onto my lower back as his eyes dip down to my lips. When I straddle him, peppering him with kisses as I unbutton his shirt, his hands graze up my legs until he cups my ass.

“Hmm . . . Heaven.”

I slide my hands under his shirt, feeling his toned muscles with each finger. I can't finish unbuttoning it, the urge is too much. Grinding against the hardening bulge in his pants, I kiss his chest, moaning at how good he tastes. Like sugar and man. Can I lick all his muscles, one by one? Would that be weird?

“Let's go to bed.” When he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, I stand. Hand in hand, we walk to the bedroom, and with a devilish smile, he takes off his tie, then the rest of his shirt. “Come here,” he says.

I walk to him and kiss him until we fall onto the bed side by side with a giggle. He looks exhausted. I graze my fingers on his cheek and wonder how I look. I took my makeup off, and I haven't slept in days.

“You're so beautiful,” he says as he turns us around so that he's lying on top of me. He's reading my mind again. “Do I look *beautiful* too?”

“Oh, are we making fun of each other?” I ask as I playfully swat his shoulder.

Locking my wrists into his fists, he holds them against the mattress. “I doubt you'll find something to make fun of me for.”

“Really? ‘Oh, no. She's not my, hmm, wife. No, I'm not, hmm, no, married, no,’” I mock.

“Ah, yes. That wasn't super smooth, I'll give you that.” He pecks along my jaw. “Therese is so sneaky. And I didn't want you to think you were my side piece.”

“Turns out you were mine,” I whisper, and when he bites my neck with a growl, I shriek. “I'm sorry! Sorry!”

“Are you sleeping in this?” He lets my wrists go and holds onto my shirt. As I nod, more kisses rain all over my face. “Then get under the blanket. It's time to close our eyes.”

I hold myself up on my elbow as he stands to take off his pants. Studying his muscular legs sprinkled with short, dark hair, I wonder how it'd feel to squeeze them with mine. “You want to . . . sleep?”

He smirks as he folds the pants and drops them on the white leather armchair. “Yes. You haven't rested in forty-eight hours. You're exhausted, and you've just cried.”

I'm too tired to argue, but I wish we'd take things further tonight. Still, when my head hits the pillow, it feels like floating on a cloud. My eyes shut, and I can feel myself drifting off in a second.

“Scoot over,” Shane whispers.

I’d argue that the right side of the bed is mine—I normally would—but I can barely move up enough for him to lie down. Nor can I focus on the fact that Shane is laying down beside me, his chest to my back as he kisses my shoulder. I can’t enjoy the contact of his skin against my shirt, his legs entangling with mine. I’m barely aware of his hand stroking my arm, of his delicious smell leaving its imprint on my sheets.

It’s the first time any of this happens, and I’m missing it, because I’m falling asleep, but my heart hasn’t gotten such a heavy workout in years. Being here with him is all I need, ever.

Him and his desserts.

Chapter 26

The Date



I HAVE no clue what Shane and I are doing tonight.

Staring at the brown locks roaming over my shoulders, the dark circles plaguing my tired eyes, and the pale skin of my face in the mirror, I lay my makeup on the desk. Since sleep hasn't been an option for the past few days, makeup will do.

Red lipstick, smoky eyeshadow. Might be too much. Nude makeup? Maybe it's too simple. If only he'd tell me where we're going, this would be so much easier.

Still, I can't wait for my first date with Shane. Seriously, it's ridiculous. We've been spending most of the last five weeks together, but tonight is official, special. New and exciting. Which also means I'm a nervous wreck.

When the buzzer rings, I stop dabbing my foundation.

That's not Emma. She knows I'm going out with Shane tonight. I don't think it's Shane either, because I gave him a key to the apartment. With everything that's been going on at the office, at least one of us always ends up staying at work until midnight, when the other is fast asleep. And I love waking up next to him too much, so, though it's absurdly early for it, he has a key.

I walk to the intercom and press the button. "Yes?"

"Can I come in?"

At the sound of his whiney voice, my stomach clenches. "No, Alex. You can't."

"This is my home too, Heaven. If you don't let me in right now, I'll call your parents. I'll show up at work. I'll fucking wait right here until you come out. And I won't pay for the lease—you'll be kicked out."

There it is. Though I knew this moment would come since Emma showed me that screenshot, it hits me as if I didn't foresee this. As if it comes out of nowhere. As if I didn't know the man I spent the last five years of my life with would throw me under the bus in a minute, without a second thought. "Call my parents, if you want. Call yours too. Tell them about all the shit you've been up to, while you're at it." I press the button with even more strength. "And don't worry about the lease, because I don't want your money."

The event is only a few days away, now, and with it, my promotion and raise will come. No one can deny I did a great job, everything considered, so I definitely have it in the bag. To hell with Alex.

"It's not my fault—"

"You've cheated on me, Alex! You're constantly belittling me, using me, and setting me aside when you're done. You don't love me—you just want to keep me around."

"I made *one* mistake! One, and this is what I get?"

I scoff. "One? *One* mistake?"

"Yes, one! And I swear it will never happen again."

I draw in a deep breath. I understand he's suffering, but he needs to stop harassing me, and I won't coddle him as he lies to me yet again. "Joining a dating app is more than one mistake, Alex. You can actually count each of the girls you matched with as a separate mistake."

"Dating app! What are you talking about?"

I scoff. "RadaR, Alex! I'm talking about RadaR!"

There's a beat of silence, then, out of the intercom, comes his voice. "What the fuck is a RadaR?!"

My brows furrow. "RadaR is the dating app you've been using to pick up girls. *One-time-only hookups*. I know about it, Alex. I made a profile there to catch you cheating. I'm Nevaeh."

After another short pause, he stutters, "One-time . . . RadaR? Why would I join a dating app, Heaven? You know how I feel about privacy. Do you really think I'm stupid enough to join those websites? I'm not making my data available for the government to . . ."

My eyes roll as his voice becomes a background noise. I can't hear yet another rant about how everyone's out to get his *data*. What data? And who's everyone anyway?

But something else gets my attention—the honesty in his voice. The

confusion etched into his tone. The fact that it really seems like he has no idea what I'm talking about.

"Listen, let me—let's talk," he pleads with urgency.

"No. I don't want to, and besides . . . I'm going on a date soon. You need to leave." More silence. Maybe knowing I'm with someone else will help him understand we're done.

"Is it with that guy?"

"Shane."

"Is it with him?"

I lean with my back against the door. "Yes." A loud thump blasts through the intercom, and my forehead creases. "Alex, you have to go. This is getting scary."

"You know I'd never hurt you, Heaven, please."

"You already have," I say, looking down at the wooden floors and spotting a tiny chocolate stain on the baseboard. My entire apartment still smells like chocolate, and I hope the scent of it never leaves.

"Heaven, please . . ."

I rub my finger over the chocolaty spot, balancing myself on one foot to keep my other hand on the intercom. "No, Alex. It's over. I'm—I'm with Shane."

There's more silence, and when I call his name, he doesn't answer. Hopefully, he left.

Once I'm back to my makeup, I'm holding my belly as a huge weight settles on it, but I finish with the last touch-ups, and by the time I'm done, I've pictured a hundred different scenarios involving tonight and I'm back in my good mood.

Peering into the bedroom, I bite the inside of my cheek as I stare at the pillow on the right side. I walk to it and nudge my nose closer to get a little whiff of Shane. It'd be amazing if I could shove my face into it—I won't admit nor deny I've done it multiple times—but I just finished doing my makeup.

Then, opening the wardrobe, I choose a light blue dress I bought a couple months back. It's cute, sexy—it should be fine for whatever we're doing, unless it involves climbing walls or sliding through mud.

Once I'm done getting ready, I'm half an hour early. I water the plants, then notice another spot of chocolate and clean it up. I wait until the seconds stretch into minutes, and my stomach is in knots. By the time I sit again, it's

five minutes past the time Shane should have been here. And he isn't one to be late—ever. But he wouldn't blow me off, right?

My mind hops from one fear to the other, and when my phone finally rings, I jump at it. It's Shane. "Hello?"

"Hi . . ."

My brows bend into a steep curve. Shane's tone isn't . . . Shane's tone. "What's wrong?"

"I can't make the date tonight. There's been a problem with—Yeah. No. I don't fucking know, Marina. Sort it out." He sighs. "Heaven?"

"Yes?"

"I'm stuck at the office. I'm sorry. I would have called before, but I thought we'd be done by now. Turns out we're not even close."

I clear my throat. I don't want him to hear how upset I am, but there's a lump the size of an orange blocking my airways. "Oh, that's okay. Is everything under control?"

"Yeah, sort of. I'll have to stay a few more hours. We were supposed to send all these boxes by today so that they can get to the clients next week, for the anniversary of the company. But someone forgot. Marina scheduled a new pickup for tomorrow, and there are hundreds of boxes that need to be put together by then."

"Can I help?" I ask as I slump down on the couch. The disappointment of knowing we won't go on our date tonight isn't nearly as wrenching as the awareness that I won't see him until later tonight, when I'm half-asleep.

"No, no. Enjoy your night. And I'll bring you on that date tomorrow. I . . . I had it all planned out." He sounds just as upset as I am, which cheers me up a little. At least he misses me too.

Before I can answer, he's screaming something at Marina again. Finally, he apologizes and hangs up.



I PAY the cab driver and walk toward the office's double glass doors. I've been here plenty before at night, and it always relaxes me. The building looks bigger, more aseptic as my heels click clack on the floors.

Entering the elevator, I press the button to the sixth floor while the blinking of cars and street lights shines through the night outside. I straighten

my dress and fix the locks of hair tumbling down my shoulders, though both are fine, and when the doors finally open, I walk to Shane's office.

He's sitting at his desk in a black shirt and black tie, shouting addresses, and Marina is running from one side of the room to the other, with her heels still on and a pencil skirt that makes her move like a broken doll.

"Wynyard Avenue. Robert Garland."

"Check," Marina answers.

"John Kane Street. Kimberly Simmons."

"Check."

As he writes something every time Marina gives him a "check," I eye the boxes all over the place. A few hours? I don't know how much of this is done, but it looks like it'll be an all-night job.

"Heaven," he whispers once he notices me, his brows arching over his forehead as Marina halts.

She sends me a hateful look before strutting past me and into the corridor. "I'm getting a coffee."

"What are you doing here?" Shane walks to me with impatience in his gaze, and my mind goes into countdown mode. Three . . . two . . . one . . . and he's hugging me. I immediately relax against his chest—how it is *this* comfortable, I'll never know. But I haven't hugged him since this morning, and that's way too long for a newborn clingy couple like us. "I came to help," I mumble against his firm chest.

"It's not your job," he murmurs, the pecks he presses into my hair telling me he doesn't care enough to stop.

"I know. But it sounded like you needed me."

"I always do. Still, I couldn't possibly ask you to come. You're overworked as it is, and this isn't even about the Devòn project."

Resisting the impulse to rub the side of my face against his shirt because my makeup would be all over it, I inhale his addictive smell. "I know you wouldn't ask. That's why I came."

He takes a step back while he holds my hands, his eyes tumbling down. "Look at you. You are all dressed up for our date." He shakes his head with a sigh. "You look . . . God, you're so beautiful."

"Are we done here?" Marina asks, joining the room with a scowl on her face while holding a cup of coffee.

Shane's glare strikes at her. "As my assistant, you might want to ask if I'd like a coffee too."

“I’m your assistant, not your barista.”

Shane’s gaze follows her movements around the room. Almost like he’s expecting her to explode, like he’s so clearly commanding with his eyes. When she doesn’t, he barks, “And maybe thank Heaven for coming down here to help us.”

“No one thanked me for being here.” Once Shane’s expression halts her from saying more, she widens her eyes dramatically. “Thank you, Fourth Floor. We’d all be lost without you.”

“You’re welcome, *Sixth Floor*.” I drop my bag on the chair and can’t help the chuckle that bursts out of my lips. “Where do we start?”



I DRINK A SIP OF BITTER, reinvigorating coffee and put my hair up in a bun. My usual work-braid is there for a reason—I hate when my hair keeps moving in front of my face. “Daniel . . . Radcliffe?”

“Not the actor,” Shane answers with a shake of his head. “We have it. Is that all?”

“That’s all.” I drop the paper I’m holding and stretch my legs. Shane sent Marina home an hour ago—apparently, after three in the morning, she becomes nastier than usual, and he promised me I didn’t want to be around that.

“I can’t believe we’re done.” He looks at the hundreds of boxes scattered around the room, then at his tie and jacket, discarded on a taller pile by the far corner. By now, I know each of the boxes contains a few pamphlets about the company, a tote bag, some beauty products, and a bunch of office supplies, as well as a bottle of expensive wine and a jar of some fancy sundried tomatoes.

“At what time is the courier coming to pick this stuff up?”

“Tomorrow at eight.” He drops onto the chair in front of me, leans forward, and pulls my chair until it rolls against his. As I move my feet up so they’re resting on his thighs, he massages my soles. “I can’t believe you came to help us.”

“Can’t you? I’m known for being nice.”

“I’d like to think our unique situation also played a minor role in that.” His fingers rub circles over my legs, and goosebumps cover my skin like a blanket.

One week together, still no sex. Emma is losing her mind over this. Every day she texts me and asks if we've done it. Every day she uses a different, colorful expression. "Have you dipped the biscuit?" was a good one, but "Did you Netflix and chill?" also deserves a shout-out. I had to look it up to know what the hell she meant.

"Should we go home?" I ask, stifling a yawn. "Because I'm so tired I'd be okay sleeping in the break room."

He chuckles, but I'm one hundred percent serious. The thought of going all the way to my apartment and having to wash my face and put my pajamas on seems dreadful. Especially if we need to be here again four hours from now. And I know whether we sleep here or at home, there won't be any sex happening tonight either. I've never seen him so tired, and despite the three layers of concealer I slapped on my face, there's evident dark circles beneath my eyes.

"Let's get out of here," he says, pushing my chair back until my legs flop on the floor.

"Fine." I groan as I follow him along the corridor. I hold my heels, because there's no way I'm wearing them after the night we had, and I'll probably need to shower too before I get to bed. These floors must be so dirty.

Once we reach the elevator, he lets my hand go with a sigh. "Come here." He turns to me and pulls me up, my legs wrapping around him.

Resting my cheek on his shoulder, I whisper, "I think my underwear is showing."

"It's okay. There's no one to see it."

True. I close my eyes and clasp his neck. He smells so good after working sixteen hours. It's unfair.

Once we're in the car, I force myself to wake up and make conversation. The streets are silent and everything is dark—knowing he's exhausted too, I'm genuinely afraid he'll fall asleep at the wheel. But he's fine as he drives through the city and responds to my comments, though he seems lost in his thoughts.

"I'm sorry about tonight."

I tilt my head. "It's okay. We can go on your big night tomorrow."

"Yes, but this was supposed to be our first real date, and I'm sorry I had to cancel on you last minute."

"We still got to spend some time together. We have all the time in the

world to date.”

When his eyes fixate on mine, I wonder if I’ve said something a little too intense. It’s difficult to remember we’ve only been together for a week. I’ve been crushing over him much longer than he has over me. “Do you feel like staying up a little more?” he asks.

A red alarm goes on and off in my head. Sex. Sex. Sex. Not knowing when it’ll happen fills me with nervous tension. The first time with someone is always a little bumpy, and I want to get it out of the way. More so because I haven’t had a first time with someone in five years. On top of that, I want him so badly, my whole body feels like it’s on edge.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” I say, perking up embarrassingly quickly.

When he turns left, my stomach clenches, but then he takes a right, and I slump in my seat. Home’s the other way, so I guess sex is off the table for one more night.

As he parks, my heart stills for an instant.

The square is deserted, but beautiful nonetheless. Water sprays out of the horses’ mouths at this hour of the night too. I know the coins are there, copper and green against the white marble.

Shane’s bringing me to his secret place.

Crap. I can’t wait for him to, yet I dread this moment with the same intensity. How should I react? I don’t want to pretend like I don’t know. I *do* know—but I can’t tell him that.

I follow him out of the car, and hand in hand, we walk toward the graffiti of the little girl in the pink dress, past the fountain, until we’re faced with the wall. “You see that graffiti?” he asks.

“Hm-hm.”

“That’s my sister.”

My eyes bob from the wall to him and back. “Your sister?”

“Yeah. I had a friend of mine draw it. It’s inspired by a picture of my sister as a child, in the pink dress she loved so much. She had the most amazing sense of wonder. She still does, in a semi-adult way.”

God, there’s so much I want to know about this man. He is close to his grandparents, and I’ve seen the affectionate relationship between him and Riley. But does he have friends he is close to? He said his sister has a kid. Is it a boy or a girl? How is he around his niece or nephew?

He points at the narrow passage between the wall and the canal. “If you follow that path there, you get inside. There’s an arch.”

He drags me to the entrance of the building, to the green door for which I have a key, and I wait as he opens it. “Why did you have the graffiti done?”

“I don’t know. I guess I liked the idea that those who share the same sense of wonder as Riley, the same playful way to look at life, would find this place.”

The door opens with a squeak, and after a few steps, we’re inside the familiar, quaint space I’ve grown to love.

“This is where I lived as a child, with my parents and my sister.” He walks into the middle of the room with a nostalgic gaze. “There.”

This is where he—what?

