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New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author
m a x m o n r o e

**SINGLE
DAD
SEEKS
JULIET**

m a x m o n r o e

Single Dad Seeks Juliet

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Single Dad Seeks Juliet is a full-length romantic comedy stand-alone novel.

At the end, we've included an excerpt of *Taming Hollywood's Baddest Boy*, the first hilarious romantic comedy standalone from our best-selling *Hollywood Collection*.

Now that you know, don't throw your kindle when *Single Dad Seeks Juliet* concludes at around 90%. As far as we know, homeowners insurance policies don't cover e-reader-related damages. ;) ;)

Also, due to the hilarious and addictive nature of this book's content, the following things are not recommended: reading in public places, reading while pretending to work in your cubicle, reading while eating and/or drinking, reading while operating heavy machinery, and reading during your (or your children's/spouse's) Zoom meetings.

Happy Reading!

All our love,

Max & Monroe

To 80s music: You were the wind beneath our wings for this book, and we'll be forever grateful for your greatness.

To personal ads: Thank you for your endless entertainment rooted in truth. There is nothing better than a tiny glimpse into the quirks of human nature.

To donut holes: We love you so much. Forever and ever, amen.

INTRO

Chloe

“No, you lunatic! I am not typing those words about my father—*ever*.”

“Oh, come on!” my best friend and altogether wild woman, Hailie Hargrove, teases, setting her chin on my shoulder and rubbing it into the muscle awkwardly. “Not even if there were a werewolf chasing you? And I’m not talking about dreamboat Jacob Black trying to imprint on you either. I’m talking full-on werewolf with beady eyes and sharp teeth that *can’t* be deterred by humans *or* hella sexy vampires.”

I roll my eyes and jerk my shoulder to make her weirdo chin find another home. “For the sake of our friendship, you need to stop rereading *Twilight*.”

“It’s not my fault Stephenie Meyer released *Midnight Sun* and I’m back on my Team Edward bull-shizzle,” she responds, acting like her words provide a perfect explanation for the fact that she’s read the *Twilight* series no fewer than fifty times.

No joke. She’s been reading that series since we were, like, twelve. And considering we’re both seventeen—*almost eighteen*—now, her obsessive love for a fictional vampire is going five years strong without any signs of letting up.

Don’t get me wrong, I love *Twilight*, but Hailie could stand to read about some socially conforming mortals every once in a while.

“It would do our friendship some good if you fit in a few John Green or Jenny Han books between your Edward Cullen

binges.”

“Speaking of us talking about my vampire boyfriend and your dad’s penis, do you think Edward’s penis sparkles in the sunlight too? I mean, his skin sparkles, but does his—”

“I don’t care about Edward’s sparkly penis, Hail!” I cut her off on a whisper-yell. “And *we* are not talking about my dad’s penis. *You* keep trying to. But I am not.” *Ew*. Just saying those words threatens my gag reflex. No teenage daughter should be forced to think about her father’s...*you know what*.

“Okay, fine. *I’m* the one talking about your dad’s penis,” she corrects. “And *you’re* the one who never answered my question.”

“Because your werewolf analogy was horrible, and the question was so ridiculous. it didn’t deserve a response. Saying illicit things about my father’s penis-power, as you so eloquently put it, would do absolutely nothing for me in a chase with a werewolf.”

“Oh geez. What is that? What are you doing there? Are you trying to be *rational*?”

I skewer her with a glare, but my best friend is undeterred. She swings her long dark locks over her shoulder and scoffs.

“That’s so boring, Chloe. You need to live a little.”

“Excuse me? What exactly do you think I’m doing here?” I question and scrunch up my nose. “I’d say typing up a personal ad for my dad for the Bachelor Anonymous contest—*that he has no freaking clue about and will most likely kill me for—is living a lot.*” My laugh is equal parts amused and terrified. “Heck, I should get it all in now. Just live. It. Up. Because when Jake Brent finds out I entered him into a dating contest, I’m going to be D-E-A-D, dead.”

“Don’t be such a worrywart! Chances are, he’s never even going to know you did it. They only notify the winner, right? Out of, like, hundreds of entries, he’ll probably never win. Especially since you’re too much of a prude to tell everyone about his big dick energy.”

“Oh my God. Shut up,” I whisper.

“What?” Hailie questions like it’s no big deal that she’s still talking about my dad’s... *Good God, don’t you dare even think it!* “You know your dad is hot, right? I mean, back in the day, he was a big bad military god and *still* has the body to prove it. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that man is packing some serious heat in his pants.” She laughs, waggles her brows, and then adds, “Just deal with it, Chlo. Your dad is a total babe!”

“Keep your voice down,” I hiss. “He is right outside in the family room.”

“That’s the only thing that’s lame about him,” she whispers and rolls her grayish-blue eyes toward the ceiling. “What kind of parent doesn’t let their almost eighteen-year-old daughter keep their computer in their bedroom?”

“A dad who was a Navy SEAL,” I say matter-of-factly. “Plus, we share this computer. It’s just easier to keep it in the den.”

“Sure, Chlo-Chlo.” She snorts. “You live in the bougie part of San Diego. You have a formal living room, a family room, and a *den*. Not to mention, you have to go through a gated, Fort Knox-esque entrance to even get to your house. Pretty sure your dad can afford to buy you guys separate computers. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, though. He refused to let you have a phone *or* the Gram until you were fifteen.”

The Gram—*aka Instagram*. Hailie’s favorite social media app on the planet. If I had a dollar for every selfie she’s involved me in, I’d probably be able to afford my own college tuition.

Not even kidding. “Do it for the Gram!” should be written on her freaking tombstone.

“Hailie, shall I remind you that you live in the same *bougie* neighborhood as me? Your house is literally right across the street from mine,” I retort, but she ignores me completely and rambles on about anything but the darn personal ad I’m trying to write.

“Although, I guess I sort of get it,” she continues. “If I had a daughter who looked like you, all long legs, gorgeous blond hair, and big, pretty eyes, I’d probably lock you in a closet until you turned thirty-five.”

We are polar opposites when it comes to looks. Where I’m tall with blond hair, Hailie is short with dark hair. I look like I was born and raised in our home state of California, and she looks like she came from some exotic Mediterranean country.

“The same can be said for you,” I counter. “You’re like a teenage version of Megan Fox and have had boobs since we were in sixth grade.”

Hailie shimmies her chest, and I let out a deep sigh when I realize just how off track she’s managed to get us.

“Do I need to remind you that today is the last day to enter this contest?” I glance over my shoulder and glower at her with a stare. “I need you to stop shaking your ta-tas around and help me write this thing.”

“I’ve *been* helping,” she whines. “You just don’t want the help I’m giving.”

“That’s because you’ve taken a leave of absence from reality, Hailie. You really think I’m going to write about my *dad’s penis* in a newspaper personal ad? Can you even fathom the number of hours I’d have to spend in therapy if I did something like that? Not to mention, if my dad actually *saw* it? The money he saved for my college tuition would end up going to our freaking therapists!”

“I don’t know why you make that sound like such a big deal. Everyone is in therapy these days, Chloe. *Everyone.*”

“News flash, girlfriend,” I say and shoot a pointed look in her direction. “If I don’t have money for college tuition, then you’ll end up going to Berkeley by yourself.”

When Hailie and I were thirteen, we begged my dad to drive us seven hours to see the Golden Gate Bridge. And my dad, being the awesome dad that he is, gave in and took us on a three-day trip to San Francisco. We did all kinds of touristy

things that weekend, but the one thing that stuck with us girls the most was walking around Berkeley's campus.

Ever since then, that school became our dream college, and we've been bound and determined to go there together.

"Fine." She blows an annoyed breath from her pursed lips. "How about this? *Man seeks woman. Not to turn his world upside down, but instead, to help him keep it right-side up. Must have sense of humor, heart of gold, and big, fat tits.*"

I choke on my spit as a laugh catches in my throat, and Hailie has to slam the flat of her palm on my back to save me.

It makes a hell of a ruckus, and the door cracks open gently. "Everyone okay in here?" my dad asks.

Of course, Hailie cackles like a hyena. A nervous habit she's had since we were in elementary school.

"Yeah, Dad. We're good," I sputter over my best friend's insanity. He smiles, obviously surmising by my track record of staying out of trouble that I'm continuing my streak, and chalks up Hailie's laughter to her being her usual, crazy self.

Instantly, though, with him standing mere feet away from the computer screen that showcases the evidence of my in-process crime, cramps make my toes curl into the carpet, and an anxious twist wrenches my belly.

Why am I doing this? He's going to kill me.

I hold my breath and hope he doesn't decide to come any closer.

"Okay. Then I guess I'll leave you girls to it," he agrees with a laugh, and I offer up a silent *thank you* to the Big Guy upstairs that I will live to see another day.

And while I hate when Hailie rambles on about my dad being *a total babe*, with him standing right there in the doorway, his thick, dark hair kind of mussed and his handsome smile and bright-blue eyes directed at me, I can't deny he is an aesthetically good-looking man.

I study his face and the lines around his eyes. Lines I *know* are there from laughing with me, and before I know it, I'm

trying to picture him after I've left for college next year. I'll be over seven hours away from him, and he'll be here, alone, in this big house, having completely wasted all his best years raising me by himself.

He's such a good guy, and I *hate* the idea of him feeling lonely at all. *That's why I'm doing this*, I remind myself. *For him.*

He'll freaking hate it at first...but he'll thank me later, right?

Goodness, I hope so.

I turn back to the computer as he shuts the door and try really hard to focus. Hailie is right about one thing. There will probably be hundreds of entries, which means this thing is going to have to be *good* if he's going to win.

Even the title needs work. ***Man Seeks Woman.***

It's so mundane. So regular. So blah.

I need a wow factor. Something that'll hook everyone right from the start.

"We need a better title," I tell Hailie. "Something that really grabs people." She opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off preemptively. "And it *cannot* have the words dick, cock, or penis in it."

She frowns but laughs at the same time. "Don't worry, Chlo. My vocabulary is bigger than that. And I've moved on from your dad's dick—at least metaphorically speaking. In some sense, I feel I'll never move on from your dad's big, beautiful—"

I slug her in the shoulder, and she laughs.

"Fine. How about *Single Dad Seeks Juliet*?"

"Single dad? Should I really say that?"

She nods with wide, convinced eyes. "Oh *yeah*. That's, like, at least fifteen percent of Jake's hot factor."

I groan. "You know I hate it when you call him Jake."

“I could call him *Daddy*. But somehow, I thought you’d prefer this.”

“Forget it.” I cringe. “Let’s just get back to the ad.”

I turn back to the computer and start to type inside the personal ad template on my dad’s Bachelor Anonymous application.

Single Dad Seeks Juliet.

Yeah. That’s it. It’s got flair without being too ridiculous. I mean, it *is* for a contest being run by our local paper in which readers vote on the personal ad of their choosing to select an anonymous, unnamed bachelor who will be farmed out on several dates to find his Mrs. Right, so a certain amount of absurd is welcome—necessary, even—but I don’t want it to be too over the top. It should, at the very least, capture some sense of who my dad is as an actual person.

Fingers poised at the keyboard, I continue.

At 40 years old, after almost eighteen years of raising my daughter on my own, I’m ready to find someone for myself. I’m loyal, passionate, grounded in reality, and looking for someone who can say the same. I’m looking for my Juliet—without the tragic ending. Sense of humor is an absolute must.

Hailie looks over my shoulder, reading along with me as I type. When I get to the end, she whispers the addition of a finale so close to my ear, I squirm. “P.S. You’re beautiful. Yes, you.”

“*What?*”

“Talking to the reader always ups a feeling of engagement. That ad with that ending?” She shakes her head. “He can’t lose.”

“Great,” I say aloud as I type the addition into the template on the *SoCal Tribune*’s website.

On the inside, I am a *mess*.

But Hailie? Apparently, she’s just *peachy-keen-jelly-bean* with the whole sordid situation and reaches around me, scrolls down to the end of the page, and clicks the big red *Submit* button at the bottom.

“Hailie! What the heck?” Panic makes my heart lurch inside my chest like it’s stubbed its toe on the leg of the living room sofa.

But my best friend just smiles at me. “Too late to back out now, sweetcheeks.”

It’s really happening. My dad, Jake Brent, is officially in the running to be Southern California’s first Bachelor Anonymous.

Holy macaroni.

I want happiness for him more than anything in this world. He’s the best dad, and he deserves it. He deserves to find a woman who will make him happy. Someone who will make him laugh and smile. Someone he can spend time with when I’m away at college and no longer living at home. Someone he can build a life with.

But I can’t help but ask myself...*Am I really prepared for him to win?*

Because if he does, I can guarantee he’s going to be *pissed*.

Gah. Immediately, I glance at the date on iCalendar—*June 15th*. And then, I scour *SoCal Tribune*’s website to find out when the last round of voting for Bachelor Anonymous will occur—*July 26th*.

So...okay...almost six weeks of summer to enjoy until I have to worry about whether or not I’ll make it to see the first day of my senior year of high school...

Fingers and toes and pretty much everything crossed the next month and a half moves like Hailie that time she attempted to try out for the track team in the name of her crush

on Taylor McKinley and ran the sixty-yard dash in a staggering two minutes—*aka very, very, very slowly*.



Holley

Today might be a Tuesday, but it's feeling all kinds of Monday.

My work to-do list is a mile-long, and I have the lovely—*cough* painful *cough*—pleasure of fitting in a quick meeting with my editor in chief before I start my day.

With the fresh cup of coffee I snagged from the shop up the street in tow, I tip-tap my heels across the shiny white tile floor as I take a left out of the elevators and head down the long hallway that leads to Gloria Favorelli's large corner office. Her door is already open, and the lively, early-August sun peeks its rays through the partially opened blinds of the window behind her desk.

And unfortunately for me, once I step inside, she doesn't waste any time diving into the meat and potatoes of why she requested this powwow.

"Are you just as thrilled as I am about our Bachelor Anonymous contest, Holley?" Gloria asks, a far-too-happy smile on her face.

Sigh. I sit down in the chair across from her desk, and it takes a Herculean effort not to let out a deep, heaving, frustrated breath. Of all the journalists at the *SoCal Tribune*, for some insane reason, Gloria chose me—*the woman who, just a little over six months ago, ended a more-than-a-decade-long relationship*—to run this three-ring dating circus.

“Oh yeah,” I answer, the phony friendly tone of my voice not at all matching the pain that’s already starting to make its way inside my chest.

I had a feeling this was why she wanted me to stop by her office this morning, but I was desperately hoping it was about something else. Like, her telling me I’ve been switched to a new assignment and will no longer be running the dreaded Bachelor Anonymous contest.

Hello, wishful thinking? It’s me, Holley.

“So, I take it we’re all set with our bachelor and his five lucky dates?”

“Yes.” I dig deep and force a smile to my face. “He has officially been chosen by the readers, and I’ll be meeting with the five selected women today.”

“How exciting!” She flashes a grin in my direction and rubs her hands together.

“Uh-huh.” I grind my back molars together. “*So exciting.*”

I’m probably the last woman on earth who should be spearheading a contest that involves helping people find love, yet here I am, pretending to be absolutely *delighted*. Call it survival. Call it a desire to keep my job. Call it a thirty-three-year-old woman in the middle of some kind of nervous breakdown. Whatever the reason for my agreement, the fact remains that I am a journalist through and through, and no matter the story, I will write it.

“So, tell me about our bachelor. What’s his name? What’s he like? Is he as hunky as we’re all hoping he’ll be?” she asks, her voice giddy and her short red hair bobbing up and down with each enthusiastic word. For a woman who can be such a hard-ass about deadlines, Gloria is the world’s biggest romantic. Her penchant for watching every single season of *The Bachelor* is proof of that. Also, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out where she obtained the inspiration for this contest.

Thanks for nothing, Chris Harrison.

“His name is Jake Brent,” I answer, but I choose to skirt around the whole issue of my not actually being in contact with him yet. “And...he’s certainly *something*.”

“I have to tell you, Holley. I’m a little jealous that you get to be the one who goes on all the dates with our bachelor and witnesses the swoony romance in real-time,” she says through a little squeal. I swear to God, if her smile grows any bigger, it might break her damn face.

Yep. I’m *so* lucky. Not only do I get to run the whole freaking contest, I also get to discreetly attend the dates as a third wheel. *FML*.

“Well, you know, I’d be more than happy to let you take my place,” I respond without hesitation, but what I really want to say is, *Seriously, Gloria, for the love of everything, put me out of my misery and sacrifice yourself to this stupid contest you created!* “Pretty sure that’s the benefit of being the boss,” I add, in a sad, pathetic attempt to persuade her. “You get to call dibs on any assignment you want.”

“Don’t be silly.” She waves off my words with a casual hand. “You’re going to have so much fun with this.”

Oh yeah, Gloria. So much fun. A deathly, so-painful-it-feels-more-like-hell amount of fun.

“And what about his dates?” she asks. “Were you able to find five women that you think meet the criteria?”

Was I able to find five women? Yes.

Was it a horrible, mind-numbing process that took me days upon days of scouring through a weirdly peppy cesspool of hundreds and hundreds of female applicants? Also yes.

“Uh-huh. And actually, they should be here in the next fifteen minutes or so to sign NDAs and get abreast of how the contest will move forward.”

“Fantastic. Sounds like everything is running smoothly on your end, then.”

“Sure is.” Considering I’ve yet to officially talk to our Bachelor Anonymous, it’s safe to say things aren’t exactly

running smoothly. But if there's one thing you learn as a journalist early on, only tell your dictator—I mean editor in chief—what you *need* to tell them. And right now, all Gloria needs to know is that the contest is in progress.

“Well, if you don't mind,” I add before she can ask me any more giddy fucking questions I don't have answers to. “I'm going to head out and get ready for my meeting with the five women.” She gives a little nod of approval, and I waste zero time hauling ass out of her office.

Once I'm settled at my desk, I prepare myself for the first priority of the day—the nerve-racking phone call to Mr. Bachelor himself.

It takes several deep breaths and numerous more read-throughs of the bullet-pointed *and* numbered notes I took in preparation.

1. ***1. Name: Jake Brent. (Don't forget to identify yourself as Holley Fields from the Tribune!)***
2. ***2. Tell him the readers loved his personal ad submission and he has been selected as the Bachelor in the SoCal Tribune's Bachelor Anonymous Contest.***
3. ***3. Give some time for him to react positively; act supportive and excited.***
4. ***4. Tell him it's best if we get together in person to go over all the details and sign some paperwork; ask what time works best for him. Possible locations if he doesn't suggest any: Grey Street Coffee, Ballard's Restaurant.***
5. ***5. Don't forget to ask if he has any questions about the way the contest works; detailed rules and procedures listed on paper under this one.***

Hello, neurotic, right?

Well, trust me, there's a reason for my neuroses, and it revolves around my lifelong track record of turning into a flustered, stumbling mess on a dime.

When I'm confident I have all the important reminders laid out in front of me, I pick up my phone from its cradle and carefully dial the numbers from Jake's application one by one.

Here goes nothing...

When the first ring sounds over the line, I take a deep breath and toss my reading glasses onto the top of the desk.

Of course, I panic then, because I'm not going to be able to read any of my notes without my damn glasses, and I scramble to get them back on my face as the line clicks over to answered.

"Hello?"

"Uh, hi." I stumble over my words, briefly surprised by the young, female voice. Cold calls are not my forte—to be honest, they're not even my "five-te." While I may be a confident, successful, intelligent woman by some measure of the world, I am also an eternally awkward mess. Babbling, stuttering, fumbling—I'm guilty of all the cardinal tells. "May I speak with Jake Brent, please?"

"Oh! He's not in right now," the girl says cheerfully. "Can I take a message?"

Shoot. I wasn't entirely prepared for this. I was expecting Jake himself to answer the phone, to be able to follow my little prewritten script, and I foolishly didn't prepare a backup script for the instance of leaving a message. Still, there is an actual human waiting on the phone for me to get my shit together, which becomes even more apparent when she prompts, "Hello?"

"Ah...yes," I force through my saliva-filled throat. "I'm Holley Fields with the *Tribune*. I'm just..." I glance down at my notes, and in all of two seconds, I try to soak up as many bullet points as I can. "I'm...uh...calling regarding his entry into the Bachelor Anonymous Contest. He's been selected, and I need to go over the details. Can you tell me when might be a better time to reach him?"

There's a muffled shuffle and a muted yell on the other end of the line, and I draw my eyebrows together slightly. When a

thud sounds in my ear, I pull my desk phone away from my face to look at it—as if the clunky plastic handset will tell me anything—and then put it back. I still hear a small scream in the background. What is happening over there? *I swear to Jesus, this guy better not have a secret wife. I cannot redo this contest! The voting already took six weeks to process. Not to mention, the additional seventy hours of work I had to suffer through last week, just to choose the damn women!*

“Did you say Holley Fields?” the woman asks, an edge to her voice that I can’t exactly place. All I know is she no longer sounds easy like Sunday morning.

“I did.” *I said it quite well, actually, thank you very much, I congratulate myself. Eloquently, even.* “And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

I smack my forehead. Now I sound like the Queen of England.

“Chloe,” she says simply before adding, “Chloe Brent. Jake’s daughter.”

His daughter?

Of course, it’s his daughter, you moron! His personal ad is titled Single Dad Seeks Juliet!

Oh hell. Suddenly, the reason I gave for calling seems a little *too* detailed. I sure hope she knew her dad was signing up to be part of an all-out dating meat market since I just outed him. Yikes. You’d think nearly ten years of journalism experience would’ve prevented that horrible mistake, but here I am, fumbling and bumbling my way through this call.

Oh well, at least it’s not a secret wife, right? Now, that would be bad.

“Ah, okay. Well...hmm...okay.” I pause, tripping over my own words. On a quiet breath, I sink my head into my hands and find the strength to try again. “Do you know when a better time would be to reach your dad?”

“He’s, uh...” She pauses almost long enough to confuse me before continuing. “Pretty hard to get ahold of on the phone.”

Sooo...how am I supposed to get ahold of this guy? Literally all other forms of communication are escaping me right now. How can someone be hard to get ahold of by phone? Isn't it surgically attached to his hand like the rest of us?

"All right. Hard to get on the phone..." Holy hell, this conversation has turned remarkably uncomfortable. "Should I...email?"

"He doesn't really do that either," she says, and I internally snort. What's left? A carrier pigeon? Are they even still working, or did some union put a stop to that?

"Is he of this world? Or a goblin of some sort?" I find myself asking sarcastically before I realize I'm shit-talking to a stranger. A stranger who just so happens to be the daughter of this year's Bachelor Anonymous, mind you. I slap a hand over my mouth and bang my head against the desk.

Thankfully, she laughs.

"My dad isn't a goblin," she says through a final snort. "He's one hundred percent a human man, and he'll be at Coronado Beach tomorrow morning. He's literally there every morning, just after sunrise. A bit of a creature of a habit, I guess you could say."

"Coronado Beach?" I repeat and mentally calculate that it's only a short drive from my house. Ten, fifteen minutes tops.

"Yep. You can find him there."

And, what? I'm just supposed to stumble around the beach for a couple hours until I find him? Pretty sure I'm going to need a meet point that's a little more detailed than an entire freaking beach...

"Maybe I should just give him another call ton—"

"No!" she says quickly, and I squint, curious as to her intensity. "He won't be home. But I'll let him know that you called, and he'll be expecting to see you tomorrow at Coronado Beach. Right across from the Hotel Del."

“But he doesn’t even—”

The line goes dead before I finish the rest of my thought, “*know what I look like.*”

Well, that didn’t go as planned...

I pull the phone away from my ear slowly before replacing it back in the cradle. I’m not sure what level of awkward I’d classify that conversation as, but it was definitely on the spectrum. Still, I guess being the daughter of a single man who’s entered himself in a bachelor competition has to be a little unsettling. I know I probably wouldn’t have known what to say or do in that situation either.

Which is exactly why you shouldn’t have given so damn many details at the beginning.

I cringe and offer up a silent prayer that my minor conversational fuckup doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass. The last thing I need is Mr. Bachelor threatening to sue the newspaper because I accidentally spilled the beans to his daughter.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

You’d think, at this stage in my life, I’d be better prepared for my blundering, but no.

My foot-in-mouth syndrome appears to be chronic.

Goodness, I really hope I didn’t traumatize his daughter with my slipup.

My dad had the good grace to be perpetually single after my mom passed. Don’t get me wrong, I want him to be happy—I’ve always wanted him to be happy, and I know a large part of that would be amplified by a companion in his life. But the interviews I’ve spent the last week doing in order to narrow the Bachelor Anonymous dating pool have been irrefutable proof that it’s scary out there in the open seas of desperate women.

I sigh, and when I look up from my desk, I come face-to-face with the only five women who seemed like it wouldn’t be an actual crime to make our nominated bachelor date. In the

glass-walled conference room across the hall from my office, they sit, waiting for me to join them.

Damn, sometimes Dolly—one of the main office assistants here at the *Tribune*—*is far too prompt.*

I sigh again. I thought I'd be meeting with them after getting verbal confirmation of participation from our *bachelor*, but I was clearly a little too ambitious with my timing.

Oh well. The NDA I've had the legal team draft should be all-encompassing. Even if we had to make a change to Bachelor Anonymous at the last minute, it wouldn't make a difference in the paperwork.

At least this part will be out of the way.

I shove my chair back with my hips and press the button on the front of my computer monitor to shut off the screen. The glass walls may have seemed like a good idea to the designer when they remodeled the *Tribune* two years ago, but I can tell you, they were *not*.

My neighbor to the left—Fritz Callo, the contributor responsible for the oversensationalized Men Want More column—is a snoop and, in all honestly, kind of a pervert. I make a point to steer clear of him and his wandering eyes at all costs.

Meanwhile, to the right of me sits Gianna Welsh, the woman in charge of obituaries. Sounds innocent enough on the surface, but let me tell you, she spends half her workday video-chat flirting with all the widowed men. I can't even count the number of times I've seen her reach into the V neck of her top to pull her boobs up and inward for more camera exposure just before signing on to—or *during*—a call.

I do have to hand it to her, though. She's frighteningly, impressively shameless. Everyone in the office other than the editor knows of her behavior and knows of it well. I'm actually surprised her name didn't show up on any of the applications I've been sorting through over the last two weeks for this contest.

But I guess all the competition for his affection makes Bachelor Anonymous too hard of a mark.

The hustle and bustle of the office amplifies as I shove through the glass door of my office and step out into the hall. A huge network of cubicles just on the other side of Fritz buzzes with the anxious anticipation of our print deadline. Beat reporters pull phones away from their ears and cover the mouthpieces to shout at their compadres, and runners sweep the grid, looking for articles that can get picked up, proofread, submitted to the editor, and fast-tracked over to layout. The timeline of our paper's release never changes—ever. And yet, we're almost *always* comically, *agonizingly* in a rush. Either the expectations to fit this much work into the timeline given are ridiculous, or we're staffed mostly by procrastinators.

Based on myself, I'd wager a guess that it's a healthy mix of both.

My phone pings with a text from my blazer pocket, and I pull it out quickly to make sure it's not something of immediate importance. A single text from my dad previews on my home screen, cutting the message off somewhere in the middle.

Dad: Went fishing this morning. Caught some bass and a couple of sunnies, but when I went to take the boat out of the water, my stomach got to gurgling something fierce. Nearly crapped myself right...

A small smile curls one corner of my mouth upward as I click the screen off and put the phone back in my pocket. *Dad and his fish-capades*. He'll be going on about this for a while—I'm sure of it. I expect no fewer than twenty texts in the next hour. But with the time constraints of getting this contest/dating column up and off the ground, I'll have to humor him later.

I shove open the glass door to the conference room—where the bachelor's future dates sit—and step inside, letting

the weight of the door bring it closed behind me.

Five sets of eyes come up from their phones and land squarely on me. The technology in their hands ticks in my mind like bombs. Normally, I wouldn't look at something so harmless so skeptically, but I know the power of social media these days.

All it takes is a tweet to bring a whole empire crashing down. By my calculations, that means it would only take about twenty characters to ruin me and my contest.

Quickly, I set my folder down on the table and open it up. Five NDAs are stacked on top, and if I were an investigator, I'd be slamming them down on the surface in front of each subject. But, obviously, this isn't an interrogation and I'm not the FBI.

Calmly as I can, I take the stack and pass it around to each of the ladies. Honestly, these NDAs cannot get signed soon enough if they're going to be the official contestants. Thankfully, though, at this stage in the competition, there isn't that much meaningful information they could have leaked. I haven't revealed the Bachelor to them—or myself, frankly. All I have is a weird phone conversation with Jake Brent's daughter. Until he signs all the documentation, it could all go down the drain.

Ha. Ha-ha-ha.

Man, nothing makes you laugh in absolute terror like the threat of sheer and utter devastation to your livelihood, right?

“Hi, ladies,” I greet, trying my damndest to make a smile reach my eyes. I'm a skeptic at my best, and a cynic at my worst. Honestly, since my breakup with Raleigh, I'm barely functioning on a human level.

I'm more like Skeletor, the almost human woman.

Though, considering everything I've been through with my bastard ex, I think that's pretty damn understandable.

Ugh. Do not go there, Holley.

On a discreet breath, I shove all thoughts of Raleigh Reynolds and his cheating dick aside and focus on the job at hand—this dumb, wait, I mean, *awesome* contest.

“Thanks for your patience as I finished up a call...” I smile conspiratorially. “With your bachelor!”

They all clap and giggle, and I have to fight the urge to cover my ears. It’s good that they’re excited. It wouldn’t make for an interesting read if they were feeling super lackluster about the whole thing, but that doesn’t make me enjoy it any more. Frankly, the shrill sound of their joy kind of makes me want to ralph.

“Let me tell you...he is great,” I lie. *I know absolutely nothing about him—don’t even know for sure who he is.* “You’re all going to be so thrilled with the man who’s been chosen.”

They all squeal. I wince and look around to make sure I haven’t somehow stumbled into the middle of a pig farm, but all I find are relentlessly attractive, svelte women.

“Great,” I mutter to break up the noise. “I’m so glad you’re all excited. But in order to get started, we need to get some paperwork out of the way. First, you’ll find a document in front of you. It’s a nondisclosure agreement. Essentially, it means that you agree to keep the details of the contest to yourself. That means your dates, the bachelor, your involvement in the contest...anything pertaining to Bachelor Anonymous, you’re strictly—legally—forbidden to talk about.”

“But what about, like, Twitter?” one of them asks, her blond bob swinging side to side.

“No Twitter.”

Her eyebrows knit.

“Instagram?”

“No. No social media platforms, no texts, no phone calls, no letters...” I laugh to myself. Suddenly, I have a handle on every method of communication, and yet ten minutes ago, all I could come up with was carrier pigeon. “It’s all legally

forbidden. You are not to discuss the details of this with anyone.”

Another woman with wavy auburn hair opens her mouth, and I cut her off. “Not your mom. Not your sister. No one.”

They all kind of frown, but I charge ahead. “It’s like being on a jury. You are sworn to secrecy over the details until the contest is completely over. And even then, you’ll have to be released from your nondisclosure agreement in order to share anything.”

“What’s the point if we can’t share anything?” the blonde asks again.

“To find love,” I offer. “To meet someone you can spend the rest of your life with.”

“But, like, how would that work? My mom is going to want to meet the guy I marry,” the blonde asserts.

I nod, though I kind of want to smash my head into the table. Really, though, it’s my fault. I should have seen this coming. When there’s this much hair spray in a room, the fumes are at least partially noxious. I should have told Dolly to put them in a room with a window.

“The nondisclosure will almost definitely end after the contest is over,” I begin to explain. “And then, you’ll be free to share your relationship wherever you and your partner like. But it’s an integral part of the contest now. It’s to protect both your and the bachelor’s privacy as you get to know each other.”

Four of five women put their pens to the paper and sign. One, though, she’s a holdout for some reason. To be honest, I can’t tell if she has a genuine problem with those terms or if she’s still trying to make sense of it all in her head.

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that these women have done nothing to wrong me, no matter their striking likeness to Raleigh’s assistant, and smile.

“Is there something I need to explain more?”

She shakes her head but doesn't offer up any explanation for her hesitance.

“Are you uncomfortable with the terms? You're free to back out at any time if this makes you uncomfortable, and we'll fill your slot with another contestant.”

That apparently strikes a chord. She picks up the pen and signs her name at the bottom of the paper.

“Great,” I approve with a smile, collecting the NDAs and filing them in my folder immediately. “Now we can move on to the fun stuff.”

More squeals fill the air, and I reach into the folder, pull out the next round of forms, and mentally brace myself to be stuck in this room of giggly squealers for the next hour and a half.

Lord, please give me strength.



Jake

Music thumps through the ceiling of the kitchen like there's almost no buffer of drywall and wood at all between one floor and the next, but I'm the one who built this house—I know better. The construction is sound.

That can only mean one thing—my daughter Chloe is trying to communicate with otherworldly lifeforms via her stereo system.

Just another normal Tuesday night.

I smile to myself as I jog down the hall and take the steps two at a time up the stairs to the second floor. I pass a guest room and bath and knock on the closed door on the right with four hard raps. There's no point in wasting my time with a gentle tap. She's raving in there—there's no way she would hear me.

“Chloe!” I yell through the closed door when the volume doesn't descend to non-rock-concert levels immediately. “Open up!”

The heart-shaking music finally drops in intensity, and a few seconds later, the door swings open to my beautiful daughter's repentant face. “Uh, hey, Dad. Music too loud?”

I shake my head with a smile and a laugh. “I've only just started to bleed from my ears.”

“Sorry,” she apologizes with a giggle.

“It’s fine. I mean, when I go deaf in about five years, you’ll only have your music to blame. But it’s perfectly fine.” I grin, and she just rolls her eyes on another giggle.

I reach forward and tug on the end of her long ponytail. “And it’s time to come down for dinner anyway.”

Something rings on the screen of her iPad, which is propped up on its stand on the desk, and we both look behind her to the source of it.

“Okay, Dad,” she agrees, walking swiftly toward the tablet. “Let me just answer this call from Hailie and tell her I’ll call her back, and then I’ll be down.”

I look at the screen harder, trying to make out the image there. It doesn’t look like Hailie at all, and I’m instantly confused.

“Uh, Chlo?” I prompt.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Is Hailie dressed like a chicken or something?”

“What?” she asks, turning her head to face me, the screen still ringing.

“I know you said it’s Hailie, but it looks like a guy dressed like a chicken to me.”

She looks back to the screen and bursts out laughing, grabbing her stomach so hard she almost falls to the floor when she glances back at me.

“What?” I ask.

“Oh my God, Dad. That’s not Hailie. That’s my screensaver of Conan O’Brien dressed as The Crazy Rooster!”

Her laughter rings out in peals as she finally does something to answer the call, and a camera screen pops over the man-chicken, putting Hailie’s face in the window.

Ohh.

“Oh my God,” Chloe squeals again, immediately inciting a whirlwind of excitement from her best friend. “My dad just

confused you and Conan O'Brien!" she yells toward the screen, and I take that opportunity to make my exit with a roll of my eyes.

"Two minutes, Chlo," I remind her, and she turns around to nod as I'm shutting the door, still laughing so hard she can hardly breathe.

Jesus, I think to myself. Some days I convince myself that forty is still young. And then, moments like this make it painfully obvious just how old I'm actually getting.

I'm halfway down the stairs on my way back to the kitchen when my phone vibrates in my back pocket.

I pull it out and look at the screen.

One new message: Heather

Ah, the lovely Heather. A flight attendant with an irregular route, she's been one of the easiest women to meet up with without complication as of late.

She comes into town, we get together if it works out, and then she goes back on her way without any hurt feelings on either side.

I click the box to open the message and see what she has to say—and to remind myself that I'm not exactly dead and buried yet.

Heather: Hey, handsome. In town tonight only. Want to get together?

Ah, tonight only. I hum to myself before typing out a message in response. Shame.

Me: Can't tonight, busy. Maybe next time.

I have a strict rule when it comes to easy sex, and it's that I never put it ahead of my daughter on my list of priorities. I fit

it in where I can, when I can. But I never cancel even the smallest of moments with my daughter to do it.

If she's busy with friends or otherwise occupied, okay. But spending time with her is more important than any random fuck will ever be.

I make my way back to the kitchen and take off the lid to the pot of rice to combine it with the chicken when Heather responds.

I scan the message quickly, but I don't feel any guilt or disappointment.

Heather: 😏 Okay. Next time!

I close the message and toss my phone onto the counter to free up my hand for an oven mitt.

A few clicks turn the oven off, and I'm just pulling open the door when Chloe bounces into the room, still feeling the high of my dad-moment-of-confusion. Her amber eyes are so alight they almost look gold, but after one look at my face, she decides to keep any more commentary to herself. Instead, we both turn our attention to the food.

"Oh yeah," she celebrates as I pull the chicken out of the oven. It's my special recipe, developed over many, many years with the help of no cookbooks at all, and one of her favorites. "Heck yes!"

"Excited?"

"More than K-Poppers when BTS drops a new album! Your chicken and rice is fire, periodt."

"Chlo, you know I don't know what you just said at all. Please, help your dad out by using English."

She laughs. "Come on, Dad. It's the English of my generation. You're better off just learning it. Everyone my age is going to be in charge one day. Wouldn't you rather be in the know?"

“No,” I refute. “I’m just fine like I am.”

She rolls her eyes but smiles as I hand her a dish of food before turning back to make my own. She rolls up on her toes and plants a kiss on my cheek as I’m scooping.

“All right, you can stay uninformed,” she teases. “I’ll be, like, your professional translator.”

I chuckle. “Works for me, babe.”

I grab a fork from the drawer, scoop my phone up off the counter, and head for the table behind Chloe. We both take our seats across from each other and dig in.

It tastes delicious, I’m not afraid to admit, but it’s really not about the food when it comes to dinner with Chloe. I just like to spend the time with her.

“Did you get your class schedule yet?” I ask, knowing she’s been watching the school website almost religiously, waiting to find out if she and Hailie have anything together for their senior year.

School doesn’t start for almost another month, but it’s a small private school with an abundance of resources, and they’re normally pretty on the ball about getting things ironed out well in advance.

She shakes her head, chewing. “Not yet. I think maybe next week.”

I nod, and my phone buzzes on the table.

I hate interrupting our family time, but I have to at least read it. I own a construction company in the area, and sometimes important decisions and issues come up even after regular work hours.

Garrett: Drinks tonight?

Thankfully, it’s not anything pressing. My buddy Garrett is a San Diego firefighter and, without a doubt, the best guy friend I’ve got. But he’s also a grown man with a life of his

own. He gets my priorities, and I don't have to explain anything to him.

Me: Sorry, man. Dinner with Chloe.

Garrett: That's all right. Some other time.

I kind of feel bad that I'm not making the effort to meet him after dinner, seeing as his marriage is a fucking dumpster fire, but I rarely get uninterrupted dinners with Chloe anymore. Soon, she'll be busy with school and friends, and sooner than I'd like to think about, she'll be moving out of the house and starting college.

After seventeen years of raising her myself—of dedicating my life to her—I'm honestly not sure how I'm going to handle it. For the time being, I'm determined not to rush any of the time I have. I set my phone back down on the table and turn my attention to her.

“So,” I say. “How's your—”

The back door in the kitchen bursts open, and Garrett walks inside. My head drops forward as I sigh.

I really should have seen this coming. Because he's a grown man who gets it—but he's also a pain in the ass.

Chloe jumps up from her seat and runs over to him, her feelings about one hundred times more welcoming than my own. “Uncle Garrett,” she squeals, wrapping him up in a tight hug. “Did you bring Hayden and Sarah?”

“Nope. Sorry. Unlike you, they think it's *totally uncool* to hang out with their dad,” he mocks good-naturedly, bobbing his head back and forth like a teenage girl might. “They're at the movies with friends.”

“Bummer,” Chloe whispers, and I smile. Not many teenage girls would be genuinely upset by the absence of

eleven-year-old twins. Chloe, though, has a natural sense of nurture. In fact, I'd say she has that quality *in spite* of me.

When they put her in my arms all those years ago, and I looked down into her amber eyes, I was just a walking, talking grunt factory. I'd spent the last five years in the Navy SEALs—the last month and a half in the thick of a jungle without access to anyone other than my team—and I didn't know how to do anything with emotion. I'd been taught to be devoid of it, frankly. The only things that got me through those first few days with a newborn girl were patience and finesse—skills I'd trained for—and a whole hell of a lot of luck.

Somehow, she made it out okay, though. And as a bonus, she taught me to smile and laugh and cry along the way. My biggest hurdle now is convincing her that it's not her job to take care of me. All she needs to worry about is herself.

“No tacos?” Garrett accuses as he pulls out the chair across from me and sits down with his plate of chicken and rice. “It's Tuesday. Everyone knows what you're supposed to eat on Tuesday.”

I roll my eyes and lean back into the wooden back of my chair. “You can have tacos. You just have to make them yourself. Since you weren't invited to this dinner anyway.”

“What? You said, and I quote, ‘Dinner with Chloe.’ I'm here for dinner with Chloe.”

I shake my head, but I also have to laugh. Garrett has a way of making things fit his narrative. “That's not what I meant, and you know it. Not to mention, I texted you about a nanosecond before you burst in. You were obviously already here.”

He pretends to act shocked as he shovels a forkful of chicken and rice into his mouth and smiles. “You know what? You and I need to work on our communication skills. That's all this is.”

“I think you're spending too much time with the marriage counselor,” I say as Chloe takes her seat at the table again, this time with an ice cream sandwich from the freezer. She giggles.

Garrett laughs too, but I can tell his heart's not really in it as he comments, "Or not enough."

Shit. I probably shouldn't have said anything.

Thankfully, Chloe is there to bring some sunshine to the mood. "Did Hayden and Sarah get their back-to-school clothes yet? Middle school is such a big deal!"

"They're going this Friday and..." He points his finger in the air as he tries to calculate the time. "Not this Sunday, but the next. Apparently, there are different sales on different days or something. Hayden is excited," Garrett answers. "But Sarah drafted a two-page essay of protest."

Chloe snorts. "Oh my God, she's the best. She's, like, the coolest little person. She's into fashion, though, isn't she? I thought she'd want to go shopping."

Garrett shrugs. "She does. She just... Bethanny won't let them go without her, and she has really strong opinions about what Sarah should get. It usually doesn't line up with what Sarah actually wants."

Man, I make it a point not to judge people or relationships that don't involve me, but Garrett's wife Bethanny has proven to be a heartless shrew on more than one occasion. He's worked so hard to make it work, but at a certain point, I'm just not sure it *should* work anymore.

"I could go with," Chloe offers. "Play buffer and stuff. Maybe Sarah will end up with more of what she wants that way."

Garrett leans over and kisses Chloe on the top of the head, and I smile at my girl.

"That would be amazing, Chlo. Sarah would love that so much."

"No problem! I don't need an excuse to shop."

I laugh. "Isn't that the truth?"

Chloe waggles her eyebrows at me, and I don't have to think twice about the motive.

“I suppose I could give you an allowance to spend on yourself while you’re there. Just to make the reasoning credible.”

Chloe squeals, jumps up from her seat, and runs around the table to give me a kiss on the cheek. “Woo-hoo! Thanks, Dad!”

Without waiting, she heads for the den to do what I have no doubt is a massive amount of online “pre-shopping,” as she calls it. As I understand, it’s intended to make the actual shopping easier and more efficient when she gets to the store.

I usually just take the shortcut of doing the pre-shopping and leaving it at that. They deliver clothes these days, and it’s amazing. I haven’t had to set foot in the mall to shop for myself in years.

Just like that, dinner with Chloe is over.

I sigh, but I focus my energy on tonight’s uninvited, but always welcome, guest.

“So, what’s up, man?” I ask, knowing that even being the pain in the ass he is, he wouldn’t be here if there weren’t something bothering him at home.

Garrett shrugs at first, ignoring the question, so I take the opportunity to get up from the table and go to the fridge to get each of us a beer.

When I return to the table, I set it in front of him with a resounding thunk. “Come on, man. Talk.”

He scrubs a hand down his face and then sits back, putting the bottle to his lips for a swig before complying.

“She’s just giving me shit about work. I’m supposed to go up north for a couple weeks, battling those two big fires that are approaching the national forest. She says I’m abandoning her and the kids.”

Fucking hell.

“Dude, you know that’s bullshit.”

“Of course I do,” he agrees. “And it’s not like I really get a choice. The captain says we’re going...we’re going. You know?”

I nod. I’ve known Garrett for nearly fifteen years, and being a dedicated firefighter is truly one of the things that makes him tick. Even his beloved facial hair—I’ve never seen a man love sporting a beard more—takes a back seat to his commitment to the job. In fact, that’s usually how I know his schedule—if he’s sporting a beard, he’s on downtime. And his family has always been the most important thing to him, but he doesn’t have a normal nine-to-five job. Bethanny just never seems to understand that—and she’s been with him longer than I’ve known him.

“Anyway, she’s at the spa. Said if I wasn’t going to make her a priority, she’d just do it herself. I dropped the kids at the movies and headed over here.”

It’s hard to hold my tongue anymore. Shit like this has happened one too many times, and I’m getting tired of watching my buddy get treated like he’s a piece of garbage. “Look, man. You know I back you one hundred percent. I know you’re fighting for this. Trying your best. But at what point is enough enough?”

He shrugs. “I am gone a lot. I...don’t want to be insensitive to that.”

“You’re gone for work when you have to be,” I reassert. “Every other moment, you’re home being a husband and a father.”

“I want her to do what she needs to do to feel whole. If she needs to go to the spa, I understand.”

“Yeah, Garrett,” I say gently. “I get that. I’m all for it. Self-care, whatever. It’s not about her going to the spa or buying shit or any of that. It’s about how she treats you, dude. There are ways for her to communicate her needs that don’t shit all over who you are as a human being, you know?”

He looks at me for a long moment before one corner of his mouth cracks into the curve of a smile. “Maybe I should be

paying you to be my marriage counselor.”

I smirk. “You’d never be able to afford me.”

He snorts.

I raise my beer bottle in front of me in a sort of shrug. “I’m not married, dude. So, I guess you have to take what I say with a grain of salt. But it seems to me the principal of a relationship should be pretty cut-and-dried. It’s both give-*and*-take. Not just one or the other. And I haven’t seen Bethanny give you much of anything other than a headache and blue balls in quite a fucking while.”

He doesn’t say anything, just pulls at the label on his beer bottle as he considers my words.

“Now, come on,” I say, cutting into his thoughts. “You interrupted dinner, so now you’re going to buy me dessert on the way to pick up your kids.”

He nods with a smile and stands up to carry his plate to the sink while I yell for Chloe in the den.

“Chloe! Get your shoes! We gotta go!”

“Where?” she shouts back but makes no move to come out from behind the closed den doors.

“To grab some ice cream and pick up the twins with Uncle Garrett.”

“Um...hello? I’m a little busy in here!” she retorts, but after only a few seconds of silence, she adds, “But I could be convinced into going if we get froyo!”

“Yeah. Sure thing, Chlo.”

“What the fuck is froyo?” Garrett asks and I shrug.

“Hell if I know.”

“It’s *frozen yogurt*, Uncle Garrett,” Chloe chimes in, already heading into the mudroom to grab her shoes. “*Sheesh*. You guys need to learn the lingo.”

“Is it just me or do teenagers make you feel really damn old?” Garrett asks and I laugh.

“Preaching to the choir, dude.”



Holley

Now would be a fantastic time to put on your big-girl panties and get out of the car, my mind sasses me as I stay rooted in the driver's seat of my parked car.

Instantly, I lean my head back against the headrest and force myself to inhale a big, cleansing breath.

For a Wednesday morning, this is the very last place I want to be—sitting in a public parking lot in front of Coronado Beach, moments away from attempting to find Jake Brent.

Holy moly, talk about insane.

The rearview mirror taunts me, and it doesn't take long before I meet my reflection again and check my makeup for a third—*or is it fourth?*—time. I doubt much has changed since I last looked a minute and a half ago, but my nerves are acting like this is a Fourth of July fireworks show.

Pow, bam, sizzle!

Any more of this, and they're going to drag me out to the barge in the Hudson River to be a part of the television broadcast display.

Not that I know much about the Hudson River and New York City. I've only ever been twice, and after growing up in the Midwest with my dad, I ended up choosing the West Coast over the East. Once I graduated from my small-town high school, I headed for the bright lights of Southern California to attend college at San Diego State.

Compared to the Iowa farm country I was born and raised in, California was glitzy and glamour-filled, and needless to say, it wowed me.

Sadly, it's probably because of that wide-eyed wonder that I fell so easily in love with frat boy Raleigh Reynolds. He was clean-cut, well-liked, from a well-off family, and he treated me like I was something special. Amid a crowd of perfect bodies and plastic surgery, I was absolutely thrilled that someone like him could think I—*the small-town girl from Iowa*—stood out.

One month after meeting Raleigh at a party during my junior year of college, we started dating, and to be honest, I thought I'd date him for the rest of my life. I thought we'd get married and have kids and be the perfect California couple with big dreams and a house in Malibu.

I glance at myself in the mirror again and shake my head. *My God, what a naïve little girl I was.*

I swipe at the crease of my eye shadow and check the corner of my mouth for excess lipstick. Everything is in order, but I still pull out my eyebrow pencil and do a couple extra strokes at the apex of the arch of my brow.

The clock glares in the dim morning light, clicking over to another minute of time, and I swallow wordlessly.

It's time to face the bachelor music.

With a pop of my door handle, I step out of my car quickly, and along with the door, I shut any chance of checking my makeup another needless time behind me. I tug at the hem of my black blazer, trying to get it to settle onto my shoulders in a way that feels remotely comfortable.

The morning air is heavy, almost misty, and I can't remember the last time I was awake this early. Actually, that's not true. I do remember the last time—I remember it vividly, in fact. It's just that I choose *not* to relive the horrid memory that served as a big fat catalyst for my world imploding.

Graceful as can be, I trip as I take my first step onto the sand on Coronado Beach, but I catch myself without taking a tumble. It's not crowded, though there are several more people

than I would have expected, seeing as the sun is barely even peeking above the horizon.

A contingent of Navy T-shirt-wearing men jog by, and not a single one of them looks up at me. I choose to believe it's their dedication to their duty and not the extra pounds I've put on recently that make me invisible.

I almost roll my ankle again, and I curse under my breath to make myself feel better. Stooping low, I take off what my dad likes to refer to as my "man heels" in favor of bare feet. They're normally my most sensible "I'm still trying to look professional but not get blisters" shoes—hence the less-than-flattering nickname from my dad—but apparently a heel of any kind in soft sand is a death sentence.

I scan the waterline for a man of Jake Brent's description—tall, athletic, muscular—but all I see are military men and large, rolling waves. To be fair, a good number of them are of both good height and physical condition, but none of them seems like the man I'm looking for.

There's something about Jake Brent that makes me feel like I'll know him when I see him. It's not cosmic destiny or anything—it's just access to information.

In addition to the personal ad entrants submitted for the contest, they also had to provide a brief physical description. For whatever reason, the paper's legal team insisted on it, but for the most part, they all read the same way to me—average male.

This one, though—it had something else—rigorous details that people often don't notice about themselves.

Tall, lean-muscle athletic body type, black hair, bright blue-green eyes rimmed with laugh lines, and a tattoo-sleeved arm that tells the story of my life.

I still remember the way it brought my mind to a halt when I read it.

Trudging farther into the sand, I make my way down the beach until I'm even with the Hotel Del, the landmark Jake

Brent's daughter referenced when explaining where I'd be able to find her dad.

Ha. "Landmark referenced." More like the hint she dropped on my doorstep right before she ran. It was the ultimate ding-dong ditch of explanatory phone calls.

The air is still a little hazy with dawn, but from what I can tell, almost everyone else I noticed in the vicinity before has moved on to sandier beaches...or something

I look back toward my car, wondering if I should just peel out of here, get on the phone again, and hope Jake Brent actually answers my call this time so I can schedule a meeting in which I feel slightly less awkward. But in the end, the sheer distance of the walk makes my decision for me

Instead, I plop down in the sand and dig my newly freed toes down until the grains feel cool. Serene and quiet, the morning blankets me comfortably.

The truth is, I've spent the last six months out of sorts. Confused, lazy, desperate to find something that motivates me again after breaking off my engagement to my college sweetheart. After I spent more than a decade of my life with someone, it's like I forgot how to function properly on my own. I laugh to myself as I think of my dad's car analogies I almost never get.

According to him, ever since I broke it off with Raleigh Reynolds, I've been down a cylinder or two. Whatever that means.

I check the time on my chunky Michael Kors watch and glance over my shoulder. Nobody. Frankly, the place seems to have gone from hopping to deserted in no time flat.

I look out at the ocean and scan the surface of the water for anything of interest.

I don't expect to see much, but with a hand over my eyes to shade out the light from the rising sun and a squint, I can just make out a human-looking figure in the ocean right before it disappears under a crushing blow from a huge wave.

Holy shit! That doesn't look good!

Panic grips me, and I jump up to my feet in the kind of swift motion I didn't even know I was capable of anymore in my thirties. I search the surface of the water for signs of the person as quickly as I can. Briefly, so briefly I almost miss it, his head pops up from the hollow in between the waves, arms stretched up, and then disappears again.

Shit! That definitely isn't good! Isn't that, like, the international sign for distress in the water or something? I feel like I've read it in a book before.

I run forward toward the edge of the waterline, dropping my purse in the sand in the process. I watch avidly for the man to reappear, but all I'm able to make out is a rogue arm through the wall of yet another wave.

I think that guy is going to drown!

Fear for the stranger's life grips me, and I jump into action without thinking, sprinting into the water up to my thighs. My clothes are getting more drenched by the second, and the instant a wave breaks right in front of me, I freeze in my spot.

How in the hell am I going to help him? I'm not Michael Phelps, for fuck's sake!

I search the water manically, hoping to lock on to a body part—a fleck of hope for this soul—when the back of a head bobs in the water before disappearing yet again.

Jesus, I can't just leave him. I could never live with myself!

Shit. I'm really going to have to do this. I'm going to have to try to help him.

I time my jump into the body of the next wave just before it breaks, hoping to avoid getting caught up in the inertia of it. I'm an average swimmer at best, but I've seen the movie *Blue Crush* at least a dozen times. Surely, I can use all that research to my advantage.

Surprisingly enough, my film-grade technique works out okay, getting me to the other side of the wave without incident, but it's in the results of my move where I find the problem.

No longer able to touch bottom, I fight to keep up my doggie-paddling as I search the water for the missing man. Another wave approaches, and without any footing to push off with, I don't know how I'm going to force myself under the barrel of this one.

I glance back to the shoreline quickly, but it's much farther away than anticipated. The current of the ocean has sucked me out well past where I'd ever choose to venture on my own.

And I'm getting *dangerously* tired. I would have sworn I'd be able to keep my legs churning for longer than sixty seconds, but maybe I'm not as buoyant as I used to be. Does age make you sink faster? Do carbs?

Okay, this isn't good.

I scan the surface of the water again, hoping to find either the man who brought me into the stupid fucking ocean or a conveniently located platform to stand on, but I see neither.

Big and bold and overbearing, the wave makes it to me, crashing over my head as I take a huge last gulp of air. I immediately start fighting for the surface, but I can't find it. I touch sand on what must be the ocean floor and flip my body so I can push off with both feet.

I fight and kick and claw my way to the top because there is no way I can look people in the eye in heaven if I know how absolutely stupid of a reason—trying to meet up with a guy I've dubbed Bachelor Anonymous for a freaking newspaper promotion—I died.

I'm not going down for useless pop culture!

I break through the top of the water and suck air into my lungs savagely, but it isn't long before another wave crashes over my head.

Why would anyone swim in this ocean? Why? It's a goddamn death sentence!

Salt water goes up my nose as I struggle for the surface again and burns a path straight to my brain where realization officially sets in.

I came into the water to save the life of a stranger, but chances are looking a little too likely that I'm going to drown before I even find the guy.



Jake

Morning swim-cardio completed, I move on to some of my lung-capacity exercises, slowly increasing the time I spend underwater one fifteen-second increment at a time.

I do it all for fun now, but I used to need the ability to ensure I came home alive. Something about that stuck with me, I guess, because I can't start my mornings without swimming in the ocean. Clearly, I'd never be able to move away from the beach.

Timing the waves, I go under again, this time for a full minute, resting on the sandy bottom and taking in everything around me.

Thankfully, the water is pretty clear here, and after years of training, the salt water barely even burns my eyes.

A school of fish swims by, unaffected by my presence. The sound of the ocean's churn is quiet, but even from the floor below, you can feel the power of each wave.

Something about it recharges me with the energy I need to face the day.

My underwater watch blinks, signaling I'm at the end of my interval, and I stand up and push off the bottom before swimming for the surface.

I breach the barrier of the water and take a deep, satisfying pull of air to fill my lungs once again. I feel invigorated and ready to go again, but I do my due diligence and give myself

and my lungs the recovery time I know they need by floating on my back in the hollow of the swells.

Eventually, my timer goes off and I repeat it all again, over and over until I can't take it anymore.

I've just crested the water after my two-minute dive drill when I unexpectedly see the head of a woman disappear under the barrel of a wave. I'm always out here alone—I make a point of it by being here so early. But something feels off about her presence, and I'm immediately on alert.

