

Penny for Your Heart



SEASON VINING

Penny for Your Heart

A Romance in the City Novel

Season Vining



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EPUB Edition

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First Publication by Tule Publishing 2023

Cover design by ebooklaunch

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ISBN: 978-1-958686-47-8

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Dedication

This is dedicated to Kaci Jordyn, who has been telling me to write it since the day we met.

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Chapter One

Eighth Grade

“**Y**OUR DRESS IS beautiful,” Misa said.

“Thanks. I’m mostly stoked that it has pockets.”

Misa checked her reflection in my full-length mirror and frowned at what she saw. “This dress is the worst,” she said with a pout. “I mean, it looks homemade.”

I peeked over her shoulder and glanced at her reflection. “Well, to be fair, it *is* homemade.”

“Our first homecoming dance and I’m in a homemade dress that makes me look like Wednesday Addams.”

“Umm, high collars are in,” I pointed out.

I slipped large silver hoops into my ears and grabbed my charm bracelet from my desk. When I turned, I found Misa slumped on my bed, surrounded by rejected dresses and rumpled lavender sheets.

“It doesn’t matter what you wear, I bet Mark Miller will still ask you to dance.”

Misa rolled her dark eyes, tucking straight black hair behind her ear. “Oh, joy.”

“Come on,” I said, standing before her. “You don’t want to be stuck hanging out with me in the dark corner of the gym while I judge everyone, do you?”

“You know better than that,” she said. “By the end of the night, you’ll be involved in some kind of crazy antics that I’ll probably get grounded for. Even your mom says you’re made of chaos and spice and everything nice.”

“You know me. I like adventure and it likes me back. I’m sorry you get dragged along for the ride sometimes.”

She shrugged. “Best friends stick together. **Misa and Penny’s Rules #7.**”

“And we will.” I held two fingers up and kissed them, just as Misa did the same. We pressed our fingers together, completing our rule book ritual. “You

know I honor the code. Besides, you look fine.”

“But look at you,” she said. “You’re so…” She stopped and stood to face me, just inches away, looking into my eyes. Misa’s hands reached for mine and there they dangled between our bodies, entwined.

My mouth wanted to point out that she was not even looking at my dress. But for the first time in my extroverted life, I remained quiet. Because there was something in the way she was looking at me—something quiet and deep and burning. It sparked a curious feeling inside, one that I wanted to hold on to.



Present

I STAND AT the corner of Broadway and West Houston Street waiting for the signal to change.

“That dress bright enough, honey?” some guy asks. He’s grinning as if he knows he’s charming and funny and the world deserves to hear his opinion. “I bet they can see you from Jersey.”

“If I wanted your unsolicited opinion about my wardrobe choices I would have fucking asked.”

“Whoa. You kiss your mother with that mouth, Red?”

“No. I kiss yours,” I say with a wink.

He turns away and faces the street, probably unfamiliar with people calling him out. My yellow dress is reflected in a shop’s mirrored storefront window. Twisting back and forth, I watch how the skirt lifts and billows before settling again. Sensible flats with embroidered purple flowers on them and a vintage cardigan complete the look. It’s my first day at a new job and this is as professional as I get.

The signal changes and I hurry through the crosswalk. A woman slides up alongside me and says, “Well, I love your dress.”

“Thanks! It has pockets!” I say. And that pretty much defines New York. For every crude comment, there are equal and opposite compliments.

This is the third person I’ve mentioned my dress pockets to this morning. Two were in response to compliments and one was just an announcement on

the Q train because I felt like in the event of an emergency, everyone should know.

Of course, this was in between scouting volunteers for the youth center I volunteer at. The Oasis Center is my home away from third-floor walkup. It's a safe space for queer youth and holds a large chunk of my heart. As head of volunteers, I've made it my mission to recruit as many new volunteers for the Center as possible. The Q is the perfect place for this. I've got an audience that literally cannot escape. Thank you, Metropolitan Transportation Authority and people of Brooklyn.

I check the time and am grinning when I hit the sidewalk again. This city—the steel, the concrete, the veins of sidewalks and moving pedestrians—gives me life like no other place in the world. And I've seen a lot of the world. There is something about the magic of New York that can't be duplicated. It's got life, a throbbing pulse that keeps in time with each step of the joggers in Central Park and each hiss of city bus air brakes.

The buzzing excitement in my belly reminds me that time is moving, so I better get moving, too. My nerves seem to settle and dissipate as I enter the building where the agency is housed. I'm used to walking into the unknown. I embrace it. A new adventure.

I pass through security with my temporary ID and pile into the elevator with the normal morning crew. I mean, I assume this is normal. But what do I know of normal? Up until two months ago, I'd been in school and before that, a nomad traveling the world.

Returning home almost felt like turning my back on adventure, but my best friend, Ross, convinced me that it was time to think about a career and my future. As he so lovingly put it, "Get a job, Miss Free Spirit."

I entered art school and found myself inspired once again. But I realized that even being tethered to one place...every moment, every person, every experience has adventure potential. It's all in your approach.

I take a deep breath and the smile falls off my face. I wish someone in this elevator would have had an adventure to buy some deodorant this morning.

"Twenty-eight, please," I say. No one moves. I squeeze through two people and wedge myself next to the panel, pressing the button for the twenty-eighth floor exaggeratedly while looking each person in the eye. "Thanks so much." At least they all have the decency to look embarrassed.

We stop on almost every floor on the way up, and I think I'll have to factor elevator time into my morning commute if this is the situation. When we finally reach the twenty-eighth floor, I am left with one other person. He exits with me, and we both approach the front desk of Create Slate.

A middle-aged woman sits behind the desk wearing a headset and a hairstyle older than my mother. The nameplate on her desk says *Rena*. She wears a lot of makeup, and her thick eyebrows curve over severe brown eyes. Her resting bitch face makes me wonder if she is unhappy or indifferent about our arrival. Holding a finger up, she indicates that she'll be right with us.

The guy next to me looks young in the way that Macaulay Culkin will never really look like a grown man to anyone who watched his childhood movies. He's wearing an oversized suit and carries a briefcase with initials monogrammed onto a gold plate near the handle. Another lemming following the masses up the mountain and over the cliff. No thanks. I'll stand back here and enjoy the view while you plummet to a trophy wife and sensible retirement.

I notice that it's completely silent now and turn to see Rena staring at me. I stare back. Is she still on the phone, or is she waiting on me? How am I supposed to know when she's wearing a 2004 Britney Spears headset? My imagination immediately places her in a plaid skirt and pigtails, and I'd *never* let her "Hit me, baby, one more time."

"What can I help you with?" she finally says. Though this is the first time I'm hearing it, it's said in a tone that implies she's already asked three times.

"Oh. Me?" I ask, placing a hand on my chest. "It's my first day."

"Me, too," says the eager beaver next to me.

"Department?" she asks.

"Art."

"HR."

We fire back at the same time. She sighs, already over our enthusiasm. The finger comes up again, and I'm beginning to resent that wide-knuckled, red-lacquer-nailed motherfucker.

"Andrea? You have a new hire at the front desk." When I hear the receptionist say my boss's name, I'm immediately grateful because it turns out I have been saying it wrong since reading over my job offer paperwork. It's Andrea with a soft A instead of the long A I've been practicing

handshakes with in the mirror at home. At least I won't say my boss's name wrong to her face now. Thanks, Bitchy Receptionist. I've decided you're cool today.

Rena snaps her fingers in front of my face, pulling me out of my head. *And there went her cool.* "Name?" she asks.

"Penelope Winters, but call me Penny."

"Penelope," she says with a frown after rolling her eyes.

"You know I can see you, right?" I ask.

She ignores my comment. "Andrea will be right up to fetch you," she says.

"Super. I'll just wait over—"

"Your name?" she interrupts, looking at Mr. Briefcase.

"Here," I finish, taking a seat in one of the boxy white leather chairs in the lobby. While it looks like a sturdy, firm chair, I find out that looks are deceiving when I sink into the cushion so far that my ass is practically on the ground in the malasana yoga pose. But I'm already here, so I decide to own it. Stacking one leg over the other in the most awkward leg cross of all time, I swing my foot back and forth like I am not even a little concerned with first impressions.

A girl passes through the lobby, and when she smiles my way, I am reminded of a sweaty, satisfying night in Nepal. Waking up in a stone hut in the Himalayas wrapped around Binsa had been a highlight of my time there. Her lips were wide and full, the kind that pinch in on the corners like cartoon drawings. Those lips were perfect for kissing and whispering dirty words in Nepali that I didn't need to translate to understand. After a round of salty kisses and three orgasms, I'd shared my breakfast of roti, fruit salad, and milk tea with a white yak holding up in the shade of the hut.

A cough and I am brought back to the present Manhattan advertising agency with bamboo floors and artwork trying so hard to be ironic it's irrelevant.

Deciding that I should be standing when my new boss arrives, I use the leverage of the chair to haul myself up and go flying right into the arms of Mr. Briefcase.

"Oof," he says when I collide with his chest. His hands grasp my forearms to keep me upright. His surprised expression morphs into a sly

smile. In any other circumstance, this would be an adorable boy-meets-girl intro to a sweet office romance. But here, he's barking up the wrong lesbian.

"Penelope?" I turn to find my new boss, Andrea with a soft A, giving me a long look. Remembering where I am and that his hands are still on me, I remove myself and dust off my dress as if he were covered in dirt.

I extend my hand, and Andrea shakes it with a grin. "Nice to finally meet you in person," she says. "I was on an extended vacation when the last designer quit, so I had to depend on my assistant to do the hiring."

I tug my bag higher onto my shoulder and try to keep up with her quick steps. "Barb was super nice. It's great to meet you, too, but actually, I prefer Penny," I say.

She keeps walking. We move past frosted glass offices and rows of cubicles. "Fine by me. Just so you know, office relationships are frowned upon." She motions back toward the lobby.

"Uh, no worries there."

"So, first I'll let you put your stuff down at your desk. Then you'll go to HR for paperwork. After that, I'll give you the tour and introduce you to the rest of the art department. We'll dive into training after lunch. Sound good?" I open my mouth to answer, but she keeps going. "You'll be sitting with Barb for training, so I hope you two hit it off." Andrea finally stops and faces me. "Here's your space."

It's not the dreadful, crushing corporate space I envisioned. It's a group of four desks pushed together, each one holding a large Mac computer. There's a wall of art and books, along with a light box, drafting table, rulers, paints, and every drawing tool imaginable.

"Wow."

"Not what you were expecting, right?" Andrea asks, crossing her arms while wearing a grin. "Slate is not your standard agency. We really embrace the artistic side of advertising and want to make sure you guys stay inspired. I think you'll be a perfect fit. You seem...spirited."

"Spirited?" I say with a laugh. "Everyone else calls it *annoying*, but I'll take *spirited*." I drop into my chair and wiggle my ass. "Yep. Perfect fit."

She nods her head toward the hall. "Let's get you to HR."

Over an hour of my life is taken up filling out forms and scribbling my name so many times I'm pretty sure I signed my soul over to a crossroad demon in exchange for casual-dress Fridays. Only time will tell.

One highlight of my time spent in the very gray and very sterile HR department is getting to witness Mr. Briefcase Chest Bump being trained. He sits in on my session and scratches detailed notes onto a large yellow legal pad. This guy—whose name is Chad—is wound tighter than a corset on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

I'm so relieved when Andrea comes to get me that I jump out of my chair and knock over a cup full of mints from the desk in front of me.

"Shit," I say before slapping a hand over my mouth. "I'm sorry." I turn to Andrea. "I didn't mean to say *shit* on my first day of employment in front of my new boss and the head of HR."

Briefcase clears his throat.

"And Chad."

Andrea chuckles as I drop to my knees and start shoveling the mints back into the bowl. "It's fine," she says. "We're all adults here." I want to question Chad's place on the adult spectrum but instead tuck a handful of mints into the pocket of my dress. I place the bowl back on the desk and give a wave to the whole human resources department as I follow Andrea out.

"That was awkward," I say mostly to myself.

"Fond of mints?" Andrea asks with a smirk.

"I'm craving chicken shawarma for lunch. It's a preemptive strike."

She outright laughs and slaps my shoulder. "I'm sure Barb will appreciate that."

Andrea shows me around the office, making note of the gender-neutral bathrooms (+4 points); the break room with free coffee, snacks, and a refrigerated vending machine that takes debit cards (+3 points); and the CEO's office which is presently clouded with cigar smoke (-5 points).

"We'll come back to him later," Andrea says. "But I'm sure you'll love Rupert. He's pretty easygoing as far as bosses go. Except for the office romance thing." She trails off and seems to get lost in her head. "There was an incident."

I'm intrigued but decide not to press her.

I am introduced to the art team first. Juan sits next to me, while Kendra and Thomas sit across from me. They all seem friendly, though there's a look in Kendra's eyes that says I don't know what I'm in for. I've seen that look many times from many people who underestimated me. My smile replies with a *wait and see, girl*.

I meet the copywriters, accounting department, and finally the account execs. There's a dude-bro named Adam who is super enthusiastic about everything. In a sixty-second conversation, he mentions the Mets, his cat, a new pizza place on the block, my red hair, and his brother's mobile juice bar business. I just smile and nod and endure the intense handshake as he welcomes me to the team.

Next is Markus. He's very chill and relaxed, not even dropping his feet from where they're propped up on his desk when we enter. After the standard introduction, he stands, says it'll be great having me on the team. I don't tell him that's a bold assumption but that he's probably right.

When we get to the last office Andrea taps on the frosted glass door and waits for a reply. Unlike the other offices, there is a desk outside of this door manned by an attractive blond guy typing as if his life depends on it. His skin is flawless and he wears a bit of stubble along his strong jaw. This guy looks like the Ken to Malibu Barbie.

"This is Ryan," Andrea says, waving a hand toward him. "How is she today?" He doesn't look up.

Ryan hits a button on his laptop, and the theme song of the Wicked Witch of the West plays for a few seconds. I laugh. Andrea does not.

"Brace yourself," she warns. "I saved the best account exec for last. And don't look her directly in the eye—you may turn to stone."

My eyes go wide and Ryan snorts as Andrea grins and pushes through the door. A woman stands at the wall of glass looking out over Houston Street with her back to us. Long, dark hair stops in a harsh line across the middle of her back. Her tailored shirt is tucked into her black pencil skirt with her feet wrapped in spike-heeled leather. She's on the phone using harsh tones and demanding words. I feel like I should apologize for something and sit in time-out.

"Fine, but no later than two p.m. today," she says, ending the call and turning to face us. "I apologize."

In the silent space, I hear a tiny gasp. For just the slightest moment, I see her eyes widen and her lips part. I blink and all of that is gone. Did I imagine a reaction?

This is the moment when every organ inside my body tries to evacuate to the outside. My chest constricts, and the room is a vacuum, sucking the air from my lungs until I'm dizzy. There's a shrill kind of squealing noise

coming from my throat, like when you pinch the end of a balloon while letting the air out. I stop and swallow it down.

My head spins, my mouth bobs open and closed, and I don't know what to do with my hands.

"You must be the new designer. Hello," she says, holding out a delicate but rigid hand toward me. "I'm Misa."

"No shit," I mumble before sucking in a breath and pressing my lips together.

I feel Andrea stiffen next to me. "This is Penelope Winters, the new hire for your team."

"But everyone calls me Penny," I say, waiting, hoping to see some spark of recognition in her beautiful face. We shared ice cream at the beach, braided each other's hair, wore matching pajamas, and I once peed on her jellyfish sting. Still, Misa looks me over and her expression gives nothing away. Suddenly my heart hardens into porcelain in my chest, a delicate and completely frail organ. With every second that ticks by a painful fissure forms there. *Crack.*

"I loathe nicknames," she says. I want to snap back that her real name is Misato and Misa is a nickname, but I stay quiet realizing there's more that I *don't* know about her than I *do* know about her. I finally place my hand in hers, and Misa's skin is soft and cold. I don't recognize it. *Crack.*

"I loathe those little ribbons that are sewn into your shirts sometimes to keep them on the hanger. I forget about them and end up thinking there's a bug in my shirt an hour after I put it on." I turn to find Andrea staring at me, wide-eyed and confused. "What? Are we not just randomly naming things we loathe? I thought that's what we were doing."

Misa stares as well, no visible emotion. What am I supposed to say when all I want to do is throw myself into her arms and tell her how much I've missed her and that I still have my best friend key chain and I know she must remember me, too?

"If you'll excuse me, I have a load of work to get to," Misa says, her expression finally changing to one I recognize—boredom. *Crack.*

Andrea nods and takes a step back, but I don't move. I'm frozen to the spot, staring, hoping, just needing something from her. There is so much distance between us, miles and miles of hurt and rejection.

I notice my reflection in the windows. There in that glass, my yellow

silhouette stands next to her black one. I twist my arm and extend my fingers out enough so that our reflections connect. But it brings no relief. *Crack.*

Misa turns her back to us, facing the windows again. “Welcome to the team, Penelope.”

It’s three steps to her office door. *Crack. Crack. Crack.* In the carpet-lined hall, beneath fluorescent lights and in front of my new boss, my heart shatters as I kiss two fingers and press them to her door.

Chapter Two

Eighth Grade

THE FIRST DAY of school was never exciting. I was surrounded by the same kids I'd known since kindergarten. For years now, I had seen the same faces day in and day out, with none of them really seeing me. Doodling in the margin of my spiral notebook, I looked up when a girl walked in. The heavy wooden door thumped closed behind her, giving her a nudge into the classroom. She turned and scowled at the door as if to threaten it.

She wore a sugary smile and glanced from the teacher to the class as she was introduced. We were instructed to welcome her, and so our collective voices said hello in unison. Misa Ito gave a wave and took a seat at the only empty desk—next to me. All eyes followed her, but she didn't notice or didn't care. I liked her already.

Misa's skin was Crayola Copper, while mine was fair with freckles thrown on like one of Mom's splatter paintings. She called me her little Jackson Pollock. It took me years to realize that it was a compliment.

Misa's hair was sleek and black, cut into a bob made of very straight lines. On anyone else it would look a little kid's style, but Misa wore it like a statement. Meanwhile, my red hair fell in wild curls and waves just like Granny's ivy plant that had outgrown its pot.

"Hi," I greeted.

She turned to me with eyes so dark her pupils were lost. "Hi."

"I'm Penelope, but everyone calls me Penny. I'm a lifer here."

"Misa, but I guess you knew that," she said with a shrug. "I love your hair."

"Whaaaaa," I questioned as I leaned away in disbelief. No one had ever told me that before.

At lunch, Misa sat next to me. We swapped pudding cups because she loved vanilla and I loved chocolate. The girls across from us stared like they were waiting for us to do a trick. I almost barked just to get a reaction.

Without even trying, Misa and I each pulled the foil lid from the cup, licked the pudding from it, folded it in half and placed it on the table. Synchronized dessert consumption. The girls giggled. We giggled. And I knew I had found a new friend.

By the time we headed out for afternoon break, Misa and I were dying to talk freely. I sat in the shade of a huge oak tree, crossing my legs in the cool grass. Misa plopped down next to me.

“So, where you from?” I asked.

She sighed. “We just moved here from the city. My parents were becoming tired of that life and wanted something ‘quieter.’” She held up her hands to use air quotes on the word quieter. “I told them there isn’t going to be anyone like me in New Jersey, but they said that’s a good thing.”

“Like you?”

“My mom is Black. My dad is Japanese. Which makes me pretty unique.”

“I think being unique is the coolest thing ever. How boring would the world be if we were all the same?” I asked. “Must have been fun living in the city.”

Misa nodded. “I really liked it there. It was...so *alive*. The whole city sparkled. Like you couldn’t help but become something special.”

I stared at her as spots of light trickled down through the leaves and moved over us. Her eyes held mine, and I knew Misa was something special—a future pop star or the girl who cured cancer.

“Cool,” I said, running my palms over the blades of grass.

“The city” was what everyone in New Jersey called Manhattan. For some it was a goal, bursting with possibilities. For others—like my mom—it was a soul-crushing dream killer that sent even the hardest triers back home where they belonged. Her words, not mine.

I plucked a dandelion from the grass and ran it over the back of my hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked, leaning closer to watch.

“Hold out your hand,” I said. Misa didn’t even think before doing it. There was an instant and natural trust between us. I ran the flower along her skin, and she grinned. “It tickles, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah, but, like, a medium tickle. Not enough to make you laugh out loud. Just enough to remind you of something happy.”

I hummed in agreement and blew on the weed, watching the fluffy white pieces float away. “Like burying yourself in sheets fresh out of the dryer.”

“Or a cat’s purr when it lies on your belly,” Misa said, running her hand across her stomach.

“Just like that,” I agreed.



Present

SITTING ON THE lime-green sofa in the main room of our apartment, I bring my knees up and rest my chin on top. I pick at a hole in the knee of my unicorn pajama pants, sticking my finger through and twisting it to stretch the hole bigger. A large number sixteen from Pho King sits steaming on my coffee table. I pop open a ginger ale, take a huge swallow, and slam it down like that will do anything to quell the fiery mess happening internally.

Usually, this little apartment in Flatbush is my sanctuary, my happy place. But today, Ross’s shelves of random classics and autobiographies, the house plants by the windows, the white lights strung across the kitchen bring me no joy.

It’s a third-floor walk-up with the charm and quirks of any Brooklyn building over one hundred twenty years old. There are high ceilings and crown molding, doors and windows that stick because they’ve been painted over so many times. Our shared bathroom is tiny with just enough room to fit a sink, toilet, bathtub, and exactly one human.

The place was renovated about twenty years ago, but there’s a spot behind the refrigerator where you can see all the different layers of paint colors. The heat and condensation make the layers bubble and flake off in a pattern that follows the coils of the old fridge. We found this when one of my overnight guests dropped her glasses and then accidentally kicked them under the appliance. When we slid it out, we found the many colors of apartment 3B, along with a bug graveyard and my long-lost *USS Enterprise-D* bottle opener. Like the rings of a tree, those colors represent the life and longevity of this place. If this apartment could talk I imagine she’d have a thick Brooklyn accent and an attitude to match.

I hear the keys in the door and sigh in relief. I definitely can use some Ross right now. He’s my person, my rock, my pillar, my dearest friend. Ross’s heavy footsteps clomp down the hall, the door closes, and I hear him

drop his bag in the closet. He shuffles past the kitchen and kicks off his shoes, then unpacks his dinner of street falafel and plops down onto the sofa next to me.

“Fucking Q train can suck my dick,” he says.

“Technically, you don’t have one yet,” I point out.

“You know I’ve got plenty in the nightstand and a surgery savings account. That’s close enough,” he says, gesturing to his crotch.

“Touché.”

Ross transferred to my high school our sophomore year. Back then Ross was the toughest looking butch I’d ever laid eyes on. He wore ripped Levi’s and white T-shirts like an old greaser from the 1950s. I knew we just had to be friends.

My mouth got me in trouble more often than not, and Ross was always there to protect me. The best part about him was that he never got violent with anyone. Ross could charm the contour off of a Kardashian and talk his way out of anything.

He was smart and universally liked by everyone except the Mariannes (our *Easy A* inspired term for homophobes and bigots). When he decided to transition, it just made sense. He was finally owning his truth and getting comfortable in his skin. Unfortunately, not everyone was on board with this change. Almost overnight I went from being the protected to the protector. And I *did* get violent. Do not fuck with my people.

“I’m supposed to be working my shift at Oasis Center right now, but I had Rachel cover it because I just can’t people right now.”

“Peopling *is* difficult,” Ross agrees, running a hand through his dark brown hair before scratching the back of his neck.

He sees my pho and sucks air through his teeth. “Damn,” he says, pushing my hair from my face. “You’ve initialized ‘Pho Emergencies Only’ protocol. What happened?”

I shake my head. “I’m not ready yet. Eat your dinner.” He nods but doesn’t move. We’ve been through this many times, and Ross knows I won’t hold out long. There’s a few seconds of silence until the needle slides over to the next song on my Joni Mitchell album. “So, do you remember me telling you about Misa?”

“There it is,” Ross says, turning sideways on the sofa to face me. “Your first girl crush and bestie that moved away? Yes.”

I turn to him, now laying my cheek on my bent knees. “I saw her today.”

“That’s good, right? Was it, like, the best bestie reunion ever?” he says with a flourish. I frown. “Of course it wasn’t, or we wouldn’t be here in your emotional-support pajamas.”

“She pretended not to remember me.” I blow out a breath and lean back into the soft sofa cushions, dropping my feet onto the floor.

“Ouch,” Ross says. “Guess that friendship sunk.” He pauses for a beat. “Get it?”

I roll my eyes. “I mean, maybe our time together didn’t mean as much to her as it did to me. I get that we may not have experienced the same revelations. Hell, not many kids realize they’re a lesbian before they even know what a lesbian is. But our friendship was *real*. And I know that it was important to her—that *I* was important to her.”

Ross nudges my thigh with his foot. “I’m sure there’s a reason, Pen. If we’re being real, you’d be really hard to forget at any age.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. Between the red hair, the chaos that surrounds me, and a mouth that doesn’t know when to quit, I’m nearly unforgettable.

“And the worst part is, I casually asked around the office and everyone is either scared of her or can’t stand her. She’s, like, some kind of uptight ice queen. And not like Elsa singing songs and building dope ice castles. Like you could probably freeze ice on her ass.”

Ross unwraps his falafel and takes a bite. “That would be a killer party trick. Why is it so fucking hot in here?” He waves a napkin in front of his face before dabbing it along his forehead.

“Because it’s summer and Velma is on her last leg.” Ross glances at the little AC unit in the far left window. She’s got giant googly eyes that one of Ross’s ex-girlfriends stuck on during a Halloween party in the apartment. From there, it spiraled into oversized glasses from the party store and a maroon skirt attached around the bottom. Someone yelled “Jinkies!” when they first saw her, and the name was born.

“I hate to replace her,” Ross says. “She’s like a third roommate.”

I nod. “Also it’s, what? Day four since your hormone dose? You’re at max level for the three *Hs*.”

Ross uses the napkin to wipe sweat from his brow. “Truth. Hot, hungry, and horny. This is my fifth meal today. Anyway, what’s up with Misa? Is *she* hot? You still want to hit that?”

I groan. “You should see how beautiful this woman is. Flawless. And giving off these ‘don’t fuck with me’ dominatrix vibes that made me want to drop to my knees and submit. And you know I’m not into that shit.”

“Not from personal experience,” Ross says with a mouthful of food.

“Oh, shut up. There was that one time at Josh Winchester’s party our senior year.”

“We did not sleep together,” Ross argues.

“I know you’re all about technicalities, but we did some naughty stuff that night.”

“I remember. It almost ruined our friendship.”

We both stare across the room at the framed photo of us together in our caps and gowns. Memories of that night and every bad decision we made play through my head. I give him a nostalgic smile and nod. “We were so close, we just had to make sure there wasn’t more to our relationship. It was like a scientific experiment.”

“A naked, awkward scientific experiment that somehow ended up with you on the floor and me having a black eye,” he says with a shake of his head.

“So glad we got past that. I think it made us stronger. Where would I be without you?”

Ross shoves another bite in, talking around his food. “Probably still traveling the world with a backpack and a smile, you fucking hippy.”

I laugh for the first time since seeing Misa today. It feels light and healing. My toes curl into the thick loop rug beneath my feet and flex again. My coral-painted toenails contrast Ross’s purple ones. It sends me back to Misa again. Her dad never let her paint her nails in junior high. Said it sent the wrong message.

“I just can’t wrap my head around that person in the office today and the girl I knew. Like, how does that even happen?”

“People change,” Ross says. “Believe me, I know. I’m sure you’ve changed, too, right?”

I pull my bowl of pho into my lap, cradling it. The heat warms my palms, and I focus on the burning sensation just long enough to weigh Ross’s question. Have I changed?

“If I say no, does that make me an immature, emotionally stunted woman with no potential for growth?”

“Not necessarily. But it does explain your obsession with buying cereal with toys in the box.”

“Collector’s items,” I argue.

“Garbage,” Ross counters.

“Anyway.” I slurp some noodles into my mouth and swallow down a spoonful of spicy broth. “Why is this so good? Seriously, there is no American food with the healing power of pho. Name one. I dare you. See, you can’t.”

“Not with you rambling on like that,” he says. “Let me think.” Ross chews and stares up at the ceiling. “I mean, chicken noodle soup would be the obvious equivalent here.”

“Not even close.” I slurp. He thinks. Joni Mitchell sings on.

“Oh! Mac and cheese. That shit makes everything better.”

I shrug. “I’ll give you a close but not equivalent. So, what do I do about Misa?”

“Depends on what you want to happen. You could go on with your day-to-day and pretend like you don’t remember her, either. Focus on work. Treat her like any other coworker.”

I imagine a scenario where I work beside her every day, living the lie, hiding our connected past. Not just any past, a past that was special and life-changing for me. A story that would be optioned for some kind of queer-inclusive Hallmark Channel movie.

I can’t envision any scenario of keeping up that charade that doesn’t end in me losing my shit—and my job—when I just call her out in front of the entire office. Because let’s face it, I love an audience.

I frown and set my bowl aside. “Or?”

“Or you corner her fine ass in the copy room and remind her who you are.”



I LEAVE FOR work twenty minutes early on my second day and somehow still end up in the elevator with Chad. He gives an enthusiastic wave when he sees me.

“Good morning,” I say in the crowded elevator. Chad nods and presses the button for twenty-eight. When the space has emptied out a bit, he moves closer to me. I fold my arms across my chest—a reflex and signal that you’re in my space, bro.

“How was your first day?” he asks.

“Good. Fine. Yours?”

“It was great. I think I’m going to like it here.”

“Yep,” I agree, playing with a loose string hanging from my bag. While I’m comfortable in silence, I feel the tension radiating off of him. I can almost see his brain working overtime to make conversation while my eyes plead with him to just...don’t.

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. We exit together, and when we part ways at the front desk he tells me to have a nice day. Rena, the receptionist with the Finger of Authority, actually grins. I assume she’s assuming too much.

Since I’m early, I don’t find anyone in the art department yet, and that’s fine with me. I set my bag down at my desk and wander over to the wall of windows that looks out over Houston Street. From up here, New York City life looks crowded and hectic. People, like ants fleeing a disturbed hill, move about in every direction at the fastest and most determined pace. In the quiet of this room, I feel removed from it all.

I lean forward and rest my forehead against the glass. I wonder if any of those people know they’re only racing against themselves, that life is not a competition. Moving across this globe, seeing the things I’ve seen, this is the biggest lesson I’ve learned.

Even in the simplest existence and smallest footprint, life is only a challenge to be a better you than you were yesterday. That is the true place growth comes from—within. It’s not getting that promotion or winning the account. Though those things come naturally when you focus on being a worthwhile piece of the human puzzle.

A yawn escapes my mouth, fogging up the glass and disappearing just as quickly. I blink a few times and decide I need coffee. When I straighten up, I find a big blotchy mark on the clean glass from my forehead. My first thought is maybe I overdid it on the moisturizer this morning. My second thought is I need to get this cleaned.

I search the immediate area for something to wipe it off but can’t find

anything. I don't want to leave and come back, in case someone comes in and sees it. They'll think *Who is this greasy-ass person leaving face prints on the glass?* or maybe that the cleaning staff is off their game. I want neither of those things linked to me.

Scanning the area, I see I'm still alone. So I grab the hem of my maxi dress and raise it to the glass. I rub the area, which only smears it at first. But then I flip the material over, rub vigorously again, and the glass comes clean.

With my dress still balled in my fist, I raise my arms in celebration. When I drop them, my skirt swings around my ankles and settles. The first thing I see is a man standing on the same floor in the building across the street. He wears a satisfied grin like he's just finished watching porn. And in a way, he has. But more like that softcore stuff that Cinemax used to show. He continues to stare and smile. I just shrug, take a bow, and scurry away laughing.

While traveling, I found panties to be the biggest annoyance. Baths and showers weren't always available on a daily basis, and I just felt gross if I wore them for more than a day. So, eventually, I ditched them altogether. Much less to wash, much less to pack. Returning home to this so-called normal life didn't seem like a reason to start enduring underwear again, so I just didn't. And now, I've made some random stranger's day a bit brighter. I hope he pays it forward. In a good way, not in a random-dick-pic way.

Entering the break room, I find Andrea, Chad, and Misa there. My pulse spikes at the sight of her, and I know now is not the time to hash this out. She's already on the phone, demanding something from someone who I imagine is bending to her will. Andrea greets me with a hello as Chad pours his coffee. Misa exits the room without a glance in my direction.

When Chad sees me, he raises the coffeepot in question. I hold out the Jean-Luc Picard mug that I brought from home as he fills me up.

"Thanks," I say before taking a cautious sip.

Chad's eyebrows lift high. "No sugar or cream? You're hardcore."

"You have no idea," I say, exiting the room and taking the long way around to my desk. Being a world wanderer means you take coffee whenever and however you can get it. In most countries, it was usually this dark, bitter drink that made you feel a little jumpy and falsely invincible. I got used to it, and now the thought of sugar or cream in my coffee makes me shudder. It's

so strange how something new and shocking can become your norm when you're not paying attention. I suppose that's how it is when people meet me.

When I pass Misa's office, I can barely make out the shape of her body pacing back and forth behind the glass. Ryan is not at his desk. Her voice raises, and I physically cringe away from her office.

"Her bark is worse than her bite," Andrea says from behind me. I spin to find her toting her own coffee. I hadn't even realized I'd stopped walking.

"Oh, I'm not scared of her," I say, forcing my slingback peep-toe cork wedge espadrilles to move.

"Good," Andrea says. "You're part of her team, so you two will be working together often." We reach my desk and I turn my computer on. "But if she ever gets to be too much, just let me know. I can step in as a Misa buffer when needed."

"Okay, thanks."

"You'll sit with Barb this morning. Today she'll go over our workflow system, where files are stored, and all that. After lunch, we have our weekly project meeting. Then you'll meet directly with Misa and Ryan to go over any pending projects that haven't already been reassigned."

My insides buzz at the thought of sitting with her, having to talk shop with her, but I'm not sure if it's fear or excitement. Either way, lunch can't get here fast enough.

Time with Barb is interesting. She shows me everything she's supposed to all while simultaneously giving me extremely detailed gossip on everyone in the building. The old security guard who works nights and sleeps through his shifts used to be a dancer on Broadway. The talent firm on the sixth floor just endured a huge harassment scandal involving agents and models and a photographer or two. Barb says the whole floor smells like sex and latex. And Melinda in our very own accounting department is totally having an affair with her assistant who is half her age and half her IQ.

I ask about the workplace-relationship incident, and suddenly she is tight-lipped.

"Uh, we don't really talk about that. But let's just say that it did not end well for all parties involved. And none of them still work here."

Just as we're covering agency-wide color profiles across all platforms, she stops to mention that Henry "the caveman-looking copywriter" once wore platform shoes to work with his usual khakis and oxford shirt. They

were covered in silver sequins and had clear plastic heels. I make a mental note to meet Henry.

I eat my PB&J from my Ruth Bader Ginsburg lunchbox in the break room with a few strangers. Ross says I'm a forever child trapped in a grown woman's body, but I say fuck that. I am me. And whatever that entails is purely Penny and unapologetic. Being a designer allows me to get away with a lot more than the average person does anyway. "She's an artist," people say. "She's eccentric." Well, I'm just fucking weird, but I don't hide it. Instead, I like to parade it around to engage people and get them talking—even if it's about me.



AFTER LUNCH, BARB and I walk into the conference room, meeting up with the other designers, plus Andrea and the head of sales. Each designer is updated on existing projects and new ones coming their way. I take furious notes since I'm the newbie and know I'll have to step in on someone else's work halfway through a project.

When we are dismissed, I make my way to Misa's office. For once it is silent. I knock on the glass. The sound is so loud it seems to echo through my chest and match my thundering pulse.

"Enter," she calls out. Enter? Besides inbred royalty from Shakespearian tales, who says that? I roll my eyes, paste on a smile, and push through the door.

I find her sitting at her desk, her pretty face lit silver blue from the computer. Her eyes don't leave the screen.

"You're early. You can have a seat at the table. We'll get started as soon as Ryan gets here."

I stare again, at a face that I see but don't recognize. When she doesn't look up, I take a seat at the table with my notebook and glance around her pristine office. There's not much in the way of decor. But I do spot a framed photo of her and a handsome man on the bookcase behind her desk. My eyes are glued to that photo until Misa clears her throat. I move my gaze to finally find her looking back. Her expression is hard to read, intense.

Misa slides the end of an expensive pen back and forth across her bottom lip while watching me. Her pink tongue sweeps out after it, and heat engulfs my body. I raise one eyebrow in question, but she doesn't back down. This is full-on, unapologetic eye fucking. Which, of all the options, is not a *bad* kind of sex. There's no chance of STDs and no cleanup. Just dirty thoughts rolling around while you dare the other person to blink. It's also an interesting development considering the couple's photo on her shelf and the ring on her hand.

Just when I'm sizing up the sturdiness of her desk and whether it could hold both of us, we are interrupted.

"Sorry I'm late. The copywriters were still working on the Rivet file," Ryan says, pushing through the door in a whirlwind and taking a seat at the small table. His dirty-blond hair falls over one eye as he lays colored file folders across the space, making sure each is perfectly lined up and perpendicular to the edge of the table. Ryan smooths down his pale blue button-up and gives me a nod. "Okay, we're ready, Miss Ito."

I keep my eyes on my notebook as Misa makes her way to the table. She has a seat across from me and slides the purple folder closer. She stops and sniffs the air, her eyes sliding over to Ryan.

"What is that smell?" she asks.

Ryan slaps a hand over his mouth before pulling it away, huffing into his palm and smelling it. "What in the vampire repellent?" he asks no one. "I made this fabulous Thai soy garlic shrimp—heavy on the garlic—with roasted cauliflower and herbed quinoa last night. Fancy AF. I had leftovers for lunch."

Misa tries not to roll her eyes and flips open the folder. She reads over the top page and closes it. "This has been reassigned to Andrea since Daphne quit," she says to Ryan. He seems flustered as she tosses it in his direction. Ryan scribbles something on a note and sticks it on top.

Daphne. According to Barb, Daphne could no longer endure working with Misa. The poor girl was frazzled and overwhelmed. And every time she was near Misa, she was "like a widdle bunny wabbit caught in a twap." I send some positive energy into the universe for Daphne, knowing she still needs it. Not everyone was built to handle a woman like Misa. But I'm not everyone.

For thirty minutes I sit across from this woman, this girl I used to know, as she spouts off directions for this or font changes for that. She's clinical and

not concerned with niceties. Once, when our hands touch during a folder handoff, she jerks her fingers away and frowns. With every interaction, my hurt and sadness change shape, transforming into something closer to anger and a raging desire to understand what kind of game she's playing here.

It's easy to understand why people in the office dislike her so much. She is a shell of a human, going through the motions, void of any emotion or camaraderie. Somehow, in the last fourteen years, she's lost sight of what we once considered priorities.

Misa and Penny's Rules #1: Be kind.

At first, they were crudely scratched into the back of my Environmental Science notebook. But eventually, Misa typed them up and printed them on yellow cardstock at her father's office. We each had a copy decorated with stickers and officially signed at the bottom.

When our meeting is finished, I'm a little overwhelmed with the amount of work I have to catch up on and the time she expects me to do it. But I'll push myself to get it done. Maybe the only way to get access to Misa is to earn her respect. Maybe then I'll be allowed conversation or to at least ask enough questions to jar her memory.

"I'll update the spreadsheet right away," Ryan says. He gathers the folders and hands them over before blowing his hair from his face. "Good luck," he says. "If you have any questions, just come to me." He makes a quick exit, and I'm left alone with Misa.

I stack everything together on the table and clip my pen to the top of a folder. I pretend that I'm not lingering, that I'm not waiting for an *ah-ha* moment. When I look over, Misa is already seated at her desk again, like the girl who showed her how to put on eyeliner isn't standing here fourteen years later with a head full of questions and a mouthful of words.

There is a stillness in the air. A tense kind of quiet that binds my feet to the floor and my eyes to her face. Her white wrap dress is a beautiful contrast to the rich tones of her skin, the V-neck a perfect complement to her tiny waist. I'm drawn to the long lines of her exposed arms and the way her collarbone dips in like a pocket to hold kisses. For a second, I wonder what her skin tastes like in that exact spot.

But more than that, I want to ask her where she's been and what her life was like after we were separated. I want to know if she ever loved me like I loved her. I want to know if she has a coming-out story or if she's living the

straight life. I want to know where she went to college and who she looks up to. I want to know what turned her into this hard-ass sitting in front of me and what happened to the shy, sweet girl I knew at fourteen.

“Misa,” I say, my voice barely a whisper. She doesn’t look up, but her fingers freeze, hovering over the home row.

Her shoulders rise toward her ears just slightly. She rolls her lips inside her mouth, and they reemerge wet and shiny, catching the afternoon sunlight.

“Yes?” she asks.

“Misa,” I repeat, turning in my chair and tapping my nails on the tabletop. This is a standoff, and she’s waiting for me to give up. Apparently her memory fails her.

With an audible sigh, her dark eyes slide to mine, and just like that the hard lines of her face soften into someone I recognize.

“Penny,” she says with a hefty exhale. The corner of her mouth lifts slightly. My heart stops.

I deflate into my chair, relief flooding my veins like ice water. “You *do* remember me.”

Misa full on grins now, and it’s just enough to remind me of the young girl I once knew, once loved.

“Of course I remember you. You’re pretty impossible to forget,” she says, folding her hands together on top of the glass desk. Her lips part as if she’s going to say more, but then they press together and I know she’s holding back. I just don’t know why.

I stand and move toward her. “Then why did you pretend not to?”

She looks down at her hands and shakes her head. “It’s complicated, Penny. I’m not the person you knew anymore. That girl, well she dissolved into nothing but memories, and this is what took her place. It was necessary.” Misa’s eyes drift to the window, where she stares out at the sky.

“Necessary?” I ask. “I don’t understand. Were you in a cult?”

She laughs but keeps her eyes on the window. “No.”

I stand before her desk, my eyes drifting to the photo of her with the handsome man. Their smiles look forced, but still, they’re an extremely attractive couple. Misa turns to see what I’m looking at. Her shoulders straighten, and she returns her attention to her computer screen.

“Like I said, it’s complicated. That’s all for today, Penelope. You have more than enough to keep you busy,” she says, resuming the *tap, tap, tap* on

her keyboard.

I bite my bottom lip to keep from saying any more and gather my things at the table. I don't understand how she is this double-sided coin, being harsh with everyone else and showing glimpses of her softer side to me. Everything moves in slow motion as my brain tries to process what any of this means.

When I finally turn to go, I notice the photo of her and the man has been turned around so it's no longer visible. Walking into the hall, I take a deep, cleansing breath and wonder what the hell that means.

Chapter Three

Ninth Grade

NINTH GRADE TURNED out to be the best grade. Misa and I had become inseparable. We teamed up to play tetherball and challenge the other girls in our grade. We always won because my dad had built us one at home to practice on. I showed her how to make flower chains, and we wore them on our heads like crowns until a couple of bees chased us across the yard. We swapped diaries and left notes for each other. We had sleepovers—always at my house because her dad was super strict—where we talked about Edward and Bella from *Twilight*, each pretending that we wanted to marry a handsome vampire and not Anna Kendrick.

Misa taught me her favorite things about Japanese culture. The only time I stayed at her house was for their *Bonenkai* party—the Japanese version of a New Year’s Eve bash. We ate lots of food before setting off fireworks in the street.

That night, I removed my favorite charm bracelet and put it on her wrist. Misa tried to decline, saying she could never take my favorite jewelry, but I insisted. As much as I loved that bracelet, I mostly loved the way something of mine looked on her.

The next morning Misa’s dad woke us while the sky was still dark. He took us outside and up onto the roof to watch the *hatsuhi* sunrise. *The first sun.*

The way the light came over the trees that morning was magic. We sat absolutely still and absolutely silent until the golden rays painted our faces. I was entranced by the glow of Misa’s skin. And when she reached for my hand, curling her fingers through mine, I felt like I could fly.

“Life is so good,” I said. She just smiled and squeezed my fingers tighter.

We fell into a friendship so easily, it was like suddenly waking up in a world attached to your soul mate. And we fell apart just the same way. Because at fourteen you have no control over your life. You don’t get to call

the shots. I got to choose where to hide my journal or which clothes to wear. Neither of us got to choose to lose a best friend.

Misa was a pink plastic piece wedged into a car in the board game *Life* and driven away while I stayed at *Start*. She was my first love, the girl I would judge every other love by, but I didn't know that until she was gone.



Present

TUCKED INTO OUR favorite booth in our favorite coffee-and-cocktail bar in Brooklyn, I explain the Misa-Penny Scandal of Create Slate to my friends. After listening intensely they sip their drinks and take guesses like it's some kind of game show.

"Maybe she had some kind of head injury and it was just enough trauma to erase what you guys meant to each other," Evan says.

"This is from a medical professional," I reply with a huff.

"Hey, maybe she told everyone some elaborate lie about her childhood and she's worried you'll destroy her cover," Andy pipes in.

"Her cover for what?" I ask.

He shrugs and snags his shirt collar, tugging it away from his neck. "I don't know. For being an FBI informant on small-business tax evasion?"

I snort.

"*Maybe* she's been scared straight and she doesn't want you to out her," Rachel, Ross's girlfriend, says.

"We don't even know if she's queer. It wasn't even like that when we were kids," I argue. "I certainly didn't know I was queer."

"That doesn't mean Misa didn't have the same epiphany that you did," Rachel says, combing her fingers through the blue streak in her otherwise black hair. Her light brown skin is flawless and such a contrast to the green eyes that seem to glow in the light of Edison bulbs. She grew up in Spanish Harlem with her family, but coming out didn't go so well. As she puts it, "Strong Puerto Rican Catholicism has no room for the gays." I know she still checks in with them from time to time, but I also know she misses being close to her brother and sister. I first met Rachel at the Oasis Center, where

we were both volunteering. I thought she was sweet and feisty. When Ross met her, I swear he fell right then and there.

Every time I see Rachel, there's something new with her hair—color, extensions, one side shaved, braids, curls. It's become my own personal game trying to predict what I'll find every time I see her. I guess one of the perks of being in cosmetology school is endless options and plenty of volunteers to work on you. My favorite so far has been slick, straight lavender hair. With those eyes, it made her look like a fairy.

“Good point, babe,” Ross says, kissing her shoulder.

“*Gracias, chacho.*” Rachel grins and leans into him. It makes me happy to see Ross happy. He's faced so many struggles, and my biggest regret is that I wasn't here for a lot of it. I was off traveling, discovering the world while he was here. We were both lost, but in different ways.

“You guys are so cute,” Evan says from across the booth, downing the last of her fruity cocktail. Evan works with Ross, both of them nurses. She's a sweet Midwest transplant who followed a boy to the big city only to get dumped a month after getting here. Though everything eventually worked out—because tonight she's brought along her husband to endure our shenanigans. Andy's a truly good guy. I've met all kinds of people in my travels and have honed my character judgment to perfection. I can tell he's the real damn deal. Andy is tall and lean with dark hair and the kind of blue eyes that seem to shine in a dark room. He's got a crooked smile and a nervous habit of pulling at his shirt collar. Andy loves to act offended or embarrassed by half the things we say, but he secretly loves being a part of our group. I bet he repeats our stories around the coffeepot at work just to feel cool.

“Ross and Rachel,” Andy says, shaking his head. “I still can't get over the *Friends* reference here.”

“Yeah, except all those people were whiter than a grain of rice in a glass of milk in a snowstorm,” Rachel says.

We all give her a strange look while Andy chuckles.

“What? My crazy drunk *tío* always said that,” she says with a wink.

“Just try to refrain from ‘we were on a break’ jokes,” Ross says. “I swear I can't hear another one this week.”

Andy opens his mouth, but Evan slaps her fingers across it. “This includes any and all mentions of the cute girl Chloe who works at the copy

store, too, babe.” She drops her hand, and he deflates.

“Hello?” I say, grabbing the overhead lamp and swinging it toward my face. “Spotlight on me. Let’s get back to this Misa situation.”

Evan laughs and pats my shoulder. “There may not even be a situation, Penny. Maybe the woman just wants to leave her past in the past.”

I groan and pull the band off my wrist and twist my red curls into a messy knot on top of my head. “You guys just don’t get it. You weren’t there. We were important to each other.”

“Fourteen years ago,” Ross points out. I glare. He grins. “I love you, but this is killing my buzz.”

I finish off my fourth drink and slap both hands on the tabletop. “Well, excuse me and my existential dilemma. Please, let’s get back to important things like the bacteria level in the Hudson River and which direction Beyoncé parts her hair this week.”

“Down the center,” Evan says. Everyone turns to stare. “What? Don’t come at the BeyHive.”

“For the record,” Andy says, “I didn’t know I married into that,” he finishes, pointing a finger at her.

I sigh and lean back into the booth, knowing that my dramatics have reached an intolerable level for the evening and it’s best to just sit and observe. I close my eyes and try not to think of Misa. I try not to think of impossible situations like she’s been kidnapped and replaced with a robot clone or some alien parasite has taken over her body, making her void of emotion. Or the worst possible scenario—she’s the same girl who held me for hours when my dog, Pinky, died and she just doesn’t care to know me anymore.

“I think we’ve lost Penny,” Rachel says. Behind closed lids the light goes from soft to dark several times, indicating that she’s waving her hand in front of my face.

“Let’s get you home, Pen.” Ross tugs on my elbow, and I nod.

I am leaning against the brick front of the building while Ross and Rachel say adorable things to each other and make out for a solid minute. When I’ve cleared my throat six times to remind them of my existence, they finally say their goodbyes.

“Bye, Rach!” I yell when she’s halfway down the block. “Rach. That’s a funny word. Rach. It doesn’t sound right.”

“Because it’s not a word,” Ross says, throwing an arm around my waist and pointing me toward home. The alcohol burns through my veins, and with each passing block I care less and less about where I am. I’ve got just the right amount of buzz to make me sleepy and make my legs jelly. Beads of sweat form around my hairline, and the taste of whiskey lingers on my tongue like a song that’s stuck in my head. I just want to lie down.

“I’m tired,” I whine.

“I know, Pen. Just one more block.”

I groan and take a few more steps before trying to sit on the hood of someone’s car. Ross pulls me up and drags me a few more steps before I sit on a stack of boxes on the sidewalk. Apparently the boxes are empty because my ass crashes right through, and now I’m folded in half, hands and feet sticking out of the top.