When he notices I froze, he pulls my back against his chest, then points up again. “Second floor.”

I can’t see much of it, aside from the black railings and the weeds growing past it. They’re tangled with colorful flowers that hang loosely above our heads. Yellow, blue, pink. A pastel, decadent spectacle. “It’s gorgeous, Shane. Is this—is this the place—”

“Yes. This is the place I was forced to leave and come back to,” he says as he slowly loses his smile. “I’ve always felt this need to . . . I don’t know, write over the bad memories here with some good ones.” Smirking, he continues, “Lots to unpack, there, huh?”

“Not really.” I sigh, looking up again. If there’s something I can relate to, it’s trying to control something when you’re utterly powerless about everything else. “I get it.”

I’ve never been here this late at night, and tonight there’s no moon brightening up the sky, but the stars do it enough that I can recognize the column behind which I found the key, the arch that leads to the canal, the wall with the other graffiti of the girl. I get it now. She’s throwing her hands in the air because she’s happy. She found the secret spot.

Shane’s chest rises and drops behind me. It feels great—even more when he takes a deep breath at the nook of my neck. “Confession time. I’ve bought it.”

“What—” My heart drops in my chest. Did he just say . . . he *bought* it? “What do you mean?”

“They kicked all tenants out about ten years ago. The city was going to knock the building down and make something else instead, with this part of the city being up and coming.” Letting me go, he moves to one wall and crosses his arms. “But they never did. Never had enough money for it, or, I

don't know. Poor project management.”

We both smile.

“So, you bought the whole building?” I ask.

“Yes. They put it up for sale a few years back, hoping that someone would buy it and fix it up. I have a contractual obligation to repair it within the next five years.”

My jaw drops. “That . . . sounds . . .” Expensive. Why would he do that? I know he's family-rich, but he must have invested a lot of money in this place. To then . . . let it sit?

“Silly? Emotional? Completely unlike me?” When I nod, he does too. “Yeah. Told you there's lots to unpack. Honestly, being here every once in a while is worth it.”

“How did you buy it?”

“They were selling it for close to nothing, provided I'd take care of the repairs. I got a mortgage.”

“But—why?”

He stifles a laugh. “The plan was to fix it up. My parents and I were going to do it together. Then . . .” He rubs his fingers over his chin, shying away as if he's embarrassed. “Then my dad had one of his affairs, and my mom pulled out. That time was particularly bad, so I lost it with him. He pulled out too.”

Oh, damn. His parents' relationship affected more than his childhood, didn't it? “So . . . what will you do?” I ask.

He must notice the concern etched into my voice, because he chuckles. “I have an interested buyer. He'll knock it down and build something else. With the prices on this side of town increasing by the minute, I'll pay off the mortgage and make a good profit.”

That sounds much more like him.

As I let out a deep exhale, he walks back to me and grabs my hand in his. “Were you worried you'd need to pay off my debts?”

I give him a quick shrug. “A little. I can't let you go to jail.”

He pulls me between his arms. “Well, until I *do* sell it or it crashes down on us, let's work on those good memories?”

No argument here.

I kiss his lips, his taste tickling my tongue, spiced and warm and mine. It's so silent around us that the sounds of our mouths are all I can hear. Until I hear our worked-up breaths too. In a minute, his hands are everywhere, and

I look into his eyes, short of begging him to take me home.

He stares back at me, and there's so much sexual tension between us that if it doesn't happen now, we'll end up doing it under the desk in his office one of these days. "Heaven," he whispers against my lips.

I let out a shallow exhale. How can the way he says my name be so excruciating? It's a religious, stupid name, but he makes it sound so dirty and sexy.

"Shane," I whisper back, his lips nudging mine.

His fingers press on the soft skin of my hips, and after a few moments of silence, a tense smile bends his lips. "Let's go home?"

"Yes, please."

Chapter 27

Home Sweet Home



SHANE'S BRINGING me to his place. Though I can't say I'm too pleased with the reason for it—I know he thinks I'll freak out like last time because of my memories with Alex—I'm also looking forward to peeking into his routine, his life. Does he use shoes inside the apartment? Is there a pile of unread mail on the coffee table? All right, it's safe to say there isn't. Still—what does his kitchen look like, with all his baking? Does he keep any plants? Is his mattress soft and comfortable?

“We're here,” he says as his hand lets go of the gearshift and settles on the lower part of my thighs. He squeezes gently, sending me a complicit look, and I snap my legs closed to soothe the growing ache. At least, there's a similar impatience in his eyes as I feel within.

We hop out of the car and walk toward a tall building. It vaguely reminds me of our office complex, though this one's made of cement instead of glass. But it's equally cold, neat, businesslike. We step into the hall, brightly lit and minimal, though I don't have too much time to look around as Shane drags me into the elevator.

In there too, I barely notice the mirror on one side, the hideous, red-carpeted floors, because his mouth attaches to mine and he moves forward, forcing me to back-step until I'm pressed between him and the cold wall.

I don't even see what buttons he presses. All I know is that just as his long fingers squeeze my upper thigh, the doors open with a ding, and he moves, his lips still united with mine. It's lucky we don't tumble from one wall to the other like in a pinball machine, because he's paying zero attention to where we're going. Instead, he's much more focused on burying his face against my neck, peppering it with scorching kisses.

“Here,” he says as he stops by the third door in the corridor. He lets me go to quickly get his keys out, then he opens the door and grabs my hand to pull me inside. Once the door is closed behind us, I breathe in the space.

It’s Shane. Just quintessential Shane. Most of the furniture is dark, and the flooring is a lovely, light hardwood. Rustic, but also fancy enough to answer my question about shoes inside the apartment. The walls are white, decorated with a few art pieces that seem carefully chosen. I can spot the fridge in the kitchen to the right, and I have to will myself to keep still. It’d be impolite to barge in and take a tour.

As his hand finds mine, I turn back to him. His gaze sticks to my lips, and after pressing a soft kiss on them, he leans back. For a second, he looks confused, then he smiles lightly. “You want to snoop, don’t you?”

Feeling warmth tickle my cheeks, I shrug. “You’ve seen my apartment a handful of times. It’s only fair.”

With a chuckle, he leads me into his living room. There’s a brown leather couch facing a flat screen TV, and most of the walls are covered in shelves filled with books, so he *definitely* reads more than that boring manual about event management.

Next, we tackle the kitchen. I take my time, looking through expensive machines that he explains are a dough mixer, a waffle maker, a bread slicer, and loads of other stuff I don’t understand. It’s pristine. Cleaner than my standards. He must spend most of his time at home here, but it’s so neat, one would think he just moved in. It’s like he pays special attention to this space, even more so as he straightens one of the knives on a magnetic stripe by the stove. It fits him. After all, Shane is the type of person who takes good care of what he loves.

He patiently waits for me to examine every inch of his black, glossy cabinets and his baking tech, and only once I stand before him with a satisfied smile, he asks, “Bathroom?” then smirks.

Right. Only two rooms to go. Bathroom, and then . . . “No, tour’s over. Bedroom, now.”

He nods, his chest visibly heaving. Taking a step closer, he tangles his tongue with mine, sweeping and twirling until I’m breathing hastily in his mouth. “This way.”

When we leave the kitchen and enter the living room again, my whole body goes stiff. There’s one more thing in his gorgeous apartment that he didn’t show me.

I halt, and his fingers abandon mine as I stare to my right at the blinking lights of the night. It's the view I saw in his picture—the one of himself he sent to Nevaeh. I can almost see it. His lazy smile, his cozy sweater. The balcony behind him and the view of the city. I was right, we're on the top floor. It's stunning.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” I focus on the worried brown eyes scouting my face and cup his cheek. God, why am I doing this? Why am I lying to this beautiful person who seems to care so much about me? How can I be here, in his apartment, about to share something so important, when he doesn't know the whole truth? “It's just, the view is beautiful.”

“Do you want—”

“No,” I reassure him. “Bedroom.”

With a doubtful nod, he takes my hand again and walks us into the bedroom. It's on the far left side of his apartment, and is twice as big as mine. The bed looks cozy, with fluffy pillows and a thick, warm blanket in neutral colors. His slippers are on the right side, and there's a pair of headphones on the bedside table, next to his folded pajamas. It's his life, his routine. And though it pleases some deep, remote nook inside of me to learn bits of information about him, a sudden awareness also freezes me on the spot. I have no place—no *right* to be here. Not in his home, not when I haven't been a hundred percent honest with him.

“Heaven, what's wrong?”

He really can read me like a book.

Rubbing my forehead, I smile at the floor. “Nothing, I'm sorry. It's . . .”

He clears his voice. “Am I rushing it? Because I might have misread—”

“No!” I squeal in a swirl of panic. Trying to get my tone of voice to a calmer state, I shake my head. “No, you didn't misread anything at all. I *really* want to.”

He steps closer, sliding his arm around my back and grazing the knuckles of his other hand against my cheek. “Are you sure? We can just sleep. We're both exhausted, and we've only been us for a week, plus—”

I throw my lips on his. Stubborn, considerate Shane. I know I won't convince him this isn't about him or sex. Not with words, at least. Instead, I passionately kiss him, sliding my palms down his chest. He lets out a moan, and just as I'm about to reach the hard length pressed against my pelvis, his lips find my neck and every thought flies out the window. It's just him and

me. Heaven and Shane. No aliases or masks or lies.

What we *do* have, however, is too many clothes on us.

It takes me forever to get his tie off, and when I do, I mess with the buttons of his shirt, grunting against his lips in frustration.

“Let me,” he says, his tongue back in my mouth before I can agree.

My hands move to his jacket and discard it on the floor, then I drop mine with it. His shirt flies off quickly after, and when I unbuckle his belt, his face parts from mine. “I had a whole date planned.”

I slide the belt along his waist. “I know.”

“Dinner, at this romantic restaurant by the beach.” I unbutton his pants, his lips pressing against my neck, then my chest in a rush. “We were going to take a walk at the docks. And there is that small amusement park. I got two tickets.”

“It sounds so sweet, Shane,” I whisper, pulling his pants down.

He holds the nape of my neck until my lips are an inch from his, the warmth of our bodies mixing. “I wanted it to be perfect.”

I nod. I understand this isn’t what we pictured for tonight, but there’s also something else to consider. “Shane, I can’t wait anymore.”

“Me neither.” He pushes me onto the bed and follows me down. Pulling my dress up my body, he breathes, “Off. Off.”

I get it. Speaking is challenging. I wish I could tell him how thoughtful it was of him to think of such a cute date for us. That this is perfect and we don’t need a romantic date to make it better. Instead, I grind against him, getting familiar with his body on mine. The words won’t come to me.

“Heaven,” he says, his eyes rolling down my body in adoration as soon as my dress is off. His gaze feels like sex already. Moving his big, warm hands up my stomach, he trails his tongue between my breasts. I whine, his hot breath fanning over the spot he wetted with his saliva. “Does it feel good here?”

I squirm as he does it again, his eyes flickering with delight.

His fingers travel to the clasp of my bra, his other hand pushing on my shoulder blades until my back is arched. When he slides it off me, his gaze is dark, his pupils blown wide.

“Which way is better?” he asks. “This . . .” When he sucks the tip of my breast into his warm mouth, I moan gruffly, surprised and pleased in equal measure. “. . . or this?” He twists his tongue over my nipple, my fists grasping his soft, thick hair and tightening.

“This,” I say without a hint of hesitation. “This is better.”

He does it again and again, on one nipple and onto the other, as quick, uneven breaths shake out of his lips. When his teeth pinch, I buck my hips up to meet his body.

Everything about this man is divine. I drive my hands through his locks and hold on to his wide shoulders, and I can’t even feel nervous. My brain’s off. Gone on holiday.

His fingers dangle against the waistband of my underwear, his kisses trailing down my body until he’s crouched between my legs. I flinch as his stubble prickles the skin of my inner thigh, and once he presses the first pecks on my thigh, I pant so hard you’d think he’s already there.

“Is this okay?” he breathes.

It’s more than okay. It’s embarrassing, because his breath is scorching hot against me even with my panties still on, and his fingers are rubbing against the soaked fabric, damping it further.

When I nod, he slides the pink fabric down my legs, spreading them wider once the last layer of cotton between his eyes and me is gone. “Heaven,” he whispers in reverent surprise. “You’re . . .”

“Sorry. It’s—” Warmth spreads to my cheeks, and I quickly shake my head. “We’ve been waiting for a while and . . .”

His eyes darken as he moves closer, his hands stroking my thighs. When his tongue laps flat against my sensitive, slick flesh, my legs almost give out, my brain snapping shut in a second.

“Oh my God,” I breathe, arching my back. Hearing his chuckles, I bring a hand to cover my mouth. “Don’t make fun of me while I’m naked and vulnerable.”

“Hm. Okay. I’ll make fun of you later.”

“No, if you say that I won’t be able to let g—ohh . . .”

Burning hot, his mouth wraps around my clit and sucks. My muscles tense, then relax. They twitch as if he’s doing more than tasting me—more than sucking and lapping and swallowing. As if he’s touching every one of my nerves, turning on every lightbulb and connecting every wire.

I roll my hips, but his arm rests over my belly, keeping me trapped. Whimpers and whines burst out of my lips as his tongue dips into me sinfully, and his hums of satisfaction hit the spot inside me that makes me melt like a candle too close to a flame.

“I want to do this all night,” he rasps as his tongue strokes slowly through

my folds. Jerking my legs wider, his thumb rubs my clit slowly, then his tongue parts me and dives inside until I hear my voice crying out, begging, and can't recognize it as my own—thin and shaky as it is.

When he flicks his tongue quickly over my clit, pressure builds in my stomach, fierce enough to make me cry out for more.

His thick fingers sink into me, then curl over a spot that makes my eyes cross until everything's blurry and distant. I rock my hips to accompany the movement of his hands, his name spilling out of my lips a million times as an overwhelming orgasm ripples through me. My pleasure flickers into a million sparks and explodes, like fire met with gasoline, and no matter how much I squirm, he holds onto my thighs as his hungry gaze sticks to mine.

And even as the trembles stop and my eyes shut, he remains exactly where he is, his wet fingers stroking my inner thigh and his tongue thrusting in and out of me softly. My heartbeat slows down, his name whispered out of my lips again and again. It's the only thing in my brain.

"Wait—I," I mumble when the tip of his tongue brushes against my clit. "It's not—I don't—"

"Just another one," he says, his voice low and commanding. "Come on my face one more time."

"No—you . . ." My legs clench lightly as I push his forehead away. "I want you."

There's a sour pinch to his lips, but when I tug on his shoulder, his body rests on mine, heavy and warm even against my heated skin. His tongue tastes like my orgasm, and when I cup his face, it's slick. It's so erotic and so new—I haven't done this in years.

With a proud grin on his face, he moves his fingers to my hair, then my neck, like he can't stand not to touch me for a minute. "Maybe the book was right after all," he says.

"Maybe," I breathe. My voice is strained, my lips dry. "Maybe it's us."

He must think I'm joking, because he playfully nibbles my jaw, but I'm not. A first time has never felt so good, so natural. Like it was meant to be, waiting for us to catch up.

I lick my dry lips, my hands lifting to reach his back. "I think it's time for me to verify the other aspects mentioned in the book."

"What's that?"

"Your girth."

"My *bulging* girth," he corrects.

I wiggle my brows as my hands travel down his stomach, feeling the hard consistency of his flexed muscles. “Yes. Your bulging girth. No pressure.”

To be one hundred percent honest, I know his . . . *girth* isn’t underwhelming. I’ve felt it before, even if I’ve never seen it, touched it, or altogether been around it. And, anyway, if there’s a moment in which I thought it really doesn’t matter, it’s this one. But my hand finds him, and I’m proven right. There’s nothing underwhelming about Shane.

Once my fingers wrap around his hard, thick shaft, his eyes lose clarity, as if swallowed by a dark fog. “Now it’s your turn to tell me how you like it,” I whisper. I stroke him, then gently rub the tip, spreading the pearl of wetness over it. His breaths, shaking against my clavicle, are quick and hot.

“Faster,” he whispers, kissing a spot under my ear. Once my hand slides up and down quicker, he moans against my ear. “Hold it tighter. Heaven, fuck—”

When I do, his whole body winces—his pleasure hitting me deep in my stomach. Soaking his low moans, I squeeze his thigh between my legs and rub myself on it, his muscles tightening against my soft core.

“Shit, now it’s too good. Stop, stop.”

I chuckle, feeling the sting of his bite on my shoulder as his laughter vibrates against my skin. “It’s okay if you come, Shane,” I say as I thread my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. “We’ve been waiting a while.”

“I know. Come here.” His mouth greedily takes mine, and with his erection pressing against my pelvis, I shift, trying to pull him closer.

“Can I?” I look down, and when his brows furrow in confusion, I press my palm on his chest until his back rests on the mattress and I straddle him.

Lord have mercy.

I’ve never seen him from up here, and, damn, he looks good. Solid, like hardwood. He’s all wide chest, defined abs, strong shoulders and thick arms. My hands explore all of it, shivers flaring through him at every new spot I touch, and when that’s not enough, I do something I’ve dreamed of for weeks. I trace the muscles of his chest with my tongue.

I can’t even say I’m doing it for him. This is my glorious moment.

Slowly, I slide down, rubbing against his shaft until it’s wet with me, low gasps bursting out of our lips as we lock eyes.