I scan the surface, waiting for her to reappear. It takes much longer than I'm comfortable with, and when I finally catch sight of her, it's painfully obvious that my comfort level is the least of our worries. Her arms flail helplessly as she fights for purchase on the water's top, and when that doesn't work, she disappears to the depths of yet another wave.

Son of a bitch. She's struggling.

In my prime as a Navy SEAL, I was able to hold my breath for more than three minutes at a time, but as I've aged, my ability has sloped off. Still, I make it a habit to train every morning—to maintain both my lung capacity and real-world training so that I can still stay underwater longer than any average person.

I jump into action, swimming in the direction I last saw her and waiting for the eddy from the wave to recede. I go under quickly, opening my eyes to search for her. She's at the bottom, rolling around and trying to make sense of her body. Her clothing is baggy and soaked, and it's making it even harder for her to find the surface.

Did she dive in with her damn clothes on?

I swoop down swiftly, and with practiced ease, slide an arm under her armpit, across the wall of her chest, and secure my hand under the other armpit. And then I swim for the shore.

I know she's likely close to the end of her air supply, but we'll make it to shallow water much faster if we swim below

the waves. The surf is rolling today, and it's probably why she got into trouble in the first place.

Waist-deep water comes quickly, and I switch my grip on her upper body, shifting her into my arms to carry her behind the head and the knees. I run to dry ground, settling her body softly into the sand as she sputters for air while her throat works to rid itself of ocean water.

I push wet strands of her dark hair away from her face and look her over, but all in all, she seems pretty lucky. No signs of severe oxygen loss, and her pupils are reactive.

"Are you okay?" I ask when she stops coughing. The sound of my voice forces her to focus on me for the first time as I search her crystal-like eyes. They're the color of jade.

"You're alive!" she responds strangely.

My eyebrows come together as I assess her further. She's in a black business suit. It hangs on her body, but I can't tell if it's a tomboyish structure to the suit or the weight of the water that's the cause. What it isn't, though, is a swimsuit or wet suit or appropriate apparel of any kind for the ocean.

"Why are you wearing clothes?" I question.

"You're alive!" she shouts again, and this time, I can't ignore it.

"Yes," I say slowly. "And so are you. But you're extremely lucky to be. You almost drowned out there."

"I almost drowned because you were drowning."

"No." I shake my head and almost laugh at the ridiculousness of her response. "You didn't drown because I know how to swim, and I certainly don't go out into the ocean in business clothes."

"I went into the ocean in business clothes because *you* were drowning!"

"No," I say again. "I *wasn't*."

"Yes. You. Were," she retorts, her voice stubborn. "I watched you go under and never come up, and I went into the

ocean to save you.” I open my mouth to refute her again, but she points an accusing index finger in my face and rushes to speak again. “I saw it with my own eyes, so don’t you go saying no again!”

“I was holding my breath. Not drowning,” I explain.

“What kind of person goes underwater and holds their breath for that long! There’s no way—”

“A former Navy SEAL,” I cut her off. I don’t mean to be impolite, but so far, this conversation isn’t going anywhere. The only thing that’s going to help it along is clarity.

That closes her mouth—in fact, it goes so far as to make her suck her lips in over her teeth.

For the first time, it’s silent, and both of us look down to realize I’m lying half on top of her, my hand at the bare, exposed skin of her waist.

Goose bumps form under my fingertips just before I pull them away and push back to my knees in the sand. I put my ass to my heels and roll up to my feet.

She watches the movement avidly but doesn’t venture to make any of her own.

“Are you going to be okay?” I ask again from my position above her. The sun is bright in my eyes, but I can’t seem to turn away from her.

She nods, biting into the flesh of her bottom lip and laughing a little. Mascara runs down her cheeks and settles into her dimples, and her sandy, wet hair clings to the sides of her face.

She looks like a wet rat. Somehow, though, I can still tell she’s extraordinarily pretty.

I reach down and offer a hand. She accepts it readily, and I pull her up to standing.

“Thanks for trying to save me,” I say, a teasing smile playing at the corner of my lips.

She laughs outright at herself and sinks her head into her hands. “Oh yeah. This’ll be a story for the grandkids, for sure. Assuming I ever have any, that is.”

Her comments are self-deprecating but laced heavily with humor. I can’t help but laugh and stick out a hand. “I’m Jake, by the way.”

“Hold on...” She stares down at my hand like it might catch on fire. “What did you say your name was?”

“Jake,” I repeat.

Her face freezes briefly, and then she breaks out into full-blown cackles.

Okaaaay. *This is one of the weirdest mornings of my life.*



Holley

The guy who was drowning—more like, the guy you thought was drowning, even tried to save from drowning, but who, in all actuality, saved you from drowning—is him, Jake flipping Brent.

The exact man I came here to find.

“Of course you are,” I blurt out through another round of laughter.

Of all the people on the planet—of all the people on this beach this morning!—and I had to make a fool of myself with the actual guy I’m supposed to meet. There’s no running. There’s no hiding. There’s no *Don’t worry about it, Holley, you’ll never see this guy again*. This is Grade A, prime choice embarrassment, and it’s going to give me horrible indigestion for the next several weeks.

Oh my God! I cannot believe myself.

“What? Is Jake a bad name?” he asks through a raspy chuckle, completely behind the curve of our fate. “I can go by something else if that’ll make you feel better.”

Oh, so he’s incredibly handsome *and* charming? Sounds about right at this point.

My eyes don’t miss—*can’t* miss—the way his fingers move the zipper of his wet suit down, down, *down*, from his neck to just slightly below his belly button. With the kind of ease I do not possess, he slips his arms out of the sleeves and

lets the material hang loose at his waist. His nearly full sleeve of tattoos on one arm is unbelievably vibrant against his tanned skin. And the rest of him?

Biceps and pecs and a six-pack, oh my!

This guy is forty? Good grief, his body looks twenty-five, tops...

Get it together, you little floozy! Stop staring at your assignment like he's lunch!

I shake myself out of my beefy-muscles-induced trance and clear my throat. "No, no," I backtrack, trying to figure out how to save face when I'm pretty sure it melted off in the ocean. Or, at the very least, when his fingers played tug-of-war with his freaking wet suit. "Jake is a fine name. It's just... well... I'm Holley," I reveal. "Holley Fields."

I giggle to try to soften the awkward news, but he doesn't react at all how I expect. Instead, his eyebrows draw together. A smile still highlights his perfect cheekbones and insanely blue eyes, and *my God, why does he have to be so attractive?*

"Holley," he says then, acknowledging that he did, in fact, hear me say my name correctly, but taking it no further.

"Right," I confirm. "Holley Fields."

He shrugs and settles his hands on his hips, calling my attention to the line of muscle that scoops down on both sides and points to the glorious world under his bathing suit.

"I work for the *SoCal Tribune*," I say, elucidating even further.

He nods as if it's all the same to him. "And I have a construction company."

I start to open my mouth when it finally fucking dawns on me. He has no freaking clue about me. He doesn't know that he's meeting me here or that he's been selected for Bachelor Anonymous or anything. He probably never paid attention to my name on the submissions, and his daughter obviously didn't relay the message. She wrote it down on some notepad

and moved on with her life. I know how teenage girls work—I was one once.

Oh, hell's bells, he must think I'm insane.

“Uh, I’m just now realizing that maybe we’re miscommunicating a little bit. I spoke with your daughter last night—Chloe. About your Bachelor Anonymous submission. You were selected, and she assured me she’d let you know and that I should meet you here this morning, but I’m guessing you didn’t get the message...?”

“*What?*” he says, his tone unmistakable. It’s the tone every dad in the natural world invokes when they’ve just found out their kids have done something like taken their autographed sports memorabilia and flushed it down the toilet. I suddenly feel very protective of the unknown Chloe. I don’t want to be the reason she gets in trouble.

“Honestly, we probably got our wires crossed. Or maybe she didn’t get a chance to get the message to you. It’s no big deal—”

“Sorry, Holley, but it *is* a big deal,” he insists. “For you and me. Because I don’t have a single clue what Bachelor Anonymous is, and I can assure you, if I did, I’d never sign myself up for it.”

“Oh shit.”

He nods. “Oh shit, indeed.”

I follow closely behind him as he turns on his heel and heads for a pile of stuff about twenty feet away. I have to assume it’s his. Either that, or the news of his involvement in the contest has inspired a robbery of some kind.

Still, I prefer to bank on the latter.

Sand sticks to my feet and nags on the back half of my body as I trudge behind him. He’s focused, though, and doesn’t seem to notice me—the sand yeti—at all.

He digs in the front pocket of his bag and comes out with a phone. His fingers move over the screen.

“What are you doing?” I ask, a boldness I’m not entitled to somehow taking me over.

“I’m calling my daughter,” he answers matter-of-factly. “She has some explaining to do.”

“Maybe she didn’t have anything to do with this? Maybe someone else submitted a personal ad for you?” I offer, and he targets an incredulous yet stern look directly at me.

“Holley, with all due respect, I know my daughter pretty fucking well,” he responds, and his jaw clenches a little. “And I’m one-hundred-percent certain she’s the culprit.”

Uh oh.

I wince, feeling seriously sorry for the unknown teen now. “Maybe you should...calm down,” I suggest.

Unimpressed with my brazenness—*which, quite frankly, I can’t blame him for...I don’t know where it’s coming from!*—he spears me with a glare, and I try like hell to speak in coherent sentences as I attempt to explain myself.

“I just...maybe you should read the ad first. Get acquainted with the whole situation before you...” I pause as I backpedal away from saying the words *rip her a new asshole*. “I have it in my bag.”

Without speaking, he holds out a waiting hand, and I don’t hesitate.

Quickly, so quickly I’m huffing, I run through the thirty feet of sand back over to the spot I left my purse, grab it, and jog back over to him. I open the top flap, dig around, and finally pull out the edition of the paper in which the ads ran for the contest.

Through all of this, he never puts down his hand.

I slide the paper between his fingers, which clamp down immediately, and he begins flipping through the pages furiously.

“It’s on page six,” I say, trying to be helpful.

Clearly, I just can’t help but butt in today.

Once he gets to the right page, the ad is easy enough to find. I have it circled in bright-red pen.

I glance at the paper, and my eyes widen. Okay, so that's not a circle. *How in the fucking bejeezus did I not remember that I put a heart around it?*

Embarrassment heats the back of my neck, and if it weren't for the smeared makeup and sand, he'd probably be able to see some pink in the apples of my cheeks. As it is, I'm pretty sure nothing could make me look out of the ordinary.

"*Single Dad Seeks Juliet,*" he reads aloud with a slight edge of derision. I suck my lips into my mouth and stay silent. I'm just thankful he hasn't mentioned my sixth-grade-style doodle that looks like it came straight off Lisa Frank's production line.

"I can't believe this," he mutters to himself as he continues to read, and it's all I can do not to sneak around and take a peek over his shoulder.

I mean, I've read the ad. Several times. But it's kind of like watching a movie you've seen and love for the first time with someone else. It's all about knowing what parts they're specifically reacting to.

"I thought it was a really tasteful ad," I say softly, hoping to shed some kind of positive light on Chloe's situation.

"Oh, really? Well, I'd like to remind you that Romeo and Juliet fucking killed themselves," he replies.

Yowzer. I clamp my mouth shut again.

"This just isn't like her," he says, more to himself than to me. "To do something like this behind my back. What in the hell was she thinking?"

Now, I know—I *know*—the question was meant to be rhetorical. But for some reason, I just can't help myself. "I'm sure she didn't mean to upset you. Maybe she's trying to help, you know?"

"By entering me into a fucking ridiculous dating contest?" he questions, and instantly, for the briefest of moments, he

actually finds a way to come out of his anger long enough to think about me. “No offense, of course.”

It’s surprising—startling, even. I’ve never seen anything like it before. All the men I’ve ever known didn’t know how to pause long enough to consider anyone but themselves.

“Oh,” I say with a wave of my hand and a squish of my lips. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s just not something I would do,” he explains further. “She knows that. We’re very close. I’m sure this is great for some people.” He’s being so nice now, I’m actually starting to get uncomfortable.

“Hey, it’s okay.” I shrug one shoulder. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me. I’m getting paid to be a part of it.”

I shut my mouth immediately after that one. I swore up and down to myself that I wouldn’t go there—that I wouldn’t allow myself to even consider that I’d rather be doing something other than these articles. All that negativity will only make the work ten times as painful.

He takes a deep breath, but eventually types out a message on his phone that I can’t actually read without seeming far too creepy. I’m curious, but it looks like I’m just going to have to stay that way.

He looks up when he’s done typing, narrowing his eyes as he considers me for a moment. “You really want to know what I said, don’t you?”

I shake my head vigorously. “What? Me? No way! I would never dream of invading your privacy like that!”

He snorts. “I just told her to meet me at home because we have to talk.”

I suck my lips into my mouth and nod. Man, it feels so good to know what he said. Even more than that, I’m glad I agree with it.

Not that I need to at all. Obviously. It’s not my business.

Yet you just can’t seem to stop making it your business.

“I think that’s a good move,” I comment. “In person is better.”

He surveys me closely, looking over my sand- and water-soaked, haggard body before landing on my eyes. His are earnest and friendly—and only a small percent amused by my appearance.

I look ridiculous. I know it, and he knows it too. But he’s chosen to be nice.

“Are you going to be okay? You know, to drive and everything? Because—”

“Who me?” I say, far too casually. “Are you kidding? I’m great. Terrific. Totally A-OK.”

I look like a wet rat and I’m going to find a new Bachelor Anonymous for the contest in a crazy short amount of time, but that’s just minor details...*right?*

“Are you sure?” he checks, and despite the internal battle that’s beginning inside me, I nod.

“I’ll be fine.”

He jerks his chin upward, just once. It’s smooth and casual, and... Wow. I’ve never seen a man pull off that move without looking utterly ridiculous before. But he’s done it.

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

I shake my head. “I’m good, promise. You have important things to get home to.”

He nods and then chuckles a little. “She is *my* kid. She’s probably going to join an animal shelter and pick up forty-five hours of volunteer work in the next two days, just to have a good excuse to avoid coming home.”

“I’d be practicing my crying if I were her.” I giggle. “Heck, that’s what I was doing when I *was* her.”

Jake smiles, and it feels like a reward. I keep going.

“I was a teenage girl once. I know the feeling of impending punishment. I have many years of training for an

Oscar. Can't believe I didn't use it to make buckets and buckets of money."

Mouth still curved toward his eyes, he holds up the paper between us and asks, "Mind if I keep this?"

I shake my head. "Not at all. I have another copy."

"But do they all have a heart drawn on them?" he teases, and I almost faint.

"My dog did that," I blurt, despite the fact that it's both preposterous for an animal to be drawing and I don't have a dog.

He chuckles, and I'm almost tempted to think of some more dumb things to say.

God, he's cute. The women in the Bachelor Anonymous contest would have eaten him up. And I'm still considering all the ways I can make a fool of myself for the benefit of his laughter when he bids me goodbye.

"It was nice to meet you, Holley."

"You too, Jake."

With one more chin jerk and a smile, he scoops up his bag and his towel and heads for the sidewalk at the top of the beach. I watch as he goes for a moment, but I finally snap myself out of it.

I look down at my toes and sigh. I'm a fucking mess. I don't know if I have any extra clothes in my car, but if not, I'm going to have to drive home practically naked. Because there's no way my Infiniti's seats will survive this.

Hiking the strap of my purse farther up onto my shoulder, I start my walk through the sand, headed back to where I came from on the other side of the Hotel Del. We're down a little ways, and I've lost sight of Jake, so I'm sure he's gone.

I dig in my purse, grab my keys, and bleep the locks on my car as I approach. The parking lot is mostly empty, thankfully, so I head straight for my trunk and pop it with the button on my key fob.

Please God, let there be something in there that can help me.

And, for the love of everything, please make finding a new Bachelor Anonymous easy.



Jake

Stuff tossed into the bed and dry towel resting on my driver's seat, I climb up into my truck, shut the door, and turn the key to fire up the engine. The radio comes on, and immediately, I turn down the knob to soften it.

Normally, I listen to my music loud. I like to jam as I drive, but I'm not the same person who got into the truck this morning to come here, a father whose teenage daughter would never dream of signing him up for a fucking dating contest.

Now, I'm torn between knowing my daughter is still sweet and loving and kind and an amazing human being—and a huge fucking shit-stirrer.

I cannot believe she did this behind my back.

I'm honestly shocked.

I close my eyes and let my head fall back onto the headrest. I take a minute to gather my thoughts, to process the whole cluster of a morning I wasn't expecting.

I come here to swim every day. Every day for the last seventeen years, that I've been home, I've gone swimming in the ocean to start my day. None of them has shaped up quite like this.

I open my eyes again, prepared to put the truck in gear and head for the house when I see the lone car across the parking lot light up as the locks bleep.

Holley materializes from the beach onto the sidewalk, heading directly to the Infiniti.

What I should be doing right now? Putting my car in drive and heading home to figure out what in the hell Chloe was thinking with this Bachelor Mysterious—*or whatever the fuck it's called*—stunt.

But what I'm actually doing? Still sitting in park, watching the enigma that is Holley Fields.

She moves to her trunk and pops it open, dropping her bag on the one side and leaning so far in all I can see is her sand-covered ass.

I bite my lip, laughter so close to the surface I can feel it in all the features of my face.

She's something. Awkward. Kind of a mess. But really, that's just camouflage. After ten minutes on the beach with her, it's more than obvious she's both funny and beautiful.

I take my hand off the shifter and relax into my seat, unable to stop watching the show. She roots around for a while, looking for god knows what, and when she finally emerges, she holds a towel in the air like it's Simba and she's Mufasa, presenting it to her kingdom.

I chuckle a little out loud.

“What's she going to do now?” I mutter to myself as she moves from the trunk of the car to the passenger side door, rustling around on the floorboard.

She pulls out a previously opened bag of chips and takes the clip from the folded edge and tosses it on the top of her car.

Then she looks up, glancing around the parking lot, sweeping right over me in my truck. Apparently, she can't see me with the backlighting from the sun.

Falsely surmising the coast is clear, she steps into the open door of her car again to shield herself slightly—though it does nothing for someone looking on from my direction—and yanks off the soggy black blazer before tossing it to the pavement.

Next, she wiggles her hips, working at the waistband of her pants while facing away from me, and finally shimmies the sand-logged material down to the ground. Her panties are black lace, and I suddenly feel like I'm doing something very, *very* wrong by watching her without her knowledge.

I don't want to startle her by driving away, though, so I don't move.

And against my better judgment, I don't close my eyes either.

Holley Fields was definitely hiding one hell of a body under that business suit.

Struggling against the wet fabric of her top, she peels it from her skin up over her head, tossing it onto the pile in the parking lot as well. I look on at the tanned skin of her bare back and the unbelievably beautiful shape of her ass.

Christ.

She grabs the towel from where she previously left it on the seat, wraps it around her entire body, and then takes the chip clip from the roof and secures it at the chest.

It's ingenuity at its finest. But necessity definitely is the mother of invention, isn't it?

To be completely honest, that could be the slogan for my life as a parent. Because when I first had Chloe, I didn't have a goddamn clue what I was supposed to be doing. The only option I had was to make it up as I went along.

Finally ready to leave, Holley grabs her bag out of the trunk, slams it closed, and rounds the car to the driver's door.

She sinks down into the seat and disappears. I wait, watching as her taillights come on and she backs out of the spot, before putting my truck into gear.

Her reverse out of the spot is quick, and she's off like a shot toward the entrance of the parking lot before I even get rolling.

She puts her right turn signal on, pulls to a stop, and then starts to go and almost runs over a couple crossing the road.

“Shit.”

The brake lights come on as she narrowly misses them, and I can see her arms going crazy through the glass of her back windshield.

I don't know exactly how I can tell, but I know they're the motions of apology.

Still, the couple glares before finishing their stroll across the sidewalk at a jog.

Fairly traumatized, she sits there at the stop sign for a full minute, swinging her head back and forth before she finally takes the leap again, pulling out onto the street with caution.

I pull up to the stop sign myself, give Holley's retreating car one last glance, and then turn the other direction. Toward home. Toward Chloe.

Toward answers.

Sorry, baby girl. It's time to face the fucking music.



I put my truck in park, kill the engine, and jump down to the driveway without pause. Normally, I would pull into the garage, but my mind is too chaotic to allow me the patience needed to do it, so I've settled for the simpler parking spot in the front circle drive. My need for answers from Chloe has only grown with the passing moments of my twenty-minute trip back home, and the quicker I find her, the better.

I climb the front steps two at a time, unlock the front door, and shove it open.

“Chloe!” I yell as soon as I cross the threshold. When she doesn't respond immediately, I shout her name again. “Chloe! We need to talk right now!”

I circle around the front stairs and go down the hall to the kitchen. She's not there, so I walk into the den, over to the back staircase, and take those steps two at a time on my way to her room. As I approach, an open door becomes obvious. With

just that, I know she's probably not in there, but I continue until I'm far enough to look inside anyway.

"Chloe!" I yell again, a little edge of panic starting to make its way in alongside the anger.

Where is she?

I jog back down the stairs with ankle-snapping speed and circle back into the den, my head swinging back and forth and coming up empty once again. I'm just about to head back out to my truck to find my phone when she steps inside from the back patio, an undeniable look of culpability on her face.

"Chloe," I say, this time as calmly as I can manage.

A lone tear runs down her cheek almost immediately, but I try to stay strong in my role as a father who needs to question his daughter when she does something incredibly stupid.

"What were you thinking?" I ask, my voice rising in irritation.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers, and a few more tears stream down her cheeks.

Shit. For as angry and desperate for answers as I am, I still can't ignore the power of her sadness on my own emotional scale. It's incredibly ironic that I, the former Navy SEAL, can crumble like a ton of bricks at the mere sight of my daughter's discomfort.

With two long steps, I pull her into a tight hug.

She shoves her face into my chest, and the waterworks amplify in intensity.

"Hey, Chlo," I say softly. "Calm down, okay? Shh."

Gah, I hate when she cries. Why does it suck so much when a woman cries?

"So, it's safe to say, you're familiar with why I've come home?" I start, and she nods into my chest, squeezing her arms tighter.

I sigh and let my lips fall forward to her hair.

“Calm down, and let’s just talk, okay?”

She shakes her head, and I almost laugh. Apparently, the music Chloe thinks she’s about to face sounds like the song they play at funerals in New Orleans.

“I’m not going to yell. We’re just going to talk,” I promise.

She takes her face out of my chest and looks up at me, her mascara a smeared mess not entirely unlike that of an almost-drowned Holley Fields. “You’re not going to yell?” she asks to confirm.

I smile. “I wanted to. But no. There’s no need anymore. I just need you to be honest with me. No lies, no details left out. I need to know what exactly you were thinking. And, Chlo?”

She looks up at me with quivering lips.

“I need to know it right now.”

Finally, she nods, stepping back and wiping the skin under her eyes with both hands. “Okay,” she agrees. “But I really need cookies for this, so can we please go into the kitchen?”

I laugh before nodding in agreement. “Yeah, cookies sound pretty good right now.”

She nods. “I’ll make some.”

“While we talk,” I order. “No delaying the inevitable, got me?”

She nods yet again. “I can bake and talk at the same time.”

“Good.” I walk her into the kitchen and into the pantry where she can gather the ingredients she needs. I decide I’ll give her the peace to do that without me barking questions in her ear, but not much else. After all, baking is pretty precise, and despite everything, I really would like to be able to eat some of these cookies.

“You get started getting everything you need,” I tell her. “I’m going back out to my truck to get my phone. I’ll be right back.”

She nods mutely, and I turn and make my way to the front door, walk down the steps, and lean in the passenger side of

my truck to get my phone, keys I left in the ignition, and the article from the front seat.

When I get back inside, I lock the front door and head for the kitchen again. Chloe is already at the kitchen island, adding ingredients to the bowl.

I toss the paper onto the counter next to her, the heart-circled ad right there for her to see.

“Single Dad Seeks Juliet?” I question simply, pulling out a stool at the island and sitting down across from her.

She winces, cutting open a bag of chocolate chips, dumping them into the bowl and stirring them in with a wooden spoon.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time?” she says, the inflection of remorse tinged with an obvious air of excuse-making.

She regrets getting caught; that much is certain. But I don’t think she regrets doing it at all. And I desperately need to know why.

“Chloe,” I prompt, and she sighs.

“Okay, fine. I...maybe I shouldn’t have done it, but I *had* to do it.”

I furrow my brow. “I don’t understand.”

“I had to, Dad. I had to try everything—do everything I could—to look out for you the way you looked out for me.”

“I’m not your responsibility, Chloe. And my love life certainly isn’t. I’m the parent, and you’re the child. Simple as that.”

“No,” she dissents immediately. “It’s not that simple, and you know it.”

“It *is*,” I insist. “I take care of you. Not the other way around. It’s my job as a parent.”

“It’s your job to make sure I’m fed and clothed and loved, Dad, but you’ve always gone way, way, *way* above and beyond that, haven’t you?”

“Chloe—”

“No!” she snaps, and I almost open my mouth to tell her to cut the attitude, but she beats me to the verbal punch. “It wasn’t your job to join a single dads’ club when I was a toddler to make sure you were doing all you could to help me adjust to growing up without a mom.”

“Chloe,” I whisper.

“And it wasn’t your job to take me to tea parties when everyone else was there with their mom, or dance on stage to help me at my first recital when I couldn’t remember the moves.”

Emotion crawls into my throat and thickens it so much I don’t know if I’ll be able to swallow.

“It wasn’t your job to take a lesson at the salon so you’d know how to do my hair, or go to the women’s center to research all you could about getting your period so it wouldn’t catch me off guard.”

She stops stirring and leans into the counter to look me in the eye, her amber ones shining brightly with unshed tears.

“You went the extra mile to be the absolute best father you could be, but that wasn’t your job. Just like taking care of you *isn’t* mine. But I’m going to do it anyway, and I’m going to do it the way you always did with me. Maybe signing you up to be the bachelor in some newspaper thingie was extra, but I stand by it.”

“Chloe.”

“I’m grown, Dad. Grown,” she emphasizes. “My needs are different than they used to be. Now, I need to know you’re set. You’ve been my best friend for my entire life, and if you don’t want happiness for your friend, you’re not really a friend at all.”

“If you want me to meet a woman, there are a hundred ways to do that that don’t include being the pawn in a ridiculous farce called Bachelor Mystery.”

“Bachelor *Anonymous*,” she corrects me on a giggle.

“Whatever.” I sigh. “It doesn’t matter what it’s called. What matters is that there are plenty of other, not ridiculous ways for me to find someone.”

“Fine. You’re right,” she agrees. “But if you were going to do any of them, you would have done them years ago. Just give this a chance, Dad. *Please.*”

“Why is this so important to you, Chlo?” I ask, a knot of unwelcome emotion clogging my throat as I think back through the movie reel of our lives. So many memories. So many tragic moments. So much beauty and love and happiness. “Why do you think I need a woman *so* badly? Have I cheated you by keeping you to myself all these years? Did you miss out by only having a dad to look up to?”

“I didn’t miss out. You did.”

I shake my head. “My life has been exactly what I’ve made of it, Chloe, and I made it that way for a reason. I wouldn’t change it.” I laugh a little. “Hell, I don’t even know if I’m equipped to compromise with someone on everything anymore. I’ve been on my own, in charge of my own decisions for a long time. Sometimes it’s hard to unlearn living that way. And I don’t know if I want to.”

“With the right person, you won’t have to compromise all that much.”

I shrug, sighing internally at myself for having all those conversations about empowerment in a relationship over the years. I wasn’t prepared to have her feeding all my own crap back to me so soon.

“And you think *this*—whatever this contest is with the paper—is going to produce the right person?”

“I think you miss a hundred percent of the shots you don’t take,” she fires back, quoting me from yet another parental speech.

It’s like I loaded the gun for her, for God’s sake.

I sigh heavily and consider her closely, and she does the same to me. We stare at each other with the weight of our lives—years and years of counting on each other and trusting that

even if it seems crazy in the beginning, it'll all make sense in the end.

“This is nuts, Chlo. You realize that, right? You entered your forty-year-old dad in a dating contest run by a newspaper.”

“A dating contest in which readers voted and *chose* my forty-year-old dad to be the most eligible bachelor in San Diego.”

I stare at her in confusion, and she shrugs.

“I might have written the ad, but the *SoCal Tribune* readers voted you in.”

“This just gets better and better, doesn't it?” I mutter, and a soft giggle pops from her lips as she turns to preheat the oven.

“Just do it, Dad. What's the worst that could happen?” she questions with a glance over her shoulder. “You meet an amazing woman who catches your eye, and you actually enjoy spending time with her?” She feigns disgust. “Ew, gross.”

Am I really going to do this fucking thing?

Silver lining? You'll get to see the intriguing woman that is Holley Fields again...

“I can't believe I'm agreeing to do this.” I shake my head and bring it down to the counter, and she shrieks a cheer into the air.

Hell, just what am I getting myself into?



Holley

Papers flutter into the garbage as I toss another heap from my desk into the trash can near my desk. Hundreds and hundreds of personal ads and application information to go through, and still, finding another viable option for Bachelor Anonymous seems impossible.

The instant I left Coronado Beach, I stopped at my house for a quick shower and a change of clothes and headed straight back to my office to try to figure out a game plan that won't end in me losing my job.

I've been working on said game plan for the last several hours, and I'm only certain of two things: Jake Brent is a no-fucking-go and, besides the cleaning staff, everyone in the office has headed home for the night.

Basically, I've yet to move past square one—find a new Bachelor Anonymous.

I can't do another vote—there's no time. Not to mention, having *Tribune* readers know the process has been fucked from the jump isn't the kind of image I'd like to portray. As a general rule of thumb, I try to make decisions that *won't* get me fired.

I pick up the next sheet from my pile and read the ad aloud.

“Single male with a good couch looking for a woman with a house in Palos Verdes. If interested, please send picture of the house.”

*Oh, for goodness' sake, this dude doesn't want to find love!
He wants a sugar momma with a sweet house!*

Without even looking at any of the other information, I quickly ball that one up between my hands and chuck it over my left shoulder in the direction of the trash can.

“Holy flaming fuckups, I’m going to end up writing obituaries. I can feel it.”

I grab the next paper, holding my eyes closed tight until I feel ready and then pop them open to read. This one’s a little longer and starts off way more promising.

“Divorced white male, 6’1” tall and a muscular 210 pounds, looking for love with a single female of any ethnicity,” I read quietly to myself. “Looking for someone I can make laugh. Recovering addicts, a plus.”

I scan back over the last sentence again. “Wait, *what?*”

My mouth moves numbly as I read over each word carefully. ***Recovering addicts, a plus.***

A plus?

Why is this guy *looking* for recovering addicts? Does he, like, want to prey on them or something?

Lawsuits against the paper and me, and basically everyone in greater Southern California swirl in my mind, and I cringe.

I don’t even bother balling up the paper before tossing it behind me this time. It drifts to the ground like snow on Christmas morning. *Geez Louise, why is this so hard?*

I pick up the next one and scroll my eyes over the title.

Widowed Male Seeks Curvaceous Sexual Attention.

Ugh. Next.

Single Male Seeks Hot Girl Summer.

Eye roll.

Single Male Seeks Love.

Okay. This one doesn't sound so bad...

I cover my eyes and look between my fingers as I continue to read silently.

Single and ready to mingle, ladies. At eighty-six years young, I know the meaning of love.

Holy prune juice and melba toast! Eighty-six? This isn't going to work at all, though I can't help but keep reading.

Must like watching Flea Market Flip and riding in golf carts. Send pictures first.

I let my head loll back and try not to cry. Am I living in some sort of alternate dimension? I mean, wasn't almost drowning this morning in the real ocean enough? I have to drown in the metaphorical deep end of work, too?

Gah.

I pick up the next paper from the stack hesitantly. Who knows what snakes in this pile of ridiculousness have yet to strike?

Single Male Seeks Virgin. I'm looking for a woman between the ages of 18 and 30 who will glorify me and God forever. I am willing to teach her all the things she doesn't know. Virgin preferred but will consider someone revirginized after one-time lover.

“Oh, for the love of everything holy—”

My desk phone rings and startles me out of my seconds-away breakdown.

With a hand to my chest, I inhale a calming breath.

Normally, I'd be annoyed by the surprise, but at this point, I'll take any distraction I can get.

Hell, I'll talk to anyone right now—telemarketers, drug pushers, political activists, Pilot Pete's mom from *The Bachelor*, anyone—to save myself from reading another personal ad sent straight from hell.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Holley Fields from the *Tribune*,” a warm, masculine voice says in my ear. “This is Jake Brent from the Ocean.”

“Holy—”

“Shit,” he finishes for me. “Holy shit, indeed.”

“I... Well...” I pause briefly to clear my throat and blink myself out of shock. “Yeah. I guess you could say I didn’t expect to hear from you.”

“And I never expected to call you,” he replies, a slight lilt to his husky voice. “Trust me. Nor did I think I would have to scour the *Tribune*’s website to find the number for the woman running a dating contest, which, apparently, I’ve been nominated to be a part of.”

“So...why are you?” I ask, then immediately wince. *Man, I hope he’s not thinking of taking legal action against the paper.* I’d really like to be able to continue to pay my mortgage and buy donuts. I *need* to have a job.

“Because I’ve lost my mind?”

I laugh. “I lose mine at least twice a day. I still don’t call people who save me from drowning for no reason.”

“I saved you.”

“Po-tay-to, Po-tah-to.”

He chuckles. “Well...I guess I’m calling because...”

“Because?”

“Because he’s going to do it!” I hear Chloe yell in the background.

His response is swift and firm without being mean. “*Chloe.*”

How is it that fathers can say so much with just a name? My dad has the exact same ability.

“You’re going to do it?” I ask tentatively, rather than get in the middle of their parent/child dynamic.

“He’s going to do it!” Chloe shouts excitedly.

Her name is swift and firm again, but this time, somehow, Jake manages to combine the disciplinary word with a laugh. “Chloe!”

The sound is magnetic. So much so, I have to shake off the eerie, warm way it makes me feel.

Finally, of his own accord, Jake confirms my salvation from the land of terrible personal ads. “Yes, I’m going to do it. Slightly under protest, but my daughter thinks this is the right thing to do...for both of us. And...since I’ve done such a good job of raising her,” he says teasingly, “I’m going to trust her judgment.”

Instantly, I feel giddy. I honestly have to work exceedingly hard not to giggle into the phone.

“But I have to remain anonymous,” he adds, his voice edging along serious. “I cannot be part of a circus, and I won’t bring my daughter into one, no matter what she thinks is a good idea.”

“Of course,” I say swiftly, trying not to sound too excited and failing miserably. “Bachelor *Anonymous*. You can’t put the word in the title without meaning it, right? I’ll use the utmost caution and discretion when it comes to your identity during the dating portion of the contest.”

The line goes silent, and I start to worry that maybe he’s decided this is a horrible idea after all.

“All right, then.” He eventually puts me out of my misery. “Where do we go from here? God help me...but what are the details?”

Hallelujah! I fist-pump the air and then promptly clear my throat and try to act like a professional woman who isn’t tempted to hop up onto her desk and start twerking.

“We should probably get together in person,” I respond. “It’ll be the easiest way to go over everything, and I have some paperwork for you to sign.”

“Okay.”

“When would be a good time to meet?”

“How about now?” he shocks me by offering. “You can come to our house. We were just about to figure out dinner, and you can join us.”

Their house? Holy geez, that seems personal.

“Holley?” he questions.

“Right. Your house. Now.”

He laughs a little, and I’m completely surprised by his mirth. I’m even more surprised when he speaks. “Stop overthinking this and just come over. Do you like spaghetti?”

How in the actual hell does he know I was overthinking it? And, of course, I like spaghetti. I’m not a monster.

“I like spaghetti.”

“We’ll see you in a little while, then,” he says, voice easy breezy. “I’m assuming you have my address from that lovely application my daughter illegally sent in on my behalf?”

I hum my affirmation. “Mm-hmm. Sure do.”

“Great. Drive safe, Holley from the *Tribune*.”

“I will. See you soon, Jake from the Ocean.”



Holley

The speaker box to my left squawks unexpectedly as soon as I lower my window, and I jump.

“Holley?” the young woman’s voice says excitedly.

I put a hand to my chest, suddenly concerned that I’m on camera. I try to look for a lens inconspicuously, but I can’t find one. “Um...yes?”

“Yay! Come on through,” she says as the box buzzes, and the gate starts to open.

My Infiniti—or what my dad likes to refer to as my “I’ve been dumped crisis car”—purrs as I rev the RPMs and let off the clutch enough to roll through the gate.

My tires rumble on the paver driveway as I pull around the circle and come to a stop right in front of the grand steps of the main entrance.

They’re trademark rich-people steps—the ones that curve in sweeping arches all the way to the top instead of running straight across.

I don’t know how much money Jake Brent has, but I know it’s more than I do.

Though, I suppose that’s not the hardest of benchmarks to achieve. After nearly ten years at the paper, I do okay for myself. But I’m not knocking down any glass ceilings or anything.

I'm pretty sure I'd need one of those flying machines from Willy Wonka to do that.

I pull up on the parking brake and cut the engine before taking one last look up at the house.

It's fairly unassuming for its size and obvious opulence—I mean, I don't see any gilded lions or anything—but I still feel like I'm suddenly playing ball in a whole other league.

I'm equipped for, like, T-ball. This is, at the very least, a Division I farm team or something.

I snort to myself. I should really leave the baseball metaphors to someone who actually watches baseball.

Climbing out of my car, I shut the door, bleep the locks—though I'm not sure it's necessary within their gated driveway—and head for the stairs. I have the first foot poised on the very bottom one when the door bursts open and a tornado of arms, legs, and tanned-skin teenager comes flying through.

I, being the graceful human that I am, trip and fall immediately. “Oh my God,” the blond girl shrieks. “Dad!”

All of a sudden, I'm being lifted to my feet by strong hands under my armpits. When I look back over my shoulder, Jake Brent's blue-green eyes are assessing me closely. I swear I didn't even see him descend the stairs.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and the mortification of being rescued by him for a *second* time today makes my neck feel hot.

“Yeah,” I assure him through a thick swallow. “I'm fine.”

Just another night in the blundering world of Holley.

“You're not hurt?” he prods further, pushing me back and away from his body a little so he can run his eyes over the length of me.

His scrutiny makes my hot neck spread into pink cheeks, but I shake my head. “I'm fine. Really. Just a little clumsy.”

“I'll help you up the stairs,” he offers, but I shake my head to refuse.

“I know I’ve made quite the impression today, and I really do appreciate the offer, but I’m currently trying to hold on to my final shred of dignity.”

He smiles then, stepping back and sweeping his arm out ahead of me. “Understood. You lead the way.”

I do as he says, taking each step one at a time. Walking up a set of stairs isn’t normally such a difficult task for me. But today, with his eyes burning into the flesh at my back, it seems astonishingly more difficult.

A breath of relief fills my lungs as I make it to the top and turn to wait for his arrival. The girl’s energy is palpable as she skips from the doorway over to me and sticks out a hand for me to shake. “I’m Chloe, by the way. And sorry if I startled you. I’m just super stoked that you’re here.”

Jake rolls his eyes, but I take her hand all the same. She is, as it were, the one I have to thank for his entry in the first place.

She’s also the one who caused this whole debacle of a day, but after reading the ads I did over the last several hours, her gifts really outweigh the negatives.

“No worries, Chloe. I’m not the most graceful anyway.” Jake snorts, and I glare at him. “I owe you a thank-you for entering your dad, and more than that, it seems.” I lower my voice to a conspiratorial whisper, though I’m absolutely positive Jake can still hear me. “How *did* you convince him to do it?”

Chloe starts to giggle, but Jake grabs her gently at the back of the neck and turns her toward the house without waiting for her to answer. Instead, he raises a pointed eyebrow at me.

“That’s not important. But if you don’t want me to change my mind, you should probably go ahead inside.”

As much as I want to needle him, I don’t dare test the waters. I need him to do this too badly at this point. With the bound of a gazelle, I prance inside.

He laughs, evidently hip to my point.

I'll give Jake Brent that. So far, he has a great sense of humor. Not many men would find it in their hearts to be teased by a woman like me. A woman who, so far, has brought nothing but chaos to his life.

It hasn't been on purpose, but it's undeniable. I've yet to be anything but a giant thorn in Jake's side.

Unfortunately, knowing what I know about the rules of the contest, I don't see that ending anytime soon.

"Come on. Let's head into the kitchen," Jake suggests. He walks down the hall, and I follow, Chloe noticeably bouncing behind me.

Her feet make the cutest little rap on the wood floor.

I pay attention to the craftsmanship as I walk down the hallway. High ceilings, crown molding, and impeccable built-in shelves for neatly organized belongings. A light at the end of the hall beckons, opening up into what I can already tell is a large, state-of-the-art kitchen.

I can't make out more than the color and quality of the cabinets as of yet—a beige-gray custom wood—but they really say it all.

This house is the *crème de la crème*. Honestly, it pulls out all the stops.

Knowing that Jake is in the construction business, I can't help but wonder if he built it himself.

And perhaps, what kind of sexual favors it would cost me to get him to do some work at my place,

When we make it to the kitchen, my every thought is confirmed. It's beautiful. Tall, almost unbearably beautiful cabinets with big, chunky pulls and marble countertops, and the most intricately patterned simple subway tile backsplash I've ever seen. The appliances are all high-end, commercial-grade, and under-cabinet lighting makes me feel like I'm aboard the fanciest of spaceships.

I take a seat at a high-backed black velvet stool on this side of the massive island as Jake moves around to the other side,

opens the fridge, and takes out a pitcher of lemonade.

Chloe grabs a couple glasses from the cabinet and sets them down in front of him without having to be asked. Instead, she directs a question to me. “Do you want a cookie, Holley? I baked them earlier.”

I find myself nodding before I can even pretend to be polite. A nice glass of homemade lemonade and fresh-baked cookies sound like exactly what I need after the day I’ve had.

She grabs it from the decorative cake plate in the corner, gets a tiny plate from the cupboard, and sets it down in front of me. I eye it lovingly, but just when I get it to my mouth to make sweet love to it, Jake interrupts our dalliance.

“So, what is it that made you want to write a column about this? What exactly drew you to Bachelor Anonymous?”

Sadly, almost dejectedly, I set my cookie back down on the plate in front of me. A tear threatens to leave my eye, but I hold it back.

Time to be professional.

“Ah, well. It’s a really interesting concept, you know? Letting the public decide on the man they’d like to see chase true love.”

Jake settles his hips into the counter behind him and crosses his muscular arms over his chest as I continue.

“And then to take those self-described qualities and use them to try to match him—well, you—with the best of the best as far as matches go...” I trail off, and a small smile curves the corner of his lips.

“You absolutely hate this contest, don’t you?”

“No!” I protest.

“Holley,” he says with a laugh. “You can barely even stomach the description.”

“No, no,” I counter again. “It’s great. It’s honestly...so great.”

“Holley,” he challenges again, and I can’t help it. I sigh.

“My editor assigned it to me. I didn’t have a choice.”

“You hate it.”

I roll my eyes. “I *probably* wouldn’t have chosen it.”

He chuckles. “Oh my God, you loathe it so much.”

I throw up my hands, and he dissolves into real peals of laughter.

“I know, I know!” I shout. “I’ve ruined the sanctity of the contest. If you’re second-guessing it now—”

“Are you kidding?” Jake interrupts. “It’s seeming like a good idea for the first time today.”

“Wh-what?” I’m almost unable to form the simple word. I’m so confused.

“I was dreading working with someone who thought this was something...” He shakes his head as he gathers his thoughts. “It’s just a relief to know that you have skepticism. I think we’ll get along so much better than if you’d felt a different way. That’s all.”

“Good,” I say. “I think?”

He chuckles again. “It’s good.”

Finally, unable to stop myself, I pick up my cookie and take a bite. It’s freaking delicious. “Oh my heavens, Chloe,” I nearly shout. “You made these?”

She nods, a small amount of crimson tingeing her cheeks. “Um, yeah.”

“They’re so dang good. Where did you learn to make these? I need the recipe.”

She shakes her head. “I...well, I taught myself. And the recipe is mine. I just, kind of, made it up.”

“Holy crap, are you serious?” She nods.

“See,” Jake interjects. “I told you they were good.”

She shrugs. “You eat anything. You’re not a good judge.”

She turns to me and continues. “Seriously. He’s like a garbage disposal.”

I turn to look at him, surveying his body closely. No candor, no subtlety—I straight-up devour his big, fit body with my eyes. Tanned, veiny, muscled arms and a trim, in no way cushiony waist, make his T-shirt look like it’s been royally awarded the privilege to sit atop his skin. His thighs look like weapons—I know for a fact after seeing him in a wet suit this morning.

The disparity is almost too much to handle. How is it possible this man eats anything and everything he wants and still looks like that?

For shame, Holley! Stop ogling him like he’s the human version of that cookie!

Jake clears his throat, and I do a slow blink.

“That’s...interesting,” I say, unable to come up with anything else. Chloe turns away, almost definitely in an attempt to conceal her smile.

Dangerously close to letting this meeting get completely out of control, I reach into my bag at my side and pull out the folder full of paperwork.

Business, Holley. Get back to the safety of business.

Jake looks over at the folder in front of me and turns to Chloe. “Why don’t you—”

“Going to my room now,” she finishes for him with a smile. “You got it, Daddio.”

I really have to admire his parenting skills. I’ve never even been a good dog mom. Though, to be fair, Raleigh’s dog Helga always favored him. I swear she had some kind of party the day I left.

What I don’t do, is mention any of that aloud.

I don’t think it’s my place to make any sort of commentary on him as a father—even if it’s positive. In my experience, people would much rather you just minded your own business.

“Well,” Jake says. “What have you got there?”

I flip through the folder and pull out the simplest of the forms first. It’s a standard NDA, and I’m fairly certain he’s pretty eager to sign it.

“This is an NDA or a—”

“Nondisclosure agreement.” He nods and reaches a hand out for me to pass over the paper. I don’t waste any more breath before sailing it across the island in his direction. He catches it, and then reaches out a hand for a pen. Quickly, I dig through my bag and toss one his way.

He signs it the way most men sign things—with a squiggle I’m absolutely certain looks nothing like his actual name—and sends it back across the marble to me. I catch it and put it in my folder.

“Next,” he prompts.

“Next is a form stating that you’re agreeing to participate with the following terms and conditions...” I start to read them off when he wiggles his fingers again. I send the paper across to him, and he catches it with a flat palm to the counter, reading silently to himself.

“So, not only will you be writing articles about each date, but you’ll be the journalist there *after* the dates for a debriefing of some sorts?” he asks, lifting his eyes to meet mine.

“Yes,” I answer. “I’ll actually be at each of the dates the whole time, but not, like, right there with you guys. Just discreetly in the background. Won’t be in your way at all. Promise.”

“And what’s this thing about a reveal party?” he asks, and I school my face into a relaxed expression, trying to convey that it’s no big thing.

“Oh, that’s just a small party at the end of the contest,” I say, my voice hopefully as easy breezy as I’m trying to make it. “Once you go on all five of the dates, you’ll choose the one contestant that you think is the best match—the one you want to pursue because you see a possible future with—at the reveal party.”

Truthfully, the party is going to be *kind of* big. I mean, there will be caterers and photographers and a guest list, but something tells me those details will officially scare him off...

He narrows his now-scrutinizing eyes. "Tell me there isn't an engagement ring and me getting down on one knee involved in this reveal party."

"Oh my God, no!" A laugh bursts from my lungs. "There's no marriage proposal involved. I swear. You'll just announce which contestant you want to take on a second date. That's it."

"Okay, good. I don't need some seventeenth-century bequeathal of the dowry or some shit raising my tax liability next year," he says before going back to reading. I blink three times, trying to make sense of everything he's just said.

"The bequeathal..." I repeat softly, making the corner of his pink mouth curl into a smirk. "Oh." I laugh as it becomes clear that he's joking. He lets his smirk grow into a smile but largely keeps his concentration aimed at the paper as he reads more.

He rolls his eyes at some of the bullet-pointed rules farther down the page, but eventually, puts his pen to the dotted line and scribbles.

"Okay, what else?"

I look down into the folder and wince. Man, I was really hoping I'd figure out how to make myself a holograph before having to bring up this part.

"You're really not going to like this."

He quirks a curious brow. "Not going to like what?"

"The next detail, as it were. But it's a part of the official rules, and the legal team says it has to be done, and..." I pause, trying to find the right way to deliver this doozy.

"Holley. What is it?"

I wince. "Well, you're required to go get an STI test. And a drug test. And a physical."

"Anything else?"

“No. Well, yes. But it doesn’t require peeing or needles or anything. I just need you to fill out a questionnaire to help us plan the dates. What you’re comfortable with doing, some of your hobbies, and if you’re allergic to anything specifically.”

“Shouldn’t that be in my physical?”

“Yes,” I agree, *one hundred percent*. “But the *Tribune* has a strict policy on anaphylaxis. Mainly, that we are not to cause it under any circumstances. So, we double down just in case it’s not in your medical records.”

“And the women...?”

“They have to do all the physicals too. We can’t assure everything—there’s some risk, obviously, as there always is with dating—but we’re trying to lower the percentage as much as possible.”

He considers me for a minute. My hands shake a little, but I hold eye contact. I will not back down.

I mean, given enough time and pressure, I probably, almost definitely, will. But the goal right now is for him not to know that.

I am a steel fortress. These are the terms. Take them or leave them.

Ha. Ha-ha-ha. I’m sweating.

“Fine.”

“Fine?” I ask, my voice far too hopeful for someone who should be a balls-of-steel negotiator.

He nods. “All of it is fine.”

Instantly, relief washes over me, and I let out a breath I didn’t even know I was holding. My God, the stress, the anxiety...finally, I can start to let it go. This is going to be good. I’m not going to get fired, and maybe, eventually, if it goes well, I can put in for a request to move my office location. Get out from in between—

“Except...there’s one thing.”

His words are a pin to my balloon of joy.

“One thing?”

“One thing I want done differently.”

I’m shaking my head before he even gets started. There’s no way they will budge on the doctor’s appointments and the testing and the—

“I don’t want to fill out some questionnaire about dates with women I know nothing about.”

The questionnaire? That’s what he has a problem with?

“It’s just to make—”

He holds up a hand, and I stop talking immediately.

“I want to plan each date before it happens, with you,” he further explains. “We’ll go over some information about the woman so I can take each of them into consideration. It’s the only way I’ll do it. And as far as I’m concerned, there’s no way in hell you’re going to learn all you need to know from a stupid piece of paper. You’ll spend a whole day with me, and then you can draw your own conclusions for your articles from that.”

“This is a deal-breaker?”

He nods. “I’m not doing this to waste my time, Holley. If I’m going to do it, I’m going to do it. I’m not the type of man who likes to half-ass things or, worse, fail at them. I’d like to have some chance at success, and if you ask me, no piece of paper with a questionnaire is going to give me a shot in hell of doing that.”

“Okay,” I agree. I mean, what else can I do? “You and I... we’ll plan each date together, one by one. And I’ll learn what I need to know about you from spending the day with you—not from a piece of paper.”

“Great. You free tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” I question more to myself than him. *What’s tomorrow? Thursday?* “I think—” I almost say yes, but then realize I have a dreaded yearly with my gynecologist. “Wait... I—” And then I almost freaking tell him that I have an

appointment with my gyno. Thankfully, I settle on, “Actually, I’m busy tomorrow.”

“Then Friday?” he offers, and I agree with a nod.

“Friday works great.”

“Well, Holley, it looks like you’ll be heading back to the ocean on Friday morning, then.” He winks and turns around to stir the pasta sauce that’s now starting to bubble on the stove.

Back to the ocean? Oh boy.



Jake

I'm just finishing up checking in at the front desk when the door to the office opens behind me. Curiosity is a human reflex, so I turn instinctively to see who's coming in.

The results of my reflex, however, are anything but expected.

With brown hair tucked behind her ears and a makeup-free face, Holley Fields steps inside the door and shuts it behind herself without looking up. She's wearing a simple white T-shirt, jean shorts, and strappy sandals, and despite a huge height deficit, her legs seem to go on for days.

I watch her without guilt or subtlety, but it still takes her almost a full minute and actual physical contact to realize I'm there.

"Oh," she mumbles quickly as her hands, texting something on her phone, bump into the soft cotton fabric of my baby blue T-shirt. Our toes are nearly touching, which makes the action of her head moving from its downward tilt all the way up to meet my eyes even more dramatic.

Once recognition sets in, her eyes turn wide and surprised.

"Jake."

"Let me guess, Holley, my homemade pasta sauce last night was so good, you decided to track me down today?" I smile so hard I feel it in the skin behind my ears. "Or wait..."

don't tell me, you have to sit in on my doctor's appointment too? I don't remember that being in all the fine print."

"What?" Her face is downright comical as her brain backpedals. "No, no. Wait. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for my appointment," I say with a laugh. When she still looks confused, I take my explanation a step further. "This is a doctor's office."

She stumbles over basic human functions, looking over her shoulder and around the room and back at me with little-to-no traceable rationality. When she lands back at me, I raise my eyebrows.

"I...I know this is a doctor's office," she stutters. "This is your doctor's office?"

I laugh again and scratch a hand through my hair. My brain is starting to hurt a little. "Are we speaking the same language at all?"

"No, yes. I mean...sorry. It's just... This is my doctor's office. My..." She lowers her voice to a whisper. "Gynecologist. I... Do they do something for men now?"

I turn to look back up at the front desk window again, and a big typed-up sign is in the center of it.

Piper Gynecology and SoCal Family Medicine are temporarily sharing office space.

Please excuse the confusion and the mess, and sign in on the correct sheet.

Holley follows my line of sight and, apparently, reads to herself.

"Oh my Jesus."

I laugh. I can't help it. "I guess we're doctor buddies today, huh?"

She looks ready to crawl out of her skin, leave the shell here, and slither out the door.

And hell, if it isn't making me want to tease her even more.

"Doctor buddies," she mutters with a fake giggle instead. "Great."

"I doubt they'll put us in the same room," I joke. "Though, I bet we could request it."

She shakes her head violently and grabs my arm as I pretend to turn to the receptionist. "No!"

"Relax," I comfort with a laugh. "I'm just kidding. I'll go get the broomstick of the witch in my room, and you'll go do whatever it is you do in yours."

"The broomstick of the witch?"

I nod. "Extremely powerful, but nearly impossible to procure. Isn't that a requirement for Bachelor Anonymous? Everything else is."

She bites her lip, and finally, as the panic recedes slightly, breaks into a small smile and shrugs. "I guess if it's in there, you might as well grab it. Can't hurt."

"That's what I figured. I also assumed I needed to get all this testing and such done as soon as possible, right?"

She nods. "We are working on a bit of a deadline with the first date next week."

"Right. So, I called the doctor first thing this morning, and they fit me in for today."

"The doctor's office squeezed you in same day?" she asks disbelievingly.

My answering smile is conspiratorial. "I told them it was really important."

"Still...a physical doesn't usually get them jumping to it ___"

She stops midsentence when I rock my head back and forth on my shoulders. Her eyebrows pull together, and I curl a finger in her face, suggesting she come in closer. She does, but not nearly close enough. I widen my eyes, and finally, she gets close enough that I can lean right into her ear to whisper.

“I may have...possibly...told them that I was experiencing some pain I’m not.” She gasps. “Maybe, kind of, sort of chest pain.”

She snaps back to standing, her back ramrod straight.

“You told them you were dying?” she whisper-yells.

I laugh. “No, no. I just suggested that maybe they should fit me in is all.”

“You gave them the sense that you might be in cardiac distress, Jake.”

“No. They may have surmised that on their own—”

“Oh man. You’re bad.”

I waggle my brows. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“What do you think they’re going to say when you get in there and you aren’t experiencing chest pain?”

“Nothing.” I shrug and slide my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “I’ll play dumb. They’ll think it was a mix-up, and I’ll get my physical.”

She shakes her head, her eyes wide with panic, and I have to laugh.

“What? That’s not something you would do?”

“Never,” she says vehemently.

“You’re a good girl, huh?”

“I’m not psychotic, if that’s what you mean.”

I chuckle.

“Ms. Fields?” the receptionist calls, making Holley jump almost ten feet in the air. She glances back at me with unrepressed angst and then heads for the reception desk like I’ve somehow included her in high-level Russian espionage.

I watch avidly as she bends into the window, discussing something with the receptionist I can't make out, before standing up and making her way back across the room to me. We sit down in chairs next to each other, but it's more than obvious she thinks even looking at me will make her guilty by association. I lean over and whisper in her ear again.

"I'm not with the KGB, you know. You don't have to worry about Homeland Security or anything. This is just a doctor's office."

"You probably just got us both flagged and put on the terrorist watchlist, I hope you know," she whispers back angrily. "They listen to everything through our phones."

"Yeah," I say with a laugh. "But I said *not* KGB."

"Stop saying KGB!"

"Are you secretly a Russian operative? Is that why you're so nervous?"

"Jake!"

"All right, all right," I soothe. "I'll stop."

"Great," she says with a roll of her eyes. Clearly, she thinks it's too late now anyway.

"What *can* I talk about, Holley? Is there anything that's safe?"