“Ross! Help!” I hear him laughing while I am stuck in this tube and too tipsy to do anything about it. “Keep laughing, asshole.” My voice is muffled by cardboard walls and the sound of defeat.

“I’m sorry,” he says, still chuckling. “I had to take a picture first, or no one would have believed me. Like, how does that even happen?”

“I’m sorry, universe,” I say, folding my hands together in prayer between my pink Converse. “I’m sorry for my negative energy and for posting that meme making fun of women who support vaginal rejuvenation. Okay, I’m not really sorry for that at all. I’ll do better tomorrow. I’ll work an extra shift at the Center. Please get me out, Ross. It smells like cat litter and New Jersey in here.”

Ross lays the stacked boxes—with me inside—down on the sidewalk and tells me to wiggle out of the back. He helps me to my feet again and throws his arm around my shoulders. “The universe is not punishing you for anything, Penny. It’s your usual chaos catching up with you. But just in case, I won’t let go again.”

Every few steps he starts laughing again. I’m guessing with the picture of me folded into boxes stuck in his head.

“Okay,” I say, slapping his chest. “Ha-ha. It’s so funny. LMSO.”

His feet stop moving, which means I stop, too. “What?”

“LMSO?”

“Laughing. My. Strap on. Off.”

Ross grins and shakes his head. “You’re so special, Pen.”

“That’s what my mama always told me.”

Ross tucks me into bed after forcing me to eat a sandwich and guzzle down two glasses of water. The sound of the neighborhood sings me to sleep. People walking the sidewalks in conversation, passing cars, a siren in the distance—all of it part of the ever-present song of Flatbush.

When I plug in my phone to charge, I knock over my blue-and-white earthenware plate from Greece and let out a sigh when it doesn’t break. My brain goes back to the month I spent on the Greek island of Santorini. I shared a room with a girl named Gia. We drank a lot of ouzo and swam in the Ionian Sea with waters so blue, it felt like diving into a painting. Some days we would climb the steps of Oia and knock on random strangers’ doors, making bets on whether they would invite us in for dinner. I always bet on yes, and I was usually right. Gia was lively like me but more grounded. She liked to flirt with and tease boys, but she only ever brought one back to our flat. She was beautiful and spoke very little English. And when she had too much to drink, she would flirt with me.

As sleep pulls me under, Gia drifts away and is replaced by Misa sneaking me into her room one night so we could study for a midterm test in Spanish. Instead of reading over notes or practicing our verbs, we laid on her bed and stared up at glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling. She told me about a boy in her English class who said he liked her. She said her father would hate him. Even then, before I recognized what it was, jealousy ate at me like acid burning through my flesh as she described his dark hair and brown eyes and how funny he was. But not as funny as me, she’d said.

We fell asleep that night curled around each other, surrounded by Spanish books and the awful ignorance of what the next day would bring.



I WAKE WITH a pounding headache, cottonmouth, and a small piece of cardboard in my hair. The daylight feels punishing, but I power through a shower and manage to brush my teeth without gagging. By the time I make it to work, I’m starting to feel human again. Of course, the two Gatorades and protein bar I downed on the train ride over have made all the difference. On the downside, I’ve really got to pee.

Instead of searching out a bathroom in the lobby, I hop onto the crowded elevator and do the bouncing, Kegel-squeezing dance for ten floors and then shuffle from right foot to left foot for ten floors. The woman next to me gives me the side-eye and moves into the corner to put some distance between us.

“Sorry,” I say with a grimace. “The doctor said the burning sensation would go away within twenty-four hours of starting treatment, but I’ve seen no relief.” I squeeze my thighs together so hard they could crush a walnut. She exits on her floor wearing a sour expression. I’m alone when I get to my floor, and it’s a good thing.

By the time I round the corner and hit the bathroom, I’m at a full sprint. I shove the door open and run into a stall, barely making it before my bladder explodes. Letting out a satisfied groan, I finish up my business, right my dress, and exit to find Misa standing at the sinks.

My footsteps falter just for a moment, but then I am next to her, soaping up and washing my hands for much longer than necessary. Glancing down, I realize that she’s doing the same thing. Our bodies are only inches apart and we’re both making excuses to stand here and say nothing. Only that’s not how I operate.

“Hello, Misa,” I say, watching our reflections as her eyes rise to meet mine.

“You know,” she says, turning off the water and grabbing two paper towels, “everyone else around here calls me Miss Ito.”

I dry my hands and turn to face her now. “Well, to be honest, that’s only what they call you to your face.” She frowns, her expression morphing into harsh lines.

Misa tosses her paper towel into the nearby garbage can and I do the same. Then it’s a standoff as we face each other. My eyes rake over the curve of her neck and the way her lipstick perfectly traces the shape of her mouth. I’m waiting for her to do something—anything. And I have no idea what she’s waiting on. She is stone-faced and still, while my insides churn.

“I’m not interested in childish nicknames from my coworkers,” she says with a wave of her hand. When Misa drops her hand to her side, her bracelet falls off and hits the floor between her feet.

I bend down to retrieve it, lose my balance, and fall forward. Catching myself with one hand on the bathroom floor—which will be immediately rewashed when this is done—I grab the delicate silver jewelry, distracted by

the tiny carved charms that dangle from it. My eyes trace over a Japanese symbol, a coin, and pieces I recognize from the charm bracelet I gave her years ago.

“Is this my old...” I try to stand, only something hits the back of my neck. I snap my head up and realize I am currently between Misa’s legs and under her skirt.

Her knees clamp down on my head. “What the hell are you doing?” she screeches. At least that’s what I think she says—it’s kind of hard to hear with her knees pressed against my ears.

My hands grab onto her thighs and I pull myself out from under her skirt. By the time I’m back to standing, she looks completely different than before. Her expression has softened, her bottom lip trapped between perfectly straight teeth. Misa’s chest rises and falls at a quick pace as if she’s gasping for air. And her left hand clutches the sink so hard that her knuckles pale.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t even know how that happened.” Just as an experiment, I drag my clean hand across the neckline of my dress, the bracelet dangling between my fingertips. Her gaze follows. “I have to say, I half expected to find barbed wire under there.”

The door swings open and someone from accounting barges in, disappearing into a stall.

Misa snaps out of her trance and holds out a hand. “My bracelet.”

I don’t move.

“Some of these charms look familiar,” I say. She looks down at her feet and back to my eyes. Her lips twitch as if she’s holding in a smile, and it saddens me. “Is this the charm bracelet I gave to you?” I ask.

She barely nods. “Took me two hours to find it last night. Please,” she whispers so desperately that I think she’ll burst if she doesn’t leave the room in the next thirty seconds.

I dangle the bracelet over her open palm and slowly lower it until our hands are touching. Her eyes dart down to where we’re connected as I slide my fingers over her palm until we’re apart. Her hand closes into a tight fist around the bracelet as she moves around me and pushes through the door.

Checking my reflection, I can’t help the grin that splits my face. Misa’s reaction to me, to my touch is telling. It sparks a bit of hope in my memories of an old friend and a woman hiding behind something. The only other

thought in my head is that's the first time I've ever been between a girl's legs and she's left unsatisfied.

Chapter Four

Eighth Grade

THE LAST DAY of middle school felt so special. Like we were leaving behind everything childlike and we'd all be adults at the end of the day. After unloading our stuff at my house, Misa and I sat in my backyard listening to "My Life Would Suck Without You" and belting out the lyrics.

"My life really would suck without you," I say while braiding a strand of hair.

Misa grinned. "Yeah, same."

I threw the braided hair over my shoulder. "What do you think high school is going to be like?"

"I don't think it'll be that different, but we'll be the youngest ones there," Misa said, lying down in the grass with her head on my thighs.

I pointed my face toward the sky and closed my eyes. The afternoon summer rays warmed my skin and made my lids glow red. "I love summer. No schoolwork. Just days at the shore and spending so much time outside."

Misa groaned. I tilted my head back down and looked at her. Misa's face shone as my eyes adjusted to the light. "My dad already has my summer planned out. I have assigned books to read, reports to write, and testing for advanced placement next month. He's even talking about sending me to a Japanese summer camp. Can you believe that's a thing?"

I shook my head and chuckled. "Don't worry. Your mom will keep him in check. We're going to have fun this summer if it kills us."

Her full lips pulled up high on one side like they often did around me.

"You've got pretty eyes. So many different colors," Misa said with a grin. "Blues, greens, even gold."

I returned her grin. I had never met someone who gave compliments so freely. My dad always said boys would say nice things but only because they wanted something in return. Was the same true for girls?

“Thanks. My mom is from California. She says I hold the entire Pacific Coast sunset in my eyes. She even says that she can see the gray storm clouds roll in when I lose my temper. One day I’ll go to California to see for myself.”

“How often do you lose your temper?” Misa asked. “I’ve only seen it once or twice.”

“More often than I should, I guess. Dad says it’s the curse of the red hair.” I tugged on a loose tendril. “Mom says I’m just passionate. Probably because she’s a redhead, too.”

“My mom says I’m disciplined. But it doesn’t feel like a compliment, you know?” Misa pulled a handful of grass from the ground and tossed it in the air. We both watched the blades flutter down and disappear into the green.

There was the sound of traffic from the street and the kids playing next door, but all I heard was the tune Misa hummed—a soft little melody that I didn’t recognize. “So, I never asked—where’d your folks get the name Misa?”

“My dad got to name me, and he picked Misato. It means *beautiful knowledge* in Japanese. His culture is very important to him.”

“That’s cool that it actually has meaning, though. My name means my mother watched too many soap operas.” Misa tilted her head, thin brows pointed in and down toward her nose. “I’m named after a character from *Days of Our Lives*.”

“Oh. We don’t watch much television.”



Present

I SHOVE MY bag into a locker and print my name on the volunteer sign-in sheet before heading back into the house. The Oasis Center is buzzing with activity tonight. Making my way past the storeroom and staircase, I follow the sound of British accents into the television room.

Rav sits on an old corduroy beanbag chair in front of the TV. His attention doesn’t leave the screen even as I plop down next to him onto a floor cushion. I pull up my knees and wrap my arms around them.

“So, *Downton Abbey*, huh?” I ask.

He nods before turning to grin at me. “Don’t let the accents fool you. These people are conniving as fuck.”

I watch the screen for a few seconds and then bump his shoulder with mine. “Where are you staying these days?”

“At the shelter on Church Avenue.”

“Are you okay there? You need anything?” I ask.

“Nah. Jen hooked me up with a MetroCard earlier, that’s all I need, really. You should check on some of these other kids.”

“Rav,” I say, staring at his profile. He holds out his arms showing me the old scars on the inside of his forearms.

“I’m clean, Penny,” he says, finally turning to look at me. There’s a purple bruise around his left eye. It fades into varying shades of blue and green before disappearing into his cheek.

“What happened to your eye?” I ask, leaning closer to take a better look.

Rav shrugs and turns back to his show. “Just some guy at the shelter. I took care of it.”

“Like he’s buried in some old lady’s flower garden in Park Slope?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “No, you crazy ginger! Like his face looks a lot worse than mine and he won’t be fucking with me anymore.”

“Okay,” I answer, dragging out the word.

Another few beats of silence with his eyes trained on the television. “You know when I came home after traveling the world for years, this place helped ground me. It gave me something to be passionate about right outside my front door. I didn’t need to travel for adventure, this place became my best adventure. It kind of saved me. It can do that for you, too, if you let it.”

“Who says I need saving?”

I hold my hands up in surrender. “Not me. I’m just saying there are resources here—besides *Downton Abbey*—that really get you back on your feet and hashtag living your best life.”

Rav gives me a side glance. “I know, Penny. I’m okay. I promise. Now go. You’re making me miss my show.”

I pat him on the head and make my way around the house, checking in with each volunteer to make sure they have what they need and are where they are supposed to be. Most of the kids recognize me by now and offer greetings as I pass by. I try to learn each of them, but names have never been my strong suit. Plus, there are so many new faces it’s hard to keep up.

When I get to the director's office, I knock before strolling in. "Jen!"

"Hey, Penny," she says. "Good to see you. Come in. I'm stuck under a pile of paperwork right now, but a break would be nice."

"Good," I say, taking a seat in one of the chairs in front of her desk. "Anything exciting or new I should know about?"

"Actually," she says, leaning back in her chair and lacing her fingers behind her head, "we had a new volunteer sign up today thanks to one of your Q train speeches."

"Really?" I ask, perking up. "I knew I'd wear them down eventually."

Jen laughs and leans forward, dropping her hands to a stack of papers on the desk. "His name is Charlie. Seems like a good guy. I already started his paperwork and background check."

I smile, pride radiating through my chest. "Getting just one person to come in and volunteer is a win, you know? I mean, do you know how frustrating it is to work the queers of New York? I'm sure you do. But getting just one person to realize that they can make a difference? Well, it feels amazing. Our community has this stereotype of being so self-centered and vain. But we have great people with life experiences coming out the wazoo. Experiences that would give these kids wisdom and confidence. Now I just have to convince the other thousands of queers that mentoring our youth is saving and changing lives. No big deal."

Jen smirks. "Hey, if anyone can find a wazoo, it's you."



I'M CROWDED INTO the conference room, stuck between Chad and a woman who reeks of liquor at nine o'clock in the morning. Not like she's been drinking it, but like it's oozing from her pores in a cloud of toxic fumes. We lean against the wall of windows and wait as the CEO makes his way to the front of the room. Andrea and the rest of my team are seated at the large table, but I got here late, so I'm being punished between the drunk and the guy most likely to iron his underwear.

"Good morning," Rupert Singer, our CEO, says. His black hair is slicked back and tucked behind his ears. He wears the standard young CEO starter kit: a faded vintage hairband T-shirt tucked into dark jeans, a suit jacket, and

expensive shoes. To top it all off, today he's donning rectangular thick-rimmed glasses. He's attractive in the way that most of the guys working down on Wall Street are. Like, he looks good, but he's probably really controlling and eats microgreen sandwiches on gluten-free bread.

We all mumble a greeting as he gives the room a smile. "We're going to start by welcoming our new hires for the month." He picks up a sheet of paper and reads it over. "We have Chad Ellzey in HR," Rupert says, sweeping his hand our way. Chad nods and gives a wave. Everyone claps. "And Penelope Winters in Design." More applause.

"Penny," I say.

Rupert smiles and nods. "Penny," he repeats.

When he moves his focus from us to monthly numbers, my mind drifts away. Rupert's voice becomes a mumbling distant sound as I close my eyes and drop my head back against the glass warmed by the morning summer sun.

Rupert mentions an account for a new restaurant named Tampico, and my thoughts land on the few days I spent in Tampico, Mexico. I was young and naive then. Got duped by some kid who ended up stealing my bag. I chased him for a few blocks before losing him in a crowded market. Thankfully, my wallet, phone, and passport were tucked into my bra—because when you have to pay twice as much for your bra just because it's larger than a C cup, that bitch gets double duty, otherwise known as "two pockets to the top."

A woman found me trying to catch my breath near her cart. She took pity and fed me tacos until I didn't care that my bag was gone.

They were—and still are—the best tacos I've ever had in my life.

"Tacos," I say with a desperate moan. My eyes snap open when I realize I've said this out loud. The entire room is silent and staring at me. I shrug. "Uh. I really like tacos."

There are three seconds of quiet before Rupert laughs, then the entire room.

"And that's the kind of enthusiasm we need on this account," Rupert says, still chuckling. I'm not even ashamed because...tacos.

Chad elbows me. "Smooth move, Ex-Lax," he says.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know we had a third-grade intern program. Welcome to Create Slate, lil buddy," I say.

My eyes find Misa in the crowd, and as soon as we connect, her tilted

smile falls away. I am doomsday, a magic eraser, the anti-smile where she's concerned. My brain tries to cement this woman with the girl I used to know. Images and memories of our past flicker, spark, and fire at each other, but nothing connects. A dead circuit. It infuriates me, but I focus my attention back on Rupert to make sure I don't miss anything.

"And last but not least, please send all your positive energy to Misa today. She's pitching to Chef Marco Delgado for a chance at rebranding. This would mean huge things for the agency."

He motions to Misa, and she nods. "No pressure," she says with a practiced smile. Everyone chuckles lightly, though I don't think it's meant to be funny. But who can tell with Miss Stone-Face Ito over there?

We are dismissed, and I make my way back to my desk. I've got a few revisions but nothing pressing. Checking my email, I'm interrupted when I feel someone's presence behind me. I turn to find Ryan smiling down at me. His grin is made of politeness and a bit of pity.

"So, this is your workspace?" he says, picking up my empty Jean Luc mug.

"It is."

Ryan leans on the edge of my desk and looks everything over. "You can tell a lot about a person from their workspace." He puts the mug down and taps my Judy Garland bobblehead.

"And what does my space say about me?" I ask.

"You're quirky, chaotic, a little messy," he says with a frown as he waves his perfectly manicured hand across my desk. "Are you an INTP?"

I scrunch my face up and shrug. "Are you an LMNOP?"

He rolls his eyes but grins. "It's a rare Myers-Briggs personality type."

"Oh. I don't know. Never really paid attention to stuff like that. I'm just me."

Ryan crosses his arms over his chest. "Definitely an INTP. Anyway, Miss Ito would like to see you in her office," he says.

As soon as I nod, Ryan disappears, off to do whatever the minions of Misa Ito are assigned to do. Steal candy from babies. Take the batteries out of remotes. Hide all the left shoes. I make my way to Misa's office and knock before pushing the door open.

"You beckoned," I say, feigning nonchalance and taking a seat in one of the chairs parked in front of her desk. My skirt hikes up on my thighs and

there is a lot of leg showing. Misa looks up from her computer, her gaze meeting my lap, then my eyes. She frowns. I lean forward, resting my elbows on the edge of her desk and my chin in my hand. “What exactly is it about me that makes you wear that frumpy-grumpy pout?”

She sits back in her chair, and below the thick glass of her desktop, I see her long legs uncross and cross again in the opposite direction. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, okay. Is that what we’re doing? So, what did you need? Want to report me to HR for our under-the-skirt debacle? Perhaps you’d like to pretend you don’t know me some more?”

Misa sighs and folds her hands together on top of her desk. But I see the tiniest crack in her facade when she looks me over. There’s a longing there, something she wants but won’t ask for.

“Penelope, I just wanted to prepare you for when I land this account. Things are going to get hectic very quickly. Chef Delgado is famous for working hard and fast.”

I sit up taller, scooting to the edge of my seat. “That’s a lot of confidence you have there. What if you *don’t* get the account?”

Her dark eyes meet mine and knock me back into my chair. “I will.”

Misa’s confidence doesn’t feel bold or unfounded. It feels as though she can will things into being just by declaring them so—a definite one-eighty from the timid girl I knew. I hold my hands up in surrender. “Okay. Fine. I will make sure my schedule is clear.”

She stands and walks around her desk, sitting on the edge of it right in front of me. The space is tight, and our legs are almost touching. Her eyes stay on mine, even when I adjust my position so that I expose more thigh than is appropriate for corporate settings.

“I can’t tell you how important this is, Penny,” she says.

“Oh,” I say. “I’m Penny again. What’s with the back and forth, Misa?”

She ignores me. “This is big.”

“Bigger than our group project on ocean pollution in which you and I did all the work and everyone got an A?”

The corners of her mouth turn up. “Yes. And I’m afraid we’re going to be doing all the work this time, too. I’m going to need you all to myself.” I raise one eyebrow in question, and Misa leans forward just enough for me to

notice. “For the account,” she says, the smell of vanilla and jasmine wafting over me. Probably a fancy shampoo that costs more than my entire wardrobe.

“Of course,” I say, leaning into her. “For the account.”

Her hand reaches for me. Her fingers curl over mine in my lap. The soft, warm pads of her fingertips slide against my thigh, and I hold my breath.

“It’ll mean a great deal for your career, too, you know? Despite what you think, I am glad you’re here. It’s absolutely crazy that our paths crossed again, but I wouldn’t want to share this with anyone else.”

After all this time and all her mixed signals, what is that supposed to mean? I exhale and bring my other hand to cover hers. We are stacked palms and fingers joined together by so much more than flesh.

“It’ll be like old times. Misa and Penny versus the world.” I raise two fingers to my lips, press a kiss to them, and hold them in the air between us. It’s a test, a double dare.

Misa’s eyes widen and she lets out a tiny chuckle. She releases me, kisses her two fingers, and presses them to mine. Flashes of this same routine from the past scroll through my mind, and I grin.

“This isn’t world domination just yet, but we’ll get there,” she says. My mind works to connect this woman with the one everyone else sees. I don’t understand why she hides this away like kindness is something to be ashamed of.

My heart races at her nearness, and the heat from her body wafts over me like a blanket settling against my skin. I want to just push her down on that desk and kiss the hell out of her. The ring on her finger stops me, while the fire in her gaze urges me on. They are on opposing sides, fighting a war that I can’t see. I don’t take my chance here—because I can’t tell which side is winning.



“ON FRIDAYS RUPERT brings in free breakfast,” Andrea says as I set my bag down. I follow her to the break room to find an assortment of bagels and pre-made breakfast tacos lined up on the front table.

“Life is so good. I love breakfast,” I say. “I rarely get up early enough to eat it, but it’s probably my favorite food group.”

Andrea chuckles. “I’m not sure if it’s a food group. But if it’s free, it’s for me.”

“That is an amazing motto to live by.” I pick up a chorizo, egg, and cheese taco and fill my mug with coffee. “I’ll have to eat while I work. I’ve got to finish those Lancaster proofs before lunch, or Misa will have my ass.”

I freeze, my brain reeling from talking about her as if she’s just any demanding coworker. In reality, she could have my ass, my arms, my everything else if she would just go for it. I physically shake my head and thoughts of her rattle around before disappearing.

When I’m back at my desk, Andrea takes a seat in Juan’s chair next to me. “I’ve been meaning to catch up with you all week, and Barb says you’re doing great. How’s your first week been? Is Misa being hard on you?” she asks.

“Not at all,” I say, starting up my computer. “She gave me all the direction I needed at our meeting. I’m good. You guys really seem to be concerned about my well-being around her, though. I assure you I’m not as delicate as I look.” I lift one of my freshly threaded eyebrows in her direction. “I once wrangled a canteen from a tamarin monkey in Brazil. I got the water, but then he stole my hat. I like to think of it as more of an even trade than a win/lose situation.”

Andrea hits me with that familiar puzzled look that follows most of my stories. “O-kay,” she says before blowing her bangs from her eyes. “I know Misa is our top sales exec, but she’s...” She pauses, and I grin while she tries to keep it professional. “*Demanding* is the nicest word I can think of.”

“We’re all grown-ups, remember? You can call her a bitch if that’s what she is,” I say.

Andrea laughs but then slides her lips sideways. “I’m pretty sure the last designer quit solely because of working with Misa. I mean, the woman is amazing at her job and charming to clients, but her interoffice personal skills are lacking.” I shrug a shoulder to appear indifferent, but it hurts to hear. **Misa and Penny’s Rules #2: Be compassionate.** “So, yes. She’s a bitch.”

I lean back in my chair and sip my coffee, thinking about that label and how freely women use it against each other. But it’s a versatile word because sometimes we use it to lift each other up.

“Many females have climbed corporate ladders, become business owners, left toxic relationships, and won Olympic medals by being a badass bitch,” I

say.

Andrea nods. “I mean, I get it. Some women in the corporate world get labeled as a bitch because they feel like they *have* to be hard and tough to get ahead, to even be considered an equal,” she says before taking a huge bite from an everything bagel.

“You’re right. Like, there’s the woman who uses her softness to navigate the system and there’s the woman who uses her hardness. People call one a slut and one a bitch, but they are both just goal driven.”

Andrea stands and pats my shoulder. “That’s deep and I haven’t had enough coffee to process it yet. I’m not sure if Misa’s behavior is justified by goals or if she just enjoys treating people like servants. I’ll get back to you on this.”

“Hey,” I say, raising one hand in the air as if speaking the gospel. “I ain’t saying she’s a gold digger. She just tryna make her check bigger.”

Andrea laughs her way back to her office as I get to work. I keep myself focused the rest of the morning on finishing the proofs needed and sending them to Ryan to get to the printers for a presentation on Monday. By lunchtime, I am famished and need a break from the office. Ross says he’ll meet me for a bite since his job is only six blocks over. We agree to meet in the middle.

He works as a nurse in a small urgent care clinic. While I’ve seen crazy shit all over this planet, some of the stories from his work make most third-world countries seem like Disneyland. I consider myself a compassionate person, but I could never do what he does. Everyone in that profession is going to be rewarded big-time in the next life—whatever that may be.

I meander down the street, everything about me a contrast to the typical New Yorker. While I love the city and all the things that come with it, I won’t let it change who I am. I live in the slow lane, eyes up, greeting strangers, smiling at dogs, skimming the bark of a tree with my fingertips because they’re so uncommon here I don’t want to forget what that feels like. The city has so much to offer, but I want to remember everything else that is out there. Like ocean views and Southern food. Elephants and giraffes roaming freely. Rice farms and people who work the land to feed the rest of the planet.

Ross has a table at the front window when I join him at Thai Palace. His brown hair sticks up in every direction, but it’s a look he can pull off. We

order our food and each a Thai Milk Punch because it's Friday and day drinking is strongly encouraged.

"I'm so tired," Ross says, covering a yawn before running his hand over the stubble on his jaw and chin.

"Me, too," I agree. "I went to Oasis before work to drop off all those donations I collected, plus a few loaded MetroCards. I know a couple of the kids needed new socks, so I stopped and bought some of those, too. Wanted to make sure the early crowd gets a chance to grab what they need."

"You're so good to those kids," Ross says with a grin.

"So are you," I tell him. "Those kids love you. They just think I'm that crazy redhead with funny stories."

"I was them once, you know? That youth center means a lot to me. And I know for some it's all they have. I'm so glad you convinced me to volunteer."

"And you call me sentimental."

"You are," Ross says.

"Well, I have work till five and then I'll be at the center for my volunteer shift until ten. Tonight we're having a bi poetry night."

"Does that mean poetry about bisexuality or poetry by bisexuals?" he asks.

I shrug. "I mean, in the name of bi? Both."

Ross nods. "I haven't had a fucking minute to stop and pee today, much less eat. I'm starving and the *nam sod* is amazing here. I'm going to eat every bite and not even think about my abs."

"Please," I say with a wave of my hand, "Thai food is better than abs. Plus, you spend enough time in the gym—I think you're good."

"Just trying to be in the best possible physical condition for the second surgery, you know?"

"I know," I say. "You're a lot more disciplined than I could ever be."

"Discipline is only part of it. You know I went through four gyms before finding a place where I wasn't constantly harassed for being in the men's room? Some days it's hard to not give up."

"I'm sorry. Some people just don't understand. And they fear what they don't understand. And when they get scared, well, their first reaction is anger. Because how dare you make them question ones and zeroes!"

Ross grins. "You have always been my biggest cheerleader, you know

that?”

“Yeah. It’s just because I want to be like you when I grow up.”

“Aww, don’t worry Peter Pan. You don’t have to grow up,” he says, tugging at my hair.

I slap his hand away. “How much more money do you need?”

Ross displays a smile that is made of pride, the corners of his mouth held up by the future he knows waits for him. “About six more months of saving and I’ll be ready. Maybe a Christmas present to myself?”

Our drinks are delivered, and Ross lifts his over the table. I press my glass against his. “To the first week at your big-girl job.”

“To a very trans Christmas,” I say before we each down half of our drinks. “Hey, that would make a great holiday special. We should pitch that to the networks.”

“I don’t think the world is ready, Penny. They still think we want to stalk their children in public bathrooms.”

“Not everyone thinks that. Just the mouth-breathing window lickers. They’ll either come around or die off soon,” I tell him with a wink. “You’ve got to have faith.”

“I feel a song coming on,” Ross groans.

I sing the classic George Michael tune while doing jazz hands. He drops his head and bangs it against the table a few times. “Look, you’ve got to recognize the glorious talent of George Michael. Plus, he’s family.”

“Oh, I recognize *his* talent.” I glare. “And didn’t he get caught doing the five-knuckle-shuffle in a movie theater?”

I shake my head. “No. That was Pee-wee Herman. And I believe he called that performance art.” Ross chuckles. “George Michael got caught having sex in a public toilet in Beverly Hills.”

“How very Hollywood,” Ross deadpans. “Any updates on Misa?” he asks, swallowing down the rest of his drink.

“Nothing except she remembers me, but ‘it’s complicated,’” I say. “Whatever that means. She’s like two completely different people. One is this hard, demanding woman, and the other is more like the girl I used to know. I’m trying to not obsess about it, but you know I totally am.”

“I do.”

“I just focus on work, but then she’ll walk by or I’ll smell her perfume...”

“Her perfume?” Ross asks. “You can identify this woman by scent now?”

“Shut up. I’m ovulating and it’s a well-known fact that fertile women have an extremely heightened sense of smell.”

“I’m a medical professional, and there is no such known fact.”

“An-y-way,” I pronounce slowly. “It’s this clean, light scent that completely wrecks me. I can’t help but notice.”

Ross watches me closely. His gaze traveling across the wood tabletop decorated by the shadow of letters from the front window. I’ve never been good at hiding my emotions because I’ve never wanted to. I am transparent, whether it serves me or not. When his gaze doesn’t leave my face, I roll my eyes and look away. Transparent? Yes. Immune? No.

“Tell me about her,” Ross says—he holds up a finger when I open my mouth and it reminds me of Rena the receptionist. “Not the girl you knew, but what you know now.”

I take a long sip of my drink and set it down, my eyes glance at people hurrying along the sidewalk. The midday sun slices down between tall buildings and illuminates the streets and pedestrians. I think about Misa and everything I’ve seen of her this week and try to form a clear picture in my mind.

“She walks the maze of cubicles like a model on a runway—expressionless and beautiful. She’s feminine the way Wonder Woman and stilettos are. She’s got perfectly manicured nails—but no polish—and a diamond ring that reflects every bit of light in the room. She’s a Grande Skinny No-Foam Latte, piping hot or not at all.” I lean back in my chair and sip my drink, suddenly realizing how much I’ve learned in a few days. “Her dark eyes are deep and feel like falling into a black hole that you want to be in. She’s so polished and purposely constructed that she belongs in a gallery, hung by white-gloved hands and viewed by people who love high-concept literature and crab cakes.”

I take a deep breath and blow a curl from my eyes.

“So, basically your opposite in every possible way,” Ross says with a frown. “That’s all you had to say.”

“Considering my cuticles are still stained red from the Flamin’ Hot Cheetos I had for dinner? Yes.”

We both stare at the sidewalk until our food is delivered. The first few bites are enjoyed in silence, but I know Ross won’t let this sit. He’s

overprotective. He'll want to shield me from this woman, this memory that has died and been reborn as something entirely new.

"Look, Pen. I know you have this amazing past and that she meant a lot to you and your journey. But maybe you've got to let her go. It sounds like the girl you knew doesn't exist and you're just hanging on to a ghost."

I suck a noodle into my mouth and chew, not wanting to admit anything. Ross continues eating, but I know he's waiting for the fallout. And the strangest thing is I don't feel one coming. I know he's right and I know I should let go, and normally I would be very loud and forthcoming with this information. But just this once I tuck that shit away and eat my pad Thai in silence.

"Are you feeling okay?" Ross asks after a few minutes. "I don't get to say stuff like that and not get a response. Maybe you should come back to the clinic with me. We can get you in triage, do a full workup."

"Eat me."

"There she is!" he shouts, raising his hands as if he's scored the winning goal in some sort of sports ball game. The entire restaurant turns to watch, but the show is over.

I just grin and shake my head. "Look, if she's a ghost call me a motherfucking Ghostbuster because I *will* get through to her."

"You gonna show her your containment unit?" Ross asks with a grin.

I laugh. "It's a shame I don't have a pole for her to slide on."

Ross cracks up, covering his mouth so food doesn't fall out. "I was going to counter with something about slime, but I know when to stop," he says.

I crack up, having to cover my mouth to keep food from falling out. Once I've regained my composure, I take a sip of water and sigh. "But it's not even about sex, you know? I don't even know if she's into girls. I just want to get to know my friend again."

"But you hope she's into girls," Ross says.

"With the looks she's throwing my way, I'd say my chances are good."

A bike messenger zips by the window, weaving in and out of people on the sidewalk. I refocus on my lunch and think about Misa sitting up there in her office like a dark queen in a tower. She's got goals and precision focus, while I kind of flutter through life like a leaf in the wind.

"You ever feel like you can see heartbreak and catastrophe ahead, but you can't help yourself?" I ask, meeting Ross's eyes across the table and mostly

empty plates.

“Every single day.” My chest aches at the tone of his voice. “But if you don’t take any risks, you’ll never experience any rewards. Chaos is inevitable for you, but I’m learning to embrace it, too.”

“Well, I’m completely here for it.”

Ross nods. “So be it.”

“So be it,” I repeat.

One, two, three seconds of silence, then, “Fuck, my mouth is on fire,” he says.

I laugh, and the air around us feels lighter, more breathable. “Thai food is only good if you’re sweating by the end of the meal.”

“Amen,” Ross says.

A few minutes later, we hug it out in the doorway of the restaurant and promise to see each other at home tonight.

Stepping off the elevator, Rena and her Finger of Authority ignore me as I walk past. The office is too quiet, and I find myself alone in the art department. I drop my bag onto my desk and go in search of my coworkers.

Following the sound of chatter, I find a crowd gathered in the break room, everyone laughing and smiling. Half of them are holding champagne flutes, spilling over and dripping onto the floor with bubbly foam.

“Penny!” Andrea shouts. “You missed it. Misa landed Marco freaking Delgado. His rebranding *and* a new restaurant in California. This is huge! We’re in the big leagues now, baby!”

“Marco Delgado? Wow!” I say, grinning as she hands me a glass. “My mom has the biggest crush on him!”

I find Misa in the crowd. She’s leaned against the counter talking to Rupert, more animated than I’ve ever seen her. There’s an actual tilt to her mouth, forming a lopsided smile that steals my breath. There. Right there is where I see the girl I fell in love with.

All of that is gone the moment she spots me. Words collect in her throat as she presses her lips together and the smile disappears. She is silent now as we watch each other from across the room. People move like blurs across my vision, but I keep my eyes on her.

Rupert follows her gaze. “Penny!” he shouts, waving me over. I weave through the crowd to join them, keeping equal distance between the two.

“Penny,” Rupert says. “I’ve been meaning to check on you this week.

How are you liking Create Slate so far?”

“It’s great,” I say with a genuine smile. “Love the art department, and Andrea is easy to work for.”

He grins and holds up his glass of champagne. “Well, your job just got a lot more demanding, but I bet you can handle it. Congrats to you both,” he says. We each lift our drinks and sip. Misa’s eyes hold mine over the rim of her plastic cup. There is something there that she can’t or won’t say, something that stirs dormant emotions inside me.

Landing this account is amazing. A world-famous chef and his restaurants will present an amazing opportunity to the agency. It *will* mean a lot of work for me and probably a lot of time with Misa. With that thought, understanding and realization clicks into place as I interpret the expression on her face. Fear. If only I knew what she was afraid of.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I say to Rupert. I leave my glass of champagne on an empty table and flee the room before my mouth filter and all restraint falls away.

Chapter Five

Our Only Summer

“HURRY UP, MISA! We’re going to miss getting chairs next to each other,” I yelled toward the bathroom. I pulled my hair into a high ponytail and slipped into my flip-flops. “You know how important it is to get to the pool before the geriatric crew.”

“I can’t come out,” Misa said, her weak voice muffled by the closed door.

“What? Why?”

The door cracked open a few inches and all I could see was a sliver of Misa wearing an old bikini of mine. “My dad will kill me if he sees me in this.”

I rolled my eyes. “And your dad goes to the neighborhood pool when?”

“Never,” she says, looking down at her bare feet.

“Come on,” I said, waving her out. “Would you rather go home and grab your bathing suit and have to answer a million questions from him? No. So get out here.”

The door creaked as she swung it open, slowly revealing her entire body. Misa’s arms wrapped around her middle as she stepped from the cold, hard tile of the bathroom to the soft, beige carpet of my room.

“Damn, Misa. You look…” My head swam with adjectives that ranged from sweet to downright vulgar, and I mentally flipped through them in a panic. “You look hot.”

“I feel naked.” Something flashed in my mind, just a fleeting image, and I pushed down the fire that lit in my belly.

“Well,” I said, turning away to finish packing my bag. “You look great. Throw on your cover-up, and let’s go.” Catching my reflection in the mirror, I could see my cheeks burned bright pink.

“Okay.”

I was hyperaware of Misa moving around my room. So much flawless skin framed by the baby-blue bikini pulled at my attention like nothing I’d

ever felt before. As she reached for the cover-up, I gave up the fight and watched her. Toned muscles moved beneath dark skin. My gaze traveled up her endless legs until it got stuck on the tie at her hip—a little bow made of blue ribbon that seemed to burn into my brain.

“Does it look that bad?” Misa asked, pulling on the cover-up. “You’re staring.”

I swallowed down all the saliva pooled in my mouth, and the unfamiliar feelings drowned with them. I shook my head. “It looks great. You look great.”

Misa looked up and propped her hands on her hips. “We look great.”

“Yeah. We.”



Present

I NEVER BEFORE had an appreciation for the weekends. When you don’t have anything holding you to a schedule for years, each and every day is any day. And any day has the potential to be great or another notch in the chaos belt that I wear. After my first five days at a new job—plus the emotional blow of being reunited with Misa—I welcome Saturday with open arms, a glass of prosecco, and Stevie Wonder on the turntable.

Ross shuffles into the main room with sleepy eyes in a T-shirt and boxers, hair sticking up in every direction. He scratches his ass and plops down next to me on the sofa. I continue sketching in my journal.

“Sparkling wine for breakfast?” he asks.

“Wine not?”

Ross shrugs and leans his head on my shoulder. I can feel his eyes tracing over the pencil lines of my drawing, but I don’t mind when people watch me work.

“Is that her?” he asks.

I nod and shade the side of her slender neck as it curves into her shoulder.

“She is pretty. But she looks like a supervillain.”

I put down my pencil and take a large sip of wine. “I suppose she is,” another sip, “to some people. What makes you say that?”

Ross leans in and studies the sketch more closely. “Because people that beautiful always hold power. Whether they use it for good or bad depends on the person. Misa looks like she just wants to fuck people up and leave footprints on their faces.”

“You might be right,” I say with a sigh, smudging the swell of her hip. “But I think that’s just what she wants people to see. It’s not really her.”

Since Ross didn’t get in until I was already in bed, I catch him up on the happenings in the office, the new account, and what it’ll mean for me.

“Pen, that’s an amazing opportunity,” he says, straightening up and kicking his feet up on the coffee table between my Brassavola orchid and an antique copy of *Anna Karenina*. His short nails scratch through the stubble covering his jaw. “I don’t know what it means for you and Misa, but this is huge for your career.”

“I know,” I say, sipping again while my index finger smooths the harsh gray line of her skirt, softening it. “It’s a great opportunity.”

“We should celebrate tonight.”

“You’re not working?”

“No. Evan asked to switch shifts because she needs Monday off. Rachel and I were going to grab dinner somewhere and head to Fringe after.”

“Oh, Fringe! I haven’t been there in a few weeks. That sounds like fun.” I tuck my hair behind my ear and flip it over my shoulder. “Except I always end up with a Stage-Five Clinger when I go there. Can’t a girl just buy you a drink, make out in the bathroom like a normal lesbian, and call it a night?”

“Apparently you’re just too irresistible,” Ross deadpans.

“Apparently,” I agree, jabbing him in the ribs with my elbow. “I can’t help it if they’re not ready for this jelly.”

He laughs. “Everything always comes back to Beyoncé, doesn’t it?”

“To be fair, that was still when she was with Destiny’s Child, so don’t leave out love for Kelly and Michelle.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I sigh and empty my glass. “I don’t want to be a third wheel, but thanks. I think I’ll stop by Oasis for a bit and then head to the beach today. I’ll probably meet you guys at Fringe, though.”

Ross yawns. “Rockaway?”

“No, I’m going big. Coney Island.”

“Of course. You’re such a tourist,” he laughs.

“I’m not a tourist. I just don’t have an aversion to tourists like most New Yorkers.”

“Yeah. You’re special, Pen. Plus you’re never a third wheel with me. You know that.”

“I know.”

I write the date on the top of my journal page, pull the ribbon down the spine to mark the page, and fold it closed. In every relationship Ross and I have ever been in, it always came with a BOGO disclaimer. You date me, you get the other one, too. Never in a relationship or sexual kind of way, only in the way that means *this is my person, we’re a package deal*.

“Good. Well, I’ll see you tonight, then,” Ross says, kissing my cheek and heading to the kitchen—probably to make himself a bowl of the cereal he complains about me buying but secretly loves.

The beginning notes of “I Don’t Know Why” fill the room as I grab my already-full watering tin from the floor and give all my window plants some love.

The morning sun heats my skin in this east-facing apartment. I close my eyes, and a smile paints my face as I think of doing the same thing at my old house in New Jersey when I was a kid. Mom always had plants everywhere but especially in the bay window of her studio. As soon as I was big enough to hold her watering can, she taught me how to take care of them and nurture them and appreciate the life they bring to a space.

I inhale deeply loving the green, earthy taste on my tongue, the feel of cleaner air in my lungs. Suddenly there is an aching pull in my head telling me to go for a visit and now my Sunday is planned.



“HEY, JEN!” I wave as I close the door behind me. The Oasis Center is alive with activity today. There’s a game of pool going on in the game room, while two girls battle each other in Call of Duty. The choir must be meeting upstairs because I can hear the soft, sweet sound of a cappella drifting into the room. The group therapy door is closed. I check the time and know that Asher is in there with whoever he could coax into talking today.

“Hey, Penny,” Jen greets, pulling me in for a hug and kiss on the cheek. “I told you we didn’t need you today. The schedule is covered. And as the head of volunteers, who makes the schedule, I would assume you know that.”

“I do,” I say. “I’m not staying. Just wanted to drop in for a bit and check on Rav.”

Jen sighs and digs her hands into her pockets. “He hasn’t been here in a few days,” she says, shaking her head.

“Damn.”

“A couple of the other kids said his stuff is gone from the shelter.”

I run a hand through my hair and tug on the roots. “Ugh. He’s so frustrating. He just can’t stay in one place long enough for me to make any headway. As soon as I get him to open up, he leaves again.”

Jen squeezes my shoulder. “But he always comes back when he needs us. That’s what counts, right?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Hey, Penny!” Tara says with a toothy grin. She waves her neon-pink fingernails at me, does a twirl, and disappears into the game room. “Penny’s here!” she shouts.

“Hey, Penny!” a chorus of voices call out from the other room.

“Hey, guys. I’m not staying, so if you need anything come see me now.”

I hear feet pounding on the hardwood floors as Tevon comes barreling around the corner. He doesn’t slow down as he wraps me in a tight hug that lifts me off the ground.

“Whoa,” I say, clutching his large shoulders as he swings me around.

“Thanks for everything,” he whispers in my ear before setting me down on my feet. Devon smiles at Jen and then back at me. “That’s all I needed. Byeeee.”

I just shake my head and give him a wave. It’s amazing how small gestures and kind words can mean so much to these young kids. I look around at this place and all it has to offer and can’t imagine where some of these kids would be without it.

“Well, I’ll see you guys next week, then.”

“Get out of here and enjoy your weekend,” Jen says.

“If you see Rav...”

“I know. Tell him you’re looking for him.”



As I SIT on the Q train for the thirty-minute ride to Coney Island, my eyes drift to the windows across from me. I love traveling above ground instead of through underground tunnels. Natural light and a blur of brownstones, trees, and shop signs always wins out over fluorescent lighting and being encased in dark cement walls. Even with that mystery stench coming from the opposite end of this car. Mothers pushing strollers and toting toddlers wedge themselves and all their precious cargo into the nearest empty spot. A group of teenage boys gets on, roughhousing and using the overhead handrails to do flips over empty seats.

We've all got bags with us, and it occurs to me that the contents of those bags depends on who you are. Most moms will have everything you would ever need in the case of hunger, dehydration, wardrobe malfunction, communication, cleanup, alien invasion, or injury. Most guys just throw food and booze into a backpack and think of nothing else. Mine is somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

Tucked inside my colorful half-moon bag made by one of the elders of the Hmong tribe in Thailand are a random novel plucked from Ross's overflowing shelf, sunscreen, two granola bars, my hand-painted reusable water bottle, earbuds, a bright blue beach towel from the 99¢ store, my wallet (made from hemp and purchased from a street vendor my first day living in Brooklyn), and my journal.

I ride the train until the last stop, grinning when the Wonder Wheel comes into view. The walk to the boardwalk is short but filled with so much to see. I love how in one five-minute stroll you can pass kitschy souvenir shops, family-owned ice cream stands, and national landmarks like Nathan's Famous hot dog eatery.

The heat is intense, but when that breeze comes in off the water, it is cool and saltwater scented. It blows through my gauzy dress and flips up the brim of my sun hat. Some kids run past me, barefoot, faces painted with chocolate ice cream. Their excitement is contagious, and I find my flip-flops moving quickly toward the sand.

After the second application of sunscreen, I tuck my dress and shoes into my bag, pull out the book, and settle onto my towel. The beach isn't super

crowded today, but it's still early. For a while, I just sit and watch the waves crash on the shore. It's crazy to think about how many shores I've visited around the world, all of them connected by my memories, journal entries, and global waters. I don't pretend to know anything about ocean currents, but I'd like to think that some of the water that visits me here today could have once covered my toes in South Africa. Life is so good.

Caught up in people watching, I never open the book. Every golden-skinned, dark-haired girl that passes reminds me of Misa. She is the sun and my thoughts are a chaotic solar system circling around.

When the heat gets to be too much, I walk down to the water and tread along the surf. It's up past my knees, and I know I don't want to go much farther out. There's just something so unpleasant when the cool water reaches your lady bits that sends a shock through your entire body.

When Misa and I would go down to the community pool, I always just jumped right into the deep end. One big splash and instant acclimation. Misa would test the water with her toes and eventually descend the steps, one at a time, pausing long enough for her skin to adjust to the water temp. Six inches at a time, she would eventually submerge herself and meet me in the deep end.

"Heads-up," I hear someone yell. By the time I turn my head, a football splashes down in the water in front of me, throwing water up onto my crotch, and now I've unwillingly experienced cooter shock. A chill breaks over my skin, rushing up my spine until the base of my neck tingles.

A muscled guy in board shorts runs over. He's all perfect white smile and Becky with the good hair as he runs a hand through it on his approach. I grab the ball from the water and hold it out to him.

"Yours?" I ask.

"Yeah. Thanks." He grins, and I'm sure most of the girls swoon because this guy is attractive. "Sorry we almost hit you. I almost never miss." And charming.

"No worries," I say. "I'm not really into balls flying at me, so make sure it doesn't happen again." I smile so he knows I'm teasing.

There's approaching splashing and then Chad from HR is standing next to him. What a small world. The odds of seeing this kid outside of work in an area of over eight million people is slim. Yet here he is.

He grins and grabs the football from his friend. "Penny. Imagine running

into you out here.” Whether consciously or not, he flexes his pecs.

I’m thankful for the oversized sunglasses hiding most of my face. “Imagine.”

“You alone today?” he asks, looking around. “You could join us if you want.”

I tug on the brim of my hat and rest my hand on my hip. “Thanks, but I’m good. Just wanting to hang by myself.”

His eyes blatantly rake over my body, and my black bikini now feels like clear plastic wrap. “Well, if you change your mind,” he says, “we’re right over there.” His head nods to a group just up the beach from us.

“Thanks.” I turn and start to make my way back toward my spot since he just stands there with his friend. After a few steps, I look over my shoulder to find him still in place. His friend punches him in the chest, steals the football, and runs off. Chad reluctantly follows.

After the eye molesting he gave me, I feel gross, and it makes me want to dunk his balls into the cold water. Back on my towel, I grin at the thought and toss my hat aside. My loose braid hangs down my back and tickles the skin just above my bikini bottoms. I lie back in the sand, cover my face with my hat, and let the crashing waves sing me to sleep.

I wake up to the sound of a passing couple dragging their crying toddler through the sand toward the water. Blinking the sleep away, I sit up and decide I’ve had enough beach for the day. I’m hot and sweaty in places a lady shouldn’t be. I’ve got swamp ass, boob sweat aka Mountain Dew, and the grit of sand in my bikini bottoms. I’m in the middle of pulling my dress back on when I hear Chad’s voice.

“Leaving so soon?” he asks.

Tugging the dress into place, my eyes meet his. He’s watching me, hopeful and optimistic, and even though he seems like a creeper I feel like it’s only fair to be upfront with him.

“I am.” I pull my bag onto my shoulder and slide my sunglasses back onto my face. “You know, Chad, we’ve got something *big* in common.”

“Really?” he asks with a smirk.

“Yes. We both eat pussy,” I mock whisper. His mouth drops open and his eyes go wide. “Well, actually that is a bold assumption on my part. I don’t know if you eat pussy. But if you don’t, you should. And be smart enough to be good at it,” I finish with a huge smile.

His shocked expression is replaced by amusement, and I absolutely know what's coming. I can almost hear his words before they get here. I've heard it a million times in many different languages.

"You're a lesbian? Maybe you just haven't met the right guy yet."

There it is, ladies and gentlemen. The official stance of the straight male with an overinflated ego and sense of pride. I roll my eyes and dismiss him with a flip of my hand.

"See you Monday," I shout as I retreat.

"I hope it's just a phase," he says to my back. *And the hits just keep coming.*

I spin and lower my sunglasses, looking him over. "Not as much as I hope that that haircut is just a phase." I turn again and move faster toward the sidewalk.

Chad scurries up next to me, kicking up sand. "Wait! Penny," he pleads. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

I stop and look him in the eye. "Chad, I'm not offended that your prepubescent brain can't comprehend that some ladies like other ladies regardless—and not in spite—of men's existence."

His eyebrows fall heavy over confused eyes and he frowns. He may have to google a few definitions after I'm gone. "Uh. Well, I'm just saying that you should give it a try. You might like it."

I let out a frustrated growl and stomp off toward the train. And that right there is the difference between men who celebrate women and men who want to conquer them. Chad will not accept defeat. This will be a battle until I stand with one foot propped on his bloody corpse and a rainbow flag planted in his back—metaphorically, of course.



I EXIT THE train and spot my mom waiting to pick me up. She waves, and I practically run to her, stopping just short of where she's standing.

"Missed you, Mom."

She wraps her arms around me and squeezes so tight I feel all of her love at once. She is my home; not a building or an address—her. Even if she were

standing on the opposite coast, like she's threatened to do a million times, she'd be where my heart lives.