“Heaven, just—” His breath catches. Mine does too. I’m so turned on, so lost in pleasure, that I almost push myself down until I’m filled with him.

And I think he reads it in my eyes, because he reaches for his wallet from the nightstand.

“No, no. Not now.” I force myself to sit on my heels, between his legs, then I look at the *bulging girth* we’ve talked so much about.

When I wave my hand up and down with an appreciative smirk, he bursts out laughing. “Yeah?”

I bring a hand to my chest. “Oh, absolutely. Consider me impressed.”

Bending forward, I wrap my fingers around the base of his cock, but he sits up, his brows tightening. “Wait, Heaven, wait.”

My worried gaze flies to him.

“Are you sure?”

I sigh, set to ignore the reason for his question. Instead, I gently swirl my tongue on the tip, then slide it down, tracing it all the way to the base. He hisses, slowly falling back again, and when I take him in my mouth and suck, he groans. I can’t tell which way he likes better. “Which one, Mr. Hassholm?”

He shakes his head, his jaw clenched. Tension radiates off him like he might not be able to take it, and judging by how hard he is, I think he’s pretty close. “All of it. Everything.”

The unique taste of him is pleasant on my tongue as I push my mouth down. Adjusting my angle, I take about half in, and the hard shaft fills my mouth. It makes me shift my legs trying to soothe the ache I feel.

“Oh, God,” he breathes. “Fuck, Heaven, you’re so good—perfect. You’re—yes. Your mouth.” The sheets crumple in his fists as he sucks in a breath. “Slow, slow. I’ll—*oooh*, you’ll make me come.”

Fine. I rub it over my tongue slowly, a deep, desperate sigh coming out of his parted lips. Once he threads his fingers through my hair, I think he’ll push me up and down to fix my speed, but he simply rubs my scalp. He rocks his hips forward, a low noise coming from deep in his throat. “Heaven—yeah, that’s it. Yes, don’t stop,” he slurs.

I couldn’t if I wanted to, and I don’t. Instead, I take him until his tip is at the back of my tongue and I can no longer breathe.

“*Fuuuuck*,” he drawls. His fist tightens into my hair, holding me there, and only once I lean back, his muscles relax. “That. That’s the best—”

I do it again, running my tongue along it. I don’t think I need to breathe as long as he makes that expression.

“Fuck. Stop, stop.” I’ve never seen him so tense before, his veins strained

against his skin and a pink coloration over his cheeks.

“Again,” I say once he tugs at my arm. My voice is husky, the pulsing throb between my legs making it difficult to elaborate much more. I’m completely lost in his pleasure. It’s addictive. “Again, one more time.”

“I’ll come,” he warns, like that’s going to demotivate me. It does *not*.

He shudders as I fit his cock in my mouth, pushing down until it almost completely disappears into me. Breathing through my nose, I take in his musky scent and watch his expression as he breaks down. Knowing *I am* doing that to him is just as good as feeling pleasure myself.

“Heaven,” he pleads. “Stop, stop. I can’t—take—it.”

When I lean back, pleasure gushes out of him in waves as his chest rises and falls. Pumping with my hands, I wrap my mouth around his tip, and moans ripple out of his lips, so deep and strangled, I can feel them inside.

“Fuck,” Shane groans through the aftershocks of his orgasm, his piercing brown eyes blown wide. Pushing back the dark locks over his forehead, he looks surprised, ecstatic, and displeased all together. “Fuck, Heaven, I…”

He gestures at me to move closer as he sits up, and within seconds, his arms are wrapped around me, both our bodies deliciously damp with sweat.

Newsflash is somehow he still smells *incredible*.

“You didn’t have to do that.” He gently brushes some hair off my face, then presses his lips to my shoulder and my clavicle.

“Why do you assume I didn’t want to?”

“Well . . . what you said to your ex. I don’t want you to think I need that.”

“It’s different, Shane,” I say as I press a kiss to his chin dimple. “This is you.”

“But you know, only because I do it, I don’t expect you to—”

“Shane, I wanted to do it,” I cut him off. “I want to do everything with you.”

He nods, then his lips are against mine, the kiss drawing out until he’s on top of me. Our tongues mesh, our moans muffled by each other’s mouths, but I can’t tell whether it’s a minute or an hour. Not that it matters. I have nowhere else to be, and if I did, I’d probably bail. This is where I want to be for the next million hours.

When I yank his waist closer and feel him harden, I whimper in a silent beg. His arm reaches out, and though I can’t see the condom with his tongue still spearing my mouth, the noise of the plastic wrap mixes with our ragged breaths.

My fingers dig into his shoulders as his hand travels down between us, and I guess I'm supposed to feel nervous, but I don't. My whole body's buzzing with anticipation. This is the first time I'll sleep with someone who isn't Alex in five years, and I've never been more ready for it. I want the last man I've slept with to be Shane. And the next one too.

"Now, this might feel a little uncomfortable," he whispers against my lips.

"If you say the words 'bulging girth,' I'll lose it."

He cups my cheek, his eyes flickering with amusement and something much deeper that heats up my skin and fills my stomach. "Heaven, I've waited for you for so long. Do you know that? Have I ever told you that you're the best thing that's ever happened to me?"

He never told me, but I think I can see it in the way he's around me. How his whole face lights up when I enter a room, how natural this all feels. Like all that happened before was for me to get here, between his arms. "And you are mine," I softly whisper.

When his hand moves down again, I spread my legs wider. Our breaths are quick and loud as his waist presses on mine, his tip lining up with my core. He rubs it against me until we're both moaning and trying to kiss, only grazing our lips on each other.

"I'm ready whenever you are," he whispers, but we're both too hazy, too eager, and after a failed attempt at a "yes" on my part that sounds nothing like it, he pushes in.

Inch after inch, he stretches me, fitting inside me as I adjust to his presence. His face drops to my shoulder with a groan, my feet pressing onto his lower back to pull him closer until I'm so full, I can hardly breathe.

"So warm, so *fucking* tight," he says over my lips as he gently slides out.

My hands grip his neck, my body mourning his presence already. When he pushes in again, my teeth pinch sharply around his bottom lip, and with a hiss, the rhythm of his thrusts picks up.

"Tell me how," he rasps, grunts bursting out of him every time he's deep inside me.

Though I understand what he's asking, I can't talk any more than he can. "Faster. More."

His hands grab my hips, and with a blunt pull, he nudges me closer. He presses forward then plunges in deeper, faster, harder—everything becoming foggy as he hits the most delicious spot and the entire room echos away. I can

only focus on his eyes, dark with arousal and filled with adoration. “Like this?”

My eyes roll back.

He kisses my neck, then his teeth sink into the skin of my shoulder. “Look at you. Look how fucking gorgeous you are with me inside you.”

I clench around him, his words speaking directly to my soul, and he growls in response. Devoid of any self-control, he slides out of me, then his hands press on my lower back and pull me up.

He kneels on the bed as I climb him, relaxing against his body once he’s back inside. His hands cup my ass, holding me in place, and still shaken by the frenzied pleasure, I press my mouth to his shoulder and grind my hips.

“Heaven, tell me how to make you come,” he drawls.

I am once again at a loss for words. All I can do is bounce on top of him, trying to meet his rising hips faster, stronger. Running after pleasure like an addict as I hold on to his damp neck and cry for him to continue.

Quickly shifting one hand to my lower back, he moves the other between us. His thumb circles my clit, the slapping noise of his thrust mixing with more slick sounds.

“Just like that, take it,” he moans as my walls clench again and again around him. “*God*, if you knew the things I want to do to you.”

I drown my moans into his mouth as I’m dragged away, taken over by pleasure again, and when he applies more pressure with his finger, I throw my head back, his lips settling over my nipple. “Faster? Slower?”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” I chant.

He grunts in a way that reverberates through my body as his fingers continue their torturous circles over my clit. My body tenses, waiting for the release, and sweat runs down my back.

I’m so close, so very close.

“You’re mine. You’re fucking beautiful, and perfect. And you’re *mine*,” he barks against my neck as his thrusts stutter, slowly hitting the perfect spot inside me.

I can’t process everything that happens then. I’m vaguely aware I’m shouting, because I struggle to hear his voice, but my mind is blank. I can only feel. I feel his erection swell up inside me. I feel it twitching, pushing. I feel his breaths on my mouth. I feel his fingers pressed into my lower back. I feel Shane. All of his essence, all of his soul.

And then I feel our orgasms crashing against each other like waves,

becoming taller and more powerful as they meet. It's breathtaking, unimaginable, phenomenal, and I travel out of my mind and back, somehow still whole.

He says my name. I hear it in the back of my mind, and it feels like he repeats it a hundred times. Then my cheek is pressed to his, and I'm holding him as tight as I can while I break down.

We remain locked in that hug for so long, I'm pretty sure I'm asleep by the time my head hits the pillow, the sweetest words whispered in my ear. "You're all I've ever wanted," and "I'll never let you go."

At first, I kiss his shoulder. That's all I can do. Then I don't do that either and enjoy his lips pecking my head and his body still together with mine.

Chapter 28

His Lie Over My Truth



THE NEXT FEW days go by so quickly that by Thursday, my head is spinning. The event is tomorrow, and we're ready. Except we're not.

"The food's there," Keira shouts.

Holding the phone to my ear, I move another thing to the "Done" column. The food is there, which means I'm done with it. As I'm done with decorations, the guest list, journalists, staff, and about twenty other items. But there's still a scary amount of colorful notes on the to-do list.

"Heaven?" A very disgruntled Shane enters my office. "Have we approved this? Because there's a fucking typo."

I glance at the poster he's talking about and shake my head. "No. I spotted it and fixed it a week ago." I giggle. "Where's your head?"

His lips twist with a mischievous grin. "I don't know. You almost ripped it off last night with your thi—"

"Yes? Hi, this is Heaven Wilson from IMP," I say, jumping up to cover his mouth as soon as the modeling agency answers the phone. I kiss his lips, pointing him to the door, and he leaves with the usual smile.

I don't know if people here are still calling him Mr. Asshole, but at this point, it's ridiculous. He's happy. He whistles—*whistles*, for crying out loud—and there's a permanent smile on his face.

The entire office knows about us, of course. He's not good at hiding it, or maybe he had no intention to start with. After all, though he's my boss right now, he's not the one paying my wage, making decisions about my career. And after tomorrow, our jobs won't intersect in any way.

After an hour-long meeting about the last adjustments for the event, he forces me to stop for lunch. Apparently, he deemed it "not legal" to work

eighteen hours without a break. Pointing out he should probably be arrested too didn't sway him either.

As I leave the office behind, everyone's crazed, running from one side of the floor to the other and screaming information. This place has never been relaxing, but today it's a complete madhouse. I can't imagine what it'll be like tomorrow.

I get out of the elevator on the second floor, where the cafeteria is. Sending a text to Emma, I ask if she's free for a quick lunch, but once I get there, I find her at one of the tables.

"Hey!" She squeals as I approach. "What are you doing here? I figured you wouldn't have time to breathe, let alone eat."

"Shane," I explain as I sit. "Apparently, Mr. Asshole turns into Mr. Babysitter at need."

"That's because he's crazy about you," she says with a huge grin. "And nothing new with Alex?"

I shake my head. It's been over a week, and he has gone AWOL, which must mean he's given up. Maybe all he needed to move on was to know that I'm with Shane. Whatever it was, it worked, so I can't complain.

"And you've deleted Nevaeh's profile?"

I nod. "Gone."

"So we can put this whole thing behind us."

With a tilt of my head, I sigh. Though she's right and this whole RadaR debacle is technically over, Shane doesn't know the truth, and I really wish he did. At some point, I'll have to come clean. "I just wish I could tell Shane about all of it, you know?"

She clicks her tongue, then rolls some spaghetti with her fork. "I know, H. But you'd get a weight off your shoulders and put it on his. Sometimes, it's better to keep the truth to yourself."

"But he's *really* hung up on honesty. His parents—there's a lot of drama there, and . . ." I say as dread fills my stomach, "he doesn't tolerate lies."

"But the lie you said was . . ." Emma rolls her eyes. "It was a good lie! It made you break up with a cheating douchebag and brought you and Shane together."

I shake my head with a sigh. "There's no such thing as good lies, Em. All lies are bad. They get out of hand and end up hurting the people around you, even if you only meant well."

"Don't be ridiculous," she insists. "Of course there are good lies."

Sometimes, a lie is easier to believe than the truth.”

At first, I smile lightly. But then, Alex’s confusion as I told him about RadaR appears like a ghostly presence in the back of my mind, and my jaw drops open. Emma already told me this exact sentence—when she showed me the screenshot of Alex on RadaR.

“Emma . . .” I study her face as she swallows and looks away. “Emma, you . . .”

She wouldn’t have done it. She wouldn’t have impersonated my boyfriend on RadaR just to have us break up. She’s my best friend and the person I trust the most in the world. “Tell me you didn’t, Em,” I plead. “Tell me you didn’t, and I’ll believe you. I didn’t when you told me about Alex coming out of the hotel with that woman, but I will now.” She looks down at her lap. “Just tell me you didn’t lie to me and manipulate me only because you didn’t like the man I was with.”

She scoffs, but her hands shake as they clench into fists. “You think that’s why I did it?”

Oh. My. God.

She drops her fork and looks into my eyes, her bright blue irises shimmering with tears. “I *saw* him, Heaven. I saw him coming out of a hotel hand in hand with that woman, but he just sold you his lies and you believed him. You believed his lies over my truth!”

“Em,” I mumble as I grip the edge of the table. My heart is hammering, sweat dampening my chest and neck as a mix of panic and anger takes over me.

“I couldn’t let you waste away any longer. You were disappearing!” Emma says as her tears trickle down her cheeks. “You’re my best friend and you were suffering, but didn’t have the strength to end it yourself.”

I swallow, my brain struggling to comprehend what’s happening. “So you decided to catfish me?”

“No, of course not.” She wipes her cheek with the back of her hand. “I thought you’d just break up with him once I showed you the screenshot. You never told me about the lease—I had no idea. I didn’t know you’d be trapped with him for months.”

She did it. She was behind this whole thing—Alex was never on RadaR. The concept keeps twirling in my mind, but escapes me. How could she do this to me?

“And then—then you said you wanted to join RadaR. I made sure we

wouldn't match with the age filter. But you figured that out . . .”

Tears burn in the back of my eyes, and I can't help my teeth from grinding. “And? You felt the need to text me? Send me pictures of someone's *dick*?” I shout as I stand over her.

A few people give me shady looks, but I ignore them as Emma stands too and tries to grab my hand, tears still free-falling down her cheeks. When I pull it back, she continues, “I added his pictures on his profile. I was sure once you'd see it, you'd decide to forget about matching with him. You'd just believe it was him and that'd be it.”

“Where did you even find those pictures?” I ask, the answer popping into my mind even before she confirms it. “Those were pictures Alex sent *me*. You took them from my phone.”

She nods. “And, H, I didn't send you dick pics. I just knew you wouldn't open them.” She reaches into her bag for a kleenex. “You were doubting yourself, remember? You thought you were making a huge mistake.”

Oh, I remember. And the other messages also came at the right moments. I can't believe I didn't figure it out before, though it's probably because I trusted Emma with my life. “How did you even know he wouldn't be with me when you proposed to meet at Red Cube?”

Emma looks down at her lap. “You said he's been playing football every Friday—that he always comes back late. And when did I see him come out of that hotel with that woman? Saturday morning. I knew that's when he met his lover.” She holds her hand to my arm, desperation written all over her tear-stricken face. “I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do and—and I just want you to be happy. Like you are with Shane.”

I peer down at the table, but can't find anything to say. My heart's beating too fast, my chest is heavy and my legs are like rubber.

Sure, if she hadn't done all of this, I would have never chatted with Shane H. I would have never seen the other side of him that he fights so hard to hide at work. I wouldn't have spent the last six weeks getting to know him, the last two weeks dating him.

But it doesn't make it better.

My phone rings as if on cue, and it's Marina. Trying to force my voice to come out stable, I pick up. “Hello?”

“Fourth Floor. Where are you?”

“Lunch break,” I mumble.

“Lunch break? Are you insane? We're dying here.”

I take a deep breath. “Is there something you need?”

“I need to see the seating chart. Anna wants to know if we’re trashing the lilies and there’s an issue with the sound system.”

I groan, pressing a finger to my temple. “Okay. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“A few minutes? Didn’t you hear—”

I press the red button with so much strength I’m surprised my screen doesn’t crack, then turn to my friend. The one who knows me the best in the whole world. The one who betrayed me and manipulated me.

“Please, tell me you forgive me. You’re my sister, Heaven. Tell me you understand.”

Emma’s big eyes squint as more tears fall down her pretty face. Her mouth is twisted in a horrible frown, sobs shaking her shoulders as she waits for me to say something. And I’m furious, but there’s one thought I can’t get rid of. Though what she did is borderline insane, I know she didn’t mean any harm to me. Her lie, just like mine, got away from her.

“I have to tell Shane,” I whisper.

Emma’s mouth widens. “About Nevaeh?”

I nod. Yes, I need to tell him about Nevaeh. I’m tired of the web of lies, of the mess this whole situation has become. I need to be honest, so that we can start out fresh and build our relationship on the one thing he asked of me. Truth.

