



THE  
**BOOKWORM'S**  
GUIDE TO  
**dating**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMA HART

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# THE BOOKWORM'S GUIDE TO DATING

# The Bookworm's Guide, Book One

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Cover Design by Emma Hart

## CHAPTER ONE – KINSLEY

RULE ONE: DON'T TALK NON-STOP ABOUT YOUR BOOKS.

“Ahhh! You stupid dumbass bitch!” I threw the book at the wall and felt a satisfying rush of emotion as it hit it, the pages splaying everywhere, before it landed with a thud on the floor.

Then I froze.

“Oh, damn it!” I hauled myself out of the oversized beanbag and rushed across the room to retrieve the book. “I’m sorry,” I muttered, holding it against my chest as I straightened out the pages that had bent. “But it really wasn’t my fault. If you’d just picked Kieran, Alexandra, then I wouldn’t have gotten so mad at you.”

Good Lord, being a romance reader was hard work.

The door swung open and one of my best friends, Saylor, stepped in. She paused in the doorway and she took in the scene in front of her and sighed when her blue gaze fell on me crouching on the floor. “Kins, are you throwing your books again?”

I straightened up and bristled. “Alexandra picked Will.”

She frowned and tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder as she came over. She plucked the book from my hands and looked at the cover with a wince. “Ah, yeah, I wondered how you’d get on with that one. The love triangle is brutal.”

“Brutal? Brutal? Until this last chapter, she was all about Kieran! Lovely, sweet Kieran.” I took the book back and slipped my bookmark in to mark the place of my betrayal. “But noooo, Will comes along with his magic dick, and suddenly Kieran isn’t that great after all. Never mind that Will is a raging jerk with an ego problem and an even bigger inferiority complex and Kieran has never done anything to hurt Alex! Will kissed his ex! Good God, take the damn book before I throw it again.”

Saylor dutifully took it. “Do you want me to get rid of it?”

“No. Don’t be stupid. I have to finish reading it.”

“Oh, my bad. I thought you were done.”

“If she doesn’t change her mind, this author is dead to me. You hear that, Saylor? Dead to me.”

“No, she’s not. Her next book is about Will so I know you’ll buy it as soon as it comes in.” She grinned and tucked the book against her body.

“Shall I put this under the counter?”

I groaned and stalked out of the staff room. “Goddamn it. I have got to stop reading love triangles.”

Holley looked up from the counter when I walked back into the store. “Oh, you got to the bit where she picks Will and his stupid magic dick, then.”

“Has everyone read this book but me?” I threw my hands in the air and slumped against the counter. “Why did nobody warn me?”

“It’s fun to see you flip out,” she said, taking the book from Saylor and checking the page I’d marked. “And it happened sooner than I expected. Saylor, you owe me fifty bucks.”

I rolled my eyes. Sure, I was an emotional reader, but wasn’t that the point? I wanted to get mad like this at a book. I mean, the heroine was a dumbass bitch with terrible taste in men, but it’d been pretty enjoyable to be inside her head.

“Nope, she threw the book at the wall, which means you owe me twenty,” Saylor mentioned.

Great. Their bets were getting out of control.

“Whatever, you still owe me thirty bucks, which means I’m getting white girl wasted on Sauvignon Blanc tonight.”

“No, you’re not,” I said, stepping to the side so Holley could serve a customer.

Saylor waited until the customer had left four historical romances heavier and fifty dollars lighter before she said, “She’s right. It’s Kinsley’s birthday tomorrow so you have to be here early to open the store.”

“Crap. Yeah.” Holley pursed her lips. “So... Does anyone mind if I run out to the party store?”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Go.”

Saylor swapped places with her. “We’ve been friends since we were four. How can you still forget her birthday twenty-something years later?”

Holley held up her hands. “I know when her birthday is, but I’ve been so busy planning Ivy’s baby shower that I lost track of the dates. On the bright side, I have her birthday present already.”

“You do?” I brightened. “Is it a book?”

She tapped the side of her nose and grabbed her purse from the staff room. “You’ll find out tomorrow. I’ll be back in twenty minutes.” She darted out of the store, and the bell above the door rang to announce her departure.

“She won’t be back in twenty minutes,” Saylor said dryly, sitting on



the stool and grabbing the paranormal romance she'd started reading that morning. "At least two hours."