"You, too, Penelope. My sweet girl." She lifts my face and examines it closely. "My sweet, hungover girl. What did you get up to last night? Was she hot?"

I cringe and climb into her car while she laughs. "I did not hook up with anyone last night, Mom. Just drinks with Ross and some friends."

She purses her lips and nods. "Yes, I know what lesbians call 'friends.' I'm old, not dumb." I roll my eyes while she just stares at me.

"What?"

"Penelope, you know this car does not move until you buckle up."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, clicking my seat belt into place just before she guns it, merging into traffic with only three honks from other drivers.

"Still a bad driver?" I ask.

Mom slides her sunglasses down over her eyes and grins. "Still a judgy McSassy Mouth?"

Over afternoon coffee and her ridiculous recipe of black bean brownies, I tell her all about Misa. Everything between us has always been an open book, and this is no different.

"Wow," she says, reaching for my hand. "What are you going to do? Is it so terrible that you need to find another job?"

I give her a sad smile and shake my head. The biggest thing I appreciate about my mom is that she's never going to say I'm overreacting or being dramatic. She believes that everyone's feelings are valid and never discredits emotion.

"No. I mean, it sucks being so close to her when she is being so mysterious and distant, but I can deal with it. Every now and then she melts into this softer version of herself—only when we're alone. It's all just so confusing. And it hurts to think I didn't mean as much to her as I thought I did, you know?"

"I know." She releases my hand and swallows down her half coffee/half milk. "You two were inseparable. Remember when you guys made up a dance routine to 'Umbrella' by Rihanna?"

I groan. "How could I forget? There were so many inappropriate moves for a thirteen-year-old to be doing. But I remember it was the first time I felt

any kind of sexual attraction to her. Even though I didn't know what it was at the time."

"I'm sure I still have it recorded somewhere if you'd like to relive those glory days. Can you still move like that?"

"No, I do not want to see that. And yes, I've still got all the moves."

Mom laughs and sips her coffee. "Are you going to confront her at some point, or just let it go?"

I give her a look that is all the answer she needs. "You of all people know that I'm not a 'let it go' kind of girl."

Mom grins. "True. You're still mad that we lied about Santa."

"You mean Santa's not real?" I gasp.

"Oh, he's real. He just lives with his new girlfriend on the shore now."

"Yeah. Santa's on my shit list, for sure."

It's my turn to reach for her hand now. I give it a squeeze, and she nods, knowing all the things I want to say. Dad left her over a year ago, but you can still find hints of him around the house. His Atlantic City souvenir ashtray on the back porch still sits where it always has. The wooden box he made for all my letters and postcards is tucked onto a shelf in the den. My name is carved into the top in his handwriting. The tree we planted in the corner garden when my grandmother died has tripled in size and shades half of the yard now. She doesn't avoid talking about him like someone does when a loved one dies. She speaks as though they are long-distance friends who have fallen out of touch.

"So, any new girlfriends I haven't met yet?" she asks, steering us away from Jersey Shore Santa.

"Nope. Still single and now mind-fucked over this Misa thing."

"Hey," she says. "Don't let that girl stand in the way of anything. You know I always liked her, but if she's acting like she's too good for you, then fuck her."

"That's kind of the goal here."

Mom laughs and slaps my shoulder. "Sometimes I worry that there is too much of your father in you. How's Ross?"

"He's good. Dating a girl named Rachel."

My mom's eyes light up and a grin pulls across her face. "Ross and Rachel? I couldn't love that more!"

"I figured."

“I saw his mother at the grocery store last week. She asked about you.”

“But not her son?” I ask, venom in my voice.

Mom shakes her head. “I think asking about you is a roundabout way of asking about him without doing it, you know?”

I breathe through my nose and glare out the window into the backyard. “Whatever. She turned her back on him. She said all those horrible things. I just can’t.”

“I remember,” Mom says. Her eyes glaze over, and I know she’s reliving the nightmarish day that Ross’s parents came to find him at my house and tried to drag him off to some kind of “camp” that would “help” him. Even with me throwing my body across his, they’d tried dragging both of us out of the house. It wasn’t until my mom threatened to shoot them that they left. They didn’t know it was a paintball gun.

“You two have been through the trenches together,” she says.

I nod. “He’s my ride-or-die. Always will be. Oh! Did I tell you that I’m meeting Chef Marco Delgado tomorrow?”

“What?” she screeches, dropping her empty coffee mug onto the table. “In person? How? When? Can I be there?”

“At my new job. We’re doing his rebranding. I’m getting to work on his account.”

“My daughter is a rock star,” she says, raising her hands into the air. “Do you need an older but very attractive artistic assistant?” Mom folds her hands together under her chin and bats her eyes.

I shake my head. “No, Mom. I don’t think it would be very impressive to have my mother hovering over me at my first big client meeting. I’m already nervous as hell. Along with all the Misa stuff.”

“First of all, I wouldn’t be hovering over you. I’d be clinging to Marco like a newborn spider monkey. Secondly, you’ll do fine. You’re talented, Penelope Winters. And I love you.” Mom squeezes my hand and releases it. “I kinda love Chef Delgado, too. Can you put in a good word?”

“Oh my god. No.”

When she drives me to the train station, Mom gives me a tight squeeze. “Good luck at work,” she says. “The moment will come when you’ll know exactly what to do about Misa. Just follow your gut and you’ll be fine. Unless your gut leads to jail time. In that case, let me know because I’ve still got

your father's Rolex hidden away in my underwear drawer. We can use it for bail money."

Chapter Six

Our Only Summer

MISA AND I walked along the boardwalk wearing matching airbrushed T-shirts and cutoff jean shorts. A cool breeze blew in from the Atlantic as the sun tried to murder us with heat.

“I’m parched,” Misa said, smacking her lips before sticking out her tongue. “My tongue is dry, a clear symptom of dehydration.”

I laughed. “You’re dramatic, but let’s get a frozen lemonade from that stand in front of Eddie’s.”

“The one with the girl with all the tattoos and piercings?” Misa asked.

“Yeah.”

“Are you, like, obsessed with her?” Misa asked.

“No,” I answered too quickly. “Are you jealous?” I asked, stopping to face her.

Her left eyebrow twitched. “No.”

“Ha!” I said, pointing. “Liar. Your eyebrow twitched. Dead giveaway.”

“It did not,” Misa said, crossing her arms and stomping away.

I jogged to catch up with her while suppressing my grin. “Hey,” I said, grabbing her arm to stop her again. “I’m not in the best-friend-replacement program or anything, okay? I just think she’s...cool.”

“Cool?” Misa deadpanned.

“Cool,” I repeated.

We began our walk toward the stand again. “If that is your definition of *cool*, how are we even friends?”

I throw up my hands. “Because you’re cool, too. Just in a different way.”

“Very different.”

“You and me?” I said. “We balance each other. You’re calm. I’m chaos.” To punctuate my point, I did a cartwheel right there on the boardwalk.

Misa laughed and linked her arm through mine.

When we reached the stand, the girl with the tattoos asked what we wanted. We each ordered a frozen lemonade.

“Always the same thing. You don’t want to try anything different?” the girl challenged. “Be adventurous.”

I grinned beneath the shade of her cart umbrella and shoved my hands into my pockets. Her crooked smile and the stud in her nose made me blush, and I dismissed it, thinking *I want to be her* instead of *I want to kiss her*.

“I like adventure,” I replied.

“You look like an adventure,” she said.

“Lemonade, please,” Misa almost shouted as she stepped between the two of us.

“Cherry lemonade,” I said from behind her.



Present

THE SECOND I reach my workspace Monday morning, Andrea is dragging me across the office. She snatches a notebook and pen from a random desk and shoves it at me as we keep moving.

“Come on,” she says in a whisper. “We’re already late.”

I check the time on my phone. “I’m ten minutes early.”

She pulls me to a stop just outside of Misa’s office. “Delgado and his team called to move the meeting to early this morning. I wasn’t able to get in touch with you, so I’ve been stalling.”

“Fuck,” I say, looking down at my dress with cats riding rainbows all over it. Frankly, I was so excited when I found it in the back of my closet that I completely forgot about our world-famous chef meeting today.

Andrea follows my gaze and frowns. “Just get in there and smile and nod and pretend like you know what’s going on.”

“No problem,” I say. Inside, my heart is rattling against my ribs, my guts churn, and I suddenly have thigh sweat.

I grab the handle of Misa’s door, take a deep breath, and exhale. Pushing the door open, I walk into that room like I own the fucking building. Misa looks displeased but replaces her scowl with a smile for our guests.

“Gentlemen,” she says, “this is our in-house designer, Penelope Winters. She’ll be working on the team responsible for your rebranding and restaurant launch.”

I recognize Marco Delgado from television. He’s got a handsome face with a permanent grin and crinkles at the corners of his eyes that point to gray at his temples. He gives me a kind smile and stands to greet me, as do the other men in the room.

“Penelope,” he says, his voice smooth with a hint of Portuguese accent. Though he is warm and welcoming, I can tell he’s the kind of man who is used to having people jump when he says so. I have a feeling this agency will be no different.

“Penny,” I counter.

“Penny.” He grins. “Even better, pretty centavo. So nice to meet you.”

I hold my hand out, but he grabs my shoulders and brings me in for a kiss on each cheek. He is extremely energetic for this early in the morning. Meanwhile, I haven’t had coffee yet. Still, I grin and introduce myself to the two members of his team before we all have a seat.

“You are the artist, yes?” Marco asks.

Before I can answer, Misa cuts in. “Yes. While you can think of me as the brains of this operation, consider Penelope the beauty.” My head whips toward her. I try to keep my expression neutral when her eyes meet mine. “She’ll design you a brilliant aesthetic that will resonate with your desired clientele while maintaining a fresh and unique brand.” Misa looks away, turning to Marco. “She’s a talented artist, and we’re lucky to have her on our team.”

“Good, good,” he says. “For this, we will require the best. I work fast and expect my team to do the same.”

The meeting lasts almost an hour. Ryan is awestruck and doe eyed the entire time, fawning all over Chef Delgado while trying to remain professional. I take four pages of notes, also throwing out ideas and suggestions when they come to me. I want to be useful and a little more than “the beauty” of the operation.

When Marco and his team members have left us with all the cheek kisses we can stand, Andrea escorts them out while Misa, Ryan, and I collapse into our chairs.

“Holy shit, that was intense,” I say.

“Not as intense as that dress,” Misa says, one perfect brow raised higher than the other.

I cut her with my glare. “I just wanted to make sure we didn’t wear the same outfit for the big meeting.”

Ryan laughs but covers his mouth when Misa shoots him a look. She walks to her desk without a word and takes a seat.

“Good one,” Ryan whispers across the table. “I’ve never heard anyone talk to her like that. It’s refreshing.”

“I’m as fresh as it gets,” I say with a wink.

“I’m meeting with the copywriters this afternoon, and we’ll need first draft concepts by end-of-day tomorrow,” she says from behind her computer.

I snap off a soundless salute and help Ryan gather everything up. We throw away coffee cups and napkins and plates with half-eaten pastries.

Making our way out of Misa’s office, Ryan nudges my shoulder. “Tens across the board,” he says. I stare blankly. “You did good,” he clarifies. “Sorry we couldn’t warn you about the early meeting.”

“It’s okay. I guess my phone was on silent.”

“Just to let you know,” he says lower, dragging me away from Misa’s door. “This project has a pretty short timeline, so be prepared to put in some late nights. It’s going to be fierce.”

“Not a problem,” I tell him.

“Don’t worry, I’m usually here, too.”

“Oh,” I say, though I’m not sure if I’m disappointed or relieved.

He sighs and leans his shoulder against the wall. “I’ll add you to the spreadsheet for this account so you can see all updates.”

I frown. “I’m a creative. I don’t do spreadsheets.”

Ryan rolls his eyes. “I mean, I could have guessed that. But it’s how I operate, so get on board.”

“You’re so committed.”

“Yes. I’m here so much that I have a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and a pillow in my desk drawer. I’m super close to adding a hot plate, ramen, and sriracha, too. I’m not sure if that makes me prepared or just sad,” he says with a sigh. “Either way, I’ll try not to leave you alone with the Ice Queen. We don’t want another Daphne. That whole situation was busted.”

“No worries there,” I say. “I’m committed, too.”

When I’m back at my desk, Andrea instructs me to finish up some minor

changes on a small coffee shop package and tells me that all other projects will be distributed among the other designers and herself.

“I’ll need you focused on Delgado for the next few weeks,” Andrea says. “And I’ll be here to help with anything you need.” She motions to the other designers. “The team is great for brainstorming if you get stuck or just need fresh eyes on something. Of course, if I’m not here you can go to Barb.” The team all nods in agreement. “Well, I’ll let you get back to work. This is so exciting!”

As soon as she is gone, Thomas peeks around his computer. “You got lucky grabbing this huge account your second week on the job.” He pushes his glasses higher on his nose and disappears behind his screen again. His face is smiling and congratulatory, while his tone is not. It’s the sound of *this fucking bitch right here* mixed with a little *I cannot even*.

“Yeah,” Kendra says, not even looking up from her computer. “Super lucky.”

Juan leans over and gives me a genuine smile. “Congrats.” He holds out his fist. I bump mine against it and know that at least I’ve got one supportive ally here in my department. “You won the fucking *lotería*, girl.”

While they may be bitter about my luck, they have no one to blame but themselves. Andrea mentioned that they were each offered to partner with Misa and they all refused. If you want to be a big fish, you gotta swim with the sharks, bitches.

It’s the end of the day, and most of the office has cleared out. I’ve stayed a few minutes late to finish the last project I have assigned to me so that I can start on Delgado’s account tomorrow. Just as I’m packing up, Ryan appears next to my desk. He’s got a ton of colored folders stacked in his hands.

“Hey,” he says, looking down at his feet instead of my face. “Misa needs you.”

Misa needs you. While I know those words are spoken in a professional manner, I wish they were something more. Or do I? Because the woman in that glass box overlooking Houston Street is not the girl I need. She’s something new and shiny cut from a pattern and sewn up into someone who cares only about herself.

Misa and Penny’s Rules #3: Support your friends. Girl power!

I grab my notebook and start for her office while Ryan heads in the opposite direction. “Where are you going?” I ask.

He finally meets my eyes. “I’ve got to get these to the print shop and pick up dinner. I’m so sorry.”

“What happened to not leaving me alone with her?”

He shrugs and sweeps his hair out of his eyes. “I’m sorry. The Ice Queen has spoken.”

“Liar,” I call out.

“Fish,” he sings from around the corner.

I roll my eyes and swipe a pen from my desk before turning to go. This time, I don’t stop outside her office and gather myself. Hell, I don’t even knock. This time, I push through with my head held high, my shoulders back all while still wearing a dress covered in rainbow-riding cats. I am not the other people in this office. I am not intimidated by her. I don’t need a Misa buffer.

“You rang?” I say, standing in front of her desk while she hasn’t even acknowledged that I’ve entered the space.

I don’t hear her sigh, but I see it in the high rise of her shoulders and the way they relax and fall into place again.

“You can take a seat,” she says.

I sit in one of the metal-and-leather chairs facing her desk, cross my legs, and open my notebook. She finally looks up at me. I glance to the shelf where the photo of the happy couple used to be. It has been replaced with a purple vase. *Interesting.*

Misa folds her hands together on top of her desk. “After meeting with the copywriters, I have to say I’m disappointed in everything they’ve come up with.” She stops, swallows, and looks like she’d rather say anything else than what’s about to come out of her mouth. “I liked your input in the meeting with Delgado. I need you to stay late and help me brainstorm a few solid ideas for the rebranding.”

“Tonight?” I ask, my voice a little too screechy to sound unaffected by the idea of a late night alone in the office with her.

“Yes. If you’re available, of course,” she says, turning her chair toward the wall of windows and looking out. “I won’t pretend to know what someone like you gets up to on a Monday evening.”

“Someone like me?” I ask, a bite to my voice.

Misa waves one hand in my direction but keeps her eyes focused on the windows. “Yes, Penelope. Someone with nothing tying her down.”

“You know zero about my life and responsibilities outside of this office. I could have three kids, a cat who only shits in my shoes, and a successful vegan froyo startup.”

Misa blinks a few times. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“As it so happens, I’m available.”

She swivels back to face me with a flustered huff. “All the assets are set up in the conference room. Take a break and meet me there in ten minutes.”

I push through her door and head straight to the bathroom. The office is mostly dark, and I don’t spot another person on my way. I throw myself inside and toss the notebook onto the counter. My hands wrap over the edge of a sink and I lock my elbows, pushing my shoulders up to my ears. Dropping my chin to my chest, I take three deep breaths.

“This is not a big deal,” I say out loud. “She doesn’t care, so you don’t care.” When my eyes lift to meet my reflection I see a liar. And Chad. I let out a surprised squeak and press a hand to my pounding chest. “For fuck’s sake. What are you, a ninja pooper?”

He laughs and approaches the sink next to me. “You okay, Penny? You look a little unsettled.”

I adjust the clip holding my hair in place and flip the rest of my curls over my shoulder. “I’m fine. I’m the perfect amount of settled. Just working late.” I turn and lean my hip on the sink to face him as he dries his hands on the scratchy brown paper towels. “What are you still doing here?”

“I actually was looking for you.” He turns to face me now. “My friends are having a Fourth of July party this Sunday. I wanted to see if you were interested in coming.”

I scrunch up my face and cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t really think your friends are my kind of crowd. But thanks.”

“You didn’t even meet my friends,” he challenges. “Are you making assumptions about me?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, that’s not fair,” he says, stepping closer. I don’t move. I don’t give an inch. He needs to believe that I can handle myself.

“You’re right,” I say with a tilt of my head. “But I bet you were going to tell me to bring a friend and some wine coolers, right?” I grab my notebook from the counter and nudge the door open with my shoulder.

“I’ll email you the details,” he calls out as it closes behind me.

After fetching my bag from my desk, I head straight to the conference room. In the dark office, the frost-filtered light spills out into the hall, calling me in like a moth to the flaming lesbian in denial.

“There you are,” Misa says, looking at her watch with a frown. “I was beginning to think you left. Is Jane okay for dinner?”

“Uh, I guess. I’ve never eaten there.”

Misa huffs.

“Just order me what you’re having. I’m not picky.”

“I already did,” she says.

My head whips toward her as she quickly picks up her phone and sends off a text. “Presumptuous much?” I ask.

“I figured you’d be fine with anything,” she mumbles, still staring at her screen like she doesn’t actually know this. But I know that she knows and she knows that I know she knows. With a shake of her head, she puts her phone down and motions to the enormous dry-erase board. “Let’s get to work. We’re going to start with the rebranding first. Once we have that nailed down, we’ll get to the West Coast restaurant.”

I fall back into a chair with a groan. “Fine.”

“As you can see,” she points out, “this first column is the mood we want to create. Rich. Indulgent. Exclusive. Next are the specific things that Chef Delgado pointed out in the meeting. Steel and glass, masculine, unique, and versatile.”

She’s all business when I want to ask her a million questions about her personal life. Instead, I check the board against my notes and find a few things missing. “He really seemed to like the idea of using spices as a color palette, too.”

“You’re right,” she says as she writes that in the middle column. The curve of her hips in the form-fitting dress she’s wearing momentarily distracts me, and I miss what she says next.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I asked if there is anything else useful in that notebook of yours?” she asks, propping a hand on her hip.

I hold the notebook close to my chest. “Of course there is. Everything in here is useful. Not for things like solving world peace or feeding the hungry, but there’s probably a recipe for distilling German moonshine somewhere in the margins.”

“Ideas, Penelope. We need ideas,” she says.

I rise from my chair and move toward her. She looks like a damsel stunned into stillness by an approaching train while she’s tied to the tracks. There’s panic and fear in her eyes, though she holds steady. Because there’s also something deeper and wanting there. As bold as she is, she’s not brave enough to act on it.

Our toes are six inches apart when I stop. Misa’s grip on the dry-erase marker makes her knuckles pop.

“I have an idea,” I say, lowering my voice so that it’s made of sex and dirty intentions. “Now that we’re alone, how about you tell me why things are so complicated.”

She gasps. There it is out in the open. Every bit of confidence and hard woman is stolen from her body. Her expression softens and she drags her teeth over that full bottom lip. It emerges, and all I can see is a mouth that I never got to kiss.

“Tell me the truth, Misa,” I say. My fingers twitch. They want to reach for her. They want to grab hold and pull her body against mine in a puzzle piece that fits every curve and edge. Misa’s eyes are wide as she searches my face, her lips part a few times, but nothing comes out. When her gaze drops to my mouth I know we’re on the same page.

“Tell me,” I say. This time it is harsher, louder, more demanding. A tone that she can recognize and appreciate.

Her eyebrow twitches. “I can’t...”

“Okay,” Ryan says, storming into the room holding two bags of food from Jane. Misa pushes past me to meet him at the table. “I’ve got two lobster cobb salads with dressing on the side, a couple of sparkling waters, and your favorite pinot noir already uncorked.” He sets the bags down and starts unpacking everything. “Here are your utensils, napkins, and I figure you’ll make do with the water glasses already in the room. I asked them to include some lemon wedges because while the salad is tasty it needs a bit of acid to balance out the flavors. Can I get you anything else before I head home?”

Misa occupies herself with setting up her dinner and popping the temporary cork from the wine. I glare at him, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“That’s all, Ryan. Thank you,” I say. His eyes drift from Misa to me and return to her. He mouths, *Are you okay?* I make a crazy face, crossing my

eyes and shrugging. He lets out a laugh and tries to turn it into a cough.

“Okay, ladies,” he says, clearing his throat. “Don’t work too hard. See you tomorrow.” He gives me one more fleeting look before closing the door behind him.

The tension that filled the room before Ryan’s arrival seemed to thin out in his presence. But now that he’s gone, it builds and blooms and presses into the corners, filling every square inch of space. I feel it against my skin and in the thick air that seems harder to inhale. I take my place across the table from Misa and prepare my salad. She holds up the wine bottle in question, and I nod.

We sit with our dinners, eating in silence, ignoring the water completely. I crunch, I sip, I wipe my mouth with the napkin. The same choreography is done on her side of the table. My mind is reeling. I want to know what she’s thinking. I need to know. But she is good at keeping her guard up.

After ten minutes of the most awkward dinner since Jesus had to break bread with that two-timing Judas, Misa finally speaks.

“I’m engaged,” she says, immediately downing the rest of her wine as if she needs to keep her mouth full or confess everything at once.

A tiny smile lifts one side of my mouth, and I glance down to the bling on her finger. “I know.” Misa rolls her eyes and sits back in her seat. “So what does that have to do with us being friends?”

She sighs, kicks out of her five-inch heels, and tucks her legs under her body. “That was a long time ago, Penny. I don’t know what you want from me.”

I put down my fork as my eyes trace the lines of her pout. “I want you to stop pretending that I’m a dirty little secret. Like you’re ashamed that you know me.”

Misa’s gaze snaps to my face. “I’m not ashamed,” she says. I wait for her to elaborate, but I get nothing. Her silence kills the last bit of restraint I had.

“Then, what?” I demand, standing now, leaning over the table. She remains quiet. “Dammit, Misa. Why are you like this? This back-and-forth thing you do with me is ridiculous. Are you the woman this office fears, or are you the girl who was my best friend? Why do you switch between the two? Will the real Misa Ito please stand up!” I wave my arms in her direction before turning to face the windows.

Over the years I’ve gotten better at controlling my temper—but not much.

My fists clench into tight balls at my sides as I take slow, purposeful breaths. Misa still says nothing. I exhale and shove my hands into my pockets. Her quiet makes me fill with rage. The heat in my face burns, and I want to press it to the glass for some relief. I shrug out of my cardigan and toss it behind me.

I stare out and down at the street below. The fading light from the sky throws a pink hue over the city like a sheer scarf hung over a lamp. Movement in the window catches my attention, and I raise my eyes to find Misa's reflection right behind me.

Turning to face her, I lean against the window. The cool glass is a shock to the heated flesh of my exposed back. But I endure it because she's in my space and I want her there.

"I always loved that fire in you," she says. "Was jealous of it. You always say exactly what you're thinking. Damn the consequences."

I tuck my hands behind my back, trapping them between the glass and my body. Mostly because I don't trust myself with the way Misa's looking at me.

"What else?" I ask, my voice just a whisper between us.

She steps closer now. Without her shoes on, we're the same height. Finally on my level.

"Your crazy clothes," Misa says, and her hand comes to rest on my waist. "Your confidence." Her touch is delicate but fixed. Both of our eyes watch as her thumb swipes over a cat on my dress. All I can think is that she's touching me. She's touching me and looking at me with those eyes, and my heart does flips in its cage. The heat from her hand seeps through the material of my dress and spreads like spilled ink across my skin.

"You say *crazy*. I say *fun and eccentric with a hint of whimsy*." My attempt at lifting the weight from the room is useless. "Go on," I insist.

"Your wild red hair. Your natural artistic talent. The freedom that defines you, Penny," Misa says. "You've been back in my life for a week and you have no idea all the things you've already changed or made me question. You are chaos. And I. Am. Affected."

"So, I affect you, huh?" I ask, looking up through my lashes.

She nods. "I'm not ashamed of being friends with you, Penny. I'm ashamed of the way I feel when I see you. I feel helpless, confused, and out of control around you. I thought you were a closed chapter, but now...I don't know. I feel like we're a story that never got its chance to start."

“What kind of story are we, Misa?”

Our breaths come quickly now. Chests heaving, my body begging for more of her. But all I have is a hand on my waist and a look in her eyes that feels like that moment right before an orgasm—mind reeling, skin tingling, an ache that may never be satisfied.

“The story of feeling like a coin with two faces—desperately trying to keep the teenage girl in love with her best friend separate from the professional woman soon to be married.”

Her confession steals the breath from my body. To know that we were on the same page back then is such a relief. I reach up and pull her bottom lip from between her teeth. The pad of my thumb slides across as her lips part slightly. Warm breath moves over my hand, and I think I might burst into flames. Let me die in this moment, but let it be with her mouth on mine. The cleaning crew will find me here, a pile of ash and rainbow kitties.

She steps closer now, our bodies just inches apart. My tongue sweeps across my bottom lip, and it is enough to break her resolve. Misa leans in, pressing her lips to mine. So soft I can barely feel it. She does it again, this time it resonates in every cell of my body. I open up and let her in. Her tongue moves against mine, and it is everything I’ve ever imagined. Despite her harsh tones and sharp edges, she tastes sweet and moves with tenderness. This kiss is fourteen years in the making. It is made of secret handshakes, friendship rules, and pillow fights. It’s built on a vintage kind of love, one that exists only because of friendship and finding the balance to your soul. It tastes like wine and coffee and so much need I could drown.

Misa pushes forward again, and my head thumps against the glass. I don’t care. I just want more. My hands free themselves and I reach for her. One rests on her shoulder while lips, tongue, and teeth battle for dominance. It is the first time in my life I don’t care if I win or lose.

I feel her movements slowing. I feel her pulling away. I detest the war she’s fighting inside herself. When her lips leave mine, our eyes open and find each other. We are swollen mouths and billowing chests and completely desperate. The ache is standing inches away and feeling millions of miles apart.

“Do you love him?” I ask. Misa frowns and drops her hand from my waist, stepping back. My hand falls to my side. She is once again unreachable.

Another step back, and no answer. I see the wall coming back up. Brick by brick she's shutting me out. Misa rounds the table and takes a seat. She pushes her food aside and looks over her notes.

“So I think we should really embrace the spice ideas for his branding. We'll solidify a color palette tonight, and you can work up some concepts tomorrow.”

And just like that, she's gone.

Chapter Seven

Ninth Grade

I LAID ON my bed, staring at the ceiling while the DJ on the radio talked about a big Halloween party happening this weekend. I couldn't wait to be old enough for stuff like that. I was going to live a big life, and I couldn't wait to do it.

"Oh my god," Misa said, rushing into my room and shutting the door behind her.

I sat up, blinking at the panicked look on her face. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

Misa threw down her book bag and sat next to me on the bed. "The weirdest thing just happened, and I'm not sure how I feel about it."

I turned toward her, one leg propped up on the bed now. "Well?"

"Okay, so I was packing up after Debate Club, right?" I nodded as I searched her face for clues. "And then I realize it's just me and Nick Keller left in the room."

"Uh-huh," I urged.

"And he's staring, Penny. Like really staring."

"Creepy much?" I said, but Misa shook her head.

"It didn't feel creepy. Anyway, I zip up my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and turn to go, only to find him right there."

"Again, creepy."

She dug her fists into my mattress. "Would you listen?"

"Sorry," I said. "Go on."

"Anyway," she pronounced long and slow. "He tells me he likes my hair, and I don't know what to say, so I just sit there like a rock. Then he moves closer, and he's wearing this tiny smile like he's asking me a question and I'm supposed to know what it is but I just don't. So I stand there—clueless—until his lips are touching mine."

My eyes went wide. "He kissed you?" I screeched.

“I didn’t even know what it was until it was happening,” she said. The delicate fingers of her left hand came up and touched her lips. “And before I could react, it was over.”

“He kissed you.”

“He kissed me,” Misa said. “My first kiss, Penny.”

“How did he even know you wanted to be kissed?”

She shrugged. “He didn’t. I guess he just took a chance.”

“Hello?” I said, standing and pacing the room. “Has he ever heard of consent? What if you didn’t want him to kiss you? Wait. Did you want him to kiss you?”

“I don’t know,” she answered before chewing on her bottom lip.

I threw my hands in the air. “How can you not know something like that?”

Misa shrugged. “It wasn’t bad. And now I’ve had my first kiss, so it was like a rite of passage.”

“A rite of passage? With the captain of the debate team?”

“He’s cute,” Misa argued.

“He’s weird.”

“He’s smart,” she said.

“So’s my dad. You want to make out with him?” I asked before throwing myself into my desk chair.

“A,” Misa said, glaring at me, “we didn’t make out. It was just a kiss. And B, why are you pooping on this?”

I spun in the chair to face my computer and frowned at my reflection on the screen. I didn’t have an answer for her. I knew I was angry and confused, but I didn’t know why.

“I’m not pooping on it,” I said with my back to her. “Just feeling left behind, I guess.” I shrugged one shoulder and logged into my email to keep my hands busy.

Misa’s arms came around my shoulders. She kissed my cheek and, with her warm lips still pressed against my face, whispered, “Your day will come, too.”



Present

“DUDE. JUST TO be clear: I have designed an entire branding package for world-renowned chef Marco Delgado in four days.”

“Yeah, you have,” Ross says, clinking his cereal spoon against mine.

“Not only that, but he approved the second concept with only a few minor changes. I know you’re not in design, but that is a *huge* deal. Usually, it’s revision after revision until you want to claw your eyes out and burn every font to the ground.” I shove a spoonful of cereal into my mouth and look over to Ross. He’s just staring.

“You are so odd,” he says.

I shrug. “But that’s why you love me.”

“Truth. That and the fact that we can eat kid cereal for dinner with no judgment.”

“It’s magically delicious.”

For a few minutes, the only sound in the room is spoons clinking against bowls and crunching. Ross puts his empty bowl down and leans into me. He’s quiet and wringing his hands, so I know he’s in his head about something. This is just his process. Ross likes to think about things before he says them out loud. He rolls his words around and arranges them together like magnets on the fridge. It’s like he’s always looking for the most efficient way to tell a story. A far cry from my *blurt it out and hope people understand* method.

“Found this kid in the Prospect Park station in really bad shape,” Ross says, shaking his head. “She was just skin and bones, like baggy clothes hanging on a frame of a person. I bought her some food and convinced her to go to the Center. She didn’t really seem comfortable around any of us. But I know that feeling of distrust. Anyone could be an enemy. I hope Jen can get through to her. It never gets easier, you know? They’re just kids, homeless and barely surviving. Living on the streets is one thing. Being trans and living on the streets is infinitely worse.”

“She gonna be okay?” I ask.

“Yeah. I hope so. That place has all the resources to help her—if she stays. Sometimes they don’t want help. I think maybe her desire for survival outweighs her fear.”

“Good. I’m glad it was you who found her. Can you imagine how many people walked past her without a second thought?” I shake my head. “Humans can be really disappointing.”

“And sometimes they can be really amazing, too,” Ross says.

“Says Mister Amazing.”

Ross snorts.

“What’s her name? I’ll check on her on my shift.”

“Amber.”

I nod and make a mental note to look for her tomorrow. “Anything fun happen at work today?” I ask.

He chuckles. “This girl came in and asked if she could die from smoking too much weed. Then she just begged us to make her ‘not high’ for an hour straight.”

“Wow. Amateur.”

“I know, right?” Ross says. “How about you?”

I tap the end of my spoon on my chin and look at the ceiling. “Let’s see, anything ridiculous? My childhood crush spent another day pretending like she doesn’t want to kiss me while wearing her engagement ring and only talking about sales accounts.”

Ross presses his lips together and nods. “Soooo, same old shit?”

“Same old shit.”

He sits up now, turning sideways on the sofa to face me. “I know you, Pen. I know it’s killing you, especially after that kiss. But have you thought about the end game here? How do you even know you like the woman she’s become? Maybe you’re just obsessed with the girl you used to know.”

I sigh and drop my bowl onto the coffee table next to my journal where I’ve gone on and on about how I feel and what I think. “I have thought about all that. Of course I have. I mean, besides work, it’s like all I think about.”

“And if you actually hook up, do you think she’s going to leave her man?”

“I don’t know, Ross. I don’t even know if that’s what I want. You know I’d never be anyone’s side piece. I just want answers. I want her to just be honest with me and stop playing games—if that’s what we’re doing.” I lean forward resting my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands.

Ross rubs circles on my back, something my mom always did to comfort me. “If you ask me, you could be looking at a situation of experimental

lesbianism just for play. This woman has the potential to hurt you.”

“I won’t let her,” I say, sitting up. “She’s not the only one with power here.”

The apartment door swings open at the same time that Rachel calls out, “Knock, knock.”

“Did you leave the door unlocked?” I ask Ross.

He looks embarrassed but shakes his head. “I gave her a key.” My mouth drops open. “I know I should have asked you first but it just happened, and I like her a lot, and please don’t make this awkward,” he says in one rushed breath.

“Hey, babe,” Rachel says, dropping her messenger bag into a chair. Today she’s got a head full of pink-and-purple curls pinned up into a pile on top of her head. “Hey, Penny.”

Rachel gives Ross a peck on the cheek and sits next to him on the sofa. I look at the ceiling, my lips pressed together while Ross sits, knowing.

“Hey, Rachel,” I say. Ross blows out a breath. “Otherwise known as the first girl that Ross has ever given a key to and said he likes a whole lot and lets her see him with milk dripping down his chin.”

Rachel bursts into a fit of giggles while Ross chokes. I slap him on the back a few times and, once he’s recovered, hand him a napkin to wipe his face.

“So you like me a whole lot, huh?” Rachel says, throwing her arm around Ross.

He turns to me. “Thanks, Pen.”

“Hey, you’re welcome. If nothing else, you can thank me for getting you laid tonight.”

He glares. I smile.

“She’s not wrong,” Rachel says, her finger tracing the shell of his ear. He practically moans. I am forgiven.

“That’s my cue to leave,” I say, hopping up and tossing my empty bowl and spoon in the sink.

“You don’t have to go,” Rachel says, her hand squeezing Ross’s thigh.

“No, really. I do. I haven’t had sex in so long. And with the vibes you two are giving off, I need to remove Lady Dolla from the situation.”

“Please don’t ask,” Ross says with his eyes squeezed closed.

“Lady Dolla?” Rachel asks anyway.

“It’s what she calls her vag.”

Rachel laughs while Ross shakes his head.

“Lady Dolla make you holla,” I say, before throwing up a peace sign and disappearing into my room.

I turn on my AC window unit and lie naked in bed. The cool air blows across my skin, and all I can think about is Misa. My hand slides across my belly and moves lower. I close my eyes, and after a few minutes, I shamelessly come with visions of her mouth on my body and my hands fisted in her hair.



AFTER MY FRIDAY morning coffee, I’m called into a meeting with Misa, Ryan, and Andrea. Every time I see her, I am filled with this mixture of dread and excitement—the same feeling you get when binging Taco Bell after a night of drinking.

Andrea sips her tea and pulls out a chair for me to have a seat. Ryan is wearing a Cheshire grin and bouncing in his chair. I’m hoping for good news on this Delgado account. Something like, *Hey, everything is perfect. You guys don’t have to work so closely anymore.*

Misa takes a seat and flips open the account folder. “Delgado is thrilled with his new branding and has approved all final versions. Honestly, it’s amazing that we got this done in a week.”

“I’d say a lot of that has to do with all of Penny’s hard work,” Andrea chimes in. Her smile makes me sit a little taller.

Misa nods. “Yes, Penelope was vital to getting this done on time. We’ve got a beautiful package to use for marketing and social, plus a foot in the door for any other advertising.”

“Great,” I say. “That was too easy.” I mime wiping my shoulders off.

Misa shoots me a look that snaps my mouth closed. “We were supposed to start work on the La Jolla restaurant next week. He’s finalized the name, calling it Marco.”

“How original of him,” Andrea says with a chuckle.

“Yes, well,” Misa pauses. “Before we start on that project, Delgado has insisted that we visit the space and experience the menu.”

“We’re going to California?” I say, suddenly wide awake.

Ryan grins so wide the smile splits his face in half. He claps his hands together while bouncing in his seat. Misa gives him an annoyed look.

“Ryan, Penelope, and I will leave Sunday. Delgado is providing one of his homes for us to stay in while there. We will have a three-day itinerary of tours and tastings. We return Thursday. Back to the office on Friday.”

“I mean, I guess I’m free,” I say with a shrug, a giddy grin on my lips.

“See to it that you are,” Misa says without looking up from her paper. “Ryan has booked us an early afternoon flight out of JFK and car service to the airport.”

“Did you need a vegetarian meal on the flight?” Ryan asks me, his pen poised above paper.

“No, why?”

“Umm, you just look vegetarian.”

“What?” I ask, looking down at my shirt and back to him. “What do vegetarians look like?”

“Well, your bag is hemp,” he defends.

“Ryan,” Misa says, “stop talking.”

“Sorry. No shade meant,” he says, clicking his tongue. I kick his leg. “Ouch! Don’t get cute.”

“Anyway,” Misa says with a sigh. “You will all be emailed an itinerary with the details. Does anyone need anything else?”

We all mumble a no.

“Wow,” Andrea says as we all stand and push in our chairs. “I’m so jealous. I’ve never been to California. Have so much fun and take pictures and send them to me so I can live vicariously through you.”

Ryan and I make it to the door at the same time. I bump his shoulder on the way out.

“Brat,” he calls out with a grin.

“Weirdo.”

“Well, that ain’t news, sugar.”

I whip my head toward him, surprised by the lilt to his words. “Whoa! Where did that Southern accent come from?”

Ryan stands up taller and smooths down his tie. “Sometimes it just slips out. Don’t gag.”

I just stare at him. “Sometimes it’s like you’re from a different planet.”

“Honey, the *South* is a different planet.”

News travels fast in this office, so by the time I make it back from lunch I get the third degree from my fellow designers. This time I don’t even blame them for their questions laced in jealousy and irritation. I totally understand. But I don’t apologize.

In a few weeks, I’ve already proven that I am an asset to this company and I can hold my own when it comes to dealing with Misa. Even though I want more from her, I’ve come to realize that whatever she’s dealing with is her own battle. Whether she’s fighting how she feels about me or how she feels about herself is still unclear.



FRINGE IS PACKED. So packed that I have to squeeze through too many sweaty, half-clothed bodies to make my way to the bar. This is unacceptable. I do not have the mental capacity to deal with this kind of bullshit right now. I need my drink, and I need it now. Don’t they know that tomorrow I have to get on a plane with Misa and stay in the same house with her and pretend that everything is goddamn Michael and Dwight when it’s totally Jim and Pam?

When I finally make it to the bar, I order two drinks. Looks like I’m double fisting tonight. We’re talking drinks here, not to be confused with the subgenre on PornHub.

By the time I make it back to the tiny table my friends have snagged in the far corner, half of my first drink is gone.

“Whoa,” Ross says. “Two hands, two drinks. I adore your math skills, Pen.”

“I’m a creative. I’m too cute for math. This is just logic.”

“If train A leaves New York at three p.m. traveling eighty-eight miles per hour,” Rachel says, twisting her slick black hair around one finger, “and train B leaves Philadelphia carrying only drag queens and bears in leather—”

“D,” I shout. “They all love the *D*.” The group laughs, and I kill the anxiety inside with more sips of my drink.

“How about double *D*?” Evan asks. “That blonde with the big boobs keeps giving you the eye. Go get you some.”

I laugh and finish my drink, setting my second one down on the table. “No harm in a dance, right?”

I move onto the dance floor, swaying my hips and pulling my hair up into a bun. She sees me coming and knows I’m here for her. This girl is gorgeous—long blonde hair, light eyes, and a body that could use some exploring. The second I’m within reach, she grabs me and pulls me flush against her.

“I’m Tatum,” she says.

“Penny.”

Her smile is sexy and devious as she spins me and grinds against my ass. The heavy bass beat pulses through my body, and I move along with her. Tatum’s hand skims my waist while the other traces the curve of my thigh. She fists the hem of my dress in her hand before pressing her palm to my leg and sliding up.

This feels too good. A stranger touching me the way I need to be touched. Her desire is static on my skin and warm breath curling around my neck.

Tatum releases my dress and whispers two words into my ear. “Let’s go.”

I abandon my extra drink and my friends to follow her to the exit. She’s exactly what I need right now—something physical and distracting. Her hands are on my waist, her fingers tickling up my ribs, skating the outer curve of my breasts before resting on my shoulders. She pins me to the brick wall outside of Fringe and kisses me. It’s demanding and aggressive, and it only makes me think about Misa and how different her kiss was. I groan and shake those thoughts from my head.

Live in the moment. Follow this chaos. It’s who I am. It’s what I do.

Tatum’s hands reach around and grab my ass, pulling me hard against her body. I want to want her. I want to feel more. But behind closed eyes, I see only Misa. The guilt builds and builds until I can’t kiss the lie anymore.

I break away. “I’m sorry,” I say between panting breaths. “I can’t.”

Heavy brows dip low over those crystal blue eyes, and she shakes her head. “What?”

“I’m sorry to be a twat tease,” I say, freeing myself from her grip and making my way back inside.

I weave through the crowd again, find my friends and my waiting drink. I down it in two swallows and take a seat on one of the stools.

“I’m fucked,” I say.

“That fast?” Ross asks. “Must be a record.”

“No,” I shout over the music. “I didn’t fuck her. I’m fucked.” I tap my temple. “Up here.”

“Bring it in, guys,” Ross says to the group.

I find myself surrounded by Ross, Rachel, Evan, Andy, and even their friend Simon. They form a protective circle around me while Ross holds my face in his hands.

“You are not fucked. You are strong, brave, smart, creative, a fucking badass citizen to this garbage society we live in. You are in love with a memory. You have a week to work that out. In California it’s do or die, right?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Find out what she wants and what you want. If those things match up, then let’s make this real.”

I nod again. “I love you,” I tell him.

“We love you,” Ross says.

“Now break this shit up. I’m claustrophobic.”

They laugh and resume their place around the table, leaving me to suck on the alcohol-laced ice from my glass and think about all the things I don’t want to face in the upcoming week.

Chapter Eight

Ninth Grade

MISS RAYBORN PACED in front of the chalkboard, white chalk dust covered the bottom of her sweater.

“I want a two-page outline highlighting your goals after high school and the steps you need to accomplish to achieve them.”

“But we’re only freshmen,” someone called out from the back of the room.

“It’s never too early to start planning, people.”

The bell rang, and Misa met me at my desk so we could walk to algebra together.

“Do you think we’ll still be friends after high school?” she asked as she hiked her bag up higher on her shoulder.

I whipped my head toward her as I zipped up my own bag. “Of course.” Misa had French braided her hair this morning. With all that hair pulled back from her face, it really highlighted her high cheekbones and heart-shaped face. She was so beautiful, but like in a grown-up way. In a way that even the teachers noticed.

We made our way into the hall and walked along with the herd toward the next building. “Where do you think you’ll be?” I asked.

“If my dad has his way, I’ll have earned a full-ride scholarship to an Ivy League college.”

“Yeah, well. I definitely won’t be there,” I said.

“You could totally get in if you applied yourself.”

“Eww. Stop. You sound like your dad.”

She stopped in the middle of the hall and rolled her eyes. “Meanest. Thing. Ever.”

“I’m sorry. Forgive me?” I asked, kissing two fingers and holding them in the air between us. Misa grinned, kissed her fingers, and pressed them to mine.

“I just meant you could come with me,” Misa said as she resumed our trek. “If you wanted to.”

“I don’t know, Misa. I really want to see the world. Experience everything I can.”

“You could do that after you get your degree,” she said.

“That would never happen.”

We walked in silence for seventeen steps before she asked, “Where will you go first?”

“California. My mom talks about it so much. I’ve just got to experience the West Coast.”

“And you’ll call me every day?” she asked.

“Of course! How else could I make you jealous?” We both laughed and took our seats in algebra, not knowing that there was an unknown variable we couldn’t solve for.



Present

I AM SCRAMBLING through the apartment, throwing things in a bag while my phone buzzes on the kitchen counter.

“Hello?”

“Miss Winters. This is Milton with your car service to the airport. I’m outside.”

“Great,” I say, my eyes automatically glancing toward the window. “I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

I end the call and grab a handful of granola bars from our pantry, shoving them into my bag. Next, I place my phone in the front pocket and drop my charger inside.

“Have everything?” Ross asks from his spot on the sofa, hands tucked behind his head in the most relaxed pose possible.

“Fuck if I know.” I spot my journal on the coffee table and toss it in. “You know I stayed up late binge-watching *The Handmaid’s Tale* instead of packing.” I stop and look at him, my expression serious. “Is the book that bad? That is some terrifying shit, and my ass would have been dead the first time Aunt Lydia asked me anything. Because I’ll be damned if—”

“Stop,” Ross says calmly. “Save your tangent and focus on the car waiting for you downstairs.”

“You’re right. The new schedule for the Center is on the fridge. Can you give it to Jen when you go? Bye,” I shout, heading for the door. “I’ll be back Thursday. Have fun! Don’t have sex on my bed.”

“Why would I—”

“Just don’t!” I shout as the door closes between us.

I drag my suitcase and carry-on bag down the stairs and emerge onto the sidewalk like a hot mess awaiting my royal carriage. The driver steps out of the car and takes my suitcase while I cling to my bag. I’ve traveled enough to know to keep all the essentials in your possession at all times. He places the suitcase in the trunk and then opens the door, ushering me inside.

“Sorry you had to wait,” I tell him, sliding into the cool, dark leather interior. He just smiles and closes the door behind me. I turn to put my bag on the seat to find Misa already in the car. She’s focused on her phone and only scoots over a bit when I infringe on her space.

“Not a great traveler?” she says, never looking away from her screen. The silver-blue light highlights the high cheekbones and curve of her forehead.

“I’m an awesome traveler,” I say. “Not a great planner. I do better with impromptu adventures.”

Misa drops her phone to her lap and finally looks at me. “*Adventures*,” she says. “Your favorite word.”

“Better than *chaos*.”

“Yet not as well suited.”

I lean against the door to put some distance between us. This is the first time I’ve seen her in casual clothes since meeting adult Misa. She’s got jeans and a blouse on with cute ankle boots. Still monochromatic, but at least she looks human and not like Darth Vader’s second in command.

“I think you like my chaos,” I say with a smirk.

She huffs and looks at her phone again.

“Texting your boyfriend?”

“Fiancé,” she corrects.

“Po-tay-toe, pah-fake boyfriend.”

Silence sits between us, and neither will break it. Minutes go by with each of us staring at our phones, pretending the other doesn’t exist. My head

swims as I think about the woman I want to devour and the woman I want to strangle. How are they the same person?

“So, after a week of avoidance are we never going to talk about that kiss?” I ask. Misa slowly lifts her eyes to meet mine. Her gaze flicks to the driver, who’s definitely within earshot, and back to me. I’m not sure how she believed I would not revisit this.

“That kiss was a mistake,” she says. “A moment of weakness.”

“It didn’t *feel* like a mistake. Do I make you weak?”

She pouts her lips and I want to kiss them all over again. “It was just fourteen years of pent-up curiosity. It was nothing.”

Misa goes back to her phone. The word *nothing* feels like a punch to the gut, and I abandon the conversation—which is exactly what she wanted.

The car turns left on Linden Boulevard. The buildings blur by in grid patterns and streaks of brick and cement. “Are we picking up Ryan?” I ask.

Misa doesn’t look up. “No, he lives in the Village. Totally out of the way.”

“So, you live in Brooklyn?” She nods. “Slumming it with us common folk, huh?”

She glances at me and then out the window. “I’m not sure what you mean. Brooklyn is a very respectable place to live, and my fiancé is in real estate, so we got in early on an amazing investment.”

“Of course you did,” I shoot back. “Did it come with a white picket fence and an intact hymen for your wedding night?”

She leans toward me now, and like a magnet, I move closer, too. “This animosity has got to stop,” she says. “We’ve got to present a united team to Delgado. So for the next four days can we agree to *try* to be friendly? For the sake of the business at least.”

Our legs are touching now—midthigh down to the knee. I’m not sure when it happened, but it’s all I can think about.

“I can be *super* friendly,” I say, losing my breath at the end of the sentence.

“Good,” she says. Misa crosses her legs, and the feel of her is gone. I cross my legs, too, away from her, and we are two bookends on each side of stubbornness with so much sexual tension the leather seats let out lustful creaks with each movement.

At the airport, we check our suitcases for the flight and make our way to

the long and winding line for security. We stand. We step forward. We wait. We do not talk. I may check out her ass in those jeans, and I am compromised. Send help because this week is going to kill me.

When we finally reach the gate, Ryan is already there. He's got his earbuds in and a bag tucked between his feet. He grins and waves when he sees us. Misa takes a seat on one side of him while I sit on the other. I tap his knee, and he pulls the earbuds from his ears.

"I haven't even looked at the ticket. Please tell me you're sitting between us on the flight," I whisper.

He chuckles. "You and I are together, and she's in the row behind us. It's a six-hour direct flight, hunty. Though it's partly self-preservation, I also thought of you. I'm not a heartless queen."

"Oh, life is so good. Right now you are my favorite person."

"What a coincidence," Ryan says. "I'm my favorite person, too."