"You can talk about bananas?"

"Bananas?" I ask with a laugh. "Why bananas?"

"Because they're a nice, innocent fruit, okay?"

Also, phallic-shaped, but I choose not to mention that for fear her head might explode.

"And full of potassium," I add mockingly, and she glares. "What'd I say wrong now?"

She sticks out her tongue at me. "Don't make fun of me."

"Oh, come on," I say, and a chuckle escapes my throat. "Bananas? You knew you had it coming with that one. What am I supposed to talk about with bananas?"

“I don’t know,” she snipes. “Gwen Stefani managed a whole song on the topic.”

Man, she’s cute and almost dangerously entertaining. I’ve never met a woman like her in my life. I’ve never seen the appeal of bickering with someone before, but this is unbelievably fun.

“Ah, yes. I know the song well. Chloe went through a god-awful phase with that one.”

“It’s not her fault,” she says defensively. “It’s catchy.”

“Oh no, you too?”

“It’s a Gwen Stefani classic. It’s not like Chloe and I are alone. Maybe you’re the weird one.”

“Maybe I am,” I agree.

“Jake Brent?” the nurse calls from the door beside the reception desk. It feels like no time at all has passed, sitting here teasing Holley Fields, and it almost feels like a shame to leave her. Still, I get up from my chair and bid her adieu.

She looks at me nervously, obviously thinking I really told them I was suffering symptoms of cardiac arrest to get this appointment—a little fib I thought she’d catch on to immediately since they would have sent me to the ER instead of coming in here like it was no big deal—and I have to work hard not to laugh as I smile.

Another nurse shoves in next to mine and calls out into the room loudly, “Holley Fields?”

I bite my lip as Holley jumps to her feet next to me.

“Do you think they’re onto us?” I ask. She slugs me right in the kidney as she steps around me.

I wince and laugh at the same time, jumping into a walk that matches her pace. We walk elbow to elbow all the way to the door, her eyes flitting nervously back and forth between us the whole time. My nurse smiles at me, while hers narrows her eyes. Apparently, she finds it suspect that Holley is that twitchy.

Hoping to ease the awkwardness, I wrap an arm around Holley's shoulder and pull her toward me, saying loudly enough for her nurse to hear, "No reason to be nervous, sweetheart."

"What?" Holley asks, confused. I put my lips to her ear and smile as I whisper. "You look like a junkie right now, all fidgety. I'm helping you."

"I'm only jumpy because you made me that way," she hisses, and I laugh. Making a big show of it, I put my lips to her cheek and give her a kiss. Her eyes widen, but I take my arm away from her and say my goodbyes. "See you after, honey."

She glares, but my nurse is apparently taken with the show. "Oh, nonsense. We've got rooms for you two right next to each other, don't we, Cheryl?"

Cheryl, Holley's nurse, finally starts to warm, agreeing, "Yeah, I think we do."

"Great," I say cheerfully. Holley looks absolutely miserable, but I can't help it. It's the good kind of miserable. The kind she'll get over. The kind I always tell Chloe is the fun kind of embarrassment.



Holley

Jake Brent is literally in the room next door. They walked us down the hall together, handed me a cup, and requested that I go fill it with my urine, all while he was still within earshot.

Heaven help me, this day has not gone at all how I thought it would.

I didn't expect to see him. I didn't expect to see anyone. One does not go to the vagina doctor to have buddy time. One goes to the vagina doctor because they absolutely *must* to ensure reproductive health.

The thin paper of the gown on the bed feels like nothing against the air from the vent above my head, and the draft on all parts of my body only amplifies the acute awareness that I am seriously naked only a wall away from Jake.

And it was all his doing!

I'm pretty sure he was suffering some sort of psychotic break out there. Like, it's good he's in a doctor's office at this point, but did he really have to be in the same one as me? In the room next door?

How am I going to handle the claw of death cranking open my vajayjay with him no more than a wall away? This isn't normal. This isn't something women should have to go through. Shouldn't our doctor's offices at least be keeping to their own halls?

There's a knock on the door, and I have to admit, a part of me is hoping it's the grim reaper, here to put me out of my misery.

Like, he and his sharp scythe aren't *that* intimidating.

They're even kind of friendly looking if you really think about it.

Alas, it's not him when the door swings open. "Hey there," my nurse greets, going over to my cup of warm pee and dipping a test strip in it with gloved hands. I look on as she lays it on top of protective plastic across the edge of the sink and waits for the results.

"Everything looks normal," she says, sounding almost disappointed. "Not pregnant."

Good. I'm glad. I'd really have to fucking worry if I'd somehow turned up pregnant without even coming close to having sex. Still, she looks like it's not the best of news, so I make sure I nip that in the bud.

"That's good."

She smiles kindly as she heads for the blood pressure cuff. "You two aren't ready to try?"

I laugh. Am I high on drugs? What in the world is going on here? "What two?"

"You and Jake." She flashes a knowing, amused grin. "He's too funny. He was just making jokes out in the hall. You're a lucky girl."

I roll my eyes. He's like a charm explosion all over this place. I, apparently, had my force field engaged beforehand, though.

"We're not together," I clarify.

She smiles like she doesn't believe me. Whatever. I have no reason to try to convince this woman anyway. I'll likely never see her again. At most, at my next annual appointment.

Thankfully, she moves on too. "Blood pressure is normal. Anything in particular you need to discuss with the doctor

today?”

I shake my head. “Just my normal appointment.”

“Okay, great. She’ll be in shortly, then. Okay?”

I nod. *Okay, Cheryl.*

Laughter rings through the walls of the next room, and my head whips that direction so fast, I almost knock myself right off the top of the table. As it is, the paper makes a horrendously loud noise.

What is it, Comedy Hour in there?

I shake my head and pull my paper gown a little tighter. Still, a cool breeze blows across the bare skin of my vagina and makes me tense up.

He can’t hear me in here, can he? I mean, I can hear them laughing, but they’re being extra loud. There’s no way he can hear normal-volume conversation, right?

For the sake of my sanity, I agree with myself. He can’t hear me, and he definitely can’t see me. It’s just like any other awful trip to the gyno. I’ll just get my pap smeared, my boobs squeezed, and get the hell out of here. We probably won’t even leave at the same time, and by the time I see Jake Brent next, I’ll have had the chance to get some composure back.

A knock at the door startles me once again, but somehow, I find my voice. “Come in.”

The door pushes open, and the doctor steps in with a smile on her face. She’s shaking her head, and somehow, I just know Jake is the one responsible.

“Sorry,” she says with a laugh, her blond ponytail swinging. “We’re just cracking up out there. Cheryl says Jake’s your boyfriend.”

I grimace.

“Actually—”

“He’s a riot.”

I smile so fakely, it's a miracle my face doesn't shatter. "Oh yeah."

Dr. Davenport doesn't notice. "Anyway, let's get this over with, shall we?"

I nod. Now *that* sounds like a splendid idea.

"Okay, just lie back for me. Scoot all the way down to the edge," she instructs, turning to get her instruments ready.

I do as I'm asked, shimmying my way down the table, and my paper gown crinkles the whole way.

My instinct is to cross my legs, but I know better than that. This is the time to butterfly. Wide and open to the air, I'm to spread my vageen for all to see.

I can only hope, with the way this appointment's gone so far, that Jake Brent doesn't open the door and step inside right at this moment.

I shake my head and close my eyes. Why am I making this such a big deal? It's not, obviously. It's a coincidence. And Jake's been friendly and fun. Clearly, everyone else is loving their time with him.

Maybe I just need to lighten up? Think of him without jumping to conclusions or getting all nervous.

I mean, it was great to see him smile so much. He's got an undeniably great smile. It goes all the way to his blue-green eyes and lights up the room. And the ad was right—it makes the most perfect of wrinkled laugh lines at the sides of his eyes. Clearly, he's like this all the time. Cutting up and having fun. He's spent many, many years finding the mirth in life.

"Just relax," Dr. Davenport instructs, putting gentle pressure on the insides of my knees as they've closed right up again. "You're going to feel the pressure of my fingers, first outside and then in."

I pull my lips into my mouth and stare at the ceiling. Nothing like the feeling of a stranger's fingers as they root around inside you. Seriously, nothing like it.

“Good. Now, I’m going to use the speculum. Just take a couple deep breaths for me, okay?”

I nod. Oh goodie. The most fun part of all.

“Relax,” she instructs again as I feel my muscles go full-on boa constrictor. I take a deep breath in and then slowly blow it out as she slides the plastic dinosaur inside and slowly cranks open the jaws.

“Okay, you may feel a tiny pinch—”

I wince as she swabs the cotton over the inside of my body and pulls it out.

“All done,” she announces finally, pulling the plastic back out. “Great. Everything is looking great.”

Always good news when someone has just taken a super thorough look at your vagina. Come to think of it, maybe that was the problem with Raleigh. I don’t think he ever told me my vagina was looking really good.

Dr. Davenport moves up the bed, pulls off her gloves and tosses them in the garbage, and then gently opens the front of my gown to give my boobs a quick rubdown. I once again look awkwardly to the ceiling as she makes circles from my nipples all the way out to the edges of my breasts.

“Good,” she says again, and for as dramatic as I’ve been about this whole thing, I take another deep breath. Anytime you can come to this doctor’s office without getting bad news is a blessing.

I sit up a little, shuffling my bare ass from the edge of the table to back under my body. She makes some notes on my chart and then looks back at me.

“Do you want an STI test?”

“No.”

The doctor nods, ready to leave the room when panic overwhelms me. My mouth is about to move without my consent. I can feel it coming like vomit crawling up my throat. “Yes. Actually, yes. I’d like to get tested. Just to...know. For future reference kind of thing. Just in case.”

Could I be any more awkward? Seriously? Why am I like this?

“All right, then.” Dr. Davenport nods. “I’ll have the nurse come back in with the test in just a couple minutes.”

“Thank you.”

After Raleigh left me for his assistant, I should have gotten tested, but I could never bring myself to do it. I didn’t have any symptoms—thank God—but he’d been sleeping around on me for at least a year. And seeing as he’d gotten the woman pregnant, he was obviously not using protection.

But now...it just seems like I should.

It couldn’t possibly have anything to do with the man in the room next door...

No way. I don’t even really know him. Plus, he’s done nothing but tease me all day.

You want to be teased, all right.

Oh, for fuck’s sake! This is a professional relationship, that’s all, despite what everyone in this office might think.

Jake Brent is Bachelor Anonymous. I’m spending the day with him tomorrow to know what to write about in my article. *That’s it.*



Jake

My bare feet sink into the cool sand of the early morning with ease as I sling my bag over my shoulder and look back in the direction of the parking lot.

A huge array of pink and red and orangey-purple paint the sky with an artistic warning of the sun's upcoming arrival above my truck, and birds chirp in the silent stillness of it all.

I turn back to the roll of the ocean and make my way about halfway down to my normal spot in the sand before spreading out my towel and dropping my bag on top of it. Normally, I wouldn't waste any time before pulling my T-shirt up and over my head, pulling on my wet suit, and heading into the ocean, but this morning—against all of my better judgment—I'm waiting on Holley Fields to join me.

I shake my head to myself. I still can't believe I agreed to be a part of this shit. Fatherhood is a powerful form of emotional weaponry; I'll tell you that.

I take a seat on my towel, but I face the street rather than the waves. The sun will be above the horizon at any moment, and for once, I'm going to allow myself the chance to watch it.

A lone plane leaves a trail in the pink mist at the top of the sherbet display, and sea gulls cry out for one another.

A flash of movement catches my eye from down below, and I tip my chin down away from the sky to see what it is. I recognize the little blue car immediately as it pulls into the

parking lot, and I smile to myself with thanks that this time, it's not nearly as close to running anyone over.

Once Holley Fields comes to a stop, she moves around on the inside, but I can just barely make her out through the windshield. Only a minute or two passes before she shoves her door open and climbs to her feet. I watch as she tugs at the waistband of her shorts, shoves one hand down the back to relieve herself of a wedgie, and then leans in again to pull a bag across from the passenger side.

She drags it out, grabs it by the top, and then shuts the door to walk away, but her whole body jerks back, the handle having gotten trapped in the door.

I cover my mouth to keep the sound of my laugh from carrying the distance between us.

She's a fucking mess. Bag finally free, she makes her way to the sidewalk, cutoff jean shorts highlighting the length of her long, tanned legs in the process.

Her white T-shirt is simple and tight over her full breasts, and her shoulder-length brown hair falls in natural waves around her face.

She's a walking disaster—but man, she's beautiful.

She stops on the sidewalk and leans down, still without having noticed me in my position on the beach. Her sandals are attractive but undeniably complicated, and the bag on her shoulder, thanks to gravity, flops to the ground and almost knocks her over. She stumbles a little, still working at the strappy buckle on one foot, and my smile grows again.

Frustrated, she kicks at her bag, making it spill out its contents, and a loud groan sounds all the way across the empty air and echoes off the ocean.

I bite my lip.

She turns then, hands still on her ankle, her ass still in the air, and reaches forward to get something before it can roll away.

The vision of her ass sparks a memory from the last time I saw it—covered in nothing but lacy black underwear as she stripped down in the same parking lot.

Fuck.

Concerned with my line of thinking, I spin around and face the ocean for the remainder of her antics. We're probably both better off if she doesn't know I've been sitting here watching her struggle anyway.

I reach between my shoulders, pull off my T-shirt, and then shove it into the big opening of my bag. The screen of my phone lights up in the little pocket, so I pull it out to look at it, but it's just an email.

I stand up and start to stretch, but the sound of Holley's voice calling out to me makes me turn around.

"Hiii," she calls, definitely oblivious to the fact that I watched the first and second act of her comedy sketch routine.

"Ah," I hum as Holley comes walking through the sand, carrying her overly complicated shoes. "At least you're wearing shorts this time."

"Last time was not my fault," she sasses. "Plus, I was saving you from drowning."

"You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"Why would I? It's the truth."

A laugh jumps from my throat. "Okay. Sure. In your mind, you were saving me."

"Not in my mind, cowboy. I *was* saving you."

"Holley."

She narrows her eyes. "Jake."

"*Holley.*"

"*Jake.*"

I sigh. She smiles. Man, does it light her up. There's something about her face—something so engaging. It's

beautiful and cute and earnest at the same time. I've never seen anything like it.

"Ready for a swim, then?" I ask, and she laughs so hard she actually snorts. It echoes on the empty beach.

"No *way* are you getting me back in that water."

"Why? According to you, you saved me. Shouldn't be any trauma associated with that, right?"

"It's complex." She skirts around the question. "But just trust me, we're both better off."

"I'll watch out for you."

"No." She shakes her head, and strands of her dark locks slide across her shoulder.

"You won't even notice you're in the water, I'll take such good care of you."

"*No.*"

"But how will you accurately write about any of this if you're not out there with me?"

"You swim in the ocean, blah, blah, blah. I bet I can make up some really good stuff."

I put two hands on my hips. "Come on, Holley."

"I don't have a suit."

I grin, clapping my hands together between us so hard she jumps, and then turn to my bag to riffle through it. I find the fabric easily enough, pull it out, and hold it up in front of her. "Given how you dressed last time, I thought that might be the case, so I brought you one."

Her jaw nearly hits the sand. "*What?*"

"A bathing suit," I say, shaking the material between us. "I took one of Chloe's."

"I'm never going to fit into one of Chloe's bathing suits."

"Sure, you will," I say. "You're about the same height." Not really, Chloe is definitely taller, but I'm not above necessary white lies if it'll get her to put the thing on.

“But not even close to the same weight.”

I frown. She sounds kind of like she’s being down on herself about her weight, but I don’t get it. Her body is amazing, despite the ambiguity of its first impression in an ocean-soaked business suit.

“The material is stretchy. It’ll fit.”

“Jake—”

“Holley.”

She shakes her head, and I shake the suit. “Come on. I’m not going in without you, and I can’t start my day without a swim. It’s going to throw our whole schedule off if you don’t get a move on it.”

She snatches it out of my hand, and I have to hide my smile as a fiery heat surfaces to her cheeks. “You know, I’m getting the sense that you’re becoming more annoying by the day. Could you quit that?”

“Me?” I ask innocently. “Annoying? Are you sure?”

“Yes. Both yesterday and today. Very annoying.”

Her irritation makes me chuckle. “Okay. I’ll try to stop.”

She smiles and breathes a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

Again, I shake the bathing suit.

“I thought you said you were going to stop!” she yells with a stomp of her foot.

“Sure, I am. But not without you going for a swim.”

“I’m going to look like a pregnant woman’s cankle in this thing.”

I snort. “And what a beautiful cankle you’ll be.”

Several curse words leave her lips in a string I can’t make out as she snatches the suit from my extended hand and stomps away toward the public restroom. Little does she know, they keep those locked on every day of the week but Saturday and Sunday, but I don’t think it’s smart for the news to come

from me. This is the kind of thing she should figure out for herself.

Of course, given the need to change in her car, there is a possibility she'll just get in it and drive off. But that's a chance I'm just going to have to take.

I'll wait until after our swim to show her the other bathrooms all of us Navy men know are across the street. By then, she'll be able to laugh about it, I'm sure. She'll just be glad to have a shower to rinse off all the seawater once we're done.

But for now, a little annoyance is good. It'll keep her safe and alert in the water.



Holley's hand in mine, I lead her out into the water at an extremely tentative pace. Her hand is like a vise, and it's pulling me back toward the sand like an untrained horse on a lead line.

It's safe to say she's feeling pretty reluctant about our swim this morning, but I'm confident, once I get her out there, I'll be able to show her enough techniques to help her relax.

And if not, that's fine. I can carry her the whole time without much trouble. I'm almost more at home in the water than I am on solid ground.

"Come on," I coax softly, "It's all right. I'm not even wearing a wet suit today. That's how you know we're not doing anything too intense."

"Shh," she says, and immediately a smile curves up both sides of my lips.

"We're better off getting past the breaking waves. It's much calmer out there, but we have to—"

"Shh," she snaps again, and I laugh.

"Do you want to just climb on my back? Hold your breath? I'll have us out there in under fifteen seconds."

“What are you, Ocean Uber?” she asks, her voice half amused, half terrified.

“Something like that,” I agree with a grin. “Just trust me, Holley. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She looks at the waves as they crash ahead of me and then back at me and, without much prodding, agrees. “Okay, fine.”

I don’t give her a chance to second-guess her agreement. Gently, I grab her by the arm and turn around to lift her up.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she asks as I wrap a hand around her thigh.

“Putting you on my back,” I say slowly. “You know, like we just talked about.”

“I’m reconsidering.”

“Holley, just get on.”

She frowns and then steps forward again to put both hands to my shoulders. “I think I can get on myself.”

“Fine. Whatever.” *Anything to get this show on the road.*

I stoop down with a bend of my knees, and she jumps—it is *not* graceful.

Rather, her hands slip on the slick of my skin, and she starts to fall, scraping at my neck and throat for some kind of purchase and almost knocking the two of us backward. I don’t wait for permission this time—I just grab her thighs and lift her up the rest of the way, wrapping her legs around me and securing her feet at my waist.

She’s silent while I cough, trying to catch my breath after her attempt to crush my windpipe.

“Um, whoops,” she whispers softly.

I shake my head, but I don’t say anything. I’m afraid to even try at this point.

She giggles as I run through the first wave as it crashes around my hips and clings tightly to my shoulders as I approach the next.

It's coming fast, getting ready to break, and with the height of this one, it's liable to break right at our heads.

"Hold your breath," I instruct, just before diving through the body of it.

She stays with me as I shoot under the barrel and surface on the other side, and she screams a little in exhilaration as we come up.

I laugh, but she's got commentary.

"This has got to be what it's like to ride on the back of a sea turtle!"

I shake my head again and prepare for the next wave. I'm no longer able to touch the bottom, and we'll have to be under the surface even more to clear this swell.

"Get ready to hold your breath again. Longer this time."

I feel her nod against my back as the wave approaches, and I take a deep breath of my own as I submerge our bodies again.

The wave rolls over us, and we come up on the other side, and finally, we've reached the sweet calm of gentle swells.

I pull her around, off my back, and manipulate her body so that she's floating on her back.

She clings a little in panic, but for the most part, she doesn't fight it.

"This is the easiest way to stay afloat," I tell her, putting gentle pressure on her back so she lifts her belly higher toward the sky. "Just like this. You could stay like this for hours if you had to. All you have to do is relax."

She nods in the water and her chin almost goes under, so I reach under her back again and help her stomach back to the surface.

"See?" I say with a smile. "This isn't so bad, right?"

"It's not as bad as, like, water torture is, I'm sure," she qualifies, and I laugh.

"Wow. A stellar review."

“I’m nervous is all,” she mumbles, and I swim around to the other side of her outstretched body and move to float on my back right beside her.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about. I’m right here, and I promise I won’t let anything happen.”

“Okay,” she whispers quietly before blowing a breath toward the sky.

I watch as a couple clouds dance next to each other, headed farther out to sea.

“So...uh...what do we do now?” Holley asks after a brief minute of quiet.

I turn my head to face her and study the line of her profile. Her features are petite and proportionate, but her lips—they’re much fuller than average. Natural, though, not fake. I can tell.

“Well, normally, I would do some calisthenics followed by underwater training, but obviously, we can modify this morning to fit what you’re comfortable with. How are you at opening your eyes underwater?”

“I haven’t tried in the ocean, but I can do it in the pool. Is it different?”

“Some people think the salt water burns a little more. But I actually think it feels better than chlorine.”

“I guess I can try,” she says toward the vastly changing hues of the brightening sky above us. “Is there a lot to see down there?”

I chuckle. “A thing or two. It’s the ocean.”

“Yeah, well, I’m usually the *I’d rather not know* type of ocean gal. I’m better off without the intimate knowledge of all the things that could kill me in here. I have a feeling if I knew, I’d really never come in again.”

“I’m going to tell you what I always tell Chloe, but I’ll try not to sound like a condescending prick, okay?”

The corners of her mouth curve upward.

“Knowledge is power. It’s always better to have it.”

“I don’t know,” she hedges. “I’m pretty sure I’d rather not know a lot of stuff. The knowing is what’s caused me a fair amount of heartache.”

I shift in the water and take hold of her carefully to make sure she can see me. She’s been too scared to turn her head in my direction while on her back, and for some reason, I find it tremendously important that she is able to look me in the eye right now.

She searches my steady gaze as I grab on to her hips, lift up on her thighs, and force her legs around my waist.

It’s an incredibly intimate position—I’m not unaware—but it’s the easiest way to keep us both afloat out here while we talk.

It does mean that I have to wait at least thirty seconds, enough time to let her eye sockets shrink back down to the realm of their normal size before I continue with my point.

“Knowledge is power,” I repeat, squeezing the fabric of the swimsuit above her hips to emphasize my words. “The reason it doesn’t feel like it sometimes is because of fear. Fear of conflict. Fear of consequences. Fear of dealing with something you have yet to establish a comfort level in.”

“You sound like you really believe that,” she comments softly, and I nod my head.

“When Chloe was born, I was an active Navy SEAL, on a mission in an undisclosed rain forest in a remote part of the world. For seventy-two hours, another man from my unit and I had been following a target, doing reconnaissance. I hadn’t been home in more than a month and I knew she was due soon, but when you’re out there, doing that kind of work, time passes differently.”

Holley agrees with an up-and-down tilt of her chin, though I know she doesn’t *really* understand. And not because she’s a woman or a civilian or any of that crap—I just know because I never understood either. Not until I lived it.

“Anyway, we were at the tail end of that assignment, working our way back to civilization, when we got word about

Chloe's mom going into labor. It's not out of the ordinary for wives—or girlfriends, in my case—to give birth alone when they're involved with a military member, but something about this meant that I was being given leave, effective immediately. There was a C-130J with my name on it, and I was on my way home, stateside."

"That's good, right?"

I smile—not the kind that conveys happiness and not the kind that's faked. It's a sad smile filled with sad memories from a long time ago.

"Knowledge is power, Holley, but no one saw fit to give me any. I walked into the hospital, dirty, sweaty, overtired, but happy. So, I went to the gift shop to get a couple things to celebrate. Wendy and I hadn't planned on getting pregnant, but we were both excited anyway. But when I got to the front desk and asked for the room information, the guard immediately called upstairs to someone and they came down to meet me."

Our close proximity forgotten, Holley takes a hand off of my shoulder and puts it to her lips.

"From there, I was taken to a room and informed that all the joy I'd spent the last twenty-four hours preparing to feel wasn't to be my reality at all. Wendy had passed away during childbirth—a detail they'd known since the beginning and the reason for my leave—and I was the only person my brand-new daughter had left. Three days she'd been in the care of the hospital staff, without any other kin to call, waiting on me to arrive. Waiting on someone to bond with—a person to call home. And I was in the gift shop."

I don't know why I decided to share that story with her. A story I keep very close to the vest. But there's just something about Holley Fields that makes me feel comfortable enough to open up.

"Jake," she whispers, her voice laced with poignant sadness.

"Knowledge is power, Holley," I repeat. "I spent a lot of time wishing I could redo a whole lot of those first moments—"

wishing I'd been given the chance to prepare for them better. It wouldn't have lessened the heartache on my way home—it would have amplified it. But it would have given me the time to prepare to fight. Understand?"

She nods, the green of her eyes clearly shining with the moisture of unshed tears. Her hands have moved from my shoulders to my neck, and suddenly, the proximity of our bodies is feeling a hell of a lot less innocent.

In fact, I can feel my dick starting to get hard.

Gently, so as not to alarm her, I set her away enough to ensure I'm not at the center of an uncomfortable explanation but keep a hand to her elbow for support. She churns her legs in an active doggie-paddle, which is sure to tire her out quickly.

"What do you say we make our way back toward shore?" I suggest. "Go get some breakfast." Today's ocean exercise will be limited, but one day of variation isn't going to kill me. I'll be back into the workout and breathing exercises tomorrow.

She nods excitedly. "I love breakfast, Jake. And since knowledge is power, I just really thought you should know that."

I chuckle and shake my head. "Are you mocking me?"

"Only a very little bit," she qualifies. "It's good advice, and I promise, I took you seriously. It was just too good of an opportunity to pass up."

I nod and hum. "I see how it is."

Her smile curves even the corners of her eyes, lighting them up with the reflection of the water. I take a hand and splash the surface in front of her, effectively sprinkling the peachy-tan of her skin with a million droplets.

"Ahh!" she shrieks, splashing me back without hesitation.

I laugh as she starts to move farther away and follow her. I'm fine with having her out here, but I don't need her developing a late surge of confidence that gets her in trouble again.

“Come on, Holley,” I say. “Take my hand.”

“No way!” she says with a laugh. “I know what you’re going to do when I get close. You’re going to splash me again!”

“No, I’m not,” I assure. “I’m done with that childishness.”

“Sure,” she replies disbelievingly.

Needing a new tactic and running out of options, I go for something that’s bound to work but she won’t like very much.

Pulling my face into a position of concern, I look directly over her shoulder and lower my voice. “What’s that?” I ask suddenly, like I’m a little shaken.

She notes the seriousness on my face immediately. “What’s what?”

“That,” I say ominously. “Oh my God, Holley. It’s right behind you.”

“Oh my Gooood!” she squeals, panic making all her muscles tense up. The problem with that, of course, is that it’s going to make her sink that much faster.

I put out a hand toward her quickly. “Come on. Swim to me.”

She does as asked, looking over her shoulder with unconcealed fear, and I start to feel just the tiniest, slightest bit bad. I doubt it’ll stick, but at least when she reads me the riot act, I can honestly say I had a moment of conscience.

Holley safely within reach, I pull her up onto my back like before, only this time, she doesn’t hesitate to hold on.

We do the same routine as we did on the way out, beating the waves by swimming under them when we can. We’re in waist-deep water in no time, and Holley doesn’t waste even a moment before jumping down and running to the perceived safety of the sandy beach.

I take my time, a slow methodic walk out of the water allowing all the, *ahem*, parts of me I’m not always in control of time to calm down.

“What...what was that?” she asks from a spot next to our stuff, shivering in the air.

I reach down and grab a towel, offering it to her as a show of goodwill—you know, before I admit the truth.

She accepts it readily, and I grab one of my own while I answer. “There wasn’t anything. A couple of fish, maybe. Just wanted you to swim back over to me.”

“What?”

I laugh. I can’t help it; her face is too priceless. “There were probably some fish close to you, but that’s about it. I didn’t see the Loch Ness or that big shark from *Jaws* or anything like that.”

I can see an argument building in her mind, but remarkably, she closes it down before it even gets rolling.

“I’m scratching this from my memory.” She shakes her head. “Nope. This whole thing didn’t happen. Because I don’t want to think about Loch Ness monsters or sharks or fish, and I don’t want to think about how I’d like to wring Bachelor Anonymous’s neck.”

I laugh and shake out my hair, flinging some of the moisture in her direction.

“Hey, look at it this way. Now we can go to breakfast.”

“That is a positive,” she agrees. “I just wish I had somewhere better to change than my car.”

I bite my lip. Looks like the other thing I’m going to get in trouble for is swift on the first transgression’s heels.

“Oh. Yeah. Well, see... There are some bathrooms across the street that are open. There’s a shower and everything, so you’ll be able to clean up pretty good.”

Her eyes narrow as she considers me, but she doesn’t say anything.

It’s almost scarier than having a woman get sassy. I smile, trying to disarm whatever bomb she’s got ticking, and when

she rolls her eyes at my attempt at charming her, I have to laugh.

“Come on. I’ll show you where the bathroom is.”

She nods once and then shakes her head. I repeat the motions with my own head, trying to keep up with what’s coming next.

“I just didn’t want you to almost drown again,” I defend myself when she still doesn’t say anything.

It takes a heavy sigh, two clucks of her tongue, and a roll of her eyes, but she finally ends the silent treatment.

“Fine. Show me the bathroom, then.”

I smile, thrilled with my little victory, scoop up all of our belongings from the beach in one armful, and show her the way.

I can’t explain how weirdly enjoyable our needling has been this morning, but I know this—my shower is going to have to be a cold one.



Holley

Looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I scrape my wet hair into a messy bun and twist it with a hair tie. Thanks to the shower, my skin and hair are devoid of the sticky residue of salt, but there's nothing I can do about drying my wet locks. Luckily, if I leave it like this for a couple hours, it'll dry on its own into a pretty decent showing of waves. Of all the things I've had tough in my life, making my hair work in a pinch isn't one of them.

My T-shirt clings to my newly dried skin, and my nipples jab at the material of my bra. I try to tell myself it's the cool air of the bathroom on previously heated skin, but I'm too much of a cynic to fully believe it doesn't have anything to do with the man waiting for me outside and the time we spent in the water with his hands all over my body.

Having my legs wrapped around his hips, listening to him share the heartbreaking true story of his early life—I almost couldn't take it. My whole body felt drawn toward him, like being pulled in by a black hole in space.

I had to swim away—to put some distance between us—for the sake of my survival. I mean, Jesus. From what I know about space stuff, black holes, like, suck stuff in forever, never to be seen again. With the way my hormones were raging, I would have been in the same predicament, for sure.

No turning back.

I shake my head to clear it and grab my belongings from the sink top. The longer I stare at myself in the mirror, the more uncomfortable thoughts start to surface, and I'm not ready to face them.

I make my way along the stalls, up to the front entrance of the bathroom, while shoving my deodorant back down in my bag. I round the corner of the wall at the exit and slam right into a hard body.

"I'm sorry!" I squeak, but firm hands settle at my hips before I can say any more. I'd be lying if I said I *could* say any more. The truth is, looking up into startling aqua eyes and feeling the sensation of his hands on me again have robbed the voice box right from my throat.

Call the cops, baby. I'm a victim of a crime.

Holy moly, I think I'm losing it.

Jake smiles at me like he can hear all of the thoughts running through my mind. Like he's acutely attuned to every stupid thing I can't seem to stop myself from wondering about.

I reach out to grab his tattooed arm—purportedly to push myself back and away—but when a fresh droplet of water sinks into my palm from the skin of his forearm, my vision tunnels and my actions slow. My God...is that droplet of water from his shower? And if so, what other parts of his body might it have touched?

Someone call a doctor. I'm a sick, sick woman.

Slowly, carefully, I extricate myself from his body and try my best to smile without looking like I've just been fantasizing about him. It seems like a better option than pretending to be mad again because that means coming up with things to argue about. And he's funny. It's not easy pretending like the jokes he makes are annoying.

I have no idea if I succeed in my endeavor to look innocent or not, and I hope I never find out. Because with my track record, the statistics on that one, friends, would not be in my favor.

“You ready to go to breakfast?” he asks casually, like we spend the day together all the time. It’s startling how natural it sounds.

“Yep.” I reach back to the suit hanging over my bag and hold it up for him. “I rinsed out Chloe’s bathing suit, but I can take it home and wash it if you’d like.”

He shakes his head, grabbing it from me. “No problem.”

I watch with startling fascination as he throws it over his shoulder and tucks it close to his throat.

That was just on me—in fact, the crotch of the suit that’s closest to his mouth is still warm from my flesh.

Danger! Danger!

I shake my head to clear it again. What is wrong with me this morning? Who even thinks of something like that? Like, how horny am I?

I point in the direction of my car over my shoulder. “I can drive myself. Probably a good idea.”

He smiles, but he stops himself from laughing at me by biting into the flesh of his bottom lip. “No need. We can walk to breakfast.”

“Walk?” I ask, almost sounding horrified. “How far is it?”

He laughs now. “Just under a block. Don’t worry, you’ll make it without collapsing.” I glare, but he keeps going. “And if you don’t, I’ll pick you up and carry you.”

All attitude and sass, I step around him to start walking, but I’m not paying enough attention to my footing and accidentally step off the sidewalk and into the sand.

It took a full three minutes to get these sandals all done up again—don’t ask me to explain why I chose them—and now one foot is full of sand.

I try to ignore it, even try to discreetly shake the sand out, but it’s beyond annoying. The grains are in all the bad spots, rubbing the skin off my foot with quick precision. I’m going to

have to stop and fix it, but that's going to make it really hard to continue to save face.

Desperate, I transform my gait into a limp. Maybe if I don't put full pressure on that foot, it'll survive the walk to the restaurant without needing to be amputated.

"Holley," Jake remarks behind me, watching me do my best impression of a peg-legged pirate. "Did you step on a scorpion or something? What are you doing?"

"I have sand in my shoe," I say with a roll of my eyes, finally stopping and bending down to try to get it out.

Jake doesn't say much from behind me, so I do my best to ignore him while I work at the intricate strap and buckle that circle my ankle.

It's always difficult to get the strap out of the buckle because the leather is too stiff to really bend. They're adorable shoes, but they're really a pain in the ass. I do my best not to think about the fact that I actually put these on in some lame attempt to impress Jake with my good fashion sense.

The reality is, he probably didn't even notice.

I shove and pull and torture the strap, trying to force it to bend to my will and release the prong from its hole. My cheeks flush immediately at my own mental commentary.

All I can think about are the barbed penises I read about in J.R. Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood* books. Now *that* was a prong that was hard to get out of a hole.

Still messing with the buckle and thinking about sex with a penis that actually, like, latches on, I'm caught off guard when Jake scoops me up into his arms and tosses me over his shoulder in a full-on fireman's carry. The bathing suit is gone, but I've been messing with my shoe for way longer than would have been necessary for him to actually put it away in his bag somewhere.

I shriek, of that I'm sure, but finding actual words to shout at him is proving much, much harder.

“I... Well... I’ve never... Hey!” I ramble, trying to sound convincingly aggressive.

He snickers, of course, obviously shaken by my articulate and well-versed threats.

“Put me down,” I finally manage, but the shake of his head against my hip makes me seal my lips altogether.

“Nope,” he declines, hoisting me even farther up onto his shoulder to find a comfortable position while he walks. “You’re taking too long, and I’m hungry. I saw you try to work those sandals this morning before you came down onto the beach, and it took you a year and a half.”

“You saw that?” I whisper, unable to hide my horror that I wasn’t in my own world as I’d so naïvely thought then.

“Yes. I watched until it was too painful to watch anymore, so I’m not watching again. I’m all topped up on my quota for watching you mess with sandals for the day.”

“Well, then,” I huff.

He chuckles. “Don’t get all offended. Once we’re at the diner, you can take your sweet time fixing it. Hell, I’ll even help you fix it if you want me to. But I’m not waiting anymore here. I can’t.”

I shut my mouth and narrow my eyes at his back. He doesn’t seem fazed, but that could have something to do with the fact that he can’t see my glare.

Regardless, we walk the rest of the way to the restaurant like that—me tossed over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and silent.

When we get to the entrance, he sets me on my feet again, and miraculously, my sandal seems to be free from sand. It’s almost like his carrying me shook it all loose.

I don’t say anything, instead following him into the hostess stand and then walking right past it like we own the place. I look back at the *Please Wait to Be Seated* sign with uncontrollable do-gooder anxiety, but Jake doesn’t even pause. I do my best to keep up.

We take a booth in the front of the restaurant, grab menus from their spot behind the condiments, and scan the food options in silence.

If it's possible, it seems like we're actually in the middle of a little tiff. We're practically strangers, and yet it feels very much like we're an old married couple in the midst of a spat.

"Have you ever been here before?" I ask in an effort to break the tension.

His smirk is sharp and sarcastic. "A time or two."

"What?" I ask, annoyed by his attitude.

"I come here every morning."

"Oh," I say with a smarmy raise of my eyebrows. "Well. How was I supposed to know that?" I question but shield my annoyed expression with my menu.

Jake just snorts in response.

"What's good here, then, oh great patron?"

His eyes dance as he pulls my menu down from in front of my face, one corner of his mouth hitched up. "Are you mad at me?"

"What?" I ask. "Why would I be mad at you?"

He shakes his head, the other side of his mouth now engaging in the smile. "I don't know. That's why I'm asking you."

"I'm not mad," I lie.

"Are you sure? Because you sure seem mad about something. Maybe me carrying you here?"

"I'm not," I lie again. "I'm perfectly fine."

"Oh," he says, nodding dramatically. "Fine. Gotcha. That changes everything."

"Don't mock me," I challenge.

"Come on, Holley," he says through a knowing chuckle, gesturing to my face with one hand. "You're mocking yourself. You know as well as I do, 'fine' is one of the most

mischaracterized words in the English language. Fine is worse than bad. Fine means I should pack up my shit and go.”

“All right!” I snap. “I’m...mad. Sort of. But I’m not sure why, okay?”

I expect him to cackle in my face. I mean, I sound ludicrous. Instead, he reaches out and pats my hand. “There we go!” He smiles. “Doesn’t that feel good? To get the truth out in the open?”

I frown a little, but I can’t help but consider what he’s saying. I do feel better. It makes no sense at all, but all the tension in my shoulders has softened. “I’m very confused by you, Jake.”

He laughs at that. “And I you, Holley. I think that’s the way of our genders, though. Let’s not fight it, okay?”

I nod. I don’t know what I’ve just agreed to, really—it feels like some kind of illicit or illegal treaty—but I have no choice but to run with it at this point.

“Now,” he says. “As far as breakfast is concerned, you really can’t go wrong. Everything is great, but I usually get two eggs, over medium, a large side of bacon, wheat toast, and a side of seasoned, cubed hash browns.”

“That sounds good. I think I’ll get that too.”

“Great. Do you want coffee?”

I scoff. *Do I want coffee? What kind of a question is that?*

He grins, understanding my nonverbal cues better than I understand them myself. “Coffee’s a yes, then.”

The waitress finally stops at our table after running the feet right off her legs. She looks like she’s one of the only people here, and the place is packed. Jake smiles up at her, and I swear, she looks down at him like he’s Christ reborn, here to save her.

“Jake,” she says, her voice warm.

“Hey, Shell. Crazy today, huh?”

“You have no idea.” She breathes out a deep sigh. “SEALs are supposed to graduate BUD/S tomorrow. Families are in town.”

Jake nods like he knows what she’s talking about, but my eyebrows pull together. *Seals? Buds? As in Navy SEALs?* I really should have researched this more after he saved me the other morning.

“That’s right,” he says with a smile. “Almost lost track of what day it is.”

She chortles and reaches down to touch his shoulder softly. “You and me both.”

“We’ll both take my usual, okay?”

Shell finally looks over from Jake to me, but I’m pleased to see her eyes warm on me too. There’s no jealousy or angst from her. She’s just friendly. I make sure my answering smile meets my eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Shell,” I say. “I’m Holley.”

“You too, darlin’. Be right back with your coffees,” she says to us both with a wink.

“She’s nice,” I say as soon as she walks away.

Jake nods. “She is. Works really hard, too. She has a couple kids and a deadbeat husband, so tips are really important to her.”

I purse my lips as I think about Shell struggling. I don’t want that for her. Instantly, I dig down in my purse to try to find some extra bills to leave for her on the table when we go. She needs them more than I do.

Jake’s hand comes down on my own to stop me, but when I look up, his eyes make Shell’s look like glaciers. *Geez.* I don’t really know if I’ve ever been looked at like that. “She won’t take it,” he whispers. “That’s why I come here every morning. You have to spread it out a little bit at a time.”

My throat closes around itself as he sits back in the booth and looks out the window. His jaw is strong, and Lord

Almighty, he's attractive. Now, after telling me the reason he comes here every freaking morning, dare I say, more than ever.

And let me tell you—he's pretty dang attractive all the time. So, being more than that? Should be impossible.

I set my purse back down on the seat beside me and lean my elbows into the table with a sigh, asking, "So, what else should I know about you?" He raises his eyebrows, and I shake my head and clear my throat. "What should *readers* know about you, I mean."

"I'm just a regular guy." He shrugs off his words. "Have been for a really long time."

My eyes narrow on his way-too-vague answer, but I don't have time to argue it. Shell arrives with our plates, and I have to shove back out of the way so she can place it in front of me. "Wow," I say. "That was quick."

Shell winks at me before setting down Jake's plate. "Let me know if you all need anything else."

She's barely out of earshot when Jake leans into the table to whisper. "She probably snuck our order to the front of the line."

I smile. "Shell is quickly working her way on to my Christmas list."

I was really only speaking to myself, but Jake laughs anyway.

I look up at the sound, and as luck would have it, that means I'm just in time to see him pick up the leafy garnish under the wedge of orange on his plate and toss it into his mouth.

"What...what are you doing?" I ask, flabbergasted. "That's a garnish."

He shrugs. "Tastes like lettuce to me."

"You're not supposed to eat it," I point out further.

"So?"

"You just ate it!"

“I know,” he confirms. “Still chewing on it right now.”

“I just... Why would you do that?”

“Why wouldn’t I do it? It’s edible. It’s on my plate. I ate it.”

“That’s so not the point.”

He quirks a brow. “And what is the point exactly?”

Head absolutely spinning that we’re in the middle of another semi-spat over him being a freak, I decide to drop it. “Never mind.”

A soft chortle slips past his full lips. “Man, that’s going to bother you all day, isn’t it?”

“It’s just weird!” I snap.

His hand shoots out and grabs the garnish from *my* plate and shoves *that* in his mouth too.

“Why?” I whine into my hands. “Why are you taunting me?”

He cracks up then, but he eventually reaches across the table to pull my hands off my eyes. “Okay,” he says with a raise of his hands in surrender. “I’m done.”

I snort. “That’s because you’ve eaten it all!”

“Maybe,” he concedes with a wink.

“Just eat your real food now, weirdo.”

I don’t have to tell him twice. He scoops a giant piece of egg onto his fork and lifts it to his mouth, and I tuck into my own food. We really do have a long day ahead of us, and I have a lot of notes to take. This first article isn’t going to write itself, and unlucky for me, it’s already due tomorrow afternoon because it’s supposed to print in the Sunday edition. I have no choice but to get it done.

Jake’s phone buzzes on the table, and a smile lights his face as he wipes his mouth with his napkin, sets his fork on his plate, and picks it up to answer it.

“Good morning, Chlo,” he says into the space between us, the phone tucked close to his ear. His words are warm and familiar, and his heart is in his eyes.

It’s more than apparent, his sun rises and sets within his daughter.

I smile to myself but duck my head back down to look at my plate.

“Yeah. I know,” he continues his conversation. “Yeah, she’s right across from me. We’re having breakfast.”

He chuckles, and an intense curiosity lights my whole body on fire. They’re talking about me, and I *need* to know what they’re saying.

“I am being nice,” he asserts. “Why wouldn’t I be nice?”

He laughs again, then snaps at me to look up at him. I do, obviously, and I’m even half confident that I don’t look guilty as hell when I do. *No, no, Jake. I haven’t already been listening to your conversation with bated breath at all...*

“What?” I mouth, but he waves a hand to say never mind.

“What, then? Do you want me to send proof of life or something?” Curiosity makes me scrunch my face as he offers, “I could take a picture of her right now. Send it to you.”

Panic shoots into my veins. *Whoa, whoa, whoa. No pictures of me are supposed to occur.*

“I am being serious,” he responds, a perpetual chuckle making the air between us vibrate. “You’ll see her tonight, and you can ask all the questions you want yourself...” He pauses, and I listen harder. It doesn’t help, but my ears do ring a little with the extra concentration. “Yes. Dinner at Boogie’s.”

Boogie’s?

Familiarity makes my synapses light up. My dad and I have been going to a place named Boogie’s ever since he sold the family farm in Iowa and moved out here to retire and be closer to me a couple years ago. He says it’s the only thing that makes him feel even remotely close to home. Well, that and me.

“Listen, Chlo, I have to go. Gotta be at work in half an hour.” He shakes his head and rolls his eyes. “I know I’m the boss, but it doesn’t matter. What are you doing today?”

He listens for a minute, transforming from playful back to full-on dad mode. “Okay. Text me when you get there, text me when you leave. You know the drill. And be careful. Always pay attention to your surroundings, yeah?”

Chloe’s response makes him smile. “I know I always say it, and I always will. Even when you’re forty.”

I set my fork down and settle my hand into my chest, no doubt in an attempt to stop the newly awakened flutter under my ribs. Goodness gracious, single dads—good ones—really do have a hotness about them that’s unmatched. I think it’s because they show their ability to love. With every conversation, every kiss, every consideration they give their kids, women see the opportunity to be given the same. It’s concrete, black-and-white evidence of a man’s ability to think outside of himself. Which isn’t exactly on the top of the list of the male’s biological strengths.

“I know. I love you too, kid. Bye.”

He tosses the phone back to the top of the table with little finesse and picks up his fork again to dig back into his hash browns. He doesn’t even notice that I’m trying to reconstitute myself from the puddle of goo his conversation formed. *Thank everything.*

Why is it always like that? Why is a father being loving to his kids always so special? Moms are that way all the time, and no one seems to notice.

I don’t know. There’s, like, some kind of biological trigger or something. My ovaries have fired up the power bank and are ready to start pumping out some product, I’ll tell you that. Little fucking baby factories. Meanwhile, Shell’s here sweating her tits off to make ends meet, and nobody’s banging down her door, trying to give her a glass-plated trophy. The only one who’s seemed to notice is Jake, and for as kindhearted as he is about her situation, I also don’t get the sense that he has in any way, shape, or form tried to date her.

I shake off my weird thoughts and tuck my napkin under the edge of my plate. The food really was delicious, and if it weren't for the fact that it might seem like I was stalking him, I might just follow Jake here every morning.

I pick up my mug of coffee and hold it in both hands. It's toasty and smells just as good as it tastes, and I sip on it while Jake finishes his meal in silence, and I surreptitiously watch him the whole time.

He doesn't notice—at least, he doesn't let on that he does. But it doesn't feel weird. Strangely, it feels comfortable.

Like we've been doing this forever.

And if that isn't the scariest fucking thing I've admitted to myself in the last ten years of my life, I don't know what is.

I redirect myself swiftly, though, shoving my feelings of deep spiritual connection as far back in the filing cabinet of my brain as I can get them. I don't even bother to hook the little end of the folder on the edges. No, I'd rather that fucker fall down through the others and get lost in the bottom of the drawer forever.

Or as Randy Travis once wisely sang... *Forever and ever, amen.*



Jake

“Okay. What’s the secret password? How the hell do I get into this thing?”

I look across the cab to Holley, still on the ground, surveying the height of the jump up into my truck with bewilderment.

I’ve never liked running boards, so I specifically ordered my F-350 Platinum without them, and up until now, it’s never really been an issue. At six foot three, I just climb in, and so does Chloe, since she’s five foot seven. But Holley can’t be much over five feet, and apparently, it’s a lot longer way up for her.

“Hold on, I’ll come help you in,” I offer and reach to unbuckle my seat belt.

But she’s quick to deny me. “No, no. Just give me some tips. Some strategy.”

I laugh. Outright. I can’t help it. “I don’t know. I normally just climb in.”

She rotates her eyes toward the sky before focusing back on the challenge—*the normally simple task of getting into my damn truck.*

Once we finished our breakfast and said goodbye to Shell, I had to help Holley get sand out of her Rubik’s Cube of a sandal in the parking lot. And now, since we’re running late by at least fifteen minutes, having her figure this out quickly

would be ideal, but still, I somehow find myself relaxing back into my seat and waiting without impatience. I have a strong, strong feeling this is going to be too good to miss.

“Okay,” she peptalks herself and tosses her purse up into the seat. “If I grab the handle here, maybe I can put a foot here,” she strategizes, stretching out her leg to place the bottom of her sandal to the tire. “And then, maybe, I can just sort of launch myself up.”

I bite my tongue to stop myself from commenting on what sounds like a disastrous idea.

What can I say? Stopping her before she gets started would really spoil the fun...

She seems to figure it out herself, though, taking her foot off the tire and starting from scratch. “No, that seems like it’ll end in a concussion...” She pauses, staring at the door, and considers her options. “I could maybe put my elbows in the seat and lift myself up like I’m getting out of a pool, but that’s normally assisted by the buoyancy of water. I’m not sure a dead-lift of all my weight is going to happen...”

“Holley—” I start to interject, feeling a little bad that this is becoming such a big deal, but she silences me.

“*Shh!* I’m thinking over here,” she says, rubbing at her chin and then tapping it with her fingertips. “Can I reach this...?”

In a combination of fascination and amusement, I watch as she stretches to the tips of her toes and manages to wrap her fingers around the handle inside the truck by the windshield. Then, she turns her body and puts a hand to the surface of the seat before hiking up a leg awkwardly to try to get a knee in the floorboard. It is a sight to see. *Truly.*

But it also looks like it could end in catastrophe.

Hopping on the one foot still left on the ground, she gets a rhythm going, almost like she’s on a trampoline, before finally launching herself up and toward the floorboard.

I lean over the console quickly, wrapping a hand around her upper arm and pulling as hard as I can to make sure she

ends up inside the cab instead of splattered on the pavement.

“I did it!” she shouts victoriously from her pretzel-like position—her body sprawled half on the floor and half on the edge of the seat.

It’s all I can do not to laugh as I congratulate her. “You did. And it was very impressive. Now, do you think you can make it all the way into the seat?”

She huffs out an exasperated sigh before getting to both of her knees, moving her bag from the seat, and lifting herself up. “Ugh! Finally!” Her breaths come out in hard pants when she sinks into the leather and clicks her seat belt into place.

“Do you need a bottle of water?” I tease, noting the way her face has flushed the prettiest shade of pink. “A cold towel, perhaps?”

She shoves my shoulder as hard as she can manage, but it’s not very hard. I have to imagine, though, she’s probably pretty worn-out after the gymnastics competition she just performed into my truck.

“Next time we ride together,” she announces with one pointed eyebrow raised in my direction, “we take my car. You just have to fall in.”

Damn, this woman cracks me the hell up.

“Sounds like a plan.” I wink. “The next day we spend together, we’ll take yours.”

She narrows her eyes but doesn’t say anything. I’m almost positive it’s of great difficulty for her. And, somehow, she even manages to keep her sarcastic remarks to herself until I put my truck in reverse and back out of the spot.

“Where are we headed now?”

“To one of my jobsites. They’re preparing to put the roof on today, so I need to make sure they have all the trusses and bracing done right.”

“Is it a house?” she asks.

Oh yeah. I forgot she knows next to nothing about me. She's just so easy to be around; it kind of feels like we've known each other much longer than we really have.

"Yes. I have a residential construction company. Mostly high-end stuff in the greater San Diego area, but we also do work in a couple other places when requested," I explain and pull out onto the main road. "This house is for a tech mogul. Invented some kind of app that Chloe thinks is a big deal, but I can't even remember what it's called."

She shakes her head on a snort. "Don't ask me. I don't know any of that stuff. I'm, like, the opposite of a pop culture savant."

"So, you're saying you're old," I tease with a laugh.

"Pretty much, I guess." She shrugs, nonplussed. Most women would blow their fucking gasket if I suggested they were anything other than fresh from the womb, whether I was joking or not.

"Don't worry," I comfort. "I'm old too. In mind and spirit anyway." I shake my head at myself. "Getting up there in the body too, to be honest."

"Don't worry, you..." She abruptly pauses, shuts her mouth, and turns her head to look out the passenger window like she's embarrassed.

"What?" I ask.

"You're... Forty is still pretty young, and you don't even look it."

I smile. "Thanks. You look young, too," I assure her. She blushes. "Not so young that I'm wondering why you're not in school, though."

"So, you're saying I'm, like, the Goldilocks of age right now?"

"Yep." I nod. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Thanks." She flashes a little grin in my direction. "I accept the compliment."

Frighteningly, when I look away from her, I realize I'm already approaching the driveway to the construction site. I don't even really remember getting here, but autopilot apparently took care of me this time.

I try to shake myself out of it, though. Getting yourself so distracted while driving that something stupid could happen is the exact kind of thing I'm always preaching to Chloe not to do. It's just as bad as texting while driving and one of the easiest ways to end up in an accident.

"Is that it?" Holley asks, staring forward at the jobsite with wide eyes.

I almost laugh. It is huge. It makes most houses look like little miniature boxes. "Yep. That's it."

"Maybe I should get a little hipper to pop culture? Find out who this tech guy is and see if I can get his number."

A weird current runs through my chest, but I ignore it. She's really funny. I'm almost positive she's joking.

Why does it matter if she's joking? a little voice in my head asks annoyingly. I ignore it completely, concentrating on pulling the truck over to the side of the boom truck we have on-site from setting trusses this morning.

Holley looks around with unconcealed curiosity. It's evident she's never seen any of this stuff up close before.

Once I come to a stop, I put the truck in park and shut off the engine, but I don't make a move to get out just yet. Instead, I reach into the back seat for some of the props I thought it would be fun to bring along. A safety vest, a hard hat, and big, heavy-duty gloves to complete the ensemble.

One by one, I move the items from the back floorboard to Holley's lap. She becomes increasingly alarmed with each addition.

"Uh...what is all this stuff?"

"It's for you," I reply. "I thought that was obvious."

"Okay, then. But why do I need it?"

“For the jobsite,” I say with a jerk of my chin. “There might be stuff falling or debris in unexpected places, and with your limited experience around it, this gear will help ensure your safety.”

She shakes her head, her eyebrows drawing together. “I don’t know if you were planning on getting some free labor out of me for the day or what, but Holley Fields isn’t the type of woman who wields a hammer.”

I grin. I can’t help it. The innuendo is just too much to ignore. “No?” I ask, disappointment in my inflection.

“Nope.”

“You’ve never...*wielded a hammer* before?” I push further.

“Sure.” She scrunches up her nose, visibly annoyed with my question. “When I was younger, my dad used to make me help with stuff.”

I have the sudden urge to cover my ears because, *wow*, my play on her words has taken a turn for the unfortunate. Unable to stop myself, I cringe.

“What?” she asks. “What did I say?”

I shake my head. I don’t need to relive it.

“Nothing.”

“Jake! Come on, I obviously said something.”

“It’s nothing. Really. I just thought you’d pick up on my pun-play with the phrase *wielding a hammer*, and you definitely did not. You really did not, and yeah...your father. Helping him.” I pretend to throw up.

“Oh geez!” she snaps, finally understanding. “Why are men such children?”

I shrug. “I think it’s biology.”

“It must be,” she grumbles. “Because you’re all like this.”

“Oh yeah? How many man-children have you known?”

Her face shutters for a moment before she turns to look out the window. “Enough. Trust me.”

It seems to kill the mood—I’m not sure why—but I am at least mature enough to pick up on the fact that teasing time has ended. It’s time to be kind and supportive and act...well...grown.

“Come on,” I say cheerfully, hoping I can distract her from whatever’s crept inside her head now. “You really don’t have to wear that stuff...except the hard hat. Something really could fall from one of the rafters, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I could just watch you from here,” she suggests, thankfully back to her playful self.

“No way, Holley from the *Tribune*.” I shake my head slowly to punctuate my words. “You asked for the whole shebang. The Jake Brent Experience. And it’s nowhere near complete without a little on-site blabbering between me and my guys. So, let’s go.”

Without waiting for her to come up with another excuse, I hop out of the driver’s seat and onto the gravel drive. It crunches beneath my booted feet as I turn to shut the door and round the hood to meet her on the passenger side.

She’s still trying to determine how to get down when I get there, but this time, I don’t wait for her to figure it out. I reach up into the cab, grab her by the hips—a move that makes her gasp—and lower her gently to the ground.

I’ve known she’s much shorter than me—about a foot, actually—but from this proximity, it’s even more obvious.

“Uh, thanks,” she says, and I smile.