“Wait, Heaven—” Emma starts, but my scowl halts her. She’s meddled with my life enough, and I surely won’t be taking any advice from her when it comes to honesty.

“I have to go. Right now.”

As I get up, Emma comes to stand in front of me. Though I somewhat get her motive, I also can’t look at her at this very moment.

With a deep breath, I walk out of the cafeteria, still too shaken to form a proper reaction to Emma’s betrayal. Surely, lunch is no longer an option. All I know is that I need to talk to Shane, and I need to do it now.

Chapter 29

Thank You for Nothing, Nevaeh!



I'M deep into a document that needs to be signed by the journalists when there's a knock at my door. Shane has been in a meeting since I came back from my non-lunch, and I told Marina to send him my way the moment he was done, so my gaze flies to the entrance. But it's not him waving at me through the glass.

I study her chocolate brown waves, her tan skin and pointy nose. Her smile's wide, her teeth bright and her ash brown eyes warm with affection. I haven't seen her in years, but I'd recognize her if she'd shaved her head and came up here wearing a trash bag. "Olivia?"

Her arms widen, her lips bending up as she opens the door. "Surprise!"

It takes me a second. At first, I burst with happiness, then I realize what her being here means. She's Nevaeh, at least to Shane. If he comes here and sees her before I have a chance to talk to him—"No, no, no, no!" I whisper in a panic, grabbing her and pushing her toward the entrance. "You have to go right now! You have to leave!"

She looks back at me with a confused expression but walks nonetheless, and we make it to the hallway without meeting Shane, my heart a step from exploding. "What's going on?"

"What do you—Shane, Olivia! Shane!"

"Wasn't the event yesterday?" she asks, pushing a few curls off her face, and when I point at the *huge* sign behind me that reads "Events Department," her eyes widen. "Oh, shit!"

She presses the elevator button, though I already have, and the next ten seconds are the absolute worst of my life. I focus on the thumps of my heart, steadying myself against the wall as my shoe taps. Am I breathing? Am I

even alive at all?

When the bell dings and the elevator doors open, I draw a sigh of relief that's immediately sucked back in. Alex is there, standing with a dumb smile on his face, his blond hair styled to one side and his shoulders rolled backward with confidence.

Oh my God, Alex is here. Why in all hell is he here?

"Hi," he says, the plastic around the bouquet in his hands crinkling as he moves. He steps out of the elevator, and when he notices Olivia, his eyes squint. "Hello."

Olivia scowls, then turns to me with a panicked look, which is probably only half as terrified as mine.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. My voice is paper thin as the air turns thicker and warmer. With only half of the hours a body needs to sleep behind me and the stress of today, this is the nail in the coffin. I think I'm about to pass out.

He holds the bouquet of red roses out. "I came to show you I'm different. That things will be different now."

Rubbing my brows, I ponder what to do. If this was any other day, I'd tell him that things don't work like this. That he can't show up at someone's place of work two weeks after a breakup declaring to be different. That people don't change in such a short time, and that in any case, I'm done with our relationship. But today, I don't have time for this. With Olivia here, I need him to go. I need both of them to go.

When he notices she hasn't left, Alex turns to her again and studies her face. "Are you—can I help you?" he asks.

"Don't you remember me?" Olivia croons. "We chatted on RadaR when you were cheating on my friend."

It's difficult to keep everyone up to date, with so many lies.

Dragging a hand over my face, I sigh. "You have to go," I tell Olivia. "Both of you." I can deal with my ex, but if Shane sees Olivia, this whole thing will go downhill really fast.

She frantically presses the button to the elevator, but just at that moment, the door behind me opens, and a familiar, loving voice calls out my name. "Heaven?"

My shoulders tense, my heart stills.

"Is everything okay?"

I lock eyes with Olivia and shake with each shuttering beat of my heart.

Although she turns to the elevator, hiding her face, I know I'm done. If he didn't see her already, he'll know something is wrong the moment our gazes lock.

"What's going on?" Shane insists as I turn to him. His focus is on Alex, specifically on the roses he's holding.

"I am here to speak to Heaven." Alex slides between us, giving Shane his back and squeezing my shoulder. "Can we go somewhere private?"

Shane's jaw clenches, but at least he's not looking at Olivia. "Do I need to call security?" he asks with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

I almost say yes. That way, he'll have to leave. In the end, I shake my head and take a deep breath. Alex is a douche, and he probably deserves to have his ass dragged out of the building, but I won't stoop so low. "No, that's okay." I glance back at Alex. "This is ridiculous."

"Heaven, I don't know what this whole business about . . . RadaR is. I've never made a profile anywhere. Yes, I made a mistake with Pauline, but that's it. It's never happened since and it won't happen again."

Shane's brows furrow over his eyes—he doesn't know about Emma's betrayal yet either, though that's the least of my problems.

When Alex grabs my hand, I try to free myself from his grasp, but to my horror, he kneels in front of me and opens up a ring box. Inside, sits a kitsch golden band with a huge, vomit-yellow stone surrounded by smaller diamonds. "Heaven, I know I messed up, and I've hurt you."

I gape. "What the—"

"But now that I've lost you, I saw how much of me needed changing."

"Alex, stop," I interject.

"I'm doing it for you. I'm here to show you I'm yours forever. Please, marry me, Heaven Wilson."

I stare at him, wondering if he lost his mind. Actually, I'm pretty sure he has.

A stern look turns Shane's gorgeous face into a mask of anger. "You gotta be fucking kidding me," he says with a long sigh.

The huge, ugly ring sitting in the black box Alex is offering me is the only thing I can stare at, and I'm sure it didn't just attract my attention, because Shane looks past me, and his brows tighten.

"Nevaeh?"

As his question echoes in my mind, it all collapses. The rug is pulled from underneath my feet. The sandcastle crumbles into a million tiny grains.

“What are you . . .” he asks, and he must see it in Olivia’s expression that she has no idea who he is, because his whole face scrunches. “Nevaeh . . .” His jaw slowly drops, and he turns to me. “Heaven.”

He knows. He knows I’m Nevaeh. He knows I catfished him, deceived him, tricked him. He *knows* he was talking to me all along.

His face breaks, the shock in his arched brow replaced by an angry sneer on his lips. His eyes narrow into slits, and instant hatred almost vibrates off him in a green, toxic cloud.

Swallowing, I move past Alex, who is speaking. I don’t hear him over my worked-up heartbeat. I hold on to Shane’s jacket, balling it into my fists as panic fills my chest cavity. “Listen to me. It’s not what you think, okay? Let me explain.”

He squeezes my wrist away as his hands shake, and short, quick breaths ripple out of his lips. “It was you. The whole time, it was you.”

The first tears spill out of my eyes. “Yes, but it’s more complicated than —”

“You said you trusted me. I gave you the key. We watched movies . . .” It’s as if flashes are passing in front of him like a slideshow, and each of our memories is being tainted by the awareness that I lied to him.

His fist moves over his mouth, and each time he blinks, breathes, swallows, I know. What I’m witnessing is his heart breaking.

It doesn’t look like there’s any relief or joy in him over the fact that his missed connection turned out to be not-so-missed after all. He’s not happy, not an ounce of relief in his distraught face at the thought that it was me all along.

Though I beg him to wait, to let me explain and to listen to me, he turns around and strides back into the office, leaving me behind.

And my heart breaks too.

Things happen around me. Olivia forces Alex to get up and leave—although I’m not sure how. All I do is stare at the glass door that Shane just slammed behind him, aware that I’ve done it. I’ve ruined the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and it’s all my fault.

Tears cloud my eyes, wet my cheeks, and taste salty in my mouth as Olivia walks me into the elevator. I couldn’t go after him if I knew what to say, because I’m not sure my mouth works. I don’t think the words would come out, that I’d manage not to break down at the new awareness in my mind.

I ruined it. The way Shane looked at me—it’s definitely over between us. It hits me, again and again, like a knife cutting through my stomach. I lost him. I lost the best man I ever met.



WHEN I KNOCK on Shane’s door a few hours later, he looks up at me for a second before focusing on a stack of paper in front of him. I enter anyway and make my way to his desk, then sit.

He remains silent. No one else is in the office—I specifically waited for Marina to leave before coming here—and the only noise I hear is my own heart beating uncontrollably in my chest.

“Shane, can we talk?”

“No.”

I swallow, but my mouth remains dry. “We *have* to talk. If you need time, I understand, but—”

He keeps his eyes on the screen. “I don’t need time. We’re done.”

He doesn’t mean it. He’s just angry and disappointed. There is no way he means it, and if he does, I won’t accept it. “Shane, I know I shouldn’t have ___”

“Heaven, look at me.” I already am, so I sit still. “We’re done. Get out of my office.”

I freeze. I don’t know what to do. He can’t possibly want to break up with me without hearing what I have to say about this. Can he? He can’t be shutting me out again. He *promised* he wouldn’t. “You’re angry, and you have every right to be. But are you seriously going to put an end to us?” I swallow a sob, forcing the words out. “Our relationship isn’t a lie. The last six weeks haven’t been a lie.”

His eyes scroll through the page in front of him. “That’s the thing with lies, though. Once you’re caught in one, your word is worth nothing.”

His tone slices me open, but I try to keep my tears at bay. He says things he doesn’t mean when he’s angry. And he puts up this mask to pretend like nothing and no one can hurt him. But that’s the whole problem, right there. I’ve hurt him.

“We just need to talk about it. Not now, if you don’t want to. But tomorrow?”

He shakes his head slowly, then looks straight into my eyes—more, he digs into my soul. “No, Heaven. No.”

Tears finally spill out. I can’t hold them anymore. I don’t know what to say to convince him to give me a chance. Nothing comes to mind, aside from begging.

When an entire minute passes, and I’m still sitting on his chair and crying, he looks up at me and points at the door, then focuses back on the paper.

With my whole body shaken by sobs, I walk away, knowing I deserve this and more.

What I *don’t* deserve is him. Him and dessert.

Chapter 30

No One Benches Heaven



I WAKE up in a bed without Shane. It sucks. Not in the sense that it's bad, but in the sense that it literally sucks the joy out of me. More so when I realize that I've woken up because Billy is calling me.

"Hello?" I grouch as I press the green button on my screen.

"Hi, Heav! How are you? You weren't sleeping, were you?"

"I'm fine. Is everything okay?" I ask, sitting up. His cheerful mood can only mean one thing: he has bad news. I can't take any bad news today.

"Everything's great, and I am about to make you so happy. You're getting back to your team today!"

"What?" I ask, panic spreading through me and tensing up my muscles. "What do you mean?"

"We have a new project that needs to be started as soon as possible. You'll love it. Video game company that wants one of those super sleek campaigns across all main media. They're spending a lot of money."

"Today? Billy, I can't. The Devòn event's today. This will have to wait until Monday."

"I've already talked to Mr. Hassholm. It's all figured out."

I swallow. What that means is plenty clear. Shane asked him to call me back. "Still . . . I'm not okay with this. I'll see through the event I've been working on for close to two months. I'm sure you understand."

Billy sighs. "Heav, *essentially*, you have no choice. Listen, I don't know what happened. Mr. Hassholm wrote the most flattering letter about you, recommending you get the senior project manager position and . . . quite frankly, a ridiculous salary raise. But he wants you gone. Right now."

My shoulders slump as my lips tremble. I can't believe he's going

through with this—barely giving it a second thought too! But he made sure I got my promotion and my raise, so he still cares. Some part of him still does. Maybe it's the same part that I can appeal to.

Even so, I break into sobs, pouring countless tears while on the phone with Billy. That's where my life's at.

“Oh. Oh, come on, Heav. I thought you'd be thrilled to come back. Did you enjoy events that much?”

I shake my head, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I—I . . . Billy, if Mr. Hassholm agrees to let me finish my last day, can I start on Monday?”

“Yes, of course. But I'd leave it as it is, Heav. *Essentially*, he was very final.”

I can only imagine.

“That's okay. I'll try to see what's up. I'll . . . talk to you soon.”

After hanging up, I stand and look at my empty, cold bed. I cry as I shower, then as I brush my teeth. I weep while I prepare coffee and break down into hysterical sobs as I hold the key to the apartment I gave Shane. When I came back home last night, it was waiting for me on the table. He must have sent Marina to return it.

Once I'm all out of tears, I'm so angry I can barely put some makeup on. I know I fucked up. I fucked up big time. But this—Shane's behavior is unprofessional, unfair. He has no right to kick me out of the project a few hours before it sees completion. He *knew* it would piss me off. More than that, he can't break my heart over a stupid mistake and refuse to listen to me. He promised he wouldn't shut me out without hearing my side first.

Finally, I settle for mascara and some foundation—I look like a mess anyway—then I storm out of my apartment and into a cab, like a hurricane ready to ravage the world.



“YOU BENCHED ME?” I blast, entering Shane's office in a rush.

A blonde and a brunette woman sitting on the other side of his desk both turn to me, flustered and wide-eyed.

Shane's jaw clenches. “You can see I'm in a meeting, Heaven, right? This isn't the moment to—”

“You benched me?!” I ask in the same voice, slamming both hands on his

desk. My heart is in my throat, but I refuse to back down. He can glare at me all he wants—this is my job, and I’m not leaving.

“Let’s . . . Let’s talk about this later today,” he politely says to the two women.

They quickly nod and get up, closing the super slow door behind them.

Once we’re alone, Shane sighs and crosses his fingers in front of his stomach, setting his gaze on me as if I’m the worst thing that’s ever happened to his office. “Your work is done. You’ve helped us immensely, and now it’s just a matter of taking care of the last details. Which Marina is *perfectly* qualified for. Billy needed you back, so I don’t see what the problem is.”

“The problem is that you’re benching me! This is *my* event. I—”

“*Your* event?” He chuckles, straightening his tie. “You’ve worked on it for less than two months. I’ve been working on it for a year.”

There’s a coating of disinterest over his eyes that makes me want to throw something at him. Stepping closer, I snarl, “And what a great job you did until I joined the team. They had to *beg me* to come save Mr. Asshole’s ass.”

His chest rises as he takes a deep, frustrated breath. “You’ll go back to your team one day early. Get your promotion and your raise today. And you’ll be back on your floor of *artists*. Works well for everyone.”

I cross my arms and roll my shoulders forward. “It doesn’t work for me.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, does it?” he asks, turning his palms up. “I’m your boss, and so is Billy. We make the decisions, whether or not you like it.”

“And what about ‘work is work’? I thought we were going to leave our personal lives out of this. Did that only apply to me? Or were you *lying*?”

He bolts up, pushing himself closer with a shark-like glare. “I thought you were a decent person. I thought we wouldn’t lie to each other, betray each other’s trust. I thought you understood it better than anyone.”

I straighten my back until there’s some space between us, and all the outrage I came in with is swept under the rug. All I feel is a deep, enveloping sadness. “I *do* understand it.”

“You knew how I felt about dishonesty, with what happened with my parents. You knew I needed you to be sincere, that I wanted to build *trust*. And you pretended to be someone else to . . . what? Spy on me? See if I was who I really said I was?”

“Shane, no,” I say, my tone softening with every word. “I created that profile to catch Alex cheating. I didn’t know who you were when we matched.”

“And why the hell did you match with me? Huh? If you were there for Alex?”

I groan. “I was drunk and—”

“Why didn’t you tell me after? Why did you continue?” he shouts, his words echoing in my silence.

He’s right. What can I say? He’s one hundred percent right. I should have come clean, and we probably would have laughed it off. We would have watched *Back to the Future* together. *The Matrix*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Men in Black*. We would have eaten dessert and laughed and kissed, missing all the best parts of my favorite movies.

Bringing both hands to my face, I try to get the words out. “I didn’t know how to tell you,” I whine, but I don’t know if he can even understand my muffled voice from behind my fingers.

“You’ve deceived me. You took the key to the most important place in my life, and you were lying to me. You made a fool of me in this office. You made me think that your nice ways were genuine, that you were a person—”

“They are! They are genuine. I *am* genuine,” I scream back, like on a broken swing between sadness and anger. “And you’re the worst catfish of us all. You pretend like you don’t care about your employees, about your family, about me. But you do. You pretend to be Mr. Asshole, who isn’t fazed by anything, but you aren’t!”

He glances behind me as we both catch our breath.

“Go work in Heaven’s office,” he shouts at Marina.

With a glare, she walks away, disappearing into the corridor.

“I’ve never pretended not to care about you, Heaven. And I won’t pretend that I do now.” Shane opens his drawer, his movements rushed and furious, then takes something and grabs my wrist, putting it onto my palm. “I brought you something. I treasured it as the gift of a friend. Something equally important as the key I gave her.”

I already know what it is. The cold, metal DeLorean presses on my palm, burning a hole through it.

His eyes stare into mine, holding me in place, showing me just how much he means what he’s about to say. And I know this will be the hit that kills me, the one that leaves me gasping for air. The one that’ll write the words “the end” into our intense but brief love story.

“I told you. You have the power to make your own future.” He smirks with no joy. “Well, *Nevaeh*, you made yours. Now go back to your floor,

because you're not wanted here anymore."

He lets my wrist go and walks away, out of his office and out of sight.

Tears dripping down my cheeks and my key chain tight in my fist, I stand there, the pain so strong it's physical.

It's the hit that kills me.



"I DON'T THINK I can go any farther," the cab driver says as he glances at the crowd ahead.