People watching at the airport could be considered the highest form of entertainment. I can't think of any other place that houses such a variety of people. From employees to passengers, you never know who is going to walk by next.

I watch a mother alone with her toddler sitting across from us. She keeps him busy with snacks in a spill-proof cup. The only problem is when his chubby little fist reaches in, he grabs a handful and yanks it out of the cup. Yellow puffs fly out. Then he spends another few minutes plucking them from his lap. His mother watches with amusement.

When his cup is finally empty, he wipes his hands on his shirt and hops out of the chair. He shakes the empty cup at Mom before searching the seat for any he could have missed. Then he folds his body in half, resting his head on the floor to check under the seat. With wide eyes and a frown, he looks to his mother.

"Why gone?" he shouts. His hands come up, shoulders high. "Why gone, Mama?"

I laugh, only to hear Misa do the same. We look at each other still wearing our smiles, and for once they don't disappear.



I SLEEP THROUGH most of the flight, waking up about an hour before we land. The three of us collect our bags and find a man wearing a suit and holding a sign that reads CREATE SLATE.

He tucks us into the back of a limo and says it's a short trip up the coast to La Jolla. I can't help but smile as I watch the palm trees roll by. I love the West Coast. My mom is from here, and it helps me feel connected to it somehow. She's told me so many stories from her childhood that it's easy to place her here, imagine her on the beach as a wobbly toddler or kayaking in the ocean as a teenager. There is so much West Coast in my mother that it sometimes makes her look out of place back in Jersey. I roll down the window in the car and lean my head out. The salty sea air smells just like her shampoo, and the warm—but not overbearing—sun reminds me of her hugs.

Pulling into the semicircle driveway in front of Marco's beach house already has me impressed. It's a white stucco house with a clay-tiled roof surrounded by palm trees and flowering plants. The dark wooden door swings open, and a smiling woman lets us inside, explaining that she is the property caretaker. She's dressed in all white, a contrast to her golden skin, with her hair pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck.

"My name is Carla. If you need anything at all, just let me know. The house is yours while you are here. Please make yourself at home, and feel free to use any of the amenities. If you don't see something you'd like, let me know and I will make sure it is provided. Chef wants you to feel comfortable here and hopes that you enjoy your visit to California."

While her words sound rehearsed like a flight attendant making the standard announcements, her tone is warm and welcoming.

The tile floors of the foyer lead out into a large open space that is the main living area and a very modern kitchen. Everything is white and steel, sleek lines and minimalistic. The entire back wall is made of glass, and it frames a beautiful view of the white sand beach leading down to the Pacific Ocean. The three of us stand gawking at this beautiful home and scan the space to take in every detail.

"This is a note from Chef Delgado," Carla says. "My number is on the back should you need anything at any time," she says, handing over an envelope and letting herself out.

I open the envelope and pull out a card, reading aloud, “My home is yours. Explore the house and enjoy the private beach. I suggest Cantania in La Jolla Village for dinner. Toast the sunset with a Bellini and try the *merguez* sausage pizza. See you tomorrow. Marco.”

“Yassss. I love *merguez* sausage. It’s this spicy North African lamb sausage that makes everything taste better. Interesting choice at an Italian restaurant,” Ryan says. “I already love California.”

“I’ll take the master bedroom,” Misa says.

“Dammit,” I groan. “How could I forget to call that? Amateur move, Winters.”

“I’m sure every room in this house is *eleganza*,” Ryan says with a consoling pat on my back.

He and I take off down a hall, opening every door, exploring every room. I pick a gorgeous bedroom on the beach side of the house. The walls are stark white with bright teal gauze curtains over the windows. The space is very minimalistic with only a couple of pieces of art on the walls and a white dresser near the door.

“Leave me here,” I tell him. “I have been chosen by this room.”

“Fine,” Ryan says. “But I better get an ocean view, too.”

I throw myself down onto the bed and find out it is as plush as it looks. The fabric is so soft it makes me wonder if it was spun from the wool of Tibetan sheep by the Dalai Lama himself.

Rolling onto my stomach, I type out a text to Ross to let him know I made it and snap a selfie.

I belong in this kind of luxury. I’m going to marry for money.

Finally, you’ve set some realistic goals. [eye-roll emoji]

“Let’s go,” Ryan says from my doorway. “Miss Ito is ready.”

I groan. “Can you at least call her Misa while we’re here? You’re like a Stepford Wife with that ‘Miss Ito’ shit.”

“I’m a rule follower to a fault,” he says, holding up three fingers in salute.

“You were a Boy Scout?” I ask.

Ryan looks at his salute and back to me with a shrug. “Of course. I mean, there were boys and I was scouting.”

I laugh. “But seriously. Stop with Miss Ito.”

“I’ll try to acquiesce to your request. Now let’s book it. I’m starved.”

“I’d happily starve to death if I could die on these jабillion-thread count

sheets.”

“I don’t think *jabillion* is a thing.”

I hop up from the bed, grabbing my bag. “It is in this house.”

Ryan searches online for the restaurant Chef Delgado mentioned and says it’s a short walk from the house. As soon as we step outside, I inhale deeply, letting the cool ocean air fill me. Every ocean, every gulf, every sea has a unique salty scent to it, but this one is my favorite.

Misa keeps her attention on her phone while Ryan and I point out gorgeous houses and chat about going down to the Children’s Pool one day to see the seals that hang out there.

“They just come right up on the beach?” he asks.

“Yes. It’s the coolest thing ever. You’re not supposed to go down there, but I did once because...seals!” I say with a grin. He laughs and presses the button for the crosswalk signal.

We are seated on the patio at Cantania. The sun hovers above the watery horizon and the blue sky fades down to gold. We each order a Bellini as instructed, and when they arrive, I hold mine out over the middle of the table.

“To living our best lives,” I say.

Ryan raises his glass. “Here’s to those who wish us well. All the rest can go to hell.”

Misa sits quietly for a few seconds and then finally lifts her drink. “To hell,” she says, her eyes meeting mine, and I am stunned by the fire there. “May the stay there be as fun as the way there.” A small grin lifts the corner of her mouth as we clink our glasses together before sipping.

“I didn’t know that word was in your vocabulary,” I say. “*Fun.*”

“Yes, well, I’m sure there’s no end to how much you don’t know about me.”

A breeze blows through the patio and a few loose curls tickle my shoulders, but it doesn’t squash the fire inside. The flip-flopping emotions of this woman are hard to keep up with. “I thought we were supposed to play nice on this trip.”

Misa raises an eyebrow in my direction. “You started it, Penelope.”

“Consider it finished,” I say, slumping back in my chair and downing the rest of my drink. I motion to the waiter for another.

“Fine with me.”

“What in the lovers’ quarrel?” Ryan’s attention volleys between the two

of us, his expression is one of shock and awe. I imagine he's never heard anyone banter with her. At the office it's all *yes, ma'am; no, ma'am; can I suck your dick, ma'am*.

When we remain silent for a few minutes, he picks up his menu and reads it over.

"I mean, is it rude to order something other than what Chef Delgado suggested?" he asks. "What if he asks us how it was? And we have to be like, 'Uh. I had a salad.' I don't like all this pressure. I just want to eat all the things."

I chuckle at him and thank the waiter when my new drink arrives. Looking out at the ocean, the Pacific now cuts the sun in half in a sunset that I've seen many times. Taking out my phone, I snap a photo and send it to my mom.

Here's a little piece of home for you. xoxo

"It's so gorge here," Ryan says. "And so quiet. What a contrast to New York."

"The quiet is unnerving," Misa says, sipping her drink.

"The sunset looks exactly the same from the west coast of Africa," I say. "Isn't that crazy?"

Misa watches me but doesn't answer. The wind whips her sleek hair across her face in ribbons of black. She looks stunning—something I'd like to sculpt from clay and paint in neon colors just to piss her off.

We do order the pizza Chef suggested but also a couple of appetizers to share. Dinner is mostly quiet, each of us taking in the atmosphere and stifling yawns between bites.

"Jet lag is a bitch," I say. "I'm so tired."

"How is that even possible?" Ryan asks. "You slept for, like, five hours on the way here."

"I didn't get much sleep last night"—Misa turns away as if she's uninterested, but I can tell by the slight tilt of her chin that she's listening—"if you know what I mean."

Ryan laughs. "No shame in that." We clink glasses again.

Of course, there's no truth in what I'm insinuating, but the tendons pull tight in Misa's neck and her jaw tics. Very telling. "Waiter," she says. "Another." He nods and hurries off to get her a new drink. It is delivered within minutes.

We are left with empty plates and two slices of pizza so good I hate to leave them.

“I’m so full. Can you guys just roll me back to the house?” Ryan says, rubbing his flat stomach.

“I was going to ask you to carry me,” I tell him.

Misa downs the last of her drink and asks for the check.

“Your meal has been taken care of by Chef Delgado,” the waiter says.

“Great. Thank you,” she tells him. “Let’s go.” She’s out of her chair and heading for the exit before Ryan and I can even process what’s happening.

I grab my bag and my Bellini, swallowing it down as we move through the restaurant. At the door, I hand over the empty glass to the hostess with a smile.

“Thanks,” I say. “Everything was amazing.”

The walk back is slower as our full bellies and drinks weigh us down. Back at the house, I grab my carry-on bag from the foyer floor. “I just want to shower the plane funk off of me and fall into bed.”

“Good night,” Misa says, pushing past us and disappearing down the hall.

Ryan watches her go. “That woman is such a conundrum.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Wrapped in an enigma, built on a quandary.”

“Nice use of the vocab.”

“Well, I’m off,” I say. “See you in the morning.” I drag my bag toward the hall. “Which room did you pick?” I turn and ask.

Ryan gestures to the opposite side of the house. “The one over here. It was the last one left with an ocean view.”

I nod and make my way to my room. Dropping my bag onto the bed, I open my curtains to look out over the dark beach. There’s a long deck that looks like it runs the length of the house with steps leading down to the beach.

Moving into the bathroom, I start the six-head shower and check out all the bottles of high-end soap and shampoos while the room fills with steam. They all smell great, so I toss my clothes aside and bring all of them with me. The hot water washes over my skin and disappears down the drain along with my anxiety about the day.

I survived another day with Misa. Of course, we’re away from home and have a Ryan buffer, but every other day we’ll be surrounded by even more

people. I have no doubt I can hold it together and just get through this week with her.

When I'm finished, I squeeze the water from my hair and wrap the towel around my body. In the bedroom, I discover that I never brought my suitcase in here, only my carry-on.

"Shit," I say.

Cracking my door open, the house is dark and quiet. I tiptoe down the hall and into the foyer where I grab my suitcase and haul ass back to my room. When I turn the corner I smash into Misa, who loses her balance and grabs for me on her way down to the floor. She lands with a thud and my towel in her hand.

I've never been a shy girl, so I don't flinch when her eyes rake over my body. Sure, I am soft curves where Misa is toned and lean. But I love my body. And I love food, a combination that suits me.

It's been almost a minute when I clear my throat. "I'm standing naked in the hall and you have my towel."

"I'm sorry," she says, finally averting her eyes and scrambling to her feet. She awkwardly drapes the towel across my body and backs away.

"You okay?" I ask.

She bites that lip again, and it is all I can do to remain in this spot. "Uh. You're fine. I mean me. Fine. I'm fine." Misa walks backward until she reaches the room past mine. She blinks a few times and throws herself inside, slamming the door closed.

"Still got it," I say, licking my index finger and pressing it to my shoulder while making a sizzling sound.



MY EYES BLINK open, and for a moment I forget where I am. I roll across the bed and check my phone. It's 4:09 in the morning.

"Ugh," I sigh. "Why am I awake?" Because it's 7:09 back in New York. I shoot Ross an update since I know he's headed to work right now.

Day one and Misa has already seen me naked. No news beyond that.

Who hasn't seen you naked, you exhibitionist? The next text better be sent from Lady Dolla.

I stare at the ceiling and listen to the waves crash. It's a soothing sound that sends me back toward dreamland. Until I hear her voice. Crossing the room, I pull back the curtains just an inch to find her sitting on one of the deck chairs, phone pressed to her ear. There's just enough moonlight to make out the silhouette of her face and the weave pattern of the thick braid hanging over her shoulder.

I turn my head to listen in, but she is speaking Japanese. I don't know what she's saying, but there is sadness and frustration present. Misa ends the call, and I watch as she swipes at her cheeks. I don't even think before I slide the door open and walk out onto the deck.

She turns to find me there but doesn't say a word. Walking over, I take a seat across from her and pull my feet up in the chair. I rest my chin on my knees and look at her. She's looking back. Misa is wearing running shorts and a white T-shirt. I haven't seen this much of her skin since we used to go swimming at the neighborhood pool back in the day.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ask.

Her shoulders sag and she leans forward, twisting the ring on her finger. "No." The words barely win out over the static sound of waves crashing on the shore. "My life is..."

"Complicated," I finish. "I know. Tell me."

Misa stares out at the ocean wringing her hands. "I am no longer engaged. Haven't been for a couple of weeks." She blows out a long breath and keeps her eyes on the horizon.

"Wow. So why do you still wear the ring?"

"We're not telling anyone yet. That's the complicated part." Her eyes shoot to mine. "I don't know what I want right now. Am I a terrible person if all I feel is relief?"

"I don't think so," I say. "Like you said, it's complicated."

"You wouldn't understand."

"Hey," I say, my hand reaching for her but coming back to rest on my chair. "Don't underestimate me." Misa remains silent. "There was a time when we shared everything."

She lifts her head. "I remember."

"I mean, I even told you when I farted in my completely silent math class. Mrs. Amond couldn't even keep a straight face." Her mouth spreads into a

smile, and it sends a fluttering kind of warmth through my chest. “Everyone laughed for, like, thirty minutes.”

Finally a chuckle from her.

“They called me Master Blaster for a year!”

Misa is full on laughing now, and what a sight it is. All the defenses she carries have fallen away and I can finally see the woman, not the facade. I laugh along with her, and when that dies down to silence, we wear matching smiles.

“I miss you,” I tell her.

Her smile falls, and that carefree woman disappears as if pulling on a suit of armor. “We should get some sleep. Big day today.”

Chapter Nine

Ninth Grade

AFTER TWO TRIPS to the hobby store, an hour of practicing my lettering, some help from my mom, a little hot glue, and a lot of paint, Misa's Christmas present was finished. I wrapped it and placed it under the tree for when Misa would come over later.

There were two or three inches of snow on the ground, and I was really stoked to finally have a white Christmas. We'd already opened presents at home and had lunch with my grandma, so I was just sitting in my dad's recliner smiling as I watched the snowfall.

"Will Misa be allowed to leave the house with this blizzard?" my mom asked as she rolled her eyes. She did not approve of Misa's father and his overbearing ways. I was used to it, so he didn't bother me much. I just hated when he made Misa sad.

"It's barely coming down," I said. "She'll be here soon. She promised."

"You two are really getting close, aren't you?" Mom asked as she took a seat on the sofa across from me. Her hands wrapped around a warm mug of tea as she blew across the liquid to cool it.

"Yep."

"Does Misa have a boyfriend?"

"What?" I asked, turning toward her now. "No way. Her dad would die first."

Mom chuckled. "Yes, I suppose so. And what about you? Any boys at school catch your eye?"

I pulled on the lever, propping my feet up on the recliner. "'Catch my eye'? Mom, no one says that anymore."

"Okay," she said. "You peepin' any hotties?"

I laughed. It was a sudden and loud noise that erupted out of me and echoed off the walls. "That would be a no."

"Hmm," she hummed as she took a sip of her tea.

“‘Hmm’? What does ‘hmm’ mean?”

“You’re a pretty girl, Penny. Surely boys have noticed.”

“I mean, sometimes they flirt, but I’m not interested in any of those guys.”

“You ever ask yourself why they don’t interest you?” she asked.

“Huh?”

A knock sounded at the front door. I hopped out of the recliner and ran through the room, my socks sliding to a stop as I grabbed the handle. I ushered Misa inside, brushing the snow from her hair and hanging her coat in the foyer.

By the time I made it back to the room, Mom was gone.

Misa handed over a red foil-wrapped box with a green bow. “Merry Christmas,” she said.

I grinned and ripped the paper from the box, prying it open. Inside I found a Japanese yukata robe. It was blue with pink flowers to match hers.

“Thank you!” I shouted as I held the robe up in front of me. “Now we can be twinsies.”

I hustled to the tree and grabbed the small box. “This is kind of a weird gift because half of it is for me,” I warned.

Misa just smiled and took the box from me. She slid her finger beneath the tape and gently pried it up before unfolding the paper. Inside, she found a wooden keychain. It was two halves of a heart that fit together.

“I didn’t want to do what all the other besties did,” I said. “I wanted ours to be special.”

Misa’s piece said, *I’ll keep you wild* and my half said, *I’ll keep you safe*. It was something my grandparents always said to each other, and I felt like it fit Misa and me. She balanced my chaos and I showed her how to let loose.

“It’s perfect!” she squealed. “And I love that *you* made it.”

On our knees, in front of a tacky Christmas tree and a snowy window, we hugged each other until our legs ached.



Present

I SHUFFLE INTO the kitchen in search of coffee around eight a.m. Ryan is freshly showered and looks right at home, frying up some eggs on the stove. He's even wearing an apron that I sincerely hope he found in the house and did not bring from home.

"Coffee," I mumble.

"I've got you," he says, pouring me a cup and sliding it across the counter.

I grunt and drink my coffee while watching him cook. "How long have you been up?"

"About two hours," he says. "Guess I'm still on East Coast time. But that was the best sleep of my life."

"Right?" I say, covering a yawn. "I'd sell a kidney, part of my liver, and maybe my left pinky for that bed." Though it was amazing, I never got back to sleep after waking up with Misa. My brain wouldn't shut off long enough. All I kept thinking about was her broken engagement and the timing of it.

"That's oddly specific," Ryan points out. "Like you've really thought this through."

"I did. I've been awake for a while, too."

I spin on my stool to face the back wall of windows and look out over the beach. It's another beautiful, sunny day. Misa jogs into view. She makes her way up the steps and onto the deck where she bends and stretches after her run. I'm mesmerized watching the way her body moves.

"This bitch would," Ryan says, glancing to the deck with a roll of his eyes and back to his eggs.

"Would what?"

"Work out while on vacation. I mean, I know it's not a real vacation, but even work vacation means you get to take a break."

"I don't think it's in her DNA to take a break from anything."

"She really is beautiful when she's not talking, right?" Ryan says. I turn to find him staring at her now. His gaze is appreciative, lips barely forming a smile.

"She is."

He continues to watch her.

"Oh god. You're not in love with your boss, are you?" I tease.

He looks horrified and does a bothered shake of his shoulders. "Uh, no. Fish is not on the menu."

Looking back to Misa, I watch her grab a towel from the railing and wipe her face and arms with it. Something she probably left out there before her run because Misa is always prepared. She disappears down the deck, and I assume she goes into her room from there.

Ryan places a plate in front of me. “Avocado toast with sprouts and blistered cherry tomatoes, topped with a balsamic drizzle and a free-range organic egg fried in Kerrygold butter.”

“Damn, Ryan. You fancy.”

“Nah. That’s not fancy, but it is delicious,” he says, taking a seat next to me with his plate. “I love food. I love cooking. Been doing it with my grammy since I could walk.”

“That’s cool. I wish I had learned how to cook. Instead I was just blessed with this bangin’ body and amazing personality.”

“Back in North Carolina, my grammy’s been running her own restaurant for forty years. She taught me as soon as I could see over the counter.” He takes a bite and grins. “And thus began my love of food. This trip is my own personal heaven.”

“Mmm,” I say after taking a bite. “This is good. My own personal heaven would resemble Woodstock without all the mud and raw sewage. But definitely the drugs.”

“Girl, eww. I could have easily guessed that,” Ryan says with a chuckle.

When I’m finished with my toast and coffee, I place my dishes in the sink and grab a bottle of water from the fridge. I twist the cap off and tilt my head back, swallowing down almost half of it. I swipe at my mouth and find Misa, dressed in her usual business-chic ensemble, watching me.

“We have to be at the restaurant for ten,” she says, checking her watch.

I nod. “I’m good. Ryan, you good?”

“Be out in a few,” he says, heading down the hall toward his room.

I turn sideways to slide between Misa and the fridge. Her arm shoots out, palm flat against the appliance, blocking my way. I freeze and turn to look at her. Our faces are inches apart, I can feel the heat from her body reaching out for mine.

“And try to wear more clothes in the common areas of the house,” she says. “You probably made Ryan uncomfortable, and this *is* still work.”

I look down at the plaid boxers and sports bra I have on with a smirk. “Ryan is uncomfortable?” I ask before leaning in just an inch more so that

my lips brush the shell of her ear. “Or is it the fourteen years of pent-up curiosity in your lady cave?” I duck under her arm and hightail it to my bedroom, laughing the whole way.



WHEN WE PULL up to the restaurant location, there is a smoking-hot girl standing outside. She’s got jet-black hair cut short and slicked back, shaved on the sides. She’s wearing jeans, a V-neck T-shirt, and black Chuck Taylors. Sleeves of colorful tattoos cover each arm and disappear beneath white cotton sleeves. Cat-eye sunglasses cover her face and a clipboard is gripped in her hands.

“Good god, I want to be that cool when I grow up,” Ryan says, staring at her through the tinted windows of the car.

“Not a chance,” I tell him. “People that cool don’t do spreadsheets.”

He makes a face at me as the car comes to a stop. The door is pulled open, the warm California sunshine pouring in.

“Ladies,” she greets each of us with a helping hand out of the car. “And you must be Ryan. My name is Avery. Pronouns are she/her. I’m a Sagittarius, like long walks on the beach, and retro skateboards, but enough about me,” she says with a smile, full pink lips framing white teeth. “I’ll be your go-to girl during your stay. I hope you had a nice dinner last night.”

I’m thinking Avery could be my go-to girl for lots and lots of things. “Hi, I’m Penny.”

“Lovely to meet you, Penny,” Avery says, taking my hand and placing a kiss on my knuckles.

“Our dinner was lovely,” Misa says. “Misa Ito.”

“Good, good. If you need suggestions of sites to see, restaurants or bars in the area, I can recommend plenty of things. Now, let’s get you guys inside for the tour.” Avery slides in next to me and offers her elbow. I laugh and hook my arm through hers as she guides us through the reflective chrome doors.

Once we’re inside, Avery moves her glasses to the top of her head, and the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen are looking back at me.



SHE GIVES ME a wink. “You’re staring, Penny.”

“Absorbing,” I counter.

“Appreciating?” she asks. I nod and grin. Avery turns to address Misa. “As you can see, this is the main dining area. We kept with a minimalistic look to stay on brand with Chef’s other restaurants but really upped the modern feel here.” Each of us spreads out a bit, taking in the space. “The side facing the cliffs is electrochromic glass allowing us to go from transparent to translucent with the flip of a switch.”

She walks to the wall, hits a button, and the windows facing the ocean turn almost frosted with a bit of light and blurred shapes still filtering through. She hits it again and they return to clear.

“Wow, that’s dope,” I say.

“Indeed,” Avery agrees. “You guys are free to take photos of whatever you need, then we’ll head back to the kitchen.”

“Ryan,” Misa barks. Her tone has definitely gotten worse since we got here, and I hope I didn’t push her too far this morning. I don’t want her to take it out on poor Ryan.

He jumps and pulls a camera from his messenger bag, snapping photos of the room and some detail shots of decor.

“Let’s see,” he says, snapping another photo. “What’s it giving? Modern. Sleek. Perfection.”

Misa continues to wander the room, while Avery hangs back with me near the entry.

“That your boss?” she asks, motioning to Misa.

“She likes to think so,” I say with a shrug.

Avery laughs and throws one of her inked arms around my shoulders. “Looks like a total hard-ass, too. How very New York.”

I grin. She’s not wrong.

When Ryan is finished we follow Avery into the kitchen. The restaurant doesn’t open for two more months, but the space is teeming with employees and smells divine. Chef Delgado is at a cooktop yelling out orders when he spots us.

“Misa,” he says, jogging over and greeting her with the double-cheek kiss. “Penny, love. So glad you could come out to see my new girl, eh?”

Avery leans over, whispering in my ear. “He refers to all his restaurants as women.”

I frown.

“Not in a condescending way,” she adds. “This man adores women. Totally a good guy. A rarity, especially in this industry.”

“Hello, Chef,” Misa greets. “The restaurant is just stunning.”

“She is a beauty, no? And you haven’t even tasted her yet!”

“I can’t wait to taste her,” I blurt out. Avery chuckles, while Ryan snorts and Misa shoots me a look.

“It will be a pleasure,” Chef says. He sweeps his arm to the left, motioning to a busy man in a chef’s uniform. He’s a tall guy with a chiseled face and colorful tattoos covering one arm. Wavy brown hair sticks out of his backward baseball cap. “This is Miguel. He is my very talented executive chef and will be running the restaurant when I am on the opposite coast.”

We shake hands with Miguel as he offers up warm smiles for each of us. “Hi,” he says with a perfect smile. “Welcome to Marco. We’re really excited to have you as our guests.”

“We’re really excited to be your guests,” Ryan says, his hand lingering a bit too long in Miguel’s grip. “Where’s your chef hat? I’ve always wanted a chef hat.”

“Ryan,” Misa chides as Miguel and Chef Delgado laugh.

“Perhaps you will get your own one day,” Chef says. “Avery, darling, can you seat them at my table?”

“Of course. This way, people,” she says, sweeping her arm toward the door.

All four of us take a seat at a table near the kitchen. Avery whips the cloth napkin from its folded shape and places it on my lap. She reaches for Misa’s napkin, but Misa snatches it from her hands.

“I’m sure I can manage on my own,” she snaps. Avery holds up her hands in surrender and takes a seat between Misa and me.

Ryan has already situated himself, and with a fork in one hand and a knife in the other, he is clearly eager to start the tasting.

“Each of you has a menu in front of you. Today, we will be tasting the brunch menu,” Avery says, holding up the thick printed paper. “Tomorrow you will have lunch, and Wednesday, dinner.”

Ryan knocks over an empty glass and drops his silverware on the floor. “Sorry,” he says. “I’m just really excited right now.”

“Ah,” Avery says with a grin. “Here they come.”

Three people, including Miguel, file out of the kitchen, each holding two large silver trays each. They take turns circling the table and placing plates of beautiful food in front of us. Ryan grabs a new fork from one of the other settings at the table.

“Ryan,” Misa snaps. “Take shots of each one before you inhale them.”

He groans but nods and snaps photos of each plate before having a seat again. Misa’s eyes slide over to me, and her expression is nothing but hard lines and death glare. Yep. Definitely pushed her too far this morning. I want emotion from her, not a justified homicide. I pull myself from her gaze and look at all the plates.

“I don’t know where to start,” I say.

Avery slides a plate in between us. “My favorite is the stuffed French toast,” she says, grabbing a fork. “It’s brioche soaked in a rich custard and fried on the griddle, and in the middle is the most delicate bacon-infused patisserie and grilled peaches.” Avery cuts a piece, stabs it with her fork, and holds it out to me.

My lips close over the bread and I slide it from the fork into my mouth. There is so much deliciousness happening at once, my taste buds are kvelling.

“Fuck me running. That is so good!”

Avery laughs and cuts a bite for herself.

“Inappropriate,” Misa says under her breath, keeping her eyes on her plate.

“Oh!” Avery says, sitting up taller with a look of shock on her face. “Do you guys not say *fuck* in New York?”

It’s my turn to laugh, but Misa is not amused.

“Here, girl. Try this one next,” Avery says. “It’s a roasted vegetable and goat cheese quiche.” Again, we share a plate, both moaning as we take synchronized bites.

“How is this so good? Does food just taste better on this side of the country?”

Ryan laughs and tosses a chocolate mousse-stuffed strawberry into his mouth. “I’d believe it,” he says. “I am living for these strawberries.”

Avery leans in. “Perhaps it’s the company?” She gives me that smile again, and I swear Lady Dolla is writing her a personal invitation.

“Perhaps.” This girl is smooth and gorgeous and completely into me. All

this ocean air has me feeling dense. Why did I not embrace her flirting before? I could definitely use a distraction while here, and Avery is my golden ticket.

Refocusing on the food, I point to another dish. “Let’s do that one.” She nods and switches out our plates, feeding me from her fork again.

Ryan tries each dish, oohing and ahing before revisiting his favorites. “My new favorite thing is grilled peaches. It doesn’t count as binge eating if you leave at least two bites on each plate, right?” he asks.

“I’m pretty sure you just made that up, but I’ll get on board,” I say.

Meanwhile, Misa eats quietly, taking exactly two bites of each dish and scribbling into her notebook as she goes. Though every few minutes, she hits me with a look so dark I almost feel ashamed for returning Avery’s flirt. Except she called me a “mistake,” so I tuck that feeling away.

After we’ve tried everything, Chef Delgado and Miguel emerge from the kitchen and have a seat with us. Ryan looks like he could burst—from the food and from sitting next to the famous chef. Misa is all business. And Avery, well, she’s got her hand on the back of my chair, tracing the pattern on my dress with her fingertips.

“How was everything?” Chef asks.

“Splendid,” Ryan says.

“Delicious,” I say.

“Impressive,” Misa says as we all talk over each other.

He throws back his head and lets out a loud guffaw. It echoes in the empty room. “So happy you liked it,” he says. “Miguel and I have been hard at work for months on this menu.”

Miguel nods and pours himself a glass of water from a pitcher on the table.

“Before I let you go, we celebrate with a round of my own recipe of mimosas, no?”

“Yes!” I say excitedly with a little clap.

“Good. They will be out any minute now.”

Avery scoots her chair closer. “Are you free tonight?” she asks.

I feel Misa’s eyes on me, but I refuse to look. Instead, I smile and shrug. “I’m not sure yet.”

She pulls a card from her clipboard and slides it into my pocket. “That has my number on it. Call me. I’d love to show you around San Diego.”

“Before the drinks arrive, I need your restroom,” Misa says, standing and smoothing down the front of her dress. “Which way is it?”

“To the right of the front door,” Avery says, her eyes never leaving me.

“Penny?” I look up to find Misa waiting. “You coming?” Though it’s supposed to be a question, I know that it’s not.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Avery, standing and tossing my napkin onto my chair.

I have to walk quickly to keep up with Misa. The sound of her heels clicking against the concrete floors sounds like a ticking bomb. She pushes through the bathroom door, and I follow her in.

“What did—”

My words, my thoughts are cut off when Misa pins me against the door and kisses the hell out of me.

“Is this okay?” she asks, briefly pulling away. I nod and her hands are everywhere, her knee presses between my legs. Her lips and tongue devour me as she moans and hums as if finally surrendering. My hands hold onto her waist as she continues our so-very-stereotypical lesbo bathroom make-out session. The only thing missing is loud music vibrating through the walls and someone banging on the door telling us to hurry it up.

Misa’s hands leave my body and press to the door on each side of my head. She straightens her arms, and now her mouth is gone, too. Our foreheads rest against each other while we exchange panting breaths.

“God, Penny,” she says, her hand resting on my neck. “Why must you torture me?”

Misa steps back, and my eyes meet hers. “To make sure you know what you want. Your signals have been more mixed up than a milkshake.”

“I know what I want, Penny. I’ve wanted it for so long.” Her thumb sweeps up my neck as her fingers curl into my hair. “I lost sight of it, and my life spiraled into a giant lie. But all that is over now. What I need to know is if you want it, too.”

I nod. “Of course, Misa.”

She leaves me there, being held up by the door, to check herself in the mirror. Misa smooths down her hair and wipes away the smudged lipstick before righting her twisted dress. She moves toward me now and grabs for the handle. I step aside as she pulls the door open. When her eyes meet mine, I recognize what I’ve been wanting.

“You are *not* free tonight” is all she says before the door closes behind her.

I blink, one, two times before covering my mouth with both hands and holding in a squeal. My heart is pounding so hard I move my hands down to soothe it. Checking my own reflection, I see something different there—something new. I don’t know if this is a good idea or if it’s the beginning of a disaster. All I know is I’m greedy for the taste that lingers on my tongue.

Back at the table, the drinks have been delivered as Ryan chats up both chefs like a true fangirl. As soon as I grab my glass, Chef Delgado toasts us and we drink.

“Sweet and tart,” I say. “So fruity. I love it.”

Chef has engaged in conversation with Misa, Miguel, and Ryan as I sit back and remember that this is my life. I sip my drink while Avery does the same, looking over the glass at me with those eyes I want to swim in.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “My boss is making us work tonight.”

“That’s a bummer,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“Well, you have my number if you can slip away.”

I nod.

“Avery,” Chef calls out with a grin. “The beautiful Penny, eh?”

She sits back in her chair with a smirk, tipping her glass up to empty it. My cheeks burn.

“My Avery, she is smart and beautiful, no? Used to run one of my nonprofits here, but I stole her for myself. She gets all the beautiful women. Me? I have to earn it. If you are a three-star Michelin chef, it makes no difference,” he says with a chuckle. “Right, Miguel?”

Miguel’s lips purse together and slide sideways on his face. He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t know, Chef.”

“Ah, one day,” he tells Miguel, rubbing his shoulder affectionately. “I want you to know that this man has a big future in the culinary world.”

“I’m sure the ladies just adore you, Chef,” Misa says, forcing a smile that to any other person would seem genuine.

“I see that ring on your finger,” Chef replies. “Otherwise, who knows what our destinies would bring, eh?”

Another forced smile. All business. “Thank you so much for this amazing brunch today. I suppose we will see you tomorrow?” Misa asks as she stands.

“Yes, yes. Are you enjoying the house?” Chef asks.

“Absolutely,” Ryan answers. “The view is amazing.”

“The sheets are amazing,” I say. Chef laughs.

“Good. You are my guests—what’s mine is yours.” We make our way through the dining room and out the front doors where the car is already waiting. “Make sure you have time to explore the beautiful coast during your stay,” he says. “I will see you tomorrow.”

Ryan climbs into the car, followed by Misa. When it’s my turn, Avery grabs my hand and spins me into a hug. It’s not overly friendly, and I know she’s just reminding me of her offer.

“Don’t let her work you too hard,” she says with her lips pressed into my hair.

I give her a grin and turn to go, tripping over my own feet and falling headfirst into the car. My face is in Misa’s lap with my ass hanging out, one knee on the ground.

“Ta daaaa,” I shout, hopping up and raising my hands in the air as if I’ve stuck the landing. “I’m okay.”

Everyone is trying to hide their laughter as I take a bow. “Byeeeeee,” I say with a wave, hopping into the car and closing the door behind me.

“Oh my god, did you just flash your cakes to all of them? Did that really happen?” Ryan says, laughing with secondhand embarrassment, his cheeks turning pink.

“I did,” I admit with a shrug. “I think I skinned my knee.” Lifting up the skirt of my sundress, I find angry red lines and a little blood.

“Are you okay?” Misa asks, wearing a concerned expression and leaning down to get a better look. Ryan’s eyes go wide, probably shocked at her concern for another human being.

“I’ve survived worse. Believe me. On my last visit to Greenland, I slipped on a wet patch of grass and literally slid halfway down a mountain. My ass was bruised for weeks. And that’s one place I don’t need any swelling, you know?”

Misa straightens up and catches Ryan’s surprised expression. “I don’t need any work-related injuries on my watch.”

Ryan rolls his eyes. “So, what are we going to do for the rest of the day?”

Misa feigns disinterest. “You can do whatever you want. Make sure you’re back at a decent time and presentable tomorrow morning for a meeting

at nine.” She looks at me now. “I’ll be in my room working.”

“I’m exhausted,” I say, looking out the window at the passing houses. “I’m going to take a nap.” The lie slips out just that easy.

We pull into the driveway and pile out of the car. “Well, you two are lame. I’m going to change and head down to explore the beach for a while. Might walk back to La Jolla Village.”

“Have fun,” I say as he heads down the hall to his room.

“And by the way,” Ryan calls out, “fantastic ass, Winters.”

I let out a laugh as he retreats into his room. As soon as his door closes, Misa grabs my hand and pulls me down our hall at a full run. She throws open her door, and I scurry inside, closing it behind me.

“I’m tired of fighting this,” she says while standing halfway across the room with her back to me. “I refuse to do it anymore.”

When Misa faces me, there is a new lightness in her posture, a saunter to her walk. What was hurried and frantic before morphs into slow and seductive. I want to dive right in and devour her, but my brain won’t accept a victory. Not unless she really means it.

Misa stands in front of me now while I lean against the door. “Why have you been fighting this?” I ask.

She doesn’t say a word.

“Believe me, I want you, Misa. In some way, I always have. But you weren’t even willing to give our friendship a chance. Why?”

She reaches for me, her hands on each side of my face. She rests her forehead against mine and her hair falls around us—a black curtain shutting out the rest of the world.

“Because I couldn’t risk being near you, spending time with you. Because even after all these years, I can’t resist the bewitching, magnetic pull of you. I’m not allowed to have you, Penny.”

“Not allowed?” She shakes her head. “I don’t understand.”

Misa spins away and holds her hair up. “Unzip me, please.”

My shaking fingers reach for the metal zipper and I pull it down, revealing inches of flawless skin. She pulls on the dress, and it drops—the impenetrable armor piled at her feet. My eyes rake up her body, and when I reach the black-and-gray tattoo on her shoulder, the air rushes from my lungs.

“I’ll keep you wild,” I read the delicate inked script aloud.

Without thought, I press a kiss over those words.

Misa sighs and leans into my kiss. “You’ve always been with me.”

Chapter Ten

Ninth Grade

I PULLED MISA inside with a giggle and led her upstairs. She followed with no questions. Pushing my door open, we shuffled into my room and locked the door behind us.

“What was so important that I had to come over at eight in the morning on a Saturday?” Misa asked, covering a yawn.

“I found something you have to see. My mom and dad are at the farmer’s market until, like, noon.” I turned on my television, grabbed the remote, and sat on my bed next to Misa.

“I had to tell my dad you had a homework emergency,” she said. “As if.”

As I pressed Play on the remote, my eyes left the screen and focused on Misa. I could hear the cheesy music and the awful dialogue, but I needed to see her reaction to this.

“What is this?” she asked. I glanced at the screen just as clothes started coming off. “What are they doing?” she almost shouted. “Is this a porno?” Misa asked, her voice much softer now.

“Yes. I found it in my mom’s underwear drawer.”

Misa briefly looked at me, then back to the television. “And we’ll discuss later what you were doing in your mom’s underwear drawer. Oh my god.”

My eyes leave her bewildered face just in time to see the two girls kiss before turning their attention to the guy standing there naked and very ready to go.

“I’ve never seen a penis before,” Misa whispered. “Do they all look like that?”

I grinned. “I don’t think so. I mean, I’ve seen them in Mom’s *National Geographic* magazine before, and they didn’t look like that.”

“So, this is sex.” Her eyes widened, and she scooted closer to the television, her feet dangling off the edge of my bed.

“I think this is a version of sex.”

“It looks like a lot of work.”

“It sounds like it feels good.”

“And why are there two girls?” Misa asked. “Is that a rule or something?”

I chuckled and paused the action. “I’m pretty sure this is an exception. Like, a guy’s top goal is to get two girls at once.”

Misa finally turned to me. “How do you know so much about sex?”

I lie back on my bed. “My parents are really open about it. We talk about it all the time.”

“I. Would. Die,” Misa said, falling back next to me.

The room was silent except for our breathing, which was notably faster than normal. I was super aware of every part of Misa’s body that was touching mine. Her elbow, her fingers, her thigh, her toes.

“I’m certainly not an expert. This is the first time I’ve seen it, like, in person.”

Misa sat up and stared at the frozen threesome on the screen. There was a pretty clear shot of one girl’s boobs and the guy’s penis standing at attention.

“What if it was only the two women?” she asked. “How would two women have sex? Like, they have the same parts, so how does that work?”

I sat up and shrugged. “You want to finish watching to find out?”

Misa nodded, her gaze frozen on the TV. “Definitely yes.”



Present

WE FALL INTO Misa’s bed together, naked, soft flesh pressed together. Reunited in new ways. Legs twist and curl around each other until nothing but hot exhaled breaths fit between us. My lips explore every delicate spot—the curve of her neck, inside her elbow, the back of her knee, those two dimples above her ass. My hands slide over soft, flawless skin and bend her body to my will.

I fill that collarbone dip with a swipe of my tongue and a kiss to follow. My hands pin her wrists to the bed because somehow I know that she’s tired of being the one in charge. Somehow I know she needs me to lead.

I straddle her body now, our wetness stacked and aching. Misa shifts her hips beneath me. As soon as I release her hands they reach for my breasts.

She cups them, weighs them, sweeps her fingers across my sensitive nipples before pinching them. My head drops back and I let out a moan that is so loud it surprises even myself.

I grind down on her while she pushes up, but it's not enough. Misa flips me over, again her hair falling around us, and her mouth wraps around my nipple. While she consumes me, my skin, every inch she can reach—her body never stops writhing, seeking out the connection she needs.

“You're so beautiful,” she says, fingers trailing down my stomach.

I smile for her because though I've heard that plenty in my life—I've always been waiting to hear it from her.

We roll over again and I slide down her body, throwing a leg over each of my shoulders. My eyes connect with hers, nothing but her naked body and vulnerability between us. I press my tongue against her and am rewarded by a strangled whimper coupled with her arched back, sheets fisted in a white-knuckled grip, and my name on her lips.

I take my time with Misa because this may be all I get. This may be the only chance after fourteen years of wanting. So I relish it. I tease her. I worship her. I make her beg me for release. And when I am sure she can't take anymore, I give it to her.

If Misa is beautiful in business suits and power heels, she is a fucking Monet naked and calling my name. Her whimpers fill the room and urge me to keep going, keep teasing, but the way her thighs clamp down, I know she's begging me to stop.

“Penny,” she breathes out while pressing a hand to her heart. “Jesus, Penny. I'm dizzy. I've never...” Misa takes a few quick breaths. “So intense.”

Crawling up her body, I hover over her. She's still recovering from her orgasm, and I wear it like a shiny mask of pride on my face. I press my lips to her neck, loving that I'm responsible for the quick pace of her pulse beneath my lips.

“Kiss me,” she says. I don't need to be told twice. Some girls love to taste themselves, some don't. Misa seems desperate for it—for me. Our tongues slide together, slowly this time, relishing the way our tastes combine into one sweet flavor. Her teeth gently clamp down on my bottom lip before dragging them away. I hum in approval.

Lying half on the bed, half on her body, we sit in silence and panting

breaths for a few minutes, absorbing everything from the moments before. Suddenly, she seems sparked to life, pushing me over and now straddling my body.

“I love your tits,” she says, palming each one. “I always wanted tits like this. Instead,” she stops and moves her hands to her own chest, “I’ve got these little things.”

“They are perfect,” I say, bucking my hips beneath her.

Misa’s eyes move over my body, a sly smile on her face. “You’ve got a group of freckles right here,” she says, her fingers tracing over my ribs. “They look like the Little Dipper.”

I grin, appreciating her eyes on me. Adoring her eyes on me. “I love your tattoo,” I say.

“I got it as soon as I turned eighteen.”

“I can’t believe it,” I say, my hands resting on her thighs.

She slides down my body and perches between my thighs. My heart is hammering, my pulse is like thunder in my ears. Misa places kisses on the inside of my knees, slowly making her way up. Her mouth transforms from gentle to teasing nips and bites along the flesh of my inner thighs.

When Misa’s hot breath fans over my wetness, I could combust from the needy ache that’s been building there. Her eyes meet mine. “I’ve never,” she says.

I snap up so that I’m sitting, looking down at her. “Wait, what?”

Misa pushes up on her knees between my thighs. “I experimented with girls but never went that far,” she says. “I was young and I was searching, and none of them were you.”

She bites her lip again, and I can’t concentrate with both of us naked. My body pulses with need, but I don’t want to push her.

“You don’t have to,” I tell her. “I mean that.”

“I want to,” she says. “I’m just not sure how.”

I grin and scoot closer, pulling her down for a kiss. Because in this moment, she is so vulnerable. I need her to know that I still want her. All of her. Whatever she is willing to give. The kiss transforms from soft and yielding to something made of determination.

Misa pushes on my shoulders so that I fall back onto the pillows. She lowers herself between my thighs while staying on her knees. I love the way her hair fans across my legs and how the narrow lines of her waist

dramatically curve out to hips and ass. My hand blindly searches the nightstand until I find the hairband I saw earlier. I tap her shoulder, and when she looks up at me from between my legs I almost forget what I want to say.

“Here. This will make it easier.” Misa grins and takes the hairband from me. My eyes watch every curve and movement of her body as she pulls her hair back and ties it into a messy knot on top of her head. I give her a wink, and she grins before resuming her position.

The moment her tongue connects with my flesh, it’s as if a circuit is connected. I am a live wire, electrified and gasping for air. As with every other goal Misa’s set in her life, she’s an expert in no time. I rock my body against her mouth as we find a rhythm that suits us both.

“Fuck,” I grit out when my orgasm rips through me much sooner than I’ve ever experienced. I squeeze my eyes shut, the muscles of my stomach and legs pull tight, but Misa keeps pushing. She licks and laps at me until there are tears in my eyes and my head is swimming. Just when I think I’ll pass out, a second climax hits. Teeth gritted, a growling kind of scream escapes my throat, my entire body caught in the ecstasy between consciousness and dream. A chill races down my spine while my skin feels like it’s on fire. I gasp for breaths as Misa finally releases me. She gets up on her knees and swipes at her proud and smirking mouth.

“Life is so good,” I moan. “Come here.” She falls onto me and we roll together until we are tangled again.

“I want to do that again,” she says.

I laugh and kiss the sweet space below her ear. “I want to let you,” I say.

My hand moves from her waist and slides down between us. Fingers slide over slick flesh until they find their destination. Curving my wrist, I push two fingers inside. Misa’s nails dig into my back as she pulls me closer.

“Penny,” she says against my skin. When my hand moves, filling her at a furious pace, she bites down on my shoulder with a whimper.

Misa falls away, lying on her back now as I continue to move inside her. My mouth finds her nipple and I bite down. She lets out a pleasurable moan, and I give her more—a third finger, more teeth, everything I have.

Her body is pulled tight and I can see every muscle, every tendon, and every curve that I want to memorize. Her whimpers come in time with my furious pace, and my arm burns as it works her over but I don’t ever want to stop.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she says, sinking her hips down against my hand in hard, violent movements. I press my thumb to her clit, and she is gone. I can almost see her climax pulling her toward the sky and then fluttering away as she sinks back into the bed.

“That was.” She stops, her dark eyes finding mine as the sun sets behind sheer curtains. “I...uh...wow.”

“That’s how you know it’s good,” I say. “When you can’t find the words. There’s so much more I want to show you,” I say.

Misa rolls into my arms and gently kisses my lips. “But first, a shower?”

I nod and crawl from the bed. She smacks my ass and follows, her hands never leaving my body.



OUR WET, SOAPY bodies slide against each other as we kiss against the granite wall. Showerheads from every direction pulse and spray sweaty skin. Misa presses me to the shower wall and explores my body with the palms of her hands, her fingers and lips. She moves slowly and with purpose, my thighs shaking from her efforts. Her intent to go slow and relish this moment is broken when I call out her name—a desperate plea amplified by the four stone walls.

She grabs both of my wrists in one hand and pins them to the wall above my head while pushing inside me with her other. Warm water washes even warmer skin as Misa’s lips find my neck. Her tongue and lips leave sucking kisses down my chest, nuzzling between my breasts. Misa’s free hand pinches one nipple, gently twisting, while her lips wrap around the other. The intensity of being touched by her in so many places at once has me up on my tiptoes, seeking out more.

Her pace is hard and fast, filling me up, pushing so deep that I never want it to stop. Misa’s mouth leaves my breast and finds mine. Our kiss is sloppy but satisfying as she alternates between fucking me and sliding her slick fingers out to tease my clit.

“Please,” I beg. She grins against my mouth and gives me just what I need to climax before melting to the floor. Misa drops with me, and soon we

are smiling and laughing and holding on to each other while rivers of water carve down our bodies.

We take turns washing each other. After I rinse the soap from her and wash her hair, it is my turn. I moan and hum as she massages my scalp until she threatens to keep me here forever if I don't stop making those noises. While I wouldn't mind another round, my stomach is growling and I know that Ryan could be back by now.

After wrapping a towel around myself, I check the hall and sneak into my room to grab my suitcase, bringing it into Misa's room.

She gets into her cami and yoga pants while I wear my favorite boxers folded over a few times and a sports bra. Misa begs me to put a T-shirt on, so after flashing her, I do. We kiss and kiss until I feel like I can't breathe unless I'm kissing her. Her hunger pries us apart, and we venture into the kitchen to look for food.

Misa checks Ryan's room, and he's still not back. She climbs up on a stool at the kitchen island and watches me rummage for food.

"There's plenty to cook," I say. "But I really don't feel like it. Want to order takeout?"

"Sure."

We use an app on my phone to order from a local Mexican joint with great reviews. While we wait for the food to arrive, we slip out onto the deck to enjoy the sound of the ocean.

I sit in one of the wicker recliners and pat the spot in front of me. Misa shakes her head and sits next to me.

"What if Ryan comes back?" she asks.

That one question sparks a million more in my mind. Where is this going? What are we doing? Will she pretend this didn't happen when we get back to New York? I don't want to break the bubble of bliss we're in right now, so I keep the heavy questions to myself. But others slip through the cracks.

"Do you love him? Your fiancé?"

She looks out over the water and nods. "Ex-fiancé. I love him like you love a friend who's been there for you through rough times. I've never been in love with him, though. He's a nice man. Treats me decently. Kind of a mama's boy. He spends a lot of time with her. It doesn't bother me because I'm honestly happier when he's not around."

I turn to her. “Did you have sex with him?”

Misa meets my eyes. “Once. Then I convinced him I wanted to wait until we were married.”

“Why were you marrying him?”

She sighs and rubs the finger where her ring usually sits. I made her take it off after it scratched me in the shower.

“That morning my dad found you and me in bed together,” Misa says. “He assumed things. Things that were true but that we didn’t even know yet. After you left, he told me that such things were a disgrace to his family and he forbid me to see you.”

“Is that why you moved away?” I ask, dropping my feet to the deck and resting my hands on her knees.

“Yes.”

“So that he could get you away from me?”

She nods. “I told him I would never stay away from you. That you were my best friend in the world and the only person who really knew me. He said that was unacceptable.”