"I'm not betting with you," I told her, straightening up the display of White Peak, Montana magnets that our elderly tourists went crazy over. "Besides, we both know it's going to be two hours. She'll start in the party store, then hit the bakery because she'll be hungry, then need a drink so she'll just have to go to the coffee shop, then someone will stop her to talk about books. The conversation alone will be half an hour and by that point, we'll have forgotten what she even went out for."

"Never mind us." She flicked to the page she'd left off earlier and peered over the top of the book at me. "Holley herself will have forgotten what she even went out for."

"True story." I stopped fiddling with the magnets and sighed. "I'm so mad about that book."

"Are you going to finish it so it's over and done with?"

"No. I think I'm too emotional. I'll end up setting it on fire or drowning it in the sink or something like that. I think I'll go and reorder the children's books."

Saylor wrinkled her face up. "Rather you than me."

"Shout if you need anything." I lifted my hand in a 'see you later' motion, because we both knew that when I got into organizing the shelves, I wasn't surfacing for a long time.

Bookworm's Books was a labor of love for all three of us. We'd all had either weekend or part-time jobs here since we were teenagers and knew the store like the back of our hands. Unfortunately, as the previous owner, Mrs. Watford, had aged, she'd let the store fall into a bit of disrepair.

When she passed away a little over a year ago, we found out that she'd written in her will that she wanted the three of us to have first dibs at buying the store if her kids decided to sell it. They all lived out of state and had for years.

Of course, we were only twenty-four—nearly twenty-five—at the time, so when they told us they wanted to sell and were happy to do so at a vast discount in line with her wishes, we didn't exactly have a lot of money put away for a rainy day.

Thankfully, we did all have *some* savings, and with a little help from our families, we were able to cobble together the money we needed.

We'd turned the store around and somehow, made enough money for

all three of us to live relatively comfortably.

Thankfully, people always needed books, even in the day of e-readers. There was nothing like the smell of a new book and reading on a device wasn't the same.

For example, if you got pissed off at an idiotic heroine in your book, it was a hell of a lot more expensive if you threw the e-reader at the wall.

I wasn't saying I'd done that, but they were *not* cheap to replace, and it wasn't something you wanted to claim on insurance...

*"Oh, yes, and how did your e-reader get damaged, Miss Lane?" "Oh, I threw it at the wall because fictional people are stupid, sir."*

It probably wasn't covered in the terms and conditions.

I pulled stacks of children's books off the shelves. Holley was the one of us who had a degree in library sciences, but thanks to her innate ability to control everything around her, Saylor and I had unofficial ones.

In other words, I knew how to organize these books so she wouldn't lose her mind.

Within ten minutes, I was shoulder-deep in every kind of children's book you could imagine. Picture books, first books, chapter books, early reader books... everything from learning to count to middle-grade heroes slaying dragons and climbing mountains.

I bet none of the kids who read these had to throw their books at the wall.

Hmph.

"Hey, what are—whoa."

I turned around to look at Saylor. "What?"

"Holy book vomit," she said. "How do you know what you're doing in this mess?"

"It's all organized."

"What is it? An organized mess?"

"Still organized," I pointed out.

She shook her head, and her hair that was now tied up into a bun on top of her head bobbed with the movement. "Whatever. I'll stick to customer service."

For a moody bitch, she was great at that. I, on the other hand, was not.

"What are you getting for Ivy? For the baby shower?"

I paused. "I was going to get some clothes in a bigger size and some baby books."

She snapped her fingers. “Damn, baby books. That’s a way better idea than I had.”

“What was your idea?”

“I was going to give her a sex education book.”

“I’m not sure a newborn baby has much use for a sex education book, Saylor.”

“No, but since she got pregnant because she didn’t use a condom, Ivy clearly does.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I was going to have to take back my comments about the good customer service.

“Maybe go with the baby books,” I said. “I’ll find something else.”

“Can I do the sex ed book anyway? Or maybe I’ll give it to Kai for Christmas. Hmmm.” She turned away without waiting for me to answer, muttering to herself about not being able to find baby books even if she wanted to.

I selected a few baby books and set them on top of one of the small bookshelves for her to grab later. I knew she’d forget and get wrapped up in something else, so this solved that problem before it even became one.

The bell over the door dinged, signaling the entrance of a customer, and by the sound of it, it was one of the nurses who looked after our grandparents at the retirement community.

They got mad if we called it an old people’s home.

I preferred ‘institution for the age challenged,’ but my grandpa told me that was ageist.

I wasn’t even sure he knew what that was.

I looked around at the books that littered the floor around me and sighed.

Saylor was right.

This was *way* more mess than organized.