I reach over her shoulder and up into the cab, grab the hard hat, and set it down gently on her head, knocking the top when it’s in position. “There. All set.”

I pull her away from the door with an easy hand at her elbow and shut it behind her. Her jade-green eyes sparkle in the sun as she stares at my head. “Where’s yours?”

“My head could stand to have a couple things dropped on it,” I mock myself. She laughs but frowns a little, too, at the thought of me getting hurt. And I can’t deny it’s a nice feeling, her caring about me, even though I didn’t expect to feel it.

I lead the way from the truck over to the house, where a couple of my main guys, Matt and Johnny, are working up on the roof. They’ve both been with my company for over a decade, and they’re some of the most capable carpenters in the business. The two of them working together can get more done than most crews of five in the same amount of time.

I put my fingers into my lips and whistle from the side of the building as we approach. Johnny covers his eyes to shade them from the sun as he looks down at us.

“How’s it going?” I ask, knowing they really hate when I ask that question. It’s a fluff question, one they’d rather not take the time to answer. That’s probably why I ask it every day. I can’t help but bust their balls.

“Swimmingly, boss,” Matt says with a laugh. He doesn’t look up from checking his measurement against his string line to ensure he’s still level but recognizes my voice all the same.

“Who’s she?” Johnny asks, still looking down the roofline at the two of us. When I glance back at Holley, I see she’s trying her best to make herself disappear behind me.

I bite my lip to stop from laughing.

Ole Matty, though—his ears have perked at the mention of a woman, and he’s no longer enthralled with the body of his work.

I jerk a thumb over my shoulder.

“Oh, her? That’s Holley. Holley Smith. She’s a state inspector,” I fib, looking back to watch her reaction.

Holley’s eyebrows shoot up, but I don’t acknowledge it. At least, not yet. “She’s just here to go over our plans and any upcoming code changes.”

“What happened to Jim?” Johnny asks about our regular inspector.

Matt laughs and smacks Johnny in the chest. “Who the hell cares about Jim?” He smiles down from the roof, charm and flirtation oozing out on us even all the way down here. “Nice to meet you, Holley. *Really* nice to meet you.”

She clears her throat, spears me with a glare, and shields her eyes as she looks up and into the sun. Matt and Johnny look like nothing more than shadows from our vantage point. “Uh...nice to meet you too.”

“So, Holley, do you need to know the blow count from the beams?” Matt asks. “I wrote it down. I can get it for you.”

“Do I need to know what?” Holley whispers frantically behind me.

I shake my head. *My God, Matt has no idea just how fucking hilarious this is.* I never even dreamed my giving her an alternate identity could be this fun.

“A blow count,” I repeat for her. “How many times they had to strike the beam with the hammer to get it in the ground.”

“The what?”

I almost snort. “Just ask him if they gave the count to the engineer.”

“Did you...uh...give the count to the engineer?” Holley raises her voice to ask, so painfully unversed in the terminology it’s ridiculous. I can’t believe Detective Sherlock Holmes hasn’t appeared to break this case wide open yet, but I’m going to enjoy it for however long it lasts.

“Yes, ma’am,” Matt responds, and Holley once again turns to me in question.

“Tell him that’s good enough. You can get it from him.”

“That’s good enough,” she repeats after me. “I can, um, get it from him.”

“Good deal,” Matt yells back down, taking his nail gun off his hip while Johnny holds the wood in position and fires off several to secure it in place.

“I get the need for mystery,” Holley suddenly says in my ear, her hand pressing heat through my T-shirt into the skin of my back. “But couldn’t you have chosen something a little less knowledge-intensive?”

I glance over my shoulder with a smirk. “I guess I could have told him you’re an agent of the IRS.”

“Ugh!” she huffs. “No way. No one wants to see someone from the IRS. No one.”

“Okay, then.” I shrug, turning to face her and putting my hands on my hips. To Matt and Johnny, it probably looks like we’re discussing important vectors of the job. It’s almost funny how much we are not. “I could tell them you’re death in human form, that you’ve stolen Holley Fields from the *Tribune’s* body, and that you just want to know what it’s like to be human before you take me to the afterlife.”

Her eyes narrow. “That’s basically the plot from *Meet Joe Black*.”

“And?”

“And what are you doing watching Brad Pitt movies?”

“I do have a teenage daughter,” I justify. “Remember?”

The truth is I did a Lifetime Movie Network marathon the last time I had a Saturday to myself, and *Meet Joe Black* was the main event. It’s a solid three hours long and surprisingly hypnotizing. When Chloe came home at the very end, she asked me who Anthony Hopkins was, and I died a little inside. I planned an Anthony Hopkins movie marathon for the next day in an effort to undo the damage I’d clearly been inflicting on the next generation.

“Oh yeah. Right.” Holley giggles.

“Okay, fine. She didn’t make me watch it,” I admit. “But I wasn’t lying about the teenage daughter. It’s a fact that I have one of those.”

“Hey!” Holley snaps with a laugh, both amused and jilted by my trickery at the same time.

“Sorry.” I shrug.

“All right, you little closet Brad Pitt lover, you.” I grin and shake my head as she continues. “What do we do now?”

“Paperwork,” I say simply, and she cringes.

“Oh. Yuck. Is there an option number two?”

“For me?” I shake my head. “No.”

She sighs.

“Sorry Charlie. If I don’t do paperwork, Matt and Johnny don’t get paid. I’ve tried it before, and they really didn’t like it.”

“So...what should I do? I assume you don’t want me rummaging through your payroll.”

I laugh. “You can take my truck and go get lunch for everyone.”

She looks from me to the trunk and throws out an arm in disbelief. “That truck?”

I nod.

“I can barely get in it! I don’t think I should be driving it. I really don’t.”

“Okay,” I agree. “Then I suggest you find a comfy spot and camp out.”

“Here?” she questions, looking around with obvious disdain for the comfort she’s going to be lacking.

“Unless you have the ability to teleport.”

She puts a defiant hand to her hip. “And what do I do if Matt or Johnny asks me more construction-y type questions?”

“You’re a smart woman,” I say with a wink. “I know you’ll figure it out.”

She shrugs and wanders to the other side of the house where a framed-out window makes a nice seat. She settles in, pulls a book from her bag, opens it up to the middle, and starts to read.

Her legs look a mile and a half long, and with a glance up to the roof, it’s painfully obvious that I’m not the only one

who's noticed. I look back down to Holley as she tucks a thick piece of wavy hair she took down from her ponytail behind her ear and chews at the plump flesh of her lip, unconcerned with the wait.

I've never known a woman who would so easily settle into an uncomfortable situation and occupy her mind without resentment.

But I guess I've never had a woman around who was getting paid to hang out with me either.

I shake my head and force myself to get back on task.

Time to get back to work.



Holley

We've been up since before the sun, and even at four thirty in the afternoon, we're still on the move. Jake's like the Energizer Bunny of men. I swear, I don't even think he stops to take a breath most of the time. However, I cannot, as of this moment, give personal testimony as to the state of his bushy tail.

After finally leaving the jobsite—which took *forever*—we headed for the storage facility where he keeps his motocross trailer. I, being a woman of limited life experiences, didn't even really know what that meant until we got to the facility and he backed his truck in front of it.

Jake didn't waste any time hopping out and hooking it up, and as much as I wanted to follow, I knew I wouldn't be able to do it in the time allotted. Instead, I climbed to my knees in my seat and spun around so I could watch him work through the back cab window.

Muscles flexing and bunching as he bent over to do something between the truck and the trailer, he was a bit of a distraction, but I did the best I could to follow along with the technical side of it all. Black and gray and green, his trailer has one of the coolest paint jobs I've ever seen, his name sliding through the inside of a graphic slash mark.

His number—apparently number 86—is stamped directly below his name.

In no time at all, he had us hooked up and was climbing back into the truck. I didn't get to see what was inside, but I didn't have to wait long.

Once we arrived at the track—a big, dirt-covered, hilly thing that is apparently what you do with motocross—he backed into a spot, jumped down, rounded the truck to help me out, and then opened up the trailer immediately.

“Ohh,” I hummed to myself as he pinned back the trailer door and I had the chance to lean inside. “It’s like a motorcycle.”

His smile lit up the blue in his eyes. “Yep. *Motocross*.”

I'd simply shrugged, and he'd let it go. Obviously, he had other things to do than sitting around explaining it to me. I could watch for myself.

And that's what I'd been doing ever since he got changed in the back seat of the truck, climbed in the trailer, and started unhooking everything inside to free the bike.

Jake backs his bike out of the trailer, climbs astride it, and pulls his helmet on, offering me a hand. I stare at the hand.

He stares at me staring at the hand.

“Come on,” he says.

“Come on where?” I question, and a laugh jumps from his lungs.

“On the bike, Holley. I'll give you a ride over to the best spot in the stands so you'll have a good view.”

I'm shaking my head before he even gets the whole sentence out. “Why don't you just point to the spot, and I'll walk there on my legs? They're pretty trustworthy. I've been using them for, oh, thirty-two years or so.”

“You're thirty-two?” he asks.

“Three. Thirty-three. I didn't walk until I was one. Does that ruin my run for Goldilocks?”

“Nope.” He grins, and he brushes his eyes over the top of my head. “Although, your hair isn't really the right color.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I’ve been blond before, and honestly —”

“Come on, Holley.” He cuts off my ramble. “Don’t you trust me? I kept you nice and safe in the ocean this morning.”

“That’s debatable. I mean, I almost got eaten by a freaking fish monster,” I sass, and he cracks another smile.

“You and I both know I made up the fish monster bullshit to get you moving.”

“I’m not so sure,” I singsong. “I recall seeing true fear in your eyes out there in the ocean...”

“Come on, Holley,” he encourages, completely ignoring my sarcasm. “Trust me. I won’t do anything to hurt you. Ever.”

I purse my lips. “That’s a really big promise to make to someone you hardly even know.”

“I know enough,” he says simply.

Butterflies flutter inside my stomach as I consider actually climbing on this thing with him. Not only does it look dangerous as hell, it’s also quite clearly designed to accommodate only one body. Where am I even going to sit? *In his lap?*

I start to shake my head again, but he reaches out and takes my hand. “Come on,” he cajoles. “Just put your left leg on this side and your right over here. Sit right in front of me like you’re riding a regular bike. As soon as we’re moving, I’ll stand behind you on the pegs.”

My nerves are fired up, but I ignore them. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and the truth is, if Jake says he’ll keep me safe, I believe him.

He likes to tease and joke, but he’s never given any indication that he’s not a man of his word. In fact, from watching him interact with other people, I’d surmise that he’s the kind of guy who never goes back on what he promises.

“Okay,” I finally agree, stepping up to the bike and trying to figure out how to best contort myself to get my leg over the

seat. *Man, I'm really going to have to start stretching more if I keep spending time with this guy.*

Jake reaches down and assists without having to be asked. Apparently, I take a long time to do everything, and he's decided he's not going to wait for any of it.

Secretly, the thought that he might manhandle me around for the rest of our time together gives me a little thrill. It's kind of like when a man loads the dishwasher really badly on purpose so he never gets asked to do it again, but reversed to give the female gender all the power. I like it. I really like it. *What else can I take my sweet-ass time doing?*

Suddenly astride the bike, I take a deep breath as he leans the warmth of his chest into my back and revs the throttle twice.

I try not to be too girly about it, but I'd be lying if I tried to pretend there isn't a distinct squealing sound coming from me that I am in no way in control of.

"Relax, Holley." Jake chuckles huskily into my ear, and a shiver runs down my spine. "I'm going to take care of you, I promise. Nice and easy all the way there."

Slowly, he starts to roll forward, and the panic of what's to come makes me cover my eyes. His body shakes behind me again, but he reaches forward with a hand to move mine.

Frankly, that's enough incentive to get my shit together because I really think this is the kind of thing where it'd be optimal if he had the use of both hands.

Apparently confident that I've come back from the land of breakdowns, I feel him shift behind me—*while we're still rolling*—and climb into a standing position on whatever he referred to as pegs.

With nothing to hold on to, I find purchase on his upper arms and hope that doesn't affect his ability to steer. And it must not because as we approach a crowd of people that makes me crow like a bird in fear, he weaves our way through like it's no problem at all.

“Wow,” I say when he revs the throttle just enough to beat a group of pedestrians to the path to the stands. Eyes are on me—on us—as we approach the wooden bleachers and slow to a stop. Jake jumps off with ease, somehow both holding the bike standing and offering me a hand of assistance as I climb off. I try not to blush as the group—largely made up of men and boys—stares at me, but I don’t think I’m entirely successful.

With a swing of a leg, I plant my sandaled feet on solid ground and resist the urge to drop to my knees and kiss it. If I’m honest, resisting isn’t even that hard. It was far more enjoyable riding on that thing than I imagined.

I turn to Jake, who’s working on climbing back astride the bike, and swiftly grab the firm muscle of his upper arm. He looks to my grip there first, grins, and then looks me in the eyes with his own.

Framed out by the hole in his green and black helmet, they look almost teal.

“What?” he whispers, thankfully sensitive to the fact that I’m not really looking for an audience with this discussion.

“Why...uh...” I pause, glancing behind me and back again before moving even closer to Jake’s face and lowering my voice more. “Why is it all men?”

He laughs, glancing at the bleachers behind me quickly before answering. “First of all, it’s not. There are a few women peppered in there. But it probably seems like it is because these are the crew bleachers, and as unfortunate as it is, there are more males in motocross than females by a long shot.”

“Am I...your crew?”

I can’t see his smile, but his eyes sure look like that’s what’s going on. “You’ve been...mediocre moral support. But yes, sure. You’re my crew. Now, can you sit down so I can go out there and get some laps in?”

Realizing for the first time that my questions have greatly delayed his entrance onto the track, I acquiesce immediately.

“Oh yeah. Sure.”

He shakes his head but greatly surprises me by reaching out and tucking some hair behind my ear. It feels remarkably intimate and innocent at the same time. My body doesn't know what to make of it. "Don't ever change, Holley."

It's such a kind thing to say, I'm almost too stunned to respond. Somehow, though, I manage to find the only words appropriate—the truth. "I don't think I could if I wanted to, Jake."

He nods, climbs astride the bike, revs the engine, and takes off down the hill onto the track so fast a whole trail of dirt kicks up behind him.

It's terrifying but, at the same time, makes it obvious that he was practically crawling on the ride over to the stands with me aboard.

I do my best to climb into the stands without taking my eyes off Jake, and as a result, I settle for the first wooden spot my ass comes in contact with.

I'm riveted as he rips down the first straight piece of the track right at a massive hill and sends himself flying into the air like Evel fucking Kniefel. No hesitation, no warm-up, just *bam!*—right into the air. I shriek a little, drawing some eyes around me, but no one else even looks fazed.

How in the world does everyone else think this is normal? He's, like, higher than a two-story building in the air, and he's doing it on purpose! Doesn't it hurt when he lands? How in the world does he do it so close to other people? I would run all of them right off the track!

I grip the edge of my seat and bounce my feet as he flies around the first curve, coming back this direction and going over a million little bumps like he's on a high-speed rocking horse. Other guys bounce along beside him, and they all make it to the next turn together, jammed in right on top of one another.

"Eek!" I squeal, sucking my neck back into itself and curling slightly into a ball.

Oh man! I jump as he jerks and weaves to avoid the other guys and takes off full throttle for the next huge hill. It's even bigger than the first, and the guys he navigated around in the curve are right on his heels.

I hiss and wince and cover my eyes briefly as he takes off like a damn rocket, twists in the air so much his body comes off the bike, and then, somehow, lands on the other side like he didn't just basically jump out of a freaking plane without a parachute.

As he rounds the corner to start the second lap, the tension in my shoulders finally starts to loosen. Clearly, he's done this a time or two, and if I press pause on my rising anxiety and really think about all of the freakishly scary things I've seen him do, it's *really* impressive.

The most noteworthy thing Raleigh ever did was a mud run—and while I'm not exactly bashing that because it's hard-core—he never really looked like he was strapped to an actual rocket ship either.

Plus, he cheated on me with his assistant and got her pregnant, so I'm allowed to mentally belittle everything he's ever done in his life until the cows come home.

It's my right.

Jake zooms around another turn and launches over the last huge hill, this time doing an actual flip with his whole dang body and bike!

Like, what is this sorcery?!

I jump to my feet, a huge scream of appreciation bursting from my lungs so loudly I almost scare myself. "Woo-hoo! Come on, Jake! Way to go!" I yell, to which I hear a small trill of answering laughter coming from somewhere in the stands. I ignore the audience and focus on the man on the bike, becoming so involved in his movements, I'm actually imitating them from my place in the bleachers.

I jump and weave and throw elbows like I'm trying to take all those other suckers down.

Before I know it, some of the others have actually started to join in, yelling for their own riders with almost the same amount of enthusiasm I am. Not quite, though, because it's pretty hard to match the intensity of a woman possessed.

Before long, I don't even know who I am anymore. I'm out for blood, and the more of his competitors Jake takes out, the better.

I scream and yell and jump, and when he makes the final turn to come off the track, I don't even know how long has passed. All I know is that it's been one of the coolest experiences of my life.



Fresh from the shower, Jake's hair curls ever so slightly at the ends and kisses at the skin of his neck as we drive away from the storage facility where we dropped the trailer back in its spot and head for Boogie's to meet Chloe for dinner.

He smells like clean soap and the faintest hint of cologne. It's so subtle, though, I'm not even sure it's cologne.

Is it possible that his skin smells that good?

I'm not sure, but I'm desperate to place the scent in my mind so that I can recreate it at a later date.

Maybe vanilla? But not a lot of vanilla because that overpowering, saccharine smell always makes me nauseous.

Yeah, a small hint of vanilla mixed with something else to it, too...

Like the scent of sweet, earthy grass.

I know that sounds weird, but it's not. He smells so good, I have to stop myself from climbing over the console of his truck and affixing my nose to his skin for a ten-day holiday.

I don't know for a fact, but I have to assume he would be put off by that.

Instead, I keep all my scent-driven-angst to myself and stare surreptitiously at the strong line of his jaw. It's relaxed—

I haven't really seen it clench at all since that first moment on the beach when he found out he was involved in this whole Bachelor Anonymous thing—but still, even lax, it's almost as though it's been cut precisely from stone.

Frankly, it's kind of a crime that this guy has been single for as long as he has. It makes no sense with nature and physics and science in general.

Still, I can tell by the way he holds himself that just because he's been single doesn't mean he's been celibate. Jake Brent looks like the type of guy who knows what he's doing—and knows it so well, that it's as if he were born with the talent. He doesn't have to try too hard or overcompensate with overzealous remarks about his dick size or tongue talent. He just has it. Both of them, if I had to guess.

The neon lights of the Boogie's sign shine in the darkening sky as we approach, and I take the last few moments in the truck to gather myself. It's been a hell of a day—one that's made me like Jake Brent a whole lot more than I expected.

He's patient and kind and really knows how to loosen up enough to have fun during all the monotony.

Still, something about going to dinner with him and his daughter makes my stomach flip over on itself. I already spent a little time with them at spaghetti dinner the other night, watching their dynamic play out, and I know the way seeing them together makes me feel. Nostalgic. Squishy. Far too invested.

I don't even want to know how much another night spent with the two of them is bound to compound those feelings.

I shiver at the thought, and Jake apparently notices. "Cold?"

I shake my head with the truth, but my mouth is at least smart enough to cover for me a little bit. "Kind of."

He pulls into a spot, throws the truck into park, and twists his torso to reach into the back seat of the truck. "I bet I have a sweatshirt or something back here you can put on."

A quick trip to Imagination Town paints a pretty scary picture of how it would feel to be *that* enveloped by his delicious aroma—to swim luxuriously in an item of his clothing.

Yikes.

I cut off that possibility directly at the pass.

“Uh, no. That’s okay. I’ll be fine without it. I’m probably just a little tired. Once I have something to eat, I’ll warm up.”

“You get cold when you get tired?”

“Don’t you?”

He shrugs. “I’ve never noticed.”

I have to laugh. “Yeah, well, that’s because I’m pretty sure you don’t get tired. Ever. It’s not part of your chemical makeup. You’re like a vampire. You never sleep.”

He raises one amused brow. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Uh, hello? This whole day? Dude, if you followed me around for a day and I had as much to do as you do, you can bet your booty I’d also have a built-in nap time.”

His mouth curves up into a smile.

“I didn’t even do the motocrossing. I just watched! And I could so go for a catnap right now. How do you do it?”

“Years of practice, I guess. I haven’t really slept a traditional amount since before BUD/S.” He shrugs, but when he searches my eyes, he offers an additional explanation. “BUD/S is the equivalent of basic training but for Navy SEALs.”

“Gotcha.” I nod. “And, see? You’re basically a vampire.”

His responding smirk is sly. “Maybe I’m a vampire, but you shouldn’t discount what you did at the track. Word gets around, you know, and I hear you were a wild woman in the stands.”

I blush as he pulls the door handle to get down out of the truck. I do the same, but I have to admit a thrill runs through me as I wait for him to come around and help me down. I'm really not sure I'm going to be able to go back to just getting in and out of regular cars myself. It's not going to feel right.

My body slides down his like a whisper, and I look up into the moonlit pools of his eyes. He watches me closely.

Almost immediately, awkwardness at his scrutiny seeps into my pores.

"We should get inside," I babble, just to fill the silence with something. "Chloe's probably here already," I continue when he doesn't move away. "What car does she drive? Maybe we can spot it in the parking lot," I keep going.

Finally shaken from whatever momentary spell he was under, he gathers himself and glances to the car behind him—the one parked right beside us. It's a dark-green Mini Cooper. "This is hers."

"Oh," I whisper. "See? I was right. She's already inside."

Jake nods silently.

I watch, unwilling to move my eyes from his. It's like my brain refuses to understand that I can be the one to break contact.

Finally, he looks away from me and back at Chloe's car before giving me the space to get out of the doorjamb. I comply, and he shuts the door to the truck behind me.

"I guess we should get inside, huh?"

I nod, without mentioning that I've been saying that for the last five minutes. It feels like our weird little exchange is Fight Club, and neither of us is allowed to talk about it.

Which, personally, I'm okay with. I don't have the slightest idea what I would even say—what I would be willing to admit.

That maybe you're kind of, sort of, forgetting the whole reason you're with him is because he's Mr. Bachelor Anonymous...? my mind questions. And maybe, you're getting

a little too lost in a guy who should be one-hundred-percent off-limits?

Yeah, now is not the time to think about all that insanity.

Not the time. *At all.*



Jake

Hand to Holley's back, I guide her into Boogie's with a million things running through my mind. It feels like a jumbled mess, to be honest, and I'm pretty sure a part of me is still back there in the damn parking lot, standing in the door of my truck, staring down at her.

The way she was looking at me felt electrifying—entrancing—and I couldn't seem to look away, no matter how hard I tried or how many times she reminded me that my daughter was inside waiting for us.

I can't be sure, but I think it had something to do with the feel of her skin as I lifted her down from the truck. Warm and supple, and I hadn't expected it when I'd reached up to pull her down.

Because for as cold as she claimed to be, I've never felt anything warmer.

The door swings closed behind us, and the hostess greets us with a smile. "Hey there! Table for two?"

I shake my head, but before I can open my mouth, Holley is already answering. "Thanks, but we're meeting someone." She spots Chloe over the woman's shoulder and points. "And, actually, I see her right there."

The woman glances back to the booth and then to Holley and me. "Enjoy dinner with your daughter."

Holley's mouth gulps like a fish out of water, stumbling over herself to try to explain, but I talk over her, putting my hand to her back and giving her a gentle push again. "Thanks. We will."

Holley's eyes bug out as she looks back at me, but I ignore it and head for Chloe. She has her head down, looking at her phone, but as soon as she spots us, she sets it on the table and forgets it.

I lean down to give her a kiss on the cheek while Holley slides into the seat across from her.

"Hi, Daddy," Chloe greets sweetly, scooting over to make room for me.

I smile in response and take my seat next to my daughter, stretching an arm across the booth behind her.

"So, Chlo, how was your wild day of shopping?"

Instantly, her shoulders sag, and a heavy sigh doubles the air around us.

"That bad?" I ask, and she offers a lazy shrug of her shoulders.

"I mean, for the most part, it was good. I even managed to get Sarah a few things she really wanted." She rests her elbows on the table and blows out a breath. "But you know how Miss Bethanny can be."

I definitely know how Garrett's she-witch of a wife can be. As a responsible adult, however, I don't put a voice to any of the nasty comments that come to mind.

"Anyway, she was really hard on her," Chloe explains. "Hayden is easy, you know? He doesn't care what he wears, so he's kind of like her little puppet. But that just makes it worse on Sarah when she wants to have an opinion of her own."

Holley looks on as we talk, her eyebrows squished together as she tries to crack the code on our conversation.

I smile and clarify a little for her benefit. "My good friend Garrett is a San Diego firefighter, so his schedule is pretty

wacky. Lots of twenty-four-hour shifts and sometimes longer stints when we're having wildfires like we are now."

"Oh, okay," she responds, but I know for a fact that I've just confused her even more.

My smile deepens as I continue. "He's married to Bethanny, and they have eleven-year-old twins, Sarah and Hayden."

Light starts to dawn, and Holley nods in actual understanding.

"Anyway, Bethanny is..." I pause, trying to come up with an appropriate word, and Chloe fills in the gap.

"Satan's mistress."

"*Chlo.*" I try not to laugh as I shake my daughter's shoulder in warning.

"What?" she questions. "She is. She's really rotten to Sarah mostly, but she's not exactly great to Hayden and Uncle Garrett either. Still, she's an adult, so I won't say anything else."

Chloe flashes a knowing look in my direction, and I relent a little, elucidating, "Bethanny is, well, very...self-centered. Garrett and the kids are not." I shrug. "But he's tried really hard to make it work for a whole number of reasons."

"He's tried to make it work because no doubt her tantrums will be worse if he divorces her," Chloe expands.

I shake my head, but not in denial. She's right. I imagine that's exactly why Garrett has put up with Bethanny for so long. Hell, it's bad now—*nearly intolerable, to be honest*—and if he *would* divorce her, he'd still have to deal with all of her ungrateful bullshit, but undoubtedly worse.

For me, though, I wouldn't even be able to stand putting my dick inside her at this point. I don't know how he does it.

"Anyway, enough about *her*," Chloe says, punctuating the last word with certified teenage attitude, and I shake her shoulder again. She ignores me. "I went shopping with them today for back-to-school stuff. Sarah has the best style.

Seriously, she is chic in girl form. I can't even explain how snatched she is."

"How what?" I ask, just as Holley bursts into a half laugh, half cough, spewing some of her water onto the table.

"Snatched," Chloe repeats, and full-blown hilarity fills my lungs and blocks any ability to form words.

Thankfully, Holley gathers herself enough and asks for the both of us. "Snatched? What does that mean exactly?"

"Like, fashionable," Chloe responds, glancing between Holley and me like we've grown three heads. "Stylish? On-trend?"

"Ohh," Holley hums, widening her eyes at me comically, and I return the gesture.

"In my day, that is not what the word snatch meant," I mutter.

Chloe shakes her head, correcting, "It's snatched...with the e-d. It's not snatch, Dad. Geez."

"Dance Hall Days" by Wang Chung starts to play, and I don't hesitate.

I reach over and grab Chloe's hand to slide her out of the booth. She comes willingly, laughing and already bobbing her head back and forth to the music. We've danced to this song since she was a little girl, and I imagine, one day, we'll dance to it at her wedding.

She swings wide to the side, shaking her head at Holley, and then crooking a finger at her.

Holley refuses—a routine occurrence, I'm starting to notice—but just like me, Chloe isn't good at taking no for an answer. She grabs Holley by the hand and pulls her out of the booth and shoves her toward me. I catch her on a spin, swinging her around the floor and then tucking her in as we shuffle from one side to another.

The song fades out pretty quickly, and "Faithfully" by Journey fades in. I expect Holley to pull away, but when she doesn't, I tuck her into my arms and sway us around the floor.

Her head rests on my shoulder, and for a brief second, I almost can't even form a thought.

Damn, she feels good in my arms.

I glance over to Chloe, who looks on from our booth with a smile on her face. It's such a foreign feeling. In fact, I haven't felt like this in so long, I'm not sure I even recognize what *this* is.

Holley's hair smells like lavender as we spin and step to the beat, and a weird memory of Chloe as a toddler flashes in my mind. It was always part of her bedtime routine to put on lavender-scented lotion to soothe her into sleep. As a result, it was always a calming smell to me too. Probably because it signified that I'd survived another day as a dad—that I'd managed to keep my kid happy and healthy and alive.

As a result, smelling it now, in Holley's hair...it feels overwhelming. Calming. Like having her here in my arms at the end of the long day is the peaceful transition I didn't even know I needed.

The thoughts are insane—a seriously big jump to make without any kind of evidence—so I shut them down before they can run away too far.

I don't know what it is about opening myself up that feels so scary, but I can't imagine it will go well if I take anything quicker than one step at a time.

Starting next week, I'm going to be dating several women after years of not dating any at all. I'm going to have enough on my plate.

The song comes to an end, and I spin Holley out and away from my body to bring our time in each other's arms to a close.

Her laughter is soft and smooth, but her smile is loud and bold. She doesn't look lost in the complicated thoughts that I am. She looks like that dance was the escape she needed for a few minutes before her meal.

I gesture for her to lead the way to the table, and she does. Chloe is smiling so big it almost makes my cheeks hurt when

we take our seats with her again.

“What?” I ask, bumping my shoulder gently into my daughter’s.

“Nothing,” she says with a giggle. “Just having a good time.”

It seems suspicious that she’s having the time of her life tonight while she just sits there—not staring at her phone—but I don’t question it.

“Did the waitress come for our order?” I ask instead.

Chloe shakes her head. “Not yet.”

I look over at Holley, who’s started bopping her head to the new song, wistfulness making the dimples in her cheeks appear.

Chloe follows my line of sight to the beautiful woman sitting across from us, adding, “Don’t worry, though. I know what you want. I can order for you and Holley if you want to go dance again.”

I can hear the smile in her voice—and I know her well enough to know I should investigate it—but I can’t seem to take my eyes off Holley as she mouths the words to a song I can’t quite place. I know it’s an eighties classic, but I’m not sure of the title.

“Do you know what you want to eat, Holley?” Chloe asks, trying even harder to facilitate our exit from the table.

“Oh,” Holley says, snapping out of the music briefly to smile at my daughter. “I’ll have the grilled chicken sandwich with fries.”

Chloe nods, nudging me with her shoulder. “Go on, Dad. I’ll order.”

Normally, I wouldn’t take orders from my daughter—especially when she seems to be up to something I’ve yet to nail down—but Holley’s face as she listens to a song I can tell she loves pushes me forward.

“Come on, Holley,” I say, holding out a hand. “One more dance?”

I don’t wait for her answer before grabbing her hand and pulling her back out onto the floor with me. We find our positions easier this time, having done it before, and I loop an arm around her back and pull her in close.

The music is a soft, sweet kind of beat, and we fall into a slow rhythm to match.

“What song is this?” I ask her quietly, and she glances up to meet my eyes.

“I Want to Know What Love Is,” she answers. “By Foreigner.”

“I knew it was an eighties classic,” I comment. “But I couldn’t place it.”

“You like eighties music, Jake?” she asks, quirking a brow.

“What can I say? I guess I’m a little bit old-school.”

“Me too,” she whispers conspiratorially, as if it’s a sin to be a fan.

I simply smile down at her, and once again, the scent of her hair is overwhelming as she tucks her head back into my shoulder and sways. Her body is engaged with the lyrics, so in tune that it feels like a current is running from her skin to mine.

There’s something there—a story—that she’s yet to share. Real heartache and pain and hurt. So much so that, no matter the time that’s passed, I can *feel* it rolling off her in waves.

I pull her tighter into me to try to absorb some of it, to leach off some of the pain, and she doesn’t fight me.

The song builds into the chorus, and so does the beat of my heart. Her head comes up off my shoulder slowly to look me in the eyes, and I don’t squander the gift.

There’s life and light and happiness there in the soft green, but there’s also so much more. Everything dark and missing

and hurtful—it stands out in a forest-green ring around her pupils.

As the song starts to fade, the longing in her eyes, the fight to get rid of all of the pain, only grows.

I don't think about it. I don't pause. I don't plan. But between one moment and the next, my head moves, closer to her—so close I can feel the heat of her breath. It feels ragged against my skin, perfectly pure in emotion, and I need to feel what it's like to touch her.

She turns her head slightly, expecting me to whisper words in her ear, but I have plans of my own—different plans—my lips landing softly on the tiny, perfectly formed corner of her mouth.

She freezes, startled by the touch, but I don't linger; I don't push it further. Instead, I bring myself out of the fog that's been induced by her striking emerald eyes and this poignant song and back into the reality of the room.

“Thanks for the dance,” I whisper to the space between us and step out of our quiet embrace.

Holley just looks up at me with those big green eyes of hers, and it takes all the mental strength I have not to fall back into the entrancing mist, not to reach out and pull her back toward me for an actual kiss. A *real* kiss.

Fuck, what is happening to me?

With a tight blink of my eyes, I push the wild thoughts out of my head and stay strong, choosing to lead us back to the table instead of continuing this confusing-as-hell sexual tension tug-of-war on the dance floor.

When we arrive, Chloe is waiting and so is our food—which I can't explain. There's no way we danced for long enough to one song to merit an order being put in and served, but I don't question it. I don't question how long we were really out there, or if we lost track of time. I don't question when one song turned into two or three or four.

I don't wonder about what any of it means or if Holley noticed.

No, I don't wonder at all. *Not at all.*



Holley

Jake: Where do you want to meet tomorrow?

I stare down at the text message and exhale.

I swear, I can't escape this man. He's either with me or texting or calling or rolling around obnoxiously in my thoughts. But what's truly frightening is the very real possibility that I don't mind *at all*.

Clearly. Because any other woman with half a working brain would have excused herself halfway through tonight's dinner and put some distance between herself and Mr. Eligible Bachelor. Instead, I went back to the table and ate my dinner in an awkward, brain-dead, dancing-induced stupor.

Dear God, the dancing...

Don't even go there, Holley!

I managed to pull it together enough to complete the basic human function of um-ing and ah-ing my way through the ride back to my car, but let me tell you, it was not my most eloquent hour.

Honestly, it's probably the reason Jake is texting me now, rather than just asking me about all of this when we said goodbye this evening.

Eventually, I type out what I hope is an easy breezy response.

Me: How about Grey Street Coffee? 9:00 a.m.?

Jake: That works. And, Holley?

Me: Yeah?

Jake: Don't forget to add our conversation about "wielding a hammer" to the article.

I smile and bite my lip, and then shoot him another text.

Me: I'm seriously regretting giving you my cell number.

He doesn't miss a beat, but the truth is, I wouldn't have expected him to. Jake Brent can volley banter with the freaking best of them.

Jake: Pretty sure you had to. You're my Bachelor Anonymous emergency contact. If I incur any injuries while I'm on these dates or consume food I'm allergic to, I'm legally bound to notify you.

Me: First of all, you don't have any food allergies.

Jake: And secondly?

Me: GO AWAY. I'M WORKING.

Jake: LOL. See you tomorrow, Holley.

I'm going to see Jake Brent again. *Tomorrow.*

Gah.

While thoughts of the day and evening threaten to consume my brain again, I head into the kitchen and uncork a bottle of wine.

Once a very tall glass of Riesling is poured, I head into my small home office, sit down at my computer and fire it up. She's a little old and slow, but she does the job, so I wait patiently as she gets ready to work. I lean over and light a candle and turn on the stereo behind me.

I scroll through my music selection and pull out one of my best romance mixes with music from the eighties and nineties. Something about dinner in that restaurant stirs up my fascination with the music from my childhood.

Lionel Richie's "Hello" comes on, and I take a big gulp of my wine.

Man, what a day. Following Jake through his daily life to prep for this article has equated to being one of the longest days of my life, but I have to admit, it's also been beyond enjoyable. I've done and seen things today I've never done or seen before—to be honest, most of the day felt that way. But Jake was always good about explaining or making me feel included, and I'm extremely grateful.

I could fall into bed right now if I let myself and hibernate for a full twenty-four hours, but I have to stay up and write this article. This is *the* article, the start of the whole Bachelor Anonymous feature. The hook that needs to ensure *SoCal Tribune* readers will keep coming back for more.

Another sip of wine down the hatch, I try to focus my thoughts on what I'm going to put on the page. Our readers *have* to be interested in the bachelor himself, or this will be for nothing at all.

Though, after spending what feels like a full twenty-four hours with Jake, I can say with certainty getting people interested in him shouldn't be a problem.

Unfortunately for me, though, that means a lot of responsibility sits on my shoulders. I have to do him justice somehow in the confines of a short feature. I have to capture his magnetism with nothing more than the written word. *No pressure or anything.*

Yeah. I definitely have to write this article tonight, before I go to bed. I have to get the words down while the day is still fresh in my mind—while I'm still trapped in the emotional web Jake spun for me today.

I shake my head to clear it as it tries to focus back on the end of the night—the one part of the whole day that I cannot think about while I write this—and force it back to the beginning of the day. To the beach and the ocean and the unbelievably confident way he commands them.

To his history as a Navy SEAL and the story he told of Chloe's birth.

To the honesty and openness he showed me, someone he was in no way obligated to welcome into his life and his secrets.

I grab my wineglass again and take another big gulp. My skin is tingling, and I'm not sure if it's from the buzz of the air conditioning kicking on or the hit of the wine or the power of the music playing from my stereo, but I rub at my arms and try to extinguish it.

With a lick of my lips, I reset my fingers on the keyboard and prepare to type. This article isn't going to write itself; I know this to be true. The best thing I can do right now is let the words pour out of me naturally.

I can worry about revising it and perfecting it after the bones are established.

Not Your Average Romeo

Bachelor Anonymous has been selected, ladies. And you better get ready to hold on to your hats...because this single dad brings quite a bit to the table.

A former military man, BA starts his mornings in the swells of the ocean, conditioning his body and mind to be ready for anything. He's strong and capable and downright impressive in his physical ability, but that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to this man. He's emotionally real and raw, and the openness he uses when approaching life, no matter the tragedies he's faced, would bring most men to their knees. But not Bachelor Anonymous. He's a single dad with a cape—and his superpower is unconditional love.

People he cares about aren't limited to a small circle of family and close friends, though. His care and understanding spread all the way to simple acquaintances and employees, and he's just as dedicated to them as his own daughter.

It's impressive to witness, to say the least, and after spending a few short hours with him in the morning, I knew that although he may be seeking his Juliet...he's not your average Romeo.

I take a deep breath and scan through what I've written thus far.

To some, it might seem like hyperbole, the way I've portrayed him. But the truth is, if anything, I've dialed my language back. What's real and ripe in my mind sounds way, way too much like a love letter. I want desperately to fill in more details and personal accounts, but that's not the point of this thing at all.

The point is intrigue. Mystery. A little bit of truth.

I pick up my wineglass and take another gulp, swallowing it without even really tasting it and then taking another gulp for good measure.

I have more to write, I know I do, but the hum of what happened at the end of the night taunts me ruthlessly and puts a restlessness in my legs I can hardly sit through.

I have more to get done, I know it. But I don't know if I can take any more tonight. I need to go to bed.

Decision made, I scroll through the menu to save my progress and exit the window quickly, shoving back my chair, picking up my mostly empty glass and taking it to the kitchen to wash it out.

Soft eighties music still plays from the stereo, and I decide to leave it thrumming in the background. I like a little music as I fall asleep most nights, and truthfully, I don't know that I have the patience to stop and change it to anything else anyway.

I move to the bedroom, into the bathroom to brush my hair and teeth, and then shut the lights and climb into bed.

My sheets are cold, a shocking but welcome feeling against my heated skin as I slink down and take a deep breath.

My head spins as I replay the moment Jake ended our final dance a million times in my mind. The way his body leaned into mine. The feel of his fingertips as they sank into my hip. The smell of his cologne as it enveloped me.

All potent, powerful sense memories I don't know that I'll ever be able to forget without doing a full-on reprogramming of my brain. He is the single most openly affectionate man I've ever been around. And yet, it doesn't seem disingenuous. In fact, it always but always feels truly heartfelt.

But all the rest of it aside, the piece of tonight my whole being cannot seem to let go of is the minute, acute, almost indistinguishable touch of our lips.

It was so small—so minor a moment—and yet, it sits atop a podium in my mind, awaiting its golden medal. How can such a fleeting touch feel like it was backed by the weight of the world? How can the whisper of his lips, a glancing blow to the very corner of my own, feel so colossal?

It doesn't make sense. It's almost antiscientific.

And yet, here I am, obsessing over it with the vigilance of a woman never touched.

I mean, I've had actual penises inside me before. Tongues in my mouth, fingers on my clit—I've had some serious person-to-person contact.

And yet, the most lasting memory of all of it—of all of the touches in the world—has come down to Jake Brent’s lips as they grazed the sensitive corner of my own.

That’s some Twilight Zone bullshit, for real.

Obviously, something has short-circuited in my brain. The wires for momentous and mere blip have crossed, and the consequences are real. No doubt, I’ll have to keep an eye on this. Next thing you know, I’ll be thinking that committing a traffic violation is the end of the world and murdering someone is a tiny slipup.

I mean, am I even going to be able to trust myself anymore?

I sink down in my bed and pull the covers over my head to block out the light of the moon. Even its gentle glow is too stark on a night like this. I need inky blackness. I need isolation. I need the kind of solace only a hard sleep can provide.

Knowing the nature of my mind, I groan and peek back out of my covers long enough to reach over to my nightstand. I yank open the drawer and grab the bottle of Advil PM. Two pills tumble into my hand as I shake the bottle, and it may not be the smartest thing in the world, but with the way I’m feeling, I keep shaking until I reveal a third.

Quickly, I toss them to the back of my tongue and grab the bottle of water I keep on the nightstand to swallow them down.

It’s for the best. Really. I need to sleep without vivid dreams of Jake Brent running me ragged. I need my mind to reset without frying, and a nice bout of unconsciousness seems like the only real way to do that.

Bottle of water repositioned atop my bedside table, I scoot back down under the covers and, once again, block out the light.

A small hum sounds from the streetlight outside my house, but I know it’ll be nothing but a sound machine for my sleep

soon. I sigh heavily, slinking my body down into the mattress more and forcing my shoulders down and away from my chin.

The tension I'm carrying within my muscles makes them feel spring-loaded.

In fact, I'm fairly confident I could launch the space shuttle if someone set it atop one of them and told me to let her rip.

Even with the Advil PM, I'm feeling dangerously restless. I need something to reset my system. Something to send me into a sleep the likes of which I haven't had in far too long.

I need an orgasm.

I slide a hand in between my legs cautiously, curiously. I haven't touched myself—no one has touched me—in six months. The truth is, it hasn't even been a consideration.

I haven't felt sexy. I haven't felt wanton. I haven't felt any drive or libido whatsoever.

And yet, one day with Jake Brent, and you're searching for an orgasm.

I close my eyes and try to shut out the annoying voice in my head. She doesn't know what she's talking about. It's not Jake—it's just time.

Still, the annoying, pesky little voice has him in my head now, and without trying, his face comes to mind as I slide a finger inside myself.

Oh boy, this is all kinds of wrong.

Yet it feels so right.

I slide my finger out and back in again, and the sensory memory of the feel of his hands on my hips as we danced tonight triggers like a movie in my mind. I slip my finger out again, soaked and wet now from quite a bit of excitement, and circle it around my clit.

I see Jake's smile as he looks down at me, and I let myself have that one. It's not a big deal. He's just fresh in my mind. Nothing more.

Imaginary Jake leans down over me, touching his lips to mine, and my back leaves the bed as a wave of pleasure crashes over me. I circle my finger again, stroking at the bundle of nerves, and a low hum starts in the back of my throat.

It feels good. *Too* good.

But I can't think about anything other than coming now. I need it so badly. I need the release of tension. The return to myself. I lick my lips as I reach for sweet relief, but there's a block of some sort in my mind. Something that's keeping me from cresting the hill into heaven.

I grab my phone from the nightstand beside me and scroll through my photos to find the one I took of Jake ripping around the motocross track. I can't use it for the article, obviously, but I couldn't help but take it. Just...for myself.

Release rebuilds quickly, taking over my muscles and allowing my eyes to shut again. I can feel it coming, feel how overwhelming it's going to be, and I moan aloud. So loud that I actually think I've set off an alarm of some sort when my phone starts to ring.

Shit.

I pick it up from its place on the pillow beside me, clicking the button to turn off the ringer and finally dive off the cliff I'm so precariously at the edge of when my dad's voice comes over the speaker.

"Holley?"

Ahhhhhhh! What did I do?

I scramble for the phone, trying like hell to hang it up, but fail miserably, only raising the volume. "Holley?"

"Dad," I say, my voice breathy and frustratingly weak.

I wrestle the phone up and in front of my face, concentrating hard to try to end the call when the camera engages, and my dad's face pops up on the screen.

Sweet Jesus! How am I FaceTiming my dad right now?!

Completely unsure of what my dad could be looking at that moment, I do the only thing I can think of. I yell. First, in a shrieking, indecipherable kind of way, and then in a way that forms actual words as my dad starts to freak out because I'm freaking out.

"Dad, close your eyes!" I scream. "For the love of God, close your eyes!"

"What in the—"

"Close your eyes!" I screech at an ungodly pitch.

"Okay, okay!" he yells back. "I closed 'em! Can't see a goddamn thing, I swear. Can't see a goddamn thing at all!"

I finally find the button to hang up the call and sag back into the bed like a rag doll. My whole body is sweaty, and I'm fairly certain those are tears running out of my eyes. I don't think I've ever felt this close to death before in my life.

Please JESUS, tell me my dad didn't just see me with my hand between my legs. PLEASE. I need him not to have seen my vagina just now like I've never needed anything else in my life.

Immediately, a text comes in, and I scream in horror and throw my phone across the bed in a panic. Only when my heart calms down to a pace that doesn't seem like it's going to land me in the morgue do I pick it up again.

I hug it to my chest until it seems like it doesn't have fangs and then pull it away to look at the screen. My dad's name beckons from the text bubble, and I slam it down on the bed again.

Will I survive the contents of this text? I'm not sure. But I'm doubly sure I'll never survive deleting it without reading it either. I have to know. I just have to know what it says.

With a grimace, I pick it up from the hollow of my comforter and bring it up to my face. I click the button to open it and hold my breath.

Dad: I didn't see anything. I just want you to know that.

I start to take a deep breath when another text message pops into the thread immediately underneath that one without warning.

Dad: But if I had, I'd just remind you that I changed your pull-up all the way until you were nearly five, so this is really no big deal. You refusing to piss on the toilet before you were practically grown was a big deal, but this isn't. If, you know, there was a this. But I didn't see anything. Swear.

Goddammit!

Dad: Also, you shouldn't feel too bad about the potty-training thing either. Doc said it was a trauma thing from losing your mom. Anyhoo, love you and your rights to a healthy relationship with your body.

Mortification isn't a big enough word. I'm going to have to move. Somewhere really remote. But, like, not so remote that Amazon won't deliver. I wonder if Jeff Bezos knows the zip code to hell.

Someone put me out of my fucking misery.

At least I won't have to move if hell's where I decide to go...because I'm already there.

Oh, and don't forget! Tomorrow, you get to finish writing that article that's literally due, like, now, and you get to see Jake again! Should be a fantastic day!

Why is my life like this? Why am I like this?

Seriously. *Why?*



Holley

When I park the car outside the coffee shop where I'm supposed to meet Jake, I look up and into the rearview mirror one last time and gasp.

Holy hell, I look like a crypt keeper from the afterlife!

I rub furiously at the smudged makeup under my eyes and lick my finger when it won't come off without some moisture.

I'd normally never leave the house in this much of a state, but to say everything has been a blur since last night would be an understatement.

I accidentally FaceTimed with my father while I was masturbating!

Okay, real talk? I really don't think he saw my vagina or anything, but he definitely had an idea of what was going on, and falling asleep after that proved next to impossible.

Instead, I fell down one hell of a rabbit hole via an internet thread on Reddit about the trauma of walking in on your parents doing it. The conclusion of my research is pretty clear—I need to find a way to convince my dad to go into counseling as soon as possible.

Logistically, though, that meant I didn't fall asleep until the sun had already risen.

Needless to say, when my alarm went off, it was not a pleasant experience. I didn't jump out of bed and sing with the birds like Mary Poppins or type up a fifty-page dissertation

like I've heard is possible at that time of the morning. Or, you know, finish my article that I definitely should have finished before coming here.

Nope. Instead, I whined. I cried. I even thrashed a little like I was having a tantrum. Frankly, that was pretty liberating, seeing as I didn't have anyone around to tell me to grow up or act my age.

My neighbor Gary most likely heard all of my toddler-like-crazy through the open window of my bedroom, but I've heard that guy have sex with a woman who begged him to lick her asshole, so I'm not too embarrassed by it.

But it did make getting ready in time a challenge.

My hair looks almost intentional in today's age of super-messy buns, and chunky earrings make me look like I half put myself together. But the mascara smears were totally giving me away.

Raccoon eyes fixed, I climb out of the car and head for the entrance of the shop.

I can see Jake through the window, sitting at a table alone and reading the paper while waiting for me.

I pull down the hem of my old AC/DC T-shirt a little closer to the waistband of my cutoff jean shorts and yank the door open quickly. His head comes up at the sound of the chime, and he smiles when he sees me, despite my somewhat Frankenstein-ish appearance.

"Hey," I say in greeting and toss my phone and keys down beside his things that have already established residency on the incredibly small bistro table. "Sorry I'm running a little late. I didn't get much sleep last night."

He directs a wink in my direction. "Stayed up late writing about me?"

HA! Yeah, I wish that were the reason. "Uh...not exactly."

His eyebrows pull together and then lift, and it takes me a minute, but I finally understand what his face is insinuating.

Oh boy, he really has no idea. I nearly laugh. Truth is, Jake, I was diddling my doo-dah to the image of you when my dad interrupted.

My face turns beet red just thinking about it. “Ha. Yeah, no. I... Well, let’s just say it was interesting. But I was not with someone.”

“Interesting? That sounds like something I need to hear.”

“No,” I say vehemently. “You don’t.” I will die before I share with him the true happenings of last night.

Death would be much more enjoyable.

“Oh, come on, Holley. You’re privy to all the details of my life. I’m not allowed to know a few of yours?” he points out with a pout.

My stomach roils, but I hold strong. I cannot tell him about last night. *Cannot.* I’ll never survive it. Once I find a safe and legal way to sign my father up for a lobotomy, I’m taking this sordid tale to the fucking grave.

“No way, Jose. At least, not this detail. You’ll have to pick something else.”

My phone chimes on the table, but before I can pick it up, Jake reaches down and pulls it into his hands, his eyes already scanning the notification. “Uh...that’s my—”

“Oh shit, this isn’t mine,” he mutters and swiftly hands the phone back to me with apologetic eyes. “You...uh...have the same text chime as me.”

Considering we both have the same generation iPhone with eerily similar black cases, I can’t exactly be angry at him, but when I check the screen and see the text preview, instant humiliation blazes to a wildfire inside my veins.

Dad: I’ve seen turkeys doing it before. Kinda funny-looking, if you ask me. All those feathers.

Holy hell! I nearly faint.

If it weren't already apparent, my father is the worst kind of text message wild card.

"I'm really sorry for reading your text, Holley. I honestly thought it was my phone." Jake's voice begs my eyes to meet his. "I'm not the type of shithead who intentionally disrespects people's privacy and personal boundaries."

Unbidden and unwelcome, a memory of Raleigh reading my emails pops into my mind.

If there was ever a man who would purposefully steamroll over my privacy and personal space, it was him. Which, considering he hid an affair from me for over a year, it was the true culmination of hypocritical and irony combined.

"It's okay," I mutter, straddling the line of being completely triggered by my past and unsure of what to say.

"And, uh, your dad...well...he sounds like a real riot..." Jake pauses, his teeth digging into his bottom lip in a half-assed attempt to fight his threatening smile. "You know, if you want to share any more text messages from your dear old dad, I'd be more than willing to lend a listening ear."

Emotional overload engaged, my entire being is on the brink of spontaneously combusting right in the middle of this coffee shop.

I wonder if they'll still be able to spread the ashes if they don't get them from an official crematorium? I'd like to be on a mountaintop. With a view. Maybe by a lake.

My phone chimes again, and I look down to see two more ridiculous messages.

Dad: Deer are horny little bastards too. They chase their women around and slam as many of them as they can.

Dad: It's nature, you know? Natural. Nothing to think about.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, horrified. “Why? Why is this happening to me?”

Jake, ever helpful, takes a sip of his coffee and folds his newspaper on the table. One of my past articles about a local homeless shelter is right on top. I ignore it, though. I have to. My whole entire system is already about to experience a catastrophic failure due to stimulus overload.

“I think I’d like to meet your dad sometime.”

“Stop,” I chastise, trying to silence my phone as yet another message comes in.

Dad: Maybe try it with someone else, though? Can't make grandkids like that, you know. I'd love a couple little buggers running around here someday.

“What?” Jake questions. “He seems like an interesting guy is all.”

I cringe at just how fucking interesting—*more like, insane*—ole Phil Fields is at the present moment. “You have no idea what’s going on.”

“You’re right. I don’t. But since you won’t tell me, and I already accidentally got a teensy taste of what’s going down over there, I’ve made up a story in my head, and man, it’s good.” He flashes a stupid, sexy smirk. “A real page-turner.”

“You’re officially the worst person I’ve ever met.”

“I don’t believe that. If that were the case, you’d already be gone.”

“I have to be here for work.”

He scoffs. “If I were the worst person in the world, I would hope you wouldn’t stick around because of some articles you don’t even want to write anyway.” He pauses to consider me. “Why is that, by the way? I’m sensing something in your past we should talk about.”

“Oh, look,” I announce in the name of distraction. “Another message from my dad. Maybe we should see what it says? I mean, you already took it upon yourself to read one of them.”

“I honestly thought it was mine.” Jake winces. “By the way, it might be helpful in the future if one of us gets a new case. They’re too damn similar.”

I stare at him, my eyes saying, *Ya think?*

But when I notice that he’s looking back at me with an expression I can’t discern, I can’t stop myself from asking, “What? What on earth are you thinking now?”

“It’s just...” He pauses and laughs almost uncontrollably, running a hand through his dark hair. “Now I know there really must be something in your past. No way you’d bring the conversation back around to your dad’s hilarious text messages if there weren’t.”

I choose to ignore that comment by boldly reading my dad’s latest message aloud. I mean, what’s the use in hiding Phil’s nonsense now that it’s been shoved out into the open? “He says, ‘No pressure, though. They say it’s harder to get pregnant—’” I cut myself off immediately, but I continue to read it silently, once I realize just how terrible this text really is.

Dad: No pressure, though. They say it’s harder to get pregnant when you’re trying. So, you should just have sex a lot without trying.

What the hell, Dad!

On a groan, I set my phone facedown onto the table, and Jake’s expression turns amused.

“C’mon, Holley. You can’t leave me hanging like that.”

I sigh, pick my phone back up, and turn it to face him so he can read it for himself.

“Oh, man. Now I *really* want to meet your dad. He gives terrific advice.”

“Phil Fields, ladies and gentlemen. A real wise guy.” I shake my head as my phone vibrates in my hand yet again, and I hate that I even check the screen.

Dad: That’s what your mother and I did. Lots of practice. Practiced a lot after you, too, but didn’t manage to make any more beauties like you. Think I might’ve had something broken.

I groan again, finally succumbing to the pressure, and let my head hit the table. “I’m not prepared for this today. I did not get enough sleep. There isn’t enough sleep in the world to remedy this. I need to go back to bed and wake up in an alternate universe.”

Jake’s chuckles feel good against my skin as he reaches out with a kind hand and squeezes mine. “Relax, everyone has embarrassing parents.”

I lift my head from the table, hope unconcealed in my voice. “Are your parents like this?”

“My parents live in Boise, Idaho,” he counters. “And I’ve never met them.”

“What?”

He shrugs. “They were young. I went into the system.”

“Oh, Jake...”

He waves me off. “Don’t ‘Oh, Jake’ me, Holley. There’s no need for sympathy or sadness on my behalf. I obviously turned out okay, right?”

I look at his big muscles and his even bigger smile. He sure looks good to me. I don’t say that, though. Instead, I offer a small hum of agreement.

“Exactly. No need to waste any time on that. Why don’t I get you a cup of coffee? Maybe it’ll turn your morning

around.”

“Yes, please.”

He jumps up from his chair and then turns back to get my order. Or so I think.

“By the way, if you would like to set up all messages from your dad to forward to me, so I can screen them for you in advance, I’d be more than happy to sacrifice my time.”

I flip him off, and he just smirks like he’s been named Funniest Man Alive. I almost forget to breathe when he leans down, so close to my face I can smell the caramel scent his coffee has given his breath. “Mochaccino?”

“Sure.” I normally don’t go for such a fancy brew, but man, I’m impressed he realized how important chocolate is at a time like this. “And extra whipped cream, please.”

“You got it,” he says, running the backs of his knuckles against the line of my cheek. It’s so gentle, so tender...so unexpected.

I never knew a hand against my face could feel that good.