I shoot to my feet and grab the deck railing, my fingers wrap around it as my nails claw against the wood. There is so much anger in me, it twists my stomach until I feel sick. “He had no right, Misa. How could he do that? We were just friends. I knew he never liked me, but fuck. He’s such a…”

“He’s made me the woman I am today,” she says from beside me, her hand rubbing my back. “He pushed me to be better than everyone, to be the best, to be hard, and to work hard. Where he’s from, in his culture, your family reputation is everything. He says I would have brought shame to the Ito name.”

My head whips toward her now, the sound of my pulse and the crashing waves like static in my ears. “And I was that shame?”

Misa nods and drops her hand. “He saw what we never got to discover while still having each other. And he stopped it. Anything other than marrying a Japanese man was forbidden,” she says.

“And your mom? She just let him do this?” I ask. “She used to be so cool and balanced him out. Just like you and I did.”

“Penny, my mom died a few months after we moved. A car accident.”

“Shit. I’m so sorry,” I say, dropping back into my chair. “I didn’t know.”

“You couldn’t have,” Misa says. “She was gone. Dad ruled my life. And

that was it. A year ago he introduced me to Jet, and it just seemed easy.” I shake my head in disbelief. “I just want to make him happy, Penny. That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. I only have one parent. I’d do anything to keep him in my life and make him proud. I knew marrying Jet would do that.” She takes a seat across from me now.

“So you just live a lie? You sacrifice your true self and your happiness?”

Misa nods. “He’s all I’ve got left. I couldn’t live with disappointing him. But now I don’t know what I’ll do or how I’ll explain our breakup.”

The doorbell rings. She kisses my cheek and makes her way inside. I stare out at the beach and think about every grain of sand it takes to make up such a place. Millions and millions of tiny pieces beat and broken down into their simplest shape and brought together to make something so beautiful.

I watch Misa place the food on the kitchen table and start unpacking it. She has been through so much, beat and broken down, while my life has been exactly what I wanted. And now she is facing decisions that no one should have to. Together we are beautiful, but I never want to be another burden in her life.

I lean against the deck and vow to take these next few days in California and live them to the fullest. To bring her happiness and orgasms and so much love that it might just be enough to last her a lifetime.

Chapter Eleven

Our Only Summer

A SEAGULL SQUAWKED overhead as I turned my skateboard and circled Misa.

“You want to try?” I asked, jumping the curb and sailing down the sidewalk. I rolled back to where she was walking.

“I’d probably break my ass,” Misa said.

I yanked on her ponytail. “Come on, I’ll never let you fall. You know that.” I put one foot on the street and kicked my board up, grabbing it with my hand. “See? It’s harmless.”

“Okay, I’ll try it. But don’t let go of me.” She kissed two fingers and held them up. I did the same and pressed them together. “Misa and Penny’s Rules Number Eight: Always have your bestie’s back.”

I dropped my skateboard and held it in place with one foot. “Okay, put one foot up front.” Misa carefully placed her left foot near the front of the board. “Good. Now, you’ll push off with your right foot. Once you start to roll, put it on the back of the board. It’s all about balance from there.”

“Shouldn’t I be wearing a helmet and protective pads?” Misa asked.

“Just do it,” I huffed.

With my hands on her ribs, I felt Misa take a deep breath. She pushed off, and I ran alongside her.

“Good,” I said. “One more push, then get all the way on.”

She pushed off the street again and set her foot on the back of the board. A huge smile spread across her face as I ran to keep up.

“I’m doing it!” she shouted. Misa threw her arms up in victory, which must have thrown off her balance because before I knew what was happening, we both tumbled to the asphalt. There we sat, laughing with skinned knees and bruised elbows until she was ready to try again.

That afternoon, we decided to cruise the streets to show off my new bike. It was one of those ordinary days of hanging out with your best friend. Misa and I were riding bikes around our neighborhood. Her bike was all chrome

with a black seat and reflective tape her father insisted on. Mine was bright pink with foil tassels that hung from the handlebars. I loved the shushing noise they made when I rode as fast as I could. We had no destination, no goal for the day. Except somehow we ended up at an abandoned house a few blocks over. A cool breeze blew in the smell of saltwater from the coast and the sky was a vibrant blue with no clouds in sight. Misa and I laid in the overgrown grass and made up stories about our future selves living in that house. While mine was full of art and plants and potluck dinners, Misa's was built on family, a husband, finally getting a dog, and maybe her own office where she would hang awards from her job.

It was a typical example of how opposite we were but how perfect our relationship worked. Eventually, we laid on our sides, resting our heads in our hands while dragonflies buzzed over our heads. We each described how we would decorate the house, what color we would paint the shutters, where the furniture would sit. It was a complete fantasy that showed us living very different lives. It never occurred to us that we could live in that house together.



Present

WHEN MISA WALKS into the kitchen at nine a.m., still wearing her tank top and yoga pants, I think Ryan's eyes are going to roll out of his head and across the travertine floor. His mouth hangs open as she pours herself a glass of juice and downs it in front of the sink. I smile over my bowl of yogurt and fruit and keep my head down.

"What in the casual Wednesday? Are we not meeting right now?" Ryan asks before looking at his watch. "My schedule says we're supposed to be meeting."

Misa turns and leans against the counter. "We can meet tomorrow. There are a few hours until we need to be ready. I want to check out the beach." She looks at me through those thick lashes, and I cross my legs to ease the ache.

"Oh, thank god," Ryan says. "I was up so late last night. I'm going to take a power nap until we have to go."

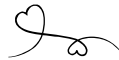
"Later," I tell him as he takes off down the hall.

Misa moves around the kitchen island and stands behind me. She presses her front to my back, sliding her hands around my waist and nudging my legs apart. Soft, flattened fingers slide over the seam of my boxers, and I collapse against her.

“Come to the beach with me?” she asks. “There’s a little nook right past the house that is pretty secluded.”

I nod.

“Good.” She removes her hand and walks away. “Be ready in five.”



I LIE ON my stomach on my towel, reading another book thrown in my bag at the last minute.

Lady Dolla is happy to report that she is sat-is-fied.

Glad to hear. Already had sex on your bed twice. ;)

I ignore Ross, sincerely hoping that he’s joking. Misa lies on her side, facing me. Her fingers play connect the dots from freckle to freckle on my back. I’ve read the same paragraph three times, so I close the book and turn to her.

“Tell me about the other girls,” I say. “I want to be jealous and petty right now.”

“Way to identify your emotions.”

“Eh,” I say. “It’s a talent. Along with being able to guess anyone’s bra size and shit-kicking the patriarchy.”

She laughs.

“I’ve got great tits, too, but that’s more genetic than talent.”

“Amazing tits,” Misa corrects. She rolls onto her back and brings her sunglasses down over her eyes. “Not much to tell as far as other girls go. Nothing ever serious. High school was difficult. My mom was gone and my dad was always on me. I wasn’t black enough for the black kids and not Asian enough for the Asian kids. So I kept to myself and focused on schoolwork.”

“I’m sorry. That sounds awful.”

“I survived,” she says. “Like everything else.”

“Still, life isn’t about just surviving, right?” I ask, wrapping my hand around hers and raking them through the sand.

“It’s felt that way for a long time. Losing you, then my mom. Things were...tough,” Misa admits. “Then I met this girl named Jess at Japanese summer camp. Yes, Dad really made me go,” she says before I can comment. “She was not just out of the closet, she wore rainbow pins and sewed feminist patches onto her denim jacket, and shaved the side of her head. And everyone celebrated her for it.”

Misa releases my hand and turns to me again. “I couldn’t imagine being like her. She was unreal—and my first girl kiss.”

“She sounds like me,” I say.

“I’ve always wished you would have been my first,” Misa responds. “But Jess, she was wild like you and just so out there.”

“I guess it’s such a relief when you realize who you are and why you feel the things you do, you want to shout it from the mountaintops. Instead, you wear rainbow everything, start resenting boys for no reason, and go down on the principal’s daughter because that asshole gave you detention for wearing a Uteruses Before Duderuses shirt to school.”

“What?” she asks with a laugh.

“Okay, so that last one was probably just me.”

“I bet you were a sight.”

“I was just me.”

Misa sighs. “After Jess, I knew for sure that I was into girls.” She shakes her head. “Even now, it is hard for me to say that out loud. Isn’t that ridiculous?”

I just shrug because I don’t want to make her feel worse.

“For a long time, I thought it was just you. That maybe I loved my best friend a little too much. Jess helped me see myself more clearly. But I knew that my dad would never allow it. He’d flat out told me so after we moved away. So, I played around a lot in college. It was the first time I was out from under his thumb.”

“But kitty was not on the menu?” I ask. “You beat around the bush?” I laugh. “See what I did there?”

Misa sits up and stares out at the ocean and the waves that crash and run up the sand a few feet from where we sit. “I always felt like if I didn’t do *that*, then I could still deny what I was. It’s stupid. I know. So, I let them do

whatever they wanted to me and I enjoyed every damn minute. But I never reciprocated.”

I sit up now, too. “Oh my god, you were a pillow princess!”

“A what? I was not.”

“You were, too,” I say with a laugh, launching myself at her. Misa falls back and my body covers hers. Her fingers skim the waist of my bikini bottoms. “So, what was your pleasure, princess? Butch girls? Lipsticks? Androgynous?”

She kisses my lips and raises her knee between my legs to keep me in place. “Redheads.”

There’s heavy petting and lots of kissing, but even I can’t convince Misa to get busy on the beach. What with all the sand in crevices and public nudity and all. Still, swimsuit material is thin and she feels every bit of my roaming hands and hot kisses. I tease her until she is writhing beneath my touch. All it takes is some dirty words whispered in her ear and a few seconds of my hand into her barely there bottoms to get her off. She curses me and kisses me at the same time. In my world, that is perfection.



“OH MY GOD, you’re glowing,” Avery says, walking me to our table for lunch. “You got laid last night. No wonder you didn’t call. You wound me, Red.” She places a hand over her heart and gives me a devious smirk.

“In any other situation at any other time, I’d give you a cat bath with my tongue,” I tell her. “They don’t make girls like you in New York. I bet you taste like sunshine and reggae music.” Avery chuckles. “But as it turns out, I’ve got other interests while in Cali.”

Avery follows my gaze to Misa and grins. “No worries. I know when I’ve been beaten,” she says. I don’t tell her that it was never a contest.

Lunch is even better than our brunch menu with flavor combinations I’d never dream of. The beautiful plating makes the simplest dishes look amazing. When Avery excuses herself to check on something in the kitchen, Ryan tugs on my sleeve.

“I met someone last night,” he says. His eyes shine and one side of his mouth lifts up as he samples the dish in front of him. “Didn’t get in until six

this morning.”

I laugh and bump his shoulder with my own. “California loooove,” I sing.

“Pack a vest for your Jimmy in the city of sex,” Ryan raps.

“Guys!” Misa says with a frown. Ryan and I both sit up taller, abandoning our song.

“But for real,” I whisper. “Did you pack a vest for your Jimmy?”

He chuckles. “Yes, Mom. My Jimmy is safe.”

“Good. Now eat your vegetables and don’t forget to call more often, dear.”

Ryan shakes his head at my antics. “Don’t be mad if I’m not down to spend quality time with you and Miss—I mean Misa—for the rest of the week,” Ryan says. “I’m going to be occ-u-pied.”

“I assure you, I’ll be fine.” He grins and goes back to his food.

When lunch is finished, Chef Delgado greets us again and thanks us for being his guests. He tells us he’s got something special planned for tomorrow evening, and Ryan is beside himself. We all share a delicious after lunch cocktail created to complement the food. It’s light and tart and the perfect end to the perfect meal.

Chef Delgado stretches his arms out, laying them on the back of Ryan and Miguel’s chairs on each side of him. “We have spent so much time tied up in this opening and developing the menu I feel like I haven’t seen the sun in months. I hope you all are soaking it up enough for all of us.”

Ryan sweeps his blond hair from his eyes. “I mean, I’ve spent too much time indoors so far,” he answers with a smirk.

“Centavo, do you enjoy California?” he asks me.

I nod. “Yes, but I miss home, too.”

“What do you do when you’re not designing fantastic art for me, huh?” Chef asks with a grin.

“I mostly volunteer at a gay-and-lesbian youth center in my neighborhood,” I answer. “When I’m not there, I’m recruiting volunteers or collecting donations.”

“That is admirable,” he says. I can feel Misa’s gaze on me; the proud smile she wears warms me like a fire in my belly.

“Thank you. Just trying to be a good human. And also pressure more queers to be a bigger part of their community. Something I’m really good at.”

Chef raises his glass and we all follow. “To being a good human. May we

all strive to be the best we can be.”

In the car, Ryan clasps his hands together and wiggles his eyebrows. “What do you think our special surprise is tomorrow?” he asks. “I’m gagging with excitement. Maybe it’s truffles. God, let it be truffles. Edible gold foil on the desserts? I’ve always wanted to eat gold.”

“Dude,” I say. “Your bucket list is odd.”

“Or maybe tableside flambé?” he asks, ignoring me. Ryan rubs his stomach. “I had no idea you volunteered at a youth center, Penny. That’s super decent of you.”

“You could be decent, too,” I say, always working.

Ryan blows out a breath. “Brooklyn is a long trek for me, girl.”

“I can help you find a place in your neck of the island.”

He grins and nods. “Okay.”

“I’ll hold you to that when we get home,” I say, pointing my finger at him.

“I am so full. But it was so good I couldn’t stop eating,” Ryan says, rubbing his belly. “This will mean lots of time in the gym, hunty. And not just in the shower room.”

“Could you be more cliché?” I ask.

“Don’t try me, Miss Winters.”

I catch Misa’s sigh and the way she sinks back into the leather seat. “The two glasses of wine were amazing. I’m sure that bottle costs more than I make in a week. I need a raise because I need wine like that in my life.”

Misa stays quiet, staring out of the window. Back at the house, Ryan says he’s going to change and then he’s off to explore again, giving me an exaggerated wink.

“What time do you want to meet tomorrow?” I ask Misa.

She looks from me to Ryan. “Let’s do nine. That way we have the rest of the day free until dinner. You two can do all the exploring you want while I catch up on work.”

Ryan snaps off a salute and heads to his room while Misa and I go to hers.

“Are you okay?” I ask when we’re behind closed doors. “You were quiet all through lunch and didn’t even touch your wine.”

She nods, unzipping her skirt and pushing it to the floor. She takes a seat on the edge of her bed. “It’s just...I didn’t realize how many lies I tell every

day—to my dad, my coworkers, myself. I guess it’s all catching up with me now.”

I climb into her lap, straddling her thighs. “What you need is a distraction. Let’s go out.”

Her eyebrows dip low over concerned eyes.

“Don’t worry. There’s no one to out us here. We can go to San Diego and make out on the beach. We can rent bikes and share a milkshake. We can hold hands on public transportation. You are free here, Misa. Let’s take advantage.”

She gives me a half-hearted smile. “Okay.”

An hour later, we are heading south on I-5 in a powder-blue rented convertible. The ocean air whips around us, and we are all smiles and laughter behind oversized sunglasses. My hair is tied up in a scarf while Misa’s braid is tucked behind her shoulder.

I’ve got one hand on the wheel and the other on her knee as the sun warms our skin. Misa’s fingers wrap around mine and she grins wider than I’ve seen since we were kids. There’s a sharp kind of pain in my chest that all of this is temporary, that everything beyond this trip is unknown. But I push that aside and live in the moment, connected to this woman who needs this freedom more than I need to guard my heart.

I take her to Old Town where we move from shop to shop, appreciating all the artisan jewelry and paintings and hand-sewn clothing. I try on a Mexican-inspired dress made of thin white material and embroidered with colorful flowers around the neckline and hem. When I twirl back and forth in the full-length mirror, all I see is Misa’s smile. I bring it to the counter to check out only to find out that she’s already purchased it for me.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say as the cashier bags the dress.

“I wanted to. Just let me,” Misa insists. So I do. And I wear the dress for the rest of the day. It is so light and flowy, leaving my shoulders bare and hitting midthigh. I love the dress just based on how Misa looks at me when I’m wearing it.

A three-man mariachi band plays at the Old Town Mexican Cafe and I join the few people dancing outside. I shake and move for Misa. Only for Misa. She sits in a chair watching me, enjoying the image of me spinning and transitioning into salsa lessons with an enthusiastic man who smiles and shakes his hips more than I do.

Next, we hit up Mission Beach for some surf lessons. She's surprised by how cool the water is, but it is no surprise to me. I've been here enough times to know this water is never warm like the waters of the Gulf.

We both pull on wetsuits and go through basic training on land before we're allowed to bring our boards into the water. Our instructor is a young guy, his skin tan except between his waistband and knees. After we prove that we can pop up and balance, he guides us into the Pacific and leads us past the wave breaks.

"If you see a wave coming and you feel it in your gut," he says, placing his hand over his flat and toned abs, "that's when you go."

Misa and I sit in the water, straddling boards. She smiles up at the sky, and I can't help but feel responsible for this lighter version of her. I want to see her this happy all the time. It's such a difference from the woman she is for everyone else. That hard boss babe disappears when she doesn't feel the need to hide.

"Where do you suppose Ryan is?" she asks as we bob up and down on our boards.

"He said he met someone last night."

"No shit?"

"No shit." I look over my shoulder and see a swell coming. "This one's yours," I say.

Misa grins and nods. She lies down on the board and starts to paddle. When the wave pushes her forward, Misa pops up, lets out a yelp as her arms flail, and falls right off the board. I laugh so much my stomach feels sore.

She climbs back onto her board and paddles over to me. "So funny, huh? Let's see you do it," she teases.

"Fine. Eat my sea spray!" I paddle to catch the next swell, hop up, and ride the wave all the way in. Our coach and Misa cheer from their places in the water. I see him motion to her, and even from my spot on the beach I can read the determination on her face.

Misa pops up and falls. This happens three more times. But each time she comes to the surface laughing. I get back out there with her and sit on my board.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" she asks without looking at me.

"Maybe once or twelve times." She groans. "Just keep trying, you'll get it, Sweetcheeks."

Misa makes a face. “Sweetcheeks? That’s what we’re going with?”

I shrug. “Why not?” She rolls her eyes, but I can tell she secretly loves it. She leans over to pull my board closer and ends up falling in the water again. Now I can’t stop laughing. “Wow. You are so bad at this.”

“Well,” she says, tossing her wet braid behind her. “I can’t be perfect at *everything*.”

“You certainly try.”

Our coach paddles over and tells us that time is up if we want to ride one in. He looks over his shoulder and catches the next wave.

“See you on the sand!” I shout as I ride my own wave all the way to the shore. Using my hand to shade my eyes, I watch as a big swell moves toward Misa. I see her shoulders stiffen. She does everything right. Paddle hard, pop up, fall over. I try to hide my smile as she walks through the water grumbling, pulling her board behind her.

In the locker room, we help each other out of our wetsuits and I end up pinned against the lockers as she kisses a trail down my neck.

“I think you enjoyed watching me bust my ass a little too much,” she says.

I hum. “That’s okay. You’ll get ’em next time, landlubber.”

Misa pushes off of me and shakes her head. “I think I like Sweetcheeks better.”

I leave my bikini on under my dress and watch Misa slide back into her shorts and backless tank. She throws a straw hat from her bag onto her head and checks her reflection.

“How is it possible that you look like a runway model just going to the beach?”

She laughs and blushes. “Superior genes and lots of time at the gym?”

“You hungry?”

Misa nods.

“Good,” I say, rubbing my hands together. “I know the perfect place.”



I TAKE MISA to Roberto’s in Ocean Beach. It’s a quaint little place with candles in the center of each table and the entire patio enclosed by winding

vines and greenery. We are delivered chips and salsa with our waters and dive right in.

“I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” Misa says, tossing a chip into her mouth.

“Yeah. Being in the water is like having sex. You’re always starving afterward.”

She grins. “Being in the water is nothing like having sex. Sex I’m actually good at.”

I laugh and choke on my water. A little dribbles out of my mouth and down my chest.

“Smooth,” she says.

“Yes, well there are many ways I like to woo my lady. Impressive surfing skills, endless orgasms, drooling.”

Misa laughs. She is beautiful when uninhibited like this. The candlelight casts golden shadows across her face, highlighting her high cheekbones and full lips. Lips that I constantly think about kissing.

She looks over the menu. “Any recommendations?”

“Have you ever had a California burrito?”

Misa shakes her head. “What makes it ‘California’?”

“Oh my god, it’s so good. So there’s carne asada, french fries, salsa, and cheese.”

“French fries?” Misa scrunches her nose up. “In a burrito? No thanks.”

“Okay, so how do you feel about fish tacos?” I ask.

“I’m super enthusiastic about those. In fact, fish tacos may be my favorite. They’ve definitely climbed up the list in the last two days.”

I stare at her, mouth open. “Did you just make a vagina joke?” She grins and continues perusing the menu. I mime wiping tears from my eyes. “I’m so proud.”

After ordering—a California burrito for me, fish tacos for her, and a margarita each—we settle into a nice kind of quiet. Just enjoying each other’s company and eavesdropping on conversations around us.

Once our margaritas are dropped off, Misa takes a sip. Her eyes get wide and she blows out a breath. “Am I breathing fire? That is strong.”

“No, but that would let you live up to one of your nicknames around the office.”

She gives me a guilty smirk. “Do tell.”

I swallow down half my drink and look her in the eye. “Ice Queen; Dragon Lady; RoboBitch; and my personal favorite, Thunder Cunt.”

Misa’s expression remains neutral. “I suppose that’s fair. Thunder Cunt is pretty creative. I like it.”

“Thanks,” I say with a grin. “I came up with that one.”

“You did not!”

I shrug. “I may have mentioned it once, and it spread like wildfire. Those people really don’t like you.”

She turns now and looks at the empty table next to us. “That’s fair.”

“Hey,” I say, wrapping my foot around her ankle, trapping her leg and attention. “That’s only because they don’t know the real you. You only allow them to see what you want them to. So, you could change it, you know?”

Misa shakes her head. “It’s too late for that. Any vulnerability and they’d eat me alive.”

“I think you underestimate people.”

She finally looks at me again. “And I think you give them too much credit. To make it in this industry as a woman, you’ve got to be tough. Not only am I a woman but I’m also a Black/Asian woman. To our male-dominated industry, practically invisible. They don’t see my accomplishments, my degrees. They see a brown-skinned skirt, and immediately I’m labeled as less than.”

I sip my marg and nod. “So you created a role to play? A fake persona of the demanding, ruthless, cold sales exec to get their attention?”

“It’s not fake. It’s who I am, Penny. Who I became, out of need and the goals I have for my career.”

“You’re not like that now,” I point out.

“Yes, well, you seem to have that sweet charming effect on me—and practically everyone else you meet.”

I shrug and grin at her.

“Okay, enough about work. Tell me about your travels.”

“I could go on for days about that. In four years, I saw so much. I met so many people and experienced so many cultures. I climbed mountains. I hiked rainforests. Almost froze when my hostel in Northern Kazakhstan lost power during a snowstorm. I got sick in Brazil—like, really sick. I’ve seen so much and still feel like there’s much more to see. There’s a lot of good in the

world, but there is so much suffering, too. Sometimes I felt helpless but never hopeless.”

“Wow. It sounds exciting. But you did all this without a plan?”

“Plan, shman. I was left a large inheritance by my grandmother. I lived off of that as long as I could. And when that was gone, I worked jobs to earn food and shelter. You’d be amazed at the skills I have.”

Misa grins and looks down at her fidgeting hands. “If there’s anything I’m certain of, it’s your skills.”

I chuckle. Our food is dropped off, and we dig in.

Taking a bite, I moan and chew, humming the whole time. “Life is so good.”

I eventually convince her to try my burrito, and she concedes that french fries on a burrito are pretty damn good. When we are full and content, we pay the check and exit to find the sky a fiery orange.

“It’s almost nine o’clock and still not dark,” Misa says in wonder, like a child seeing Santa for the first time.

“I love summers out here. Get in—I know the perfect place to watch the sunset.”

We climb into the car, and I drive the two-minute trek out to Sunset Cliffs. While this place is usually teeming with people at this time of day, I actually find a pull off area with only two other cars in it. I park facing the ocean, and we perch ourselves on the hood.

When the sun reaches the Pacific, the sky is a gradient mesh of pinks and purples, leading down to blue-gray water with gold highlights on its peaks. We lie back against the windshield and stare out at the beauty.

“I’ve seen a thousand sunsets in a hundred places, and this is still my favorite.”

Misa turns to me. “Your mom was right,” she says. “Your eyes are the colors of this sunset.”

“You remember that?” I ask.

“I remember everything,” she says, reaching for me. Our bodies slide together, and she places the gentlest kiss on my nose. “I remember sitting under that tree the first day we met. I remember just what the grass smelled like and the way the light danced around like a disco ball. I remember the tilt of your smile and how each curl of your wild red hair seemed intentional.”

“Wow. All of that, huh?”

“Everything,” Misa says again. “Like this little scar on your chin,” she says, tracing the light pink line with her fingertips.

“Oh, yeah,” I say. “My mom took us to the city for a women’s march.”

“We didn’t even know why we were there,” she laughs. “But we held our signs and knew that we were mad as hell about something.”

“Then I tripped over a curb and busted my chin. There was so much blood.”

She lies flat on her back again, the sky is almost dark now. “I was grounded for a month because out of all the thousands of people in Manhattan at that particular march, we had to make it on the eleven o’clock news.”

“Your dad was so pissed.”

“Yeah,” Misa says with a sigh. “I know he’s a hard-ass and he’s always pushed just a little too much. But I also know that everything he’s done is out of love and to protect me.”

I frown. “I know. But how much are you willing to give up to make him happy?”

Misa closes her eyes. I see the rise of her chest and the way her lips part to exhale. “I thought I knew,” she says. “But you make me question everything, Penny.”

I swallow. Blink. Wait. “Is that good or bad?” I ask.

“I don’t know that, either.” A beat of silence.

“Am I the reason you broke off your engagement?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Yes and no. Being around you again just reminded me of the girl I used to be and who I wanted to be. You made me realize that my entire life was fabricated to make someone else happy. I don’t know what I’ll do when we get home, but I know it’s going to be hard. It’s going to hurt people that I care about.”

“Well, let’s not think about that right now,” I say.

“Today has been amazing. My mom would have loved it here.”

“I bet it’s hard not having her around,” I say, grabbing her hand.

Misa sighs. “It is. I miss her. And I know my dad misses her, too. I think that’s why he’s always been so hard on me. He’s trying to prove that he could raise me on his own, that in some way he’s making her proud.”

“She wouldn’t have wanted you to be unhappy. That’s not the Wanda I remember.”

“Tell me what you remember.” Misa closes her eyes.

“Any time I came to your house, she was always in the kitchen. Even if she wasn’t cooking, she’d sit on that old stool near the back door reading her mystery novels. Or she was dancing in the living room with the vacuum while blasting some old school R&B song we’d never heard. And Sundays were always very colorful.”

Misa smiles. “Yeah. Being a black woman from the South meant that she loved to cook, she loved to dance, and Sunday church outfits were always secretly a contest.”

“Oh, yes,” I laugh. “The hats. The enormous hats.” We both laugh until Wanda fades from our thoughts like the sun from the sky.

“Thank you for this day, Penny. Being with you like this, I feel like a new person.”

“I’m not done,” I say. Rolling over, I throw one leg over hers and take her bottom lip between my teeth. She moans and shifts her body against me. “I’ve got one more trick up my sleeve. Back in the car.”

It’s a quick trip to South Shores Park. I pull into the large lot and park in a dark, secluded spot.

“Umm, is this where we hear a spooky noise, go to investigate, and get murdered by some guy with a fishhook for an arm?” Misa asks.

I turn the engine off and check the time. I find her thigh in the dark. My hand slides higher as I lean into her. “No. This is the part where we climb in the back seat and I fuck you until you see fireworks.”

She laughs and climbs over her seat, getting up on her knees and grabbing my shoulders as I turn to face her. “What if *I* want to fuck *you*?”

“That’s the great thing about being a lesbian. We can get both of those things done at once.”

Misa kisses me and drags me into the back seat with her. We are all desperate kisses and greedy hands. She slides my bikini bottoms off and buries her head beneath the skirt of my dress. Her tongue and lips are on me, and I am mindless and melting, falling apart beneath her.

“Come here,” I beg. Misa wiggles out of her shorts and swings around, knees on each side of my head. I grab her hips and pull her down to my waiting mouth. There is moaning. So much moaning and rocking and whimpers. Misa makes noise, too.

“God, Misa. I’m going to come,” I breathe out in stuttered breaths from

between her legs. My thighs clamp around her head when my climax hits. My whole body burns and aches in the most delicious way. My hips shift against her over and over, riding out my orgasm as she slows her tongue and flattens it to a soft stroke. My thighs twitch and I hear her laugh, pleased with herself.

A loud boom vibrates through the car, and the sky lights up in red-and-blue fireworks. Misa gasps and gets up on her knees, eyes to the sky. I press my mouth to her again. The loud pops and crackles of the fireworks drown out her whimpering my name, but I feel it where I am connected to her body. My tongue laps at her as she drops her head back, her skin changing hues with every new explosion. Though I love being under her, I wish I had a better view of Misa. I want to see her biting that lip, hands sliding over her own skin, the look of pleasure and wonder on her face. She grinds down on me like she needs this more than air.

One last boom rattles my chest, and Misa is done. She screams and falls forward, laying her head on my thigh as she enjoys the last notes of her orgasm.

“I don’t even want to know how you’re so good at that,” she says, her words muffled by my dress.

We clean up with one of the beach towels and slide back into our clothes. Misa sits up while I lie with my head in her lap, feet propped up on the side of the car. She twirls my curls around her finger and unwinds them again while smiling down at me.

“Did you know about the fireworks?” she asks. “Of course you did.”

“SeaWorld does fireworks every night at nine fifty. This is the best view outside of the park.”

“The feel of your mouth on me,” she says, staring up at the starry sky. “The taste of you still on my lips. The vibrations and bright sky. It was all just...perfect. I don’t remember ever having moments of complete and utter bliss like that.”

“Never?”

“Not as an adult.”

My heart breaks for her. I want to wrap her up in my bubble and keep her there. I shut off that line of thinking before I fast-forward back to New York and what waits for us there. “Can’t we just stay here forever?” I ask, feeling satisfied and spent.

“Hmm,” she says. “That would be nice.”

“We could get a little bungalow on the beach. Wake up naked to the sound of waves crashing on the beach every morning. You’ll become a flip-flop model and I’ll sell weed to support our taco habit. It’ll be great.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Both of us know *that* future is not an option. I feel the dread pull down over us. Our drive back to La Jolla is solemn and quiet, and it reminds me that tomorrow is our last day here. We don’t say a word to each other. We don’t need to. Instead, our hands lace together in Misa’s lap as we both try to hold on as long as possible.

Chapter Twelve

Ninth Grade

“MISA, YOU KNOW I can’t stay long—my mom and dad are taking me to dinner for my birthday.”

“I know,” she said, pulling me by the hand into the community pool house. “I’ve just always wanted to sneak in here. I hear there’s a heated Jacuzzi in the back room.”

“It’s January,” I said. “And these are the only clothes I have.”

“Just come on,” Misa said, yanking on my hand. I watched as the most reserved girl I’ve ever known pushed open an unlocked window and crawled through.

“My baby girl and her first misdemeanor,” I said.

“Penny, get in here,” she whispered.

“Fine, I’m coming,” I said, swinging one leg inside. “But if we get caught —”

“SURPRISE!” a room full of people shouted as the lights came on. The place was covered in ribbons of purple crepe paper and pink balloons. Music started to play and someone threw confetti into my hair. I looked to Misa, who was nervously bouncing on her toes with her hands clasped together.

“You did this?” I asked.

“I’ve been conspiring with your parents for weeks!”

I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed until she protested. “You’re the *best* best friend ever,” I said into her ear.

I felt her cheek rise as she smiled. “You, too, Penny. Now, let’s party.”



Present

“SO, AFTER THE brunch and lunch tastings, I think we’ve got a great sense of what this restaurant is going to be,” Misa says before taking a bite of her

bagel with cream cheese.

She spreads out the photos that Ryan took across the table so that we can all see them. I'm not sure when or how she had these printed and delivered to the house before nine a.m., but I will never again doubt her magical powers to get shit done.

“What are some keywords?” she asks. “How do we feel?”

“Sat-is-fied,” Ryan says.

“I think she means about the food, not your secret lover,” I pipe in.

“It's not a secret!” He insists, but when I press him with my eyes, he backs down and dismisses me with a wave. “Whatever.”

“Focus,” Misa says. “Give me words.”

“Unique,” I say.

“Decadent,” Ryan says.

“Unexpected.”

“Yes!” Misa says, pointing to me with her pen. “Unexpected. Bold. Refined for the West Coast palate.”

“Fresh and light, while adventurous,” I say.

“Exactly,” Misa agrees. She jots down notes on her tablet while Ryan and I continue to look over the photos.

“When did you take this?” I ask, holding up a photo of Misa against the wall of windows looking out over the ocean.

“That was an accident,” he says shrugging.

“I'll get rid of it.” I grab it from the pile and slide it into my notebook when he's not looking.

“What's some feeling words we want to evoke with this brand?” Misa asks.

“Fresh and exciting,” I say.

“Fucking nom nom nom,” Ryan says, staring at a photo of the stuffed strawberries.

“That's not helpful,” Misa points out.

“Sorry,” he says. “This is making me hungry.”

“It's fine,” she replies. “I have enough to brainstorm today before dinner. I assume you'll be busy until then?” Misa asks Ryan.

He blushes and nods. “Fine. I have work to do. Penelope, maybe you could sketch a couple of logo concepts before tonight?”

I nod as Ryan disappears down the hall. As soon as his door closes, I

jump into Misa's lap and kiss the lips that have been ordering us around for an hour. The sweet taste of strawberry cream cheese softens that overbearing mouth.

"Penny," she says with a smile, trying to resist me. "I really would like to have something to show Chef Delgado tonight."

I place kisses along her collarbone and up her neck, with one hand wrapped around her shoulder and the other gripping her ponytail. "Oh, there are plenty of things I could show him tonight, but I doubt you want to be on display like that."

She pushes me from her lap and stands. "I'm not kidding," she says, her expression serious. All the playful energy in me is zapped. "I know we've been having a great time, but this is still work."

I grab my notebook and pen from the table and tuck it under my arm. "I understand."

Shuffling my feet toward the hall, I am surprised when she grabs me by the shoulder and pins me there. Her knee is between my legs, her mouth at my ear.

"Please do not take this as rejection," she whispers. "I want nothing more than to spend hours in bed with you all day. Touching you, teasing you. Learning about every moment I've missed all these years."

My body reacts to her words, desperate and longing for more of her touch. "But this needs to get done first," she says. "The sooner you get me two ideas—just simple sketches—the sooner I can get you in my bed."

"Maybe I don't want to be in your bed," I say, pretending to be uninterested. She knows me too well. I can't lie.

"I think you do want to be in my bed," she says, her hot breath ghosting down my neck. "And on my face and in between my thighs and—"

"Okay, okay. You called my bluff. I'll let you know when I'm done. But I do not work in trade. There will be actual money exchanged for these ideas, not just sexual favors."

She grins and bites down on the lobe of my ear. "Of course."

I push her away and disappear into my room, closing the door behind me.



I TOSS MY sketch pad aside, satisfied with the two concepts I've come up with. They are simple but modern while feeling rich. Hopping off my bed, I walk to the window and stare out over the beach. I wonder if the people who live here take this for granted.

There is beach and ocean right outside my door, and she's making us work.

Work work? Or sex work? Ross replies.

Work work. Doesn't she know we're wasting valuable time?

It's a few minutes before I hear from him again. *Because this all ends when you get back to New York?*

My fingers hover over my phone, unsure. *I don't know. I don't want to ruin it by asking. How's the Center?*

Somehow not falling apart without you.

I wait for his words of wisdom on Misa, for Ross to tell me what to do here, but he doesn't. So I decide to stick with the original plan and make the most of our time here.

Cracking my door, I take a peek into the dark hall. The house is quiet. I check my phone again for a reply from Ross but find nothing. Turning the corner, I slide my phone back into my pocket and freeze.

Misa is in the kitchen wearing a tank top and some boy shorts with a white apron tied around her. She leans over the island, slipping rainbow-striped candles into a pink frosted cake.

"What are you doing?" I ask, walking to the opposite side of the island and taking a seat.

She just grins and slides the cake toward me. "Happy birthday," she says.

"But my birthday was in January."

"I know," Misa says. She pulls a long lighter from a kitchen drawer and starts to light the candles. "This is for every birthday that I missed."

Sure enough, I count fourteen candles. This is more than missed birthdays. This is stolen time and discovering girl love together. This is a gesture—an *I love you* without saying it. Because even though it's been over a decade in the making, it's too soon to utter those words. They are too heavy, too binding, too permanent—as true as they may be.

"Well then, happy birthday to you, too."

She grins and bounces on her toes. "Make a wish," she says.

"You, too."

We both lean in, close our eyes, and blow the candles out. As tiny wisps of smoke rise from the extinguished candles, I pull her into my arms and squeeze so tight. This is Misa, my friend—the girl I knew. And I am so happy to have her back.

“That was so sweet,” I tell her.

She swipes her finger through the frosting and holds it to my lips. I suck her finger into my mouth and clean it off, moaning at the delicious frosting.

“So good.”

“Really?” she asks. “I followed a recipe. I don’t really cook. Ever.”

“Well, maybe it’s just another thing you excel at,” I say before kissing her smiling lips.

“It’s not easy being me,” she says. The smile is still there, but there’s a kind of pain to her tone.

“I know, Sweetcheeks.” I smack her ass and palm it just because I miss touching her. “Cake for lunch?” I ask.

We sit on the deck with our cake and quietly eat. I watch the seagulls fly up and down the beach.

“You know, someone once told me that seagulls are like the rats of the sky.”

“That’s gross,” Misa says without looking up.

“Right? But it’s kinda true. I mean, they’re scavengers. And they can be pretty aggressive, too. I had one steal a churro right out of my hand in Tijuana.”

She throws her head back and laughs, pink cake perched on the end of her forgotten fork.

“Fucker flew right off with it, too. Didn’t even look back.”

“Hold on,” she says, still laughing. “I’m picturing this.”

“Keep laughing and flashing your cake around. It only takes one to notice, then they’ll all be over here.”

As if summoning them with my words, two seagulls swoop low right above our heads. Misa yelps and ducks while I cover my cake.

“See?”

This only makes her laugh more. That is until the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth birds show up. They perch on the railing directly in front of us, and it is a standoff.

“Is this really happening?” she asks in a whisper as if the birds can

understand her.

“Yep.”

“What should we do?”

I watch the birds watching us and chance a glance at the two still circling overhead. One seagull spreads his wings and flaps. Assuming that’s an attack signal, I yell, “Leave the cake and run!”

I drop mine to the deck, while Misa is a bit smarter and throws hers in the opposite direction while we cover our heads and run. The moment we’re up the birds are up, flapping and squawking and chasing us inside.

Once we’re through the door, I slide it closed and lean against it. Both of us are panting and watching the birds fight over our cake on the deck.

“Dude,” I say, pressing my face to the glass for a better view. “We almost died.”

I look over to find Misa laughing so hard, she is completely silent. Her shoulders shake as she holds her stomach and doubles over. This causes me to laugh, too, and soon we are both on the floor, gasping for air and cackling.

When Misa can finally catch her breath, she says, “That was the most ridiculous thing ever.”

I sit up and take a deep breath, wiping tears from my eyes. “You haven’t even seen ridiculous,” I say. “On a boat trip to Laos, we had like six goats on board with us. On day two they all started dropping dead. By the end of the trip, there was a pile of dead goats on the boat. And the owner said it looked like they died of avian flu. I was so paranoid I walked around with my sports bra strapped over my nose and mouth.”

“Oh my god,” Misa says, her expression horrified.

“But here I am. I survived.”

“Yes,” she says. “Here you are.”

Misa tackles me to the floor, her lips aggressive and her tongue sweeping the sugary icing from the corners of my mouth. I roll us over and pin her beneath me, my fingers around her wrists.

“Now, I hope you’ve got all your work done for the day,” I say, straddling her hips. “I know we’ve been having a great time, but this is still work.”

She rolls her eyes before glaring at me.

“I won’t have you distracting me from this account.”

She bucks her hips, throwing me off-balance, and pins me to the floor

now. “You’re a real smart-ass, you know that, Winters?”

“I’ve been told that a time or thousand.”

“We’ve got four hours before we have to start getting ready for dinner,” Misa says, biting that lower lip that I adore. I can practically see the gears turning in her head and all the dirty things she wants to do to me.

Misa releases me and gets to her feet. “Get to my room.”

I don’t move.

“Now.”

The look in her eyes makes me scramble to my feet and take off running toward her room. When I get there, I remove all my clothes and toss them aside.

Misa takes her time getting there, but by the time she walks into the room I am naked and on my knees, waiting. “Now this looks promising,” she says. “You’ve never looked more beautiful than you do right now.” She slides her hand through my hair as she moves past me. I keep my head down. Misa throws open the curtains, filling the room with light. “And I’m going to want to see every detail of this.”



RYAN MEETS ME in the foyer at exactly six o’clock. He’s dressed in a nice button-down and jacket with dark jeans. He does a twirl and mimes flipping hair over his shoulder before striking a model-esque pose.

“Looking good, Ryan,” I say. “If I weren’t into ladies, I might take you home.”

He grins. “Liar.”

I laugh. “You’re right. But I was being nice, you snollygoster.”

“What the fuck is a snollygoster?”

“Well, if you don’t know, I’m not telling.”

“Girl, eww. You’re such a hag.”

“Fuckface,” I say.

“Rug muncher.”

“Are you two done?” Misa asks, entering the room.

My mouth drops open at the sight of her in the hottest dress I’ve ever seen. It hugs every curve of her body, leaving nothing to the imagination.

There's a keyhole cutout just below the choker collar, revealing more of her flawless skin. She is all lean arms and long legs, and I'm pretty sure I'm drooling. The best part? It's bright red. The color contrasts her dark skin and hair so beautifully, I am speechless.

"Holy snollygoster," Ryan says.

"That's not right," I chime in, not taking my eyes off of Misa.

"Who cares?" he replies. "Look at her."

Misa huffs and waves a hand at us. "You two are so dramatic."

Ryan opens the door, and I follow Misa out. "You look fire, babe," I whisper in her ear.

She mouths the word *thanks* and looks me over. "You, too."

My emerald-green dress fits like a corset top down to my waist and flares out into layers of tulle and chiffon that end at mid thigh. I have to admit, the girls are certainly up and at 'em tonight.

We pile into the car, and the corset pushes my boobs up even higher. When I tried this gorgeous dress on, I forgot to test it sitting, and this is not the best option for dinner. But it is too late to change now. I'll just have a nice chin rest all evening.

Ryan pulls his gaze from the windows to me. His lips purse, and I can tell he's barely holding in some kind of snarky comment.

"Are those snollygosters?" he says, motioning to my chest. "Because daaaaamn."

"No."

"Ryan," Misa says.

"What? Her titty meat is hanging out, and I'm in trouble?"

I press my hand to my stomach. "I can't breathe, either. If I start looking faint tonight, someone just cut me out of this bitch."

Ryan laughs while Misa graces me with a crooked smirk.

When we reach the restaurant, Avery is waiting like always. Though this time, she's decked out in tuxedo pants with a white shirt and red suspenders.

"My god, ladies," she says, helping Misa and me out of the car. "Are you two trying to kill me tonight?"

"I take no responsibility for these things," I say, waving a hand across my boobs. "My legal disclaimer is that no harm is meant to anyone who encounters them and if one pops out, just alert me so I can get her back in place. Individuals are held responsible for their own hands and elbows, and

there will be no accidental fondling, bumping, or motorboating of any kind. Got it?”

The three of them stand and stare wordlessly. “Got it,” they all respond at once.

“Good. Now let’s get me inside before I tip over.”

Ryan is three steps ahead of us when Misa grabs my hand and squeezes. I squeeze back.

“You’ll see that we’ve got a couple more guests for dinner tonight,” Avery says with a sly grin. As we approach the table, she stops. “Create Slate team, please meet Chef Kaci Lovegood of Lovegood Eatery in Beverly Hills and her fiancé, Scott Eastwood.”

We all try to seem unaffected by another celebrity chef and her Hollywood boyfriend, but Ryan is compromised. He grabs onto my arm to hold himself up, his eyes never leaving Scott.

“Is this real life right now?” he asks. “I am living for it.”

“Life is so good,” I reply, giddy.

After introductions, we all have a seat. This time Misa makes sure she’s sitting between Avery and me.

All evening, we eat the most delicious food, tell stories, compare New York to California, and have the best time ever. Misa forgets all about pitching my sketches tonight. The wine is light and delicious, pairing with the lobster dish perfectly.

When they bring out dessert, Scott holds his hands up in surrender.

“I think if I eat one more bite I’ll burst. But damn if that doesn’t look amazing,” he says as the silver dome lids are lifted away to reveal a praline-raspberry tart with caramel drizzle.

“Well, I think you’ve gotta ask yourself one question,” I say.

“Oh, please don’t finish that,” Misa groans.

“Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?”

Thankfully, Scott is a good sport and I at least get a courtesy laugh. Ryan just sits speechless, apparently not getting the Clint Eastwood reference. Poor sheltered Ryan.

Scott raises his glass toward the middle of the table. We all follow his lead. “To amazing food and new friends.” We clink our glasses together wearing smiles made for this evening.

“He just said we’re friends,” Ryan announces, raising his glass high into

the air. “No take backs.”

This night is shaping up to be pretty epic, and I think it will remain in my best memory bank for a long time. I could definitely get used to this life. Especially with the gorgeous woman sitting by my side. But the more wine I drink, the more I realize that this is not my life. And the woman beside me is not mine. We are simply playing pretend while across the country from her ex-fiancé and disapproving father.

By the time Chef Delgado comes to thank us for being his guests, I have had too much. Too much wine, too much thinking, too much dreaming, and never enough Misa.

We are inundated with hugs and kisses from the whole table, though for me, it all blurs together into the way everyone can't keep their eyes off of Misa. I don't blame them. And though I have enough self-confidence to power the tri-state area in the event of a blackout, I am nothing compared to her.

Back in the car, I feel bloated and tipsy, and I just want out of this dress. My head spins and my ribs start to ache from pushing against the boning. Each breath feels harder and harder to grab hold of.

“Boo, you okay?” Ryan asks, resting his hand on my bare shoulder. “Penny?”

I hold up a hand. “I'm fine. I just need to...get out of this dress...” My hands reach behind my back, fingers clawing at the hook-and-eye closures that are just out of reach. The car comes to a stop at the house as I throw open the door and stumble out. I suck in a huge breath and exhale, my hands finally connecting with the clasps.

Ryan has a hand over his eyes and puts the other out in front of him in search of me. “Don't get naked yet. I can help,” he says. “Hold on.”

“I got it,” I tell him, fingers fumbling, fingernails breaking between the metal clasps.

“No, I got it,” Misa says. “You can go in, Ryan.”

I hear his footsteps fade away and the car pull out of the driveway. I place one hand on the front of the house and rest my forehead on it. “I'm starting to see spots.”

“Shit,” Misa says. Her hands work quickly to unfasten the entire back of the corset. When the last one pops free, I sigh and hold my dress up with one arm across my middle. After a few deep breaths, my head clears and I

squeeze my eyes shut. I'm not sure if I don't want to see Misa or if I don't want to see the way she's looking at me, but one of those is the truth.

"Man, was that a wardrobe malfunction or what?" I say, turning my head to the side, still avoiding her face. My eyes linger on the way that deep red material hugs the curve of her waist, the curve my hands already have memorized.

"Is that all it was?" she asks, ducking down to catch my gaze.

Sweat forms over my brow as I take in her concerned expression. "Yeah. That and too many of the wines."

"Feeling better, then?" she asks.

I can't take the pity in her eyes, the questions perched on her lips, the finality in this evening. So I do what I always do. Create chaos.

I turn to face her now and throw both hands in the air. My dress drops to the ground, and I step out of it. "I feel better than better!" I shout into the sky, naked in my six-inch heels. A car horn blares, and I step to the sidewalk, giving a wave at all the passing cars. Tires screech as two cars narrowly miss each other trying to get a look.

"Oh lord," Misa says, swiping my dress from the ground and ushering me inside the house and away from the street.

She drags me into her room and sits me down on her bed, tossing my dress onto a chair and kneeling between my legs.

"Oh, hell yes," I say, needing her more than she knows.

Misa surprises me by running her hands down my legs and pulling each shoe off. She massages my feet for a few minutes until my whole body relaxes. I feel boneless and mushy as I watch her get undressed and slide into a T-shirt and boy shorts. She slides my boxers up my legs, and I wiggle into them even though I don't see the point. Finally, Misa pulls a shirt over my head and removes the pins from my hair.

She crawls up the bed and silently asks me to follow. I lie on my side while Misa tucks herself behind me. Her long body curves along mine, connecting us from head to toe. One arm comes around my waist and she pulls me against her, burying her face into my messy curls.

There's something so refreshing about letting others take care of you, especially when they know what you need more than you do. I am not used to this connection. I am a wanderer, but here in this moment, I would stay tethered to Misa for eternity.

“I love you, Misa Ito.”

Chapter Thirteen

Ninth Grade

MISA STUDIED HER chemistry notes from the neat pile on her side of my bed while I dug through the scattered sheets of pink-highlighted papers on my side.

“I can’t find my notes on the kinetic theory of matter,” I grumbled as the papers crinkled under the weight of my hands and knees.

“I told you to organize,” Misa said without looking up. She flipped the page in her binder and continued to read, offering no help.

“I’m not you. I’m not organized. But still, I usually know where everything is. It’s chaos, but it’s my chaos. We are familiar.”

Misa sighed and closed her binder. “Don’t you already know this stuff anyway? I swear, you retain everything like a sponge.”

I plopped down onto my butt and looked at her sensible face with her sensible words and her *I told you so* expression. I loved that expression. She wore it quite frequently around me.

“Still, I should review,” I said. “Ugh. Why do we even need to know this stuff anyway? I will likely never need to use any of this information ever again. I mean, who needs chemistry?”

“People in love,” Misa replied as she slid her books from her lap and stretched out her legs next to mine.

“Say what?”

“Well, when you first fall in love it’s because of dopamine, norepinephrine, and phenylethylamine releasing in your brain. Dopamine produces a feeling of bliss. Norepinephrine is similar to adrenaline. Then after a while, estrogen and testosterone kick in for the sex-drive part of the relationship. The whole gang works together.”

I stared, mouth open, unblinking. “You are so odd.”