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**COLTON: What do u want for ur birthday?**

I frowned at my phone. It was eight-thirty, which meant my big brother was really cutting it fine if he was being serious. I hit reply to text him back.

**ME: A lie in and books?**

**COLTON: I don't know why I asked**

**ME: It's a bit late anyway, don't you think?**

**COLTON: I was going to offer to buy u dinner**

**ME: We buy each other dinner on our birthdays every year, it's hardly revolutionary**

And by 'buy dinner,' I meant that I cooked him dinner and dessert from scratch on his birthday, and he gave me a choice of the three takeout places in town.

Such was my life.

**COLTON: Fine. What do u want tmrw? Pizza? Indian? Chinese?**

**ME: I don't know, it's not tomorrow yet.**

**COLTON: I'll even push the boat out and treat u to a sit down meal in Bronco's**

**ME: Oh, so fancy. Careful there, you might break the bank.**

**COLTON: We're not all Michelin star chefs, Kinsley**

**ME: Colt, I made you spaghetti Bolognese last year. I'm not exactly Gordon Ramsay.**

**COLTON: Mm, that was good spaghetti though**

**ME: I know.**

**COLTON: Wanna make that?**

**ME: Do I want to cook for myself on my birthday? Not really.**

**COLTON: I know. Why don't we all go to Bronco's and I'll pay for ur dinner**

**ME: Who is all?**

**COLTON: Everyone. Josh, Kai, Ivy, Tori, Say, and Holley**

**ME: No Amber?**

His response about his girlfriend took too long to come. And by too long, I meant that it didn't come at all.

**ME: Colton.**

**COLTON: We're not talking right now. I want u to have fun, not worry about that**

**ME: I'm not doing karaoke. No way.**

**COLTON: Aw, man. I wanted to serenade u with Bohemian Rhapsody**

**ME: I cannot think of a worse birthday present, honestly.**

**COLTON: Are u sure? Me and Josh have practiced our parts and I think Kai is on board**

**ME: I've heard Kai sing, I'm still going to pass.**

**COLTON: Spoilsport**

**ME: Dinner at Bronco's it is. Now go away, you're interrupting my Sookie marathon.**

**COLTON: Sookie? Isn't that that dumb vampire show?**

**ME: I'm sure it is dumb, but I wouldn't know, I'm reading the books.**

**COLTON: I have no idea how I got u for a sister**

**ME: God liked you the day I was born, obviously. I'm a blessing.**

**COLTON: Blessing to Satan, maybe**

**ME: Stop talking about yourself, Colt. You'll hurt your feelings.**

**COLTON: Oh, go read ur book u brat, ffs**

I laughed and put my phone down. It was good to know that even as we got older, our sibling banter didn't change. There was a weird comfort in that, even if he was a total shit.

I also wasn't surprised that he and Amber weren't talking. Their relationship had been on the rocks for a long time, and while I was in *no* position at all to give any dating advice since I was historically very bad at it, I was firmly in the camp that it was time for them to end it.

Not only was my brother almost thirty, but he just wasn't happy. As much as I loved Amber, their issues were too big to overcome, and I didn't get it.

But like I said, I was the worst dater in history, and probably wouldn't know a successful date if it slapped me in the face.

Not that it bothered me. I was twenty-six tomorrow, not ninety-six. I had plenty of time to dedicate to a relationship. Admittedly, it probably didn't help that I had a terrible habit of comparing every real man I met to the fictional ones in books to the point that I actually stopped trying to meet real men.

God, they were all so disappointing.

I mean, look at my brother.

It was a miracle he'd ever gotten a girlfriend with his lack of cooking skills.

I sighed and put my book down. Maybe I was too picky. Maybe I'd set my bar too high. That was a thing, and the longer I went without meeting guys I even saw potential in, the more I wondered if I was being a bit of a

relationship snob.

Then again, was having standards a bad thing? If I felt I was worthy of a certain type of man, did that really make me a snob? Or did that mean I respected myself enough to hold out for someone who was everything I wanted?

Or did it mean I had way too high of an opinion of myself?

Probably a bit of it all, in all honestly.

It likely didn't help that the only thing I was ever really comfortable with talking about was books. Any books—romance, non-fiction, sci-fi, mystery, thriller... I could talk books until I turned into one, and the fact that I co-owned a bookstore didn't even get away from it when I was ultimately asked, "So what do you do?"

I sagged back on the sofa.

That was it.

Twenty-six was going to be the year I put myself out there and got a date at least once a month.