"No, here's perfect." I force a smile on my lips as I pay and leave the car. Once I take in the surroundings, my stomach clenches.

Gorgeous-looking people, all somehow taller and skinnier than me, walk around in expensive and exuberant gowns and suits. The red carpet is surrounded by photographers and journalists on whichever side, and the villa behind it looks magnificent. The last time I was here was during the day, and now the decadent, beige façade is brightened by beams of light that aim for the sky. It's breathtaking, which doesn't help the constriction I already feel in my chest.

When my phone rings inside my clutch, I take it out and sigh.

Emma.

We haven't spoken since her confession yesterday, though she's called me about fifty times. She also sent hundreds of texts, and Olivia begged me to end the *torturous* silent treatment. It's ridiculous, but it's also the longest I've ever gone without talking to Emma since we first met, and with what happened with Shane and what I'm about to do . . . I could use a friend.

Cupping my left ear against the noise, I bring my phone to the left one. "Hello?"

"H! Oh—*I'msoshoriIshouldavenevr*—"

My nose scrunches as I move the phone a few inches away. "Only dogs can hear you, Em."

"I'm—so—sorry—I—"

"I know, calm down." I sigh, moving to the side to let a couple of gorgeous blonde giants pass by. "I understand why you did it, Em. You were frustrated and you have a history of impulsive behavior. Really, I'm surprised you didn't just murder him."

“I considered it,” she whines.

With a stiff smile, I observe the tip of my blue heels. “I just need some time to . . . I don’t know, forgive and forget.”

“Yes, I get that. I’ll give you all the time you want. But you still love me?”

“Yes, I lo—” A loud honk startles me.

“Where are you?”

“Oh . . .” I glance at the slew of limousines and fancy cars stopping in front of the red carpet. “I’m at the Devòn fashion show.”

“You—what? But Olivia said that Shane freaked out—”

“Yeah, and he *forbade* me to come.”

“And you went anyway?”

With a pout, I say, “Pretty much.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“Right?”

“Of course! He can’t just cut you out of your event twenty-four hours before it finally happens. It’s unprofessional and totally unfair. He left you no choice.”

“That’s exactly what I was saying!” I shriek.

We both chuckle, and as silence settles, I shoot a look at the wardrobe-men dressed in total black at the doors. “Of course, there’s a chance they won’t let me in. Or that they will, and Shane’s murder glare will finally turn him into a Scanner.”

“A what?”

“A Scanner. From the movie *Scanners*?” I shake my head. “Individuals who can hurt others with their psychic powers by staring at them.”

“So . . . nerd stuff.”

With an eye roll, I nervously study the red carpet. Should I even go? Does it even matter if I *win*? The prize isn’t Shane anyway.

“I wish I could come with you,” Emma says as she blows out a big breath.

“I know. It’ll be okay.” I square my shoulders and begin walking. Maybe there’s no point in me going, but I certainly know that staying away and giving up won’t get me any closer to Shane. “Look, I have to go, but . . . I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Okay. Go get your man. Love you, and . . . sorry, again.”

As soon as I move closer, the journalists notice I’m no one worth taking a

picture of, snap a few lazy shots my way and move on.

Walking down the red carpet, I clench my fists to stop my hands from shaking. Especially when I face the guard who asks for my name. “Heaven Wilson.”

With a nod, he scans through the list.

My heart throbs in my chest. It’ll be so humiliating if my name isn’t on that list and I have to walk the red carpet backward and find a cab.

“I don’t see your name here. Wait a second.”

He turns around and motions at someone to come, and to my instant relief, it isn’t Shane. Might not be much better, though, because it’s Marina, who rolls her icy-blue eyes and looks up and down at my dress with faint disdain.

“Fourth Floor.”

“Hi,” I say, shuffling my feet. Should I ask her to let me in? Probably not. She’d get off on it, and I doubt that my begging would make her change her mind anyway.

“Didn’t you go back to your department?”

I have no alternative. It’s begging time. “This is my event too, Marina. Please.”

She tilts her head and shakes it *no*, but says nothing for a few seconds. Looking behind her, then at me, she groans. “Fine. She’s in.”

I could almost hug her as I follow her into the venue, and I think she can sense that because she halts and turns to me. “I am not doing it for your ridiculous relationship. Just because we need help.” She adjusts the trim of her dress. “Especially since Mr. Asshole has been anything but useful today. Dragging himself around like a zombie.” When I say nothing, she rolls her eyes. “And he involved me in his personal life, which is simply unacceptable. Asking me if he was making a mistake.”

I stare at her, my brows furrowing. Is she—she’s . . . helping me.

“What did you tell him?” I ask.

“That he wasn’t. That he’s much, *much* hotter than you, and he’s better off with literally anyone else in the world.”

Or maybe she *isn’t* helping me at all, the shrew.

“And that he never smiled as much since he met you. So if a poor decision makes him happy, maybe it’s not such a poor decision,” she adds with a glare.

I walk after her, and I don’t have time to analyze the whiplash I’m

getting, because she's already talking about what we need to fix, check and resolve. But when she asks me if I got it, I hug her, and though she stiffens, I don't let her go.

Maybe she doesn't like me, but I think she likes Shane. She has his best interests at heart. And that might be the only thing we have in common.



I DON'T SEE Shane until one hour into the event. The location is that big, and there are too many people. And when I do, I almost collapse to the ground. He's wearing his dark blue suit, the same color as my dress. I asked him to wear it tonight, and he did, though I wasn't supposed to come.

As if called, his eyes move to mine. Directly. Enough to make me wonder whether he already knew I was here. After glancing down at my dress with his lips slightly parted, he grimaces and turns around.

Since yesterday, it's happened a handful of times already, and every time, it kills me all over again. He looks at me like it's all ruined, like there's no going back. I guess it's the same way I looked at Alex.

Ignoring the growing dread inside me, I put out fires all night, running from one side of the mansion to the other while Shane sits at his table and makes conversation with Therese and the group of clients.

He ignores me for the next few hours, but as I'm swallowing a couple of the appetizers in the kitchen, he appears by my side and drags me into the corridor. I'm forced to follow him, grateful that once again, he's touching me, though it's far from similar to the way he touched me before.

"So you just do what you want. Don't you?" he asks as he halts and focuses his enraged gaze on me.

Pointing my chin up and straightening my back, I prepare for the upcoming battle. "I wasn't going to let you bench me, Shane. I've poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this project. I deserve to be here."

He looks away. "Who let you in?"

He's not serious, is he? He won't scold Marina for letting me in. How does he know my name isn't on the guest list?

My jaw drops open. "Did you ask to have my name taken off the list?"

"I know you, Heaven," he says, cocking his head to the side. "I knew you'd show up."

What. An. Asshole.

I scoff, crossing my arms. If that's how he wants to play it, then we shall. He *knows* I know how to fight. "Then you know it takes more than that to stop me."

"I'll inform Billy you've gone against my direct orders and joined an event I specifically asked you to stay away from."

"Make sure to tell him I've spent all night fixing up the messes your team can't deal with."

"You're unbelievable," he mumbles.

"I'm *awesome*," I snap back.

His eyes quiver. The mask almost falls off, and for a second, he looks the saddest I've ever seen anyone looking. Then he quickly regains his composure. "Fine. You win. Stay at the event. Save my team and do what you want, like always."

As he walks away, I step after him. "That's not the only thing I win."

"What?" He faces me, his brows bent with exasperation.

"That's not the only thing I win. We made a bet, and today is the deadline."

Fitting his hands into his pockets, he scoffs. "Yes. And what is it you want?"

"Another chance," I say, and before he can refuse, I set my hands on his chest. "Shane, I know what I did was wrong, but there was no malice in my actions. If you would just let me explain it all to you, I'm sure you'd understand."

He draws in a deep breath, looking down at my hands. His palms cup my knuckles, the warmth from them so comforting I could cry. "Even if I wanted to, I can't, Heaven. I don't trust you. What's done is done."

Gripping my hands, he moves them away.

"Really? 'What's done is done?'" I insist once he begins walking again. "You can make your own future, Marty." He ignores me, but I'm not giving up. If I need to, I'll shadow him all night long. Until I have the chance to talk—until he listens to me. "If you're throwing everything away over one stupid mistake, over one stupid lie—"

"Then what, Heaven?" he snaps, turning around so suddenly I almost bump into him.

I stare into his eyes, now almost lifeless. "Then—Then do I even matter to you? Was this . . . real? Did it even mean *something*?"

He glances at a couple of waiters walking by our side. When they're far enough, he focuses on me. "Do *not* blame this on me, Heaven. All I wanted was one chance—that's all I asked. For you to be honest and give me one chance to prove to you that you could trust me."

"That's what I'm asking right now, Shane, but you won't even listen to me."

With a bitter chuckle, he smirks. "Yes, well. You sound annoyingly familiar. How about you and Alex give each other another chance? The ring was quite spectacular."

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out, although there's plenty I need to say. If only my tongue was cooperating, I'd tell him how chatting with him on a fake profile hardly compares to the shitshow my relationship with Alex had become. How the difference between Shane and me, compared to my ex and me, is that we share feelings for each other. How the ring was crap, and like everything else Alex does, shows how little he knows me.

But my mouth remains open and empty, and Shane throws a "goodbye" my way, leaving without looking back.

I scout the surrounding room as I *feel* every beat of my heart, every breath that comes out of my lips. All around me, this place is decorated with objects I've seen a thousand times. The guests, wearing gorgeous gowns and tuxedos, are people I've talked to or I know by name. They move around a location I chose, eating food I tasted. And in all of that, there's Shane too. It's almost too painful to look at.

The meetings about the seating chart, shifting little pins onto a board from one side to the other. The band we saw together, before our non-date. The catwalk he made me test a few days ago, while he pretended to take shots of me with his hands.

I shouldn't be here.

I walk to Marina, then hand over the board she gave me at the beginning of the night.

After looking at it, then at me, she walks away in silence and with the usual frown.

I have nothing else to say either.

Advancing toward the entrance, I turn to the room one more time, and my eyes meet Shane's. I inhale deeply, lingering for a second, but I won't cry anymore. Not in front of him.

He takes a few steps towards me, and for a moment, hope makes me

levitate a few inches off the floor. But someone stops him, and when I've been standing in front of the door for long enough that it looks weird, but he doesn't pay me any attention, I get out and walk into the night.

Chapter 31

The Gratitude of the Aftermath



I WALK toward the café down the trafficked street. Today, I finished working early, so I can enjoy the pleasant warmth of the sun above my head and the unusual vitality of the city center over the weekend.

Alex is sitting at the last table on the right, and as he sees me, he gets up.

With a wave, I join him. “Hi, thank you for meeting me.”

“It’s no problem. Can I get you a coffee?” He moves his hand up to call the attention of the waiter, who’s serving a man a few tables away. When he approaches us, I ask for a coffee with milk, and once again, I’m alone with Alex.

My stomach churns as he rubs his hands together, and every time we look at each other, we smile in an awkward and forced way.

“So . . . Have you thought about my question?” he asks.

“Alex . . .”

“Isn’t that why you wanted to meet?”

“In part.” I cross my legs and focus my gaze on him. “Despite everything, I believe we shouldn’t end our five-year relationship on such a sour note.”

He blows out a breath that rattles his lips. “Let me guess . . . That guy broke up with you, and now you’re here to beg.” I gape at him, but before I can speak, he raises both hands. “That’s okay. We both made mistakes, and —”

“You’re right,” I interrupt. I’m afraid if I let him talk, I won’t go through with it at all. “We’ve both made mistakes, and I’m here to apologize about mine.”

The waiter brings my coffee over, and after I mumble a “Thank you,” he walks away, leaving Alex and me in yet another uncomfortable silence.

Maybe this was a bad idea. We've been here for two minutes and I already want to strangle him.

"Listen," I say as I stare at the dark brew in my cup. I really want to do this, so I'll give it a real chance. "I'm not here to decide whether to get back together. I know it's a horrible thing to say, but since we broke up, I've been happier. Our relationship went south years ago." He opens his mouth, and I move my hand to his. "Still, you deserve an apology. I shouldn't have gone behind your back. I should have talked to you, faced you, when I learned about RadaR."

"I was never on—"

"I know." With a smile, I let his hand go. "I know you weren't. And if I'd just talked to you, if I'd just been honest . . ." I sigh.

"Why didn't you, then?"

"Honestly, I was afraid if I broke up with you, you wouldn't pay your half of the lease, and I'd end up in debt and kicked out of the apartment."

"You really think I'm that horrible?" he asks, his brows steeply curved over his eyes.

With a scoff, I cross my arms. "Well, that *is* exactly what you said after I broke up with you."

He rolls his eyes but says nothing.

"In any case, I should have faced this better. I should have been honest and straightforward, and I'm sorry I wasn't. About us, about Shane. I should have talked to you."

He nods, but his gaze doesn't meet mine. After what feels like a whole minute, he looks up, his lips wobbling. "I'm sorry too, Heaven. I know I should have done better."

With a tiny smile, I grip my cup and take a sip. There's lots we need to discuss, such as what to do with the apartment, the car. What to tell our families and our friends. After five years, so much of our lives are intertwined that it'll take a while to figure it all out.

"I—I was never on RadaR," he says with a sniffle. "I'd never join a dating app. But I did cheat on you . . . more than once."

My heart throbs in my chest as I set the cup down. There isn't much of a reason for it. I guess it's knowing I'm about to get the truth, finally.

"I slept with Pauline. Every day at work, she just . . . she kept flirting with me." He grimaces. "I'm not trying to blame her—I know it's my fault. But it had been so long since I felt like someone actually wanted me that I started

wanting her too. Until I went to a work dinner a couple of months ago, drank a little too much. She kissed me and . . . and I couldn't stop her. That's how it started. We met a few times at a hotel downtown since then."

The Silverton hotel, where Emma saw the two of them.

"Were you ever going to tell me, Alex?" I breathe. "I confronted you about it, and you lied."

He fidgets with the spoon in his cup. "Because I didn't want to lose you. I know it doesn't make sense, but I *do* love you. I don't want to be with her. The minute we were done, I wanted her gone. I wanted you there."

"It does make sense." I squeeze his arm, letting go quickly after. "I think it might have something to do with being afraid. You don't want to be alone, so you'd rather have something. It's still better than nothing, though it isn't everything. But you owe it to yourself to aim for everything."

"Yeah. I guess you're right," he says unconvincingly as he studies his cup.

Silence settles, and I sip my coffee, turning my focus to the street. People walk around, crossing paths as they step onto the sidewalk, and I wonder how many of them experienced the affection that Alex and I felt for each other. There was a lot at the beginning, and in a way that makes me lucky. "Better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all," someone said at some point.

Slumping back in my chair, I open my mouth to ask about the million things we should figure out, but a shadow is cast over the small, round table between Alex and me. Turning to the right, I see Marina's unfortunately familiar sneer. "Wow. Isn't this wholesome?"

My brows furrow as her judgemental, catlike eyes scan me and Alex alike. "Hi, Marina. What—"

"Is this why you came to the sixth floor?" She crosses her arms, the dozen of bags in her hands wrinkling as they're pushed against her flat stomach. "To get a break from your unimpressive existence and wreak havoc, only to go back to your farm-life boyfriend?"

With a sigh, I ask, "What's your problem with me? Is it jealousy? Do you have a crush on Shane or something?"

She chuckles flatly. "Is that what you think? That I want to steal your ex-boyfriend?" Rolling her eyes, she turns her back to me. "Unbelievable."

"Well, then, explain it to me."

She seems to consider it for a moment as she halts, then turns around and

lightly bends down, her freezing irises roaming over mine. “You want to know what my problem is, Fourth Floor?”

“Please.”

“Fine.” She sneers. “My life has been *miserable* for the past five years. Shane was playing asshole boss before then already, but *that’s* when he really began giving his best.”

Five years? What is she talking about? I knew she wouldn’t be honest, but trying to blame her resentment on her shitty workplace, then suggest it’s *my* fault because I joined the company five years ago—well, that makes no sense. “If that’s the case, I suggest you bring this to Mr. Hassholm’s attention, because—”

“Then you show up, and he’s a fucking teenager.” Her mouth twists in disgust. “Smiling, whistling, flirting.” She points at Alex. “But you had to go and ruin it all.”

Throwing him a look, I shake my head. “He’s got nothing to do with Shane and me.”

“Like I give a shit, Fourth Floor,” she says as she turns to leave.

“It looks like you do, though.” I stand, waiting as she faces me. “After all, you let me in at the Dèvon party.” I challenge her. “Was it because you want us together so that he’ll be easier to work with?”

“No, no,” she says, her head slowly shaking. “I’m just a sucker for cringey couples. Don’t let the vomit squirting out of my eyeballs mislead you.”

Of course, she doesn’t have my back. I knew that already. But I’ll get the truth out of her. She’s fooled me for a while, but the night of the event, when I left, I saw the disappointment in her frown. That wasn’t discontent over her work situation—that was proper sadness.

“Well, now, calm down,” Alex says, uncomfortably shifting in his seat as he glares at Marina.

Moving my hand up, I stop him from interjecting. “All right. So what do you want from me?” I ask, crossing my arms.

“What do I want from you . . .” she mumbles. “I never want you on the sixth floor again, for starters. Leave Shane alone and let us live our miserable fucking lives because you and your *boyfriend* can’t separate work and your private business.”