I watch with interest as he saunters up to the counter and orders my drink with ease. He doesn’t look hurried or uncomfortable or like he’s affected by the traumatic messages he’s just read from my father.

I mean, is he wondering at all about the context? Because he sure isn’t acting like it.

My phone buzzes on the table, and I look down to see what else Chatty Chadwick has to say. It’s a nickname given to my dad by my grandparents, and there’s a reason it’s stuck for all these years.

Dad: You turned out pretty good, though. So, I guess my sperm have something going for them.

Good gravy. How is it possible that receiving a message from your own father with the word sperm in it doesn’t

instantly make your phone explode? There should be a fail-safe built in.

I look back over to the counter to Jake again. He's leaning against the glass of the dessert case, and his phone is to his ear. He's smiling and laughing, and for one tiny, irrational moment, I freak out that he might be telling someone about me and my messages.

But I realize pretty quickly how incredibly self-centered that thinking is. He has other things going on in his life—lots of them. He doesn't need or want to spend all his time spreading info around about me.

I shake my head at myself and look back down to my phone. I only let myself feel slightly strange that the messages from my dad are the only messages I'm getting. Clearly, I don't want to miss having a girlfriend to confide in, but if I open up that Pandora's box, I'll have to admit that I've never really had one.

My dad is the closest thing I've got. On that note, my phone buzzes again. I sigh as I pick it up and read it. My dad is persistent, I'll give him that. I haven't even responded to any of these texts, but that hasn't stopped him from charging onward toward Crazy Town.

Dad: You need a vibrator? I'm into hip Christmas gifts. I could find one for ya somewhere, I'm sure. I bet the flea market has a selection at good prices.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Seriously? I think it's officially time to pack it up for the day. Because I doubt it's possible to recover from this.

Eventually, I find the strength to respond from my hole in the earth after being swallowed right up. It's at least cool enough for sweatshirt-wearing. I might be okay to stay here for a while.

Me: Please. I beg of you to stop right now. Never utter those words to me again, Dad. PLEASE.

Jake takes the seat across from me once again and sets down my coffee. I reach for it like the desperate woman I am and down about a quarter of it in one gulp.

I gasp though, because—*goodbye, taste buds!*—coffee is hot.

“Jesus,” Jake remarks. “Are you okay?”

I nod, though I’m not entirely sure I don’t have third-degree burns on the inside of my mouth and down my throat.

“Oh yeah,” I croak. “Great.”

He raises his eyebrows, skeptical, but I choose not to respond.

Instead, I wave him off and dig in my bag to pull out the folder on Bianca, Bachelorette Number One.

The sooner we get down to the real reason for being here and move away from me, you know, mortifying myself in every way humanly possible, the better.

“What’s that?” Jake asks as I move my coffee cup over to open it in front of me.

“It’s a dossier on your first woman.”

“A dossier, huh?” He quirks a sarcastic brow. “I didn’t know the *Tribune* was a front for the CIA.”

I squint my eyes. “It’s not, like, her blood type or anything. Just basic details she filled out on a questionnaire. You know, like the one you *refused* to fill out...”

He grins.

“Anyway, I figured it would help us since you’re so keen on creating a date specific to the woman.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he says defensively.

Realizing my tone, I correct it swiftly. “No, no. You’re right. It is a good idea. If you’re trying to get to know these

women in one night, it's best to do it in an environment in which they'll thrive."

I flip the first page over since it's nothing more than personal details and move on to the second. "Let's see here," I say, scrolling over her answers with a finger on the paper and my tongue between my lips.

"It says here that she's a big traveler. Loves to try new foods. Hmm," I hum, reading the next line. "She's not officially a food critic, but according to this, she kind of fancies herself as one."

Amusement pops from his lips. "Wow. You don't like her."

I look up, shocked. "What? What do you mean?"

"You didn't hear the way you said that?" he asks, and I scrunch up my nose in confusion.

"No. What did I say?"

"It's not really what you said but how you said it."

"Isn't that something women normally say to men?"

He points at me with a knowing stare. "Don't deflect, Holley."

I shake my head and look back down at the paper, reminding myself not to be so fucking transparent. Just because I know Bianca is the blond-bob-sporting, slightly ditzy woman from my initial meeting with his dates doesn't mean I should go coloring his view of her before he meets her.

I'm extra conscious of my tone as I read aloud the next question on the list.

"Does she have any food aversions?" I slide my finger down to her answer. "None to speak of!" I clap my hands in front of myself, and Jake smirks. "Well, that's good."

"Sounds like I should take her to a nice restaurant, huh?"

I shrug both shoulders. "If that's what you want to do, I think it's a good idea."

He nods before looking out the window, pondering something. I don't dare ask what. When he finally looks back at me, I close the folder and take out my notepad to jot down whatever he comes up with. "Which restaurant do you have in mind?"

"What's that new place downtown?"

My eyebrows draw together as I try to figure out which one he means.

"The one that's supposed to have the best dessert."

Ah, now he's speaking my language.

"MoMo Milan," I say happily, and he grins.

"That's the one."

From what I've heard, they have a homemade donut and ice cream that's absolutely to die for. The only problem is that they have a reservation list a mile out. I could probably pull some weight if I mentioned the paper, but then we'd be risking a leak from someone...

"I...uh...think it's pretty hard to get into."

He waves a hand between us. "I'll take care of it. I know a guy who has connections at restaurants all over. Built a house for him a couple years ago. We're still in touch, and he's always telling me to let him know wherever I want to go."

"Wow. Well, that's handy."

He winks. "I'm a handy kind of guy."

"I really think you need to introduce me to all the people you're building houses for from now on."

"I'll take that under advisement," he says with a little smirk, just as my phone vibrates on the table. I'm almost afraid to look at it at this point, but I do.

Gloria: Where's your copy, Holley? This thing goes to print in three hours!

Shit. For as much as I didn't want another awkward message from my dad, getting that message from my editor—when I know well and good I'm not done writing my article—might be worse.

I start furiously putting away all my shit. Time to pack it up and get back to the grind.

“You're leaving?” Jake asks, and it almost sounds like he's disappointed. When I look up at him, though, he's smiling. I shake off my misgiven feelings.

“Yeah. I have to have my article turned in in less than three hours. I'm right down to the wire.”

“But I thought you were working on that last night?”

“I was. But it's not completely done yet. And, what, are you the deadline police?” I glare at him, and his grin turns sly.

“So, what's it say about me so far?” He waggles his brows. “Let me guess, that I'm charming, handsome, intelligent, and the greatest man you've ever met?”

“*Greatest man I've ever met?*” I repeat with a roll of my eyes. “A little full of ourselves, aren't we?”

The handsome bastard just grins back at me.

My phone buzzes on the table again, and I pick it up to look at the screen. Unfortunately, it's another message from my father, and it's the one that breaks the camel's back.

Dad: You know what looks really funny mating? Turtles. Went in a gas station bathroom one time, and they had a picture on the wall of a couple of turtles going at it. Funny-lookin'.

Without hesitation, I turn off my phone and slam it into my bag, standing from my chair and pushing it in under the table. Jake picks up his coffee and takes a drink, his mesmerizing eyes staring at me over the rim of the cup the whole time.

“So, I guess I’ll see you Tuesday,” I say. “You’ll let me know what time you make the reservation for?”

“Yep.”

“And, you’ll, um, need to get there a little early...and so will I. Just so we can make sure we’re all set before your date arrives.”

“Will do.” His smile is warm. “I’ll see you Tuesday, Holley from the *Tribune*.”

Suddenly, Tuesday seems really far away...

Something in my chest burns, but I ignore it. Surely, it’s indigestion from knowing I’m this tight on my deadline.

“See you then, Jake from the Ocean.”

18

Jake

Unwelcome nerves churn in my gut as I step up to the bar and order a beer. I'd like to order something stronger, but I also don't want to come off as even remotely tipsy on my first official date as Bachelor Anonymous.

Christ. This is nuts. How I ever let Chloe get me into this mess defies logic.

And there's no denying that diving back into this—dating instead of fucking—feels like a colossal change.

I glance back to the table by the bathrooms where I know Holley sits, waiting to take notes on my awkward first-time interaction with a woman I know nothing about.

I'm still looking that direction when a small hand wraps around my bicep and gets my attention.

"Excuse me," she says. "Are you Jake?"

"I am." I swallow past the discomfort lodged in my throat. "Bianca?"

Her mouth morphs into a megawatt smile. "That's me."

She's beautiful—that's clear right off the bat. Long, tanned legs are heavily visible under the short hem of her tiny black dress, and her breasts are perfectly round and perky. She has a blond bob cut with fashionable bangs, and her makeup is done with the hand of a professional. Her eyes are a pale, icy blue, and they sparkle under the lights of the bar.

If we were going strictly off physical appearance, this woman would be the kind of woman I'd have taken to my bed over the years. Of course, the distinction I should be making is that it wouldn't have been my bed.

Instead, it would have been a bed at a hotel or her bed. But never mine. It was always important to me—of the utmost importance—to separate Chloe from the fuck buddies of my life entirely.

They didn't belong in the same compartment as her. Because Chloe—well, it's safe to say she's my world.

I think most dads would say the same about their daughters, but I challenge that I mean it more. When you're in the close heat of the jungle, stalking the lowest of the world's scum, only to get pulled out, put on a plane, flown to the US, and driven straight to the hospital to have your newborn daughter placed in your arms—her mother having passed away during childbirth—something changes in you.

I was all she had, and suddenly, she was all I had too.

A little tiny human, counting on me to see her through life without a mother. The responsibility was nearly crushing—even for a trained Navy SEAL like myself—but she gave me the strength to find something in myself I can't describe.

She gave me purpose. She gave me light in the darkness.

And as much as I was a man with physical needs, I was a dad who lived by a concrete code of morals and honor.

The two were never to cross.

I chuckle to myself. I never thought in a million years Chloe would be the one to rewire the whole thing.

So now, it's about more than that. And Bianca may be beautiful, but I need to know if there's anything under the top layer. Is she funny? Does she have depth? Is she the kind of human I want to be around for more than an hour and a half?

These are questions I never even bothered to ask before. Now, though, they're important.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, sticking out a hand for her to shake.

She takes it readily, but her hand goes limp within mine. I hate to be so judgmental, but a limp-fish handshake is not a great sign. I like strong and bold.

“You too,” she answers. “You’re even better-looking than I imagined.”

I laugh. Well, then. What was I just saying about bold? I guess we could work on the handshake.

“Thanks, I think. Though, I have to admit, I didn’t have much to do with it.”

She smiles a little, but I can tell she doesn’t understand, so I elucidate, “You’d have to thank my parents’ genes for the looks. They’re responsible.”

“Their jeans?” she asks.

My eyebrows pull together, but I push on. “Yep. Their genes.”

“Is it a special kind of denim?”

Oh, for the love of intelligence.

I cough behind my hand to conceal the absolute riot act happening in my head and remind myself to be a gentleman.

But the truth is, with one simple comment, I’m as done as they get.

There is no way in hell or heaven I could stand to end up with someone like Bianca. There’s someone out there for her, I’m sure. But I’m not that guy.

And yet, I have to take the polite, gentlemanly road and sit through an entire dinner with her. The only self-preservation will be my ability not to take any of it too seriously.

“Yeah,” I say instead of wasting my time trying to explain how chromosomes work. “It’s, like, a poly-stretch blend, I think.”

She nods like she understands exactly what I mean.

My brain knocks on the inside of my skull, begging to be set free. I do my best to ignore it.

“Anyway,” I say, widening my eyes and taking a deep breath. “I guess we should head for our table.”

She smiles and nods, and I gesture for her to lead the way.

Once her back is to me, I scan the restaurant, looking for Holley. We’re going to have to have a talk about her picking this one for me—for anybody, really. She can’t convince me she couldn’t have searched for another option.

I finally spot her in the far back corner of the restaurant, her head bent to her notebook as she jots something down with a pen.

When we make it to the table, I pull out Bianca’s chair and get her settled and then take the seat across from her—the one with a direct view of Holley Fields over my date’s shoulder.

I keep staring there until Holley looks up and meets my eyes unexpectedly. It makes her startle, and I take a little perverse pleasure in it. It’s the least she owes me for this.

“So, Bianca,” I begin, forcing myself to look away from Holley and look my date in the eye. “What is it you do for work?”

“I’m a brand spokesperson on Instagram.”

“And...sorry, I’m not really in touch with a lot of today’s social media stuff...what does that entail exactly?”

Her red-painted lips quirk up at the corners. “I talk about different products on my Instagram page, and they pay me.”

“Is Instagram the one with the bird or the one with all the pictures?” I ask. I know Chloe is always talking about them, but I honestly can never remember what’s what.

Bianca’s eyes widen, and her lip, I think, might even quiver. “You don’t know what Insta is? Do you have a profile?”

I shake my head. “I pretty much leave all of that stuff to my teenage daughter.”

She grimaces into a fake smile, and I almost fucking laugh.

Hell, now she's questioning what she's doing here with me, too.

She looks at me again, though, moving her eyes over my face and body and squaring her shoulders. "Never mind."

I take a deep breath and decide to try again. The more effort I make, the quicker this dinner will be over, and I can ask Holley what the hell she was thinking. "Are you from San Diego originally?"

"No, I moved out here instead of going to college."

Right. Okay. I make it a point not to comment on how that may not have been her best idea.

"Have you ever been to Balboa Park?"

She squints as she thinks about it. "Is that, like, the place where they filmed Rocky?"

"Yes," I lie, just because I can, and once again, explaining seems like the most torturous thing in the world.

"Oh my God, no, I haven't. But we should, like, totally go! My brother always loved that movie, and Sylvester Stallone is a total artifact. Posting to Instagram with him would be a huge flex."

She laughs, hard, and the loud, screeching sound of it nearly startles me out of my chair.

I didn't think this thing could get worse, but my God, it just did.

It really, really did.



Holley

Date number one for Bachelor Anonymous is officially underway.

And I have the horrible pleasure of being the journalist who is being forced by her editor to stalk their every move in the name of selling papers.

Thanks a lot, Gloria.

Bianca reaches out and touches Jake's hand flirtatiously. Jake glances down at it with a weird look in his eyes. I try to read their lips as Bianca laughs and pulls her hand away, but I'm failing miserably. Obviously, I should have trained harder for this moment. Taken up lip-reading exercises on the internet. Searched for a coach to help me study. *Something.*

Now all I am is a regular creepy woman in the back of a restaurant staring desperately at a couple on their first date. I was trying to be inconspicuous, but in the future, if I want to have anything to write about at all, I'd better choose a closer table.

It's almost cruel, however, the way that Bianca's laughter carries. Now, I don't need to be closer to hear that at all. It's this horrid mix of Fran Drescher and Janice from *Friends*, and it's ricocheting off the walls of this upscale restaurant like it's on a mission to make everyone's ears bleed.

Jake glances over Bianca's shoulder at me, and I have to wonder if he's thinking the same thing I am. It's a damn shame

I don't know how to play charades well enough to spell it out for him without making a scene.

And hey, that's probably a good thing. Maybe he's not thinking that at all. Maybe he's thinking she has the most beautiful laugh he's ever heard and my insinuating otherwise would offend him.

Bianca cackles like a hyena again, and I cringe.

I have to hope he doesn't find that lovely, though. For the love of God, I hope.

When my phone buzzes in my pocket, I purse my lips in question, but I reach down to pull it out.

Eight thirty at night? My dad is already in bed, and—*man, this is pathetic*—I don't really know anyone else.

For better or worse, Raleigh got all our friends in the breakup. I guess I could be sad about that if I really tried, but the truth is, we were only really friends with his friends from high school and their wives. And, to be frank about it, the wives and I never really jived.

In the end, even the women chose Raleigh's side. Although, I don't know if they had much of a choice. They were married to all his bros, and that group of friends was very much a "bros before hoes" kind of crowd.

I swipe up on the screen to unlock it, my eyes nearly bugging out of my head when I get a look at the sender of the text.

Jake: Just curious, did you get Chandler Bing's approval before setting me up on a date with his ex-girlfriend Janice?

Me: You're bad.

Despite the fact that I was clearly just thinking the same thing, I choose to pretend I'm above such snobbery.

I'm so not above it. Not at all.

And the thing is, I think he knows I'm not.

Jake: Although, I think even Chandler himself would be thinking, "Could this woman's laugh BE any louder?"

I have to fight my laugh as another text rolls through.

Jake: Holley, it's almost like it's staged. Please, I beg of you, find out if she's doing it on purpose.

Me: I'm not asking about it.

Jake: Well, I'm not either. I have to sit through the rest of a date. She might poison my food.

In order to prevent a Bachelor Anonymous protest right in the middle of his first date, I try my hand at reassurance.

Me: Just...ignore the laugh. It's really not that bad.

He looks over Bianca's shoulder and pointedly rolls his eyes at me. And the truth is, he's right. There's a better chance of snow in hell than ignoring Bianca's laugh for the rest of the meal.

Jake: Not that bad? HA. You should take this comedy act on the road, Holley. Also, you're going to owe me so much for this one. Could you really not find a woman who doesn't know the difference between genes and jeans?

I shouldn't text back, I know I shouldn't, but I'm too curious for clarification to stop my fingers from tapping across the screen.

Me: What?

Jake: Oh, and hypocrites. She doesn't understand why anyone would think hippos are an insult. They're "adorbs."

I cover my mouth and look over at him. His eyes are dancing with both pain and the kind of amusement you can't make up.

Apparently, Bianca's ditziness is worse than any of us thought.

Their food arrives as I look on, and Jake glances over Bianca's shoulder at me with relief in his eyes. Something to chew on—something to occupy his mouth. Perhaps, something to occupy hers so she doesn't laugh any more.

I lean farther into my table and make a couple notes that I will definitely not use for my article because they're a little mean-spirited, but I kind of want to remember them later so I can have another laugh.

Maybe that makes me a terrible person, but I have very little to live for, okay? I'm single. I have no pets. My best friend is my dad. And I've been forced to play fucking matchmaker. Really, I'm allowed to have this.

My waiter arrives with my prime rib, and I salivate just looking at it as he sets it down in front of me. I shove my notes to the side, Jake and Bianca and Chandler Bing long forgotten. It's all about me and the meat right now.

I cut into the tender beauty and pop a piece in my mouth, a moan setting off a small alarm in my brain that I'm embarrassing myself. It makes me look up and across the room. Jake is staring at me, but his eyes flit away and back to Bianca before making real and true contact with mine.

I go back to my meat, slicing off another bite and shoving it in my mouth.

Man, that's good. Juicy and tender and moist...

Yikes. *Why does it sound like I'm describing something else all of a sudden?*

I shake off the thought and tuck back into my meal with single-minded dedication. To be honest, I kind of forget that I'm supposed to be watching Jake and Bianca and taking notes about their interaction.

I'm swiping a piece of my broccoli through the juice on my plate and bringing it to my mouth when a shadow appears over me, making my vegetable look darker green.

I look up, the bite poised at my lips, expecting to find my waiter, but instead, Jake stands there, a grin slathered across the entire bottom half of his face.

"Enjoying the meal?"

Shocked, I look behind him at the table I know he and Bianca occupied not long ago and back at him.

It's empty, their discarded napkins piled atop the surface, while the busboy scrapes the crumbs from the tablecloth.

"Where's Bianca?" I say dumbly, broccoli still hovering at my mouth.

"She just left. Date is over."

"Oh." *How long have I been eating this prime rib?*
"Already?"

"It was pretty clear by the time we finished the main course that we weren't a match."

"Oh. Okay." I finally abandon the broccoli, putting it back on my plate and taking my napkin from my lap. "I'll just get my stuff and we can—"

Jake waves a nonchalant hand, pulls out the chair across from me from under the table, and takes a seat. "Sit. Eat. I'm sure you want to debrief, and I'm sure as shit not going to do it on the sidewalk."

“Well, I do need to get some clarification on a few things. I couldn’t exactly hear what you guys were saying from my position.”

His responding smirk calls bullshit. “Get real, Holley. You just want to stay for dessert.”

I shrug and bite my lip, whispering, “Donuts and ice cream, Jake. Both homemade.”

“Yeah, okay.” His responding laugh is infectious. “Count me fucking in.”



Jake

I stare as Holley sucks the last bite of ice cream off her spoon and moans at the taste. It's downright sensual, and I have to clear my throat to stop from saying something entirely inappropriate.

She's the strangest combination of sexy and awkward I've ever spent time around, and I have to admit, it's a million times more interesting than my date with Bianca this evening.

I don't feel bad, though. Bianca was almost as miserable as I was as the night wore on, devastated to be on a date with such a grandpa. No Instagram profile? No Twitter? She couldn't believe it.

I can only hope the candidates get better from here, or I don't see much of a chance of this contest heading anywhere but down Failure Drive.

"Tell me, was the selection of women done randomly? Or did a chimpanzee do the profile matching? Because tonight's matchup was a disaster."

Holley narrows her eyes and points her empty spoon at me menacingly. "Hey now! You better watch it. I picked the women."

I laugh, hard and sharp, and she rolls her eyes. "You're actually taking credit?"

"Listen, you don't know what the applicant pool looked like. Bianca was beautiful...and she sounded way better on

paper than she turned out in person, okay?”

I tilt my head to my shoulder and wait. Just the weight of my stare will be enough to make her rationalize some more, and it’s just so damn fun to listen to what she comes up with.

“The next women are better, I’m sure. Bianca seemed a little thrown by the whole process from the beginning, but I’m positive you have some really good options left. Just think of this as, like, a drug trial or something. By the time your pill goes to market, the side effects will be minimal.”

“You sure you want to go with that for your analogy? Have you ever even listened to the side effects on one of those commercials before?”

I pick up my glass of whiskey to take a small sip as she answers.

“Of course. This is different, I swear. In fact, I’ll personally guarantee no nausea, vomiting, or anal bleeding whatsoever.”

Whiskey and spit fly everywhere, coating the table and her and me in a fine sheen.

She screams a little before breaking out into the most endearing cackles I’ve ever heard. They’re *loud*. Almost offensively so. But the difference between Holley’s laugh and Bianca’s is that it’s rooted in the belly and grows through the heart. Holley’s laugh—hell, Holley in general—is genuine in a way Bianca only pretends to be.

No filter.

I laugh at myself at the thought. *I guess some of what Chloe’s been trying to teach me about this shit managed to stick.*

Dessert consumed and debriefing done, it seems like we’re nearing the end of the night.

Holley fiddles with her napkin, and I roll around the remaining ice in my glass, trying to come up with a reason to stay. And the truth is, I don’t have one.

“So...what did you have in mind for your next date?” Holley asks, and the relief I feel at having a reason to hang around is unexpected.

“Well, the no anal leakage seems like a good place to start.”

Holley snorts. “Foundation,” she says. “It’s all about the foundation.”

A small laugh mixed with a sigh escapes my throat. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about the woman. Do you feel like hanging around to tell me?”

“Uh...sure, okay,” she agrees, and an odd, relief-filled sensation fills my chest. “I actually have the folder right here.” She bends down to dig in her bag. “Let’s see. Who’s the lucky lady?”

I start a drumroll on the table as she sets the folder down, and she doesn’t disappoint on the follow-through. As I come to a crescendo, she pops open the folder and points with her finger, right down at the name.

“Rachel!” she announces playfully, like we’ve stepped onto the set of *The Price is Right*. “Come on down! You’re the next contestant on Bachelor Anonymoussss!”

I chortle, putting my hands together in a golf-style clap so as not to disturb the other customers any more than we already have, and Holley’s smile grows so big it almost wraps around her face twice.

Damn, she really is beautiful.

“What else does your little folder say? What do I need to know about her?”

“Well...” She hums as she pauses long enough to read. “Rachel is an outdoor enthusiast. She’s an adventurer.”

“That’s great,” I remark with a skeptical smirk. “But that’s not her career, is it? An adventurer? I don’t want another social-media-obsessed, cackling Barbie situation.”

She bites her lip, her green eyes dancing as she holds up a finger and scans the file some more. “Nope! She is...an

elementary school teacher.”

“The matchmaking chimp did a little better on this one, I think.”

Holley glares at me but reads on some more. “She’s allergic to shellfish and tries to eat healthy.”

I nod. “That sounds reasonable.”

“But she does allow herself the occasional treat of low-calorie, high-protein frozen yogurt.”

Holley scrunches her nose, and I have to laugh. “That seem like a red flag to you?”

“I mean, it’s not ideal,” she answers honestly. “But there’s a lot of pressure as a woman to remain the perfect body type. Maybe she just needs a little encouragement to loosen up.”

“We’ll see,” I say.

Holley’s face changes slightly, but I can’t place exactly how. “We will.”

“When will we see?”

She looks at her phone calendar, holding up a finger for me to wait as she scrolls. “Uh, Saturday. The article highlighting Date Number One will run in this Sunday’s paper, and that will give me plenty of time to get Date Number Two’s article finished up and ready to print during the week.”

I almost open my mouth to let her know I took the time to read last Sunday’s feature article, the one that discreetly introduced me to the world. Truthfully, I was so fucking curious to see what Holley had to say, I grabbed the paper that morning before heading to the beach for my daily water workout.

And, let me tell you, she certainly had things to say.

Pretty great fucking things, to be honest.

But I probably shouldn’t read anything into that, *right?*

It’s her job to write—

“Does that day work for you, or...?” she asks, her voice pulling me from my thoughts.

“Um, yeah...” I pause and clear my throat. “That works. Let’s do...a four-wheeler date. At Blane Start Park. There are riding trails that lead to a great lake where we can picnic—without shellfish, of course.”

“Of course,” she repeats, scribbling notes down on her pad. “A four-wheeler date?”

“I’ll bring one for you to ride too. Follow us along.”

“Uh, no thanks.” Holley nearly chokes. “I’m better off on solid ground.”

“Oh, c’mon, Holley,” I push. “Haven’t I shown you how fun it is to challenge yourself?”

She raises one perfectly groomed brow. “Like, when?”

“Swimming in the ocean...riding on a motocross bike...pretending you’re a state inspector,” I remind her. “Do those ring any bells?”

She glares at me but scribbles something else down on her pad that I assume signifies her tacit concession.

I smile at the table, holding myself back from saying anything that would really rub it in.

My phone buzzes on the table, and I pick it up to see who it is. It’s a message from Chloe, so I click it open to read it immediately.

Chloe: Just got home. Will you be here soon? The attic fan is making that freaky sound again.

I smile to myself. Normally, any kind of anxiety on Chloe’s part would send me into violent action, but that attic fan has been making the same noise since we moved in to the house. It’s not even something to fix. It’s just the sound of moving air. If that’s what has her spooked, I doubt there’s anything wrong.

Still, I do my due diligence as a dad and cover all the bases.

Me: I'm sure it's fine, but lock all the doors and keep your phone with you. I'll be home in about fifteen minutes.

Holley's looking at me when I finish typing, understanding in the arch of her eyebrows. "Time to go?"

"Yeah, I think so." I toss my napkin onto the table before standing. "How about you? You headed home?"

"Yep." She stands to gather her things, putting the folder on Rachel back in her bag along with her notebook. "Hopefully I'll get some much-needed sleep."

"Sleep? Oh, I'll probably just hang out in my lair," I tease.

She laughs. "I bet you will."

"And I guess I'll see you on..."

"Saturday," she supplies for me. "I'll make sure everything is ready to go and meet you at the park."

It feels strange, knowing I'm not going to see her for the next few days, but it makes sense. I stick out a hand for hers, and she takes it immediately. We complete a firm, sturdy handshake and then go back to standing across from each other awkwardly.

"Be safe getting home," I tell her quietly.

"You too, Jake."



Holley

The afternoon sun warms my shoulders as I walk from the parking lot toward the front entrance of YOLO Yoga. The door is standing open, letting some fresh air breeze through, and I step inside with my freshly dusted and disinfected pink mat tucked beneath my arm.

The damn thing was a mess this morning when I located it in the back of the hall closet. Honestly, the last time I used it was the day before I found out Raleigh's and my life together was a total fucking sham.

I used to exercise every day, chasing the perfect body and energy I needed to be the kind of wife Raleigh would be proud to have on his arm at company events and the like. Surrounded by women who looked like real-life versions of *The Stepford Wives*, I'd been determined to at least maintain the physique that had drawn Raleigh to me in the first place.

I can see now how toxic my whole lifestyle was—leaning so heavily into someone else's opinion of me and hingeing my decisions about my own body on it—but when I was in it, all I could see was the outside world encroaching on our bubble.

I didn't want it to burst.

Clearly, my tactic worked really well.

Gina looks up from the front desk and smiles when she sees me. I do my best to return the gesture, but I have to admit, I feel like the failures of my life and my months-long lapse are written all over my face.

“Holley!” she greets cheerfully. “It’s so good to see you again! How are you?”

The tension in my smile eases a little, thanks to the fact that she isn’t pushy or forward about asking where I’ve been.

“I’m doing pretty well, thanks. How are you?”

“Doing great. You’re going to love today’s class. Judy *always* makes it fun on Wednesdays.”

“That’s fantastic.” I smile at her simple familiarity and fond memories of Judy’s classes. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

With a little goodbye wave toward Gina, I walk past her reception desk and head through the door that leads to the large studio. Since the room is already filled with quite a few people, I find a spot closer to the back of the space and roll out my mat.

A few of the women chat with one another, and I think I might recognize some of them, but for the sake of my sanity, I keep to myself.

I spend the next several minutes stretching and getting ready for class before Judy walks in and greets us.

“Good morning, everyone!”

We all chirp our hellos back as she sets up her own mat and grabs a wire from the stereo to hook up her phone.

As a soft melody begins to play, she leads us in our opening stretches and meditation, and then starts the routine of taking us through all of the harder poses and movements.

Being back at yoga for the first time in almost seven months feels both refreshing and challenging, but I’m not nearly as flexible as I used to be and when asked to perform, my muscles put up a much larger protest.

Following Judy’s lead, I push my hands into the mat and adjust my body into Downward-Facing Dog and exhale. Rapidly, along with a burst of air, I feel as though a tremendous number of burdens lift from my muscles.

My ex-fiancé and his new wife and baby.

The feelings of inadequacy and identity loss.

The desertion of motivation.

All of it leaves me in a rush, and when I take a deep, steady inhale of air back into my lungs, only a fraction of the tension that was there before comes back.

It's taken me a while to separate what I used to do from what I *want* to do. And at first, it felt like I needed to make a clean break from everything. From my neighborhood, the people I knew, the routine I'd established. It all felt rooted in Raleigh Reynolds. Not nearly enough of it felt rooted in me.

But the time off has done me good, and I really have to say, I feel like I'm finally grasping at a whole new perspective. A fresh, invigorating outlook on my life.

I can still be the woman I was before, with a few modifications. But I can also be better. I just have to find out exactly who I *want* to be now.

The truth is, I love working out. Not during the struggle of getting back into shape—I'm not a psycho—but when I'm feeling good and challenging my body regularly, I feel energized and ready to take on the world.

I think I'd like to feel that consistency again, but with much fewer restrictions on the rest of my life. Work out, get energized—but for the rest of it? Just let it come. I don't want to restrict carbs or count macros or any of that bullshit, and I don't want to focus on losing five pounds for the rest of my life.

I want to feel healthy. Strong. Confident. But I want to be those things while also eating a fucking donut when I want to.

My phone buzzes from its spot on the floor, and I reach over as inconspicuously as possible to glance at the screen. It's a message from Jake, and my impulsive excitement to see what he has to say almost throws me completely off-balance.

A few of the other class-takers notice, but they mostly pretend to mind their business as I pull the phone onto my mat and directly under my body to safely read it without falling flat on my face.

Jake: Weirdest thing happened this morning. I almost drowned in the ocean.

Unable to stop myself, I quickly type out a reply.

Me: What??? Are you serious???

My phone vibrates again almost immediately.

Jake: Oh, wait. No, I didn't. I got confused. That's something you do.

Sarcastic bastard. I snort to myself and send an equally sarcastic response back.

Me: Pretty sure I only do that when I'm trying to save YOUR ass from drowning.

Jake: Fair enough. How's your morning?

Me: I'm at yoga right now.

Jake: You take yoga? Why is this news?

Me: Probably because you don't really know me. And because I haven't been in several months. Now leave me alone so I can pay attention to my yoga instructor, Judy.

Jake: You're in the middle of yoga RIGHT NOW?

When I look up, the rest of the class has moved on from Downward-Facing Dog, and I look like a lunatic still hanging out in this position.

Shit.

After I ignore his message so I can move into Warrior Pose, a smile crests my lips as I think about what Jake might be up to right now. By this time of morning, he's probably on a jobsite somewhere, giving Matt and Johnny or some other crew member a hard time.

The man likes to tease and have fun, that's for damn sure.

My phone vibrates on my mat again, and as much as I want to read it, I know I shouldn't. Which is why I kick it over to my pile of stuff and settle into Camel Pose.

From here, all I can do is count the ceiling tiles anyway. I'll read the rest of his messages and respond when class is over.

When Judy moves on to some of the more complicated poses like Cow Face Pose and Bakasana, it becomes startlingly clear how much my time off has impacted me.

Especially, but not limited to, my face. *I really used to be able to support myself with my arms, but hot damn, they just snapped like twigs and moved right out from under me.*

"Ow," I mouth as I push back up from wrecking directly into the pink material of my mat. I look like a plane that took a nose dive into a mountain, and I have to work my jaw to get the kink out of it.

Damn, I'm going to have to put some serious work in to get back in shape enough to handle the advanced classes I used to take.

Judy wraps things up by bringing us back to Child's Pose and walking us through the meditation steps that focus solely on controlling our breathing.

I take the opportunity to officially let go of the weight of the past—at least, most of it.

It's high time I start thinking about myself now. Looking for the things I want and going after them.

Once the class is dismissed, Jake's unread messages pop directly into my mind, and I grab my phone and read through them before cleaning and packing up.

Jake: I guess you are then, huh? Ha-ha.

Jake: I'm trying to picture you doing yoga, and I'm not sure I can.

Jake: Wait. You know what? Now, I can. I get it. It definitely fits. What else do you do that I don't know about, Holley from the Tribune?

Shaking my head on a laugh, I toss my phone into my bag and slip my socks and tennis shoes back onto my feet.

After I wipe down my mat with cleaner and paper towels and pack up the rest of my belongings, I wave goodbye to Judy and Gina and head for my car.

Once inside, I take out my phone and get ready to answer him. There's already another one from him waiting.

Jake: Matt is wondering when you're going to be at our next job. I told him you had very important inspector duties to tend to. I'm not sure if he believed me.

I finally type out a message.

Me: It almost seems like you miss me or something today. Or maybe you're bored. Is that it?

His reply is immediate.

Jake: I just got everything done so quickly without having to wait for you to climb into the truck that I've run out of stuff to do. And so now, yeah, I'm bored.

Me: Sure. Blame it all on me.

Jake: What else am I supposed to do? I can't LIE to you, Holley.

I shake my head. For some reason, when he picks on me, it always makes me feel good. I guess it's something about the way he does it.

Me: I have to go. I'm supposed to meet my dad for lunch in fifteen minutes.

Jake: YOUR DAD? And you didn't invite me? How is this possible?

I smile as I type.

Me: Because you're BA, not me. I don't have to open the trapdoor to my life. lol

Jake: Yeah, but...it's your dad. He seems so fun.

Me: Maybe you can meet him one day. When this is all over.

Jake: You promise?

Me: Sure.

Jake: I'm holding you to that.

I'm not sure why, but it kind of feels like I just signed an oath in blood.

I drop my phone into the cupholder and start the engine. It's like an oven in here, and I'm sweating profusely, but when I was texting with Jake, I was too preoccupied to notice.

I back out of the spot and take off. Lord knows, I have to get to the restaurant quick, or I'll have to risk eating penalty pickles.

Trust me, it's a long story.



The clock on my dash reads three minutes past twelve, so I'm barely even in the spot before I slam on the brakes, engage the emergency brake, shut off the engine, and jump out like my ass is on fire.

My dad is already inside, of that much I'm sure, but I can only hope he has his watch set a few minutes behind the clock in my car.

I bob and weave through the crowd of people at the front entrance, trying to make my way into the restaurant and scan the tables quickly for his big, freckled, bald head. It sticks out in a crowd and I find it fairly quickly, and I'm not all that ashamed to admit, I actually elbow a couple people out of my way to clear a path to the table.

On quick feet, I book it double time and slide into the booth like I'm diving onto the top end of a slip 'n slide.

My dad watches it all, waiting for me to sit up and look him in his faded-gray eyes.

“You’re late.” He turns his wrist and clicks his watch to stop the timer, and my shoulders sag in defeat. *Dang it.*

“Looks like you owe me four pickles, Holl.”

“Maybe your watch is fast, Dad. I mean, it could be—”

“This is a Casio G-Shock Tactical watch, Holley Marie,” he cuts off my excuses. “It’s a military watch, and the military doesn’t make mistakes.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but I don’t argue. There’s no arguing with Phil Fields about time. I know better.

“Four minutes late equals four picks.”

“Will I ever outgrow the pickle penalty?” I whine. “I’m thirty-three, Dad.”

“I don’t care how old you are, doll. You don’t outgrow the penalty. There is a way to beat it, though. You stop—”

“Being late. Yeah, I know,” I grumble, and a hearty chuckle escapes his throat and vibrates his rounded belly.

And right on cue, as if he freaking timed it, a waitress drops off a plate of pickles, and it only encourages more damn chuckles from Phil Fields.

Oh yeah, just yuk it up at my expense, old man.

“I don’t understand why you hate the penalty so much,” he says once he gets control of his hilarity. “You like pickles. It’s why I picked ’em in the first place.”

“I like pickles when I want to eat pickles,” I counter. “They taste different when they’re punishment.”

He shakes his head in amusement. “Girl, there are some parts of you I’ll never understand. Like a four-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, I swear.”

“You like my complication,” I challenge, and his responding grin is affectionate.

“I do. You and your mother, both complex women. Never loved two of ya’s more, though, that’s for sure.”

I smile as he mentions my mom and force myself to start munching on the stupid pickles. They’re good here, I’ll at least give them that. Garlicky without being too much.

“Am I really like her?” I ask, only a hint of sadness tingeing my words. Sometimes I miss the fact that I didn’t get to know her better, but I know what I’ve got in my dad, and I can’t claim to be anything other than lucky.

“Oh yeah,” he answers with a nod, leaning into the back of the booth and stretching out his arm. “She was just a little bit older than you when she passed, and I know you were probably too young to remember, but you act just like her. A little awkward and a little lost sometimes, but a whole hell of a lot more heart than the two of those combined.”

I look down at the table and back up again as he considers me carefully. I don’t know what he’s looking at, but there’s an analysis in his eyes.

“You’re looking less lost today than you have in a good while, though. What’s shakin’?”

I shrug off his question. “Working on a new assignment for the paper. Went to yoga this morning. Nothing too groundbreaking.”

“This that Bachelor Anonymous whosie-whatsit?”

A blush creeps up into my cheeks, but I have to laugh. “Have you been reading my articles?”

“Well, yeah,” he says with obvious attitude. “I read everything you write, Holl, you know that.”

I *do* know that. My dad is the most supportive guy in the universe, and he’s been that way since the moment I was born. When my mom died of breast cancer the December before I turned six, he damn near doubled his efforts. I don’t remember all of it, but I can see it like a storybook, all told through photo albums.

His dressing up like the Beast when I wanted to be Belle that first Halloween after my mom died. Him sipping tea from my brand-new tea set the following year and talking to my stuffed animals. Him wearing his beaded bracelet I made with my jewelry kit for *six* years until it broke. It was sparkly pink, but he didn't care. He wore that thing with pride, no matter where he went.

When I was ten, he even let me practice painting my nails by painting his. He left the polish on until it all chipped off on its own.

Honestly, I couldn't have asked for a better dad—even when he had to be the mom, too.

“That Bachelor fella seems like the real deal. Was he really a Navy SEAL?” he asks.

“Yep. He was.” The truth is, Jake is all the things I wrote about and so much more. There's no way an article could even begin to capture his entire essence. It doesn't matter how well I write it; I'll never do him justice.

“What's that?” my dad inquires, pointing at my face. Immediately, my brows draw together, and I start to wipe at the skin.

Do I have pickle juice on my chin or something?

“What's what?”

“That look.”

I scrunch up one side of my face. “There's no look.”

“There was a look. You think I don't know when you have a look? I've been studying your expressions for thirty-three years, and I know 'em. That look there means somethin'.”

“Are you seriously trying to claim you know my looks better than I do?” I ask, and he doesn't hesitate to respond with his usual colorful banter.

“You bet your asshole, sweetie. Is my name Phil Fields?”

I snort. “Unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately?”

“Phil Fields?” I shrug. “I hate to tell ya, Pops, but your parents did you dirty.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I hope it doesn’t mean what I think, Holley Marie.”

“I pretty much guarantee it doesn’t.”

“Stop trying to distract me,” he responds in a huff. “You’re avoidin’ this, which makes me *really* know there was a look.”

“Dad, there wasn’t a look. Can we just drop it?”

He narrows his eyes. “I’ve been watchin’ you for the last months, draggin’ your carcass through life, just barely hangin’ on. Dead eyes. Dead heart. You’ve been coughin’ up oil like a fuckin’ ’69 Nova with a rotted-out pan.”

Oh, here we go...

“Dad, you know I don’t know what any of these car things mean.”

“But your engine is runnin’ a lot smoother today, girl,” he continues, completely ignoring the fact that his car metaphors *still* make zero sense to me. “And I just wanna know why.”

He stares at me, waiting for a response, and all I can do is lift up both shoulders.

“I don’t know...” I pause, trying to find an answer that will prevent more questions and car lingo. “Time, I guess? I’m starting to get over everything that happened. Moving on, you know?”

“That ain’t it.”

A defeated breath leaves my lungs, and I slam my hands onto the table. “Then I don’t know what it is! Or what you’re even seeing, for that matter. Maybe you need to get your eyes checked?”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and without thinking, I pull it out and glance down at the screen. Another text from Jake beckons, and I can’t stop myself from opening it up and reading it.

Jake: Tell your dad I said hello and that I agree with him that sex is a very healthy, natural thing that should include a lot of practice. Except for my daughter. At least, not yet. I mean, I don't want to be one of those dads who says never, but by God, I hope it's never. Not really, though, you know? I just hope the guy's not like any of the ones I know.

I smile at his fatherly ramble and shake my head.

“That,” my dad says, startling me. I look up from my phone, and he’s pointing a beefy finger in my face. “That’s the look. That’s the look right there.”

I look back down at my phone and panic a little.

Is he right? Is Jake Brent the reason I'm not applying for the job of crypt keeper anymore?

Now *that* is a question I'm in no way ready to answer.



Jake

“So, what does this change?” I ask after Matt provides a concise update and explanation of the redline changes we’ve had to make on this house.

Some of it was inevitable—the kind of stuff you can’t know until you’re deep in the trenches on a project—but there are a couple mistakes the architect made that are really going to cost us.

Fuck, this certainly isn’t how I wanted to wrap up my Friday.

“The roofline is going to be pitched a little differently in this gable,” Matt answers, pointing down at the blueprints on the makeshift table in front of us. “And the architect didn’t leave enough head height for the stairs here. So, since we’ll never get them in the way it is, we’re going to have to reframe and change the pitch.”

“That’s going to change the elevation of the house,” I comment, and he nods, already well aware of this factor. “Dammit.” I groan and run a frustrated hand through my hair. “Tell me it’s not going to look like shit.”

“It’s not going to look like shit,” Matt assures, qualifying, “It *could*. But Johnny and I will make sure it doesn’t.”

On a sigh, I give him my approval. “All right, man. I trust you. Do what you have to do to make it right.”

Matt disappears with the blueprints, already jumping back to work, and the sounds of crunching gravel urge my eyes over to the spot where everyone parks their vehicles.

Instantly, I spot a familiar truck pulling to a stop beside mine.

I make my way over just as my buddy Garrett hops out of the driver's seat and waits for my arrival with a smile. His beard has clearly been shaved off since I saw him last week, but stubble is making a solid comeback.

"Where were you the other night?" Garrett asks, popping a peanut into his mouth and leaning against the hood of my F-350, a formal greeting of any kind apparently too difficult. "I called the house, but Chloe said you were out. I pushed, but no details. Very cryptic bullshit, if you ask me."

An exasperated chuckle leaves my lungs. "What? No hello?"

He holds out his free hand in front of himself. "You see me, don't you? That was my hello."

I shake my head and grab a peanut from his plastic jar. I have a pretty good idea the night in question is *Tuesday*, the night I had to suffer through dinner with an Instagram-loving woman named Bianca. But still, since I'm really not ready to get into any of this Bachelor Anonymous shit with him yet, I take the chance that I might be able to deflect him.

"What night?" I feign confusion. "I've been home all week. She probably just didn't feel like yapping with you."

"Yeah, whatever, dude." He narrows his eyes. "It was Tuesday. And I know for a fact that you were out. Truthfully, Chloe sounded pretty fucking giddy about whatever it was that you were doing."

I lean into the bumper, sliding my sunglasses out of my shirt and slipping them on. I need them to block out the sun, but mostly, I need them to block out Garrett's stare. The two of us have known each other way too long. I don't need him reading me like a goddamn open book.

I sigh, cross my arms over my chest, and admit, “I was on a date, okay?”

“Wait, what?” Garrett nearly shouts. “Like, with an actual woman?”

“No, with a hologram,” I retort, rolling my eyes and groaning. “Yes, a woman. You’d think you’d be less excitable with all the action you see as a fireman.”

He ignores my deflection and carries on like I didn’t even speak.

“Was this like a fuck-and-run kind of thing, or are you trying to get serious with someone?”

I snort at his terminology. He really has a way with words. “Somewhere in between. I don’t plan on there being a second date.”

“Bummer.”

“I’m happy,” I argue. “I don’t really need someone, man.”

“Oh, trust me, I know you have that whole independent vibe down pat,” he interjects. “But even you can’t deny the fact that you’re even going on dates in the first place is saying something must have changed...” He pauses, waiting for my response to his assumption.

A correct assumption, but whatever.

“Chloe...feels like I need to find someone.”

“Okay, but let’s be real. As much as you love that girl, you’re not going to go on dates just for her benefit. Something has you flipped, too.” He stares at me like he’s trying to reach inside my brain and find out all my secrets. “I just don’t know what it is yet.”

Instantly, Holley’s face flashes in my mind, but we haven’t talked since we texted on Wednesday.

Yeah, and it’s bugging you a little that you don’t know what she’s been up to...

I’m sure she’s busy. We both are.

But I won't dispute that it'll be good to see her tomorrow.

"Nothing has changed," I respond. "I'm just going on a few dates, starting with date number two tomorrow, to show Chloe that I'm trying. But that's it, man. I doubt I'll end up anything but single when it's over."

Garrett nods. And I get why. I sound believable and confident, and ninety percent of me says I am. Almost two weeks ago, though, that ninety would have been one hundred.

Which leaves me with one question.

Where in the hell did that ten percent go?



Holley

When Jake steps down out of his truck in the bright, beating sunlight of Saturday afternoon, he's never looked better. He has a trailer hooked to the back hitch with two four-wheelers strapped on it, but he doesn't stop to do anything with them. Instead, he slams the door behind himself and starts walking in my direction.

Dressed in jeans that hug his ass but don't look too tight, an aqua-colored T-shirt, and square-toed brown boots, he's like the outdoorsy cover model on any lifestyle magazine—except better.

Maybe it's because I went a full three days without seeing him, and my memory somehow blocked out just how handsome he is, but as he walks toward me through the parking lot, it's like he's backed by a heavenly glow.

Stop ogling and get it together, woman!

I turn to get something else out of my trunk—anything will do, really, as long as it gives me something to do other than drool all over my chin—and wait impatiently for his arrival.

I'm still poking around looking for something slightly credible when his voice startles me so much, I jump enough to bump my head on the trunk.

“Hey, Holl.”

I wince, and he reaches out immediately to put a concerned and protective hand to my head, pulling me away

from the trunk.

Somehow, when I stand to my full height and look him in the eyes, my fingers are gripping a freaking tire iron. *Nice one, Holley.*

He glances down and notices it, and a tiny smirk makes one perfect cheekbone arch higher.

“Have some tire changing to do?”

I try to think of an excuse fast, but I really could use some more time. “I was, um, looking for my umbrella and must have mistaken this for the handle.”

I stop just short of slapping myself in the forehead.

Is that really the best thing I could come up with? Did I hit my head harder than I realized?

Part of me kind of hopes so, just so I’ll have a legitimate reason for that lame-ass excuse. Some might say you can’t put a price on a concussion, but I beg to differ.

Desperate to move on from my laundry list of embarrassing moments—*the day has just started!*—I throw the tire iron back in my trunk, slam it closed, and turn back to Jake, shading the sun out of my eyes with a visor fashioned from my hand.

“So...are you ready to do some four-wheeling type things and stuff?”

“Four-wheeling type things and stuff?” His lips crest into a tickled smirk, and I groan.

“Whatever. You know what I mean.”

“Aren’t you a writer, though?” he pushes, and as much as I’d like to hit him back with some witty retort, that’s kind of exactly the problem.

“I’ll have you know that for some writers, words are so much easier to convey on the page than verbally, and I just happen to be one of them.”

He smiles then, a genuinely friendly smile, and then finishes it with a wink. “I’m teasing, Holley. You do just fine

with words either way.”

“Can I take that to mean you’ve been reading the articles?”

He nods and then waggles his eyebrows. “And some of your old stuff.”

“What? Where are you finding my old stuff?”

He shrugs his hands into his jean pockets. “I might be a dinosaur, but I do know how to search the internet.”

Oh. Right. The internet. Somehow, I’d forgotten that little beauty existed for a moment.

Instead of verbalizing yet another blunder, I hum and nod, hiking the little backpack I put together with my notebook and my lunch and a couple other things like sunscreen and bug spray up on my shoulder.

“Think we should get those things unloaded?” I ask, and Jake nods.

“I’ll go do it now.”

As he heads for the trailer, I go to my back seat and grab the heavy quilted blanket I’ve brought for them and the picnic basket packed full of snacky-type foods.

It’s heavy, but I manage to hook it over my elbow, prop it against my hip, and hump its weight across the parking lot to where Jake is working diligently on taking some straps off the machines.

I watch as he works, and a bead of sweat runs down between my breasts. It’s hot out—it’s August—but I bet if you asked the weatherman to check, he’d say Jake Brent doing manual labor makes the heat index shoot up an additional ten degrees.

He glances up and spots me with the basket, and then jumps down to take it and its weight from me swiftly.

“Damn,” he says when he feels how heavy it is. “How much stuff do you have in here?”

“A lot?” I shrug. “No shellfish, though.”

He laughs at that. “That’s good. And probably for more than one reason. I don’t know that shellfish is what I think of when I picture picnic food anyway.”

“I’ve actually never been on a real picnic,” I admit. “Hopefully, I didn’t completely miss the mark.”

His eyebrows draw together as he considers me. “You’ve *never* been on a picnic?”

I shake my head. “It’s...well...the guy I dated for a while...it wasn’t really his vibe, you know? He was into nice restaurants, fancy bars...that sort of thing.”

He nods, but there’s something in his eyes that doesn’t quite read as affirmation. I’m not sure what he’s thinking, but to be honest, I’m a little too scared to ask.

My heart is already beating a million miles a minute over a teeny, tiny peek into my vulnerability. I can’t even imagine what I’d say or do—maybe pass out—if he tried to ask me more.

Luckily, he doesn’t, taking the basket and climbing up onto the trailer to strap it to the back four-wheeler instead. Once it’s secure, I toss him the blanket, and he puts that in the front compartment.

When he notices me fanning my face with my hand, he smirks and asks, “Want to just meet back at my house after this one for the debriefing?”

I’m not too proud to agree. “That works for me.”

“Good. I can just bring the four-wheelers home with me for the night, then.”

Now that I’m empty-handed, I’m markedly more awkward. I do not know where to put those pesky little paddles attached to my arms.

Do I vogue?

Do I put them in my nonexistent pockets?

Do I let them hang limply at my sides?

I just don’t know.

My flight instinct is buzzing, but I stand there anyway as Jake backs the first four-wheeler off the trailer and drives it over to the entrance of the trail, and then he walks back and reverses the second one off, pulling it to a stop next to me.

He's put his sunglasses on at some point during all this, so I can't see his eyes anymore, but he's definitely smiling as he holds out a hand.

"Want a ride?"

"Oh, no. No, no, no. I can walk."

"Do we really have to fight about this every time?"

Foiled by a threat I know he'll follow through with—staying bitterly determined until I give in—I jump up on the back, facing away from him so my legs can swing freely.

He sighs, clearly unimpressed with my positioning, but he doesn't say anything as he rolls it slowly over to the head of the trail and pulls it up next to the other four-wheeler.

I jump down as he cuts the engine, and then he swings a leg over and climbs off too.

Neither of us says a word as we watch his date drive a Toyota Pathfinder into the parking lot and cut the engine.

It doesn't take her long to climb out, and when she does, it takes even less time for me to assess how truly, painfully beautiful she is.

She's wearing low-slung, skintight jeans with a heavy-buckle-sporting belt and a tank top that shows off her perfectly toned arms and ample cleavage. Her hair is long, almost down to the band of her bra—assuming she's wearing one—but she pulls it up as she walks.

I swear if I were a guy, this would be the kind of fantasy I'd expect from porn.

Jake is silent beside me, and I have to swallow hard to get rid of all the saliva filling my mouth.

She looked pretty when I met her at the group meeting to fill out paperwork, but I have to hand it to her—Date Rachel

looks like a Victoria's Secret model come to life.

One glance to Jake shows his eyes haven't left her, and I instantly feel like a big, broken third wheel.

I step to the side and back, tripping over a root in the ground as I go. Jake reaches out to catch me, concern in his eyes, but thankfully, I stop myself before I make it to the ground.

His date, Rachel, having just made it to us, looks on with pity in her eyes.

Like, holy hell, this poor woman is such a mess.

"Whoops," I mumble, tucking my burning cheeks toward the ground as I pretend to look between the two of them. "Sorry. I'll just be..."

I glance away, twirling in a circle while I try to move away, afraid to lift my eyes off the ground and back up, but unable to bring myself to stop babbling to them either.

"So, um, have fun. Looks like it's going to be... adventurous. And stuff. I'm excited," I blab on. "I'm sure you guys are excited too. So, I'll, um, let you get to it."

Jake watches me with unconcealed interest as I back into the four-wheeler that's to be mine and bump into it with my hip. *Someone, anyone, please save me.*

I don't know if I'm going to survive following them around, and I'm almost positive it's a terrible idea as I climb astride and try to figure out how in the hell you turn this freaking thing on.

I can hear them introducing themselves and making small talk, but I do my best to block them out and concentrate on trying to figure out how to operate the machinery.

There are buttons and switches everywhere, and the key itself doesn't seem to be achieving a full launch.

Let's see. Maybe if I just... No, that's not it. Hmm. Okay, this bobby thing looks like it, well, bobs. Hmm. Oh! I know. Maybe the throttle, like, wakes it up and—

“Having trouble?” Jake asks from my side, making me damn near jump out of my skin.

I put a hand to my chest and practice bringing my breathing back down to a normal level.

“Jesus. You’re like a ninja sometimes.”

“Quiet feet. Something else they teach you in the SEALs,” he explains. “Do you want me to help you get it started?”

“I was just about to get it,” I deflect, and he smirks down at me, his eyes calling me out on my bullshit.

“Uh-huh, I could tell.”

“But...I guess, since you’re here...” I pause and shrug one nonchalant shoulder. “You might as well go ahead and do it.”

“Yeah, of course,” he agrees, humoring me.

I watch as he squeezes the brake handle thingy and turns the key, and the four-wheeler fires right up.

“I really was close!” I say, even though I know there’s no way I ever would have figured out I had to hold the brake thing.

“I know you were,” he patronizes me.

I stick out my tongue, and he just laughs.

“Ready, then?”

“Not even close,” I say honestly, and his smile makes the lines at the sides of his eyes crinkle.

“I’ll go slow. Promise.”

“No,” I say with a wave. “Don’t hold back on my account. You guys have fun, and I’ll just...you know, report from wherever I can.”

“Holley, I’ll go slow.”

“I have a map,” I challenge. “It’s fine.”

“I’ll still go slow.”

I sigh as he turns and walks back to his own four-wheeler. Rachel is looking back at me with curious eyes, so I smile for

her benefit.

Her attention finally leaves me as Jake returns and climbs in front of her. She leans forward and wraps her arms around him tight, resting her cheek on his back.

A wave of olfactory memory hits me at the sight. *Man oh man, I bet he smells amazing from that close.*

Shaking away the thought, I put my thumb to the throttle thingie on my four-wheeler and shoot forward to follow them. It's tricky at first, and to say my ride is rough would be an understatement. Eventually, though, I start to get the hang of it, and with Jake going slow like he said he would, I'm able to keep up with them, no problem.

He points to things on the trail, and Rachel looks at each and every one of them with a smile, nodding into his back to affirm she heard him. She doesn't loosen her grip at all, and I make a mental note to reference her obvious physical attraction for him in my article.

A sharp twist of my stomach makes me let off the throttle briefly.

Ugh. I probably shouldn't have eaten those two donuts this morning.

They don't usually bother me, but I'm also not normally vibrating the innards of my body atop a huge engine either, so who knows.