Or maybe once every two months.

Hopefully.

## CHAPTER TWO – KINSLEY

RULE TWO: BOOK BOYFRIENDS ARE NOT REAL.

*SADLY.*

One good thing about living alone was that nobody woke you up super early on your birthday, and nobody was there to cover your living room in an explosion of balloons that you would be popping for a week.

One bad thing about living alone was that your friends had absolutely no issue sending you a delivery of three large bouquets of flowers, five obnoxious helium-filled balloons, a teddy bear, and a box of chocolates before nine a.m.

Mostly because they didn't have to wake up to it.

At least they didn't send a sing-o-gram or whatever they were called. Holley had threatened it at some point, and the last thing I wanted was an acapella band outside my front door.

Honestly, I wouldn't put it past them. Any of them.

It was the kind of shit they'd pull.

Luckily for them, the only florist in town didn't deliver before nine in the morning, so they'd been saved from my night-owl wrath for another day.

I busied myself putting the flowers into vases. Apparently, I was the owner of six various vases that I couldn't ever remember using. Hell, I wasn't sure I even knew where they came from.

I definitely hadn't bought more than one.

With the flowers carefully moved to their new homes, I set to finding them places around my little house to live. My house was actually my grandpa's before he'd moved into his retirement community. He hadn't wanted to sell it and all my money had gone into the bookstore, so he'd happily agreed to let me pay his miniscule mortgage and do whatever I wanted to the little two-bedroom house that I had so many wonderful memories in.

I was very lucky, very blessed, and very short on windowsill space.

I found places after doing some shifting around in my bedroom and the bathroom. My few windowsills were now much brighter than they had been this morning, and I found myself smiling at the burst of color that now decorated my house.

The balloons were a little jarring, but I'd long accepted that my friends



were extra.

Which was ironic since they were all introverts.

Except maybe Saylor. She definitely toed the intro-extro-vert line.

I was most definitely on the introverted side—unless I was really drunk and rapping Kanye West. Despite what my friends would have everyone believe, it really was a rarity.

I put the chocolates in the fridge and turned on the coffee machine. I was awake now and while it was tempting to go and crawl back into bed, there were other things I could be doing with my time.

Like read.

But not the stupid book with the love triangle because I still wasn't ready to finish it.

Fucking Alexandra and Will.

I added vanilla creamer to my coffee and took it out to the back porch. My yard was small but bright, thanks to my grandpa's love of gardening that he'd passed down to me. I even had some tomato plants rambling up the fence at the side, and all three of them were now bearing large green fruits that were rapidly ripening. The blueberry bush at the bottom of the yard was also nearly ready, and I couldn't wait for them to finish so I could take Grandpa a big bag of them.

Even though summer was almost over, color still exploded through the yard, and as the sun crept through the clouds and illuminated the flowers, I smiled.

It was quiet. Peaceful. The perfect place to wake up.

All I needed was a puppy. Or a cat. You had to walk a dog and that meant people would inevitably talk to you.

Hmm.

Maybe a rabbit would be more my speed.

I set my coffee cup on the wrought iron table that had been on the porch for as long as I could remember and pulled my phone from the pocket of my robe. After going to bed last night, I'd set a couple of things that I wanted to achieve this year and written them in my notes app, but the first one was screaming out at me:

Date regularly.

Which meant I needed to figure out exactly how to do that.

The problem was that I wasn't the most confident person in the world. I'd seen Tori and even Saylor chat up a guy at the bar like they'd known

them their entire lives, whereas I tended to screw it up with any guy who even thought to speak to me.

I wasn't sure I'd ever approached a man in my life.

Maybe dating websites were the answer. The very thought of that made me shiver, but there wasn't a massive dating pool in White Peak, and most of the eligible guys I already knew and had ruled out for various reasons.

Yes, look, I was a dating snob. I'd come to that conclusion last night while I'd been lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to kid myself that I'd fall asleep in the next few minutes.

I was a dating snob.

My standards were high—maybe too high—but I was not going to settle for anything less than what I wanted in a husband.

That's right. I wasn't shooting for casual dating. I was shooting for a husband.

Why would I date someone I didn't think I would marry? That was nothing more than a waste of my time, and I had a lot of other things I could be doing in that time.

Like reading books.

It wasn't my fault that books were better than boys.

I opened the app store and typed in 'dating apps.' I could already feel the regret as it coiled in the pit of my stomach and dug itself a little nest down there.