Misa pushed my shoulder, almost sending me off the bed onto the floor. “You’ve got room to talk, weirdo.”

“Well, just because all that stuff is happening in my head doesn’t mean I need to know about it. I can look at a painting and just fall in love. Like *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt. One day I will go to Vienna to see it in person. Dopamine be damned.”



Present

I BOARD THE plane and fall into the seat next to Ryan. Misa woke me before the sun with kisses down my spine and wandering hands over every inch of my body. We kissed and teased and consumed each other so slowly it felt like the earth stopped spinning. After a shower together, our morning was spent packing and watching the sunrise over the Pacific in one last goodbye to the West Coast. I tried to come up with a reason for Ryan and Misa to trade seats on the flight, but she never brought it up, so neither did I.

I may have told Misa I love her last night.

I wait for Ross to reply before they close the cabin door, but nothing comes.

On the way home, I put my earbuds in and sleep most of the way. I wake up long enough to down a bottle of water and fall back asleep almost instantly. Once we’ve landed, my phone chimes as soon as I remove it from airplane mode.

I love you. We’ll talk when you get home.

We’re all exhausted, so no one says a word as we shuffle from the plane to baggage claim. Ryan sits on the edge of the luggage conveyor while Misa and I stand.

“Well, back to reality in this concrete jungle,” he says. “But what a trip, huh?”

“It was pretty amazing,” I agree. “Aaaaand who were you fucking over there?”

Ryan just smirks and shakes his head as he mimes locking his lips and throwing away the key.

“Back to being celibate for you now?”

He squints his eyes and tilts his head just enough to let my teasing insult roll around in his brain.

“Snollygoster.”

“Love you,” I say, blowing him a kiss that he pretends to bat away.

Misa remains quiet, her arms folded across her chest. We seem to wait forever in an awkward and exhausting silence. Once the bags show up, Ryan pulls all of our luggage down and we each find our car waiting on the curb.

“Bye, ladies,” Ryan says with a wave. “See you at the office tomorrow.”

I return his wave, but Misa is already in the car. Our driver loads up the luggage, and we are off. Her hand rests on the seat between us, and I cover it with mine, curling my fingers around hers as she stares out the window.

“Now what?” I ask.

She turns to me with a frown. “I don’t know, Penny. I’m more confused than ever.”

“Well, the rule states that you can be situationally gay if it is more than one thousand miles from your home. So you’re safe.”

Misa blows out a breath and slides her lips sideways on her face. “There’s no such rule.”

I shrug. “There is. It’s in the queer handbook.”

She cracks a tiny smile. “This is serious,” she says, removing her hand from mine. “In under an hour, I’ll be back in the home I share with my ex-fiancé, Penny. We’ll pretend that we’re still together and sleep in separate rooms. We’ll visit my dad and Jet’s parents and play this charade. How can I look any of them in the eye?”

“I can’t answer that for you, Misa.”

“Once his mother finds out she’ll probably have me killed.”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

Misa shrugs. “They’re *very* close.”

We ride in silence for a long time. The closer we get to my apartment, the more nervous she seems to get. Misa’s got one leg crossed over the other, foot bouncing at a furious pace. The second we cross Flatbush Avenue, Misa slides over, fists my shirt in her hands, and yanks me toward her. Our mouths meet in the middle of the car. We are desperate kisses and solemn whimpers, both not knowing what lies beyond this car.

When the car pulls to a stop outside my apartment, she leans back and rests her head against the leather seat.

“Give me some time to figure this out?” she asks. I nod.

And just like that, I am on the sidewalk with my bags, watching her ride

away. Once the car is out of sight, I drag my bags up the stairs and unlock my apartment. Ross meets me at the door, bringing my bags in and then wrapping me in the tightest hug.

“Good to have you back, Pen. I missed you.”

“Missed you too, dirtbag.”

“Hey,” he says, holding me at arm’s length. “What’s with the name calling?”

“I’m going to use a blacklight and forensics kit on my bed,” I say, crossing my arms and giving him the best stink eye I can muster.

Ross chuckles. “Do what you gotta do. All I’ll say is your mattress offers amazing lumbar support.”

“Not funny.” I flick him in the ear.

I follow Ross into the apartment and plop down onto the sofa. “You hungry?” he asks.

“I could eat.”

“I’ve got some leftover pizza from Vinnie’s.”

“Mmmm, yes to all the greasy cheese and oven-baked carbs. I’ve had so much perfect, beautiful food all week.”

“Yes,” Ross calls out from behind the fridge door. “My heart is breaking for you.”

As is tradition, Ross and I eat our cold pizza on the sofa while “The Queen is Dead” plays on the turntable.

“How did we ever associate the Smiths with pizza?” I ask.

“Who knows,” Ross says, taking a bite and chewing. “I’m sure it involved rum.”

I nod. “You’re probably right.”

Velma sputters, makes a violent knocking noise as if taking her final breath. Ross and I stare, air locked in our lungs. A short hiss comes from the vents, and then she roars back to life.

“Thank god,” Ross says.

“Keep fighting the good fight, Velma!” I shout, holding my beer up in salute to our little AC unit that could.

We each finish our slice and stare at the last one in the box. “Split it?” I ask.

“Nah, you can have it. I’m watching my figure, you know.”

“I know. What shape are you now? A trapezoid? Parallelogram?”

He grins and kicks his feet up on the table. “Full on rectangle, working toward a pentagon.”

“Nice,” I say. We clink our beer bottles together and take a swallow.

“So, how long are you going to avoid telling me about your trip?” Ross asks. “You want to talk more geometry, or are you ready to dish?”

I sigh and put down my half-eaten slice. “In a Penelope Winters recap, the facts are as follows... She admitted that she broke off her engagement. We were at each other’s throats at first. But then there was this lava-hot girl named Avery who flirted shamelessly with me. That drove Misa to make the first move. After that, it was two days of amazing, mind-blowing sex and conversation. I showed her around San Diego. We really connected. We talked about our past. Then on the last night, I had too much to drink at dinner and almost had a panic attack. I told her I loved her. She didn’t respond. Was pretty much silent until the car arrived here, where she kissed the hell out of me and asked me to give her some time.” I take a swig of beer and swipe my forehead. “Whew. That covers it.”

Ross folds his hands together and rests them on his stomach. “*Do you love her?*” he asks.

“I always have.”

“And what does she need time for?”

“She was engaged to a man to make her father happy even though she’s into women. They broke it off before the trip, but they’re holding off on telling anyone.”

Ross sits up, dropping his feet to the floor and taking a huge bite out of my pizza. “That’s some crazy shit. She’s got lesbian drama, and she’s not even out.”

“I know,” I shout toward the ceiling. “Why is this my life?”

He throws an arm around my shoulders. “Because you are chaos, Penny.”

“I should come with, like, one of those side-effects warning labels.”

Ross chuckles.

“This woman will spout random facts about world travels, eats dessert first, talks to houseplants, and tends to get naked in public.”

He nods. “Very accurate.”

I laugh and take my pizza back from him, shoving it all into my mouth. “Don’t judge me!” My words are muffled by stuffed cheeks. “How’s the Center? Did you see Rav around this week?”

“Everything was fine,” Ross says. “Rav came by yesterday looking for you. Just wanted you to know he’s okay.”

“Good. That little shit had me worried. I can’t wait to get back there tomorrow. I missed that place.”

“The kids missed you, too. Everyone kept asking where you were.”

I swallow down the last of my beer. “What did you tell them?”

“That you were serving time for solicitation.”

“Asshole.” I throw the empty can at his head, and it makes a metal thumping sound against his forehead before falling to the ground.



IN BED, I toss and turn, unable to shut my brain down long enough for sleep to find me. I pull out my journal and flip through the last few pages, which document the best week of my life. I stare up at the ceiling and wonder if all of that goes away tomorrow.

My phone chimes, and I see Misa’s name.

I’m in hell.

I’m sorry. Wish I could help.

A few minutes go by as I stare at my screen waiting for a reply.

Close your eyes, and we’re there, I tell her.

This week will forever be my favorite moment in time.

That sounds like an ending. A goodbye.

I set my phone down and punch my pillow into submission. Another beep.

It’s not goodbye. It’s just hold on...

Holding.

After that, I set my phone to silent and fall asleep to the constant noise of Brooklyn streets.



HOW AM I stuck in the elevator with Chad once again?

With every floor and every person that clears out, he moves closer. Finally, around floor sixteen, “You enjoy your trip this week?” he asks.

“It was work.” Seventeen.

Chad leans against the wall now and crosses his ankles. “Still, an all-expense-paid trip to California. Surely you had some downtime. Get up to anything exciting?” Twenty.

I shake my head. “Nope. Just tastings and work. Pretty boring actually.” Twenty-three.

“I bet you found some equally hot chick and banged her all week.”

My mouth falls open, and I meet his eyes with the look of wrath. “A, it’s none of your business who I bang. B, you’re disgusting and disrespectful. Let me give you a tip, Chad. If you wouldn’t say it to your mom or your sister, then don’t say it to any woman.” Twenty-eight. “Pig!” I shout, stomping off the elevator and letting out a grunt of frustration.

At my desk, I get petty looks from Thomas and Kendra, while Juan welcomes me back. I don’t even entertain being nice and diplomatic. I need coffee and breakfast right now. Making my way to the break room, I grab a breakfast burrito and a cup of coffee and turn to make my way back to my desk.

Misa is there, back in her all black-and-gray power-woman outfit, the usual hard look painted on her pretty face.

“Anderson,” she says in the voice reserved for this place. “You missed three sales calls in the four days I was gone. Incompetence seems to be your strong suit, no?” She doesn’t even make eye contact as she moves past me to the coffee machine. *Fine*, I think. I’d rather be invisible than belittled.

I try to sneak out with my coffee, only to hear her voice again when I’m at the door.

“Penelope,” she says, enunciating each part of my name in a way that grinds my pulse to a stop. “Recap meeting in my office in five.”

“Aye, aye,” I say, snapping off a salute and exiting as quickly as possible.

When I reach my desk, Andrea is there waiting for me. “So, how was it?” she asks, scrolling through her phone. “I must have missed all the photos you were supposed to send me.”

I grin. “Sorry, boss. Chef Delgado kept us busy.”

“I guess I’ll let it slide,” she says. “See you in the recap meeting at nine.” I check the time. It’s only 8:18.

“Yep,” I say. “See you then.”

I grab my notebook and pen just to look official and hightail it to Misa’s

office. A whole forty-five minutes before the actual meeting. Ryan's desk is empty, so I push through the frosted glass door and find her at her desk.

"You summoned me, Miss Ito," I say, trying to keep the condescending tone out of my voice.

Her eyes meet mine across the room. "Penny," she says. It's just a whisper, but it reaches me where I stand.

I move across the room, approaching her desk while she doesn't take her eyes off of me. "Is this how it's going to be?" I ask. "I get that version of you when we're in this building?"

"I'm sorry," she says, standing and making her way to the wall of windows. She folds her arms across her stomach. "You know it has to be like this. I can't treat you any differently than anyone else."

"Again. I'm your dirty little secret," I say.

Misa spins to face me. "That's not fair, Penny."

I move toward her now, pressing her to the warm glass. "What's not fair is knowing who you really are and seeing this role you play."

"This is who I really am, Penny. I have been for a long time."

I shake my head as her hands find their place on my waist. "It's not who you were in California. It's not who you are with me."

"You make me remember myself, the girl I was. You make me soft."

"Soft is not bad," I say, sweeping her hair from her face.

"It is when you want to move forward in this business. I'm not going to be an account executive forever. I'm going to be CEO. I can't do that by being nice."

"Jeffrey Dahmer was nice, and he got shit done."

Misa sighs and releases me. "Penny."

"What? It's true."

"And if my goals ever change to being a serial killer, I'll keep that in mind."

I take a seat in one of the chairs in front of her desk. "Why did you call me in here early? So you can tell me that I just have to pretend like this past week didn't happen? Because I can't do that. Things have changed, Misa."

Misa's expression morphs to something dark and determined. She stalks over to me and drops to her knees. Her hands start at my knees and slide up, pushing my skirt with them. She grabs my ass and pulls hard, scooting me to the edge of the seat.

“I called you in here early because I can barely breathe unless I’m touching you, Penny.” She places kisses up the inside of one thigh and then down the other. Misa lowers her mouth just above my center and looks up at me through those thick lashes. Her hot breath ghosts over my flesh, and I am squirming as she holds me in place. “Because I want to spend every moment with you. I want to hear your silly stories and laugh until my stomach aches. I want to know your world and your friends, but I’m stuck on the outside of your life. So, for now, I just need to taste you.”

Misa’s tongue slides against me and I cover my mouth to muffle a moan. She works me over quickly, keeping a steady torturous pace. Soon my thighs are twitching and I’m rocking against her for more friction.

“Please, Misa,” I whisper. My hands grip the armrests so hard, my palms ache where the metal cuts into them. I don’t care.

When she slides two fingers inside me, I find my release. Every muscle tightens in pleasure and an effort to stay quiet. I push her away so that I can swallow the barely containable scream that’s building in my throat.

A knock at the door and we’re suddenly both scrambling idiots. I scoot back in the chair, pull my skirt down and cross my legs. Misa jumps to her feet and swipes at her mouth with her hand. My chest is heaving and I’m trying to calm my pulse when she gives me the tiniest smirk before announcing, “Enter.”

Andrea, Ryan, and Jim—one of the copywriters—shuffle in, and I have never felt so transparent in my life. I check my reflection in the windows expecting to see a neon sign over my head that reads *I just got off in this chair*. Thankfully, I find no sign. But who needs a sign when it’s written on my face, in my posture, in the way I squirm in my seat.

“Oh, good,” Andrea says. “You’re already here, Penny.”

“Yes, we were just discussing all the wonderful things we *ate* this week,” Misa says. “Trying to *come* to a decision on where to focus our efforts.”

Oh, now she’s got jokes.

“Well, fill us in,” Andrea says.

“Penelope,” Misa barks. I hop up, grab my notebook and pen from her desk, and make my way over to the meeting table.

Misa shakes Jim’s hand. “Good to see you,” she says. All I can think is, *Those fingers were inside me minutes ago*. My face burns and I might cry, spontaneously combust, or die from laughter. I can’t decide which one.

We all have a seat at the table, and Misa starts with our vision board and the two concepts I sketched in California. We're deep into tagline options with Misa over Ryan's shoulder, when he sits up taller and looks around.

"What's that smell?" he asks. I choke on my own saliva. *Oh. My. God.* "It smells like..." He stops. Sniffs. "I don't know. It's not familiar."

Andrea and Jim shrug while Misa ignores him, pushing our meeting forward. She's the same cold woman they all know, while all I can do is mentally document everything she's touching with *that* hand. Jim, the table, the black dry-erase marker, the account folder. Dear god, Ryan's shoulder. I'm barely keeping it together by the time we decide to reconvene on Monday.

I practically run from Misa's office and into the empty copy room—slash—supply closet. Folding myself over on the copier, I laugh until I can't breathe. Tears leak from my eyes and my stomach aches as I try to catch my breath.

"That was priceless," I say to myself. "Fuck me."

"Is that an invitation?" Chad says.

And just like that, all my giggles are gone. They are stomped to death and drowned by Chad and his ridiculous garbage mouth.

I swipe my eyes clear and spin to face him. "I know I'm new to this whole corporate-job thing, but I don't think you're allowed to say shit like that to a coworker."

He moves away, hands held up in surrender. "It was just a joke."

"Dude. You literally work in HR. Sexual harassment was covered on day one. So either you're so desperate and aching for it that you have no self-control or you're a flaming idiot. Which one is it?" I roll my eyes, grab the first thing I can reach on the shelf beside me, and leave the room.

I head to the bathroom to clean up and leave the stapler I took on the counter. No need for two staplers on my desk. Now *that* would seem suspicious.

Chapter Fourteen

Ninth Grade

“**W**HAT DOES YOUR outline look like?” Misa asked. “For Miss Rayborn’s class.”

“You know I haven’t done that yet.”

“Penny, it’s due tomorrow.”

I scooted closer to my bed, lay back on the floor, and kicked my feet up onto the mattress next to Misa and her books. “I can’t seem to start it. I mean, why on earth do I need to plan what I’m doing four years from now?”

“Umm, so you don’t turn out to be a bum living on the streets.”

“What if I want to be a bum?”

Misa sighed and kicked at my feet until they fell to the floor. “Nobody wants to be a bum.”

I sat up and looked at her pleading expression. The light from my lamp fell across her face in soft shadows. She looked serious but so pretty at the same time.

“You look like a painting in this light,” I said.

“Stop trying to change the subject.”

“Maybe I’ll be a painter like my mom,” I said. “I could go to the city, rent a studio, and sell my art to stay alive.”

Misa lay down on her side, propping her head up in her hand. “You’re such a dreamer,” she said. “That didn’t work out so well for your mom.”

“Yeah, well, it wouldn’t hurt to try,” I said, frowning at her concerned expression.

Misa blew out a breath and rolled onto her back. “I love that about you, Penny. Your love for adventure. You’re not afraid of anything.”

I got up on my knees so I could see her and grabbed one of her hands in mine. “What is there to be afraid of?” I asked.

“Everything.”



Present

FRIDAY NIGHT I stay in for a relaxing evening of organizing my vinyl collection, matching the plastic containers with lids in the kitchen cabinets, and removing all the socks from under my bed.

This has always been a habit of mine. I have to go to bed with socks on, but they never stay on. In the middle of the night, I take them off and toss them away. My mom used to complain about always having to hunt them down. Lucky for me, NYC apartments are small and there's nowhere for these bastards to go but under my bed.

I am face down, ass up with Biggie filling the apartment with his smooth rhymes when Ross and Rachel stumble into the apartment. I continue cleaning until I hear the music shut off and the urgency in Ross's voice.

"Penny!" he yells. "Penny, are you here?"

I run into the living room to find him pacing the floor. His steps count off in one direction until he hits the wall with his fist and does an about-face.

"What's going on?" I ask, looking from Ross to Rachel and back again. "Who died?"

"I ran into Jen and Asher from Oasis tonight," he says before running his hands through his hair. "They're closing the Center."

"What? Why?" I ask, stepping directly into his path. My pulse spikes, thundering in my ears, and tears blur my vision before I blink them away. Panic sets in as my brain processes what this will mean.

Ross stops and laces his hands behind his head, his biceps flexing as he barely holds his shit together. "The grant they had for facilities fell through. Apparently they've been struggling for a while and now the landlord is doubling the rent."

"Shit," I say, pulling him in for a hug. "Fucking pig landlord. We can't let them do that!"

Ross grabs my shoulders and forces me back, holding me at arm's length. "Penny, that place has helped so many kids, saved lives. More than once." He releases me and goes back to pacing while I collapse next to Rachel on the sofa.

“I mean, they took care of me that time I got my ass beat uptown. These people gave me access to a therapist—not even knowing that some of those days felt like they could be my last.”

“Ross,” I say, wiping away the tears that escape my eyes. “Don’t talk like that.” Dropping my head into my hands, my brain spins with ideas to stop this from happening. “I know what you mean,” I say. “Oasis is like my second home. All those kids...well, all of them are my family and we’re their family. I can’t imagine where they’d be if they didn’t have the Center. What are we going to do?”

Ross throws up his hands before running them through his hair and pulling on the roots.

“It’s the only local safe space for queer youth. It was the only place I ever felt like I could be myself for *years*,” Rachel says. “All the volunteers, the free services, job assistance, therapy, the food and shelter. All of that will be gone.”

“Maybe we could do a fundraiser,” Ross says.

“Yeah, but what?” I ask. “A kissing booth? Roller Derby battle? A plant sale? Softball tournament? Cat adoption?” I sit up taller, my brain reeling with ideas. “Wow. I am so lesbian right now.”

“It wouldn’t be enough,” Rachel says. “And they need a solution by the end of this month.”

Ross blows out a breath. Then I see a flickering spark in his eyes as if a light bulb has turned on. He looks us over and drops his hands to his sides. “I can help.”

It takes a few seconds before I understand. “Your surgery money?” I ask, jumping to my feet again.

Ross nods.

“Ross, no. You’ve worked so hard for that. It’s going to change your life.”

His eyes meet mine, and I know he’s already decided. “And this could change hundreds of lives, Pen.”

“No way,” I insist. “We’ll find another way.”

Ross leans against the counter, and Rachel moves behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She rests her cheek on his back and squeezes tight.

“You are the sweetest, kindest man I’ve ever met, *mi príncipe*,” she says.

He turns to face her, placing a kiss on her forehead. “Look at me,” Ross

says. “I’m already stealth. Which is what I’ve wanted for so long. The surgery is a way to make my mind be able to match what people see with what they don’t see. I can sacrifice that for a bit if it means these kids survive another day or get the help they need.”

“No, Ross. I can’t let you do that,” I say. “I’d rather rob a bank or something logical like that.”

He shakes his head. “Logical? Why don’t we just start running drugs for the cartel while we’re at it?”

I tap my chin. “That could work, too. Do you have any connections?”

“We will find a way,” Rachel says.

“We have to,” I say.

I kiss Ross’s cheek and head to my room, closing the door behind me. As I fall into bed, I am overwhelmed with sadness and anger and so much fear. Ross has been working his ass off for years to save this money for his surgery. After a lifetime of not feeling like he’s living his truth, this money was going to make that happen. And now he wants to give it all up to save the Center. I have to find another solution.

Picking up my phone, I send a text to Misa.

I’m sad.

It’s almost two in the morning, so I’m surprised when my phone rings. I pick it up and stare at the gray dancing shadows on my ceiling.

“You’re up,” I say.

Misa sighs. Her breath is a shushing sound across our phones that calms me the same way as her touch. “I can’t sleep. Why are you sad?”

I roll onto my side, tucking the phone between my pillow and my ear, and tell her all about the Center. She listens without interrupting. There’s just the sound of her soft breathing and occasional hums from the back of her throat. They are meant to let me know that she’s actively listening, that she’s still here. It’s unnecessary because I can feel her presence, even with most of Brooklyn between us. When I’m done, I pull the photo that Ryan took from my notebook just so I can see her face.

“That’s terrible,” she says. “I can’t pretend to know what those kids go through, but I know that these youth centers are making a world of difference. And I know you make a world of difference there.”

“Some of them are sick or homeless or just need a place to be themselves. I don’t want to think about what will happen if Oasis doesn’t exist.”

“It is an awful situation, Penny. I’m so sorry. And Ross sounds like a generous guy.”

“Ross is the absolute best. I just have to find another way to save the place. And all the starving children of the world. And the homeless. And Rena, too.”

“Rena the receptionist?”

“Yeah. I don’t understand how her frosted, feathered hair survived the nineties and still keeps its very distinct shape under that headset every day. But I feel like it should be retired to a museum. I bet if we shaved it, it would come off in one solid shellacked piece.”

Misa laughs, but it’s quiet and reserved as if she’s hiding. That thought aches like a punch to the chest. Silence now, and I want to beg her to come over, but she asked for time.

“I miss you,” she says, followed by a humorless laugh. “I know that’s absurd since I saw you at work yesterday, but I miss you outside of that place.”

“Maybe it’s not just me,” I point out. “Maybe you miss who *you* are outside of that place, too.”

“I don’t know who I am anymore, Penny. The bad parts—the liar, the hard-ass—those things are easy to identify. But everything else feels up in the air.”

I trace the curve of her shoulder in the photo and roll onto my back. “When it comes to you, I feel up in the air. I’m an *undecided*, a *not yet*, a *wait and see*.” I blow my hair out of my face. “I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it, either,” Misa says. “I’m stuck, Penny. Between a nice guy and a happy place.”

“But what am I to you, Misa?” She is silent, and it hurts too bad to listen to nothing. Pain churns in my body, solidifying into something more tangible—anger. Anger is something I can grab hold of. And so I do. “What. Am. I?” I ask again, sitting up in my bed.

“Somehow, after so long apart, you’re my best friend. How sad is that? You know more about me—the real me—than anyone else.”

My anger breaks apart and falls away, replaced by sympathy. I can’t imagine living Misa’s life. I can’t fathom pretending to be something I’m not. But after pretending for so long, is it pretending anymore? Maybe I am in

love with just a memory. Maybe the girl I knew has been completely erased and what's left is a new, shiny Misa.

"It's sad because lately, I don't feel like I know you at all. We have a moment in time, over a decade ago, and we have three days of bliss. Being back home with all that behind us, knowing what we know now and feeling the things we feel, I don't know how you expect nothing to change."

"Things have changed," Misa says. "For me, at least. What a whirlwind you turned out to be. Though it really shouldn't surprise me at all, Penelope Chaos Winters."

"How long do you expect me to wait around?" I know the question is harsh, and I kind of regret it as soon as the words leave my lips. But I kind of don't. As much as I want to be with Misa, I cannot put my life on hold indefinitely while she wavers between making her father happy and making herself happy.

I hear her sigh. "Can you give me until we finish the Delgado account? I just need to get this out of the way before I can think about personal stuff."

I nod to myself. "Fine. But no more office nookie until you figure out what you want. You'll just have to control yourself."

"No more office nookie," Misa agrees. "Though I have to admit, I have this fantasy of seeing you naked and sprawled across my desk."

I roll onto my stomach and grin. "Hmm. Tell me more."



"OH MY GOD. Oh my god. Oh em gee," I chant with every step, regretting the decision to wear my new heels to work before breaking them in. My feet throb and sharp pains shoot up between my toes. Still, when I see the elevator filling, I force myself to move faster. "Fuck. Shit. Ouch. Mother Bitch. Son of Satan. Hobbit balls. Fuck." I slide inside, and the doors close. All eyes are on me. "What?" My eyes dare anyone to say a word.

I hobble to my desk, where I abandon the shoes and make my way barefoot to the kitchen. There are a few people chatting and hanging out, but all I see is Misa at the coffee maker.

"No grande skinny latte this morning?" I ask, sidling up next to her.

She shakes her head but doesn't look my way. "I was running late."

Misa stands there stirring her cream-colored concoction for much longer than necessary while I pour my black coffee. We are so close, the heat of her body reaches for me. It wraps its fingers around my waist and pulls me in tighter. She picks up her mug with one hand and rests the other on the counter. I press a kiss to my fingers and place it on the back of her hand. A tiny smile appears on her profile before she turns to grab some napkins.

The pencil skirt and blouse she has on molds around every curve of that body, and I am able to sneak a few peeks while leaning against the snack cart and sipping from my Jean Luc mug.

All is fine until Andrea walks in. “Good morning, creeper.”

I whip my head toward her teasing grin. “What? Why am I a creeper?”

“I don’t know. Why are you? You’re the one standing in the corner of the room alone, watching everyone.”

“So I hang out near the pastries,” I say. “It’s not weird. Carbs love me, and the feeling is mutual. I am in good company. Except my ass is probably getting bigger just by proximity.”

She laughs and fills her travel mug. “Get to work, Winters.”

At the project meeting, I find myself distracted and staring out of the windows at the building across the street.

“Misa is out on an appointment right now, but we can go over everything without her,” Andrea says from the front of the room.

I miss seeing her, though I can admit that it is far easier to concentrate when that woman is not in the room. We discuss all of the other designers’ projects with the sales team, Andrea offering her input and direction when needed. When we move on to Delgado, the sales guys leave but my team stays.

“Penny, where are you guys on the branding for Delgado?”

“I’ve got a few concepts in the works. We’re going to present three options on Friday afternoon when Chef returns to New York. Once we get approval or even a general direction, I’ll start on the collateral items—menus, signage, advertising.”

Andrea claps her hands together. “Great. Well, you’ve got enough to keep you busy for a while.” She looks at the other three designers. “I expect you all to support Penny if she needs help or an extra set of eyes on something. As you all know, this account is a priority.”

They all nod but don’t look happy about it.

I eat lunch at my desk and spend the entire day working on the first concept for Delgado. It's a digitally illustrated, modern-looking title with a geometric pattern in rich reds. Juan offers his insight when I feel like I've been looking at it for too long. He gives me some great notes, and I keep working until I realize the office is dark and I am mostly alone.

I know Misa is still here. The light filtering through her frosted glass office calls to me. But restraint keeps me in my chair and focused on my work. Also, the torture-device shoes I wore today have caused blisters to form on my heels, so any excuse to put off the walk home is a good one.

When my eyes ache and I know I can't possibly be productive anymore, I decide to pack it up and go home. But first, I head to the supply closet to see if we have any kind of bandages or something I can rig in my shoes to survive the trip home.

I search the shelves for ideas, pushing around boxes of pens, highlighters, paperclips, and reams of paper. I'm in the middle of strapping yellow legal pads to the bottoms of my feet with rubber bands when a voice startles me. My foot propped up on the shelf slips, and I land on a body as we tumble to the floor.

"Oof," Misa says. "That's some kind of greeting."

I grin and slide so that I'm lying on the floor instead of her. "I'm sorry. You almost scared my hair straight. Are you okay?"

She grimaces and rolls onto her side to face me. "I don't think anything on you could be straight. And I may have a punctured spleen or internal bleeding, but so worth it."

"Aww, that's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me." She smiles now as my hand rests on her hip. "Ever make out in a supply closet on dirty corporate carpet?" I ask.

"You've got the smoothest lines. I thought no nookie."

"Kissing is not nookie. Nookie would be defined as—"

"I don't care," she says before pressing her lips to mine.

And just like that, her taste is on my tongue, the smell of her shampoo and perfume are in my lungs. It sparks a fire in my belly that consumes me as her hands move to my body, pulling me closer with desperation built of forbidden kisses and longing glances.

A noise comes from across the office, and we break apart, both scrambling to our feet. We are mirrored images of unsatisfied lust and lungs

that gasp for air like coming to the surface after a long dive.

“I didn’t know anyone else was here,” she says, her voice returns to the cold, harsh tone of business.

“Me, either.” I straighten my shirt and smooth down the front. “Uh, you’ve got a nip-slip situation.”

Misa looks down and sees her left boob peeking out of her shirt. She quickly corrects it and buttons her shirt back up.

“I better go,” she says.

“Same.”

She looks down at my office-supply makeshift shoes. “What the hell is that?”

“My shoes hurt so bad I’m considering riding the train without them. Can you imagine? New York City subway platforms with only notepads strapped to my feet? I’m starting a new trend of contemporary office-supply sandals.”

Misa raises an eyebrow and lowers her voice. “Or you could share a cab with me back to Brooklyn.”

She bites her lip, and I grin. “Meet you downstairs in five.”

Without another word, Misa disappears and I hurry back to my desk, remove my “shoes,” and grab my things. Then I throw the torture-device heels into my bag and sling it over my shoulder. Misa’s office is dark, so she must already be in the lobby.

I shuffle to the elevator and press the button. As soon as the doors slide open, a hand shoots out, holding them in place.

“Evening, Penny,” Chad says, motioning for me to go ahead. I nod and step inside with a groan. Once the doors slide close, Chad leans against the back wall while I keep myself near the doors. “Mondays, huh? Why do they always suck?”

I shrug. “Mine wasn’t so bad. Maybe it’s all about your attitude.” Glancing at the digital display above the buttons, I sigh when it only displays floor twenty.

Chad moves toward me now. “Yeah. Yours didn’t look so bad at the end there.”

My eyes widen and I suck in every last bit of oxygen in that metal box. I press my lips together, deciding to give him no ammunition. My heart beats wildly against my chest, but I somehow wrangle a neutral expression into place.

“You fucking Miss Ito, Penelope Winters?” he asks, his face a mixture of jealousy and appreciation. “I gotta say I’m impressed. That’s hot.” Chad adjusts his crotch.

“Of course not,” I say, stepping away from him. Floor twelve.

“So a little supply-closet make-out session, then? Is that all?” He moves closer. “What *did* you two get up to in California? Is Ryan a part of this, too, or can I throw my name in the hat?”

I spin to face him now, my face burning with rage and so many emotions that I can’t nail them down. “For the last time, Chad. You can’t throw your anything anywhere near me. I’ve been nice to you so far, but I’m done. Are you paying attention? Because school is open and ready to lay some knowledge on you. I do not like the penis. Not yours. Not anyone’s, but especially not yours. No means no, bro.”

The elevator dings and the doors slide open, bringing a cooler burst of air and an escape. I move to exit, but he blocks my path. His eyes rake over my body, and though his hands stay by his sides, I feel as though he’s touching me everywhere. I need a hazmat shower and mind bleach.

“You better watch how you talk to me, Penny.” His hot breath fans across my cheek, and it takes a lot of strength to stay there in his space. “I’m sure there’s a few people who’d be very interested to know about what I just saw.” I glare at him, my eyes holding his and not backing down until he removes himself from my path.

My bare feet move across the lobby at a furious pace, each step moving farther away from that jackass. Throwing myself onto the sidewalk, I search for Misa and find nothing. I hear a whistle and turn to see her already in a cab on the curb, window down, arm waving. Making my way over, I climb inside.

“Please, just go,” I beg the driver.

“What happened?” Misa asks. “What’s wrong?”

“We’ve got a big problem.”

Chapter Fifteen

Eighth Grade

“**M**OM, I’M HOME,” I shouted, pushing the front door open. “And I brought a friend.” I turned to Misa and waved her inside.

My mom walked out of the kitchen, wearing a painting apron covered in rainbow-splattered dots and a large red swish across her chest. She dried her hands on a towel as she walked toward us.

“A friend, huh? Who is this?” she asked.

“This is Misa.”

“Hello, Mrs. Winters.”

Mom tucked the towel into her back pocket and scrunched up her face. “Just call me Lee Ann.”

Misa nodded.

“We’re going to grab a snack and then go up to my room,” I said as my mother just stood there looking between the two of us.

“Okay. I’ll be in my studio, cleaning up. I just finished a masterpiece of Mr. Wandell’s dog, Buster.” She walked down the hall mumbling. “What has my life become?”

Misa and I giggled as I showed her the way to the kitchen. I dropped my bag onto the table and opened the fridge.

“Wow,” Misa said. “Your house is so...”

“I know. Weird. That’s what happens when your mom is an artist.”

“I was going to say fantastic,” Misa said. “It’s the complete opposite of my house. It’s just so cool.”

I looked around at all the art, homemade pottery, macrame hangings, and plants. I shrugged and closed the fridge door, not finding anything good. Opening the cupboard doors, I grabbed two packs of strawberry Pop-Tarts. “These good with you?” I asked.

Misa nodded.

“So what’s your house like?” I asked as I led her up the stairs.

“I don’t know. It’s this weird mixture of my dad who is super minimalistic and my mom who loves bright colors.”

“Sounds cool,” I said as I pushed open my bedroom door. “Well, this is my room.”

I sat on my bed as Misa lingered in the doorway. “No way,” she whispered. I watched as her eyes took in all the posters, art, and colored lights strung along my walls. Her gaze traveled from my lavender bed to my desk and finally the bay window with a built-in window seat. “You even have your own television?”

“Yep. And my own bathroom,” I said, motioning to the door across from the bed.

Misa walked along one wall, taking in all the photos and doodles pinned to a large corkboard.

“Who’s the lady in all the travel photos? She sure gets around.”

“That’s my granny. She said the best way to learn about a culture is to experience it. She’s a crazy old lady, but I love her.”



Present

I UNLOCK MY apartment door and push inside, waving Misa in. “Excuse any mess,” I say, knowing our space would never live up to the cleanliness of a Misa Ito apartment. “Ross?” I call out.

“In here,” he says. “You got a package. Must be your illegal chlamydia meds from Canada.”

“What?” I yell, dropping my bag on the counter, glaring.

He turns and laughs. “I heard you coming in with someone. Couldn’t resist.”

“You’re a shit,” I say. “Misa, meet Ross, my best friend until twenty seconds ago. Ross, this is Misa.”

The smile falls from his face and he holds a hand out. “Nice to finally meet you,” he says. “I’ve heard so much.”

She shakes his hand. “You, too.”

For the first time ever, Misa looks visibly uncomfortable. I wonder what she thinks I’ve told Ross about her and why that sweet pout forms on her lips.

“Why do you two look like you just found out you’re allergic to vag?” Ross asks.

I roll my eyes. “Chad, the guy from work who keeps hitting on me? Yeah, well he saw Misa and me making out in the supply closet. Cornered me on the long elevator ride and pretty much threatened to tell everyone. Dude is shadier than a palm tree.”

“Want me to fuck him up?” Ross says, flexing his biceps.

“That’s the roids talking,” I say, pointing a finger at him.

“This is all natural, girl. You know that.”

“I do,” I admit. “You work your ass off for those.”

Ross tosses me a bag of Twizzlers. “Picked those up for you.”

“You love me,” I say, rubbing the bag against my cheek. “You really love me.”

“I just know they’re a part of your drama survival kit. How am I still involved in lesbian drama all the time?” he asks.

“Penny,” Misa and Ross say at the same time.

I take a bow before ripping the bag open. “Hey. We’re infamous for it. We own it. It’s even in the handbook.”

“There’s a handbook?” Misa asks.

“There’s no handbook,” Ross says.

“Fuck off. There’s a handbook and decoder ring.”

“She’s talking cereal toys now,” Ross tells Misa.

Misa sighs and runs her hands through her long hair, twisting and piling it on her head before releasing it to fall in place again.

“Fucking Chad,” Misa says, her uptight business attire very much out of place in our boho-chic apartment. Her heels click along the hardwood floor as she paces between the sofa and window. She stops short in front of Velma. “What the fresh hell is that?” she asks.

“Velma. She solves mysteries with her dog and gang of friends, and when not doing that, she tries to cool this apartment.”

Misa shakes her head. “How did I let this happen?”

I bite off the end of a strawberry Twizzler and chew instead of answering her. Ross watches quietly as he takes a seat on the sofa.

“I know how it happened,” she says before spinning to face me. “It’s you. I let you in, let my guard down, and now this weasel dick is going to ruin me.”

“Whoa,” I say, holding my hands up. “You’re at a ten. I need you down around a three.”

“Why weasel dick? Are those bad?” Ross asks.

Misa throws up her hands. “You two are exhausting. Penny, he could ruin my career, my...” She stops.

I step between her and the front window, my favorite ivy plant tickling my leg. “Your what? Your fake engagement?”

Misa drops her head and blows out a long slow breath. “My everything.”

“Look,” Ross says, standing and moving between Misa and me. “I know you’re important to Penny, but I don’t know you. What I do know is that you’ve come here, into our home, freaking out about what this means for *you*. All you’ve said is me, my, and I. You haven’t even considered what it would mean for Penny.”

“Ross,” I say, putting my hand on his shoulder, but he shrugs it off.

“No, Pen.” He turns back to Misa. “If you care about her at all, then stop being so selfish and let’s figure out a way to fix this for everyone.”

Misa’s expression shifts. She nods and peeks around Ross. “I like him,” she says, pushing Ross out of the way and wrapping her arms around me. “He’s right. I’m sorry, Penny. I’m just freaking out.”

I throw Ross a look of thanks and move her to sit on the couch next to me. “That’s probably because you’ve never been the bad girl before. You’re having an existential crisis, but we can outsmart him. It’s not that bad.”

“It’s not that bad? That’s because you don’t know about the incident that happened at Create Slate.”

“Then tell me. And does everyone just call it ‘the incident’ like you can’t talk about it?”

Misa sighs. “These two employees were secretly dating. No one knew. One day the cleaning crew finds them having sex in Rupert’s office—on top of his desk.”

“Ew,” I say.

“It gets worse,” Misa replies. “After they were reported, Rupert went back and watched the security footage from our floor. These two had been having sex in the office for a year. On everyone’s desk. They had saved Rupert’s for last like it was some kind of trophy. And they did Bill Clinton–type things with one of his cigars and then put it back in the box.”

“Ewwwwwww.”

“Yeah,” she says, sinking into the cushions behind her. “Rupert obviously went nuts and forbade interoffice dating forever. So, yes, it is that bad.”

“Being bad can be fun,” I say. “And I happen to be very good at being bad. All we have to do is be badder than Chad.”

“*Badder* is not a word,” Ross points out.

“I’ll badder your ass if you don’t shut your pie hole.”

“And somehow you made it even worse,” he says, moving into the kitchen.

I flip off Ross and return my attention to Misa. “There’s got to be a way out of this. I mean, it’s not like he’s threatening blackmail. He didn’t even ask for anything.”

Misa shakes her head. “It’s only a matter of time, Penny. He’s just waiting until he figures out what he wants. And from the sound of it, it’s you.”

I wave a hand in the air between us. “Chad is not on the menu. So he can forget it. I would rather shave my legs with a chainsaw than let him anywhere near Lady Dolla.”

“Well,” Ross says, his voice booming in the room. He drops three shot glasses and a bottle of tequila onto the coffee table. “Let’s drink about it.”

She looks from Ross to the bottle and then to me. “I couldn’t. It’s Monday. And now I’ve missed my spinning class,” she says, checking her watch.

“She couldn’t,” he says, filling each glass.

“She couldn’t,” I say, lifting two and holding one out to Misa. It’s only a few seconds before she grabs it from my fingers and throws it back.

“As it turns out, I can,” Misa says.

Ross refills the glasses and sets the bottle down. He takes a seat on the other side of Misa and raises his shot. We each grab ours and hold it up.

“Don’t get sad. Let’s get mad,” he says. “We’ve all got shit problems.”

Misa grabs his hand and squeezes. Ross’s shocked expression looks from their joined hands to my face. “I heard,” she says. “I’m so very sorry about the Center, for you both.”

We all take our second shot and slump back on the sofa. “My empty stomach is on fire,” I say. “I need food.”

“How many carbs are in tequila?” Misa asks.

“It’s been a while since I converted alcohol to carb counts, so I’m a little

crusty.”

Misa smirks.

“Guess we’ll have to wheat and see.”

“Make it stop,” Ross says with a groan.

“I just knead a few more,” Misa says, laughing now.

“Hey, I’m on a roll. It’s easier bread than done,” I reply. “You ain’t seen muffin yet!”

Two beats of silence, and then... “This shit is stale,” Ross chimes in.

All three of us laugh, and I feel Misa finally relax next to me. Rachel calls and we leave Ross to chat while I bring Misa to my room. But then there’s a knock at the apartment door.

I don’t even check the peephole before yanking the door open. I believe the words “What the fuck” leave my mouth as I find my mother standing there in all her Bohemian glory. She’s got a long patchwork skirt on with Birkenstocks, a white flowy shirt and a flower pinned in her hair. She’s also wearing more makeup than I’ve ever seen on her face before.

“Hi, Pen. Surprise!”

“Mom,” I say too loudly, trying to alert everyone to our new guest. “What are you doing here?”

She wraps me in a tight hug, then pushes past me and sets her purse down on the kitchen counter. “Can’t a mother come to visit her only child in the city to make sure she’s safe and fed and not living in filth?”

I move into the kitchen, across the counter from her. “Ross and I have lived here for four years and you’ve only been here twice. So what’s the *real* reason?”

Misa steps out of my room, and my mom almost chokes on nothing but air. “Misa?” she asks, her arms wide for a hug.

Misa nods and steps into my mom’s embrace. Mom holds her for a while rocking back and forth a bit. Misa’s slender fingers grip my mother’s shirt like if she lets go she’ll fall. It’s as if she’s holding on to our past—and maybe the memory of her mother, too. Finally, Mom releases Misa and holds her at arm’s length.

“Look at you,” Mom says. “Jesus, you’re gorgeous. Penny, did you see how gorgeous she is?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Mom. I may have noticed.”

She cups Misa’s face now. “Such a beautiful girl, but so troubled. Your

aura is out of whack. Commit any crimes lately?”

“What?” Misa asks. “No.”

“Hmm,” Mom says. “Something is off.”

I clear my throat. “Mom, I love you, but please stop reading people’s auras.”

She turns and waves a flippant hand in my direction. “Yes, dear. It’s so nice to see you, too. I’ve missed you as well. Yes, I would love to come in for a drink.” She pulls me close, her hand rubbing circles on my back. “Are you okay, sweetheart? Do you want me to make her leave?” she whispers.

“I’m okay. I invited her here.”

Mom releases me with a smile and pats my shoulder. “Good,” she says. “I’m a little rusty since missing a month of my Jeet Kune Do classes.”

Slapping my hand to my forehead, I slide it down over my face with a groan. “Red or white?” I ask.

“White, of course.”

My mother leads Misa over to the sofa and pulls her down. “So where have you been? What have you been doing with your life? How are your parents?”

I drop the bottle opener, the clanging metal hitting every surface on its way to the floor fills the otherwise complete silence.

“My dad is fine. My mother passed away when I was fifteen.”

Mom cups her cheek, sweeping her thumb below Misa’s eye as if there are tears there. “You poor thing. I’m so sorry, honey.”

I get the bottle open and signal Misa. She nods. Pouring them each a glass, I deliver them and resist the urge to wedge myself between the two.

“Now, where’s my favorite boy?” Mom asks.

“There’s no boy here,” Ross says, exiting his room with a grin. “All man.”

“Well, that’s true,” Mom says, standing to embrace him. “Just look at you.” She squeezes Ross’s biceps. “That’s quite a gun show you’ve got there.”

“Good to see you, too, Lee Ann.” Mom runs her hand through Ross’s hair and gives him an affectionate light slap on the cheek.

“I miss my babies so much!” she says. “I just couldn’t stay away. You, too, Velma.”

We all stare at her, waiting.

“Okay, fine,” she says. “I have a date.”

“Well, that took an eternity to get to,” I say. “Give us the deets.”

“He’s a handsome high school art teacher here in Brooklyn. Just a few years younger than me. I’ve got a very good feeling,” she says, grabbing her wine from the coffee table and downing half of it. I notice Misa’s glass is already empty.

“How’d you meet him?” Ross asks, having a seat in the emerald velvet chair in the corner of the room.

“On the Tinder app.”

“What are you doing on Tinder, Mom?” I ask, my voice shrill.

“Penny, I’m not dead. I have needs.”

I slap my hands over my ears while Ross laughs. “Please stop talking.” I drop my hands. “And please tell me that you’re meeting him in a very well-lit public place.”

She laughs and sits next to Misa again. “Of course, honey. Plus, you know I brought my Taser.”

I shake my head, speechless for the first time in a long time.

Mom makes her way to the kitchen and pulls her purse back onto her shoulder. “Well, I should get going. Though I have to say I can’t believe you didn’t even offer to introduce me to Marco Delgado, Penny. God,” she says, waving a hand in front of her face. “The things that man does to me.”

“Overshare,” I announce, grabbing her shoulders and pointing her toward the door. “Have fun on your date. Don’t stay out too late. Use protection. I love you.”

She gives me a kiss on the cheek and waves to Misa. “Bye, dear. Be good to my baby. She deserves it. Bye, Ross. Bye, Velma!”

When the door is closed between us I feel like I can finally breathe again. “Well, that wasn’t awkward at all.”

“Never a dull moment with that woman,” Ross says before plucking a book from the shelf next to him and opening it up.

“Shall we head back to my room?”

Misa nods and follows me back to my space. She stands at the doorway, a little rigid, while I pull off my dress and change into some yoga pants and a tank. Her eyes linger in the good places, and I’m not even a little sorry.

Misa shakes her head as if to break herself from the ogling. “So, how did a girl fresh out of art school land a job as a primary designer at a Manhattan

agency?” she asks.

“The truth?” I ask, looking her over with a grin.

“Of course.”

“I met Rupert in the Bahamas the summer before my senior year. He was on vacation, drunk on piña coladas. Told me the long unabridged history of his little startup that had grown into an agency. I mentioned I was from New York, too, and in school for design. He told me to come by once I graduated.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. He promised me an interview and nothing more. While he got my foot in the door, my portfolio and winning personality were enough for Barb to hire me.”

“No doubt,” Misa says. “You’re a talented designer. There’s no question.”

“Thank you,” I say with a smile. “And don’t forget about the winning personality.”

“Winning personality, volunteer, world traveler,” she says. I sit on my bed while she circles the space, looking at all the trinkets I’ve collected in my travels. She moves like one does through an exhibit, leaning in to get a closer look at the more interesting things, but never touching.

“What’s this?” she asks about the piece of art hanging over my bed.

“It’s a Madhubani painting of Lord Krishna dancing. I got it from New Delhi the last few months I was traveling.”

“It’s beautiful,” she says, taking a seat next to me. “What an amazing life you’ve had.” Her words are wistful and longing.

“Plenty more ahead of me. You know how I feel about adventure,” I say, knocking her shoulder with mine.

“I do. I love that about you.” She rests her hand on my knee. “You’re so bold, Penny. So strong in a way that I never could be. Remember that time we were down at the shore and that guy stole your skateboard?”

I laugh. “Yeah.”

“He regretted that decision about sixty seconds later,” she says with a grin.

“Hey, he was the one dumb enough to be a thief and be slow. When a thirteen-year-old girl can chase you down, you should rethink your career path.”

Misa grins. “You ripped that board right out of his hands and then hit him

with it. Bystanders literally broke out in applause. I will never forget that as long as I live.”

“Remember when we got our ears pierced at the mall and your dad flipped out?”

“How could I forget? He lost his shit, yelling for like an hour while my mom just grinned and told him he was being ridiculous. He’s so weird about stuff like that.” She stares down at her bare nails.

“That summer was pretty boss, right?” I ask. She nods. “Your mom was so stoked about the piercing she brought us shopping for earrings a week later. It’s all about balance.”

My fingers trace where her tattoo sits on her shoulder. Even covered by her blouse, I know it when I feel it.

“I’ll keep you wild,” I say.

“And I’ll keep you safe.”

The air feels thick and heavy, and we stand at an impasse. There is no easy way for us to be together, but it is so hard to stay apart. I pull my feet up and inspect my heels.

“Fucking abusive shoes. I bet they were invented by a guy named Chad.”

Misa gives a laugh and pulls my feet into her lap. She moves her hands over them, massaging and flexing my muscles, careful to avoid the blisters.

“What are we going to do about him?” she asks.

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do until we know what he wants.” I moan and fall back onto my pillow. “Oh my god, that is so nice.” Misa continues rubbing my feet. “Right there,” I say. “That’s soooo good.”

“Hey,” Ross shouts from the main room. “Close the door if you’re going to get busy!”

I let out a loud moan. “Just. Like. That, baby!”

His heavy footsteps move closer. “I’m just coming to shut this,” he calls out. “I do not want to see Lady Dolla.”

Misa laughs as Ross stands in the doorway with one hand over his eyes and the other searching for the door handle.

“She’s just rubbing my feet, you drama banana.”

He drops his hand and looks at us. “Whatevs. And PS, pronouncing *banana* like the British just so it rhymes with *drama* is a stretch, Pen.”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

He just rolls his eyes and pulls my door closed.