Jake and Rachel get a little farther down the trail after my brief stop, so I decide to take the opportunity to test out my ability to go a little faster while I catch up.

I mash down on the throttle, and I take off like a rocket. The wind feels invigorating in my hair as trees whip past me, and a thrill I've never felt before runs down my spine.

I laugh maniacally and push the throttle down even farther. *Hell's bells, this feels good!* I can't believe I've never done it before.

Rolling and raging, I don't quite notice that the trail turns sharply ahead until I'm right on top of it.

I panic, trying to find the brake and missing completely as I shoot over the side of the trail and up into the woods without much finesse. It's bumpy and thick, and I'm thrown up toward the handlebars violently. I shriek as the front of the four-wheeler comes to a bone-jarring stop against a small tree, and my whole body whiplashes back.

My thumb is still plastered to the throttle, and only then, sitting there spinning my tires in the mud, do I think to release it.

Holy shit!

Unexpectedly, gentle hands lift me up off the four-wheeler and spin me around. Jake is there, and his eyes look wild in a way I've never seen them before—like stormy Caribbean seas.

“Holley, are you okay?” he asks, running his hands down the length of my arms and legs frenziedly.

I start to nod, but my neck is undeniably sore, so I stop that pretty quickly. “I...yeah. Sore, but I'm okay. I'm just dumb.”

“You're not dumb,” he says, his voice laden with more guilt than is necessary. “I should have chosen something else for today.”

“Jake, it's not your fault. I got cocky—”

“Is she okay?” Rachel asks from a few feet away, startling me violently back into the reality that I've done all this in the *middle of their date*. Shit, I really have a serious knack for timing.

“Rachel, I'm so sorry,” I try to lean around Jake to say.

Her eyes are narrowed on the way Jake is tending to me, but her voice is understanding. “It's okay. Just as long as you're all right.”

“I'm fine,” I try to assure them both.

“Fine? Or *fine*?” Jake qualifies, and I smile at the memory of our conversation at breakfast in the diner.

“Fine fine. The real kind.” Jake's eyes study me closely, so I smile. “You guys should go on, have your picnic. I'll just...”

wait here for you to come back.”

“I don’t think we should—”

“No,” Rachel interjects easily. “It’s fine. We can get Holley back to the parking lot, and then figure out what to do from there.”

“Guys—”

“Holley, Rachel is right. We—”

“Just go on!” I almost shout, the pressure of the situation and the resulting embarrassment finally building up to a breaking point. My dignity is back at the beginning of my knobby tire track somewhere. “I’ll be okay. Really.”

Jake looks at me closely as I beg him with my eyes. “Please, Jake. Just go... I’ll be okay here. I have my lunch with me. I’ll eat it and rest, and then we can deal with this thing when you’re done.”

When he still looks ready to protest, I reach up, grab his chin between my fingers, and make his head nod for him.

He scowls but, finally, complies. I have a feeling Rachel’s hand on his back has at least a little something to do with it.

They both turn and head back up the trail for their four-wheeler, Jake glancing back to look at me every few feet or so.

I smile for his benefit and climb up onto the seat of the four-wheeler I parked against a tree. It’s as fine a place to sit as I’ve ever seen, and I *definitely* need to sit down.

Before long, the rumble of their four-wheeler starting up shakes its way through the trees, fading slowly away as they carry on to the lake.

I don’t look up.

I can’t. All I can do is take my turkey sandwich out of the front compartment and wait for the locusts to descend.

I mean, it seems like it’s probably about time for those fuckers to make their appearance in my personal Armageddon.

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Jake

I pull the four-wheeler to a stop at the edge of the lake and kill the engine. Rachel's breasts pull away from my back as she looks up and takes in the view.

"Wow," she says with a smile in her voice. "This is pretty great. I can't believe I've never been here before."

I do my best to concentrate on her as she speaks, but I have to admit, a large portion of my mind is still standing next to Holley's four-wheeler, parked right against a tree. She looked a little shaken, but overall, no worse for the wear.

But Christ, I didn't want to leave her there by herself like that. The only reason I did—and I do mean *only*—is because she looked so embarrassed, so ready to fall into a sinkhole and let it swallow her up, that another minute with Rachel and me there, staring at her, probably would have made her do it.

Not to mention, she all but shoved me away. Hell, I was a little afraid she'd use some unknown connection with the Air Force to call in a raid if I didn't leave her be.

"That's part of its charm," I say, trying to focus on Rachel. "Not many people know about it, so it's never overcrowded." I put a finger to my lips and smile. "Don't let the secret get out, okay?"

She laughs, and while it's not obnoxious like Bianca's, it doesn't set my chest on fire with satisfaction either.

Back in the day, Wendy used to laugh at my jokes like I was the funniest person in the world. Like I alone could make or break her day with a simple joke.

We were young, obviously, and despite being pregnant with a child together, not *entirely* serious, but there was something about us that clicked. I was constantly chasing the high of making her laugh because I got intense satisfaction out of her happiness.

“Want to set up our picnic over there?” Rachel asks, pointing to a grassy spot under a big shade tree and bringing my wandering mind back to her once again.

“That looks great,” I agree, picking up the basket and blanket and carrying them over to the ground under the tree. I make quick work of spreading it out, and Rachel climbs on top, grabs the basket, and starts setting out the food.

She’s occupied with the task, therefore not really looking at me, so I take the opportunity to pull my phone out of my pocket and text Holley.

Rachel notices the action, and an excuse pops out of my mouth before I even know what I’m saying. “It’s my daughter. She just texted. I need to answer. Do you mind?”

She just shrugs off my question. “No.”

She doesn’t invade my privacy any more than that, going back to taking all the food out of the basket and setting it up, and I’m hit with a strange wave of disappointment by her reaction to my mentioning my daughter. Or that I need to text her back.

It’s weird. I don’t *want* her prying into my relationship with my daughter. It’s none of her business. We just met. And yet, something about it, the whole nonchalance of her reaction, her not even asking if everything is okay, sticks out as a negative in my mind.

Shaking it off, I scroll down to my thread with Holley and type out a quick message.

Me: Are you sure you're okay?

She answers fairly quickly, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Holley: I told you I'm fine. No, not fine. Good. Fantastic. Not fine, okay? Just ignore that, and don't go reading anything into it because I know you will. P.S. You're annoying. Do your date thing with Rachel.

I almost laugh at how well I can hear her ramble in my mind, but I take comfort in the fact that she's clearly not acting too out of the ordinary. Someone who wasn't Holley would have just deleted the sentiment of 'fine' and started the text over again.

I put my phone away and bring myself back to getting to know Rachel. The only way to make these dates bearable is to give them the chance they deserve. Rachel is a really nice, normal human. We don't butt heads like I did with Bianca, and she deserves my undivided attention for at least the next hour.

I make a promise to myself not to let distractions like my friendship with Holley get in the way of giving this a chance.

"You're an elementary school teacher, right?" I ask, leaning back into my hands on the blanket and picking a grape from the container sitting between us.

Rachel watches my hand and makes a tiny face before quickly clearing it. I don't know what it's about, but I give her a pass. I haven't exactly been the most conscientious date up until this point. She's probably just giving herself some sort of mental pep talk like the one I just did.

"Uh, yeah," she eventually answers. "I teach mostly third grade, but last year I taught a kindergarten class, and that was really fun. They're still so full of wonder, you know?"

"Definitely. That's a great age," I remark. "When my daughter was that age, she was a real pistol, too. Always

asking me the kinds of crazy questions I didn't necessarily want to answer. Did you get a lot of that with your class?"

"I always tell my class there are no wrong questions," she states firmly, and I nod.

"Yes, definitely. I agree. All questions have merit. I just mean the ones that make you uncomfortable or put you on the spot."

"I never want to discourage them from asking me anything."

I sigh internally. *Okay. Time to move on.*

I grab another grape from the dish, and she watches me the same way, only this time, she doesn't hide it as well.

Is she angry that I'm eating?

I decide to test the waters. "These grapes are delicious. Do you like grapes?"

"I only eat grapes on special occasions. They're mostly full of sugar."

"Grapes?" I ask, thinking I must have heard her wrong.

"Yes. Fruit has its place, but it's not as nutrient-centered as people think it is."

"Grapes," I repeat again. I don't want to be an asshole, but I'm really missing the bus here.

"Yes," she confirms, her eyes narrowing. "They're sixteen percent sugar."

I nod—the slow, exaggerated kind that says I'm really struggling to find a way to continue this conversation without ruffling any feathers.

I reach for a cube of cheese, and she sneers again. I glance at my watch and sigh. Time of death on date number two? 4:15 p.m.

Call the morgue; this body is ready for transport.

Fucks gone, I reach over for the basket of crackers and cheese and pull it into my lap, eating them with both great joy

and splendor. Rachel tries to ignore me as she asks me questions, but even my answers have been superseded by my ability to eat a turkey and cheese cracker sandwich.

We pass the time with small talk, but it's painful and forced. I don't bother with asking her if she's ready to go when she gets done nibbling on some lettuce; I just put all the stuff away and carry it to the four-wheeler. She follows wordlessly and climbs up behind me as I start it up again. Her body sinks into mine, but she doesn't wrap her arms quite as tightly, I can tell.

And it doesn't feel bad. I admit, the physical chemistry between us at the beginning was not terrible. Rachel is a very attractive woman. Long brown hair, bright-blue eyes, and a nice smile. She's got a girl-next-door kind of look that most men would kill for.

But now that we've conflicted so much on the food, I can't even think about the rest. Some people might say that agreeing on food standards isn't all that important in a relationship, but I'd have to disagree. With three meals a day and maybe a couple snacks, food is at the very center of our lives.

I refuse to be self-conscious about what I eat when I'm a healthy, active guy.

And, fuck me, I can't live off kale and lettuce.

Slightly impatient to get back to Holley and make sure she's done okay while we've been gone, I take the trail much faster this time than I did on the way out. Rachel holds on tightly without complaint, but she is so quiet, there's no evidence of her enjoyment either.

I'm not exactly sure what to make of her and her reserved nature. It's something I would have thought I'd like, but for some reason, it just feels kind of boring.

We weave around curves and over berms with speed and precision, and the feel of the wind in my face makes me feel alive.

We make quick work of the distance we covered after leaving Holley, and when I see the bright blue of her four-

wheeler through the trees, a knot in my chest starts to ease.

I ease off the throttle after going around the last turn and look for the gray of Holley's T-shirt with a little more enthusiasm than I care to admit.

She's leaned back flat against the seat, a book in her face once again.

When she hears us coming, she sits up quickly and slams the book shut like she's been caught doing something wrong.

I smirk, but I know for a fact that she can't see it underneath my helmet.

I pull to a stop right in the bend of the trail she didn't follow before and shut down the engine. She climbs off the four-wheeler and walks over to meet us, cranking her face up into a smile I don't quite believe.

I wonder if she's hurting?

"Hey, you two," she says cheerfully. "How was the picnic?"

Rachel and I both mumble weirdly synchronized answers of, "Great," though I have a feeling neither one of us truly believes it.

Holley's smile slips slightly before growing again, this time almost actually reaching her eyes. "Well..." she hums before looking back at her four-wheeler. "I guess it's time to try to get that thing out of there and ride it back to the lot, huh?"

"Are you going to be okay?" I ask, and she waves a hand.

"Oh yeah, sure. I'll go slow this time. Won't try to be a hotshot, I promise."

I smile then, and with a gentle nudge of Rachel to lean back, climb off and walk over to the abandoned wheeler.

It starts up fine, thankfully, and I don't smell any fluid or see anything to be concerned about, so I maneuver back out of the woods and down onto the trail where Rachel and Holley are standing together and waiting. They're both smiling so

fakely it's ridiculous, but it doesn't seem like either of them has really noticed.

Holley tosses her backpack into the front compartment before climbing back on, and I hold out her helmet. She slides it on down over her ears and gives me a thumbs-up.

I climb back on my four-wheeler and wait as Rachel does the same, then head slowly back to the parking lot.

Holley follows me over to the trailer, parks the four-wheeler at the side, shuts off the engine, and pulls off her helmet.

Rachel climbs off mine and stays close as I start to gather all the stuff I need to load them onto the trailer.

Holley looks at the two of us a little awkwardly and then backs away, hooking a thumb over her shoulder. "I'm just going to...take off. Let you guys finish up here."

My eyebrows come together, but Rachel lifts a hand to wave. "See you later."

I can't say anything else because she moves too quickly to leave. Within a couple seconds, she's halfway across the parking lot and bleeping the locks on her car.

I watch as she climbs in and leaves.

Well, fuck. I really hope she's still coming to my house.



Holley

The doorbell rings loud enough that I can hear it through the door as I push the button.

In some ways, I'm grateful. I've stood at a front door one too many times without being able to tell if I'd actually rung the doorbell or not. It's seriously awkward. Standing at a door, waiting for someone to come who has no clue you're there, or pressuring someone needlessly with three demon strikes of the bell—either way, it leads to nothing but embarrassment.

I tap my toes against the welcome mat and wait for the door to open.

Considering I took my sweet time driving to Jake's house, even stopped to fill my practically full gas tank, I'm not expecting Chloe, but she's the one I get all the same.

"Hey, Holley," she greets, pulling the house phone away from her ear. "Come on in."

I follow her inside, closing the door behind me, and make my way down the hall and into the kitchen where Chloe is very much occupied with the phone.

Unsure of what exactly I'm supposed to do, I just kind of post up by the massive kitchen island while she skips around the room and chats with her friend.

"Yeah, of course," Chloe says into the receiver glued to her ear. Her voice is the kind of chipper only a teenager her age can pull off. "It'll be fun."

She listens intently and then snorts. “I know, but I promise it won’t be bad, Sarah. We’ll get a few outfits your mom likes just to keep her happy, but we’ll mix it up with pieces we know will work...” She pauses briefly, then starts up again, “Exactly. It’ll be the ultimate shake-up. We’ll turn her stuff into the stuff you like anyway.”

The kitchen goes silent for five, maybe ten seconds, tops.

Then Chloe’s adorable laughter bursts the dam of quiet.

“Trust me, you don’t want to know what my dad said about that!” She turns her back to the kitchen island, leaning into it and listening intently. “Well, don’t worry about it... No, I know... Your dad told me...”

Shoving off the counter, she stands again and giggles. “I’m working on it. I have to get my dad to—” She stops abruptly, pulls the cordless phone away from her ear to glance at the tiny digital screen, and puts it back. “Hey, I gotta go. My dad is calling me now.” She smiles. “Bet. See you tomorrow.”

I wait patiently, still not understanding what’s going on at all or why I’m even in the house, when she answers the other call.

“Hey, Dad...” She pauses. “Yeah, it’s all done...” She pauses again. “Yeah, I’m meeting them at Cherry Bluff at ten.”

Chloe looks up then, her amber eyes meeting mine and lighting up. “Yeah, she’s right here.”

I swallow. *Me?*

“Okay, yeah. I’ll tell her.”

She pulls the phone away from her mouth and puts it to her chest. “He’ll be here soon. He got held up a little with Rachel. Said you’re expecting him, though.”

I nod, unable to do anything else. What does held up with Rachel mean? When I left, I thought she was about to leave too. I thought the date was over.

My stomach lurches.

Are they alone somewhere? Did they meet up to have a quickie or something?

Is she there now, listening in?

Is her hand on his leg or...or... *Holy hell, stop the madness!*

I expect Chloe to hang up, but she doesn't. Instead, she segues into one of the key pillars of a parent-child relationship—asking for something.

“Hey, by the way, I was just talking to Sarah, and I'd really like to circle back to those makeup lessons I brought up the other day. It'd be beneficial for me and her, and really, that makes it worth, like, double the money.”

She stomps her foot and glares at the nothingness in front of her. “I am not making that up! It's mathematically true.”

I bite my lip, immensely entertained by listening to her side of their argument.

“Come on, Dad,” Chloe whines. Somehow, though, she manages to do it without being one of those really annoying girls. “How am I supposed to have my big Chlo-up if I don't know how to do my makeup?”

She rolls her eyes and paces across the wide-plank wood floors. “A Chlo-up,” she repeats. “You know, like a glow up, but for a Chloe.”

His response makes her snort. “Oh my God, Dad! How do I live with someone who doesn't know what a glow up is?”

Her nose wrinkles, making her bright eyes shine with life. “Oh, gross!” She stomps her foot again. “Yeah, I *do* know. But just because I know you have a penis doesn't mean I want to talk about it!”

She pauses briefly, and I lean closer, shamelessly horny for the laughter I'm pretty sure I hear on the other end of the line.

You want to talk about how Jake has a penis, my mind whispers. You want to talk about it badly.

Christ. There might be something seriously wrong with me.

“I can’t learn from watching YouTube.” Chloe continues to plead her case. “I’m not a visual learner, you know this. I need real-life, hands-on lessons.”

It might make me half crazy, but somehow, I find myself wading into the brink. Of all the things I’ve struggled with in my adult life, doing my makeup isn’t one of them. In fact, I’m kind of a dab hand.

“I could show you how to do some stuff with your makeup,” I offer, gently chiming into their conversation.

“Really?” Chloe squeals, turning around so fast I have to dip backward to avoid getting whacked by her long blond hair. To be fair, though, ever the phone-call voyeur, I was following a little too closely.

“Sure,” I say. “I taught myself, but I think I do an okay job ___”

“Are you kidding?” she shrieks, completely ignoring the fact that she’s still on the phone with her father. “Your makeup always looks fire!”

“Fire?” I question.

“Oh yeah,” she confirms without actually explaining to me what she means in the first place. “You’re a low-key stunner.”

“That’s a good thing?”

“Bet,” she says confidently, confusing me even more.

Without pausing to help me wipe what I know must be a look of sheer stupidity off my face, she puts the phone back to her ear to talk to Jake. “You win. I don’t need lessons anymore. I’ll see you when I get back from the movies with Hailie.”

She doesn’t bat an eye, laughing into the receiver and then holding it out to me. I point at my chest—still confused—and she nods as she hands it to me.

“Um, hello?” I say tentatively as I put it to my ear. Chloe leaves the kitchen and goes right out the front door. And I’m left standing in their house by myself.

“You don’t have to teach her how to do makeup.” Jake’s voice is in my ear. “She can learn on the internet.”

I wave a hand—even though he can’t see it—as clarity finally comes back. “Oh, it’s no big deal. Sounds kind of fun, actually. I will have to take to the internet beforehand, though. I don’t know what *any* of these words mean. Do you?”

“Hardly.” His husky laugh bounces from the receiver. “Just tell her to use real English.”

“Are those words not English?” I ask with a grin.

“Sure as shit not the version I’m familiar with.”

I clear my throat and swirl my finger along the top of his marble countertops, trying to sound casual. “So, um, I hear you got held up with Rachel. I, um, thought she was about to leave.”

I don’t know if I achieve it or not, but it’s in my best self-interest not to analyze it too deeply.

There’s a smile in his voice as he answers me. “I thought so, too. But when she went over to her car and got in to start it, her battery was dead. She wasn’t sure what to do, but I had my cables, so I gave her a jump.”

“Ah,” I hum.

Does the woman not have AAA?

“Are you still there with her now?” I fish.

“Nope,” he says cheerfully. “I got her car running and took off. I should be home in about twenty minutes. Are you okay to wait for me?”

I try to sound important. “I guess I can. I have stuff to get done, but twenty minutes isn’t that big of a deal.”

“Too much stuff to get done to wait for me to stop and pick up the ingredients for hot fudge sundaes?”

I scoff. “Be serious. There’s always time for hot fudge sundaes, Jake.”

He laughs. “Okay, good. That’s what I thought. I’m in the parking lot of the supermarket. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Okay,” I agree, trying not to sound too excited.

Why is it that I’m so excited exactly?

This man has just spent the last three hours on a date with another woman. What is it that I think this is?

No. I shake my head. It doesn’t matter. I refuse to think about it now. It feels good. It’s necessary in order for my articles to make any sense at all, and that’s it. Period. The end.

Right?

Right.

“See you soon,” Jake says, effectively ending the call. I click the button on the handset to hang up and lay it down on the counter before looking around the kitchen.

I’m *alone* in his house.

What am I supposed to do now?

Awkwardly, I round the island and take a seat at one of the stools, my hands clasped in my lap. It feels weirdly like I shouldn’t even touch anything, but I know that’s a little overboard.

I mean, if he weren’t comfortable with me being in his house alone, he would have asked me to wait in my car, right?

Emboldened slightly, I get up from the stool and walk over to the living room shelves. They’re filled with photographs of Chloe and Jake together and Chloe by herself. There are a few with another man and a couple of young kids, and I have to assume it’s Garrett, Sarah, and Hayden.

And Garrett is hot as *fuck*, pardon my French, but holy hell. He has a thick, dark beard, dark brown hair, piercing ice-blue eyes, and the kind of muscles all the guys I used to see at the gym would literally sell their souls to the devil to obtain.

Man. I don't know the she-witch Bethanny, but she better get her shit together because if Garrett goes on the market, women all over the fucking planet are going to Lose. Their. Shit.

Lawd. I look at the huge veins in his forearms and his hands on his daughter's shoulders...

He has to be the centerfold in *Firefighters Illustrated* or something.

I move on to the next shelf and find a picture of him and Jake together. I swear to Jesus, I think I come a little in my panties.

It's like...almost inhumane to subject someone to that much hotness in one picture.

No joke. I'm surprised just having it in here hasn't started a house fire yet. I wonder if they lock it away when they put up their Christmas tree since it's such an incendiary object.

At the very least, they should have a fire extinguisher sitting beside it. Just in case.

I stroll past those shelves to the door next to them. It's open, so I peek my head in just a little to see what's inside. It looks like an office/den type of thing with a desk and a computer and a sofa, along with some shelves filled with books and binders.

I tiptoe inside to take a closer look, but it's just construction stuff about welding and cranes and signaling.

Interesting and necessary, I'm sure, but not exactly worth my very limited snoop time.

I'm not sure when I crossed over from feeling awkward and intrusive to thinking it's okay to wander his house unattended, but I'm just going to embrace it. I don't imagine I'll ever get a chance like this again.

I wander back to the door and back out into the living room and down the side hall to another room, but the door is closed. I'm obviously taking some liberties here, but I think

with a closed door, I'd better not. Instead, I turn back to the kitchen and find my way into the pantry and flip on the light.

The shelves are stocked with all sorts of snacks and baking supplies, and when I spot a box of brownie mix on the top shelf, I get an idea. What's better with ice cream sundaes than brownies?

Nothing.

I grab the premixed box and an egg from the fridge and get to work. I have to poke around a little to find a dish to put the batter in, but it's not too hard.

By the time Jake walks through the door, I'm sliding a pan of brownie batter into a preheated oven.

"Honey, you shouldn't have," he says teasingly, tossing the bag of stuff from the grocery store onto the counter. An unexplained thrill runs down my spine, but I ignore it.

"I hope you don't mind. I...I found the mix in the pantry, and I didn't have anything else to do."

He smiles but raises his eyebrows. "I really thought you would have looked around a little bit. That the journalist in you wouldn't be able to stop herself."

"I did," I admit with a lopsided grin. "I got bored *after* that."

He chuckles. "Good, good. And did you find anything interesting?"

"Well...I found out that your friend Garrett is astonishingly good-looking."

"Oh God," he groans. "Do me a favor, and do *not* tell him that when you meet him."

When *I meet him? Am I going to meet him?*

Unable to give any credence to a possibility that he probably just threw that out there because he got ahead of himself, I don't mention it. Instead, I round the counter to take a seat at one of the stools.

He watches me lift myself up gingerly, and his smile disappears. “Are you still feeling sore from the crash?”

I start to shake my head, but it kind of hurts, so I stop.

“Holley, you should go to the doctor. Get checked out.”

“No!” I protest. “I’m fine.” He narrows his eyes, and I change my choice word. “I’m good, Jake. I’ll be good. Don’t worry. I just need a little rest and a brownie hot fudge sundae.”

“Can dessert cure anything for you?” he asks.

“Most things,” I admit.

His eyes search mine. “And what about the things it can’t? What are those?”

The memories his questions spur cause insta-discomfort inside my chest.

I swallow thickly and get up from the stool to escape. At first, I don’t even know where I’m headed, but I figure out an excuse pretty quickly. “I’m...uh...just going to run to the restroom. Yes! That! Be right back.”

I make it around the counter, but I don’t make it much farther before Jake stops my progress, pushing my body gently toward the wall.

I back up swiftly until I can’t go anymore, and he boxes me in.

“What is it, Holl? Where does the pain in your eyes come from?”

I lick my lips, thinking about the morning I walked into my kitchen to find my fiancé and his assistant standing much like this, his loving hand on her pregnant belly.

It hurts to think about—it always does—but the feel of Jake’s hand as it settles on my hip takes some of the sting away. In fact, it’s like a warm balm on a slow-to-heal wound.

Achingly slowly, his face moves toward mine. My heart thrums and my breathing quickens, but for as much as I want to squeeze my eyes shut and break through the fog, I cannot. I can’t look anywhere other than the deep recesses of his blue-

green eyes, and moving my body at all has ceased to be possible.

It's only him and me and this moment, and the distinct, vibrant possibility of it ending with his plush lips on mine. I'm fairly certain my body would absorb right into the wall and stay there forever if it thought it'd extend the time of physical contact—if it thought his hand would move a little lower on my hip where his fingertips would meet flesh.

I'm just about there—just about to the point of delusion from which I can never return—when a small female throat clears behind us. Apparently, David Blaine has nothing on my ability to levitate when I've been caught horny and red-handed by a seventeen-year-old girl.

Strangely, though, Jake doesn't even flinch, turning to face Chloe like he wasn't seconds away from groping me expertly.

Which makes me wonder...maybe he wasn't? I mean, did I make that whole thing up in my head?

"Home from the movies already?" Jake asks, voice completely even and steady. I swear, I almost think he's not human. Part werewolf or vampire or something, perhaps. If I talked right now, I'm pretty sure it'd sound like I swallowed a dump-truck load of gravel.

Chloe rolls her eyes, sliding onto the stool on the other side of the counter. "Hailie's mom called right when the movie was starting—right in the middle of Ryan Reynolds's shirtless scene. Demanded she come home right then. It was traumatic, to say the least."

"Oh no. How awful. You know, anytime I'm in the middle of a Ryan Reynolds shirtless scene, I turn off anything that could interrupt it," Jake teases her like only a dad can.

She laughs and rolls her eyes again. "It'd be like you getting interrupted in the middle of a shirtless scene with Mila Kunis. Or some actress who looked like Holley."

Jake laughs and nods, stating, "Gotcha," but my eyebrows pull together. *Um, what?*

“Anyway,” Chloe says, shrugging again. “Her mom’s got two different personalities, and tonight, the strict one came out for no reason.”

Jake rounds the counter and kisses Chloe’s head before tilting it back to look her in the eye. “What do I always say?”

She nods. “I knowww. We don’t know her reasons, but her reasons are none of our business. She’s the parent.”

“Ah,” Jake teases with a laugh. “You really have been listening.”

Chloe smiles. “I didn’t make a big thing of it. Hailie did. But we left right then anyway.”

“Good,” Jake affirms. “As always, I’m proud of you.”

Chloe blushes a little as she glances at me—as if what *she’s* done tonight should make her feel embarrassed in front of *me*, rather than the other way around—and then a smile tugs at just one corner of her lips. “Thanks, Dad.”

I don’t know that I’ll ever know a better feeling than affirmation from your dad. It’s certainly been my saving grace through the years. If I hadn’t had my own paternal pillar of support through some of my shit, I don’t know what I would have done. It makes me feel all warm inside to know that Chloe has that too.

But this...whatever this is that Jake gives me—support and understanding and kindness—might just feel better.

He looks at me over Chloe’s head and promises to get the answers he seeks some other time.

It’s terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

Which only makes this whole situation all the more confusing. I mean, if he asks me again to let down my walls and share my personal burdens with him, what will I do?

Will I turn awkward and try to avoid it again?

Girl, the trust and willingness that currently sit inside your heart say you’ll probably sing like a fucking canary.

26

Jake

Garrett smiles as he walks down from the parking lot, the sun still asleep below the horizon. He's the only guy I've ever known who can smile like that no matter the time. It's like his body's clock is adjustable.

"My God, you look smug for this time of the morning," I rib as he approaches. His hearty chortles ring out across the empty space and echo off the relatively calm waves.

"It's just a great day to be alive, Jake. Don't you think so?"

I laugh. "Are you high?"

"High on life, my man. Just blessed to be here with you this morning. I know your morning ritual is all sacred and shit. I'm surprised you even agreed to fit me into this part of your schedule."

"I made you come an hour before sunrise. I'll still be able to swim on time."

Garrett laughs. "You're a machine."

Normally, he wouldn't be far off, but this morning, I'm dead tired. After a restless night of tossing and turning over dreams I can't quite remember, my energy feels depleted.

Most people would opt out of the morning routine—take a break, sleep in, and try to recharge. But I know my body well. It likes structure, and it likes physical activity. Both of those for me are the staples that get me through long days, tough days, days that seem to never end.

They're where I find my strength and the discipline it takes to maintain it. That, and it always makes me feel like I'm accomplishing something.

On a day when I don't feel quite like myself, an extra three-mile run with Garrett on the beach is just the thing I need.

"What happened with the fires up north? Evidently, you didn't end up getting called up there."

"Nope," Garrett answers and bends down to touch his toes, stretching out. I take that as my cue to limber up as well, doing a few hip twists and then grabbing my foot and holding it to my butt to stretch my quads. "They got it pretty under control, down to a thousand acres, but another fire just broke out about thirty miles south of there," he explains. "I'm almost definitely getting called out for that one. Our unit is first on the list for support outside of the precinct."

I meet his eyes. "Bethanny giving you shit?"

His smile is a little disconcerting as he answers, "Definitely."

"And that makes you happy?" I ask with a laugh.

He shrugs. "I'm tired, dude. I...don't think it's working. I think I'm going to seriously consider talking to someone about the right way to file for divorce. I don't want to surprise her, but I want to be prepared."

Suddenly, the smiling, buoyant guy who stepped onto the beach this morning is making sense. Garrett's a good-spirited person. He's not negative or angry at all—pretty much ever. But there was a lightness in his step today I haven't seen in quite a while. I have to imagine the possibility of extricating himself from the constantly stressful situation with his wife took fifty pounds off his shoulders.

"It seems like you're feeling really good about the decision?" I ask to confirm. You know, before I do a cheer or offer him congratulations in the middle of a secret emotional breakdown.

He shrugs, just the tiniest of smiles curving up the side of his bearded mouth. “Do I like ending my fifteen-year marriage to a woman I promised to spend the rest of my life with? While we have two kids together and this will affect them greatly, no matter how much I try to protect them?” He shakes his head. “No.”

I nod in understanding.

“But does it feel like I can finally breathe again, after struggling to do so for the last five or so years?” He holds his hands up and out to the sides. “Fuck yes.”

“I get it, dude. It’s not an easy decision, no matter what. I respect the hell out of you for trying everything you could until you couldn’t anymore. I know for a fact that you gave it more than I would have.”

He pulls his foot to his ass to stretch his quad and laughs a little. “Thanks, man.”

“That said, you know I’ll do everything I can to help support you and the kids while this is going on. No matter what, you can call, yeah?”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” Garrett jerks up his chin in affirmation. “So, can we go for a run now? I need my lungs to burn.”

I don’t waste any time, turning and taking off down the beach without warning. I turn to yell over my shoulder, “I’m ready when you are!”

His glare is almost brighter than the moon as he takes off after me at a sprint. I return to facing forward, stop smirking, and put my ass in another gear. Otherwise, he’s going to smoke me in no time.



I’m usually able to run without losing my breath at all, but Garrett is like a rabid dog today, nipping at my heels with questions and comments every step I take.

“How have the dates been going?”

“It seems weird that you’re going on so many. Where are you finding the women? Is there an actual swimming pool full of them?”

“I don’t understand why you’re going out on, like, Tuesday nights? Do these chicks work weekends?”

“How did you meet them?”

I screech to a stop, bending over and putting my hands to my knees, and he comes around in front of me, jogging in place while he does, the bastard.

I don’t think he’s beat me in a run—or any athletic competition of any sort—in years. I didn’t realize it until now, but apparently a simultaneous interrogation is the tool he needed to give him an edge.

“All right, all right, Jesus.” I run a hand through my hair and sigh. “You’re right, okay? It’s not just an uptick in my dating. I’m...I’m kind of doing a thing with the *SoCal Tribune*. Have you heard of the Bachelor Anonymous contest?”

Garrett’s smile is annoyingly pervasive. I bet if the astronauts at the Space Station looked down here, they’d be able to spot the glow of it. “I haven’t, but I can tell you, hearing it now is probably the best thing ever.”

I flip him off.

“So, what? How does this work? And how in the fuck did you end up doing it? A newspaper contest called Bachelor Anonymous. I’m *dying*, dude.”

I scowl, trying to think of the most succinct way to explain the whole fucking cluster. I only half understand why I’m doing it myself. Explaining it to someone else feels nearly impossible.

“Chloe entered me without telling me, and I got picked to be...the main guy or whatever.”

“And what?”

“I go on dates with five different women who applied to be a part of it, and at the end, I’m supposed to pick one to

continue dating.”

“Holy shit.” His nostrils flare as his eyes widen in delight, so rather than pause to listen to anything he might be close to saying, I carry on.

“Anyway, this woman...Holley...she’s in charge of the whole thing and writes articles about all of it as it goes along.”

“That’s amazing. So, you just date multiple women and don’t feel bad about it?”

I shake my head. “It’s not really like that. I go on one date with each of them. It’s not like it’s super deep. And some of them, man, you wouldn’t be into. They’re attractive, but like I told Holley...” I laugh as I think of some of the jokes Holley and I came up with during dessert at MoMo Milan after dinner with Bianca. “...Dumber than a bag of rocks.”

Garrett’s eyebrows draw together as he considers me. “And this Holley lady? What’s she like?”

I smile. Thinking of all the things that Holley is and how best to describe them in a way Garrett will understand. “She’s fun. We get along really well even though she’s kind of a mess.” I laugh as I think of her wrecking the four-wheeler on my date with Rachel over the weekend. She seemed a little sore Saturday night but otherwise okay. And I texted her yesterday to see how she was feeling, but she just sent me a GIF of Kim Kardashian lying in bed with the covers up to her chin followed by the thumbs-up emoji. I took her ability to joke about it as a good sign. “But she has a good sense of humor and has definitely made the whole thing a little more enjoyable.”

“How often do you see her?”

“Most days, I guess.” I shrug one shoulder. “We have to get together to plan the dates beforehand, and then we usually meet up afterward to kind of do a rundown on everything that happened. She’s there on the dates too, but obviously, we don’t really get to talk much then.”

“She comes on the dates with you?”

“Yeah. In the background kind of thing. So she can take notes for her articles.”

He nods, and I unexpectedly find myself sharing more. “She was over on Saturday night after the date, and Chloe talked her into giving her some makeup tutorials and shit.” I smirk. “You know how she’s been pushing for lessons and stuff.”

“So, Chloe likes her?”

“Oh yeah. They get along really well. Except Holley can’t figure out what Chloe’s talking about any better than you and I can. The slang is almost out of hand at this point. She tried to convince us one night that ‘snatch’ means something other than pussy.”

A small smile plays at his lips, but he doesn’t say much else. After a seriously compelling moment in which I said both the word snatch and pussy, I’m at a loss for why he’s so quiet.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he deflects, but I push.

“What?”

“It’s just...you have a lot to say about Holley, dude. Like, *a lot*. And I don’t think I’ve even heard you mention any of the other women’s names.”

I try to decide if that’s true or not. I guess it is, but it’s bound to happen. I see Holley five times more than I see any of the other women.

“Yeah, I see her a lot. And...well, so far, the women haven’t really been all that exciting.”

“And Holley is?”

“What are you trying to say?”

He sighs and lifts up both of his hands defensively before stretching out his shoulders by pulling them across his body and looking me directly in the eye. “Nothing, man. It’s just an observation. Some food for thought, you know.”

My mind reels with flashbacks of all the tiny moments I've had with Holley over the last two weeks or so. The laughs, the smiles, the dancing...the undeniably intimate moment Saturday night.

Garrett stares at me hard through it all before opening his mouth one more time. "At the end of this thing...maybe just pay attention to whichever woman you think about the most—no matter *who* she is."

I nod numbly, truly considering the way Holley's been making me feel for the first time.

Jesus Christ, how could I not have noticed before?

Seeing the look on my face, Garrett takes pity on me, shaking my shoulder softly and then patting me on the back.

"Ready to run again?" he asks, knowing me well enough to know I need the outlet.

I don't pause long enough to do anything more than nod before taking off back down the beach in the other direction.

I need to run. Hard and fast and as long as I can.

The truth is there, waiting for me to find it.

I just don't know if I'm running in the right direction.



Holley

When Jake walks into the skating rink wearing his signature jeans and T-shirt, he looks even better than ever. I feel like I'm always saying that, but it's always the truth.

The fit of his jeans is perfection, and a lavender T-shirt stretches deliciously across the muscles of his chest.

Thanks to the support from his light-purple apparel, his eyes stand out vibrantly. Hell, even from twenty feet away as he scans the arena looking for me, no one could miss that striking gaze of his.

When he finally spots me, at a high-top table in the corner, his mouth melts into a smile.

My God, the things I'd do to have a man that attractive look at me like that for the rest of my life.

I shake off my thoughts as he approaches, and I return the smile as naturally as I can manage.

I haven't seen him since Saturday night when I spent the evening eating brownies and sundaes with him and Chloe while watching the first two episodes of *Making a Murderer* on Netflix. It's been out for a while, but I'd never dared to watch it on my own.

It was interesting as hell, and the three of us—we got invested.

In fact, it was almost distracting enough to make me forget about the near kiss/grope/reveal of all my ugly feelings in the

kitchen that happened just beforehand.

Almost.

I've spent the last few days tangled in a web of feelings even Rapunzel wouldn't be able to get me out of.

When Jake texted Monday night to say he couldn't make it to our date-planning session, I spiraled even further.

What does all of it mean? Does any of it mean anything? Am I being ridiculous?

I don't want to be the patient who gets inappropriately emotionally attached to her therapist.

I mean, maybe none of it even means anything and I need to just chill.

That's the last thought I have before Jake sets his phone down on the table between us and says hello.

I swallow the thick knot of saliva in my throat and try to act normal.

"Hey, Jake," I say nonchalantly, forcing a smile to my lips that feels embarrassingly similar to Pennywise the Clown.

He studies me closely—almost as if he's gathering evidence for a dissertation—before saying anything back. I fidget and blink rapidly under his scrutiny, unnecessarily retucking the hair that's already behind my ear and licking my lips while trying—under much emotional opposition—to maintain eye contact.

He smiles then, looking around at the rink as the disco lights come down and a group of teenagers giggle their way out into the middle, and then back at me.

"I'm sorry you had to plan this date alone, but be honest with me...you chose it as revenge, didn't you?"

"Skating is America's favorite pastime, Jake," I say smartly.

He smirks. "That's baseball."

"You'll skate, and you'll like it," I threaten.

“You’re really cute when you’re vindictive.”

“Wha...what?” I stutter, my breathing suddenly erratic at the unexpected remark.

“You’re cute,” he says again, slowly and clearly and enunciating in a way I can’t deny. Not only that, but he doesn’t even add a qualifier this time. I’m just cute. Like, all the time?

What in the blackberry bush’s root system is going on here?

He raises an eyebrow in challenge, *daring* me to ask him what he means by that when a stunning woman with wavy auburn hair and a low-cut blouse I know to be Lydia, Jake’s date number three, sidles up to the table next to us and opens her stupid mouth.

“Hey there,” she greets with a scrunchy smile. “Am I in the right place? I’m Lydia.”

Part of me wants to tell her to get lost, that she took a wrong turn somewhere and she needs to head back up her own ass and to the left, but that part of me is clearly crazy.

I put a muzzle on insane me and a smile on normal me’s face. Insane me suggests I reenact Dwight’s real-life fire drill scene from *The Office*, just to ensure this date never gets off the ground, but real me, thankfully, realizes how costly that kind of sabotage would be.

“Hey, Lydia. You’re definitely in the right place.” I gesture with a hand toward Jake, whose eyes are weirdly still glued to me, and introduce them. “This is the Bachelor...” I laugh, shaking my head side to side. “Jake. This is Jake.”

She holds out a hand for him to take, and he finally peels his eyes away from me to look at her. She looks good. I’m not a guy, but I can see her appeal—frankly, a blind wombat could probably see Lydia’s appeal—but that doesn’t make it any easier to watch as Jake takes in her looks for the first time.

His eyes widen slightly, and I have to look away as he makes small talk. “Hi, Lydia. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too,” she purrs, obvious *predator meets prey* in her voice. If I allowed myself the opportunity to look, I’m sure I’d find her nipples poking through the thin fabric of her top like spears.

“So,” Jake starts in, hammering away at the ice that always accompanies blind dates. “What do you do for work?”

Lydia’s confident as she responds. “I work for the Charger Girls, the dancers for the Chargers. I used to dance with the team, but I’m a head choreographer now.”

Ha. Ha-ha-ha.

Am I crying? It feels like I’m crying.

On that note, I decide it’s best if I dismiss myself and let them have their time together. You know, for health reasons. I wave a hand to get their attention, but Jake is the only one of the two of them to look up at me.

“All righty, then. I’ll, uh, talk to you cool kids later,” I say dumbly, wanting so badly to stick my foot in my mouth. Hell, right now, if it ensured that nothing else stupid would come out of my mouth, I’d do it after putting on one of those germ-infested communal skates.

Jake smiles at me supportively, but I don’t stick around to prolong the pain. With a weird wave and a kind of jump-skip, I turn around and move to a table on the other side of the rink.

It smells a little like children’s feet over here, but it’s certainly a better location for my emotional stability.

Though, it’s a damn shame that relief is so short-lived. Before I know it, Jake and Lydia have entered the rink, its loop shape design mocking my attempt at emotional fêng shui.



It’s official: time is a vacuum. And I have no idea how much of it has passed while I sit inside this god-awful skating rink watching Jake date another woman.

Thirty minutes? Eighteen hours? The time it takes for a dentist to perform a root canal?

It's all the same. All I know is that if it doesn't end soon, I might just have to end it myself.

By the way, I realize how ominous that sounds, but you shouldn't worry too much. I have absolutely no plan, and my track record with follow-through is marginal at best. It just makes me feel better to imagine lighting this place on fire like Adele is always singing. *Set Fire to the Rink*. I laugh to myself, but it's admittedly a half laugh, half cry. I'm losing it. That's not even that good of a joke.

I don't completely eliminate the possibility of arson from my mind, however. I mean, maybe Garrett would come to put it out and I could meet him—two birds, one stone.

I shake my head almost violently to clear it. *Jesus, Holley. Get it together.*

Jake and Lydia skate by, laughing with each other as Lydia fakes losing her balance and falls bodily into the strength of Jake's hard muscle.

What a fucking cliché move.

I try not to grind my teeth as I make note of it on my pad and turn back to watch them as they round the corner on the other side of the room.

Thankfully, in the name of a perfect distraction from the roller-rink-flirt-fest, my phone chimes with an email notification. I open it quicker than I've ever opened an email in my life.

From: Phyllis.Carmichael@SoCalTribune.com

To: Holley.Fields@SoCalTribune.com

Subject: Bachelor Anonymous Reveal Party

Hi Holley,

I hope all is well in the land of Bachelor-ville!

I have some unfortunate news about the upcoming BA Event, and Gloria wanted me to make you aware ASAP.

I'm not sure what happened, but somewhere along the line, our wires must have gotten crossed. The BA Reveal Party was scheduled for next Friday, August 28th, not the following Friday, September 4th, like you originally requested.

I'm sorry...*what?* I blink seven hundred times, but when I reread it again, it still says the same thing.

How in the hell did they get the date wrong?

I keep reading in hopes that Phyllis has decided to become the next Ashton Kutcher and punk my ass. But, deep down, I know better. My fifty-year-old co-worker is too straitlaced to dabble in pranks, and she doesn't have the bone structure to pull off Ashton's haircut.

I am so sorry, Holley.

I wish I had better news, but the venue, the caterers, the photographer, they refuse to change the date and have made it clear our deposits are nonrefundable.

I tried to talk Gloria into letting us take a loss on this one and just reschedule, but she was adamant that you'd be able to make Friday, August 28th work for the BA Reveal Party, your article schedule, and the rest of the Bachelor's dates.

Which is also why, at Gloria's insistence, the invites have been sent out and the guest list is nearly set.

Again, I wish I had better news.

Please let me know if I can do anything to help you.

Sincerely,

Phyllis Carmichael

Event Coordinator, *SoCal Tribune*

Let her know if she can help me?

Uh...how about you buy a fucking time machine and go back to the day you screwed up the date and fix it, Phyllis!

Gah. This is a serious snag in my timeline. My article deadlines. Jake's dates.

It takes everything inside me not to toss my phone out into the middle of the skating rink so someone can roll the hell over it and crush it to smithereens. Clearly, this wouldn't be helpful in any way, but damn, the instant gratification of releasing my pent-up anger and frustration would almost be worth it.

On a sigh, I look up from what must be Satan's personal inbox that's somehow found its way on to my phone and catch sight of Jake and Lydia again.

Suddenly, my brain feels like it might explode. Phyllis's major fuckup momentarily forgotten, I get lost in watching the two of them glide around the shiny roller rink floor.

Lydia smiles like the sun as she skates beside him. She reaches out her stupid flirtatious hand and touches him on the arm, and then the shoulder, and then wraps an arm around his hips.

Goodness, does the woman have some sort of tactile disorder? How much does she need to touch him?

I turn my back briefly and bend down to fix my shoe—a shoe that doesn't need fixing. It's a Vans slide-on, and I'm wearing no-slip socks.

My brain, though—it needs a reality check. High crime isn't an option, and more than that, it shouldn't even be a notion.

I mean, what am I expecting here? The man is on *dates* with these women. In fact, physical contact is kind of the

point. It should excite me because it means I actually have something to say in my articles. I have words to fill my word count.

So why in the world am I feeling so dang grouchy about it?

Am I just jealous of people who actually have prospects? Has my mind somehow latched on to the first decent man I've come into contact with since Raleigh and I split up? I mean, it's not like I've known this guy for longer than a hot minute. My hormones need to calm down and get it together. There are lots of fish in the sea, and I just need to get out and swim with some of them.

I flinch. The idea of getting out and trying to meet men to date makes me want to cry so hard I'd fall face first into a bowl of Ben & Jerry's.

My God, I'm going to be alone forever.

While Jake skates around with the bubbly cheerleader, I make a mental note to research how much responsibility it requires to own a cat. All in the name of my future spinsterdom, of course.

28

Jake

Lydia's overt clinginess nearly forgotten—thank God—I grab Holley's hand and drag her out of the front seat of her Infiniti with impatience. The sooner I get her out of the car and down on the beach, the sooner we can get the stupid debriefing out of the way and get on with the fun stuff. Although, I have to admit, with the way Holley is trying not to smile right now, I might just have to pepper in some fun right in the beginning.

She eyes me with an amused mix of contempt and playfulness, and I waggle my eyebrows.

“Get a move on, slow poke.”

Her eyelids flutter as she snorts, but she doesn't let go of my hand when I shut her door behind her either. I take that as a sign of tacit compliance, so I don't waste any time pulling her away from the car.

Her eyes go from bright and beautiful to greatly opposed when I lead her from the parking lot and onto the sand and then take off toward the water, gently dragging her behind me.

“No!” she yells vehemently, digging in her heels and pulling as hard as she can. It's not exactly the enthusiasm I'd like to see, but it's worlds better than the dejected look she had on her face at the skating rink tonight.

It's a look I'm finding I hate witnessing, and I might even go so far as to say I'd do just about anything to change it.

“Relax, Holley. It's going to be fun. I promise.”

“No!” she shouts, pretending to be opposed. “I’m not going back in that water, Jake Brent! It’s nighttime, for God’s sake! It’s dark!”

I laugh outright before scooping her up in my arms and running toward the water at full speed. She shrieks—and giggles—the whole way, slapping at my shoulders with the strength of a feeble mouse.

“I thought you were getting back into yoga... You might need to work a little harder,” I tease with a fake wince, and she smacks me again, a little harder this time.

Still, though, it’s not hard at all.

“Shut up and put me down!” she exclaims, just as I creep into the edge of the water and pretend to drop her.

She screams, snorts, then grabs on to my shoulders like a spider monkey, laughing her ass off. “Jake, I swear,” she breathes out between giggles, “if you drop me in this water, I will set you up on another date with Barbie Bianca. But this time, it’ll be a couples trivia night.”

“That’s fucking dirty, Holley,” I respond, an amused smirk already making its way onto my lips. “Terroristic, even. Normally, I wouldn’t dare negotiate with a hostile, but in the name of saving my eardrums, I’ll concede.” An air of victory engulfs her, and just like that, every negative factor of her energy has been removed. I don’t bother telling her that going in the water was never really in my plans from the start. I carry her back up the beach and set her gently on her feet and then plop down in the sand beside her.

She looks down at me and then back at the truck, and I know there’s something else on her mind.

“Yes?” I ask, cutting to the chase. “What is it?”

She scrunches up her nose in the cutest way. “It really doesn’t bother you to just...sit in the sand without a towel?”

I lean back my head and groan, but it’s mixed with a laugh. Nobody amuses me like she does. “It’s just sand, Holl. I know it’s a real bitch when it gets inside your complicated-as-hell sandals, but it’s not going to kill you.”

She huffs then and sinks to the ground, pulling her bag off her shoulder and setting it down beside her.

I glance at it briefly and then look her directly in the eyes. She's waiting for an apology. Apparently, she's learned me well enough to know it's coming.

"I guess it's a good thing I didn't put you in the water with your bag, huh?"

"Yep," she agrees, "Good thing."

I chuckle and watch the profile of her face as she turns to look at the ocean with a sigh.

"Why did you want to come here so badly anyway?"

My answer doesn't take any consideration. It's a simple fact. "It's my happy place."

She looks from the ocean back to me, but with the only light being that from a teeny sliver of moon, it's hard to really see her clearly. *I wonder if she can tell I haven't taken my eyes off her.*

"It's also one of the best places to see the stars around here," I add. "And I felt like you and I needed to see them tonight."

"Why?" she challenges immediately, surprising me with the intensity of the question.

I search my mind for the right words, but I'm not sure they'll ever come. There are a million and one tiny fragments that make up the complex reason I do anything I do when it comes to Holley, and yet, I can't put concrete words of validation to any of them. They're locked up, trapped in the feelings I've yet to figure out how to emote. Instead, I settle for a cop-out. "Because, why not?"

Holley considers me closely, trying to read between the lines I've done such a poor job of drawing. I don't dare speak, for fear it'll shift the way she's looking at me like an earthquake would tectonic plates, but she finally puts words to her thoughts with a whisper.

“What are your tattoos?” She pauses as I pull up my arm between us and roll up my sleeve. “I...just realized I’ve never asked about them.”

Starting at the top, I work my way down slowly, telling her about each of them in the order I received them. “This is the SEAL trident. I got it when I graduated BUD/S. A whole group of us went together to commemorate making it through hell.”

She smiles softly, reaching out to run a finger along the edges of the design, leaving a trail of heat in its wake.

“This—” I run my fingers around the bright sunflower below the trident “—was Wendy’s favorite flower.” Holley nods in the low light, pulling her hand back and away from my arm, and without thinking, I reach out and pull it back, using her fingers to trace the rest of the designs. “This one is for Chloe, a sunrise over a turquoise sky, because she was the light beyond the clouds, and she was born in December.” I can feel the buzz of Holley’s heart in her fingers, the blood zinging wildly enough to make them pulse. “The astronaut with the flag is a really more of an inside joke with myself—a milestone tattoo for planting my flag in new territory by starting my own business—and the spilling ink at the bottom is a canvas, just waiting for the rest of the story to be written.”

Holley’s quiet, but the volume of her emotions is dialed up loud enough for me to feel.

Sitting there, together, with nobody and nothing around us, the sky starts to feel a whole lot less huge. Like the stars above us and the inky blackness of beyond are all just greater pawns in the creation of this moment between us.

My body sways toward hers, drawn to the current tethering us together. She follows suit, leaning in toward me to meet me in the middle.

My heart thrums in my chest and my stomach dances with possibility, but a car honks a horn on the street, yanking Holley’s attention away harshly. The emotional band between us snaps, breaking apart right in the center and allowing reality to invade.

I know it was real—that the moment between us existed—because my heart still beats with the same intensity. But for Holley, our bubble has burst. When she looks back, she clears her throat and pulls her notebook out of her bag to get back to business.

My chest deflates immediately.

“So...” she starts, opening up to the page with Lydia’s name at the top, and taking out a pen. “Did anything else happen on the date tonight that I need to know about for the article?”

On a sigh, I fall back into the sand and look up at the sky, trying to gather my thoughts. Thoughts about a date I can barely put together a sentence to describe; thoughts about why I wanted that moment with Holley to continue so badly. “Not really. What you saw is what you got, I’d say.”

Lydia is an attractive, bubbly woman whom I have zero interest in. What I remember about our date is waiting for it to end.

And for this time with Holley to start...

That world-shaking thought makes my chest grow tight, but Holley is completely oblivious, currently focused on the notebook in her lap.

She hums, making a few notes on the page and flips to the next one. “All right then, what do you want to do for your next date?”

Nothing. Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.

The mere idea of another date feels absurd—completely contrarian to my feelings right now. Feelings that are very much rooted in the woman sitting beside me. I breathe through the matrix of emotions and try to act like my mind isn’t fucking reeling.

“Who’s...uh...who’s this date with?” I force myself to ask.

Holley starts to dig around in her bag, no doubt pulling out Date Number Four’s file.

I hear the sound of a folder being opened, and I almost roll my eyes. I don't, though. I wait patiently as she scrolls through it, listening to the ebb and flow of her smooth voice. For as much as I don't know what to make of my current dating situation, the calming effect of Holley's presence on me is undeniable.

"Let's see. Her name is Elle, which is cute. And she's a pastry chef." As the words she's reading hit her, she breaks into her information with excitement. "Ooh! I wonder if she knows how to make donuts!"

"Maybe you should date her instead of me."

"Very funny." She reaches out to smack a playful hand against my shoulder. "Anyway, what do you think you want to do with her?"

I consider it for a moment, but when nothing comes to mind, she offers up something for me.

"How about a cooking class?" she asks. "That might be really fun."

"Sure." I act like I'm on board. Honestly, I'd probably agree to anything just to have Holley keep talking.

"Great. I'll get that set up." She scribbles something in her notebook. "And while we're at it, we should go ahead and figure out what you want to do for your fifth and final date."

I turn my head at the sound of her voice—an unmistakable, nervous timbre that says there's more to this story.

"And why is that?"

"Well..." She pauses, nervously glances down at her notebook, and digs her teeth into her bottom lip. When she finally looks over to meet my eyes again, I don't miss the way her gaze shines with apology. "The Bachelor Anonymous Reveal Party has been moved up."

Jesus. *The Reveal Party*. I'd almost forgotten about that. I cringe. The fact that I'm supposed to choose one of the five women to take out on a second date with the intention of

pursuing something further at this thing has never seemed more ridiculous.

“Moved up? What are you talking about?”

She grimaces as she answers. “I just got word that there’s been a bit of a miscommunication with the event coordination team, and instead of the party being September 4th, it’s going to be August 28th.”

“Well, shit,” I mutter. I don’t like the sound of that. That’s one less week I have with Holley around. “Maybe we should just skip date number five,” I suggest, trying to find some kind of silver lining.

She shakes her head, a painful mix of a smile and terror and melancholy all warring on her face. “Sorry, but my editor is expecting five dates, despite the change in timeline. Which really only leaves one solution.”

I raise my eyebrows in question.

“Instead of one date this weekend, you’re going to have to squeeze in two.” She grimaces again but quickly switches gears. “Saturday, you’ll go to a cooking class with Elle. And Sunday, you’ll go to one last place of your choosing with...” She pauses and digs around in her bag again for another folder. “Lucy.”

“Two dates, Holley?” I question. “Back-to-back? I think you’re going to have to find a better way.”

“It’s the only way, Jake,” she whines, and it reminds me so much of Chloe when she’s trying to get me to agree to something that a soft spot pulses in my chest. “If you don’t fit in both dates this weekend, I don’t know if I’ll be able to hit my article deadlines. If I don’t hit my deadlines, my editor is going to ream my ass. And trust me, no one wants their ass reamed by Gloria. She never, ever uses lube.”

Shit. This is her job, I remind myself. And you’re the one who agreed to do this whole Bachelor Anonymous fucking shebang, you bastard.

“I hope you realize you’re going to owe me so big for this,” I agree, her joke about her editor making a smile invade

my face uninvited. “Like, *big*, Holley. *Huge*.”

“Anything you want,” she says in a rush.

As if her words just unlocked Pandora’s box of dirty fantasies, all sorts of NSFW forms of repayment threaten to come to mind, and it takes the strength of ten fucking men not to fall down that sexual rabbit hole.

Still, I can’t stop myself from saying, “I’m going to hold you to that.” My voice is gravelly with sexual hunger to my own ears; I don’t think she notices.