Really, that should have been enough of a warning sign *not* to hit the download button on three different apps, but here I was.

Downloading them.

The first one to download, Stupid Cupid, was the first app I opened. A screen appeared that told me how it was founded in New Orleans by Chloe and Dominic Austin and was a sister company to hookup website Pick-A-Dick, run by Peyton Sloane, Dominic's sister.

Well, if all else failed, at least there was someone out there who could probably get me laid on a regular basis.

After that, it prompted me to sign up and create a username. I went for BookwormKinsley and, after a moment of surprise when it was available, set a password and completed my registration.

I spent the next half an hour setting up my profiles on Stupid Cupid, e-Matched, and Tap That. Thankfully, I got the same username on all three apps, which meant there was less of a chance I'd forget my login details

when I switched to my laptop.

The only problem was that I had absolutely no idea what to do now. My profile was pretty bare, and I sipped my coffee as I considered how best to sell myself.

*Perpetually awkward bookworm with unlimited access to books and questionable White Peak magnets. Likes coffee, gardening, and judging fictional people for their bad decisions.*

I don't know. I'd totally date me based on that description.

I thought I sounded pretty good, to be honest. It showed I was low maintenance, a little outdoorsy, and able to admit my flaws.

I didn't see an issue with any of it.

Then again, I wasn't the one looking to date me, so...

I screenshotted one of the profiles and sent it in my group chat with Holley and Saylor.

**ME: What do you think?**

Saylor responded, quickly followed by Holley.

**SAYLOR: HAPPY BIRTHDAYYYYYYY!!!!!!!**

**SAYLOR: It's the worst dating profile I've ever seen.**

**HOLLEY: HAPPY BIRTHDAY \*party emoji\***

**HOLLEY: I have to agree w Say, it's awful.**

I grimaced.

**ME: Thanks. Happy birthday to me.**

**HOLLEY: I mean, you can't see your face, Kins. Why is it hidden by a book?**

**ME: I'm trying to be mysterious.**

**SAYLOR: So dress up as a psychic at the fall fair, don't hide your face on a dating app. How is a guy supposed to know if he's attracted to a gardening-loving bookworm if he can't see her face?**

**ME: Surely he should be attracted to my personality.**

**HOLLEY: Oh, sweet summer child.**

**SAYLOR: That's not how the internet works.**

**ME: The internet sucks.**

**SAYLOR: It does.**

**HOLLEY: Alas, it's all we have in this town.**

**ME: Stop tag teaming your texts to me. I know you're standing right next to each other.**

Sure enough, my phone rang seconds later with Saylor's name flashing up on screen.

"What?" I answered.

"Sorry," Holley said down the line. "Why don't we meet for lunch and we'll see if we can tidy it up for you?"

"That depends. Are you buying it? And where are we going? Colton said we're all going to Bronco's tonight, so I don't want to eat there twice."

"Why don't we get sandwiches and walk up the trail a bit? We can shut the store for an hour. Dartree Mountain has that half-marathon thing on today and by the sounds of it, everyone is heading that way." Saylor coughed. "So it won't be busy on the trail."

I thought about it for a moment. "All right. I'll come to the store around midday and we'll go."

"Sounds good."

"Also, this morning's delivery wasn't obnoxious at all."

I swore I could hear their grins through the phone.

"You're welcome," Holley sang to the tune of the Moana song. She

hung up before I could respond.

I shook my head and set my phone down, reaching for my coffee cup to finish my coffee.

Good. Midday.

That meant I could take a shower, dry my hair, and read a few chapters of my book.

Bingo.

\*\*\*

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Kinsleeeeyyyyy, happy birthday to yooooouuuuuu!”

My cheeks flamed furiously as all my friends sang at the tops of their voices. The cake that was placed in front of me by Jasmine, Ivy and Holley’s mom, was absolutely divine. It was shaped like an open book; the cover was a dark brown, leather-look spine, and the pages were all intricately shaped to look like well-loved, well-thumbed pages.

And on the right page was a copy of the first page of *Pride and Prejudice*, one of my all-time favorite novels.

All right, the twenty-six candles somewhat ruined the ambience, and the sparklers were definitely on the extra side of a birthday cake, but I still couldn’t help but enjoy the overall effect.

Not to mention that they’d clearly thought through the cake. I was more of a run into the local grocery store and grab whatever’s left at the last-minute kind of cake buyer.