“You two are really tight, huh?” Misa asks, pushing back on my bed so that she’s leaning against the wall.

“Ross is my family. He’s my...I don’t know. My word-that-hasn’t-been-invented-yet-that-is-better-than-*best-friend*.”

Misa looks down at her hands resting on my feet now. “You’re lucky to have him.”

“I am. But he’s lucky to have me, too.”

Her eyes meet mine, and with the glow of the setting sun pushing through my yellow curtains, her beautiful face is made of gold-and-copper shadows. “Anyone would be lucky to have you, Penny.”

She kicks her shoes off and hikes her skirt up to her thighs so that she can straddle my hips. Her body moves over mine until Misa hovers above me. Long, black hair tents around us, and I am lost in her once again.

“You are so special,” she whispers. “I’ve never met anyone like you, and I know I never will again.”

My hand cups her cheek as I sweep my thumb across her lips. “You are special, too, Misa. And not for who you pretend to be, but for who you really are...” I move my hand to her heart. “In here.”

Her lips, along with her body, press against mine, and we are tangled together in urgent kisses and roaming hands. Without any words or conscious decisions, we are soon naked. Flesh against flesh, there is no end to how badly I want her.

My lips and tongue move over her body as my fingers find her center. I move inside her as she bites down on my shoulder.

“Penny,” she says so softly it breaks my heart—and almost my rhythm. Some note in her voice tells me that this may be goodbye. That notion only pushes me to consume her more slowly, to savor every moment, every sigh, every taste of a woman that may never belong to me.

She rolls us over and slides her fingers between my legs before sucking them clean. Misa’s eyes close and she lets out a low hum of satisfaction. But that is the last softness I get from her. She pushes those fingers inside me now, her thumb on my clit as her mouth sucks and licks at my nipples. I am a writhing mess beneath her, my hands clawing into her shoulders as she enters me harder and faster than before.

“Yes, Misa. So. Good.”

When my orgasm rips through me, I turn and scream into my pillow. My

body bows up off the mattress, reaching for her, needing to connect in every way. She doesn't let up, keeps teasing me and touching me until I push her away.

By the time I'm able to move again, Misa is so slick and wet, my fingers slide inside her with ease. Her hips rock against my hand as her own fingers twist her nipples. I love watching her play with herself, so much that I forget to move.

Misa stops and looks down at me. I grin and push back inside her. Kneeling between her legs, I lower my mouth while continuing my pace. She's so worked up that it's only a few seconds after my tongue connects with her flesh that she comes, long and hard and at my mercy.

For a while, we lie curled into each other, sweaty and boneless and sublimely happy. The cool air from my fan blows over our bodies, eventually chilling our skin. I run my fingers down her arm and intertwine our hands. The feel of her engagement ring cuts into my palm. I hold it up and inspect it.

"Since you're supposed to still be engaged, where does Jet think you are right now?"

Misa pulls her hand from mine. "Work." With that, she climbs out of my bed and slides back into her clothes. "It doesn't matter. He's having dinner with his mom again. I swear they haven't cut the cord yet." I watch this all from my bed, still naked.

When she puts her shoes back on, her eyes move over me and connect with mine. Misa leans over, one hand supporting her, the other tracing patterns on my stomach.

"I'll never get enough of you," she says. Misa turns to go. And when my door closes with the softest click, I stare at the space left vacant in my bed.

"But what are you going to do about it?"



I SPEND ALL day Tuesday working on a watercolor logo for Marco. I sketch out a few ideas and then work on perfecting my favorite one. During my lunch break I research companies to approach about donating to the Center. Once I've got a three-page list and contact info, I clock back in and get back to work. Misa and I avoid each other, purposely moving around in orbit so

that we have no interaction at all. There are still lingering looks and tiny smiles but nothing obvious. I don't see Chad all day, and that brings a bit of relief, if only on a minute-by-minute basis.

Wednesday I work on my third option so that we can make tweaks and changes tomorrow and have them printed for the big meeting on Friday. With my head down and concentrating on work, it's easy to get the projects finished on time. I start calling and emailing the businesses on my list to see if I can get any headway on money for the Center. I try not to refresh my email or check my phone every few minutes. I am not successful.

By Thursday, I am out the door at five and make it home by six—which is almost a miracle considering the negative space I crammed myself into on that last train. I swear everyone in that car somehow defied the laws of physics just to get us all home quicker.

Ross and Rachel are already parked on the sofa when I get home. Today she's got shaggy bangs and a short layered bob in red. Ross has his nose buried in a book while she paints his toenails an electric-blue color.

"That's a good color on you," I say, tossing my stuff into my room.

"It matches my eyes, right?" he asks, batting his lashes with a grin.

"I'm practicing for my NIC Nail Technician Exam," Rachel says without looking up before doing the sign of the cross with her free hand.

"I could never deal with people's feet all day. Eww." I plop down next to Ross and blow out a breath. "What a week."

"Big meeting tomorrow?" he asks.

"Yep."

"¡Buena suerte!" Rachel says. "Want me to do yours next?" she asks, holding up the bottle of polish.

"No thanks. I'm good." I pull off my shoes and show her my bright pink polish. "I just want to take a shower, fall into bed, and sleep for eight glorious, uninterrupted hours."

"But..." Ross says, folding his book closed.

"But we all know I won't be able to stop thinking. And I'll try to distract myself by binge watching some Netflix show, not turning it off until my eyes burn and my brain is mush."

"Good times," Rachel says. "You want to smoke? It'll help you relax."

"Nah. The last time I smoked I had a bad experience."

"What happened?" she asks as she finishes the clear coat on Ross's toes.

“I had. A bad. Experience.”

Rachel chuckles.

“Got paranoid. Thought the White House had bugged the apartment. So I played the Ramones album *Rocket to Russia* on repeat until I fell asleep.”

Rachel abandons her work on Ross’s toes and laughs until tears fill her eyes. “You are *loco*.”

I nod. “I’ve got to find the motivation to get off of this couch. And that’s not looking too promising right now.”

“Any update on the Center?” Ross asks.

“No,” I say with a groan. “Jen and Asher seem to think there’s nothing we can do. I’ve done some research on local businesses that might want to donate and tried to find a big-dollar sponsor, but I’ve been so busy with work. The ones who have answered said they will think about it or inquire with the higher-ups. And all of that takes time. Time we don’t have.”

“There’s still my savings,” Ross says.

My head thumps against the wall behind me and turns toward him. “No,” I say. “We’ll find a way.”

“You keep saying that,” he argues.

“It’s true. You know I’ll keep hustling. It’s not over until it’s over.”

“I’m just saying. It’s an option.”

Rachel smiles up at Ross with pride, and I can’t help but adore their relationship. She looks at Ross the way I look at pie. And for the first time in a long time, I want the same for myself. But somehow, I’m here in this whirling vortex of pretend-straight girls, fake engagements, disapproving fathers, and blackmailing sexual predators. I’m not quite sure where I fit into it all.

I do eventually pry myself from the couch and into the shower. Afterward, I pick out my clothes for the next day so there’s no rainbow kitty repeat and hang them on the back of my door.

Settling in bed, I ignore the spinning reel of thoughts in my head and try to focus on my breathing. Meditation has never been my strong suit, but I learned to better my techniques from a monk in Tibet.

At the time, I envied their lives of detachment. They existed simply without want or need of material things. None of them were forced into that life. It was always a choice. When I met Mattew, I knew he was different. He

taught me that letting go is the key to achieving mindfulness. He also taught me that I have a major problem letting go.

Just as I close my eyes, my phone dings. A text from Misa.

I'm actually nervous about tomorrow.

Well, thanks for the vote of confidence.

It's not you. Your designs are on point. It's just a lot of pressure. Misa responds.

I open my browser and do some quick googling. I find what I need and send back a text.

"Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement."

That's nice. Who said that?

Helen Keller.

What else you got? she asks.

Scrolling through my results, I find what I need.

"But the hottest bitch in heels right here. No fear, and while you gettin' your cry on, I'm gettin' my fly on."—Rihanna

LOL. What would I do without you?

Continue to be a badass, but without all the orgasms.

You're more than that.

I think back to when I asked her what I was to her and she gave me no answer. Maybe that was because she honestly doesn't know. Misa knows I'm more than the sum of our teen years and stolen moments together. I am more than wild red hair and sex, more than chaos and adventure. But what I need to know is what I am *to her*.

I do have a long list of qualities and uses, I say.

It's true. You're the foul-mouthed sun in a galaxy full of stars. You call me on my bullshit and you see through all my hardness. No one has really looked before.

"We still think of a powerful man as a born leader and a powerful woman as an anomaly."—Margaret Atwood. Misa, you are a beautiful, intelligent, talented anomaly.

Thank you, Penny. And you are the best thing to ever happen to me. Fourteen years ago and today.

With that, I silence my phone and plug it in to charge for the night. My mind clears like clouds being swept from the sky. I drift off to sleep immediately.

Chapter Sixteen

Ninth Grade

MISA STOOD BETWEEN my legs while I sat, still angry, on the toilet lid. She pulled out the first aid kit from under the sink and opened it up, not knowing where to start.

“Get a washcloth and clean it first,” I said, though my words were a bit slurred by my swollen lip.

Misa grabbed a red washcloth and ran it under the water. She squeezed it out and pressed it to my forehead.

“I figured the blood wouldn’t stain a red towel,” she said. Her hands shook as she held the cloth to my face. “I still can’t believe you hit him. Collin Freaking Freeman. Right in the jaw.”

“I can’t believe he hit me back. And you don’t have to remind me,” I said. “My hand is killing me.”

Misa smirked, grabbed my fingers, and gently ran her thumb over my knuckles. “You’re such a badass.”

“Stop making me a hero. Someone had to stop Mister McGrabbyHands, and today he groped the wrong girl.”

“Still...”

“Now get the antiseptic ointment, put a little on, and put a butterfly bandage over it. Make sure you hold the cut closed before you put it on.”

Misa ducked her face down, her black hair brushing my cheek. “How do you know so much about treating wounds?”

“I skateboard, remember?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

I could smell Misa’s shampoo as she worked to fix me up. The scent enveloped me and provided a sense of calm to my still pumping adrenaline. Her fingers were warm on my face, her knees pressed against my inner thighs. It was like I fed on her calm. It calmed me and kept me sane when all

I wanted to do was finish showing Collin how far back his baseball-throwing fingers could bend.

Misa rinsed out the washcloth, squeezed it, and put it in my hand. “Hold that to your lip.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once my bandage was in place, Misa stepped back—all her warmth, all her serenity gone. I hopped up and took a look at my face in the mirror. I turned my face to the side and back again.

“How’d I do?” Misa asked, her hand came to rest on my shoulder.

I met her eyes in the mirror. “Perfect. I bet it doesn’t even scar.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Penny.” Her hand slid down my arm and wrapped around the front of my body as she hugged me from behind.

I placed my hand over one of hers and squeezed. “No worries. You tell me if he touches you again.”



Present

“GOOD MORNING, SUNSHINE,” Andrea says as she passes me in the hall.

“Coffee, breakfast, conversation. In that order,” I grumble.

She laughs and continues on her way. I drop my things off, grab coffee and food from the break room, and take a seat at my desk. Juan and Thomas are already there eating.

“Happy Friday,” Juan says.

“Ditto.” I take a bite of breakfast taco and chew in silence.

“You nervous about the meeting today?” he asks, with Thomas looking on.

“No.” I sit up and spin in my chair to face him. “Should I be?”

Juan shakes his head and leans back in his squeaky chair. “Nah. Your designs are great. If they don’t like one of those options, they’re *loco en la cabeza*.”

I give him a smile and nod toward Thomas. “*Gracias. Creo que este gringo solo espera que falle.*”

He laughs and sips his store-bought iced coffee. “Yes, yes. Haters gonna hate.”

We bump fists and blow it up before focusing on the day's work. I check my email and see that Misa has called a meeting with Ryan, Andrea, and me before the big meeting. I check the time and set a reminder on my phone for twenty minutes from now.

As much as I'm trying to stay calm, my nerves do get the best of me. My knee bounces under my desk and my palms are sweating. I decide to take a stroll around the office to work off some of this energy, decidedly avoiding the HR department. Not that it matters because Chad and I cross paths in the hallway behind reception.

My eyes try to burn holes in his face while he smiles. When I keep moving, Chad reaches for me, taking hold of my wrist and pulling me to a stop.

"Why are you touching me?" I ask, yanking my arm away. "You don't get to touch me without written consent, a full medical history report, two banana nut muffins, and the sacrifice of your favorite bong."

His grin widens. "And I say—because of what I know—I get to touch you whenever and wherever I want." Chad's fingers reach for my face, but I turn away. He moves closer now, backing me to the wall. "That's okay," he says. "I like a girl with a little fight in her."

Goose bumps spread over my skin, and a sickening feeling pools in my stomach. In one sentence Chad went from a nuisance to a predator. This feels too natural for him, like he's been here before and he won't be denied.

"Breaking news," I tell him with a growl. "I will not be added to the short list of ladies who've tolerated your repulsive personality and garbage breath."

"But I—"

I place my hands on his chest and push him away from me. He moves, but only because he wants to. "I don't care what information you think you have. It's never going to happen, loser."

"It will happen," Chad says, his voice loud and echoing in the empty hall. He looks around and speaks more softly. "Or everything I know will become public knowledge."

"Or I could just kick your ass right now and skip all this nefarious blackmail bullshit."

"Hey, Penny!" Ryan says, appearing at the end of the hall. Chad moves away from me, straightening his tie. "I've been looking everywhere for you,

girl.” Ryan’s gaze darts between the both of us with a frown before dragging me away. “What the shit was that all about?” he asks.

“We were comparing dick sizes,” I say. Ryan giggle-snorts. “He was mad that mine is bigger.”

“Girl, eww. Don’t tell me. We’re late for the meeting. Let’s book it.”

The two of us arrive in Misa’s office and take a seat at the table. Andrea sets up the three logo options for Marco on easels.

“Glad you two could join us,” Misa says. I keep quiet because I have had enough crap for one morning. She waves to my art on the easels. “So, these are the options that we’ll be presenting Chef Delgado and his team this afternoon. As you can see, Penelope has provided us with some great options. I’m pretty confident that he’ll be pleased with one of these concepts.”

“Me, too,” Andrea says. “All three are clean, impressive designs but varied enough to appeal to whatever he’s looking for.”

“Thanks, guys,” I say, holding my pen up like a microphone. “I’d like to thank all the black coffee and afternoon snacks that made this possible.”

Misa smirks, but wipes it away quickly. “Before any big speeches, let’s get our presentation down so there are no blunders once Delgado arrives.”

Misa goes over her presentation with us, asking for feedback and anything she needs to tweak. Watching this woman work is like watching art come to life. Misa was made for this business. She is confident and gorgeous, which is only shadowed by how smart she is. I’ve always admired that about her. But now that we’re adults, those traits are amplified and I find myself wanting to be more like her.

“And that’s why we think that any one of these options would be a smart and innovative choice for your West Coast restaurant brand,” she says, finishing up.

Ryan is so excited, he applauds. “Tens across the board!”

Andrea and I grin.

“That was amazing,” I say. “You could sell crayon drawings to a fine art collector.”

“Yes,” Andrea agrees. “Everything was perfect. I should get you to teach my daughter how to sell her Girl Scout cookies.”

“Misa may be a little intense for a child,” Ryan says, pretending to jot down notes on a sheet of paper without looking up. Misa shoots him a look.

“Hey, anything so I don’t end up buying the bulk of them,” Andrea says.

“Because then I end up *eating* the bulk of them.”

“Doesn’t sound like a problem to me,” Ryan says, finally looking up. A beat of silence and then he taps his pen to his chin. “I’ll take two boxes of Thin Mints.”

“Focus, people,” Misa says. “Are we good?” Everyone nods. “Great. Go have lunch and come back with your game faces on. It’s do or die.”

Ryan and Andrea exit while I linger behind.

When the door closes she looks at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Chad cornered me in the hall. He’s getting more aggressive.”

Misa groans and falls into her chair. “This little prick is getting on my last gay nerve.”

I chuckle. “The last one?”

She rolls her eyes with a smile. “What does he want?”

“Me.”

“You tell that motherfucker to get in line,” she says, slamming her fist down on her desktop.

“Actually, I told him that I’d kick his ass, but then Ryan showed up.”

She leans over, resting her face in her hands. “I can’t think about him right now. I need to focus on the presentation. He’s such a twat.”

“Do not honor him with such a prestigious title. Twats are golden, honey. They are the first day of vacation, a twenty-dollar bill found in your laundry, Pacific Coast sunsets.”

She laughs. “You’re right.”

“I usually am,” I point out, crossing my legs and swinging my dangling foot back and forth.

Misa sighs. “You live your best life with no apologies, Penny, and I’m so jealous of that. Meanwhile, I don’t even know what tomorrow holds.” She turns and stares out of the wall of glass. “What I do know is that I fall asleep thinking of you. I wake up thinking of you. I want every moment of my life to mean something because you taught me to live that way in three short days. I need you to know how important you are to me, Penny. That you always have been.”

I stand and walk to the windows, looking down at the people below. Her declaration strikes a chord in my heart. The vibration amplifies out toward my fingers and toes, reverberating like the low notes of a piano. I’ve waited so long to hear those words from her, but they’re still not what I want the

most. I want a declaration, a promise. I want three little words with the biggest intentions.

“In every journal I’ve ever kept there is a memory or a sketch of you,” I tell her, still looking out over the city. “I can flip through the hundreds of pages and always find you tucked away in there somewhere. Your pages always show a bit more passion than most—the pressure of my pencil lines are so intense, it leaves a ghost of an image on the page below. Lead dust usually collects in the spine and smudges into a sort of bookmark.” I turn to face her now. Misa’s gaze burns into mine, fueling my confession. “So yes, Misa, you are important to me, too, and always have been.”

She crosses her arms, fingers digging into her ribs. I can tell it’s an effort to keep us physically separated right now. The way my pulse thunders in my ears, I want to climb into her arms and have her shush it away.

“Ugh. This is so messed up,” she says with a groan. “My life is impossible. Between you and Jet and my dad and work and fucking Chad.”

“Forget Chad,” I say. “Focus on work and this meeting. You’re going to kill it.”

“I’m just so worked up,” she says. I take a step toward her, but Misa holds up a hand to stop me. “Just stay there, you devious siren.”

Chuckling, I hold up my palms in surrender. “Fine. But I can offer some assistance in relaxation techniques.”

Misa shakes her head. “Too risky. Especially with Chad keeping tabs on us.”

“Fine,” I say, taking a seat in the chair across from her desk. “Hike up your skirt.”

“What?” she asks, her lip already trapped between those teeth.

“You heard me. Hike up that skirt, slide your hand into those lacy panties, and touch yourself for me.”

“What if…”

“Hey,” I say. “I’m way over here.”

Misa takes a seat in her chair and does as she’s told, gathering the skirt around her upper thighs. She keeps her eyes glued to mine as she slips her fingers beneath the lace and silk. I don’t watch her work—I don’t need to. I can tell the moment she connects. A tiny sigh escapes her lips and her shoulders sink back into her chair.

“Forget about everything but what’s happening in this room right now.”

A tiny whimper escapes her lips. I squeeze my thighs together for relief. All I can see is her hand and her wrist and tiny flicks of movement beneath her skirt. But it is enough to drive me wild.

“Do you like me watching you, babe?” I ask.

She nods. Misa’s head falls back and she closes her eyes.

“No,” I say. “Eyes on me.”

She forces her eyes open, half lidded and focused with laser precision on mine.

“Are you thinking about me? About how I taste on your tongue? My hands on your body? Do you remember what it feels like to have me inside of you?” I ask, my voice low and slow as her breathing increases.

Misa’s other hand grips the chair so hard the muscles in her arm tremble. She’s close and she’s mine for the taking.

“Now, close your eyes.” Another sigh dotted with tiny whimpers and stuttered breaths. “Picture me on my knees beneath your desk, my hands on your thighs, my tongue on your—”

“Penny!” she calls out as her whole body tenses, her full lips forming an O as her eyes squeeze tight. Misa rides out the last of her orgasm before slumping against her chair. She is completely spent and smiling.

“That was hot,” I say. “Life is so good.”

Misa hums and removes her hand from between her legs. She wipes it clean on a tissue from her desk drawer. She pulls her skirt back down, and we are back to Account Exec and Graphic Designer.

“Well, I’ll see you at the meeting,” I say, standing and making my way toward her door. “Go outside. Get some fresh air and regroup.”

“Thank you,” Misa calls out. “For everything.”

I nod and slip out, wearing a grin worthy of an Olympic medal in long distance orgasms.



TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE Chef Delgado and his team are to arrive, Andrea and I are in the break room getting more coffee. She pours her cup and then waits as I do the same.

“Ugh,” she says with a groan. “People here are just slobs. Look at this place.” She makes her way around the room, picking up trash and half-filled coffee cups. There’s an empty plastic container that held someone’s lunch sitting on the last table. Andrea picks it up. “I mean, really? If they think I’m going to wash it and set it out for them to take home, they are surely mistaken.”

I chuckle as she tosses it in the trash can. I can tell she’s nervous and venting, but whatever helps.

I turn to the counter, deciding I should help. I grab three coffee cups and make my way toward the garbage. A few steps from it, I slip on something and go down hard. All the cold coffee landing in my lap.

“Son of a bitchin’ coffee stain,” I say.

Andrea turns and runs over to help me up. She grabs a paper towel from the roll, not even bothering to tear it off, just dragging a long line across the room where she dabs and rubs at my dress.

“Shit,” she says. “It’s not coming out.” She checks the time on her phone. “There’s no time for you to go home and change. What are we going to do?”

“I could just wrap myself in paper towels?”

She frowns.

Looking down at the splattered stain on my cream-colored skirt, I have an idea. “Pour a few more cups of coffee and put them in the freezer.”

“What?”

“As soon as they’re cool enough, I’ll just pour more coffee on the skirt all the way around. It’ll look intentional, like a design.”

Andrea grins. “Oh my god, you’re a genius. We can use the dryer in the bathroom to make sure you’re dry before the meeting.”

“Now you’re talking.”

We wait for the coffee to cool for about five minutes. Then I take the edge of my skirt and drape it over the trash can while Andrea pours coffee on it. We do this all the way around and blot the extra liquid away. Thankfully, no one comes in while we’re doing this ridiculousness.

“What a work of art,” I tell her.

“Teamwork for the win.”

“Now I’m going to head to the bathroom to dry. Can you bring my notes and a pen to the meeting for me? I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Sure.”

I spend a full fifteen minutes in the bathroom, drying the skirt of my dress as best I can. When I'm satisfied that I won't leave stains or wet spots on the chairs, I head straight for Misa's office. Chef Delgado is already there, Misa greeting them and welcoming them back to New York.

"Penny!" Marco shouts when he sees me. "Always fashionably late, my darling?"

A kiss on each cheek and big grins. "You know I love to make an entrance."

"And you deserve one, centavo. Let's get started, shall we?"

"Of course, Chef."

I wave at Miguel, who looks very California sitting in a Manhattan conference room. As soon as Misa sees me, her eyes land on my skirt and she drops her marker. "What in the fu—ndamentals of your brand could we bring while still keeping it new and fresh?"

I press my lips together to keep from laughing, and Andrea does the same. Ryan is clueless and giving us all strange looks from his place at the end of the table.

Misa continues. "Well, we're going to show you. Gentlemen," she adds, "we have three options for you today. As you know these are just starting points, and any can be tweaked and altered as you see fit." She reveals the first logo. Suddenly, she seems out of sorts and nervous. Misa takes a deep breath and closes her eyes for a few seconds. "Penny, would you like to explain your vision here?"

My pulse spikes, not knowing she was going to call on me. And to be honest, I'm a little pissed off about it. Why was she so nervous if she was just going to push it off on me? She could have at least warned me.

Misa and Penny's Rules #4: Never throw your bestie under the bus.

"Well, as you can see, this version is very modern with clean lines, subtle color shifts, and a font that is streamlined. It speaks to the aesthetic of the restaurant while still feeling trendy yet welcoming."

Everyone nods their heads, but I note no enthusiasm. Misa continues.

"Next," she says, revealing the watercolor logo. Again, she waits for me to elaborate.

My temper flares and I am fuming. But I'm a professional, so I gather my thoughts and describe what I've done. "This one maintains the modern feel but with softer colors and a look that speaks to the oceanside aspect of the

restaurant. It does feel more feminine than the previous one, but that is balanced with the heavy, masculine font choice.”

More nodding, and still they give nothing away.

“And lastly,” Misa says, removing the third board to unveil my favorite of the designs. She doesn’t look me in the eye.

I hear a few hums and grunts and imagine that’s a good thing. Trying to push down my anger at being thrown to the wolves here, I focus on getting through this meeting. “And in the final design, I’ve used the idea of spilled spices in vibrant colors, creating the name of the restaurant in the negative white space. In my opinion, this one has the biggest visual appeal and interest, while tying into your main branding as well.”

Misa takes a seat across from me. My eyes glare for a second before releasing her from my ire.

“Okay. Let’s talk thoughts and feelings on these. Are any an immediate no? Are you leaning toward one design?” she asks the group.

“You’ve done a fine job, Penny,” Marco says with a smile. “They all seem to capture the spirit of my girl, eh?” I nod. “Time in California treated you well.”

My cheeks flush now and I feel transparent, even though I know he’s only referring to the restaurant. “Yes, Chef. It was amazing to see the space in person and to taste your delicious menu. It made my job so much easier.”

“Ah, a true talent you are.” He looks over the three designs again, tenting his hands together as he studies them. “I must say, I’m torn between the first and third ones. How do you feel, Miguel?”

Miguel nods. “I agree, Chef. I like those colors the best.”

“Ryan,” Misa says. “Can you remove the middle logo?” He stands and covers it up, dragging the easel away. He then pushes the other two options next to each other.

Chef is quiet for a long moment, his eyes sliding back and forth. “Miss Ito, do you have a favorite?”

She smiles and turns to look at each logo. “While they’re both great and representative of your restaurant, I prefer the first. It’s close enough to your overall branding while still maintaining its own unique look.”

“Hmm,” he says, rubbing the stubble on his chin. “I believe you are correct. Let’s go with it.”

And just like that, the meeting is over. Delgado stands, then we all stand

and say our goodbyes. “I’ll have Avery send you the menus and signage needs. We’d also like a few print ads created for West Coast publications. She’ll send you details.”

“Thank you, Chef,” I say.

“Beautiful job,” he tells me. “You have made this such an easy process, darling. *Obrigado*. Thank you.”

We exchange kisses, and he is gone. While his words are kind and make me feel validated in my skills and position here, the anger still churns in my belly and I can’t even look at Misa.

“Great job, Penny,” Andrea says. “Come by my office, and we’ll work out a schedule for the rest of this project.” I nod as she pushes through the door.

“I’ll get this taken care of and head out for the day if you don’t mind,” Ryan says. “Got a date tonight.”

“That’s fine,” Misa answers.

Ryan clears the table and packs up all the art before leaving us alone. As soon as the door closes behind him I am stomping toward her desk.

Misa’s smile falters when she sees my expression. “Are you trying to sabotage this account with your wardrobe?” she asks. “What happened to your dress?”

I ignore her. “What the fuck was that?” I ask.

“What?”

“All that shit about being so nervous about this meeting and you didn’t do anything. You just threw it to me.”

“I figured you know your designs better than I do,” she says, a frown on her face, eyebrows pulled low.

“Which is fine *if* you would have told me that I’d be presenting the ideas. I was not prepared, Misa.” My hands clench into fists at my sides as I try to keep my voice low.

“Well then, that was some of the best spur-of-the-moment bullshitting I’ve ever seen. You should be in sales. Why are you so angry? They loved it.”

“Because if you planned on having me do all the talking on the biggest account in the history of this agency then you should have given me some goddamned warning.”

Misa folds her hands on top of her desk and looks at me. “Penelope, this

is my account and I will run these meetings how I see fit. I don't appreciate your unprofessional attitude."

My insides vibrate as my anger grows. "Oh, we're back to *Penelope*, huh?" I say, throwing up my hands. "Why are you being like this?"

"It's..."

"I swear if you say it's complicated I will wreck every square inch of this office."

"Let's just focus on the account. I've got work to do," she says, finally meeting my eyes. "Please," Misa adds, her voice pleading and unfamiliar.

I force my hands into my pockets instead of around her throat and back away. Misa never looks up at me again. I make my way to my desk, confused, angry, and grappling with what just happened. No one even looks up when I slam things around my desk, before realizing I can't be here right now.

I grab my bag and haul ass to the elevators. The ride down is slow and torturous, but as soon as those doors open, I am almost running across the lobby and out the doors. I inhale the warm summer air and blow it out slowly, trying to calm myself. When that doesn't work, I stand on the edge of the sidewalk, counting the floors and staring up at where I know Misa sits in her office.

After all, we've been through and all we've shared, we're right back at day one. She's playing games, and I will not be a pawn in her life of lies.

Deciding I'm done for the day, I hail a cab and hop in. I shoot a text to Andrea letting her know that I'm taking the afternoon off. After giving the driver my destination, I sit back and take a couple of deep breaths. We round the corner, and I see Chad leaning against the building, taking a long drag off a cigarette. His lips curve into a sinister smile as he blows out a cloud of smoke and gives me a smile and a wave.

Chapter Seventeen

Ninth Grade

I SQUEEZED MY eyes closed even tighter. Loud voices poked at me like sticks at a sleeping bear.

“Get up!” was all I heard over and over. Finally, I blinked my eyes open to find my face pressed to my open Spanish book. I took in my surroundings and realized I wasn’t in my bed at home but in Misa’s room.

The bed jostled, and I peeled my face from the page teaching time in Spanish. I rubbed my eyes and noticed the cute sketch of Misa I had drawn in my notebook instead of the notes I was supposed to be taking. I grinned until a pillow hit me in the back of the head.

“Get up,” Misa said.

My eyes lifted to find her father in the doorway. His expression was intense, and I suddenly felt shame for doing absolutely nothing wrong.

“We just fell asleep studying,” Misa said.

Her father shouted something in Japanese. He went on and on, pointing to me, then pointing to her. I didn’t know what to do, so I threw all my books into my bag while they argued.

“You gotta go, Penny,” Misa said.

I stood and hiked my bag onto my shoulder. “Yeah, I got that part. I’ll see you later?” I asked, kissing two fingers and holding them up. She gave me a sad smile and mimed my actions, pressing her fingers to mine.

“Later.”

But later would never come.



Present

I FILL ANOTHER purple balloon with helium and tie it off before attaching the ribbon. Handing it over to my helper, Rav, I grab another and continue the

process, finding a bit of relief in the brainless actions.

“Hey, Pen,” Ross says, carrying two cases of water. “You good?”

I nod. “I think my talents are being underutilized here, and my fingers are sore from tying balloons.”

Rav grins and holds up his first two fingers in a *come hither* motion. “Which fingers? Could ruin your sex life.”

“Shut it.”

Ross laughs and continues on. I fill a balloon, tie the end, hand it over. Once Rav ties the ribbons on, he passes them off to be used around the room for decor.

“So, where have you been, Rav?” I ask.

He shrugs and slides the zipper on his hoodie higher before flipping the hood up onto his head. “Here and there.”

“Staying out of trouble?” I ask.

“Yeah. I told you I ain’t running with those kids anymore. You know me. I don’t like to be nailed down.”

“I know,” I say, inflating another balloon. I slide my eyes sideways, only to see his frown in the shadow of his hood. “You reach out to your parents again?”

He shakes his head. “That ain’t gonna happen. A waste of time.”

“And what about your sister? Didn’t she say you could go stay with her?”

He pushes his hood back, dark eyes hitting me with a disgusted look. “She lives in Alabama. Perfect territory for someone like me, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess not,” I say with a shrug. “Still, it would be nice to have a home. Somewhere to lay your head every night.”

“I’m doing fine, Penny.”

I hold my hands up in surrender, the balloon I’m inflating flies off across the room. “Okay, fine. I’ll stop prying.” He nods and leans back in his chair. “You need anything?”

“I’m applying for a job at this bodega by the shelter. Could use a reference,” he says.

Pride blooms in my chest. I want to burst with happiness and smother him in hugs, but I know better. Instead, I just give him a shrug of my shoulders. “Of course, kid.”

A girl with jet-black hair and lots of eyeliner joins us. “I’m so excited about tonight,” she says, clasping her hands together under her chin and

grinning. “But, like, super sad, too. Because this could be the last event ever at the Center.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “We’re working on a solution to keep the place open.” I don’t tell her that all my calls today were met with “Not interested” and “Sorrlys.”

She smiles. “I found this killer dress at a thrift store over in Crown Heights. And my girl is wearing her brother’s tux. Queer prom is going to be so lit!”

I grin at her enthusiasm.

“Will you be here?” she asks.

I nod. “I spent all this time planning the party. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Back in my day, I brought my girlfriend to prom at my school. It did not go well.”

“Good for you,” Rav says. “At least you had the balls to do it, right? I’m sure things were super different that long ago.”

I drop my hands, letting loose another deflating balloon. “How old do you think I am? Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

Rav and the girl laugh before sneaking off to help someone else. Ross plops down into a chair next to me and swipes the sweat from his forehead with the bottom of his shirt.

“It’s official. I’ve become the wise old dyke telling stories about ‘back in my day.’”

Ross chuckles. “It was bound to happen.”

“Next thing you know, I’ll be living in the ’burbs, driving a Lezbaru, growing my own vegetables, and composting.”

Ross looks up at me. “Aren’t those your goals anyway?”

I take a seat next to him. “Yes, but, like, when I’m much, much older. I swear volunteering around these kids all the time makes me feel like Sophia from the *Golden Girls*.”

“Well, you’re about that snarky, so it’s fitting.”

“Bite me.”

“See?”

“LOL. OMG. You’re, like, so funny.”

Ross nudges my shoulder. “But really, how are you doing?”

I look down at my fingernails, chewed down and pitiful. “I’m okay. Women are crazy. And I can’t find any help to keep this place open.”

He opens his mouth, but I hold up my hand.

“Your savings is still not an option.”

“Have you heard from Misa?”

“No. Six text messages and two calls unanswered. I just don’t understand. If Chad got to her, why wouldn’t she share that with me so we could fight this asshole together?”

“Only Misa knows that. And if she’s not willing to talk, then there’s nothing you can do.”

“I feel... Well, there are too many feelings to commit to one, but it’s like a therapist’s grab bag in my head right now.”

“It’ll be okay, Pen. You want a hug?”

I look him over, eyeing his sweat-soaked shirt. “Eww. No.”

“Come on. Give Ross a little hug,” he says, teasing and reaching for me.

I jump up from my chair. “Stop, you sweaty man pig!”

He stands and slaps my shoulder wearing a wide smile. “Thanks, Pen. That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. Now get back to work.”

We stay all afternoon, decorating the Center for their party tonight. When we’re finished, Ross treats me to a slice and we return home.

We both stop in the kitchen. Ross pours himself a glass of water, downs it, and pours another.

I grab a bottle of red from our wine rack. When I can’t find a wineglass in the cupboard, I check the drying rack. All four glasses are there, along with a couple of plates and two Lollicock Slim Stick dildos.

“Matching dildos? Oh my god, you guys are so cute,” I say, picking up the pink silicone toys and smacking him on the ass.

“Give me those,” Ross says, taking them from my hand. “Don’t be judging what goes on in my bedroom.”

“Then don’t be leaving your cocks in the kitchen.”

Ross shrugs. “That’s fair. I’m just going to hop in the shower. Rachel should be here in the next thirty minutes or so.”

“Great,” I say, uncorking my bottle and pouring myself a generous glass. “Is she bringing a matching butt plug?”

“Let it go,” he sings before closing the bathroom door.

I laugh and swallow down half my wine before refilling. With Lizzo on the turntable, I take a seat and sip my drink slowly now. I love the burn in my empty stomach and the numbness that awaits me at the bottom of this glass.

Rachel comes in, announcing herself as she enters. “I’m here,” she says from the doorway.

“Ross is in the shower,” I answer as she finds me sprawled across the sofa.

“You okay, Penny?” Rachel is a sight in her silver sequined dress. She’s got her hair pinned up in crazy, twirling knots and red lipstick on.

“I’ll be fine,” I say. “You look gorgeous.”

Rachel blushes and looks at her feet. “Thanks. This was my mom’s prom dress. I’ve had it since high school when I wore it as a costume. I will never understand why people hold onto these things, but it saved me from having to buy one.”

I sit up and smirk at her. “Maybe because it has some sentimental value, you know? She probably lost her virginity in that dress or something.”

Rachel’s expression shifts to one of horror as she looks down at herself. “What?”

“Like you said, why else hang onto it?”

“Eww. Eww. Eww,” she repeats, standing and spinning in a circle. “Eww. Eww.”

“Penny,” Ross calls from the bathroom door, towel wrapped around his waist. “Did you break my girlfriend?” I laugh as he approaches her and stops her spinning. “What’s wrong?”

“My mother did the nasty in this dress. I can’t wear this now. It’s tainted.”

I lie back on the sofa and sip my wine. “She said *taint*.” Ross shoots me a look, and I mime zipping my lips and throwing away the key.

“Babe,” he says. “Rachel.” She finally meets his eyes. “You look beautiful. I’m sure your saintly mother did no such thing. Just calm down and give me five minutes to get dressed, okay?” Rachel nods and takes a seat in her chair again. Ross points at me. “And you keep your theories to yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ten minutes later, Ross and Rachel are gone and I am alone in the apartment. I stare at my phone, willing Misa’s name to appear on the screen, but it doesn’t. Tossing my phone onto the coffee table, I finish my wine and lay there staring up at the ceiling.

While I am hurt and angry at Misa’s behavior on Friday, I know there has to be a reason for it. And that brings in worry. If she’s dealing with Chad—or

something else—it upsets me that she thinks she has to do it on her own. I thought we were a team here. To have her treat me that way and cut me out of whatever’s going on brings on another level of anger.

It’s that anger that finally propels me from the sofa, into a navy party dress and silver heels. I paint on some eyeliner, a bit of mascara, and pin my hair up into a mess of curls. I open my clutch—which I found in a market on the outskirts of Paris and had mysteriously been filled with American pennies—and throw in my ID, some cash, my lipstick, and a flask filled with whiskey. I’m going to prom.

The gym at the Oasis Center looks beautiful with all the balloons and a disco ball casting specks of rainbow light in a swirling pattern around the room. The music is loud and gay and sort of inappropriate—all the same qualities I find in myself.

Kids dance together in large groups and couples, all of them smiling and laughing in their best attire. It’s a heartwarming scene, and I know that Ross is right when he says this place is important and worth his savings. Still, I can’t let him give that up.

“You did a great job organizing this,” Ross says, shouting over the music.

“Thanks,” I say, beaming with pride and taking it all in.

“Have fun! And stay out of trouble. They’re underage.” He wraps his arm around Rachel’s waist and whisks her across the dance floor.

“I’m not one of these kids. You can’t tell me what to do!” But he’s already gone.

I sneak behind the photo booth, take two long pulls from my flask, and close it back up. I close my eyes and force myself not to think of Misa or work or California. Making my way to the dance floor, I join a group of girls and let loose. They welcome me with open arms into their circle. I dance and dance and dance until my legs ache and my feet are killing me. But I welcome the distraction.

When the song shifts into a ballad, the girls pair off and hold each other closer than they’re allowed to at school functions. I stand in the middle of the dance floor, a lonely girl beneath the disco lights.

“May I have this dance?” I turn to find Ross, with his hand extended and a smile on his face. Taking his hand, he twirls me once and pulls me into his arms. Ross holds tight because he knows me and he knows this is what I need.

“You look very handsome in your tux tonight,” I tell him.

“Thanks. And you’re a lovely sight as well.” I laugh and kiss his cheek. “I’m glad we did this, Pen. It may be one last hoorah, but it’s a great one. I’m so sorry you’re dealing with so much right now.”

I shrug as we sway to the music. “It’s okay. I’m grown folk. I can take care of myself.”

Ross ducks his head, looking me in the eye. “And the point of having a best friend means you don’t have to.” He’s quiet for a few seconds as his eyes scan the room. “You have been there for me during some of the hardest times of my life.”

“And I will always be here for you. I’m sorry I was gone all those years traveling, leaving you alone. It was selfish, but I just had to get out.”

He smiles. “I know. And I understand. I love you to the stars.”

“Same,” I tell him. “We’ve been through so much together. How are we twenty-seven years old and still dealing with all this mess?”

Ross makes a face and rolls his eyes. “Penny equals chaos.”

I nod, looking across the room to where Rachel is sitting on a bench with her shoes off, rubbing her feet. “Rachel is a keeper, huh?”

His face lights up as he twirls me around and pulls me close again. “She’s smart. She’s funny. She’s supportive and understanding. Her hair is different almost every time I see her, so it’s like dating twelve different women at once.” I laugh. “And I know she’s got a good heart because I met her volunteering here. She’s my forever.”

I smile, but my stomach feels like hitting the first big drop on a roller coaster. “I’m happy for you.”

“Pen?” My eyes meet his. “You’ll find your forever, too, you know? Whether it’s who you expect it to be or not, when it’s right, you’ll know.”

“You sound like my mom.”

He grins. “A wise and brilliant woman.”

With that, my heart softens and I laugh. The song ends, he spins me away and kisses my hand. “We’re grabbing dinner with some friends after the dance. You in?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Meet out front in twenty.” Ross leaves me there and heads off to see about Rachel.

I freshen up in the bathroom, touch up my lipstick, and snap a selfie in the

mirror. Then I think, *Nah, I can do better*. Making my way to the photo booth, I step into the space by myself, show off my good side, and take a few pics. When they print out, I drop them into my bag with a grin.

It's a quick walk to Gino's from the Center. Ross carries Rachel on his back while her shoes dangle from her hands. The space is cozy with an expansive bar and large red velvet booths. The hostess escorts us across the room to a corner booth. Everyone is laughing and in good spirits, even me—until I see the long black hair and familiar silhouette of Misa in the booth next to us. My empty stomach plummets when our eyes connect. It is a slow-motion moment of recognition and then panic on her end. Glaring anger on mine.

I wait until everyone has slid around and filled in the banquet before taking a seat at the end so that I can still see Misa and she can see me. I imagine it's her fiancé sitting across from her, but all I can see is the back of his head from where I'm at.

It's all I can do to stay engaged with the gang from the Center and not stare daggers at the woman sitting ten feet away. But somehow, I manage. We order a round of drinks and appetizers for the table before I need a break from the tension tethering me to Misa Ito and excuse myself to the bathroom.

I take my time washing my hands, fixing my hair, adjusting my cleavage. I stare at the girl in the mirror and realize that I've never been so unsure about anything in my life. I don't know what to do right now. I know I want to take a seat on top of that table and confront her. But I also know that beneath the hurt and anger I feel, I still care about her. So I touch up my lipstick one last time and push through the door to rejoin my friends.

In the dark hall leading back into the restaurant, I find myself face-to-face with Misa's father.

"You."

He stops, his mouth bobbing open a few times before he points a finger at me. "You," he says.

"Penny."

"Penny," he repeats. His expression is not like when most people run into an old friend but more like when you've seen a ghost. Suddenly, he paints on a fake smile. "So good to see you. It's been..."

"Fourteen years," I say, trying to keep the resentment out of my tone.

"Fourteen years."

I feel like I'm talking to a goddamn parrot the way he's just repeating everything. "Polly want a cracker?" He gives me a strange look and shoves his hands into his pockets. "Never mind."

"You live in Brooklyn?" he asks.

"I do."

He silently nods, looking me over. "You know, my Misa does, too. With her fiancé. Nice Japanese businessman."

I don't know why I say it, but the words spill out before I can stop them. "Yes, I know. Did Misa not tell you we work together now?"

His head jerks back in a way that makes his chin disappear into his neck. "She did not mention it."

"Well, wish I could say it was great seeing you, but you never really liked me and this has been awkward as hell."

Mr. Ito bites his bottom lip, and I see where Misa gets it from. "Misa has a good life now—a successful career, an upcoming wedding. She is a good girl."

I step to him. With my heels, I tower over the man. He tips his head back to meet my eyes. "But is she happy? Have you ever asked her that? Or is your happiness the only thing that matters?"

He doesn't say a word, just stares silently.

"I gotta get back to my friends."

I move past him and make my way out of the hall. As soon as I'm back in the dining room, Misa and I connect. She knows that he's seen me. I pull my gaze from her and rejoin my friends, not even looking up when her father returns and they leave together.

Chapter Eighteen

Eighth Grade

MY HEART RACED. The heat in my cheeks felt like fire. I grunted as I tossed a stray shoe across the room. My fists curled into balls and my nails dug into the flesh of my palms. I let out a screeching kind of growl and kicked my unicorn trash can.

“Ouch!” I shouted as Misa appeared in the doorway.

She looked around at the mess and wore a look of disgust. “What the hell happened in here?”

“My dad! That’s what!”

“Is this the emergency you called me here for?” she asked, bending over to pick up books scattered on the floor.

“Stop,” I barked. “Don’t touch anything.”

Miss dropped the books. “Penny, what’s going on?”

“I came home, and my dad was in my room.” I stopped and took a deep breath. “Going through my stuff!”

“What was he looking for?” she asked.

“I have no idea. But I freaked out. Big-time.” I paced the room, stepping on anything in my path. “I told him if he wanted to see what I had in here, then I’d show him. I just started emptying drawers and my closet. By the time I looked up he was gone.”

Misa takes a seat in my desk chair and crosses her arms over her chest. “So, basically, you made this huge mess in protest for nothing.”

I threw my arms wide. “Not for nothing. He was violating my privacy!”

“Or just looking for a pen.”

My arms dropped to my sides and I blew out a breath like a deflating balloon. “Shit.”

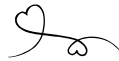
“Yeah.”

I plopped down on my bed, sending a box of colored pencils to the floor. “Why am I like this?” I asked, not really wanting an answer.

“You once told me it was because of the red hair,” Misa said, moving to sit next to me. “But I think you’re just passionate. About literally everything. It’s a good thing. You just need to learn to rein it in.”

I bumped her shoulder with mine. “That’s what you’re here for.”

“You’re lucky to have me, Penelope Winters. Good thing I’m here to stay.”



Present

MONDAY IS A mixture of dread, excitement, and double-shot espresso. As soon as I arrive at my desk, Juan tells me that Andrea is looking for me.

I make my way to her office and let myself in while she’s finishing up a phone call.

“Yes,” she says sweetly. “I assure you this will not affect our timeline at all. Okay. Thank you. Goodbye.”

Taking a seat in the chair across from her desk, I give her a grin. She does not return it. Instead, Andrea sighs and weaves her fingers together on top of a stack of folders.

“What’s up, boss lady?”

“We’re going to be moving some assignments around, Penny. I don’t know how to say this gently. You’re off of the Delgado account. I’m sorry.”

“What?” I say too loudly, scooting to the edge of my chair. “Why?”

“Misa requested to have a different designer finish out the materials.”

My pulse is thunderous, my hands digging into the soft leather armrests. “So I do all the heavy lifting and now it gets pulled from me? I thought Chef Delgado was happy with my work.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not him. It’s Misa. She said she couldn’t work with you anymore and threatened to leave the agency if we didn’t reassign you.”

I slump back in my chair. Rage filling every cell in my body. “This is bullshit and you know it.”

Andrea nods. “I do. But if you refuse, the only alternative is to let you go. Rupert will never want to lose Misa.”

I glare at her while taking deep breaths. My lungs rattle as I try to keep it together.

“Penny, I don’t know why she’s changed her mind about you, but I really would like to keep you on staff. You’re a talented designer and you deserve to be here. I’m not happy about any of this, but my hands are tied.”

“Who?” I ask. “Who is the account going to?”

“Juan.”

I blow out a breath. At least that gives me a bit of relief.

“And believe me when I say he wasn’t happy about it, either.”

I nod and stretch my fingers, loosening my grip on the chair. The fury inside builds and swells, and I hold on to that because as soon as it’s gone I’ll be left with nothing but betrayal.

“There’s nothing I can do about it?” I ask between gritted teeth.

“No.”

“Fine,” I say, standing and pushing the chair away. I grab Andrea’s door and yank it open.

“Penny,” she calls out. I don’t look at her, keeping my eyes out on the gray hallway walls. “I think it’s best if you just avoid Misa for now. Don’t confront her.” I dip my chin to let her know I’ve heard her. “At least not at the office,” she adds.

Alone in the hall, I vent to no one but myself. “Oh, I won’t confront her. I’ll fucking kill her. I’ll force her to wear bright colors and smile. I’ll...I’ll make her watch reality television and eat carbs.”

I stop and take a deep breath before stepping into the art room. Stomping back to my desk, I fall into my seat and glare at my computer screen. My head is spinning with ideas, thoughts, too many to latch on to something. I feel crazed and like I’m drowning in my own saliva.

“Are you okay?” I hear Juan ask. “I’m sorry, Penny. I had nothing to do with it.”

I turn to him. “I know, Juan. It’s okay. Well, you’re okay. There are several people in this building that I’d like to dropkick into a shark tank.”

“I’m sure. Hey, why don’t you go cool off somewhere for a bit? I’ll cover for you.”

I place my hand over his. “Thanks, Juan. You’re a good guy.”

He grins and tilts his head, urging me to go. Instead of taking the elevator down, this time I head up to the roof where the smokers take their breaks.

Pushing through the heavy metal door, it slams closed behind me with a loud bang that makes my shoulders jump.

The air is cooler up here, and I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with it and exhaling as if blowing out an imaginary drag. It's early, so I'm alone. Walking to the edge of the building, I grasp the railing and peek over. The view makes me dizzy, so I spin away.

Pulling out my phone, I shoot a text to Ross. *Misa had me removed from the account.*

What?!?

It's either reassignment or I lose my job. Fucking women. I swear.

What are you going to do?

I close my eyes and try to clear my head, but it's no use. What can I do? I don't want to lose this job. But I don't know if I can work here while she ignores me again. I don't know if I can survive talk of a fiancé or wedding when I know it's not real. And as angry as I am right now, I still want to give her a chance to explain.

I hear the door slam again, and my eyes shoot open to find Chad moving toward me. I contemplate a leg-sweep-counter-weight-full-body-toss over the side of the building, but I'm not trying to go to prison at such a young age. I'm too cute for orange jumpsuits.

"What do you want, you wank stain?" I ask.

"Just checking on you, Penny. You seem upset." Chad grins and stands across from me in his blue suit, blue shirt, and blue tie—the most boring, monochromatic villain ever.

"I'm fine," I say, stepping to him. "But I know you had something to do with this."