“Good,” she responds without hesitation, but she changes focus so fast to contestant number five that it gives my brain whiplash. “Now, Lucy,” she says, scanning through the new folder. “Even though she doesn’t have any pets, she loves animals. Especially dogs... A dog park, maybe?”

“But I don’t have any pets either.”

“So?” she questions, but her eyes keep scanning Lucy’s information. “A dog park could still be fun.”

“Just out of curiosity, Holl, would I put the collar and leash on her or me?”

Instantly, she meets my eyes and bursts into giggles. There’s a shimmer in her jade-green pupils, and I have to wonder if it’s because she’s imagining me in a collar. “Okay, yeah, no dog parks.”

I smirk. “Is there anything else she likes besides animals she doesn’t own?”

“She’s an avid reader,” she updates, sliding her finger down the page. “Loves hiking, bowling, danc—”

“Bowling,” I chime in before she can continue rambling on about Lucy’s hobbies.

“Wait...you didn’t hear the rest—”

“Because I don’t need to. We’ll go to Strike Lanes.”

Holley searches my eyes for a brief moment before shrugging one relaxed shoulder. “Okay, then, Strike Lanes with Lucy on Sunday, it is. I’ll work on getting it all set up.”

“Sounds great.” I flash a smile I don’t really feel and turn my head back to the sky, looking up at the sheer number of stars. There’s so much out there—so much beyond our little world, it isn’t even funny. And yet, somehow, the tiniest of things—like the two of us sitting here on this beach together—can feel so huge.

But when I hear the sounds of her packing up her bag, I turn my head back to look at her.

“Ready to go already?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” The corners of her mouth form a little frown. “I have to be up incredibly early tomorrow for an insanely busy day filled with finishing this article and heading into the office for several meetings. I really need to get some sleep.”

I nod then, curling my abs to sit up and then rocking back to throw myself to my feet like a fighter.

Holley yells, eyes wide and smile bright.

“Holy shit!”

I laugh and stretch a hand down to her to help her up.

“I had no idea you could do that!”

“Me neither,” I reply. “First time I’ve tried.”

“God, you’re really, like, not real, I swear.”

I shake my head and then follow it up by shaking my whole body like a wet dog. For as much shit as I gave her, I am definitely covered in sand.

“Jake!” She giggles and shields her face with her hand, backing away from me.

I crowd her unnecessarily just to mess with her, and before I know it, we’ve ended up shrieking our way into the parking lot in fits of laughter.

She climbs into her car, and I shut the door for her, but she rolls the window down when I don’t move away immediately.

“I’ll see you Saturday?” I say, for lack of anything better.

She nods and smiles, and I take in a deep breath to calm the unexplained burn in my lungs.

“See you then.”

Two fucking dates this weekend sounds so painfully awful. I’m looking forward to it about how I’d look forward to a short bout of water torture.

So, why is it then, that Saturday doesn't seem soon enough?



Jake

Holley's smile is infectious the minute she steps into the large, industrial-style kitchen with her bag on her shoulder and her hair down and curled to her shoulders. It looks like she's done it on purpose today, rather than letting it fall into its natural waves, and I'm excited to see the new look.

We've texted a few times since we saw each other Wednesday night—mostly about *Making a Murderer* since we've both been watching it—but seeing her in person makes me realize just how much I've missed her.

I lean into the stainless-steel table in the center of the room and smile back at her as she trips over nothing, spins around to see what it was, and then laughs at herself when she realizes it was just air.

I'm equal parts amused by how fucking cute she is, but also a little scared for her life in a room with things like hot stoves and sharp, chopping knives.

And I can't seem to wipe the smile off my face.

"Easy there," I tease good-naturedly. "I don't want you to split your head open on the table."

She pretends to slow her steps dramatically, but really, the way she does it just makes her look like a robot. I chuckle.

"You look beautiful," I find myself saying as she tosses her bag onto the table in between us. I didn't plan it, didn't even

really realize I was thinking it—but neither of those makes it any less true.

She blushes and drops her eyes to the table to dig out her notebook as she speaks. “Thanks.” She giggles. “I had to go into the office today. And since I had a meeting with my editor about how everything is going with Bachelor Anonymous, I tried to look human.”

I grin as she finally meets my eyes, the pressure of my compliment fading enough to make her feel comfortable again. “Human?” I ask, pretending to wince. “I mean, you look beautiful, but I’m getting more of an alien vibe.”

She punches me in the shoulder without hesitation, and I reach up to grab it while I laugh.

“Don’t be such a punk!” she threatens, and I have to bite my lip to keep myself from disappointing her by revealing just how intimidating she *isn’t*.

“Sorry,” I apologize instead. “I couldn’t help it.”

She rolls her eyes and opens her notebook to a fresh page to get prepared for today’s date. I watch as she writes Elle’s name at the top of the page and underlines it twice.

“Is that a cheat sheet for me?” I ask sarcastically, and she shakes her head.

“You’re bad.” I wink as she continues. “And brave. I can’t believe you wanted me to schedule a cooking-class date with a pastry chef.”

“Pretty sure this was your idea, Holl.”

“Yeah,” she retorts with a sassy hand to her svelte hip. “But you agreed to it.”

“Well...” I pause and waggle my eyebrows. “I guess this is a case of go big or go home, then. Which just so happens to be SEAL Team Nine’s motto.”

“Nine?” she questions.

“Top secret,” I whisper with a wink, just as the door at the front of the room opens and a couple women step inside.

They're chatting with each other animatedly, and it brings Holley's and my conversation to a hush.

When they look up and notice us, the one with the long blond hair's eyes light up. Her attention is solely on me as she closes the distances, bites her lip, and breathes, "You must be Jake."

I nod, glancing to Holley, who's now looking on from behind with raised eyebrows.

"I am. You must be Elle." I reach out a hand for a shake, but she takes it between both of hers and clasps it.

"I am," she agrees, a huge smile curling her cherry-stained lips upward. "This is Gail, she's our instructor today, but we actually went to culinary school together. Isn't that wild?" I smile, sticking out a hand to shake Gail's when she offers it.

I turn to introduce Holley too, but by the time I'm done exchanging pleasantries with Gail, Holley's retreated to the very back corner of the room.

I frown at her, but she waves me off, mouthing, "It's fine."

I frown harder at the word, so she rolls her eyes and smiles, pointing at her mouth with a finger as if to say, "See?"

When Elle grabs my arm and drags me around to the other side of the table, I have no choice but to take my eyes off Holley and focus on the dish we're making for the day.

It's steak with a garlic demi-glace and fajita corn and potatoes. Safe to say, I don't know how to make that one, so I do my best to pay attention. Elle is extremely flirty and affectionate, and while those are normally markers of a good date, I have to admit, on this one, I'm left feeling inexplicably uncomfortable.

She's very pretty, well-spoken, and intelligent, and yet, I couldn't be less into her if I were an inanimate object.

When we get the sauce or demi-glace or whatever-the-hell-it-is together, Gail steps out of the room momentarily to take a phone call, and we each take turns testing our product.

I put the tasting spoon to my mouth and take a taste, but when I pull it away, Elle makes a face pretty much immediately.

“Oh,” Elle says with a laugh, pointing at my lips and then the bottom of hers. “You have something right...there.”

I reach up to wipe away whatever food remnant is there, but she takes over, pushing my hand out of the way gently and offering, “Let me.”

Next thing I know, her lips are on mine.

I’m shocked, so shocked that I don’t pull back immediately, and she grabs on to my head to try to deepen the kiss.

What the fuck?

We’re kissing. Well, *she* is kissing *me*. For my part, I don’t do much else besides stand there in shock, giving my best impression of a dead fish, until I gently put an end to her lips’ attempts at slipping her tongue into my mouth.

Without delay, a pit of inexplicable guilt grows roots in my stomach and sets my mind to swirling.

How in the hell did that happen so fast?

I don’t know, but in this case, what I do know is even more troubling—Holley is watching.



Holley

I scoop my notebook and phone into my bag in a rush, knowing without a doubt that I have to get out of here. I don't know the reasons, and I don't want to know them.

I don't want to think about Elle's lips on Jake's at all—not for the rest of my life.

Sure, I'll have to face it at some point when it comes to writing the article—it's too important a milestone for Bachelor Anonymous to leave out—but I'll do it when I'm good and entrenched in the solace of my dark, moody townhouse with half a bottle of wine in my veins. Not in the bright lights of this state-of-the-art chef's kitchen.

Not where other people can see me, and not where there's this much stuff available to emotionally binge eat.

I wave casually at Jake and Elle—*Ha. Ha-ha-ha, have to go*—and make a charge for the door, but by the time I get there and get my hand wrapped around the handle, Jake grabs me by the elbow and pulls me through a side door, into an abandoned hallway.

“Holley?”

“What's up?” I ask as nonchalantly as I can manage while completely out of breath, as though the two of us aren't displaying any behavior that's at all out of the ordinary.

“Where are you going?” he questions in response.

“Home. Sorry to take off without saying goodbye, but it looked like it was going well, and I, well, I really have to get home and write this article since the last date is tomorrow and the big reveal party was moved up an entire week. Can’t get behind, you know?”

His eyes narrow, so I blather on.

“I also think I might have had some iffy meat at lunch. My stomach isn’t really agreeing with me.”

He considers me closely before letting go of my elbow. “We normally go somewhere. Talk about the date afterward.”

“I know,” I say with a fake wince. “And I’d love to. But I really don’t feel well.”

“Do you want me to take you home?” he asks then, his eyebrows drawn together in concern.

I shake my head—almost violently. “No, no! Go on back in. Finish your date! I’ll be fine.” His eyes narrow again on my word choice, and I rush to correct myself. “Good! Good, I’ll be good.”

“Holley—”

“I’ll be okay, Jake,” I say softly, pleading desperately with my eyes for him to give me this. To give me this moment of peace as I crawl off to my townhouse with my tail between my legs.

It’s more than obvious by the expression on his face that he doesn’t like it, but in the end, he relents.

“All right.”

I try to make myself sound chipper as I promise, “I’ll see you tomorrow for date number five! Bowling! Woo-hoo!”

He doesn’t smile.

“Hopefully *without* gastrointestinal issues,” I add, blushing at the amount of TMI, even if it’s fake TMI, almost as soon as the words leave my mouth.

I give a little wave and test the waters by stepping away a little.

He lets me go, even stepping back to give me some room.

I force another smile and turn for the door, striding through it and back to the front door.

When the slap of the hot evening air hits my face, I deflate instantly into the sack of misspent emotion I really feel like being.

I don't dally, though, walking right to my car, climbing in, starting it up, and driving straight home without pausing to have any kind of a moment.

I parallel park on the street—which, I admit, takes me a while—climb the steps to my front door, unlock it, step inside, close it behind me, and secure the lock before falling against the door in collapse.

I allow all of my anxiety to wash over me in a wave, bringing enough moisture to my eyes that I can barely hold back from actually crying.

What in the hell is wrong with me?

I take several deep breaths and pick myself up off the floor and head down the hall to my living room. I toss my bag onto the couch, and desperate to wash this feeling off of myself, I trudge down the hall, intent on taking a shower so hot it would burn the flesh off a desert ant.

Once in my bathroom, I turn the taps to hot and set about stripping off my clothes. They smell a little like Jake thanks to his close proximity when I was leaving, and it's almost enough to send me into another tailspin.

I grab my strongest smelling bottle of body wash from under my sink and take it into the steamy shower with me.

Of course, at first contact with the water, I jump back into the glass door so hard it jars my elbow, and I reach carefully around the boiling stream of water to back it down by about a million degrees.

When it finally cools to a tolerable temperature, I climb underneath the spray and hose down my head. Water runs all over, down and into my eyes and coating the strands of my

hair until I have to surface long enough to breathe. I scrape at the hair plastered to my face and push it back into a smooth fall down my back.

The water feels good—cathartic—and as a result, I stay under it long enough to turn my fingers pruney.

When I emerge as a new woman, I forgo underwear and settle for just putting on one of my baggiest men's T-shirts. It's not any man's shirt—it's mine. I bought it from Walmart. But as far as sleepwear is concerned, the oversized nature of it makes it more comfortable than anything else I've ever owned.

Now that I'm out of the hot water, the air seems chillier, so I grab my short silk robe from the hook on the back of the door of my closet and toss it on before turning off the lights and heading for the kitchen.

I grab a bottle of wine from the cabinet where I keep my supply, a glass from the cabinet in the corner, and make the two one with each other. And let's just say, I go extremely heavy with the pour.

I toss back a couple gulps quickly and then move on to the sipping portion of the evening. I want just a tiny buzz. Enough to take the edge off my feelings, but not so much that I'm not coherent. That wouldn't be very helpful in writing my article at all.

Scooting out of the kitchen and grabbing my laptop from the shelf with my free hand, I pull out a chair at the dining room table, open up my computer, and get ready to get to work.

The blinking cursor taunts me as I chew my lips, so I take another swig of wine and bolster my confidence.

I've been here so many times. In the space right before the creative flow. I just have to force myself to type things—anything—and once I've moved past the blockage, it'll pour out of me without inhibition.

BA and Elle sure concocted a recipe for love at their one-on-one cooking class, a romantic experience they'll never forget.

I hate it instantly, but I keep it anyway. It's always easier to keep typing when there are already a couple words on the page. I set my fingers back to the keys and give it another go.

"The rapport was extraordinary," I say aloud as I type. "But really, would you expect anything less from the devil's mistress when thrust upon one of God's most noble men?"

I snort at myself and hold down the delete button with unrepressed angst. I don't think my editor will take kindly to a five-hundred-word essay of female hate speech in place of my fun, fluffy article about the latest date with Bachelor Anonymous.

Let's try this again.

"The chemistry between the two was something out of a ninth-grade biology lab—hormones galore."

Ugh. I groan. I'm not built for this, dammit. I don't know how to write about a svelte, supermodel-esque woman and her terrific chemistry with the man I'm getting way too emotionally attached to. At least, not without making it seem like anything less than the ninth circle of hell.

But who would? It's not normal. It's not natural. It's not sane!

Come on, Holley. It's just a crush. A simple, harmless crush on the first decent, adult male you've been in contact with in the last god-knows-how-many years who isn't over the age of seventy.

After numerous attempts to type something halfway decent and a lot of self-deprecation, I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes and sit back in my chair. I've been at this for far too many hours and have had way too many glasses of wine. My productivity is best found in the mornings, before the sun gets going full blast—before my brain is awake enough to give any credo to anxiety.

Maybe I'm better off calling it a night, giving in to the will of the writing gods, and taking a small, stinging loss in the tally. I'll still have plenty of time to finish up writing the article in the morning, go over it with fine-tooth obsession, and turn it in by tomorrow evening, well before the print deadline *and* the start of Jake's fifth and final date.

The only problem is...if I stop working now, what will I do for the rest of the night?

Obviously, the simple, logical answer would be to get some sleep.

Yeah, but you've had too much wine for all that rational bullshit...

An evil bird nips at one ear, and I'm too tipsy to recognize its wordless warning.

Instead, I do exactly as my heart wills, grabbing my phone and typing out a text message.

Me: Are you still awake?

My God. What have I done?



Jake

Holley: Are you still awake?

I sit up in my bed and grab the chain to the lamp on my nightstand, flooding the room with ambient light.

I'd just settled into a light sleep, and the buzzing of my phone against the wood top of my nightstand woke me almost instantly. Groggy eyes had to make sense of a blurry-looking screen, but it wasn't long before Holley's name stood out starkly.

I read the words again and type out a quick message, fibbing only slightly.

Me: Yes. Are you all right?

Holley: Uh...yeah. I'm fine. GOOD. I mean, I'm good. How did the rest of your night go with Elle?

Me: Anticlimactic. The date ended not too long after you left.

Holley: Oh. Interesting, interesting. It seemed like you guys were really hitting it off.

She saw the kiss. I know she saw the kiss. She knows that I know she saw the kiss.

What she doesn't know is that neither one of us *liked* that kiss.

As I type my next message, I try my best to rectify any misgivings she may have.

Me: We weren't. Things were fine at best, but when I almost got served a tongue down my throat I didn't order, things took a turn for the worse. Damn near getting molested while I'm wearing oven mitts isn't my idea of a good time.

When she doesn't respond right away, I send another.

Me: Holley, are you sure you're okay?

Leaving things the way we did tonight was hard. Harder than I'd ever have imagined something so simple would be after surviving the Hell Week portion of SEALs training without ringing the bell.

But emotional challenges, it seems, are unique. They exercise an entirely different muscle—the heart. And when one of the body's most important organs gets involved, it's hard to stop a situation from feeling like life or death.

I watch as the bubbles wiggle in my text thread and disappear. Over and over again, she seems to be typing without ever coming up with something she deems worthy of sending.

With a flick of my wrist, I toss the covers to the side and jump from the bed, heading to my closet to get dressed. It's

impulsive and not at all thought-out, but there's a simple need inside me I can no longer deny.

I need to see Holley.

And I think she needs to see me too.

Thankfully, Chloe is spending the night at Hailie's, so my decision is easily made.

I yank on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and smash the switch in the closet to turn off the light. I stalk to my bed and pick up my phone, but there's still no reply from her.

I start typing immediately.

Me: What's your address?

The bubbles start to move again, but this time, a message comes through when she's done.

Holley: 848 Longmire Rd.

I don't bother with a reply. I make my way through the silent, dark house on quiet feet, grab my keys and a pair of shoes, and lock the door behind myself before firing up my truck and pointing it in Holley's direction.



I raise my hand to knock on the front door of Holley's townhouse-style home in one of the quiet sections of San Diego, but it disappears, swinging back into the entry to reveal a wild-eyed Holley, before I even make contact.

She looks electrified with both upset and exhilaration, her jade eyes glowing brightly in the moonlight and her hair down around her shoulders. She's wearing an open satin robe, a big, simple V-neck white T-shirt underneath, and the lengths of her long, tanned legs are bare.

My heart thrums in the silence between us, beating against the bones in my chest as I try to hold myself back enough to keep from scaring her.

I'm not sure what changed or when it did—or if it even had to. Maybe this feeling for Holley has been here all along, and I've just been too confused to realize it.

She shakes her head, raises her shoulders, and opens her mouth to say one simple word. "Jake."

And that's all it takes.

I move, launching myself through the door and slamming my lips down on hers. They're open thanks to her gasp, and I slide my tongue inside immediately, settling both of my hands on the smooth line of her perfectly delicate jaw.

There's a brief, minuscule moment of surprise—and then she returns the affection in earnest.

Groping hands and exploring tongues, we're a tornado of activity as we sink into the feel of each other and allow ourselves complete and total emotional freedom.

I run my tongue down the line of hers, and she moans. My dick practically bangs at the zipper of my pants, begging with a desperation I've never known to be inside her.

I kick the front door shut behind us and pick her up by the ass, carrying her down the hall. I've never been inside her place before, so I don't know the way to anything, but I'm not exactly in my most discriminating mood. I'll literally fuck her on the first flat surface other than the floor I can find.

"Bedroom," Holley breathes, prying her mouth away from mine momentarily to direct me. "Down the back hall."

I slam my mouth back down on hers and do my best to follow her directions without the aid of sight. We bump into a few walls as a result, but the way it makes Holley giggle is more than worth it.

She smells freshly like lavender, like she took a shower not long ago, and I suck a huge gulp of scented air into my lungs and try to hold it there.

The sound of her groan as I run my tongue down her neck forces me to let out a breath, though, along with a grunt of my own.

She feels so goddamn good.

I nip at her earlobe and lick the skin just behind it, and she shivers in my arms.

My waist bends automatically when my knees hit the soft end of the bed, and I lower our connected bodies to the surface. Eager hands rip the edges of her robe back and tear her T-shirt right down the middle.

It's a little barbaric, and honestly, a little unexpected for both of us. But her bare breasts bounce freely into the open, heavy and supple and so fucking beautiful I can't take it.

I lean down and suck a perfect pink nipple into my mouth, and she grabs my head to hold it there. "Jake!" she breathes, the sound of my name on her lips in this capacity making my dick jerk violently in my pants.

I need to be inside her.

When her nails scrape at the hem of my T-shirt, digging gently at the skin of my back as she pulls it up and over my head, I know she feels the same way.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Holley," I tell her softly against the skin of her breasts just after my shirt clears my head.

She roams her hands over my skin, touching everything and anything within reach.

"You are too," she says seriously, and I can't help but smile against the hollow of her throat and groan.

God, I love being around this woman.

I push back quickly and undo the button on my jeans, shoving them and my boxer briefs down to the floor in one movement.

Holley's magical green eyes widen as my dick springs free, and the ridiculous man in me takes great pride in the

expression.

“You like what you see?” I ask teasingly, and Holley, ever the participant, nods enthusiastically.

“That thing’s like an old-timey warrior’s sword.”

I chuckle, raising my eyebrows as I wait for her to explain.

“Strong. Mighty. Powerful and just in its rebellion against anything that might challenge its owner’s reign.”

“Jesus Christ, Holley,” I say through a smile.

She blushes a little but giggles, and that’s the end of any and all self-control. I sink down between her knees, run my fingers through the center of her to make sure she’s wet enough to handle me, and push my way inside.

Her eyes roll back, fluttering her lashes seductively. I have to bite my lip and steel my spine to stop myself from coming right then like a fucking teenager.

Her tongue sweeps out of her mouth, licking the line of her top lip as I pull out and push back in slowly.

I lean down and take her mouth with my own, the only thing I can do to stop her from making me lose myself before making her come.

I skate my hand up the line of her side so I can grab the column of her throat and use my thumb to tip her chin up even higher toward mine. She wraps her legs around my hips and sinks her nails into my back as she holds on tight.

I break our mouths apart and squeeze at her throat just enough that she opens her eyes so I can look into them.

They’re full of so many things I know she’s got to be seeing in mine. Affection, pleasure, wonder, happiness.

The connection between us is undeniable—both physically and emotionally.

I slow my strokes and move them into rhythm with her breaths. In and out along with the sweet air of her lungs.

She lifts a hand to my throat, dragging the tips of her fingers against the skin just below my jaw almost manically. She's desperate for release, and as her breathing speeds up, so do my strokes. I hold her eyes relentlessly, begging her to show me her release with all the power of my own, and when she finally falls over the edge of the cliff, it is, without a doubt, the most beautiful moment of sex I've ever had in my entire life.

Holley Fields is everything I never gave myself a chance to dream of wanting in my life and then some.

I tumble over the cliff too, dragged by the hold of her hand. It feels so fucking good, my vision tunnels and blurs, and I have to tuck my face into the sweet skin of her neck to stop myself from passing out.

She takes all of my weight as I give it to her, lying there in the sweaty, perfect mess we've made for just a minute.

I shift, pulling out of her slowly and settling my elbow into the bed so I can rest my head in my hand, and by the time I complete the movement and look down at her, she looks beyond sleepy, just skating the line between dreamland and reality.

She's vibrantly comfortable and, perhaps, a touch vulnerable, and it might make me a monster, but I can't help myself—now that I've had her like this, now that I know all the wonderful ways she is, I have to know where the pain in her eyes comes from.

"Holley," I say softly, squeezing her at her hip just hard enough that she'll reopen her eyes.

"Mm," she hums.

"I have to know...where does your pain come from? Did someone hurt you?"

She shakes her head, but I'm only half convinced she even knows what I'm saying.

"Tell me what happened to you, and I swear, Holl, I'll make sure it never happens again."

She sighs, her eyes closed, but somehow manages to mumble. “Don’t worry, Jake. I hardly even think about my bastard ex-fiancé Raleigh, his wife Meghan, and their baby anymore.”

Her ex-fiancé? She was engaged to a man who is now married and has a baby?

Holy shit.

My heart lurches at the possibilities of what she could mean, but before I can get clarification, she’s asleep.

“Holley,” I whisper, watching the rise and fall of her chest to make sure I shouldn’t be concerned for her well-being. She curls into me then, throwing a leg over my thighs and smiling a little in her sleep. I pull her tighter into my body and sigh.

And then I chuckle. I swear to God, I’ve never met a weirder woman.

Softly, I brush a strand of fallen hair out of her face and wrap my arms around her.

I lean forward and place a gentle kiss to the corner of her mouth. The same corner of her mouth I first touched with my lips the night of our first whole day spent together.

I watch her for a little while, letting my mind settle into the fact that we made a move we can’t go back from tonight—a move I don’t want to go back from—and then finally, fall into a peaceful sleep.



Holley

I almost didn't show up today, to Jake's fifth and final date. I almost packed a bag and headed for the Mexican border. It wouldn't take me long—under an hour even in heavy traffic.

I could get drunk in Tijuana and get abducted by a cartel or thrown in a Mexican prison, and honestly, any of those options sound better than dealing with facing Jake after last night... and this morning.

I'm not exactly proud of myself, but I am what I am. And even if I don't know how to do anything else, boy do I know how to panic.

In the end, however, even after I let my flight response take me to crazy heights this morning, I decided to show up for myself—for work—but to do it while avoiding my issues with expert dedication.

Every time the front door opens, slicing a ray of sunlight into the dark ambiance of the bowling alley, I jump, so when he finally does walk in, I've already given myself a case of the hiccups from all the sudden movements.

It's okay, though. Jake scans the alley, a scowl in place, and the fear his intensity awakens in me scares those fuckers right out of me.

He walks toward me intently, and I back slowly into the wall behind the table I've placed between us as a protective barrier. It doesn't stop him. Frankly, it doesn't even slow him down.

Because in what seems like the breath between one moment and the next, he's there, looking me in the eyes. His are turbulent—almost alarmingly so as he tosses his discarded sunglasses onto the top of the table and puts his hands to his hips.

“We need to talk about what happened last night.”

“No.” I shake my head manically. “We don't. The last thing we need to do is give a voice to it.”

“Why?”

“*Why?* Are you serious? How many reasons do you need?”

“At least two,” he challenges, and I narrow my eyes.

“I'm an employee of the paper, and my behavior was completely unprofessional. Not to mention, you're about to go on a date with another woman,” I hiss. “I hardly think this is the time to rehash...everything.”

“I disagree,” he counters with a sharp edge to his voice. “We need to talk about it. Now. *Before* my date. You left your *own* house while I was asleep so you wouldn't have to face me, Holley,” he whispers, his words laced with accusation. “We *need* to talk.”

I toss up both hands and start to walk away, but he reaches out and grabs my arm, turning me to face him. He holds me there, and I do my best to turn my flight instinct into fight. It's the only option I have if he's going to hold me in place. “Why do you want to talk about this, Jake? So it can be super awkward? This is *not* a good idea. That's why I left this morning in the first place.”

It's why I didn't answer any of the many calls or texts he placed to me, and it's why I found somewhere to hide out—somewhere there was no possibility of him finding me—until now. Luckily, my dad is out of town on a fishing trip or I wouldn't have been able to hide at his house. He would have given me shit, too.

“What's not a good idea?” he asks, searching my face for answers I don't have. “Talking about it or what happened?”

“Both!” I snap.

His eyebrows smash together as he scowls, and I have to look away. I can’t stand to see him looking at me like that, and that, too, is the problem.

“I’m way too...*close*,” I say to the floor. “I never should have gotten this invested with you. This involved in your life. I’m just mucking things up.”

“You really think that?” He forces my chin up with gentle fingers, and I have to look him in the eye.

“You really don’t?”

He considers me for a moment before reaching out to try to grab my hand. I pull it back. I’m way too embarrassed by the mess I’ve made for myself. If my editor knew what I’d done, I’d be fired. If the women he’s been dating knew... they’d start a shitstorm that would make the T-Swift vs. Kimye feud look as intimidating as Mr. Rogers’ cardigan sweaters.

Trust me, I should know. I’ve been involved in one before. I was just on the other end of it.

God. I’m practically the other woman!

“I’m not willing to ignore this,” he declares stubbornly, and my panic runs straight up the scale to an eleven.

“Why not?” I plead. “I’m giving you a pass, okay? You don’t have to get bogged down in the details of yet another woman. I’m fine to just move on. Put it behind us. Focus on the contest and figuring out which one of these women you’d like to pursue something with, okay?”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, Holley!” he blurts out on a rush. “If you would just listen to me—”

“No!” I finally shout, breaking my wrist free of his grip. “I can’t, okay? I can’t do this! Last night was a mistake, Jake. Just move on.” The nanosecond those words leave my lips, I have the urge to reach out into the air and shove them right back down my throat.

But it’s too late.

The damage has already been done, and goddamn, why does it feel like my chest is going to crack in half?

He stares at me so hard I feel like I might faint, but the moment is broken when a tentative voice calls out from our side. “Sorry, but am I in the right place?”

It’s Lucy, Jake’s date for tonight.

I barely hold back from crying at her timing.

Jake doesn’t turn his eyes away from me, though, and I’m left to wade into the breach. Swallowing hard, I make the right decision for both of us. Any other option...just isn’t an option.

It’s all too messy.

Turning to Lucy, I throw on a bright smile. It’s fake, yes, but at least it’s something. Jake still looks like he ate bad seafood for lunch. “Yes!” I say so chirpily I sound like a fucking bird. “You are! Sorry about the confusion, it’s just been a little stressful.”

She smiles tentatively then, holding out a hand to Jake for him to take.

He stares at me for a long moment, a million things playing across his face before he finally, apparently, lands on something in mine.

When he opens his eyes from a blink, the contact is gone, and so is everything I’m used to feeling between us. His energy, as it were, has completely shifted to Lucy.

It’s what I wanted—desperately needed, even. I just don’t know why it feels so shitty.

I literally just told him to focus on Lucy, and that’s what he’s doing. For the first time on record, a man has actually listened, and yet, it doesn’t entirely feel like a victory.

Am I crazy? Because I feel crazy.

I shake myself out of my stupor as Jake and Lucy find their way to their lane and pick out bowling balls that will be the appropriate weight. Lucy seems attentive enough, listening to what Jake says and laughing. He smiles then, a real smile

I've grown to know so well. Normally, he puts on a little bit of a fake grin to make the women feel better, but I haven't seen him open up the gates.

Not, that is, until now.

Now, he's smiling at her like he usually smiles at me.

Are you sure you're not just being a self-deprecating, self-destructive psycho who is making herself see things that aren't really there?

I mentally flip my stupid subconscious the bird. The nosy bitch needs to mind her own business. Yes, I know she's technically me, but I'm nearly in the middle of a nervous breakdown over here!

No matter what's really going down in front of me, I feel like it's all my fault. Only I'm to blame for my petty, childish outburst or the sad reality that I left my townhouse *before* he woke this morning. Who does that? Seriously? *Me*. I do that.

Jake *wanted* to talk to me, to talk about everything that we *should* be talking about, and I shut him down.

As I watch Lucy step up to bowl, and then look back to see Jake watching her, I have to wonder if I'll look back on shutting him out as the biggest mistake of my life.

I take my spot at the table behind them and do my best not to cry.

It's pathetic, really, feeling sorry for myself. I want him to be happy, and Lucy seems like a nice, normal woman. She could be that for him. He could be the one for her.

I take out my notebook and scribble down some notes about the animated way they chat with each other and the fact that neither of them ever seems eager to get up and take their turn to bowl. It's a regular romantic fucking comedy movie playing out before my very eyes.

She takes a sip of her soda and then spews it on him when he makes her laugh mid-drink. It's ridiculous and awkward, but also really, really cute. He takes the cup from her hands and grabs a stack of napkins from the table, presumably to

help her clean up the mess while they laugh together, and that's just about all I can take.

My chest burns with indigestion from last night's wine as I stand to my feet and scoop my things up off the table. I have to go to the bathroom and get myself together, and quite possibly, throw up some chicken parmigiana. *I'm an emotional eater, and I had my dad's house and refrigerator all to myself for lunch, okay?*

I weave my way through the crowd, careful not to bump or shove anyone or otherwise alert them to my presence. I have a feeling my face tells a huge story right now, and it's not one I'm particularly ready for anyone to read.

Once inside the bathroom, I head for the biggest stall and lock myself inside. I need a moment to collect myself before looking at my own reflection.

Truth is, even I'm not ready to see what my face has to say.

Almost out of habit, I put my notebook in my bag and hang it from the hook on the back of the door before going to the bathroom. I break off lengths of toilet paper to line the seat, and then sink into the seat like it's a cushion of solace. I dig my elbows into my knees, and my head finds its way right into my hands.

Why do I feel this way? And better yet, why have I allowed it to get this far?

I should have called myself off this contest long ago—a woman who's been cheated on and recently betrayed by the man she's been with for more than a decade should not be doing anything even remotely related to love.

She should be writing articles on carb-loading and finding yourself through fitness. She should be writing a travel blog about solo travel around the world. Real *Eat, Pray, Love* kind of shit.

She should not, under any circumstances, be allowing herself to become so involved with the man at the center of her

assignment that she can't see beyond him anymore. She should not be even entertaining the idea of love.

No way.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself before finally allowing myself to move.

I finish my business on the toilet and make my way out of the stall to the sinks. The lighting is bad, and the sinks are disgusting, but let me tell you, I put both of them to shame.

Dark circles mar the skin under my eyes, and red-bloodshot lines ruin the white sheen of my corneas—or whatever that part of my eye is. I'm not an ophthalmologist, so I can't say for sure.

But I don't need a medical degree to see the truth: I look like a woman who's been *through* it—not like the professional reporter I should.

Quickly, I wet a paper towel under the faucet and put the cool paper to my forehead. It's soothing to my hot skin, and I can't seem to get enough. I wet the paper again, bringing it to my forehead again, but this time rubbing it around the entire surface of my face.

"You're a strong woman, Holley," I peptalk in the mirror. "Get your shit together, go out there, and write some damn notes to help with this damn article."

I laugh to myself. I can order seventy-five pounds of Chinese food and gorge on it when I get home.

In fact, that sounds like a plan.

Decided, I finish up with my face, wash my hands, and make my way back out of the bathroom and over to the lane where I know I've left Jake and Lucy. Their scores are still on the board, but neither of them is anywhere that I can see. I scan the snack counter and the front desk, but in the end, I find nothing.

Is it really possible they just left? Together? Already?

I feel physically sick to my stomach, like the acid within has turned into the stormy seas on that fishing show *Deadliest*

Catch.

I run back for the bathroom, making it into the stall just in time. I've never found myself in an emotional hollow so low—not even when I found out about Raleigh.

It's ironic, really. I dated Raleigh for well over a decade and he cheated on me for over a year, but getting attached to Jake—and sleeping with him last night—while he's in the middle of trying to find love with someone else makes me feel like so much *more* of a fool.

I sink down onto my knees on the bathroom floor and allow the tears to flow. My hands shake and my heart hammers.

I'm scared...scared to fall in love with someone only to have it all fall apart again.

I just didn't realize until now that the alternative is even scarier.

Did I just let the best guy I've ever met slip through my hands on purpose?



Jake

I slam the garage door behind me and toss my keys onto the counter with no finesse whatsoever. Then, I grab a beer from the refrigerator and put it to my lips and take a swig.

It's only noon on Tuesday, and already, I'm fucking done. I'm done with the day, done with the week, just about done with the year, for that matter.

Matt was so unimpressed with my mood, he made me walk off my own job.

"Fucking ridiculous," I say to myself, reliving it again. Nothing was going right, and the quality of work was shitty at best. I have a right to voice my displeasure to whomever I goddamn please until they get it right.

Yeah. But is that really what has you so angry? my mind taunts annoyingly, and I slam back another slug of beer to shut it up.

I grab my phone furiously and type out a message.

Me: You around to get a beer? Need to talk.

Garrett answers almost immediately, but it is the absolute last thing I want to hear.

Garrett: Sorry, dude. Beard's gone again. ☹ On a chopper on my way up north. I should be back in a week if we get this thing under control. Meet then?

I chuck my phone at the counter and growl. “Fuck!”

“Dad?” Chloe asks from the other side of the island. I swing my gaze up and around to look at her, and she’s watching me and my very poorly concealed rage with wide eyes.

I can’t entirely blame her. I don’t know that she’s ever seen me like this. Hell, I don’t know that I’ve ever *been* like this before.

“What, Chlo?” I ask, trying not to be short with her and failing miserably. That, of course, only makes my mood that much worse. I’m not the kind of guy who takes his shit out on every innocent bystander he encounters—I don’t *want* to be that guy. Right now, I just can’t seem to help it.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I clip. I almost laugh—derisively, of course—because even the simplest of things are now tainted with memories. And as much as I’d like not to be, I’m dangerously aware of the irony of using that word.

“Did...did something happen on your date the other night?”

I narrow my eyes, and she steps up to the edge of the island tentatively, resting her hands on the top of it.

“Why would you think that?”

“You’ve... Well, you’ve kind of been in a...” She swallows. “Bad mood ever since you got back from your date Sunday night.”

Back from my date. Sunday night. With...*Christ, what was her name? Laura? Lauren?*

Lucy? Yes, that’s it. Sweet, pretty Lucy. The woman who did absolutely nothing wrong yet didn’t have a chance in hell

at keeping me at that bowling alley for very long after I witnessed Holley storm away from the table behind our lane with more than a little discomfort in her eyes. I tried to watch where she went—to be able to follow her—but between the crowd and Lucy asking me if I was okay, I lost track of her.

Seeing her like that and not being able to do anything about it was one of the hardest things I've ever been through, and I've been through some hard shit—foster care, BUD/S training, my time in the field as a SEAL, raising Chloe alone.

I don't want anything about Holley to be another item on that list, but she didn't give me a choice.

She shut me out—pushed *me* away—not the other way around.

And unfortunately for Lucy, instead of being a good guy and attempting to finish the date, I played the role of fucking coward—a role that doesn't exactly come naturally to former SEAL.

I ended the night before we'd even finished our first game by feeding her a lie about there being an emergency with Chloe and needing to get home.

Yeah. I even involved my daughter in my bullshit.

Talk about a fucking prick of a move, right? Trust me, I am not proud of any of it.

Seeing Chloe standing there across from me, waiting for answers I don't know how to give, just makes me feel that much worse.

“What's going on, Dad?” Chloe asks again when I don't offer any sort of comment on her painfully true observation. “What happened? I mean, it's so obvious that something is going on with you since—”

I shake my head. “Chloe—”

“Whatever it is, I'm sure it'll work itself out, Dad. The party is Friday, and I'm sure—”

I cut her off, slicing through the air with a chop of my arm. “No. No stupid fucking contest. No more Bachelor

Anonymous. I'm done with the whole thing. I don't need to go to the party. I want out of it."

Her eyes widen. I've never been so careless with the way I speak to her before, and we both know it. Still, she powers on, her voice a whisper.

"Dad, be serious. You have to go."

"No, Chloe, I don't. I did this for you, and you know what? You were right. I needed to open myself up, but it didn't work out. I didn't find relationship potential or love in any of these women. Which means I don't need to go put on some mockery of a show Friday night and act like I actually did."

"I don't believe you," she says sternly, a tone I've never heard her use with me before. It seems we're both sailing through new waters today.

My eyebrows pull together. "What do you mean?"

"I don't believe you actually think you didn't find love because of this thing. I mean, *come on*, Dad."

"Chloe, I didn't."

She squints her eyes at me. "You're so full of it."

"Excuse me?"

"You've never lied to me in your life, so there's no reason to start now unless you're also lying to yourself." She throws both hands up in the air. "Which you totally are!"

"*Chloe.*"

"Dad, be real with yourself and me," she says, her voice a near whisper. "She fits us. She's the perfect mix of right for you and right for me, and you know it. She's fun and funny, and I don't want to think about her not being around."

Only one person comes to mind—*Holley*.

It's no surprise she's my first thought. She's never really even left the center of any of them. She's the reason I'm so angry. She's the reason I stopped the date with Lucy abruptly when I looked back and didn't see her sitting at the table

anymore. She's the reason I'm so goddamn heartsick I almost can't breathe.

"Holley," I say her name out loud.

I've spent the last forty-eight hours consumed by thoughts of her, but it's the first time I've allowed myself to bring any of them into the light of day. I've been skating by, fueled mostly by the anger I derived from Holley's ability to act like what happened between us was something we should ignore.

For me, it doesn't even feel like I *can*.

I've almost called and texted her a thousand times, but the fact that she's content to shove everything that happened between us aside makes it feel too much like a fool's errand. A woman who leaves her own bed the morning after sleeping with you is almost definitely willing to avoid texts and phone calls.

"Of course, Holley!" Chloe shouts. "I mean, I think we both know the only reason you went on any of those dates was to be around her more, right?"

I'm both surprised and terrified at her keen observation. My beautiful daughter is so much more than I've even given her credit for.

All I can do is nod. I don't even remember some of the other women's names. It might make me a terrible person, but it's the truth. Most of my dates with them, all I did was watch Holley, waiting for her to look up at me and meet my eyes.

I've been gone—completely invested in her since the moment I pulled her soaked-business-suit body out of the ocean and she yelled at me for saving her. It's the whole reason I agreed to do the contest in the first place, though, I didn't realize it at the time. Hindsight, as always, makes things so crystal clear.

Blind dates and newspaper articles aren't my style. Not at all. But all of it meant spending more time with her. And deep down, I knew I wanted to know more.

Frankly, I can see now, I wanted to know *everything* about her stunning, stubborn, adorable, awkwardly cute, clumsy, and

sexy-as-hell being.

“You have to go tell her!” she shouts so loud it makes my eardrums ring. “You need to go tell her how you feel!”

“It’s not that simple,” I mutter, and I’m not sure if it’s to her or myself.

“But it *is* that simple!” she persists, waving her arms around like a lunatic. “You have to go to the party Friday! You have to go and tell her how you feel and make a big romantic gesture. You have to!”

My heart spasms. “Chloe, sweetie...real life doesn’t work like a fairy tale. You don’t know the whole story or any of the details about what’s gone on—”

“Do you want to be with her?” she asks unabashedly.

I do the only thing I can. I answer honestly. “Yes.” It feels like I’ve carved a hole in my chest with a spoon when she’s not around. “But I don’t think she’s sure she wants to be with me. She’s...she’s avoiding me.”

“All the more reason to go to the party! You can go and tell her how you feel,” she all but demands with crazy, urging eyes. “Lay it all on the line. She’s doing my makeup beforehand, so I can promise you she’ll be there.”

“Wait...what?” My laugh is brittle with heartache, but it’s a laugh all the same. Only Holley and my daughter could somehow set up a makeup date in the middle of all of this. “She’s doing your makeup?”

“Of course. She told me she would two weeks ago. She offered and I accepted, and it’s all planned. I’m meeting her at her house before the party.”

My chest tightens at the hope in her voice. It makes more sense now, that Holley agreed to the cosmetics date before everything...exploded...but it also means it might not be the kind of appointment she’s willing to keep. Sadness burns in my lungs as I try my best to deliver the blow softly. “Listen, kiddo, some things have happened since then—”

She shakes her head. “Holley made me a promise, and I know she’ll keep it.”

“Chlo—”

“No, Dad! You’re perfect for each other, and she’s perfect for us. I know it. So, you just be ready for the party Friday, okay? And I’ll make the plans I need to get her there.”

Hope wars inside me for the first time since my confrontation with Holley in the bowling alley Sunday. I know nothing is guaranteed but getting myself in a room with Holley seems like the first step to all of this. I know we’re right for each other—I just have to make her see it too.

“Do you really think it’ll be that easy?”

“Bet, Daddio. Team Brent is the ultimate. No cap.”

I sigh, my head falling back as Chloe laughs. I don’t even have to ask her before she clarifies. “It just means it’s the truth. Team Brent will defeat any opponent, anytime.”

I’m not sure I should put so much stock into what a teenage girl has to say, but here I am, ready to lay it all on the line in the name of love.

God, I sure hope she’s right.

34

Holley

Normally, my Friday mornings are reserved for positive thoughts about the upcoming weekend. They might even include a donut splurge from Dunkin' on my way in to work.

But most Friday mornings don't occur on the very same day where you're supposed to attend a big reveal party and watch the man you can't stop thinking about pick the woman he wants to pursue. Wants to fall in love with.

Needless to say, this Friday morning proved to be tragic.

I woke up in a fucking pitch-black mood, and that mood turned full-on doomsday when I checked my email to find several responses from readers who are simply *so excited to find out who Bachelor Anonymous picks tonight!*

Readers who have been excitedly following along with my articles on BA.

Readers who have read about Bianca and Rachel and Lydia and Elle and *Lucy*—otherwise known as Date Number Five when everything went up into a flaming dumpster fire. *Also*, by far the hardest article I had to write for this fucking assignment.

At least, emotionally. From a journalistic perspective, it was almost like I planned it—the last date in the list going so well. It was a perfect build in tempo, really, from the first lackluster date with Bianca to a final romp full of chemistry with Lucy.

Gloria was ecstatic when I turned it in on Tuesday morning, and the readers ate it up like McDonald's hotcakes when it published on Wednesday.

After finishing it, however, I am a mere shell of the woman I once was.

Truthfully, I don't even know how I managed to write anything about Jake's date number five that didn't give the vibe of a lonely single woman crying onto her keyboard. It was obviously the sheer strength of my experience with compartmentalized deadline-crunching that got me through.

But I found out this morning that you can only compartmentalize your emotions for so long until you literally snap and wake up in the worn leather seats of an American-made relic.

See, apparently, when you text your dad an emotional shitstorm of mental breakdown texts while he's out in the middle of nowhere fishing, he takes it seriously.

At least, *my* dad did. I was two pints of ice cream deep, in a comforter-robe with *My Best Friend's Wedding* playing on the TV last night when he rang the doorbell, threw a bag over my head—no fucking kidding—kidnap-tossed me into the back seat of his Buick, and drove back out into the wilderness, hysterical daughter in tow.

If it hadn't been for the sound of his voice telling me to shush up and rest as I freaked out in the back seat, I might have really thought I was being freaking kidnapped.

Phil Fields is, evidently, a fucking lunatic.

By the time we made it here last night, I was passed out in the back seat. And that's where I woke up this morning. My dad didn't even try to move me.

"Dad—"

"Come on, kiddo." He gestures to the water with a lift of his chin. "Cast it out there."

"Dad, I really didn't come to fish—"

“Put your line in the water, girl. That’s the rule of being in the boat.”

I sigh and flick the rod to cast my line out into the water. Truth be told, I don’t even think I put any bait on my hook. It doesn’t matter. Just by having the line in the water, my dad is apparently satisfied.

“Okay,” he says. “Now, talk.”

“I’ve made a mess, and I think you might be a bit of a lunatic.”

“No shit, darlin’. I already knew I had a few screws loose. And I kind of got the whole mess thing from the fifteen-minute phone call filled with snot and tears and God knows what else. But the answer is simple, Holl. You make a mess, you clean it up.”

I roll my eyes. “Not that kind of mess, Dad. Clorox wipes won’t do the trick.”

“Horseshit,” he snaps. “All messes are the same. They seem nearly impossible to tackle, but put in a little elbow grease and you’ll get ’em fixed up.”

“That didn’t work with Raleigh,” I contest with a sigh.

He snorts derisively almost before I can even finish my ex’s name. “That’s because Raleigh was a blowhard. Not a mess. You can’t fix blowhards, no matter how hard you try. They’ll always be whipping their dick out when they shouldn’t.”

“Dad!”

“Tell me it’s not the truth,” he challenges, and I shut my mouth.

“This is about that fella you’ve been following around, isn’t it?”

I turned surprised eyes in his direction, and he laughs. “A man can tell when an engine has been rebuilt, darlin’. You sound different, run smoother. It’s easy to spot if you know what to look for, and you’ve been cruising along just fine ever since he came into your life.”

Jake. I sigh. Just thinking his name spurs the deepest, most intense ache that starts from the pit of my stomach and doesn't stop until it wraps itself around my heart.

God, I miss his teasing and his jokes and his laughs and his smiles. I miss the way he makes me feel and the way he makes everything so much more fun. So much better. I miss the way he challenges me and calms me and makes me feel things I've never felt before.

I just...miss him. So much.

You're in love with him.

We haven't spoken since Sunday night at the bowling alley, when I fucked everything up.

But over the past few days, he has never once left my mind, and I've typed—and then immediately deleted before hitting send—more text messages to him than I can even count. If only I knew how to move forward after actually sending any of them.

“So, what's the problem?” my dad asks, pulling my attention back to the external. “Why'd you make a mess of it?”

“Because, Dad. It's complicated. He's the bachelor in my contest for the paper. He's dating five other women who are all vying for his affection. I can't just...just...”

“You can,” he interjects.

“I can't.”

“Of course you can, girl. Ain't no rules when it comes to love. Haven't you heard that song? All's fair in love and war.”

I nod, sinking my head into my hands. “Even so, I've messed it up beyond repair. He...well...something happened between us, and he wanted to talk about it, but I...well, I freaked out. I told him it was all a mistake.”

“So *untell* him.”

“Why do you think everything with men is so easy? So cut-and-dried?”

“Because it is,” he snaps with a laugh. “It’s you womenfolk who make us out to be way more complicated than we are. Tell him the truth. Tell him you were stupid. Tell him how you feel about him. That’ll be that.”

I guffaw. “If he feels the same way!”

“Only one way to find out.”

“I could find out the opposite is true. Maybe he completely regrets...*everything* with me. Imagine the heartache then!”

“Imagine the heartache of sittin’ on your asshole while he puts his ring on another woman’s goddamn finger.”

I scowl, and he nods, smiling. The bastard.

“Do you love him, Holley?”

When I don’t respond right away, he asks it again.

And then again.

And then *again*.

Until I finally shout my answer in frustration.

“Yes, okay! I love him!” I huff, and he sets down his rod before grabbing the end of mine and tossing it right into the water. *Jesus Christ!* I don’t really know much about fishing, but I know you’re not supposed to do that!

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Quiet,” he chastises, leaning into his knees. “I just sacrificed my favorite rod to get your attention, girl, so you better listen.”

I swallow hard.

“Real love—the kind I had with your momma—it doesn’t come around all the time. I don’t believe so much in the idea that there’s only one person out there for each of us, but I do think it’s a hell of a mission to find ’em. So, you can either sit out here on your ass with me and avoid dealin’ with your shit, or you can go back to that fella and tell him how you feel, consequences be damned.”

I chew on my lip as my stomach dances uproariously. *Is it really that simple? And are those really my only two logical choices?*

My dad waits patiently—possibly the most patiently Phil Fields has ever waited for anything.

When it hits me how right he is—how much the way I handle this could shape the rest of my life—I make a decision. The *only* decision.

“Take me back to San Diego, please. I have a party to get to tonight.”



Holley

My hand shakes as I sweep eye shadow across the crease in the lid of one eye and then the other. It's a dramatic, smoky look, one I'm not known for sporting with any regularity at all.

But I figure, a confident woman needs a confident look, and if she's not confident on her own, a confident look will sure as hell help her play the part.

I clean off my brush and poise it to dip into the next accent color when the doorbell rings. My eyebrows draw together in confusion, and then, I'm ashamed to admit, in hope. *Maybe it's Jake, and he's here to make up!*

I toss the brush down on my vanity top and rush out of the bathroom, through my bedroom, down the hall, through the living room, and out to the front door.

It's only when I see Chloe's face pressed up against the glass, her smile growing excitedly as she sees me coming, that I remember I promised her I'd do her makeup for the party tonight.

Holy shit, I feel awful!

I cannot believe I forgot.

Thank God I didn't accidentally flake out on her. No matter what's going on between Jake and me, I'd never forgive myself if I let this sweet teenage girl down.

I plaster on a quick smile and do my best to think of a game plan for her makeup. I'm a hoarder of way too many

products, so I should be able to scrape together what I need without much of a problem, no matter what her dress looks like.

She has a garment bag hanging over her arm, and I speed my jog up to a full run to get to the door quicker so she doesn't have to stand there and hold it much longer.

I turn the lock and swing the door open wide. Chloe bounces on her toes a little with her excitement, though I can tell she's at least *kind of* trying to hide it. I do my best to match her enthusiasm even though I don't feel it. What's one more faked emotion at this point? I'm already a smorgasbord of anxiety, sadness, denial, hope, and crushing disappointment.

"Hey, Chlo," I greet warmly, ushering her in with a swing of my free arm and stepping out of the way. "Sorry it took me a minute. I was all the way back in my bathroom."

"That's okay!" she says breezily. "No biggie at all."

She walks the short distance to my living room while I shut the door, her eyes wandering wildly as she takes in everything my place has to offer. Apparently, it's only when you get to my age that you feel like you have to snoop in secret. Her eyes are ping-pong balls, bouncing from my furniture to my abstract paintings on the walls to my built-in shelves and back again. Finally, they catch on a photograph on one of the shelves on the left, and when they do, boy do they narrow.

"Who's that?" she asks, pointing at it with a finger to leave no doubt as to which photograph she's talking about.

It's a photograph of Raleigh and me, one of very few that survived the séance-style bonfire I had with them the week after I found out about him and *Meghan*.

"Oh," I say cautiously, a little embarrassment creeping into my voice. "That's my ex-fiancé."

"You were engaged?" she asks then, whipping around to look me in the eye.

I nod. "We dated for..." I clear my throat. "Well, more than a decade, I guess. Eleven or twelve years. He, um, well..."

he cheated on me.” I wave a hand. “It was a whole thing.”

“Why do you keep this photo of him?” she asks unabashedly.

I groan. “I’m not sure?” I answer, kind of like a question. “I guess as a reminder of what was and what I don’t want my future to be? Plus, if I got rid of all of our photos together, there really wouldn’t be any of me left for a huge portion of my life. I decided to hold on to just a few.”

She nods, tosses the garment bag at me—I’m impressed that I catch it, frankly—and she bends down to pick up the frame. My stomach churns a little as she studies him closely, but when she turns back to me, her eyes are unbelievably kind. “You’re, like, *way* too pretty for him anyway. Wayyy too pretty.”

I look at the photograph of Raleigh in his prime and jerk my chin back into my chest. “You think so?”

“Ohhh yeah,” she breathes confidently, knocking on the glass of the frame with her knuckle. “You’re, like, totally wig, and he’s average at best.”

“Is wig a good thing?” I ask, and she laughs.

“Definitely.”

My chest warms, and a natural rush of endorphins makes my smile climb all the way up my face.

Chloe must notice because she nods. “You’re great, Holley. And you deserve someone great to love you back.”

I suck in my lips, pretty sure the tears are only moments away from flowing freely when she reaches out and grabs my arm quickly. “Come on! We don’t have much time, and we both have to finish getting ready.”

I lead her down the hall and into my bedroom, and I’m pretty sure, from the sound of it, I hear the picture frame with Raleigh and me hit the bottom of the kitchen trash can when she passes it.

And if that is the case, I have zero desire to go back and dig it out.

I take her dress bag and hang it on my closet door, while she glances around, pausing noticeably on my bed. For the first time since it happened, I realize I've been markedly avoiding changing the sheets on my bed since Jake and I slept together in it.

In fact, his leftover semen is probably still there, staining it somewhere in the middle where it leaked out of me. I just haven't been able to bring myself—

Oh, holy shit! Anxiety reaches out and wraps its hands around my throat. *My freaking birth control pills!*

When was the last time I took them?

And how I am just *now* coming to a full realization that we didn't use a condom that night?

Wild with panic, I turn recklessly and bowl right into Chloe. She almost takes a tumble—we both do, but I don't even remotely have the awareness or clarity to care. I single-mindedly run for the bathroom, grabbing on to the trim of the doorway to swing myself around at full speed, and grab the handle on the top drawer where I always keep my medication.

I'm violent in my motions, and the carefully organized rows I keep any and all medication in go right to hell, but I don't care. I scrap and scrape at the stack, throwing everything I come into contact with that isn't a little round case of very important pills right into the basin of my sink and mumbling to myself.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God...”

I can almost feel Chloe's presence as she sidles up behind me, but I pay her no mind, finally finding the elusive case and popping it open to inspect it.

I count pills and calculate dates in my head, but fucking hell, it is a fool's errand. I haven't been taking this shit for at least a week and a half. I open my mouth and close it, gulping like a fish.

What am I going to do? What if I'm actually fucking pregnant? I mean, it'd be Jake's kid, which is great—he obviously makes good kids—but holy SHIT! I'm not even

dating the guy! We slept together one time, and he's dating five other women! I swear to Zeus, this is some kind of bullshit universe full-circle crazy nonsense if I've ever seen it. I know it's my fault for not being more responsible, but—

Chloe jerks me out of my mental tirade and spins me to face her. After getting one look at my face, she grabs my head on both sides with her hands and holds me steady as she gets as close as she can.

“Do not freak out,” she commands, sounding scarily authoritative like her father. I swallow thickly, but every fiber of my body wants to rebel against her. If ever there was a time to freak out, dammit, this is it!

“Holley,” she snaps, bringing my manic eyes back to her. “Do *not* freak out! Whatever you're thinking about right now, stop, okay?”

I shake my head, and she grips it harder, forcing me to make it nod.

“Whatever it is, my dad is going to make it all right,” she says, showing a finesse and a heart so far beyond her years it's not even funny.

Tears sting my nose, but this time, they're the good kind.

It may sound weird, but I think I knew I loved her before I knew I loved him. *Yeah, yeah. I love him. I admit it.*

I laugh, and she frowns, fearing I'm moving even closer to the brink of a breakdown, but the truth is, no matter what, she's just done the impossible.