Unimpressed, I nod. “Worry not, I have no intention of coming back.”

She studies me, and for a second, it looks like she’ll fall into my trap.

Then she nods, visibly annoyed as her dark bob follows the light movement. “Great. Because he’s a *mess*, and we don’t need you to come along and make it worse.”

Stifling a smile, I nod again. I knew she didn’t hate Shane as much as she let on. “Totally. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

She looks away, as if deciding what to say, then settles her gaze on me again. “And unhappy. He’s basically depressed. He hasn’t smiled once since the Dèvon party and he’s killing himself with work.”

“Got it.”

With the veins of her neck nearly exploding and her lips puckering so hard they turn white, she mumbles, “Fucking straight people,” as she turns around. After a second of surprise, I call her name.

She stops, freezing me with her glare. “What?”

“Everybody on the sixth floor is scared of him, but you and I . . .” I grin. “We both know he’s got a beautiful heart. It’s just been broken a lot.”

She looks at me as if I’m a human-sized cockroach.

Swallowing to help the saliva lodged in my throat go down, I force a deeper grin on my lips. “Just . . . invite him to your next birthday party.”

Her brows furrow for a moment, but without another word, she turns around and walks away.



MY PHONE RINGS as I enter my apartment, grocery bags hanging from both my hands. It’s Emma and Olivia on a video call. Dropping one bag to the floor, I answer.

“Hi,” I wave at the screen, and they both wave back as they greet me. Olivia flew back to Sydney a few days ago, and who knows how long it’ll be before I see her again. I miss her already. “How are you?”

Olivia groans. “Work is hell already. My new boss hates every single one of my ideas.”

Emma joins with a similar nasal noise. “You’re preaching to the choir. Today, I lost a sale that was practically done.”

“Sorry, guys.” With a frown, I walk to the fridge. Once I open it and grab a soda, the silence of my apartment is deafening. I steal a glance at the chocolate bar on the top shelf, next to a bunch of kiwis and a jar of brown

rice. Though I don't deserve anything, I've been having dessert anyway. I don't think I would have survived the last two weeks otherwise.

When I turn to Emma and Olivia, they're staring at the camera in silence. "What?" I ask.

"Well . . . how are you?"

I try to ignore Olivia's tone. As if she's talking to an unstable patient who escaped the psych ward. "I'm fine."

Emma tilts her head. "That's not true, Heaven."

"I am."

"Heaven . . ."

I sigh, slamming the soda on the table strong enough that some spills out and lands on the white surface, the bubbles frizzing against it. They magnify a spot dirty with chocolate ganache—so tiny, I would have never noticed it otherwise. It irks me. No, more than that—it feels like someone's clawing at my skin, scratching the back of my eyes and pinching the inside of my throat.

Walking to the sink to fetch the closest sponge, I nod. "You're right. I'm not fine. It's been twelve days, and I never heard from Shane again. Basically, we spent the same time together as we did apart. So it's over. The best thing that ever happened to me is over, and it didn't last enough for me to even call it a relationship."

As my voice gets shrill, I continue, "And the worst part is that this is all my fault. All me. I've taken the most amazing man to ever land in front of me, and I lied to him. I deceived him enough to turn him into a monster who deleted me from his life in under ninety seconds. All me!"

Now I'm screaming, and Emma's soothing voice comes out of my phone. "Hey, Heaven . . . try to calm down. Do you want me to come over?"

Ignoring her, I continue scrubbing, although the soda is long gone, and the rough part of the sponge is scratching the otherwise perfect white surface. "No, actually, the worst part is that I'd like to make a joke about him using the neuralyzer from *Men in Black* to forget me that quickly, but he's the only one who would understand!"

I still, watching the gray spot on the table, stripped of its paint. Though I catch my breath, my heart still pounds, and without meaning to, I burst out crying, resting my back on one of my chocolate-scented walls. The smell never left.

After all, it looks like Olivia was right. I *am* an unstable mess.

"Oh, Heaven . . ." Olivia says in a broken voice, and on my screen, both

my friends are crying with me, which just makes me sob harder, and—well, that makes them weep.

It takes us a full ten minutes to stop, and when we do, I feel grateful for the second time today. I can count on the very best friends in the whole world. People who love me so much that my pain is theirs too.

Sure, what Emma did was messed up, no matter the good intentions it was done with. But she knows, and as much as I try, I can't be angry about something that brought me Shane. Nevaeh also stripped me of him, but those six weeks Shane and I spent working together, those two weeks in which we dated—those were the best moments of my life so far. I can't regret them.

And that's not all. Because with the absurd raise they gave me, I'll be able to keep my apartment, and I love my new position too. I'm healthy and have parents who support me. I have everything I need. And I'm the most unhappy I've ever been.

Emma dries up the smudges of makeup underneath her eyes with the tip of her fingers. "Heaven? You'll do something, right? You can't give up."

Blowing her nose, Olivia shakes her head. "Of course not. She never gives up."

I stare at them, then look down. "No, I never do. But . . . this isn't something I have control over. I can make him listen to me, or talk to me. I've done both already. But I can't make him change his mind. I can't change his feelings for me."

"But you love him so much," Emma whines.

Another sob breaks the silence in my apartment. I do. I *do* love him. "I have to respect his decision. I made my own future."

Neither of them understand my quote. I don't think so, at least. But I know what I'll do now. I'll watch *Back to the Future* and—why the fuck not?—I'll eat a whole box of cookies.

I don't need to *deserve* dessert.



I WATCH Marty's dad and mom through a veil of tears. Everything remotely romantic has me weeping, but I don't think there's anything that will drive me away from this movie. Not even the fact that I've watched it with Shane.

I'm halfway through the movie when I realize there's one more thing I'm

grateful for.

Shane.

Life has spent all day shoving down my throat the million reasons I should be happy. Slapping me with the awareness that I'm one lucky bitch. But I somehow forgot to include Shane on the list. Shane, who rendered all the loves I've experienced before him irrelevant. Who made me feel a different type of love. True, passionate, gut-wrenching love.

I think I might have loved him before I met him, because with his messages, he woke me up from the coma I was living in. He showed me everything I didn't have, then gave me all of it and more.

Desserts. Love. Laughter. Life.

The reason I didn't crush under the weight of the last six weeks is Shane. And that's true for so many things. My work, my personal life, my well-being. He kept me anchored and safe, and now I love him. I also lost him, yes. But that was my fault. And I'm still grateful he was a part of my life, however short-lived.

I wish I could tell him. I really wish he knew that despite how it ended, I don't regret him, even if he regrets me.

As I stare at Marty running toward Doc and trying to save him from his death, my phone pings from the coffee table. I reach for it, knowing it's either my parents or a promotion for something I don't need.

When I notice it's a number that's not saved, I figure it's the latter and almost put the phone down. But as I quickly scan the screen, I freeze.

Heaven, what in the name of God happened? Riley.

"Fuck," I mumble at the screen as I cup my mouth with my hand. That's Shane's sister. He must have told her about us, and she's asking what went wrong. Or maybe he told her about Nevaeh and she's just asking if I'm normal. Either way, my heart's gone through the roof.

This is the closest I've gotten to Shane since last I saw him at the Devon party. I haven't run into him in the cafeteria or in the hall. No looks across the parking lot or awkward rides in the elevator. Nothing. He's only two floors above me, yet he might as well be on a whole other planet.

But now . . . now Riley texted me. I have to answer back.

HEAVEN:

Hi Riley. How are you? So good to hear from you. Things . . . got messy, as you probably know. I screwed up, and your brother deserves better.

I might be laying it thick, but it's not like I don't believe what I'm saying. On top of that, I'm aware there's more than a chance Shane will read this. If it's the last means of communication we have left, I'll make sure my message comes across super clear.

RILEY:

OMG, you kids are going to kill me. He won't tell me what happened, but he's heartbroken. You have to fix this. He can't have waited years to be with you for a week only.

I press my lips tight. Half of me is still convinced she has the wrong person, but there's what Marina said too. That five years ago is when Shane became even more of an asshole.

With a sigh, I throw myself back on the couch cushions and stare at her message. She said he's heartbroken, and Marina described a similar situation. Is he not sleeping? Has he cried? Does it make me a horrible person that I hope he's some sort of sleepless zombie plagued by constant tears and regret? And what can I do to fix it?

Maybe I can't tell him I'm grateful for him, but I can show him. Maybe there's something I can do to let him know I love him. Even if he doesn't love me back. Even if we're done. Even if he's a mess because I hurt him.

I get up, walk to the desk, and turn on my laptop. I know what I'll do. What I do best. And I'll need a fresh pot of coffee for that.

As I walk toward the machine, a determined smile emerges over my face. Quickly typing on my phone, I send out one more message.

HEAVEN:

You're right, Riley. Don't worry about it. I'm not giving up.

Chapter 32

Back to the Future



THE HORSES FOUNTAIN is surrounded by tourists taking photographs and eating ice cream from the kiosk on the other side of the square. The sun is warm, which must be why there's such a big crowd here on a random Tuesday.

Gripping the box in my hand, I let out a shuddering breath. I thought about this long and hard, and I hope Shane will appreciate it, but I can't be sure. Still, it took me forty-eight consecutive hours of work since I thought of it, so . . . "Too late to back down now," I mumble to myself.

But I could use some luck.

With a smile, I fish into the back pocket of my jeans and take out a coin. I step away and turn until the fountain is behind me. Then, I wish with all my heart that Shane will love my gesture, that he won't think it's a pathetic attempt at buying his forgiveness, and toss the coin over my shoulder and into the fountain.

I rush back to the horses and look through the rippling water as the small silver disk sinks and joins hundreds of others just like it. Knowing they're all symbols of people's wishes and hopes makes me see them with different eyes. Now, I kind of love them.

The wind blows hard enough that I fear I'll end up with my ass in the canal, but I hold on to my box and slide along the wall until I reach the arch. With a final jump, I hop on the other side.

Everything here is like it was, of course. The weeds have grown, and the roof might be one day closer to giving in and collapsing. But everything looks the same, though everything's different for me.

I move to the center of the space, where Shane kissed me under the stars,

and look through the hole on the dilapidated ceiling. Clouds race each other on the blue background. If I close my eyes, I can almost still taste his lips, feel his breaths mixing with mine.

After walking to the column, I set the box I'm holding behind it, exactly where I picked up the red one almost two months ago. Mine is white and much bigger, but I guess it's the thought that counts. At least I hope so.

Glancing at the green door, I drop Shane's key onto the box. It's only fair, considering he gave me back my key chain. Besides, I don't think I'll ever be able to come back here. As much as I love it, this place is him, and it's his. Hopefully, he'll get my box and he'll appreciate it. He'll understand.

I take one last look around, my gaze lingering on the black railings, on the red bricks covering the walls. I will miss this place almost as much as I'll miss Shane.

"It seems like this town ain't big enough for the both of us."

With a jump, I turn to find Shane standing by the entrance. My heart's beating so fast I bring my hand to my chest. "Jesus—shit."

He smirks, passing under the big arch. He's in his usual attire, and though his blue suit fits him as well as ever, he looks a little more tired than last I saw him. There's stubble on his cheeks, and he looks somewhat tense. Maybe nervous.

"*The Western Code*," I whisper. What he just said—it's a quote from the movie that was playing on the night we first chatted on RadaR—a night permanently ingrained in my mind.

"Mm-hm. Or *Toy Story*." He halts in front of me. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Still getting my heart to slow down, I wave him off. "Why don't you use the door?"

"It's more fun this way," he says, biting his lower lip for a second. "What are you doing here?"

"Nothing, I . . ." I won't lie to him ever again. I'll possibly never lie to anyone again for the rest of my life. "I'm leaving. I was just dropping something off for you."

He glances at the box, walking past me and toward it. "Did I leave something at your apartment?"

Oh, no. Everything of his disappeared from my apartment on the same day it all ended, when my extra key appeared on my table. He left nothing behind. "No. It's just—" He leans down to open the box. "It's a . . ." The lid

pops open. “Shane?”

He halts, his cocoa irises scanning my face. “Yes?”

“I’d like you to check that out only once I’m gone. I’m afraid otherwise you might misinterpret it.”

With a smirk on his lips, he passes his fingers through the folders inside. “I thought we’d already established you can’t always get what you want, Heaven.” He grabs the first one, his brows furrowing as he reads the title. “Project Outline.” Setting his gaze on me, he shrugs. “What’s this?”

“I—I wanted to thank you.” I shuffle on my feet and lick my dry lips. “It’s my way of saying that I’m sorry, and I’m grateful for the role you’ve played in my life. No matter how brief.”

He scratches his neck. “Okay. But *what* is it?”

“This.” I point around me. “This place. I know you want to sell it and make some profit, but I’ve come up with another plan. Should you be interested in keeping it.”

He squints for a couple of seconds, then opens the folder, scrolling through the pages. “Okay. Sell me your vision.”

I take a deep breath. “That’s not really what I’ve—”

“I thought you weren’t one to ever give up, Heaven.”

I stare at his brows, raised in challenge. Though I’m aware he knows *exactly* what he’s doing, if he wants to hear it from me, he will. “All right.” I inhale and hold on to any shred of office-me that still functions when Shane’s around. “This area is up and coming and well-connected. Rents here would go for thousands a month.” I step toward him, drying the sweat off my hands on my jeans. “I have the city plans. Most of the apartments in this building have three bedrooms, a balcony, and two bathrooms.”

“You can’t rent this dump until you fix it.” He quickly scrolls through the pages. “And to fix it you need—”

“—money. A lot. But if there’s people who would spend a lot of money for a central location, it’s not private renters. It’s businesses.”

“Businesses?”

I nod. “Bars, agencies, shops. There’s space for six to twelve on the ground floor, depending on dimensions.”

He reads a few lines. “That still doesn’t explain how you plan to bring in money to fix this place. Businesses might want to rent central, but not if the roof will fall onto their head any day.” He puffs his chest as he flips the folder shut, like he’s got me.

But he hasn't.

"Nothing will fall on their head if you sell."

He leans against the column, his forehead creasing. "I thought this was all a plan for me not to sell."

"You won't sell the building, only the shop space. You'll find enough contractors and offer them part of the property as payment. *They*'ll fix up the structural damage, the electrical and water system, the façade, and the roof. Those are the biggest expenses by far."

"It'd be too costly and risky for them. Why would they accept a property they likely don't even need as payment? They'd have to sell it." He shakes his head, unconvinced. "No one will go for it."

A wide smile takes over my face. "Are you sure?"

Silence. We stare at each other, and I can almost see the wheel in his head turning. Does he really think I'd present this to him if I didn't think it through?

He seems to realize that wouldn't be my style without me pointing it out, because his lips bend up. "Numbers?"

I walk to him, grab the folder, and turn it to page twenty-four. "Business plan. One, five, and ten years," I say. His brows arch as he scrolls to the next pages. "Projections for—"

"Yes, I can read."

I take a few steps back. He looks as handsome—no, as *beautiful* as always. And he's definitely wearing his Mr. Asshole suit, but he seems not to hate me as much anymore.

"Wow," he says, and when he looks back at the box. "What's next?"

I glance at the folders. "Um . . . Renders, then some potential investors. There's a lot about cost estimates, a timeline, what you'd need to do in terms of legal compliance. Rent trends, potential complications."

A wicked smile curves his lips, and grabbing the box, he settles on a stable-looking slate. "Okay. Let's check it out."



CLEARING HIS THROAT, Shane leans to one side and grabs the box. "There's one more folder." He throws me a look. "And an envelope."

Immediately, I avert my eyes. We've been here for two hours now, and

though all we talked about was my plan for this place, I can say without a doubt this is the best moment I've had in two weeks. But things might be about to change.

"What should we start with?"

I point at his left hand, holding on to the folder.

With a knowing smile, he opens it, reading through the first page. His lips part as his eyes roam left to right and shock etches to his face. "What's this?"

"That would be . . . your bakery."

"My bakery?"

I kneel in front of him, with the folder between us, then point at the floor plan on the first page. "All of the estimates we've gone through exclude one space, which would remain yours."

I show him the renders of the bakery I created with the freelancer. I love them. Dark blue paint, white floors, and a chocolate waterfall built into the back wall. There are stainless steel fridges and a wooden counter, as well as coordinated tables. And plants as far as the eye can see.

"Desserts for Stressed People?" he asks, a spark in his gaze I've never seen before.

"Yeah, it's . . ." I shrug. "Just a suggestion. I don't know. I figure everyone wants dessert when they're stressed. We know that better than anyone. And it's . . . I think it's different. It's catchy."

He lets out a surprised huff, looking back at the folder in wonder, and I think I see his eyes watering when he gets to the renders. He loves them. "What happens to my childhood home?"

"It's yours. Eighteen apartments. Seventeen for rent. You'll need a loan to fix them up, but it won't be too high. It's an excellent investment. Any bank will go for it."

After lightly shaking his head, he looks at me with the same dreamy expression. "Heaven, this is incredible."

Moving a lock of hair behind my ear, I grin. "Will you think about it?"

"I already am," he answers, lost in thought.

With my heart filled, I sit back down as he hunches to the right and grabs the envelope. The damn letter I forgot about.

"Can you wait to read that one until I'm gone?" I ask as panic makes my throat clench. If he reads that in front of me—hell, I don't even know, and I don't want to find out either.