I obliged by blowing out all the candles. It took me two breaths, but that was because they were idiots who put *twenty-six* freaking candles on the cake. The table threw up a cheer, and I blushed when my brother wrapped his arm around me and hugged me.

“I didn’t think you’d blow them out,” Holley admitted.

Saylor sat back with a grin and held out her hand.

“Do you two just make a living betting on crap I do or don’t do?” I questioned, watching as Kai got up to cut the cake.

“Pretty much,” Saylor answered.

Ivy shook her head, rubbing her hand on the top of her rounded bump. “They’ve got at least two hundred dollars on when I’ll go into labor and how much she’ll weigh.”

Now that I knew.

“Yeah,” Tori said, flicking her newly lightened brown hair over her shoulder. “But that’s a pool, so it doesn’t count. We’ve all got about twenty bucks or so in on it.”

My pregnant friend rolled her eyes so hard, the baby probably did it, too.

“Hey, why aren’t I in on this?” Josh, my brother’s best friend, leaned forward on the table and looked at Holley and Saylor. “You know you can’t run a betting pool without me.”

“You always win,” I pointed out. “So that’s exactly why you aren’t in on it.”

Everyone nodded.

“We’re sick of giving you our money,” Kai agreed, handing me the first slice of cake with a wink. The second went to Ivy.

Josh protested. “It’s not my fault I’m lucky. Come on, let me bet on it.”

“Absolutely not,” Holley said resolutely. “You can fuck off.”

I hid a laugh behind my hand. I also knew that they’d deliberately kept it secret from Josh because, somehow, somehow, he would win.

We didn’t know how he did it. I’d long suspected he used a psychic, but that was probably the result of too many paranormal books as opposed to a genuine suggestion.

He really was just that lucky.

I ate my way through my chunk of cake as they continued bickering about Josh being able to join the betting pool or not. Since it was like five on one, I didn’t think he was going to win, but it was definitely interesting watching him fight tooth and nail for his right to be a part of the group.

“We’re going to go,” Ivy said, reaching over the table and squeezing my hand. “I’m getting tired.”

I got up when she did and hugged her, careful to go to the side to avoid her bump. “Thank you for coming to hang out.”

“Of course.” She hugged me back. “Text me and tell me if Josh ever gets to join.”

I laughed and returned Kai’s hug. “Straight away.”

“Bye.” Kai grinned and wrapped his arm around her, guiding her out of the bar.

I slipped back into my seat and looked at Josh. “They’re never going to let you join, so just quit it.”

“Thank you,” Holley said. “Has anyone messaged you yet?”

I wrinkled my nose up.

“Messaged where?” Colton asked. “You didn’t put yourself on Craigslist for your birthday, did you?”

I smacked his arm. “No. I joined three dating sites.”

He snorted his beer. “You’re kidding, right?”

Josh’s eyebrows shot up. “You joined dating sites? What are you going to do with those?”

I glared at them both. “Go on dates?”

“No,” my brother said. “You’re not.”

It was nice to know he had faith in me.

Saylor took my phone from me and opened the Stupid Cupid app. “Three messages. Impressive, since we didn’t actually get around to cleaning up your mess of a profile.”

I glared at her, too. “Obviously, it’s not that bad.”

“Meh.” She opened the messages and clicked on the first one. “Not bad. He’s twenty-seven, an engineer, and lives in Talbot Ridge. That’s, what? Twenty minutes away? Thirty in traffic?”

“There is no traffic near Talbot Ridge,” Tori said. “Nobody goes to Talbot Ridge.”

“Well, it’s deeper into the mountains than we are and they’re pretty much cut off for at least three months a year, so...” I trailed off. “I don’t know. What does he look like?”

Saylor tilted the phone, and we all looked.

“He’s pretty hot,” Holley said. “Nearby, the right age, and obviously educated. Do you think he works at that big plant on the other side of Dartree Mountain?”

“I don’t know where else an engineer would work,” Colton said dryly. “Why am I looking at guys who think my sister is hot?”

“Because you’re lame and don’t have a life,” Tori answered. “Saylor, look at the next one.”

This time, Say put my phone flat down on the table for us all to look. “Okay, next up is Clive from Dartree Mountain. He’s twenty-nine, a divorce lawyer, and likes reading.”

“I should hope so if he’s a lawyer,” Holley said. “I almost considered law before I saw how much reading that required.”

“Yes,” I replied slowly. “And I’m sure *library sciences* required

absolutely none at all.”

“Eh.” She shrugged a shoulder. “I like libraries. Not a big fan of criminals. It was an easy decision.”