Because knowing her, and knowing Jake—knowing the way they are together—makes me know that no matter what happens with him and me, I—*and maybe this baby!*—will be more than all right. It's seriously the weirdest emotional rollercoaster I've ever been on, but Chloe being here during one of the most unexpectedly ground-shattering moments of my life makes me feel calm. Right. Purposed.

I swear, I barely even recognize myself. I should have a hole halfway burrowed to China by now.

“Come on,” I say, a wave of peace washing over me and steadying my voice. I reach up and run the backs of my knuckles along her cheek. “Let’s get ready.”

“You’re fine now?” she asks skeptically. I can’t blame her. She’s only a teenager, but I’m pretty positive she knows what birth control pills look like. Hell, I wonder if she’s put it all together already? I wince internally. *God, I wonder how that makes her feel.*

I take her hand in mine and smile. “No, Chloe. I’m *good*. Are you okay?”

Chloe nods then, her eyes shiny with both unshed tears and questions. I’m not really prepared to face them, but that’s the way parenthood goes a lot of the time, I’d guess. I might as well get prepared now...just in case.

“Are you...” she starts to ask, obviously unsure how to word it. “Did you and my dad...”

Yikes. How to tiptoe through this delicate web...

“Yes. I think. If you’re asking what I think you’re asking.”

Chloe snorts a little laugh and almost smiles. “It, like, couldn’t be someone else’s, you know, baby...”

I shake my head vehemently. “If there’s a baby—and there may be no baby...” I qualify, shocked by the feeling of disappointment that follows. “But if there’s a baby, it wouldn’t be anyone else’s. Physically impossible.”

She nods and, surprising me greatly, smiles huge.

I don’t know what to make of her happiness at the possibility, but I choose not to make anything of it that’s not good. Emotionally—mentally—that’s all I can handle at this point.

My front door bangs open suddenly, handle hitting the wall stopper with a thud, and Chloe and I both jerk to look that way. We left the bedroom door open, obviously not expecting any intruders, so I push her behind me quickly and grab the first thing I can find from the counter.

I doubt my curling iron is going to do a lot of good protecting us, but it's the only thing I've got.

Chloe squeals behind me, and I reach back to squeeze her wrist in comfort before yelling out, "Who's there?"

"Phil Fields," my dad booms out from just outside the bedroom door, and I sag in relief. Anger builds in its wake.

"Jesus, Dad! You almost scared the life out of us!" I accuse. "First, kidnapping, and now, breaking and entering—"

My tirade comes to a screeching halt as he crosses the threshold of my bedroom and smirks, tugging at the lapels of his fancy black suit.

"Mm-hmm," he coos. "Figured the penguin getup would shut your trap."

Chloe giggles behind me.

"What...what are you doing?"

"Takin' you to the party," he says matter-of-factly. "What else?"

"Dad, this is a work function—"

"Ah, horseshit," he cuts me off. "This is my baby girl's shot at love. If she doesn't cock it up, that is."

I roll my eyes as he continues.

"Which is the other part of why I'm here. Want to make sure you don't wimp out."

"Dad," I say, gritting my teeth now as Chloe laughs. "This is Jake's daughter."

"Jake?"

"Yes, Dad. *Jake*."

He nods.

"*Jake*, Dad. You know, the *guy*."

He chuckles then, shrugging his shoulders. "Yeah, I know. Just wanted to see how many times I could make you say it."

Chloe snorts, grabbing the curling iron from my hand and plugging it in so she can get to work on her hair. “Oh man, Holley. Your dad and my dad are going to get along great.”

Phil laughs, and I roll my eyes to the heavens again. Chloe’s right. I guess that’s one of the reasons I’m so comfortable with all of Jake’s teasing.

“I’ll just be in the living room,” my dad offers then. “You ladies finish getting ready. I’ve got a jar of pickles ready and waiting in the Buick if we need ’em.”

Chloe’s eyebrows knit in confusion, but I shake my head. “Trust me, it’s a long story.”

She giggles, but hope makes her amber eyes sparkle. “I can’t wait to hear it one day.”

I nod. *I sure as hell hope Jake’s receptive to my apology and I get the chance to tell it.*

All I can do now is be me and tell Jake the truth.

“Come on,” I say with a smile. “Let’s get your makeup done.”



Chloe laughs again in the back seat, ever entertained by Phil as I sink my head into my hands and try not to cry. He’s been a one-man show for the last half hour on our way to the venue, filling the ride with tales of my misadventures as a child and beyond. The one good thing I can say for it is that until this moment, it’s kept me pretty distracted from the shitshow I’m about to walk into.

Phil leans over and grabs my hands, pulling them away from my eyes as I feel the car rock to a stop. His smile is kind and loving and confirms without a shadow of a doubt that distraction is exactly what he was going for.

“Don’t know much about makeup, but I figure it probably don’t like your hands all over it, girl.”

I sigh and laugh at the same time. “Probably not. Does it still look okay?” Phil surveys me closely, but when it becomes frighteningly clear that he’s not going to be able to give me a credible answer, I turn to face Chloe.

She nods enthusiastically. “You look terrific.”

I smile my thanks and let out a deep exhale. “I guess it’s go time, then.”

I grab the handle of my door and open it, and from the sound of things, both my dad and Chloe do the same. Careful to pull the train of my dress away first, I slam the door shut and turn to face the venue—The Fleet Science Center at Balboa Park.

The building has a Spanish flair, with a whitewashed stone exterior and a red tile roof, but to tell you the truth, all it really looks like to me right now is intimidating.

I was already feeling nervous enough. Declaring your feelings for a man who is quite possibly the best, most attractive guy in the universe in a roomful of people who expect him to date other women is ominous all on its own. Add in a possible unplanned pregnancy? Yeah, I might faint.

My dad rounds the car and takes my arm, gesturing for Chloe to do the same on the other side, and I have to admit, even in the middle of my breakdown, the action makes me smile.

When he starts to walk, I have no choice but to put one foot in front of the other and do the same.

Ready or not, here we go.



Jake

Wanting to make a production of the big reveal, the paper has been kind enough to keep me barricaded off in a side room in the venue, while the party guests gather on the other side of the glass wall that looks into the main space.

SoCal Tribune pulled out all the stops tonight. Flowers, photographer, and food, they didn't hold back on the big Bachelor Anonymous reveal.

Normally, I'd be running in the other direction to be a part of something so insane, but tonight is important.

Seeing Holley is a necessity. Telling her how I feel, really truly feel, about her is just as important as fucking oxygen for my survival.

And I'm wearing a suit, which feels weird, but tonight required a balls-to-the-wall, put-everything-on-the-line kind of mind-set.

I'm certain of what I should have known weeks ago—I'm in love with her. I know we haven't known each other long, but I also know that, for me, the sound of her laughter is one of the single greatest things I've heard in my entire life.

I know that when she smiles, my heart does a flip inside my chest, and when she hurts, I hurt more than I've ever hurt.

I know that I think of her when I wake up, and I think of her when I go to sleep, and I know that sending my daughter to her house tonight—taking the chance on welcoming her into

my daughter's life—has been one of the easiest decisions I've ever made.

Chloe's right. She fits. Not just me, but us, and I swear to God I'll do everything in my power tonight to make sure she believes me when I tell her.

A woman in a low-cut dress winks through the glass wall, so I turn to face the other direction immediately.

By God, the last thing I need is another one.

As chance would have it, the movement is almost cosmically ordained, happening at just the right time to clear my line of sight to the door all the way at the other end of the venue.

My heart trips over itself as Holley and Chloe walk in the door together, arm in arm with a suit-wearing, older, bald man. I don't recognize him, but I don't feel any sort of immediate threat from his presence either. And the truth is, when I get one look at the woman I'm waiting for, I can't even pretend to pay attention to him anymore. In a long black dress with a plunging neckline, Holley's everything I've ever dreamed of and more. Her lips are painted a dark red, her eyebrows heavy with attitude. Her jade eyes sparkle against the neutral background of the rest of her outfit, and it's all I can do to keep myself standing.

A hand goes to my chest as my breath leaves, desperate to put some pressure on the rapidly forming void. I know what I need to fill it—I can't take my eyes off her.

The three of them are stopped by a woman in a bright-red dress not far inside the entrance, and everything inside me vibrates. They unlink arms then, and the man—who, now that I look at him more closely, has got to be Holley's father—turns to Chloe and says something to make her smile.

Holley chats with the woman in the red dress, her whole head bobbing animatedly in agreement with something she's saying. I know Holley pretty well, though, and the wide, panicked set of her eyes tells me she's not actually hearing much of anything the woman has to say.

I wait for her to make her way around the woman and into the main area of the party, but when she gets stopped again by a woman I know to be her editor, Gloria, from our earlier introduction, I make a decision.

There's no fucking way I'm sitting in this room and watching like a voyeur for another minute.

I don't wait for the planned introduction to the party guests; I don't wait at all.

Determined, I stride out into the main room. People recognize me, that much is clear, but I only have eyes for Holley and Chloe.

Chloe spots me on my approach first, smiling widely and giving me a thumbs-up in support.

I vaguely notice some of the other women I went on dates with trying to catch my attention, but I don't return the gestures.

Holley looks up just as I step closer to her, and with her looking the way she does tonight, I have absolutely no other choice. I have to feel her body against mine, the heat of my flesh on hers. It's instinctual, basic—I've missed it so fucking much.

Her eyes widen, startled by the fact that I'm not slowing down at all, but I don't stop to explain. Just like the night she opened her door and her body to the possibility of something with me, I take her face in mine and put my lips to hers.

Ever reliable, she gasps, and I don't waste the opportunity.

My tongue sweeps inside her mouth as a low rumble starts up around us with the unexpected excitement of a total party shakeup. It takes a few long seconds in time, but when Holley's arms come up to wrap around my neck as she kisses me back, everything I never knew I needed comes crashing down on top of me, filling me with hope and love and the kind of happiness only Chloe seemed to understand I needed.

Speaking of Chloe, she whoops beside us, letting out a cheer and a whistle.

I smile against Holley's mouth, and without hesitation, she returns the gesture.

Pulling back just enough to look her in the eyes, I'm rewarded with the jade light I thought I'd have to fight and plead for—the look of a woman ready to take the leap with me.

It's wholly unexpected, but goddamn, it's so welcome. At forty years old, I've already had more than enough drama to last a lifetime.

"I thought I was going to have to convince you," I whisper softly, pushing gentle fingers into the fringe of her perfectly curled hair.

We're still close, but not enough that I can't see when she smiles, her nose wiggling slightly as she pulls her lips into her mouth and shakes her head. "I know. That's normally my thing, huh?"

I nod, leaning my forehead into hers as she laughs lightly. "I've definitely had to talk you into things a time or two."

"I finally listened to what you were saying, let go, and got with the program more quickly this time. After all, you always convince me eventually anyway, right?"

I nod again. "Always." And especially this time. I'm pretty sure I would have stopped at nothing to show her how right we are together.

"Plus," she adds like it's an afterthought. "I love you, so..." She shrugs and then giggles, and my chest swells to three times its normal size. *Holy shit*. Hearing those words from her—given freely and without hesitation—is, without a doubt, one of the best moments of my life. I reach forward and lift her into my arms, hug her to my chest, and spin her around.

She laughs at my over-the-top gesture, understanding it for what it is—reciprocation. Still, with something this important, there's not even a slight chance in hell I'm going to leave even a sliver of doubt.

I set her on her feet, pull her back with my hands at her hips and look right into her jade-green eyes.

“I love you too, you know.”

She nods, her lips twisting with emotion as she works to fight back tears. She knows. Looking back at everything that’s happened between us, I have to imagine it’d be hard not to. Truth be told, there’s no way either one of us could doubt it if we’re honest with ourselves.

Even with the other women coming and going, it’s always been about Holley. And for her, no matter the lines she wasn’t supposed to cross, it’s always been about me. Two people as right for each other as we are, always find a way through the chaos to one another.

When the fog of our moment evaporates, courtesy of a cleared throat from her father, we look up to find everyone in the room staring at us.

Eyes blink, cameras flash, and a whispered roar rolls through the crowd as people start discussing the events of our reunion among themselves. It’s quite the intense experience. I grab Holley’s hand, expecting her to shrink a little under the scrutiny, and her dad and Chloe close ranks. Intended or not, it seems we’ve formed our own little fortress—an impenetrable family unit. Its strength is unmistakable, and if Holley shrinks at all, it’s only because she’s leaned farther into me.

“I guess I can strike a vibrator off the Christmas list then, huh?” her dad remarks, startling us all with his overzealous candor.

“Dad!” Holley snaps, embarrassment hitting her like a whip. Me, though—I’m bemused beyond belief.

I glance to Holley’s father with a huge smile on my face, and I awkwardly whisper into the room while everyone looks on. “You must be Holley’s father. It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

“Pleasantries later, son,” he says without blinking. “Time now to deal with the angry mob.”

Gloria is the first to break the invisible barrier force field we have going, stomping over to Chloe and me with quick

feet. She lowers her voice to a whisper, but I'm not sure it does any good. The room has gone so silent again, you could hear a pin drop.

“What the hell is going on, Holley?”

Holley clears her throat, but instead of answering her editor directly, she apologizes with an, “I'm sorry, Gloria,” and steps forward, pulling me with her thanks to the clamp of my hand, to address the room. I would have expected her to take some sort of a baby step—explain to her editor first—but I guess when you have this kind of interaction in the middle of a crowd, you have to expect a time of reckoning will eventually come home to roost.

Voice loud enough for everyone to hear, Holley does her best to make amends for the confusion. “I...I want to, first, apologize for bringing everyone here under...well, as it turns out, false pretenses. It wasn't on purpose, and it wasn't planned, but...Bachelor Anonymous won't be choosing a bachelorette tonight. In fact, he won't be choosing a bachelorette at all. I'm so sorry—”

Surprisingly, it's Rachel, my four-wheeling, clean-eating date, who speaks up first, cutting into Holley's speech to disagree. “It looks like he picked one to me.”

All four other women chime in in agreement, and the rest of the room goes silent once again.

“Me too.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Same.”

“Looks obvious.”

“I'm...” Holley swallows hard, walking toward the women to address them directly. I think, out of everyone here, she feels the most remorse toward the five of them. “I'm so sorry for doing this to you guys. You have to know I had absolutely no intention of... I would never dream of purposely dragging you along through a pointless contest. I...I didn't recognize my own feelings, and for the position that's put you in, I'm sorry.”

Bianca, Lucy, Elle, Rachel, and Lydia all consider Holley closely, but I'm surprised when Elle turns to me. "And you feel the same about her?"

I nod apologetically. "I'm truly sorry for wasting any of your time. That wasn't my intention at all."

It's tense for about ten seconds while Holley and I stand there, the weight of an entire roomful of people's eyes threatening to crush us, but as always, I can count on Chloe to have my back. And as it turns out, Holley can count on her to have hers, too.

She starts to applaud, and before I even know what's happening, everyone has joined in. Even the women in front of us. In fact, Rachel's lips even turn up into a smile. "I can't believe the two of you didn't realize." She laughs. "Truth is, it was clear as day to me."

"Me too," Lydia agrees. "As soon as I walked up, I could tell there was something between them."

Elle shrugs. "No big deal. We only went on one date, anyway."

Bianca smiles, but when I take a closer look, I see it's because she has her phone out, taking a selfie.

It's not a big crowd, just the employees and the core group of people involved in the contest, but before we know it, everyone is back to chatting like none of our little exposé ever happened. It feels like a relief to know it's not going to end in complete catastrophe.

Chloe laughs as she sidles up to us, offering up, "So, do I need to write another ad? Single dad seeks different Juliet?" as a kind of mocking question.

Problem is, it doesn't seem so ridiculous anymore.

"No," I say with a smile. "He found her."

EPILOGUE

Holley

Single Dad Finds Juliet

As the Bachelor Anonymous contest at SoCal Tribune comes to a close, the staff and contestants alike have been left reeling—me included.

That's right, folks. Our first run at a social experiment, where a bachelor is selected based on a single personal ad and farmed out on several dates with the best of candidates, is a success. Bachelor Anonymous found love!—on unplanned date #6.

I know you weren't expecting another contestant in Bachelor Anonymous's journey, but the truth is, in order to take a detailed look at his time with her, we have to go back to the beginning.

To the day I met Jake Brent.

That's right, me. The lead contributor to the Bachelor Anonymous contest and a longtime employee of the SoCal Tribune, Holley Fields. I hope you'll all pause your jealousy long enough to congratulate me—because as it turns out, Jake Brent is the love of my life.

And I was the very last person to see it coming.

I toss this Sunday's edition of the paper down on the table in front of me and look up into the eyes of the man I love. Jake

is laughing at something Chloe says as he leans against the dessert case at Grey Street Coffee, but his eyes are on me.

He looks the best he's ever looked—of course—and I know this time, it's because I know he's mine.

I pick up my coffee cup and take a sip while he and Chloe wait for our brownies, and I think about everything that's changed for the better in the last week and a half.

For one, I'm not stuck in an office between Fritz and Gianna anymore, and I know for a fact that I won't ever have to run another dating contest for the Tribune ever again. Some might view my move to beat reporter as a demotion, but to be honest, it feels like a victory. After getting out and chasing stories for the last week, I realize that's what I should have been doing all along. The only person I won't admit that to is Gloria—I'm pretty sure she'll move me again if she doesn't feel like I'm suffering some kind of punishment.

Still, at the end of the day, I'm happy, and that's all that really matters.

In other news, I have a lot more senders of messages than my dad, and I never have time to feel alone. Jake and Chloe have my schedule of free time all booked up, and by God, it's been fun.

Jake and Chloe finally make their way back from the counter, brownies in hand and smiles on their faces, so I scoot the discarded paper out of the way and move my phone so they can take their seats.

It's only when Jake sits down across from me and pulls up his sleeve that I notice the fresh ink at the bottom of his tattoo sleeve.

“What's that?” I ask, pushing his hand out of the way and tracing the new design.

It's a doodled heart. One I recognize all too well. My heart picks up to the speed of a jackhammer, pounding in my chest.

“What?” Jake deflects, so obviously pretending not to know what I'm talking about, it's obnoxious.

“That,” I say, reaching out to touch it with my finger.

“Oh,” he says, a smile settling onto his face and lighting up his eyes. “That’s for you. I had more to add to my story.”

I almost hyperventilate, but somehow, manage to keep it together enough to speak. “It’s just like the one from the paper.”

He nods, a teasing light coming into his eyes as I take a sip of coffee. “It should be. I had your dog do it.”

I sputter and spew coffee everywhere.

Jesus. He remembers. He remembers me making a fool of myself that very first day, all the way down to the insane excuse I gave for the doodle around his ad. “*My dog did that.*”

Chloe shakes her head like we’re crazy, but I lean across the table and touch my lips to his.

Yep. *Never been happier.*



Four weeks later...

Holley

Cheryl smiles at me as she walks into the examining room, dons a pair of gloves, and dips a test strip into my cup of pee.

I shake nervously as I see her lay the strip on the side of sink and watch as it develops. It’s been about six weeks since Jake and I slept together the first time and about five since I realized I could be pregnant, and it has been the longest time of my life. Mostly because I’ve been carrying the possibility around like a secret, waiting to get real confirmation before bringing Jake into the loop. Chloe, though, having been there for my initial breakdown, has been silently supportive and celebratory ever since.

I’ve managed to talk myself into being happy with either result, but the truth is, I’ve kind of gotten attached to the

possibility of growing our family a little. Because that's what Jake and Chloe are to me—my family.

Cheryl freezes as the test strip develops, and everything inside me shatters into a million happy pieces. Her smile is huge as she turns to face me and holds the strip up in explanation.

“I guess you changed your minds?” she asks, obviously remembering my last appointment when Jake put on a whole pretend show for the office staff and told them we were together.

Now, though, it's no longer pretend.

Thank everything for that.

I smile. “I guess we did.”

The truth is, I can't believe how far we've come in such a short time. But more than that, I can't believe how *believable* it feels. *Right*. Like the best thing that's ever happened to me by a long shot.

“Have you told Jake yet?”

I smile and laugh at the fact that she remembers our previous interaction well enough to remember his name, and I shake my head. I guess he just leaves that kind of impression on people. Hell, I couldn't have forgotten anything about him after the first time I met him if I tried.

“I thought I'd do that now.”

“Is he here with you?” she asks excitedly, and I smile.

“I told him I thought I had a UTI.”

She smiles hugely, then, apparently thrilled with my deception. I'll have to tell Jake when all of this is over. Maybe he can recruit her for the KGB. “Please tell me I can go get him?”

I nod, and she shoots out of the room before any other words can be exchanged. I move my hands to the table under my butt and sit on them.

It's the only option, really, with my nerves running this rampant. I'm jumpy and awkward still—that hasn't changed. And I don't need to be waving my arms around, get out of control, and end up knocking myself off the table.

There's a knock on the door, and I suck in a huge breath to try to calm myself down. Cheryl must be back with Jake. I have to admit, though, it's really more nervous excitement than anything. Jake Brent has a way of making me know he'll be okay with any surprise I throw his way—even this.

“Come in,” I call, my voice shaking noticeably.

Jake's face is immediately drawn as he steps into the room and gets a look at me, and it's all I can do to keep myself from crawling out of my skin.

Cheryl backs out of the room slowly, but I really wouldn't be surprised if she and the other gals are leaned up against the other side with a glass to their ear.

“What is it, Holl? You're scaring me.”

I smile and shake my head. “I don't believe you. Jake from the Ocean isn't scared of anything.”

“I'm scared of losing you.”

“Losing me? *Ha*. You're stuck with me forever, buddy.” I grin and lean forward, and right there, against his lips, ask, “Are you scared of having another baby?”

He freezes for the briefest of moments before jerking back to look me in the eye. “Really?”

I nod. “I'm pregnant, Jake.”

“Holley,” he says softly, his heart swirling in the Caribbean pools of his eyes. There's happiness and hope and the most beautiful display of unconditional love. *Yeah, single dads really are the jackpot.*

He grabs his phone and scrolls through the music. It's surprising, given the circumstances, since he's yet to actually react with words of affirmation or excitement, but when the song starts, it's not surprising anymore. Just as he intended, the choice says it all.

“Even the nights are better,” I say, and he nods.

“Air Supply.”

“My God,” I say with a laugh. “Chloe already thinks we’re old. What’s this baby going to think, us playing 80s music to celebrate the news of its conception?”

“Who cares,” he replies. “We’re going to love them, and each other, enough that it doesn’t matter.”

Swoon.

I don’t know what I did to deserve this man, but hell’s bells, I’m never letting him go.



Three months later...

Jake

“I was concerned about your empty nest, Daddio, but I didn’t think you’d go quite this far to fill it,” Chloe says with a wink.

“I guess I’m just *extra*,” I tease, making her howl with laughter.

“Well, well. You’re finally caving, huh? Learning some of my kind of English after all.”

I smile and shrug. “I guess I’m going to need it.”

Garrett leans forward from his spot on the other side of Chloe and shakes his head, his voice low as we wait for Holley to walk down the aisle.

“Jesus.” He laughs. “Never thought four months ago that I’d be in the middle of a divorce while you’re marrying your pregnant bride-to-be.”

I smile, looking down at the floor as Chloe snorts.

“I don’t think any of us would have pictured it quite this way, Garrett.”

Chloe's voice is full of a smile as she disputes me. "I would. I mean, maybe not the baby. But I was definitely hoping you'd be walking down the aisle to someone like Holley." She laughs as she realizes her gaffe. "I mean, Holley walking down the aisle to you. Obviously."

Almost as if on cue, the music starts, and Holley's dad steps out into the aisle, the most beautiful girl in the world, my bride-to-be, his daughter, on his arm.

She has a bouquet of Gerbera daisies pulled in close, presumably to hide her stomach from the people she's not quite ready to tell, and a smile on her face that I'll never forget for the rest of my life.

It reminds me so much of the reasons we're here—the reasons I want to spend the rest of my life with her.

She raises an eyebrow to smirk at me, and as if I planned it myself, bobbles slightly and trips over the fabric at the front of her dress. She catches herself quickly with the help of her dad, and I have to admit, I don't think her walk down the aisle would have been complete without it.

"Dude," Garrett whispers. "You're one lucky son of a bitch."

"I know," I whisper as I lock eyes with Holley again.

The truth is, Garrett has no fucking idea. But I hope he will. One day I hope he'll get to experience this kind of love with a woman who actually deserves him.

Holley's eyes find mine, a smile on her face and a shrug to let me know that she's more than aware that I noticed the trip.

She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my entire life.

In a lacy white gown that sits just off her shoulders and hugs the curves of her figure, hair down in waves around her shoulders, and makeup that highlights the jade of her eyes, she clearly chose each aspect of her look with me in mind. But the truth is, I can barely see any of it.

Because Holley's gorgeous looks are one in a billion, but her personality—the way she makes me feel—is one in a trillion.

She's everything to me.

Her dad stops their approach at the foot of the altar, and I walk down the three short steps to meet them. Phil's head shines in the fading afternoon sunlight, and matching moisture reflects in his eyes.

I imagine he has to be feeling about the way I'd feel if I were the one giving away my only daughter. It doesn't matter that she's almost thirty-four years old, to him, she'll always be his baby.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” the reverend asks from his spot up the steps.

Phil doesn't disappoint with his answer. “She gives herself.” He turns to give Holley a kiss on the cheek and whispers the rest. “But she does it with my blessing.”

I reach out to shake his hand, and he takes it firmly. There's emotion in his throat, of that much I'm sure, so I don't put him in the position of having to say anything else.

Neither one of us really needs to speak, though. You can see everything you need to right in our eyes.

We both love Holley more than anything in the world, and we'll both go to the ends of it to make sure she feels it.

“Shall we, Jake from the Ocean?” Holley asks when my eyes meet hers again. I nod and take her hand to step up onto the platform, but before helping her up, I tell her the truth.

“I was drowning,” I admit softly, making her chin jerk back slightly. “And you saved me. It just wasn't in the ocean.”

“Jake,” Holley whispers.

“You were exactly what I never knew I needed, Holley. And I can't wait to marry you.”

She laughs lightly and looks around at everyone who's waiting for us to do just that. “I guess we should probably get

on with it then, huh?”

“Yes!” Phil interjects loudly. “For God’s sake, don’t make me break out the pickles at a wedding.”

Everyone laughs, but I only have ears for Holley. It’s still the best sound I’ve ever heard.

“I love you, Holl.”

“I love you too, Jake.”

THE END

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Taming Hollywood's Baddest Boy Excerpt

TAMING
Hollywood's
BADDEST
BOY

m a x m o n r o e

Intro

Billie

Naked lumberjacks are all the rage. Or is it that they're *full* of rage?

I'm not entirely sure, but I think *maybe*, just maybe, it's a little bit of both.

Standing beside a hot tub outside of a rustic Alaskan cabin is a bare-chested, handsome-as-hell lumberjack of a man, and he is as naked as the day he was born.

"Who the fuck are you, and what the *fuck* are you doing *here*?" the big, burly man with a scruffy beard and piercing blue eyes asks me brusquely.

And holy hell, what a question that is.

I started this journey in a meeting in LA, promising my boss the world, continued it with a plane, a car, a hike and kayaking adventure in a cold, rainy Alaskan setting, and in a highly unanticipated twist, I'm ending it in what must be an issue of *Playgirl* magazine come to life.

And boy oh boy is the centerfold pissed...

"*Hello?*" he questions harshly. "I said, who the hell are you?"

As hard as it is, given his clothes-less state, I force myself to take a good, scrutinizing look at the rest of his face. I'm here for a reason, and with nothing more than a ramshackle convenience store owner named Earl's vague instructions to go on, I can only hope that the *here* I'm at is the *here* I've spent days in a plane, car, and kayak looking for. In addition to

a remarkably carved line on the inside of each hipbone, the angry man standing boldly above me has a strong jaw covered by a beard, a little scar above his right eye, miles of muscular, tanned skin, and messy, light-brown hair. I have to look a little closer to confirm my conclusion through the rolling waves of distrust and hatred coming off him, but when I focus hard enough, the star-quality glimmer in his eyes is undeniable.

For the love of pancakes at a Sunday morning breakfast, it's *really* him.

Luca Weaver, Hollywood's former baddest boy—*the man I've nearly killed myself to find*—is right in front of me, and he is *naked*.

At my non-answer, his jaw turns to stone. "I asked you a question. Either answer it or get fucking moving." I jolt at the rumble of his voice, but my feet do nothing to take me in any direction. I am rooted to the spot, utterly awed over the fact that I've actually managed something as impossible as finding Luca Weaver and all of my normal functions are rendered useless. He scowls, unimpressed with all the hard work I've put in—work that he obviously doesn't know about. "You have five seconds before I come back out here with my shotgun."

"Uh..." I fumble, trying like hell to grasp the English language once again. I may be distracted, but on some level, I understand the importance of getting my shit together enough to at least prevent a shotgun from joining our little meet-and-greet.

But my brain is *bus-y*. And slow.

Because Luca Weaver looks *damn* good without any clothes.

Eight years older since the last time he graced the covers of Hollywood gossip magazines, Luca is a man to whom time has been seriously kind. Either his genetics are just *that* good, or there's some kind of sexy voodoo in the Alaskan water.

I mean...his penis is *right* in front of me, and I can't find a single thing wrong with it. It's straight and veiny and perfectly

pink.

“What’s the matter with you? You have a death wish or something?” he spits at the statue formerly known as my body. “This is private property.”

His words are serious and firm, and it seems that maybe I *do* have a dream that’s reminiscent of the movie *Fargo*—*fingers crossed there are no wood chippers nearby*. Because for as much as I try, I can’t stop looking at my new phallic friend, even to form a few simple words.

But, come on. *Luca Weaver’s freaking dick is right there!*

It’s not hard, but still, it’s...*big*—so big it’s not even a dick.

It’s a *Richard*. *Sir* Richard.

King Richard, really.

Shit, I’m in the presence of penis royalty, and I suddenly have the urge to curtsy.

He is a lumberjack fantasy come to life. Instantly, my brain starts thinking about pine-scented flannel and chopping wood and giving a blow job... Wait...*what?*

Stop being a moron and speak words!

“Uh...so...you’re...naked.” *Oh god, those aren’t the right words!*

He glances down, mutters something to himself, snags a towel from a few feet away, and wraps it around his waist. “I didn’t invite you here,” he says, his voice gritty with irritation—and maybe, a little with disuse. Which would make sense. It’s taken me an entire season of *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* to get here. I can’t imagine he’s having book clubs and dinner parties and gabbing with his pals on the regular.

Towel adjusted and glorious goods hidden from view, he studies me with frigid blue eyes and a glare worthy of a scorned woman. I shiver.

“I’m only going to ask you one more time. What in the hell are you doing here?”

I fiddle with the edges of my shirt as I finally find my vocal cords. “I’m Billie...Billie Harris.”

And I am in *way* over my head.

Chapter ONE

Billie

Three Days Earlier

Give me coffee, and no one gets hurt. Give Charles Hawthorne coffee, and everyone gets their ass kissed.

I suppose kissing of asses could be considered a good thing, but when it comes to Charles—my archnemesis at work—and his propensity to kiss the gluteal region of my boss, Serena, it could definitely be better.

Speaking of, my phone lights up with a message from its spot in the cupholder, and I glance down to read the preview bubble as it populates.

Charles: Serena, would you like me to bring you a coffee?

Ugh. Both of us are vying for the same position—to be the right hand (wo)man to Serena Koontz, one of the biggest production company owners in all of Hollywood.

And this is not some friendly competition turned rom-com where we fall hopelessly in love. This guy is a brownnosing, smug thorn in my side who sucks up to our boss so much his lips will eventually be permanently attached to her ass.

Serena: No.

She generally doesn't even have the decency to include pleasantries when she shoots him down, but he never lets it discourage him. He's tenacious. I'll give him that.

Charles: What about a croissant from that bakery you love so much? It's on my way in.

Serena: Have it here at ten. Morning meeting is pushed back.

I shake my head at the new information I've just obtained from being a third wheel on their conversation. Considering their messages are inside our ongoing group chat, the eavesdropping is expected, but still. *I wonder if anyone would have bothered to tell me about the change in meeting time if I weren't spying on their messages like a voyeur?*

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel as "Wagon Wheel," one of my daddy's favorite songs, starts to blare from my stereo speakers, and I shift my mind away from workplace slights.

There are a million and one memories to go with this song, and regardless of how I got the information, I just won an hour and a half of extra time.

I roll down my window a crack and soak in all the glitz around me.

Beverly Hills, Rodeo Drive. There's nothing like it. A well-dressed woman in a little white Porsche sits at a stoplight, and a black Ferrari is illegally parked in front of a Starbucks. The sun shines differently on fancy storefronts, and people walk around in outfits that cost more than my car—an almost comical contrast to the grassroots, country twang music filling my ears.

But that disparity is one-hundred-percent me.

Small town, country girl—*who isn't country at all*—turned Hollywood.

Well, *trying* to turn Hollywood.

At the first available opening, I gas it up alongside my fancy vehicle counterparts and take a right turn onto Melrose. Alfred's Coffee sits on the next corner, and despite Charles's shenanigans with the fine brown liquid, coffee *always* beckons. And usually, it does it from Alfred's. Only five minutes from work, the establishment on Melrose Avenue has become my favorite coffee spot in LA.

It takes me a few minutes to find a spot to slip into, but when I finally do, my phone has vibrated in my cupholder another three times.

Charles: Great! Can I get you anything else?

Serena: Nope.

Charles: Well, just let me know if that changes!

I pick up the phone just as he's sending one final message: a smiley face and thumbs-up emoji.

Goodness gracious, if he keeps this up, Serena Koontz will be the first human being alive to give birth to a fully dressed man.

I let out a deep exhale, type my own message, keeping it short and succinct with *See you at 9:45*, hit send, and head inside to Alfred's.

Maybe it's to my detriment, but I refuse to play Charles's ridiculous game. I don't want Serena to ask me to be a permanent employee at her production company because I'm the best at fetching fucking coffee. I want her to want me on her team because she sees potential in me.

Plus, if there's one very important thing Charles doesn't seem to understand, it's that Serena doesn't like to waste words. She started out as a successful screenwriter and

producer in Hollywood and turned that golden talent into the successful company known as Koontz Productions.

Basically, her work ethic makes Jeff Bezos look lazy.

She's an inspiration, and after working as a PA on her latest feature film, I'm hoping and praying she chooses to keep me under her knowledgeable wing.

PA, or Production Assistant, jobs are generally temporary. When you work as a PA on a movie or a television series, once the project comes to an end, so does the work.

It's a rough cycle, to be honest, but it's necessary. If I want to be a Hollywood producer, if I want to follow in someone like Serena's footsteps, I need to work as many PA jobs as I can. The hands-on experience is quintessential to the career, and the amount you can learn under Serena is exponentially higher than almost everywhere else.

Thankfully, a few weeks ago, after we wrapped up production on *Red River*—a dramatic movie that will release sometime next year—Serena sat Charles and me down and told us she wanted us to be a part of the next big project.

It was seriously exciting news—kind of like finding a scratch-off on the ground worth thousands of dollars.

And then...she dropped the nuclear bomb of reality checks.

After this project, she'll choose only one of us to mentor permanently. That person will get to move forward with her and her production company on future projects, and the other will be shit out of luck.

To say the current state of my career is filled with a lot of unknowns would be a bit of an understatement, but big Hollywood dreams aren't something that comes easily.

It will take a lot of ups and downs. A lot of hard work and determination.

Possibly killing Charles.

You know, a lot of things.

Coffee now in my sights, I push through the front door of Alfred's, the aroma of coffee beans and vanilla slapping me right in the face.

The place is positively bursting at the seams with caffeine-addicted pod-people like me, making the place I take at the end of the long line seem miles away from the hustling baristas behind the sleek black counter.

Utensils, cups, and plates clink, and the rhythm makes Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" start to play inside my head. If this were a coffee shop in a movie, this song would be playing on the soundtrack.

Discreetly, I tap my right foot and bob my head a little to the music only I can hear and think of my momma.

She always told me I would end up in Hollywood—that my strange mind was a gift. *You see life like a movie, Billie*, she'd tell me. *One day, you're gonna use that brain of yours to make movies of your own.*

But Momma was a bit of a dreamer when it came to this town. Being a budding actress herself who never quite made it out here to chase her dreams, she held out hope in a little section of her heart that my sister, Birdie, or I would be able to do it for her.

"Next!" the barista at the counter yells, and my thoughts and the music in my head fade away when I realize she's talking to me.

Oh *shoot*.

With an apologetic smile and an unnecessary glance at the menu above her head, I step up to the counter quickly.

"Vanilla iced latte and a blueberry muffin, please," I tell the pretty blue-eyed barista with wavy blond hair and insanely full lips. Her name tag reads Summer, and it's oddly right. She looks like the beach on a bright, sunny day.

"Anything else?" Surfer Girl asks, and I shake my head.

"That'll do it."

"Name for the order?"

“Billie.”

She grabs a cup and a Sharpie, writing **B-u-d-d-y** on the side.

Buddy? Billie doesn't sound like Buddy at all in the middle. Maybe all the high-tech espresso machines and their noise are getting to her hearing.

“No, not Buddy, but *Billie*,” I correct in my sweetest voice. “Billie with an ie.”

On a sigh, she puts the Sharpie back to the cup, scratches out Buddy with a swift hand, and writes the letters **B-i-l-l-d-i-e**.

Billdie? Good Lord. Am I speaking a different language?

“Uh...I hate to be a pain, but it's actually Billie without the d. Just B-i-l-l-i-e.”

The barista stares at me, cup and Sharpie still in her hand, like Billie just can't be a name for a girl. Like, surely, *I'm* the one saying my name wrong.

Michael Jackson sang about a *Billie* Jean, and *Billie* Eilish is one of the most successful female artists in music, but whatever. It's not worth arguing with the barista about whether or not my momma and daddy lied to me.

I may have been named after my great-grandpa Willy, but Billie isn't *that* uncommon of a name for a girl. I want to tell her every blessed thing that's on my mind, but it's probably best if I keep things simple between Blondie and me. One day, when I manage to meet a man and fall so hopelessly in love that I don't care if he leaves all his dishes in the sink, I don't plan on making this woman a bridesmaid.

I shake my head. “Never mind.”

“Your accent,” Summer remarks. “It's so...different. It's cute.”

This isn't the first time my accent has come up in everyday life here in California, and surely, it won't be the last. After more than four years in LA, my West Virginia twang is a little watered down, but it's definitely still there, a big neon sign

above my head, letting everyone within hearing distance know I'm an LA transplant.

“Are you from the South?”

“Well, I guess that depends on who you ask.”

She tilts her head to the side.

“Born and raised in West Virginia,” I explain. “Some people would say we're part of the South, and some claim we're from the mountains.”

“I've never been there. Nevada is the farthest east I've been.”

I don't bother telling her to change that. Some West Coasters, hell, even some East Coasters, snub their noses at the idea of visiting my home state, but I know they're missing out. I love LA, but country roads, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the Shenandoah River are at the center of my heart.

Trust me, John Denver crooned about West Virginia for a reason.

Instead, I swipe my credit card as quickly as I can and move to the side so the next customer can step up to the register.

While a young guy with a beanie and gauges in his ears makes my latte, I glance around the café and try to find an open seat, but it seems, with all the unemployed actors and actresses killing time on their computers, they're all accounted for.

Outside terrace it is.

I grab my latte and plated muffin as they set them on top of the case at the far end of the counter and weave through the crowd to the back door that leads outside into the California sun.

I spot an open seat at the far end of the courtyard, sit down, and use a napkin to wipe the crumbs from a prior patron off the table.

Laptop out of my purse and powered up, I try to dive straight into work emails, but I barely get through a message about updates needed for lighting equipment when my focus is pulled away by a male voice.

“Excuse me, ma’am? You can’t smoke here.”

I look up to see one of Alfred’s baristas standing in front of the table directly beside mine, his eyes directed toward an older woman with sleek gray hair and Chanel sunglasses, the offending cigarette hanging out of her mouth. Smoke billows around her face, and her lips slip into a firm line. “I’m outside.”

He tries on a smile, but the smoke is wafting into his face now, and it’s really hard to smile and hold your breath at the same time. “Our terrace is smoke-free, too,” he chokes out.

“Christ,” she mutters. I watch surreptitiously as she reaches up with red-tipped nails, pulls the cig from her mouth, and puts it out on the edge of the table. The butt falls to the ground, but as Jo Dee Messina would say, her give a damn’s busted. I smile as the soundtrack to the scene unfurling in front of me starts to play inside my head.

“I sure miss the hell out of old Hollywood. You could smoke wherever the hell you wanted, and no one cared. Sinatra would’ve had a coronary if you told him not to smoke on an outside terrace back then.”

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” the male employee says before bending down to pick up her cigarette butt. “Let me know if there’s anything I can get you.”

“Punk-ass wallflower,” she mutters this time, but the guy smartly heads inside.

“Adele,” a white-haired lady sitting across from her chastises with an amused smile. “I swear, I can’t take you anywhere.”

Adele laughs, a little rasp from years of smoking making it sound almost devious. “With the way this city keeps changing, I don’t *want* you to take me anywhere. No smoking, avocado

toast, and sugary coffee drinks...” She shakes her head. “I hardly recognize the old girl anymore.”

Her table mate sighs and takes a sip of coffee. “You know what that’s a sign of?”

“What?”

I move my eyes back to my laptop, but I can’t stop myself from continuing to eavesdrop on their conversation. It’s too interesting.

“That you need to retire.”

“You act like I’m still working full time, Irene,” Adele retorts.

“You shouldn’t be working at all.”

“Horseshit. I’ve got a sweet gig, making sure Luca Weaver gets his royalty checks, and I plan to do it until the day I die.”

Luca Weaver? Good God, I haven’t heard that name in ages...

He got into acting as a child—I want to say around the age of ten or eleven—and by the time he was eighteen, he had a freaking Oscar. Not just a nomination—the freaking guy actually *won*.

He was the “it” thing there for a while, landing bigger and bigger roles every year until his midtwenties. He played the lead in a blockbuster spy movie that, if I’m not mistaken, still holds box office records, but his personal life took on a much more detrimental role.

Hollywood’s Baddest Boy.

That’s what they called him. I remember it distinctly.

Unfortunately, I imagine that kind of moniker is great for notoriety, but bad for the boy. He partied hard, rumors of drugs and alcohol and rehab a near-constant in his wild life. And then one day, he was just gone.

Up and out of the spotlight completely at the height of his career.

The conversation veers and Adele goes back to bitching about not being able to smoke with her morning cup of joe, and I lose interest in listening. It doesn't matter, though. I've got everything I need to text my sister, Birdie, with the most interesting topic we've discussed in a long time.

Me: You will never guess whose name I just heard.

Birdie: You're right. I will never guess. Who?

Me: Guess.

Birdie: God, I hate when you do this. Just tell me.

Me: Birdie, just toss out a guess, for heaven's sake!

Birdie: Fine. Post Malone.

I scrunch up my nose and laugh.

Me: Post Malone? Tell me you're not listening to "Die for Me" for the 47th time today.

Birdie: Shut up. It's catchy! Just freaking tell me already!

Me: Fine. Luca Weaver.

Birdie: Oh my Godddd, I haven't heard that name in SO long.

Me: I know, right?

His younger sister, Raquel, is still a successful actress—in fact, she was pretty much all I heard about when she unexpectedly showed up pregnant in the tabloids not too long ago—but Hollywood finally stopped talking about Luca a few years back. I guess everyone finally gave up hope of him making some big, flashy return.

Birdie: You had the biggest crush on him when we were kids.

Ha! Like she should talk.

Me: I seem to remember YOU having a poster of him in your room. Come to think of it, you had it in just the right spot to stare at it from your bed while you diddled your doodle.

Truthfully, we were *both* fangirls of Luca Weaver back in the day. We would race home from school just to watch him and Raquel act in our favorite television series—*Home Sweet Home*.

Birdie: Yeah, right. I didn't have time to diddle anything. Granny tore it down two days after I put it up.

I laugh at the thought.

Granny was a stickler for shit like that. She loathed the idea of us being boy-crazy teenagers. For a woman of her generation, she was quite progressive.

Instead of encouraging us to think about our dream weddings, she encouraged us to think about going to college. Instead of husbands, she spoke about independence. Instead of babies, she told us to dream about our future careers.

All of that will come, she always said. She wanted us to live our lives for ourselves and no one else before settling down.

Birdie: So...are you going to tell me how the name Luca Weaver came up or keep talking about how badly you need to get your kitty tickled?

Me: STOP. I'm doing just fine on my own.

Birdie: Sure, sure.

Me: You're ridiculous.

Birdie: As I recall, you're the one who brought masturbation into this conversation.

Me: Come on. I JUST slept with someone.

Birdie: TWO years ago.

Me: No.

That can't be right, can it?

Birdie: YES. The guy who left his socks on.

Oh my God, she is right. Ugh.

Okay, *fine*, so I'm not exactly out there on the sexual front lines, but that has more to do with me putting my career first than anything else.

I've had priorities.

Me: Wow. Way to depress me.

Birdie: Sorry. But be honest with yourself. Your need for gratification is the real reason we're talking about Luca Weaver.

Me: It is not! I just overheard some old ladies talking about him. I think one of them is his agent. She was talking about his royalty checks.

Birdie: So, you're not going to, like, meet him?

Me: No.

Birdie: Talk to him? Work with him? Sleep with him?

Me: That's a negative.

Birdie: So, this conversation was pretty much pointless? Is that what you're saying?

Me: Oh, like you should talk. You texted me yesterday about the freaking weather in Nashville.

Birdie: Because it's May, and we had a thirty-degree day! That's a big deal. Like, where the hell is spring?

Just before I can type out a smartass response, another text fills our chat box.

Birdie: Hey listen, I've enjoyed our chat about old hunks and your dried-up vag, but I gotta run to rehearsal. I'll call you later.

I smile despite her mocking.

No joke, Birdie *is* living the music dream. The *country* music dream, that is.

Daddy always said Birdie was named Birdie because she could sing, but it took her years to find the confidence to step onstage and sing in front of a crowd.

Luckily, a little over six years ago, after our granny passed away and a cheating ex-boyfriend pushed her over the edge, Birdie finally had enough.

I was eighteen, Birdie was twenty-one, and we drove to Tennessee on a destiny-fulfilling whim. We arrived in Nashville in the evening, and Birdie entered herself in an open mic night at the first bar we found.

What song did she sing? Well, exactly what you'd think someone would sing after their boyfriend cheated on them with a girl named Jolene.

The rest is pretty much history. Someone from a record label happened to be in the crowd that night, and Birdie Harris's life changed forever.

She stayed in Nashville and signed with a record label, and I headed for LA, determined to turn the movies in my head into movies on the silver screen.

Both of us, out there in the world, making our granny's advice happen.

All thanks to Ricky Case and his cheating penis, a real-life floozy named Jolene, and country music's queen, Dolly Parton.

Chapter TWO

Billie

Call me an egg because I crack under pressure. And my yolk looks a hell of a lot like blood.

Locked and loaded with caffeine and ready to bring my A game to this morning's meeting, I slide into the chair to the right of my boss.

In nude heels and a sophisticated white power suit that looks perfect against her caramel-colored skin, Serena perches like an exotic bird at the head of the large conference table. A Bluetooth is in her ear, and she is listening intently to whatever the person on the other line is saying.

Charles takes the chair to the left of her, directly across from me, and immediately starts trying to one-up me. "Good morning, Serena," he says, and I don't miss the way he flashes a stupid smile my way.

Too bad when your lips are that close to her ass, you can't see that she's obviously on a call, numbnuts.

I open my notebook and review a few of the notes I took while poring over *Espionage*—the screenplay that Serena decided a few months ago will be Koontz Productions' next big project. It's expected to do well, and she's already managed to get the financial green-light from Capo Brothers Studios.

Charles, on the other hand, hops up from his seat, heads to the refreshment table at the back of the room, and pours two glasses of water—one for him and one for Serena.

Smug smile engaged, he locks eyes with me and slides the glass onto the table in front of our boss while she finishes up her conversation.

Internally, I roll my eyes. *Good job, buddy. Way to be Serena's gofer.*

Apparently, even with all of their family's money, ole Chuck's parents couldn't afford to buy him any common sense.

Charles and I have reached this point in our careers via very different paths.

He comes from a wealthy family that had enough money to pay for private schools and Yale and a bachelor pad in Laurel Canyon, and I've spent most of my life surrounded by hard times, crawling my way up from the fucking bottom of the barrel.

If it weren't for Granny's gambling problem and her lucky lotto ticket, my family wouldn't have had anything to give me besides the clothes on my back and a country accent.

That's right. My granny won the freaking lotto.

Four million dollars. Fifteen years before she died.

It's a long story. An ironic story. Certainly, a very fucking crazy story, but a real story, nonetheless.

Since Granny died six years ago, Birdie and I have only touched that money to pay for necessities—my Bachelor of Arts in Film and Television at UCLA, her move to Nashville, and basic living expenses when we can't afford to cover them on our own. We both know the last thing Granny would want is for us to turn into some kind of trust-fund babies who are too lazy to make something of themselves.

I'll make my way in La La Land, fighting for every inch, without leaning on Granny's money unless I absolutely have to. The fact that I'm currently living in a four-hundred-square-foot apartment in downtown LA with a toilet right next to the fridge is proof of that.

“That sounds perfect, Eliza,” Serena says, prompting me to look up from my notebook. “Talk soon.” She taps her ear to end the call and watches as the last stragglers of her team file into the room. In Serena’s world, if you’re not five minutes early, you’re late.

She promptly kicks off the meeting without waiting for everyone to finish getting seated.

“I trust you’ve all read *Espionage*.”

Anyone left standing scrambles to find any available home for their ass. One guy, I swear to everything, ends up sitting on the rim of a potted plant. Meanwhile, those of us who don’t have to worry about the moisture content in the soil nod and hum our affirmation.

A screenplay by Jakob Kauffman, *Espionage* is based on a true story about an American CIA agent who lived in Europe and the Middle East for over twenty years to gain intel on foreign enemies. It’s riveting and engrossing and different from the typical secret agent movies that have been made in the past. It’s not necessarily meant to be showy and action-packed—though, it is; it’s meant to be authentic.

It absolutely reeks of clout with the Academy. And, I’m sure, all the potential Oscar nominations are at least part of the reason Serena was able to get the Capo brothers to move forward so quickly. Everyone in Hollywood loves the sound of money.

“How is our casting situation?” Callie Frittle, Head of Development at Koontz Productions, asks.

“Casting is almost set. Lucy Larson just agreed and signed on as the female lead,” Serena updates.

“And our director?”

“Mei Chen is a go as well.”

“Wow, that’s fantastic news.” Callie taps her pen on her leather notebook. “So, we only need the male lead.”

“Exactly.” Serena nods aggressively. “And that’s why we’re all here this morning. Since you’ve all read the

screenplay now, I want your ideas. Your thoughts. Your concerns.” She flashes a grin. “Although, if your concern is anything other than being afraid of showing off with how good your suggestions are for the most important role we’ve ever filled, you can get the fuck out.”

Soft, albeit slightly nervous, laughter fills the room, and Serena stands up and starts walking around, apparently comfortable in an environment made balmy by our sweat.

“Tell me what you’re thinking. With Lucy Larson on board, who should play our male lead, Finn Slate?”

“Personally,” Charles chimes in first. “I think Harry Saint would be perfect.”

Pfft. Yeah, right. Serena’s gonna shut that shit down faster than Twista can rap about a girl becoming an overnight celebrity.

But to my surprise, Serena nods her head in agreement. “You know, I never thought about him, but I think you might be onto something...” She pauses and looks toward Olivia Wells, her casting director. “What do you think?”

“Maybe?” Olivia taps her pen against her lips, but it seems to me that’s a gesture born of anxiety. She doesn’t want to disagree with Serena in front of a room full of people, and I can’t say I blame her. “I mean, he was pretty good in *Bad Men*.”

“I also think it should be noted,” Charles interjects. “After seeing them together in *Long Road* a few years ago, we know Lucy Larson and Henry Saint will have amazing chemistry together on-screen.” I don’t miss the slimy, egotistical smile he tosses my way when Serena appears happy with his second suggestion of the day.

Are you really going to let him suggest casting for the lead actor of this project and not offer up anything better? my subconscious scolds me. What do you think will happen if his suggestion actually turns into reality?

The pressure of my current situation starts to build an impending sense of doom inside me. Palms sweaty and heart

racing, I have to rub my hands against my legs discreetly to stop myself from crying aloud.

Good God, Billie, you have to offer up something! I mean, between the ass-kissing and actor suggestion and fucking hand-delivered croissants, you're way behind the curve today!

I scan my notes. I know Finn Slate is *not* Harry Saint, but who is he?

I kind of hoped Serena would play duck, duck, goose—a going around the table to collect answers sort of thing, but instead, she jumps directly to me.

“What do you think, Billie?”

Shit!

Think of something! Anything! You can't just let Charles put in all the damn ideas!

“Uh...” I start before raising a fist to my mouth, clearing my throat, and patting my chest. I don't know what I'm supposedly choking on—maybe Charles's come shots as he fires them all over the room in premature ejacu-victory—but it seems like the most believable way to buy time. “While Harry Saint is a fantastic actor, I'm not convinced he can live up to the role of Finn Slate. It needs someone special. Enigmatic. Someone...*undeniable*.”

“Are you really saying Harry Saint isn't enigmatic?” Charles snorts. “Did you see the money he brought in with his last big film? Audiences love him.”

“Harry is amazing, obviously,” I expand cautiously. The last thing I need is some Harry fanatic coming after me for badmouthing him. “But he's not the right kind of amazing. Personally, I think this role needs someone a little darker. A little less...commercial, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, but who?” he prods. “I mean, you can't just say something like that and not offer up an example.”

I try not to hate anyone, I really do, but if I had a fork in my hand right now, I don't think anything would stop me from

launching myself across the room and stabbing it directly in that guy's eye.

Serena glances back and forth between me and Charles but stops back on me.

Give her something, for heaven's sake!

"Someone like..." I pause, searching the scraps and scribbles in my mind for something—anything. And instantly, my mind whispers a name—one I'm hearing for the second time in ages after not hearing it in damn near forever.

Charles flashes an annoying smirk at me. "Someone like...?"

"Luca Weaver." I immediately bite my tongue so hard, it bleeds. *Goddammit, Billie. Of all the freaking people in the entire world...*

Sure, he *is* a good fit for the role.

Agent Zero—one of Luca Weaver's first movies in an adult role—was dark and gritty. And he was Oscar-worthy in it.

But the guy is a freaking ghost! my mind yells. Unless you're a freaking psychic medium now, he's not a freaking option!

"Hmm..." Serena hums as she stares at me for a beat. It takes a gift from God to keep my molecules from scattering—*poof!*—and disappearing my body in a magical mist of flesh. "I haven't thought about Luca Weaver in a long time."

The room is silent as everyone waits for Serena's decision to drop. I'm out on a limb, scrambling for my footing, and seconds from falling to a tragic death when Callie finally extends a lifeline.

"I can see it. *Agent Zero* was a fantastic movie."

"Yeah, and I can't imagine anyone would see that casting decision coming. It could be genius," Olivia adds, confidence apparently bolstered by Callie.

"But Luca Weaver has been out of Hollywood for, like, a decade," Charles argues, getting red in the face at the crowd's

unexpected support of me. “He’s basically MIA.”

“Actually...he wants to come back,” I blurt out foolishly, and Serena’s eyes light up.

Oh GOD. Where is the rewind button? Please, baby Jesus, I need a rewind button!

“You can get Luca Weaver to do this movie?”

My head is nodding. *Why is my head nodding!?* And then, one word just shoots out of my mouth like a bullet. “Yes.”

No, no, no! You cannot! As Birdie so rudely pointed out, you do not know him! my panicked mind shrieks. *Watching every episode of Home Sweet Home when you were a teenage girl does not make you a magician!*

“Done,” Serena declares, and the whole room goes up in a low titter. The guy on the potted plant is vibrating with so much energy, the leaves behind him are shaking.

Oh God. Kill me. Kill me dead right now because my career is already on its way underground.

“How quickly can you get in touch with him?”

Abort! Abort! Abort!

“I’m not sure,” I say with a shrug. When all eyes narrow in on me suspiciously, I say the first thing that comes to my panic-fueled mouth. “But probably pretty quick.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Who’s his agent?” Olivia asks the room, hoping someone knows the answer.

“Adele,” I offer up because, evidently, I’m in the middle of a nervous breakdown. My mouth has gone Terminator-style rogue, but in this apocalyptic world, there’s no reassuring Arnold robot voice saying, “*I’ll be back.*”

“Oh, that’s right. Adele Lang.”

Oh yeah, Adele Lang. I nod. *This isn’t the first time you’re actually hearing her last name or anything. No, not at all.*

“I can’t believe that woman is still working in Hollywood,” Callie says with a grin. “She has to be pushing eighty at this point.”

“She’s old-school. Fucking hard-core,” Olivia adds on a laugh.

Serena walks over to the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out toward the city and stands there for a long moment.

Callie and Olivia chat animatedly about Adele Lang.

Charles stares daggers into my skull.

And, me? Well, I stay rooted in my seat, trying not to fucking piss myself.

Holy shit. What have I done?

I’ve just promised my boss a man I can in no way deliver.

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