He glances at the cream-white envelope, then at me. "We've come so far.

Why quit right before it gets good?”

When I give him a resigned nod, he extracts the folded paper, opens it and reads out the words I hand wrote this morning. “Dear Shane. Mr. Asshole. Whichever one of you showed up here.” He glares at me, but that’s not even the embarrassing part. “This is my way of thanking you. You’ve injected my life with joy and dessert, and yours should be too. You deserve this place filled with good memories.”

He swallows, dragging a hand over his mouth. “Those six weeks with you were the most challenging of my life, and far too beautiful for me to describe. But I’ll treasure them forever, like I treasure you. Nevaeh could never answer your last message, so let me. Yes, I’ve had that feeling where I’m not sure if I’m awake or dreaming. I’ve felt that way since the day I met you. Know that . . .”

I keep my stare on the broken pavement, my cheeks warm and tingly. I can’t look at him. It’s too embarrassing.

He clears his throat. “Know that I love you, and my walls will always smell like chocolate. Catch you back into the future. Heaven.”

Once he sets the paper down, the silence is deafening. Is it awkward for him to know I love him? Is he as tense as I am right now? “I didn’t mean for it to sound like I’m trying to win you back. It’s—I wasn’t supposed to be here,” I mumble.

“I’m glad you were. Making me tell myself you love me is sad enough without me saying it to the walls.”

When I look up at him, he’s smiling, so I smile too. It feels so familiar, talking to him, joking around. I can almost taste what it’d be like. But he doesn’t give second chances to liars. I know that by now.

My phone rings, and I take it out of my pocket with a sigh. Emma. She’s been calling constantly, so I’m not sure if her spider senses are at work or this is just a routine check. And it isn’t exactly the best time for a chat, but last time I didn’t answer, she nearly called the fire department. “Sorry, I have to take it,” I tell Shane before bringing the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Where are you? Did you take today off?”

There’s a familiar ding—it sounds like the elevator, so she must be at the office. “Yeah, I’ve been working on a project and needed a couple of days.” I kick a small rock, which rolls all the way to the green door. “Why? Did you want something?”

“No, no. I just . . .” She sighs. “Alright so . . . I know you’ve only

recently forgiven me for my last mistake, but . . .”

My muscles stiffen, my stomach quickly tightening into a knot. Though this isn't a comforting sentence coming from anyone, the fact that it's Emma saying it makes the hairs on the back of my neck spike. “What happened?”

“Before I tell you, just know that—”

“Emma, what did you do?” I breathe.

“He came looking for you earlier today.”

I throw a glance at Shane. Of course, I wish she was talking about him, but I know there's an equal chance that Mahatma Gandhi stopped by my office. Emma isn't talking about Shane. She's talking about my *other* ex.

Why is Alex looking for me? I thought we cleared the air. That we agreed to be friends, one day.

But most importantly, what did Emma do?

“And?” I urge her to continue.

“And I might have . . . kinda, sorta, *maybe* screamed at him a little.”

Ugh. Not this again. “Em, I know you don't like him, but you can't keep antagonizing him forever.”

“It's not that I don't like him, H.”

My brows furrow.

“But he's a damn idiot. And an asshole, though we could have seen that coming.”

Shane's eyes meet mine.

“Em . . .” I mumble.

“I just expected so much more from him, and now you're heartbroken and aggressively unhappy.”

Is she talking about Shane? Could it be that . . . him being here *right now* isn't a coincidence? “Wait—”

“And since I was the one who led you down this path of blue-suited agony, I can't help but feel responsible—”

“Emma,” I call, my heart beating so fast it's making my whole body shake. “Who are you talking about?”

“Me. She's talking about me,” Shane says, his gaze sweet and nervous as he studies my expression. “I assume as much, seeing as she just lost it on me in front of the whole company.”

“You . . .” I mumble, my arm falling down my side. I stare at him, trying to understand what it means.

He came looking for me. He didn't give up on me.

When Emma's voice comes from the phone, I bring it back to my ear.

"—anyway, once I told him all that, he just kind of mumbled that they'd told him on the fourth floor that you were off. I said you'd probably be home, so he might come to your place after work."

I swallow. "Em, I have to go."

"Pleeeeeease, don't be mad at me? At least I'm giving you a heads-up! And, when he does come over, tell him that I'm sorry. If he's there to grovel and kneel at your feet, of course. Otherwise, tell him he can go get fu—"

"Loveyoubye," I rush out in one breath before hanging up.

Shane hasn't moved, a half smile on his face and his hands joined over his thighs. How did he know I'd be here? Maybe he went to my apartment, and when he didn't find me, he tried this place.

I beg myself not to *assume*. Not to dream that the reason he's here is that he wants me back. I don't think I'd survive the disappointment this time. But even so, it's all I can think about. How maybe he's here to give us another chance.

We could pick things up where we left them—I wouldn't need him to grovel. It'd be enough that he showed me that he cares. That he's willing to fight for us. That I'm not alone in this, and no matter how difficult things get, he'll find it in himself to listen and won't push me away.

That we'll write another ending to our story.

"Where . . . where were we?" I ask when he remains silent.

His smile fades away, slowly turning into a pained expression like I've never seen before. As if he hates himself. Bringing a hand to the back of his neck, he sighs. "Emma told you, right? About what happened today in the cafeteria?"

"Yes." I straighten my wrinkle-free t-shirt. "I'm sorry about whatever she said—"

"She said I'm an asshole. A coward. A quitter. That though I might think you lost *me*, I'm the one who lost someone. Someone I'll try to replace with every person I meet."

Gee. Even for Emma's standards, that's harsh.

"That it's easy to run the opposite direction when shit hits the fan, but strong people work through their problems." He looks up at the ceiling, a low hum coming out of his throat. "That . . . uh, that I pushed you away, so I better not expect you to be there when I'm finally ready, and that I'll soon realize what I miss isn't even what we had, but what we *almost* had."

Oh, God. Why am I sure there's more? I can only hope he zoned out at some point.

Snapping his finger, he continues, "She also said something about how you won't stop shining just because I'm intimidated by your light?" With a sweet smile, he shrugs. "But I think she was just running out of insults at that point."

I bite down a grin. Though Emma *really* doesn't understand the concept of boundaries, I can't say I don't feel lucky to have her on my side. And thankful that I'm not on her *bad* side. "I'm sorry she assaulted you like that," I tell him as I wrap one arm around me and grip my elbow. "But I won't apologize for what she said, because I believe she does have a point in—"

"She was one hundred percent right," he whispers.

When my eyes widen, he stands. I do too, holding my breath as he looks down, his shoulders rising and dropping quickly. He rubs a hand over his forehead, opens his mouth, then closes it. As he stares up at me again, there's a new resolution in his eyes. "Heaven, I spent the last two weeks wishing I had a time-traveling DeLorean to bring me to the past so I could fix the future."

My heartbeat quickens, my hands suddenly tingling with the need to touch him.

"But there is no such thing. Not in real life." He takes a tentative step toward me, then lets out a long, slow breath. "And since I don't have a magic sports car to help me fix things, I figured I'd use an old-fashioned Mercedes Benz to find you, then apologize for everything I've done and hope you'd take me back."

My heart is thrumming, breaths shaking out of my lips as my eyes glisten with tears.

He said he wants me back.

He said it with *our* movie.

All I want to do is say yes. I want to *scream* it. And then maybe jump on him, kiss him, spend a whole day sniffing his hair and touching him all over, until I'm convinced this is real. But it takes me a moment too long, and Shane Hassholm hasn't been gifted with much patience.

"You never shut up, and you choose now to go silent on me?" he asks, nervously biting his lips.

My smile turns into a giggle, and only then, I see his shoulders relax. Taking a step forward, I whisper, "I'm not gonna leave you on read, Shane. I

was just thinking about what to say.”

He nods, a chuckle bubbling out of his lips. “Any luck?”

Yes, so much luck. Luck hasn’t stopped smiling at me since the day I matched with Shane. *Luck* is that he matched back with me, and everything that has happened since. *Luck* is that we’re here, having this conversation.

I look up at him, his face so close to mine I can finally smell the sugar again. “I was wondering if this is the part where you kiss me.”

“But I haven’t apologized yet.”

“You’re forgiven,” I insist.

With a light chuckle, his hands cup both sides of my face. “Heaven, I’m so sorry. I—”

“It’s okay,” I breathe. “Water under the bridge.”

“Let me finish,” he says with a stern voice. “I promised I wouldn’t shut you out again, and when it counted, I didn’t let you explain. I hurt you because I was hurting. In spite of that, you’re here right now.” He turns to the white box, and once he looks back at me, there’s a sad smile on his face. “You fought for me, Heaven, and I just gave up.”

“But you didn’t,” I whisper. “You’re here too.”

The left side of his lips tilt up. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

I step on my toes, trying to reach his lips now that he said his piece.

“Still not done,” he says as he holds his index to my mouth. “Did no one tell you interrupting others is rude?”

Un-freaking-believable.

With a smirk, he reaches into the front pocket of his jacket, takes out a tiny black box, and stretches his arm, offering it to me.

“What the . . .” I stumble back, eyes flaring as my brain explodes into confetti. This is not what I had in mind—*at all*. I want to date him, to learn every bit of him, to grow and change together, not to *marry* him. We dated for two weeks!

Frantically waving my hands left and right, I stare at the jewelry box as if it might kill me. “No. No, no, no. Are you kidding me, Shane? No. Don’t do this to me, please.”

His lips twitch. “Five. That was five nos.”

He opens the box, and sitting at the center of it is the most beautiful Oreo. Well, it’s a regular Oreo, but the mix of relief and exhilaration makes it look even better.

“Oh, Mr. Hassholm.” I hold a hand to my chest as I catch my breath, then

I take it. “My favorite. I thought—how did you find out?”

“I didn’t.”

My brows furrow deeply over my eyes.

“I didn’t need to.”

He didn’t need to? What does that mean? I think back to our conversation when we made the bet, wondering what exactly gave me away.

“So . . . *Can you guess it?*”

“*Your favorite dessert?*”

“*Anyone’s. If you know someone, can you just tell which dessert they’ll like?*”

“*I’m not a fortune teller, but I can take a guess.*”

“*Guess mine, then.*”

When my eyes flare, the smile on his face deepens. He knows I know.

“You never asked,” I breathe. “I asked *you*, and you didn’t tell me. You said someone’s favorite dessert says a lot about them, then . . .” I shake my head. “Then I challenged you to guess. You never asked.”

“I told you.” He takes another step. “I didn’t need to, Heaven.”

Clenching my fist, I go for a mock-punch on his shoulder. “You already knew, didn’t you?” I shriek. “Why didn’t you say it?”

He chuckles, locking my hand in his when I go for a second hit and burst into a fit of laughter. “And miss all that fun baking for you? I told you, you looked like you needed desserts.”

“Oh my God.” I giggle as he lets me go. I should probably be more upset that he played me, but his treats were too delicious for me to feel any kind of resentment. “You can’t be *that* competitive if you made a bet with the intention of losing.”

He squares his shoulders. “I’m *extremely* competitive. We were just competing for different things.”

Getting lost in his gorgeous irises, I swallow. I think he was competing for me—that’s what he means. “How the *hell* did you know?” I ask as my grin softens.

He holds out his hand, and once I grab it, his fingers entangle tighter with mine. “Something I’d never tell my date?”

A nervous smile bends my lips as I’m reminded of that day, forever ago, when we told each other the worst things we’d done in our lives. “Sure, Mr. Dirty-pants.”

After huffing out a laugh, he inhales deeply. “For five years, I’ve been in

love with a woman who didn't know I existed until ten weeks ago."

My breath catches in my throat, my body flinching the moment my brain registers his words. Tightening his grip, he keeps me rooted once again.

He said he *loves* me. He said he's loved me for *five years*.

I can't wrap my mind around it in the seconds of silence that follow. After all, I came here knowing what we were and thinking we'd never be that again. That I'd have to learn how to miss him quietly, since that's all I had left of us.

"Five years?" I ask as I try to read the truth in his eyes. They sparkle.

"Since you joined IMP."

My heart tumbles in my chest. Is that what his sister meant when she said he had been pining over me for years? Is that what Marina meant? "What—why didn't you say anything?"

His jaw sets as he stares at me from behind his long lashes. "Your second week at IMP, we had a Christmas party. You came with Alex, and you were obviously happy together. I figured, if it's meant to happen, it'll happen naturally."

I remember that party. It was maybe our fifth or sixth date. The thought of being alone there scared me since I didn't know people well enough by then and Emma hadn't joined yet.

Shane cups my cheek. "Five years later, Billy tells me he's sending me his best project manager, and you appear inside my office."

"That's—" I let out a shaky breath. "But I liked you when we hadn't met yet. When you were just a handsome guy on RadaR and had no idea who I was. And you were into me all along?"

"Yes," he says, his hands cradling both sides of my face. As his thumb grazes a spot on my right cheek, he smiles. "Heaven, for five years, you've eaten about three lunches a week in the cafeteria," he says with a loving smile. "You've taken out a box of Oreos from your bag, grabbed two and put the box away, then ate them and snatched two more." He pecks the tip of my nose. "For five years, I've seen you unable to resist dessert." Pressing his lips to the side of my head, he inhales deeply and whispers in my ear, "You might have liked me first, but I started loving you five years ago, and I'm still not done."

My head feels light. Shane loved me even before I found his RadaR profile. He was waiting for me in the future all along.

A single tear falling down his cheek. "Loving you changed my life,

Heaven. Losing you would too.”

It feels as if my heart *weeps*.

People always say you know it's love when your person smiles and that makes you smile too, but as I watch Shane cry for the first time, it dawns on me that's not it. It's when their agony wrenches you, splits you in two, leaves you open and raw, that you know it's love. And right now, witnessing Shane's pain feels as if someone's stabbing me, puncturing my heart with a million wounds.

Erasing the distance between us, I take his face into my hands, then use my thumb to wipe away his tear. “You could never lose me, Shane, because this is not temporary.”

He leans closer, grazing his lips on mine, then halting at the last second. “I think I'm gonna kiss you now.”

With a playful eye roll, I smile. “Thank God. You've become so damn chatty.”

He smiles for half a second, pure joy pouring out of him, then his lips are against mine. I don't know how they can possibly feel even better than before, but they do. My hand buries into his hair just as he cups my thighs and pulls me up. Once my legs are wrapped around him, he groans against my mouth. “I love you so *fucking* much.”

“Say it again,” I demand, staring deeply into his eyes.

“I love you, Heaven.”

Tears spill out. “Say it ag—”

His tongue spears into my mouth with the same hunger I feel, then he steps to the right until my body is pressed between him and the bricked wall. “Your turn,” he says, using his thumb to dry up my tears. “I've waited long enough.”

“I love you, Shane,” I breathe. My heart's exploding, I'm pretty sure. “I love you.”

When he bursts into something between tears and chuckles, I quickly follow. We kiss, again and again, tasting each other's lips in every way possible, mumbling “I love yous” as if they're the most natural words in the world.

Once again, chocolate is all I can feel, smell, taste. Chocolate all around.

My advice?

It's the best dessert for stressed people.

Two Years Later



“HEY.” Shane’s voice caresses my ear, his nose gently nudging my neck. “Wake up, sleepyhead.”

“Leave me alone,” I moan, pushing his face away. “Lunatic.”

As he moves some hair off my face, I feel the vibration of his chuckle against my cheek. “That’s what you say every morning. And every morning you text me all pissed off because I didn’t wake you up before leaving.”

I know he’s right, but at this exact moment, my pillow is too comfortable for me to listen to anything he’s saying.

“Okay. I tried.”

His lips peck the corner of my mouth, and as he’s about to retreat, I grasp onto his shoulders. “I’m up. I’m up,” I grouch. “What time is it?”

“Four a.m.”

I groan, opening my eyes. He looks impeccable in his black coat and his rested smile, though our *Terminator* marathon kept us up until late last night. How does he never look tired? “C-3PO has nothing on you, you robot.”

He kisses my nose, then my lips. “I’m really late.”

I know, but I’m unable to let him go today. And he must read it in my eyes, because he scoops me up, and as I clasp my hands around his nape, he walks through the apartment.

“Fuck,” he groans when his arm hits against the half-assembled furniture that occupies most of the living room. “I hate this bookshelf.”

“I love our apartment,” I whisper, cuddling up against his chest and

catching sight of the wine red couch, the Persian carpet, and the boho coffee table. How did I never notice how much this place needed color?

After stopping by the entrance to grab my coat and a set of keys, he proceeds into the elevator.

“I’m not a lightweight, Shane,” I say, kissing his chest. “Your back will hurt.”

“Gee, I’m not a hundred,” he mumbles.

I giggle against his chest as he opens the elevator door and walks to his car, finally setting me in the passenger seat. When he joins my side, we drive.

The city is dark and empty this early—or this late—but I know the route we’re taking like the back of my hand. He’s going to turn right at the bookstore, then we’ll take the second street to the left and continue straight for a while.

As he gently hits the brakes, I hear the rumbling of water pouring down the horses’ mouths. And behind them, home. Well, it isn’t home yet, and it won’t be for another few months. We’ve chosen the tiles and paint colors for the apartment, but now it’s up to the construction company.