Josh frowned at her before turning back to the phone. “He looks like a dick. Who else messaged?”

“Why does he look like a dick?” Tori asked.

“Just does.” Colton leaned over and clicked off the message. “They all look like dicks.”

“You’re no longer allowed to be part of the conversation.”

I took my phone back and locked it. “None of you are allowed to be a part of the conversation anymore.”

Saylor rolled her eyes. “Great. Nice one, Colt. Now she’s never going to get a date.”

Great. Nobody had any faith in me.

Considering I was also one of those people, I’d hoped maybe one of my friends thought I might have a little success.

Clearly, I needed new friends.

“Let’s get more drinks!” Holley slid out of the booth. “Say?”

“Sounds good.” Saylor followed and looked back. “Anyone else?”

I held up my half-full glass of wine in answer, and Josh did the same with his beer.

“Tori?”

“I was going to take a look at the karaoke. Can you get me another margarita?” Tori pushed Colt out of the way so she could get up. “Move, asshole.”

Colt got up and said, “Grab me another beer. I’m going to look at the book.”

“Why? We all know you’re going to sing *Bohemian Rhapsody*,” I said. “Every single time.”

“Holley, get some shots. I want her rapping Kanye by the end of the night.”

I shook my head as they dispersed to various areas of the bar. I was not in a Kanye mood tonight, and not even a tray of tequila shots was going to get me up and rapping *Gold Digger* like my life depended on it.

“So your goal this year is to date more.” Josh sipped his beer

I met his dark green gaze. “I figure it can’t hurt. It’s not like there’s a whole bunch of people in town to date, so I thought I’d try online.”



“That and you’re terrible at dating.”

I sighed. He really wasn’t wrong. “Yeah. That, too. At least if I meet someone online, the whole getting-to-know-you part is all online, right?”

“Mostly, I suppose.”

“Since I’m just as awkward online as I am in real life, I figure it won’t be such a surprise when I fuck up in person.”

Josh grimaced. “I don’t know. That’s a lot of awkward for one person, Kins.”

“Damn it. I know. I have no idea what I’m doing, and half the guys who seem to be on these apps are smart and work a lot so why would they want a small-town bookstore owner?”

“Why wouldn’t they want a small-town bookstore owner?”

I gave him a withering look. “Be realistic, Josh.”

“Why don’t I help you?”

## CHAPTER THREE – KINSLEY

RULE THREE: DON'T IMMEDIATELY ASK WHAT THEIR FAVORITE BOOKS ARE.

“What?” I blinked at Josh. “Why would you help me?”

He shrugged, fiddling with the corner of a napkin. “Because you’re my best friend’s sister, and honestly, if someone doesn’t, you might never have a successful date.”

That was painfully true.

“How are you supposed to help me? It’s not like you can be there on a date to tell me what to do.”

“No, but I can help you with your profiles and find you dates. Help you not to be so shy and nervous and awkward on them.”

“Like a dating coach?”

“Exactly that.”

I screwed up my face. “I don’t think so. That just seems... weird.”

“How is it? I know you better than most people, and we’ve known each other almost our entire lives. I can help you, Kinsley.”

“Why would you help me date? Aren’t you single right now? It’s not like I’m capable enough to return the favor, is it?”

“Yes, I’m single. I don’t expect you to return any favors. And if it helps you, then it’s a win.”

I stared at him. I did *not* like this at all. I wasn’t a fan of set up dates, and I was even less of a fan of Josh being the guy to set me up on them. Surely him being my brother’s best friend was a conflict of interest. There was no way for me to know that he wouldn’t sabotage it.

“Stop looking at me like you’re trying to figure out if I’ll double-cross you.” His lips tugged to one side. “I’m genuinely trying to help you.”

“I don’t know.” I said it slowly and carefully. “Seems weird.”

“Fine, here’s what we’ll do. I’ll set you up on two dates with guys of your specification, teach you how not to be your usual introverted self on them. If it all goes to shit, I’ll never speak to you about dating again.”

I fought back a smile. This was a terrible, terrible idea, but it didn’t look like he was going to let me tell him no. “I don’t like this,” I said.

“Come on. Two dates, and like I said, I’ll even coach you in how to make them successful.”

“This would be far more reassuring if you weren’t single. You know

that, right?”

“Hey, I’m single only because I haven’t found anyone to settle down with yet. I have a bunch of great dates, they just don’t turn into something more.”

“Why not?”