Chad holds up his hands as if he's innocent. "I gave you every opportunity, Penny. And when you wouldn't budge, well, I just went to someone else who had a lot more to lose."

"Misa," I say, my eyes cutting to his.

He moves forward, and I retreat, pressing my back to the railing. Chad places a hand on each side of my body, trapping me. "She was all too willing to give you up for her job and her man. Guess you were right. Guess your messing around was nothing."

I raise my hands and shove him away from me. And when there's just enough distance between us, I raise my metal-studded flats and kick him straight in the dick. Chad goes down faster than Trump's approval rating. He clutches his junk as his face turns purple from the pain.

"All of this because your fragile fucking ego wouldn't accept that you couldn't sleep with me?" I ask.

He grunts but doesn't say anything.

"Listen here, you cowardly little shitstick. You better get used to rejection because I see a very long line of it in your future."

"I'll report this," he groans out.

I bend over, getting closer to his sickening face. "And what? Use your bruised balls as proof? Go ahead and tell them that a girl kicked your ass. Hell, let's send out a company-wide memo. Come after me again and I'll unleash the biggest, gayest fucking revenge you've ever seen. There will be drag queens, dildo swords, glitter, and dykes on bikes. The queer mafia will hit you so hard, you'll be shitting rainbows for the rest of your natural life."

"Fucking bitch."

I grin and step around him, pulling the door open. "Fucking right."



I SLAM THE apartment door and throw my bag into the closet. Ross is on the sofa reading.

As soon as he sees me, he sits up and meets me in the kitchen. "I got you sour gummy worms and a bottle of prosecco. Who loves you?"

A bit of my pent-up anger disintegrates. "You do." Ross opens the pack of gummies and offers me one. "Thanks."

"Come tell me about your day, Pen."

So I tell him everything. My meeting with Andrea, my encounter with Chad. Spending the day avoiding Misa's office only to find out she was out all day on "meetings."

"I am so mentally drained and I just want to break shit. Then, it takes two hours to get home because of some issue on the Q. There are not many things worse than standing in an overcrowded, hot, and sweaty train with no power. It got swampy in there real quick."

He throws an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. "I'm sorry. I wish I knew how to help."

"Between Chad and Misa, losing this account, and the Center closing, I wish you did, too. But hey, I've still got you."

"There's the silver lining," Ross says.

I down the glass of prosecco he pours me and motion for a refill. "Let's talk about something else. How are things with Rachel?"

Ross smiles the kind of smile that is not thought out but a natural reaction. "She's great. So great. I mean, I'm a lucky guy."

"You certainly are," I say, this time taking a tiny sip of my drink. "You better appreciate that she puts up with you because it is diff-a-cult, let me tell you." I ruffle his messy hair. "Life is so good, Ross."

He chuckles and grabs a beer from the fridge. "Right now? Hardly. You were just listing all of your problems. Any progress on the Center?"

I sigh and hold back the tears that sting my eyes. "No. I can't find even the tiniest lead or anyone willing to help. I can't even get a foot in the door at some of the bigger businesses I've gone after. It's ridiculous. Corporate America is garbage."

Cracking it open, he holds the bottle out to me, and I clink my glass against it. "To being a part of the most fucked up drama this side of the Hudson River."

"To chaos," I counter.

A knock at the door pulls us from our drinks. "You expecting someone?"

"Nope."

I shrug and walk to the door, pulling it open. The drink slips from my hand and all the air evacuates from my lungs as I find Misa standing on the other side. The sound of glass shattering snaps me to attention as wine and sharp shards pool around my bare feet.

"You've got some fucking nerve coming here," I say, unwanted tears filling my eyes.

"I know." She reaches for me. Instinctually, I lean away. "Don't move or you'll get cut," she says, jerking her hand back to her side.

"I got her," Ross says, picking me up and carrying me to the sofa. He goes back to the door. "I'll clean this up, Pen. Do you want me to let her in or not?"

"No. Yes. Hell no. Okay, fine."

Misa enters the apartment, sets her purse down on the kitchen counter, and approaches slowly. Meanwhile, I sit on the sofa, arms crossed and fuming. Ross is absolutely silent as he cleans my mess. The only sound is my breathing and the noise from the street below.

Misa stands there wringing her hands as she looks me over. “I know you’re mad.”

I pop to my feet and move so that we’re inches apart. “*Mad* does not begin to describe what I am. Try *filled with so much rage that we should probably hide the kitchen knives!*” I yell. “Better adjectives would be *hurt* or *used* or *disappointed*, Misa. Maybe *a little fucking heartbroken*,” I finish. The tears finally fall and I quickly swipe them from my cheek.

Ross dumps the glass into the trash and heads to his room. Before closing the door, he holds up two fingers, points them at his eyes, and then at Misa.

“You knew getting into this that my situation was...complicated,” she says, crossing her arms and moving to the window. My eyes trace over the curve of her neck and down to where I know that tattoo sits on her shoulder. That word—*complicated*—makes my blood boil.

“This isn’t just your situation anymore, Misa. You’re involving my career, too. Don’t you think it looks terrible that I’ve been removed from the account?”

She spins to face me. “And what about my career? Huh? I was supposed to just let Chad run off to tell Rupert that we’ve been together? I was supposed to let him send my father the photos he has of us making out in the supply closet? What exactly was I supposed to do, Penny?”

“He has photos? Never mind.” I shake my head, my cheeks burning. “You were supposed to protect the people you care about.”

“I thought that’s what I was doing.”

My head whips toward her now. “Unless you don’t care about me.” I take a step toward her. “Unless I was just one last roll in the gay hay before you actually settle down with some penis.”

She faces me now, throwing her arms out. “Of course you weren’t. How can you not know what you mean to me?”

“Because you keep *saying* it and not *showing* it,” I growl, my voice low and grizzly. “Why did you even come here today?”

“Because I owe you an explanation. I had you removed from the account because I need to distance myself from you, or Chad will go public.”

“And the only way you can do that is to first throw me to the wolves at the meeting and then remove me from a brand I’ve worked so hard to build?”

“He threatened to physically harm you, Penny. I felt trapped and did what I thought was best for both of us. Chad wants you humiliated, but I knew you’d be fine at the meeting. And you were.”

“Bullshit!” I run my hands through my hair and then wrap them around myself. “I can take care of myself. You did what was best for you and your picture-perfect fake life.”

“‘Picture perfect’?” she yells. “Nothing about my life is picture perfect.” Misa steps toward me now. I look away. “I know I messed up, but I’m spinning out of control here and can’t seem to do anything right. The only thing I want, I can’t have.”

My eyes meet hers, angry and questioning. “You could have it if you weren’t such a fucking coward.” The blow lands exactly as I wanted it to. She takes a step back and drops her chin to her chest. “Just go, Misa. Get out.”

She walks to the kitchen, grabs her purse, and throws it over her shoulder. I follow to make sure she leaves because I can’t take another minute of arguing. When she opens the door, she turns to say something, but no words come out.

“You know, since you disappeared when we were kids, I always wondered what it would be like to find you again,” I say. “To reconnect with my best friend and the first girl I ever loved. Now I’m sorry that I found out.”

Misa and Penny’s Rules #5: Never leave each other mad.

I slam the door closed and lock all three locks before leaning against it and falling to pieces.

Chapter Nineteen

Eighth Grade

“PENNY, HE FLIPPED out. He said we can’t hang out anymore.”

Misa tugged at her earlobe as she sat at our kitchen table with tears in her eyes. My mom put a glass of milk in front of her and a plate of Oreos between us.

“What about your mom?” I asked.

“She’s secretly happy but says to let Dad cool down a bit. She sent me here and said she would talk to him.”

“Well, that’s good,” I said as I twisted an Oreo apart and licked the icing off of one side. “At least she’s on your side.”

“I just don’t get it,” Misa whined. “It’s like he doesn’t want me to have any fun or make any decisions without consulting him first.”

“There are way worse things we could have done than get our ears pierced.”

“I know!” she said.

“Like what?” my mom chimed in from the next room.

“Mom,” I whined. “Anyway, do you think he’s going to ground you or something? Not that it could be much worse than all the rules he has for you now.”

Misa lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “I know he sees me as just a kid,” she said, swiping a tear from her cheek. “But it’s still my life. When do *I* get to have some say in what happens to *me*?”

“With your dad? Whew. Maybe when you’re, like, thirty-five?”

She glared at me and shoved a whole cookie into her mouth. “Not funny,” she said with a full mouth.

“Hey, it’s not like he can un-pierce them, right? It’s done. You’ve only got to live with him for four more years and then you’re out on your own. What’s the worst that could happen in four years?”

Misa swallows down half the glass of milk and licks her lips. “I don’t even want to think about it.”



Present

I LET OUT a kind of grunting screech in frustration as I violently slide hangers from one side of my closet to the other.

“Are you okay in there?” Ross asks from my doorway as he slips into his sneakers.

“I have nothing to wear!”

He folds his arms and leans against the doorway. “Well, maybe if you did laundry more than twice a year...”

I shoot him a look and continue searching my closet. “Look, I’m a professional at making clothes last between washings. I once washed my whole outfit in the Danube River in Vienna. While still wearing it.”

“Uh, I think that’s just called swimming.”

“Not when you use soap. Duh.”

Ross sighs. “Are you okay?”

“No. I’m far from okay. I mean, what kind of outfit do you wear when you’re filled with rage, heartbroken, confused, betrayed, sober, and have to coexist with the person responsible for it all?”

“Your birthday suit?”

A little smile tugs at my lips. “I love you, but you’re not helping.” I drop my arms to my sides and face him. “Bye, Ross. Have a good day at work, dear.” Flinging myself onto my bed, I just stare up at the ceiling and the crack that grows out of the corner. I feel the bed dip when he takes a seat next to me.

“It doesn’t matter what you wear. It’s not going to change how you feel. So put something on and walk into that place like you’re the badass you know you are. Focus on your job today. Tomorrow we’ll figure out the rest.”

Ross places a kiss on my forehead and leaves. When the apartment door closes and I am alone, his words finally hit me. I can be affected without being afflicted. I summon the courage that got me through the jungles of Vietnam, the Great Baikal Trail of Siberia, and the Australian outback. If I

can do those things, I can certainly face a day at work with Misa and Chad looming around every corner.



BY THE TIME I get back from lunch, I am emotionally exhausted. Still, I sit at my computer and focus on my most pressing projects, praying that the clock would fast-forward to five o'clock. Every few minutes I check the time, and I swear it moves backward at one point.

Saving my current file, I make my way to the break room for coffee. On my way, I spot Misa and a handsome Asian man in the supply closet. This must be Jet. She has her back to me, standing over the copier while it prints out pages. He's talking to her back.

I linger outside the door where they can't see me because I guess I'm a masochist.

"Why are you here?" Misa asks, stacking a group of papers and tapping them to line up neatly.

"Your father called and reminded me it was our anniversary. I thought I could take you to lunch," Jet says.

"What's the point? Just tell him we went to lunch. Besides, I've already eaten."

"Come on, Misa."

"Why are you so desperate to hide this breakup?" Misa asks, still stacking papers. "How long are we supposed to keep this up?"

"How should I know?" he asks. "I have never been in a fake engagement with a *lesbian* before."

Misa spins to face him now. "Don't you dare come at me with judgment. I know there's something you're not telling me. I know you want out just as much as I do."

Jet pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fine. I'll just make something up."

She gives him a stiff nod. I hurry past the door and into the break room before they see me.

Of course, there's no coffee so I make a fresh pot. While I'm waiting for it to brew, people filter in and out, grabbing snacks or getting water from the fridge. They all give polite greetings, and I just can't find the strength to

return them. If I keep this up they'll start making up horrible nicknames for me, too. Drop Dead Red. The Ginger Avenger. Penny the Enemy. I smirk, not even minding those.

The *click-clack* of Misa's heels announce her arrival into the space like a tornado siren on a silent night. Immediately, my heart thumps harder against my chest. I stare at the coffeepot, willing it to finish faster, but it ignores me and keeps dripping ever so slowly.

"Is it done?" she asks, her voice much softer than these walls are used to hearing.

"Nope."

In my peripheral vision I see her face me, leaning her hip against the counter. She blows out a breath and adjusts her high ponytail. I keep my eyes on the coffee. Misa turns and crosses her arms before clearing her throat and tapping the toe of her shoe on the tile floor.

"Your fidgeting is driving me crazy," I say.

"Sorry."

There's the first apology since this mess started, and it's not the one I'm looking for. I pull the pot from the coffee maker and pour my cup, just needing to get away from her. The drips sizzle as they land on the hotplate. I replace the pot and turn to go.

"Penny," Misa calls out.

"Happy anniversary, Misa."



THURSDAY, I COME home and find Ross doing pull-ups on the bar that hangs on his doorframe. His arms shake as he struggles to get his chin above the bar, so I know he's been at this for a while.

I grab a water and a Pop-Tart, having a seat on the sofa. Finally, Ross drops his feet to the floor and wipes the sweat from his face with the towel around his neck.

"You're working out at home. That means you're stressed. What's going on?" I ask.

He chugs an entire water bottle and tosses it into the recycle bin in the kitchen. "I just get this terrible anxiety every time I'm at the Center now."

“I know what you mean,” I say, taking a bite from my s’mores Pop-Tart. “It’s like this looming countdown. Every time I help someone fill out a job application or find a place to stay, I feel like this will all be gone soon. The guilt is unreal.”

Ross takes a seat on the edge of the side chair and opens another water bottle. “Officially, the Center has until midnight tomorrow to sign the contract and pay another year’s worth of rent.”

“No pressure,” I say, offering him the second Pop-Tart. He declines. “I could skip work tomorrow and just chain myself to some fortune-five-hundred company’s front door until they give us the money.”

“That would be counterproductive because then I’d have to pay to get your ass out of jail.”

I look at Ross and give him a reassuring smile. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

He shakes his head. “Let’s not relive that night.”

“Hey, that guy was asking for it,” I say.

I chase my snack with a bottle of water as Ross finishes his own. He takes the empty bottle from me and tosses both into the recycle bin.

“Right now, we’re just waiting on a Hail Mary last-minute miracle. It feels awful,” he says, resting his forearms on the kitchen counter.

“I know. I just have to believe that everything will work out, or I’ll go crazy.”

Ross tilts his head. “You’re strangely optimistic with all the shit you’re going through right now.”

“I’m in that weird headspace where I can pretend that anything outside of this apartment doesn’t exist and all is right in the world.”

His eyes become slits as he moves closer. Ross sits next to me and presses his nose to my shoulder, sniffing. “Are you high?”

“No,” I say with a laugh, pushing him away. “Quit smelling me, weirdo. You need to sniff yourself. You smell like ball sweat.”

Ross shrugs. “Hey, a man can dream, right?”

He pats me on the head and stands, stretching his arms high over his head. “I’m going to grab a shower. Any plans tonight?”

“Nope. Full on loafing. Gonna veg out. Lay like broccoli.”

Ross grins. “You and your obsession with Julia Roberts movies.”

“*Pretty Woman* is a cinematic masterpiece, you snob.”

He moves to the bathroom door and shoots me a look. “Yes, and prostitutes have been chasing that knight-in-shining-limo dream for thirty years now.”

“Everybody comes to Hollywood got a dream,” I say, quoting more of the movie. “What’s your dream? Hey, what’s your dream?”

The door closes between us. “‘Cinder-fuckin’-rella’ is one of the most unappreciated lines in movie history,” I shout. I hear the shower turn on and know that he’s done with this conversation.

My phone chimes. I dig it out of my pocket and check the screen. Misa.

Can we talk?

I think you’ve done enough talking. That’s your problem. All talk, no action.

I wait for a reply, but nothing comes. While it eases the constant ache in my heart to know that she still wants to work on us, I can’t just forget everything that’s happened. I turn and lie down on the sofa, kicking my feet up on the end cushion. Maybe Ross was right. Maybe I am in love with the girl I knew so long ago. Maybe this version of Misa is too complicated, too hard, and selfish.

I sigh and blow out a breath toward the ceiling. But she’s also so strong and driven and just wants to make her father happy no matter what it costs. She’s smart and beautiful, and when she lets loose, she’s a lot of fun. Since we met, Misa has been a perfect balance to my chaos. She completes all the missing parts of me, fills in the gaps that opened up when I lost her so long ago. And the sexual chemistry between us is off the charts—like nothing I’ve ever experienced before.

Groaning, I roll onto my side and wind a piece of hair around my finger. I want her, but not on some kind of limited terms, not as her dirty little secret. Would I give her a second chance? I don’t know if it even matters because when the stakes were high she made her decision and it wasn’t me.

Chapter Twenty

After She Left

“**M**OM!” I SHOUTED as I barreled through the front door. “Mom, are you home? Please be home.”

“In the den,” she called out.

I made my way toward her voice and stood in the doorway. She held a watering can, pouring water into each of her beloved plants.

“Mom,” I said again, this time my voice shaky.

She put down the can and came to me. “What’s the matter? What happened?” Tears ran down my cheeks as she lifted my arms and checked for injuries.

“I’m fine,” I said with a snuffle. “It’s not me. It’s Misa.”

My mom pressed a hand over her heart and exhaled. “What’s wrong with Misa?”

I walked over to the sofa and fell onto it. “She’s gone.”

“What do you mean gone?” she said, taking a seat beside me.

My eyes stared at all the green plants soaking up the afternoon sun in the window. But my vision blurred at the edges and then completely went soft when I thought about the words I had to say.

“She wasn’t at school, so I stopped at her house to see if she was sick or something,” I said as I swiped at my runny nose.

“Was she?”

“Mom, the house was empty.”

“Empty?”

“Everything was gone. I looked in the windows. I checked the garage. They’re just gone.”

My mother wrapped her arm around my shoulders and pulled me tight into her side. “Maybe it’s temporary,” she said.

“It didn’t look temporary.”

“Are you okay?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head, more tears falling. “It hurts so much. What is this?” I ask, clutching both hands over my aching chest.

She kissed my forehead. “This is heartbreak, kid.”

A sob broke free as I turned into her shoulder and cried. She held me there until all the light was gone from the windows and my eyes were dry. When I felt strong enough, I looked up at her and saw her looking back. Her face held all the understanding but none of the answers I needed.

“I’ve lost friends before. It never felt like this,” I said, my voice low in the silent room.

“Baby,” Mom said, lifting my chin. “That’s because Misa was much more than a friend. She was your first love.”



Present

IT’S FRIDAY MORNING, and with the upcoming weekend and free breakfast there are just too many people in chipper moods hanging out in the break room. There’s so much smiling and chatter and all the enthusiastic greetings. I pour my coffee, grab a bagel, and get out of there before someone breaks into song and a choreographed dance routine like in the movies.

Powering up my computer, I try not to notice Juan working on the Delgado account next to me. I try not to be bitter about it. I am not successful.

A few minutes into going through my emails and I get a *Mandatory Meeting* email from Rupert at 9:30. From the small ding I hear on the computers around me, I breathe easier, determining it’s a meeting for everyone and not just me.

At 9:30, I follow the herd into the conference room. I take the last seat at the table, all the way at the end and on the opposite side of the room from Rupert and Misa. If she needs distance, that’s what I’ll give her. Honestly, it’s the only way I’ll get over her as well. It is best for both of us.

The room is so packed, that there’s barely space to fit everyone inside. The mood is still cheery with people laughing and joking, while I sulk like Eeyore at the back of the room.

“Quiet down,” Rupert says, his voice booming in the room. “Quiet down, people.” He waits a few seconds to make sure he’s got everyone’s attention. When the conversations have ceased and all eyes are on him, he continues. “You all know we are a small but strong agency. I built this firm up from a small office in my basement in the Upper West Side.” He grins and turns to face Misa now. “But this agency would not be where it is today without the efforts of many people. In light of her hard work and the stellar success with the biggest account this agency has seen, I’ve called you all here this morning to announce that Miss Ito is being promoted to vice president of Sales and Marketing.”

Applause breaks out as I stare at my hands in my lap. I’m proud of her. Misa is deserving of this. But I can’t find myself able to celebrate or even look at her. This is just another step on her rise through the ranks. She is a force to be reckoned with, a strong leader. Misa will definitely go far professionally. It’s every other part of her life that worries me.

“Thank you, everyone,” Misa says. I finally raise my eyes to find her standing there as beautiful and powerful as ever in a modern pantsuit that fits her like a glove. Her face is the stone-cold mask she reserves for this place. “I will do my best to represent this agency, to land even more accounts that put us on the map, and to keep you all in line, of course.” There are a few chuckles but otherwise silence. Then, her eyes meet mine and we are locked together like tangled limbs and desperate kisses in a California bedroom.

“Great,” Rupert says with a grin. “Now, if—”

“I have something else to say,” Misa interrupts. My eyes stay on her, but I see the blurred movement of Rupert’s shocked face.

“Penny,” she says. The entire room of people turns to find me. I can feel their eyes on me, the thinner air with their breaths held in their chests. She steps forward now, pressed against the opposite side of the table. “I’ve been awful to you,” she says.

Murmurs break out among our coworkers as my mouth drops open. I force it closed and stay focused on her.

“I know everything is a shit storm right now, but I need you to know that I fell in love with you when I was fourteen years old and again a few weeks ago.”

There is a collective gasp in the room. I stand now, needing to be closer to her, but there’s no way through.

“You are tattooed on my skin, on my heart,” she continues. Even though I remain silent, every head in the room volleys back and forth between us like they’re watching the best tennis match ever played. “I can’t pretend anymore, and I don’t want to. You are more than I deserve, but I’ll never stop loving you. I never really did.”

“Me, either,” I answer.

“Fuck it,” Misa says, stepping onto Rupert’s empty chair and climbing on top of the enormous conference table. I grin and crawl onto the table as well, thankful I wore pants today. We both get to our feet and stand above everyone else only seeing each other.

“I’m here,” she says, taking a step toward me. I do the same. “Telling you that I want you. Only you. No matter what it costs.”

We meet in the middle of the table, I can feel everyone watching, stunned into silence. Seeing a side of this woman that they didn’t believe existed. But I knew it all along.

“I want you, Penny. I want to fall asleep with you and wake up to that face and wild red hair. I want to be the reason you smile, and I want to get lost in your sense of adventure, as terrifying as that sounds. I want us to belong to each other like we always have. But I want it on your terms—proud and out loud and for the world to see.”

Misa places a hand on the side of my face and I lean into her touch. “Because here I am, moving through life like it’s a series of short-term goals and calculated moves. But I never factored you in. I don’t want to do any of this without you. I’m sorry I hurt you,” she says softer. “I’m sorry that I ruined us.”

She bites her bottom lip now as my hands go to her waist and pull her body against me. “You haven’t ruined us,” I say.

Her mouth crushes against mine in the most public display of affection she’s ever experienced. And the way she’s sighing and grasping at my shoulders, I know she doesn’t care. After a few seconds, our foreheads press together as we exchange tiny smiles and labored breaths.

A clap breaks us out of our bliss, followed by another. Before we know it, the entire room is cheering us on. Misa laughs as my hand reaches for hers, and I squeeze to let her know we will face whatever comes together. We turn to Rupert and take a bow. Misa leads me to his end of the table and hops down. She grabs my waist and helps me to the floor, too.

Rupert turns to us, our clasped hands together presenting a united front. His face is expressionless, and here is where I think we'll both lose our jobs. The room goes quiet again as everyone awaits our fate.

"Miss Ito," Rupert says, clasping his hands together. A slow grin spreads across his face as his eyes dance from me to her. "As much as I adore your work ethic, it's a relief to see that you do, indeed, have a heart." Misa and I exhale in relief, and she smiles bigger than these four walls have ever seen. "I assume this won't interfere with your work?"

"No, sir."

"Good, then." He turns to face the rest of the room, all eyes still on us. "I believe we've had our entertainment for the day, folks. Now, get back to work," he says with a laugh.

People slowly begin to file out of the room, but Misa never lets go of me. I search the room for Chad but don't see him anywhere.

Ryan meets us at the door. "You two are unbelievable. Unbelievable! You can spill the tea to all these strangers, but you couldn't tell *me*? All that time we spent together? All that bickering I had to listen to was just love quarrels? You both owe me big for this. BIG. I take cash or Starbucks gift cards."

"You'll get nothing from me," I say, punching his shoulder.

"Ow," he says. "Don't get cute. I just don't even know if I can work under these conditions. You know what? Thinking back, I really missed some obvious clues in California. I am so dense."

"Dense or distracted?" I ask. "You dare to complain because we keep secrets? Who. Was. Your. Booty. Buddy. In. Cali?"

Ryan looks up at the ceiling and then down at his shoes. I recognize the giddy smile that takes over his face. "Miguel," he says.

"Awww," I say. "Is that why you were all weird in the meeting with Chef Delgado? We're pitching ideas and you're fantasizing about steamy California nights with your Hispanic hottie."

Ryan rolls his eyes. "Hey. I'd like to remind you guys that you had your own steamy California nights. And I wasn't weird in the meeting."

"You're always weird," Misa says.

"Whatevs. It was just a thing. A hot, sweaty chef kind of flambé fling."

"Could not have called that," Misa says. "I thought you were straight."

Ryan gasps, his hands flutter in the air between us. "As if! Tell me you're

joking. Tell me she's joking before I read a bitch down."

"There's that accent again," I point out.

"I was joking," Misa says.

"Good, sis. Do not try me on a Friday morning unless you want to catch these hands." He laughs and hurries out of the room, probably because he's never spoken to Miss Ito like that before.

Misa drags me to her office and closes the door.

"Is this why you wanted to talk last night?" I ask.

She nods.

"So when I said you're all talk and no action you really stepped up your game."

"I did."

I slide up onto Misa's desk, my legs swinging back and forth.

"Do you have to sit up there? It's distracting," she says. "I've already told you about my fantasy involving you and that desk." I shrug. Misa approaches, places her hands on my knees, and pushes them apart. Her body slides in there as her fingers trail up my thighs. "You love to tease me, don't you?"

"I'd say you deserve a little teasing."

She groans and drops her head. "I deserve so much worse. But we can't get into all that now."

"Want to come over after work?" I ask, kissing her forehead, then her nose.

"Yeah. There's so much to say, Penny. I don't know where to start."

"And there's still the issue of Chad to deal with."

She nods. "Rena mentioned he's out sick today, so he didn't even witness all of that."

"Hmm. Maybe he's still icing his balls. And maybe we could use that to our advantage." My phone buzzes. "It's Ross. You mind?" Misa shakes her head.

"Hola, bestie. I've got some really good news."

"Well, I've got some terrible news," he says.

I hop off the desk. "What's up?"

"I just stopped by the Center and the doors were locked. It's done." His voice is so sad, so dejected. It sends a slicing jolt of pain through my chest.

"No! We have till midnight!" I say, anger and hurt sitting on my chest.

“Those assholes won’t give the Center an extension?”

“No. The landlord admitted that he wants to sell the building for apartments. He’s not interested in helping them out in any way.”

“Well fuck him, too,” I say too loudly. Misa approaches now, questioning my outburst. “Are we really too late?”

“Looks like it,” Ross says. “I’m here with Rachel. She’s keeping me together when all I want to do is break shit.”

“Well, do what you need to do. But only break your stuff. I like my stuff.”

I get a small laugh, but even that pains me. I know his heart is breaking just like mine.

“And Ross?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m so sorry. I really tried.”

“Me, too, Pen. I know.”

I end the call and turn to face Misa, swiping tears from my heated cheeks. “The Center is closed.”



AFTER THIS MORNING’S exciting meeting, the whole office is buzzing with gossip. I get everything from high fives to sneaky side glances. The news about the Center sits heavy on my mind, and the guilt eats at me. But I don’t know what else I could have done.

When I return to my desk with my second cup of coffee, Juan is grinning. “So, you bagged the Ice Queen, huh?”

I laugh.

“So why did she remove you from the Delgado account if she loves you so much?” Kendra asks. “Sounds suspect to me.”

I stand and cup both hands around my eyes, scanning the office as if using binoculars.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Looking for who the fuck asked you.”

Juan cracks up. I even get a grin from Thomas as Kendra ducks behind her computer in shame.

“Gotta say, my heart almost fell out of my *culo* when Ice—I mean Miss Ito—climbed onto that fuckin’ table,” Juan says.

“You? I thought someone had drugged the coffee and I was hallucinating,” I say.

“Penny? Can you come in here, please?” Andrea calls from her office.

“Oh, shit.”

I drag myself to Andrea’s office and find Rupert sitting in one of the chairs across from her desk. I close the door behind me and take a seat next to him. They both sit stone-faced and silent for almost a full minute when I break.

“Is this where I get fired for boning the boss?” I finally ask.

“So, I’m pretty sure I recall letting you know on day one that office relationships are frowned upon?” Andrea asks.

I nod.

“Do you always blatantly disregard such warnings and do exactly what you want?”

“If I said no, I’d be a liar.”

Andrea smirks, while Rupert lets out a loud boisterous laugh that echoes in the space. “Technically, she is not your boss,” he says.

“And, technically, can it still be called boning when it’s two women?” Andrea asks.

“Absolutely,” I say with a wink. She blushes.

Rupert grins and pats me on the shoulder. “Penny, we just wanted to make sure you know that everything here is good. As long as Misa is not your direct supervisor and it doesn’t interfere with office operations and there is no *boning* anywhere on the premises, there is no issue with you two being together.”

“That’s good to know,” I say, crossing my legs and bouncing one foot up and down.

Rupert stands and makes his way to the door. “And after a declaration like that, well, I suspect you two will be together for a long time.”

“From your lips to Elton John’s ears,” I say. He chuckles and closes the door behind him.

“I also just wanted to check on you,” Andrea says. “I know how the gossip mill can be around here. Just making sure you’re okay and not getting too much flack around the office.”

I shake my head. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Then I expect to see you back here on Monday?”

“Of course.”

“Good. In light of everything, you’re back on the Delgado account. You and Juan will split the work, and you’ll still be listed as lead designer for the project.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re part of the team now, kid. We need you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Our Only Summer

I HAD JUST finished applying sunblock when Misa came through the gate. She waved when she saw me and hurried over to the chair next to mine.

“Here,” she said, tossing a leather book into my lap. “I got you something.”

“A present?” I asked, holding it to my chest. “You know I love presents.”

“Yes, I do.”

I opened the book and flipped through the empty pages. “Uh, there’s nothing in here.”

“It’s a journal,” Misa said, pulling off her cover-up to reveal a sensible blue one-piece swimsuit with a high neckline. “You’ve been complaining so much about all this work my dad is making me do this summer that I figured it would be a way to keep you busy when we can’t hang out.”

“Aww,” I said. “That’s super sweet.” I dug through my bag and found a pencil at the bottom.

A kid ran by, slinging water all over us as a lifeguard blew her whistle. “No running!” she shouted. The kid stuck his tongue out just as his mom grabbed his hand and led him away.

“I’ve never had a journal before,” I said, fanning the pages. “What should I write about?”

Misa lowered her sunglasses down over her eyes and laid back in her chair. “Knowing you? The inequalities of the girls’ and boys’ bathrooms at school. Or the importance of bees. Or maybe plan your next big adventure?”

Without even thinking, I sketched Misa’s perfect profile framed by sleek black hair and her oversized shades.



Present

MISA IS OUT on meetings the rest of the day, so I don't see her again. It super sucks that she dropped a bomb like that and left me to deal with all the staring and questions. But it super doesn't suck that we can be together now. And hopefully Misa will open up more, people will get to know the woman that I do.

We agreed to meet at my apartment after work, but just before I hop onto the Q train, I get a text from her with an address in Brooklyn, telling me to go there instead.

It's only a couple of stops before mine, so I tuck my phone in my bag, shove into the rush hour crowd, and grab a pole to hold on to. The ride is slow, smelly, and annoyingly loud. There's a large group of teenagers singing chorus songs at the back of the car. While that is about as gay as you can get on the Q train, I'm not feeling it today.

There's too much buzzing in my head and in my heart. Too many thoughts and feelings. Too many words that I need to say and hear. The crowd thins out a bit once we're in Brooklyn, but just enough so that I'm no longer pressed against anyone else. I move to face the doors and check my phone again. No further instructions from Misa, and no word from Ross.

I make the mistake of making eye contact with a guy standing next to the doors. He gives me a grin, and I just drop my gaze back to my phone.

"Hey, honey. You should smile more."

I look up once again, my expression neutral. "I never smile before I kill a man." His eyes bug out and he spins away from me, ironically missing my genuine smile.

Once I exit the train and make my way to the address, I am mentally exhausted from the day. Turning the corner, I spot Misa leaning against an iron railing in front of the building. She looks so boss compared to me and my wild hair with flower barrettes, but that's what makes us work.

As if she can feel me approaching, Misa looks up. When our eyes connect, she gives me a smile that feels like daffodil tickles on my skin. I greet her with a kiss and a little smack on the ass for the guy who's watching from the coffee shop across the street.

"Hey, you," she says, her arms wrapping around me. "I know we have a lot to talk about, but this just couldn't wait." Misa waves to the empty building behind her.

"What couldn't?"

Her eyes move past me and she gives a little wave. I turn to find Ross and Rachel, and Jen and Asher moving down the sidewalk toward us. Ross looks pretty bummed, but Rachel keeps him distracted with conversation. Her hair is now a black-and-fiery-red pixie cut. It really highlights her tan skin and green eyes.

“Hey, guys,” I call out, greeting everyone with hugs and kisses. “What are you doing here?”

“We got a call from the board to meet here,” Jen says. “And to bring Ross. So here we are.”

“Maybe it’s a sendoff party for the Center,” Rachel says.

“Maybe it’s a trick and we’re all being hunted by the same serial killer and the inside is filled with booby traps,” I say. All four of them just stare. “What? I’ve been watching the *Saw* movies.” I dig through my bag and pull out a long flathead screwdriver, miming a stabbing motion. “I’m prepared for anything.”

“Remind me not to piss her off,” Asher says.

“Sometimes you are truly terrifying,” Ross adds. I just shrug and throw my screwdriver back in my bag.

I turn to Misa. “What’s going on?”

“Well, you guys need a building to keep the Center open, and I have an ex-fiancé real estate broker who knows a lot of people in the area. I had him ask around this afternoon, and he found this place.”

“For the Center?” Jen asks. “How much is the rent? We can’t afford the place we have now, and this looks much bigger.”

“And much nicer,” Asher adds.

She smiles. “I know a few people in the nonprofit sector who have been looking for a cause to sink their dollars into. The contract is signed, and the rent has been paid upfront for the next *five* years.”

“What?” I shout. I look from Ross to Jen and then to Misa. “Are you for real?”

“I am. Chef Delgado was too happy to fund such a worthy cause,” she says, pulling a set of keys from her pocket and jingling them. “Now, who wants to see the space?”

I plant a giant kiss on her cheek as the four of them race up the steps and through the door. I can hear the excitement and joy in their voices as they explore every room.

“I can’t believe you did this,” I say, wrapping my hands around her waist. “Why?”

“Because it is important to you, which makes it important to me. Besides, this is a local nonprofit doing amazing things in the community. It was a no-brainer.”

“And asking Chef Delgado? Brilliant!”

Misa shakes her head. “He was an easy sell, Penny. He’s incredibly generous. Now, pulling it all off in a few hours? That wasn’t easy, but you know me. When I set a goal, I always get what I want.”

“And do you have what you want now?” I ask.

Misa pulls me into her arms and dips me like we’re ballroom dancing, her mouth hovering over mine. “I do.” She kisses me breathless, right there on the steps of the new Oasis Center.

We join the rest of the gang inside, and I watch with joy as Ross tears up showing me around. Jen and Asher make plans for every inch, excited that they’ll be able to expand some programs and add more private areas for group meetings and therapy. Without having to pay rent, all of their budget will go to supporting the actual day-to-day operations.

“This could be your office, Penny,” Jen says, gesturing to a room at the end of the hall. “Hell, you can have the whole floor after saving our asses like this!” She wraps me in a tight hug and pats my back.

“It wasn’t me. It was all Misa.” I introduce Asher and Jen to Misa, and she gets the same hug that I got. A hug made from relief and gratefulness.

“And we can do quarterly fundraisers,” I say, standing at the front window overlooking the street. “It’ll be great.” Misa smiles and leans into my side. “It’s so surreal,” I say. “I would have given everything I have to keep the Center open and now, just like that, everything worked out.”

“Just like you said it would,” Ross says with a grin.

Ross wraps Misa in a tight hug. She lets out a little surprised *oomph* from the impact as he picks her up and spins her around. “Thank you so much,” he says. “You have no idea how important this is.”

“Let’s go celebrate!” Rachel says, bouncing on her toes. Jen, Asher, and Ross agree.

But I shake my head. “Misa and I have some stuff to figure out. But you guys go and have one for us!”



MISA AND I sit on my sofa facing each other. Her shiny black heels are tucked under my coffee table, and Janis Joplin croons from the turntable. She holds both of my hands in hers, her thumbs sweeping over my skin in the softest way.

“That was some big gesture you pulled off today,” I say. “I thought we were going to lose half of the staff to heart attacks.”

“Yes, well, I wanted to make sure you understood what you mean to me, Penny. I’m done playing games. I’m done with the lies and all the sacrifice. I want to be happy, too.”

I squeeze her fingers. “What about your dad? What about Jet?”

She sighs and props one elbow on the back of the sofa, resting her cheek in her hand. “I told Jet everything last night,” she says with a groan. “It was excruciating. But for the first time ever I did not feel ashamed of who I am.”

“And?” I ask.

“He actually had his own confession,” she says, excitement in her tone and a crooked grin. “All that time he spends at his mother’s? It’s because he’s been in love with his mom’s best friend for years!”

“No way!”

“Yes. They’ve been hooking up since he graduated high school, and no one knew. He even thanked me and told me that my courage inspired him to be honest about their relationship. I’d love to be a fly on the wall when that conversation goes down.”

“Oh my god. Japanese families have just as much drama as queers. I didn’t think it was possible.”

Misa laughs. “Yes, the difference is we keep our drama to ourselves, behind closed doors locked away with repression and guilt.”

I nod. “Yeah. We like to wave ours around like old gay tits at a pride festival.”

“There are old lady tits at pride festivals?” she asks.

I laugh. “Yes, but don’t worry. There are all kinds, tits of all ages, shapes, and sizes. Tits for all.”

“What on earth have I been missing out on?”

“Too much to cover in one afternoon,” I say. “Did you tell your dad the news? I need to know if I’m enemy number one or what.”

“I did. He didn’t take it so well. But he says he wants to see me happy. He also said that you were inevitable. He suspected it when we first met, but he knew it the second he saw you in that restaurant. He said that you are my *shukumei*, my destiny.”

I give her a smile. “No pressure there.”

“We still have Chad to deal with,” she says. “I know he doesn’t have leverage anymore, but he doesn’t know that yet.”

“Yeah. I doubt he has any friends at the office, so he won’t find out until Monday. And there’s no way we can let that piece of garbage keep working there.”

“You’re right,” Misa says. “He’s got to go.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll think of something. Now let’s forget about him.”

Misa scoots closer to me, my legs straddling her body and wrapping around her back. “All these years I’ve had to hide who I am. I’ve never been a visible part of the queer community, you know? Never been to pride or the dyke march or even admitted what I am.”

“Well, it’s not too late to do all those things. And now you have a seasoned veteran to guide you through all of it.”

“I’m a lesbian,” Misa says, trying out the word on her tongue. The expression on her face is made of an imagined future of girl-on-girl PDAs and using the word *queen* regularly. “I’m gay, a big ole queer, a carpet muncher, a dyke, a homo, a shrub scout, vagitarian, a clam jammer, cunny bunny, a Lesbiterian.”

I crack up, pressing my hand over her mouth. “Okay, okay, love. You know the lingo. You’re already in the club. There’s not a spelling test or anything.”

Misa grins. “All I know is that I like women.” She smiles and leans in to kiss me. “But I *love* you.” Her lips are soft and yielding. “I love you with everything I have, Penny.” I lean forward, pinning her down to the sofa. One knee slides between her legs as we grind and move against each other.

Misa’s hands scrape down my back before grabbing onto my ass and pulling me hard against her.

“Not here,” I say, pulling my mouth away from hers. “My room.”

I help Misa off of the sofa and lead her into my room, closing the door

behind us. We spend hours worshipping each other, consuming each other, celebrating us. When we are both spent and out of breath, I gently hold her chin and swipe the wetness from her lips with my thumb.

“You’re pretty proud of yourself, aren’t you?”

Misa wraps her arms around me. “I am.”

I nuzzle my face in the crook of her neck where it smells like coconut shampoo. “I’ll keep you wild.”

I feel more than see her smile. The press of her cheek against mine is firm and reassuring. “And I’ll keep you safe,” she says.

My hands and feet are prickly and tingling like they’ve been asleep my whole life and Misa lifted the spell. There are tears in my eyes and I’m not sure why. I laugh when Misa swipes them from my cheeks. She curls her body around mine, and we lie like that until all the light from the room is gone and the sweat has dried from our bodies.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ninth Grade

I SCRIBBLE THE date at the top right side of the page in my journal.

Dear Misa,

Today was the last day of ninth grade, and you weren't here. You've been gone for seven weeks, three days, and a few hours. You would have hated the way I cleaned out my locker by just throwing everything away. You would have told me to keep those notes or that doodle.

You also would have loved the way Collin Freeman practically ran when he saw me walking down the hall. I've been itching to kick someone's ass since you left, and well, why not take down that jerk twice?

I hate walking home alone now, but especially today. What am I supposed to do with my summer without you? Where did you go? Do you think of me as much as I think of you? Do you think of me at all?

My mom helped me discover something about myself recently. You helped, too, you just didn't know it. I wish you were here so I could tell you. But you're not here. So I'll just say that you were the best friend I ever had. I love you. I hope your life is so good.

Penny



Present

AFTER AN ENTIRE weekend with Misa, my trek to work feels lighter. Today I've got sore thighs, rainbow kitties on my dress, and smiles for everyone.

It's still New York, so no one notices, but I don't care. I feel alive, rejuvenated, and completely in love.

Between many rounds of sex and naked time, Misa and I talked about our past. We relived the adventures of Penny and Misa and how blind we were to what was right in front of us. Those talks turned into our present situation and eventually what the future could hold.

I made a list of the top ten places I want to show her around the globe, and she helped me set up a budget to make sure those trips could happen. Our balance is something magical and perfect.

In the lobby, I see people piling into the elevator—Chad among them—and make sure to slide in before the doors close. From opposite corners of the space, I can feel his glare on the back of my head. His contempt makes me smile.

Misa and Penny's Rules #6: Always protect each other.

The ride is slow, stopping on almost every floor on the way up. After floor twenty, we are alone. I move to lean against the back wall. He stays in his corner.

"What's the matter? Where are all your threats this morning?" I show him my vintage combat boots, the fluorescent lights dancing off the shiny black leather. "Afraid to come too close today?"

Chad steps forward, his face red and angry. I keep my smile in place. "You two are done," he says.

"You keep talk-talk-talking, Chad. But you'll never do anything about it. You'll never walk the walk, you spineless turd."

He pushes forward again, but I don't move. His breath is hot on my face and makes me want to shove a sweat-soaked sock into his mouth—a sock worn by someone with foot fungus that's been hiking through the Amazon for weeks with no shower.

"Oh, you'll see me walk the walk today, Penny. I'm going to walk all over you and your secret bitch dyke."

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. "I look forward to it."

We part ways at the receptionist's desk. Chad heads to HR, while I make my way to Rupert's office.

"Good morning," he says, waving me in as I knock on his open door. "Come in." I take a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. "What can I do for you, Penny?"

“Actually,” I say. “It’s what I can do for you.”

Rupert’s eyebrows shoot toward his hairline. “Really?”

“Yes. I can help you get rid of an employee who has the potential to mar not only the reputation of your company but is also a walking lawsuit in cheap khakis.”

He rises from his chair and closes his office door before returning to his desk. Rupert folds his hands together and leans forward, his concerned eyes holding mine. “Tell me more.”

“To put it simply, Chad Ellzey—the newest addition to your HR department—has known about Misa and me for a while now. He’s been threatening to expose our relationship not only to you but to her family. He even has photos.”

“He’s been blackmailing you?” Rupert asks, a frown pulling down the corners of his mouth. I nod. “And what did he want in return for keeping quiet?”

“Me.”

“You?” Rupert asks, sitting back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Yes, sir. He wanted sex with me. You know, the horizontal tango? Fourth base? Bumping uglies?”

He holds up his hand to stop me. “Yes, I know.”

“I’m just worried that if he’s doing this to us, who knows what he’s doing to other women in the office.”

Ding. Rupert glances at his computer. “He’s just requested an immediate meeting with me.”

“He wasn’t here for our, uh, show on Friday. He probably wants to tell you all about us.”

Rupert gives me a tiny smile. “Well then, I’ll just have to let him, won’t I?” Quickly typing up a reply, Rupert hits Enter, and I hear the telltale *swoosh* of an email being sent.

“It seems so, sir.”

“Thank you for coming to me with this, Penny. You’re correct in assuming that I don’t want anyone like Chad working for Create Slate.”

I stand and give him a nod. “You’re welcome.”

Making my way to the door, I push through and practically run to Misa’s office. She’s on the phone when I enter, and I frantically wave for her to wrap

it up. There are another thirty seconds of chitchat while I feel like I'm going to burst. Finally, she hangs up and looks at me.

"What is it, dear?" she asks sweetly.

"I just went to Rupert about Chad. He's about to get the boot."

Misa grins. "No shit?"

"No shit. Can we go sit in the hall and watch him come out of that office? I just need to see his face."

She shakes her head. "Probably not a good idea for VP of Sales and Marketing. Plus I have a conference call in five minutes. But Lord knows I couldn't stop you if I wanted to."

"You think we could get Chad to send us the photos he took of us making out? I'd like to have them framed and hung in the apartment."

Misa laughs. "For art's sake?"

"Of course!" I lean across her desk, placing a kiss on surprised lips. My fingertips glide over the glass surface as Misa's eyes follow my movement. "I think you're right. We'll have to give this desk a try one day."

Misa groans and crosses her legs, fingers digging into the seat of her chair. "Get out before it gets obscene in here."

I laugh my way out of her office, grab a coffee from the break room, and park myself outside of Rupert's door. A security guard for the building approaches and enters Rupert's office. Shit just got real.

As soon as the door swings open, I start walking toward it like I just happen to be in the neighborhood. The security guard escorts Chad from the room, and as we cross paths his eyes connect with mine. I've never seen fury and rage contained like that.

"Enjoy your *walk*," I say, tipping my coffee cup in his direction.

I hear a scuffle and turn to see Chad pushing past the security guard, hurtling toward me. I stand frozen as his hands reach for my throat, knocking my coffee to the ground. Jean Luc shatters, and I am pushed against the wall as the security guard wraps Chad in a chokehold.

"Ease up, son," he growls. "Sorry, ma'am."

I step forward and smooth down my dress before reading his nametag. "No worries, Jerome. Thanks for the stellar rescue."

Rupert appears in his doorway. "Get him out of the building," he says. "We'll mail his belongings to him."

"You bitch!" Chad yells as he's wrangled down the hall toward the

elevator. “This ain’t over.”

Everyone gathers near the front to watch him fight against Jerome while screaming profanities at me. When the doors finally close, people stand stunned for a few seconds before making their way back to their desks. And just like that, Misa and I are not the biggest gossip in the office anymore.

Rupert and I are the only ones left in the lobby when he turns to me. “Well, that escalated quickly.”

“I can’t believe he tried to attack me,” I say innocently.

Rupert looks down at me. “Completely unprovoked, I assume?”

“Of course.”

He chuckles and leaves me there. By the time I make my way to the hall to clean up my broken mug and coffee, someone has already done it for me. I text Misa to meet me for lunch so that I can fill her in on everything she’s missed during her conference call.

Back at my desk, Thomas and Kendra are still going on about the crazy guy from the HR department while I finally get to work.

“He was so quiet,” Thomas says.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Kendra replies. “Gotta keep an eye on them.” She leans around her computer and eyes me. “Are you okay?”

I keep the smart-ass retort I want to say in the back of my throat while giving her a smile. “I’m fine. Just lucky that the security guard was there.”

“You are lucky,” she says.

“I meant lucky for Chad.” Juan and Thomas laugh as Kendra’s eyes widen and she slowly slinks behind her screen.

I’m in the city. Lunch today? Mom texts.

Sure. Misa and I have plenty to catch you up on. Thai Palace on Lafayette Street at noon. Bring your boyfriend.

As I open all the programs I’ll need to get started, I can’t help but grin. In the longest, most roundabout way, Misa and I are finally together. Among all my chaos and through every adventure, our love persisted. What started out as a classroom friendship has grown into a cosmic kind of love found in fairy tales—I mean, if fairy tales include biracial lesbians and girls who fight their own battles. Life is so good.

The End

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Acknowledgements

This story is so near and dear to my heart. Penny and Misa's love was inspired by a dream coupled with a nostalgic throwback to childhood friendships. This is my first queer romance, but certainly will not be my last. I enjoyed diving into this side of storytelling and digging deep to find thoughts and feelings that I've abandoned for a while. Penny and Misa are such vibrant characters, so defined in their roles, I wanted to make sure they leapt off the page for the reader. I hope you loved them as much as I do.

I would love to thank my agent, Amy, for really believing in this story and knowing that it needed to be out in the world. She is an amazing champion for my work and has killer taste in music too. Much love goes out to my editor, Sinclair, and all her kind words of wisdom, and especially for her patience. The rest of the team at Tule has made this experience a great one and I can't wait to continue the series with them.

To my local writers group, especially Lindsey, Bridget, and Lee Ann, you guys are my favorites. For all of those who read early versions of this story, I thank you and I apologize for the hot mess express that it started out being. Denise, Katie, Amber, Rachel, and Becca, I love you.

I'd like to acknowledge the San Diego Gay & Lesbian Youth Center which inspired Penny and Ross's love for volunteering. I learned so much in that place and made lifelong friends as well. I'd like to think I even helped a few of those kids. Queer adults and allies, we need to show them that life gets better and that it's worth waiting around to find out for themselves. One person, one voice of reason, one shoulder to lean on can make a world of difference.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Jack, Alaina, Eliza, and even Bebop for putting up with chickie nuggies for dinner too often, allowing me time to write, ignoring my rant about Oxford commas, fighting off my imposter syndrome, and supporting me in every way. I love you guys.

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About the Author



Season Vining grew up in south Louisiana where food, culture, and family mean everything. She is a graphic designer by day and enjoys all forms of art. Her obsessions include live music, tattooed bad boys, vintage cars, and people who know the difference between their, there, and they're.

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