“You can check on the progress, if you want.” Shane holds my hand and kisses it as soon as he parks. He knows I’m more than excited about moving. *Probably* because I constantly talk about it, showing him an endless slideshow of things we should do or get for the new place.

Honestly, fifty percent of the reason I’m so excited about moving is that it’ll be easier for him once we do. His routine will be a little less exhausting.

“Really? I’ve been there twice this week. The workers hate me.”

“Do you need me to remind them who’s the boss?”

I assume they know it’s the building owner.

“You’ll love what I have in mind for today,” he says as we walk, and his smile is so wide and filled with child-like excitement, my chest tightens. Shane Hassholm is the best part of my world, and that has only become truer in the last two years.

Stepping through the square, I glance at the girl in the pink dress, but instead of a wall, she’s depicted on a shop window. “Desserts for Stressed People” shines in bright blue letters beneath it. The logo of Shane’s beautiful bakery.

Once the door’s unlocked and the alarm deactivated, Shane kisses my lips and lightly pats my ass. “Go. I’ll see you later.”

Though I should protest and ask if he needs help, I watch him walk away

with a grin. He's been having interviews and trial periods to find an assistant baker, but he hasn't been lucky so far.

Knowing he won't accept my useless, sleepy help, I walk to the back, on the small bed he fit there for me, and fall asleep.



“GOOD MORNING AGAIN,” are the next words I hear. Shane kisses my cheeks, my nose, my forehead, and before fully waking up, my lips are stretched across my face.

Butter, bread, cocoa, sugar. The mix of it invades my nostrils and makes my stomach gurgle. Even after waking up to it a few times a week for one year, since he opened Desserts for Stressed People, it's still the best alarm I could ask for. “Hmm. It smells so good.”

Shane fits on top of the blanket, his body firm against me, and hugs me as I open my eyes. “I hope you're hungry, because I made your favorite dessert.”

“My favorite dessert, huh?” I hide my face against his chest, breathing in a little flour and a whole lot of Shane. Now that he barely wears suits anymore, his chest is even more comfortable. Just a t-shirt and pounds of perfect muscles.

“Your favorite dessert. I'm confident this time.”

What the hell did he come up with this time? I'm pretty much convinced I've tried every dessert that's ever existed by now, but he keeps saying he has lots of tricks up his sleeve he hasn't used yet.

“You still haven't told me what *your* favorite dessert is.”

He cocks his brow. “Really? I thought it was obvious.” His eyes dart to my lips. “You are.”

“I'm serious.”

“Me too.”

“Shane,” I press.

“I am!” he insists, and when he notices the pointed look on my face, he smiles. “You and anything with the right amount of sugar. Assuming it's properly baked. And no packaged dessert. And not any of that low-calorie crap that tastes like cardboard. And—”

“Oh my God,” I whine.

“Eclairs and forest fruit cheesecake, apple cake, lemon bars, coconut truffles, though I also love dorayaki and brownies.”

I scoff, chuckling as my eyes close. Though I already knew he was never trying to guess my favorite treat, I had no idea he spent those first seven weeks of us feeding me *his* favorite desserts. “I love it.”

“And I love you.”

He’s up quickly, dragging me to the front of the shop. The chocolate waterfall in the back wall is already whirring, and I check the dirt of the many plants positioned around the shop to make sure they don’t need water. “Where’s Tess?” I ask, noticing his only employee is missing.

He moves behind the counter, studying the pastries in the glass display. “She’s coming in this afternoon. Her kid is starring in a show at school.”

Barely gulping down a chuckle, I nod. Mr. Asshole is long gone. He’s still a broody guy, which might just be my favorite thing about him, and this bakery is nothing short of perfection—ever—but he’s a kind, generous boss.

“Come,” he says, grabbing something from the counter. He takes my hand with his free one and walks to the side of the shop, through the door that leads to the internal garden. “Time for breakfast.”

I’ve hardly heard sweeter words.

I sit at one of the glass tables outside, the sun shining down on me from the skylight on the black roof. Hole aside, everything else is the same here. The brick walls are still standing, and the pavement was fixed for less money than one would expect. The original black railings hold tons of luscious plants that cascade over our heads, and the columns have been repainted, but they’re all still there.

I guess the only difference is the shops all around us and the people walking in and out of the green door like busy bees.

“Wait, I’ll get you something to drink,” he says as he sets a plate in front of me.

Before I can as much as glance at it, Jenny opens up the back of her Indian restaurant, the shutter rolling up with an obnoxious roar. “He keeps spoiling you with desserts, huh?” she shouts over the noise.

“Always,” I shout back, and with a wave, she disappears into the shop.

He always spoils me, with desserts and everything else. He says he’s decided I deserve desserts forever and keeps coming up with reasons why. Some of them are ridiculous too. With the muffin he brought back from work yesterday, he also gave me a note that read, “Correct positioning of groceries

in the fridge,” and during our *Indiana Jones* marathon last Sunday, he shoved a bucket of caramel popcorn in my hands and said, “You became a pro at separating egg whites,” which I’m most certainly not.

I look down at the pastry he prepared today, and Shane comes back out.

“Ginger tea,” he says, setting it down on the table.

“Is this—” I point at the plate, my mouth wide open as I blink the surprise away. “Are these Oreos?”

“Homemade Oreos.” He grins. “I figured, if this is your favorite dessert, I can try to top it.”

“But you hate Oreos.”

“No. I hate packaged desserts.” He points at the three beautiful Oreos on my plate. “These aren’t it.”

My stomach growls, suddenly empty, and holding back a shriek of excitement, I open the note they come with.

Our cups are colorful, mismatched, and the handles are positioned exactly forty-five degrees to the right.

“That’s why I deserve dessert today?” I ask with a giggle. He’s definitely running out of excuses.

“No. You deserve dessert because you own it like a fucking queen,” he says as he pecks the side of my head.

I grab the first cookie. It’s a little bigger than a normal Oreo, and the complicated pattern on the top isn’t there. Instead, the logo of Shane’s store is. I bite it, and the texture is a little different too. More buttery, maybe also a little softer. And the cream is so good, a moan escapes my lips.

“Good?” he asks, his eyes filled with expectation as he waits for the verdict.

“God, Shane.” My eyes roll back. “Good doesn’t begin to cover it.”

Lacing both hands behind his head, he observes me eating. Content. Satisfied. Peaceful.

“Do you understand the possibilities of this?” I ask, opening up the second cookie and licking the filling.

“I really don’t.” He crosses his arms and sits by my side, his lips

twitching.

“Well, now you can make me all kinds of Oreos. Nutella Oreos, pistachio Oreos, chocolate ganache Oreos.”

His head lightly shakes. “Oh, what have I done?”

“You doomed me to a life of diabetes.”

He leans closer, placing his hand on my knee and kissing my wrist. “Is this your favorite dessert, Heaven?”

As I study his face, I can’t tell whether he wants me to be honest or to keep playing. On the one hand, I think this might just be my favorite dessert, but on the other, seeing him try to find something I love more than packaged Oreos for the past two years has been the highlight of my life.

In the end, I opt for honesty. It’s a policy that’s worked out quite well for us up until this very moment. “This is one hundred percent my favorite dessert.”

He closes his eyes with a smile. It’s almost like he can rest now that he baked my favorite dessert. Is it something primal? Maybe it’s the equivalent of cavemen hunting for food. He wants to be the one who bakes the pastries that will make me the happiest.

It’s cute. But now we’re done playing this game, I guess.

“Okay.” He slaps his thighs and gets up. “Now—there must be something you’ll love more than homemade Oreos, right? Some desserts require days of preparation, tens of ingredients. I refuse to believe my girlfriend’s favorite dessert is a damn chocolate cookie with a bland sugar filling.”

Oh, he’s more than cute. He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, followed by these homemade Oreos. Standing, I cup his face with both hands and press my lips against his. “So you’ll keep trying?”

“I’ll never stop.”

We grin against each other’s mouths, the door to the shop opening and the bell over it jingling. “Hello, disgustingly happy couple! Aren’t you past that phase in which you make everyone around you want to barf?”

“Hi, *Paradise*.” Shane kisses my forehead and turns to Emma, her blonde hair up in a messy bun and her lips opened in the most shiny smile. “What can I get you this morning?”

“A blueberry muffin, a cappuccino, and a slice of black forest cake.” Emma must notice our curious stares, because she shrugs. “The cake’s for my lunch break.”

“Hm. Coming right up.”

Once Shane enters the shop, Emma sits down at the table, then has the audacity to try and snatch one of my cookies. Slapping her hand away, I shake my head. “You’re gonna have to start paying him for what you eat, you know?”

“Please. This place is always packed. I’m sure he’s making more money than you and me combined.” She tilts her head and bats her lashes. “Plus, he *loves* me. I’m his new best friend.”

“I remember the good times in which you were *my* best friend.” I sip my ginger tea, watching as a mom and her daughter sit at one of the tables with a plate of homemade Oreos. See? Game changer.

“Good times, my ass,” Emma mumbles. “I barely ate any pastries at all. When I did, they were not for free.”

As Shane brings Emma her order, she rushes me to the back to get ready. Fifteen minutes later, I’m wearing one of the dresses I left in the back for the days I sleep here. They happen maybe a tad too often.

Emma is still having breakfast at the table outside, but next to her sits a man I’ve never seen before. “What—” I point at her, and Shane looks up from the cash register.

“Oh, yeah. A customer. She met him a minute ago.”

Of course she did. Some things never change, thank God.

My phone rings, and I take it out of the pocket, following Shane to the back. “Uh! Look, look!”

He fake-groans, then motions at me to answer as he sets a tray of cookies down on the wooden counter.

“Hello?” I say, pressing the green button and the speaker.

“Hi, Heaven! How are you? Listen, I worked past midnight yesterday, so I’ll take the morning to get some sleep.”

“Of course.” I hold back a laugh. “Sounds good. Did you figure out that PR debacle?”

“Yes, don’t worry. I’ve sent you everything. Check it when you get to the office. I told Mark to follow you like a shadow until I’m back, so you should be fine.”

Shane shakes his head, his shoulders jumping up and down with silent chuckles.

“Great, thank you.”

“No problem. Oh, by the way, are you at the bakery?”

“Yes. Do you want something?”

“Hmm . . . Can I get a scone? No, actually . . . You know that ricotta-thing you brought last time?”

“Cannoli. Yes, I’ll grab a few.”

“You’re the best boss in the world, Fourth Floor.”

As I burst out laughing, Shane rolls his eyes. “Thank you, Sixth Floor.”

“Is Shane there?”

With furrowed brows, he walks to me, then looks down at the phone. “Hey, Marina. I’m here, what’s up?”

“Mr. Asshole,” she says in the tone she only reserves for him. Though their relationship has changed a lot, it’s still far more complicated than I’ll ever understand. At this point, I think they like pretending not to care about each other. “Miss Asshole might have told you already, but . . . Patricia and I are having a little party for my birthday at my place next weekend.”

Shane’s gaze meets mine as a light smile curves his lips. “She mentioned it, yes.”

“Well . . . you should come. If you bake the cake, that is.”

A slow exhale. “Are you inviting me or hiring me?”

There’s a beat of silence, and when I cock my brows at him, he nods, protesting with another eye roll.

“Thank you Marina, I’ll be there. Just send me an email with the details for your cake. My treat.”

“Finding Heaven was the best thing that ever happened to you,” she mumbles. Quickly clearing her throat as I stifle a chuckle, she continues, “I’ll see you then. Bye, Hassholm,” then she hangs up.

Poking at Shane’s side, I gloat. “See? Didn’t I tell you? She’s a different person now that she has a wonderful, understanding, patient boss.”

“Huh-uh.” He envelops me with his thick arms, and after a kiss that if we were home would turn into something else, he sighs. “Fine. The events department at IMP has thrived since you became their director. You’re much better at my job than I am.”

Grazing my lips against his, I shake my head. “No. Your job is this. Making desserts for stressed people like me, Emma, and Marina.”

His smile is bright as his fingers rub my lower back. “Best job I ever had.”

After a slow, delicious kiss, I push some hair off his forehead. “You’re my favorite dessert too. Better than packaged *and* homemade Oreos.”

“I wish I could believe you, but I’ve seen you with cookies.” He bites my

cheek as I chuckle. “What do you think her favorite dessert will be?” He smiles, his eyes bright with love as he lays a hand over my belly, gently rubbing the bump. “Only four more months.”

“I expect her first word to be ‘sugar’ or ‘butter.’” My hand moves over his. “But you do know babies don’t eat brownies for the first year. You’ll have to wait more than four months.”

For a second, he looks deep in thought. “I’ll make her chocolate milk.”

Emma shouts from the front that we’re late for work. Really, we’re the bosses. We’re late for work if we say we’re late for work. But I reluctantly move away from Shane.

Before I can fully detach from his flour-covered clothes, he grabs me back between his arms and smiles playfully onto my lips, hands stroking my back. “Remember when we met? You told me the story of your birth. Why your mom called you Heaven.”

I nod, cupping his cheek. “Yes. Why are you thinking about it? Are you worried about the birth?”

“No, no. Of course not.” He drags his lips across my forehead and sweet pecks rain over my skin, each more precious than the previous. “I was just thinking . . . I can’t wait to tell our baby the story of her name.”

With a chuckle, I look down at my generous bump. Before I can get a word in, Emma shouts again, this time to say that we’re *really* late.

“Go, go. Please, kick ass, all right?” Shane squeezes my hand. “Thank you. And take care of my daughter. Please and thank you. I’ll see you tonight,” he says as he cups one side of my head and kisses my other temple.

“Yes, Mr. Asshole, sir,” I say as I salute him.

He crouches down, looking straight at my belly like he always does. “And you, take care of your mom, Nevaeh.”

The End

Want more?

The next stand-alone in the series *Love & Other Recipes* is coming out soon. How soon?

Only history will tell, but soon.

If you liked *Desserts for Stressed People*, you'll love this double timeline story of healthy and unhealthy friendships, unwavering love and cheesy French cuisine. With more spice, and not only in the kitchen.

To keep up to date with Letizia's work, follow her social media or join her newsletter [here](#).

Want a little extra Mr. Asshole?

[Click here](#) for a bonus chapter!

Acknowledgments

It's not by chance that this is the first book I chose to publish. Although I take some of the credit—I won't get into exact numbers—I owe it to some amazing people who have always known and supported me and some I found along the way.

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my partner, Caroline. You're the one who endured the most (see: meltdowns and other roller coasters) and the one who's never wavered in her total support of my dream. Together with an acknowledgement, you deserve a full-fledged apology for my absence. This book is why, so let's make it worth it.

My parents, number one fans, although you haven't read the book yet because of language barriers. Though I don't like to brag, I *do* have the best parents in the whole world.

My soul sisters, Mariangela, Chiara, and Stefania. You guys are the best friends I could have asked for. You've fed my egotistical fantasies and instilled a grandeur delusion in my feeble mind by assuring me one day I'll be a best-selling author. I'll hold you up to it.

A gigantic thank you to all my beta readers. The ones who finished the book, the ones who didn't. The ones who loved it and the ones who hated it. You've all taken the time to make this book better, and I thank you for it.

And because dessert always comes last, I'd like to thank my book squad. All the authors out there know just how hard it is to find a crew of writers to share this journey with, but I never hoped to meet people quite like you.

Simone, meeting you was the little extra luck I needed. Thank you for being my psychologist on call. Love you, Mable, monster romance and all your tentacles.

One of my *favorite* authors, W.H. Lockwood. I'm pretty sure I'll read anything you'll ever write. You're a genius, a friend, a lovely human being. Though I still have to forgive you. Spoiler alert: I won't.

Becky, you are one miracle away from turning into Jesus. You've beta read, proofread, supported, and become one of my favorite people in the

world. I know gratefulness makes you uncomfortable, so you have my undying friendship.

Letizia, what can I say? I'm glad I don't remember my life before meeting you, cause that sh*t sounds dull. You're the only person I'm okay sharing my name, personality, likes and dislikes with.

And you. *You*, Laura J. Since the very beginning, you've been a wonderful friend, beta reader and critique partner, and my very own writing buddy. Thank you for inspiring me, motivating me, advising me and all those positive verbs that only apply to the best people. I'm your biggest fan. I'll fight anyone who says otherwise.

I love you all so much.

And finally, to you, my reader. To you, lover of desserts and laughter and love and book boyfriends. Thank you for supporting me and the indie industry, thank you for trusting me enough to entertain you with my shenanigans. Without you, there wouldn't be a second book coming. And then a third. You make my dream come true with every word you read, and for that, I'm eternally grateful.

I can't possibly ask anything more of you, but I'm about to. If you have one spare minute, I could use your review of my book on Amazon, Goodreads or on my website: www.letizialorini.com.

If you can't, you still got my love.

About the Author

Letizia Lorini is an Italian rom-com author who's currently based in a quaint town with pretty canals in southern Sweden: Malmö. There, she lives in her lovely apartment with her partner and their fluffy Japanese Spitz.

When she's not writing or reading romance, she's cooking up some new story, researching the indie business, or wishing she was better at marketing or graphic design. She's also a criminologist, speaks three languages and loves coffee.

Also, she LOLs about pretty much everything and takes nothing seriously enough. Insert clown emoji. And she *loves* emojis, though she put none in this book.

Here's one. 🍰 Sorry, Kindle users. It's a cupcake emoji.