He leaned forward on the table, clasping his beer between his hands. His toned arms strained against his black t-shirt, and he shrugged, pouting his full bottom lip out a little. “I guess I’m picky.”

“You’re picky.”

“I’m picky,” he repeated. “While all the girls I’ve been out with lately are nice, I just don’t see myself getting married to them, so it never goes past the third date. Usually not the second.”

“Why date them three times if you know you don’t see yourself getting married to them?”

He tapped the side of his nose. “Because first dates are always on the awkward side. You don’t really know each other and you’re feeling the other person out to see if you have anything in common. The second date you’re a little more comfortable because you already know about that stuff, so you chill. But by the end of the third date, you know them well enough to know if the relationship is going to go anywhere.”

I purse my lips. “I guess that makes sense. What do you do on your dates?”

“The first date is always more formal, like dinner somewhere nice. *Not* here, because you’re gonna see someone you know, and it’s hell when that happens. Second date is maybe the movies or something like mini golf. If she’s a bit sporty, maybe a hike with a picnic, but I usually save that for the third date.”

“Why?”

“Because I know if she cares about getting her shoes dirty by the end of the second.”

I sighed heavily. “Dating is hard.”

Josh nodded and rubbed his hand over the stubble that lined his jaw. “So let me help you. I’ll update your profile, find you guys to date, and talk you through the dates.”

I didn’t answer.

He reached over and took my phone. “Passcode?”

“I’m not telling you my passcode.”

“It’s your birthday, isn’t it?”

“Damn it.”

Grinning, he tapped in today’s date and got into my phone. “Stupid Cupid, e-Matched, and Tap That. Which one first?”

I shrugged. I didn’t really care, and I wasn’t really sure that it mattered.

“Stupid Cupid it is, since we know you’re getting hits there.” He navigated to my profile with the ease of someone who was familiar with the app. “Yeah, no. Why isn’t your face there?”

“Because people should like me for my personality, not my face.”

“Well, your face helps.”

“I think that was a compliment.”

Josh grinned. “It was. You need a real photo of yourself, Kinsley. The book one is cute, but it’s not for your main photo.”

“Did you just call me cute?”

“No, I called the photo cute. Do you have any others?”

“My Facebook profile, I guess.”

“Anything not two years old?”

I harrumphed. “No.”

“Then you’re going to have to take one tomorrow.”

“Fine, I’ll take one tomorrow at the store.”

“You’re determined to get books in your profile picture, aren’t you?”

Slowly, I raised my wine glass to my lips and sipped. I wasn’t even going to answer such a stupid question.

Of *course* I was going to have books in my profile picture.

What kind of bookworm did he think I was?

“All right, all right, all right.” He waved a hand. “Your profile isn’t bad, but a little more information isn’t going to hurt. You like hiking the trails, so you can put that in. You should also really include what you’re looking for out of the website. Some people are there for a good time, some are there for casual dates, and some are there for a relationship like you are. The last thing you want is to waste your time on someone just looking for a hookup.”

“Fine, pass me my phone.” I made a ‘gimme’ motion with my hand and he gave it back to me. I clicked the button to edit my profile and set to it, then read it out when I was done. “*“Perpetually awkward bookworm with unlimited access to books and questionable White Peak magnets. I like to spend my mornings gardening with my coffee and mentally judging fictional*

*people for their bad decisions. A fan of hiking the trails around town, but you might have to brace yourself for bookish rants. Looking for a relationship where we can mutually disparage awful book-to-movie adaptations into our old age.”*”

Josh blinked at me. “Well, there’s a lot more detail in there, that’s for sure.”

“What’s wrong with that? I might as well be honest about what I want from life.”

“It’s like you’re trying to make this hard for me.”

“Well, I’m not going to go out of my way to make this easy.”

He rubbed his jaw again. “All right, fine. I need your login info and I need to know what kind of guy you’re looking for.”

I texted him the login for all three. “There. Do you want me to compile a list of my demands?”

He peered over my shoulder, causing me to look back. Everyone was coming back, and I could already hear Colton and Tori bickering about karaoke.

I was starting to wonder if those two had an underlying sexual attraction they needed to screw out of each other.

“Yeah, send me a list,” he said right before crazy mob we called our friends returned with two trays full of drinks.

This was going to end very, very badly.

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**JOSH: You’re not picky at all.**

**ME: Coming from mister “I don’t get past date three” that’s a little rich.**

I put my phone down on the counter and looked around the store. It was quiet today, so I was here on my own. I’d spent the entire morning texting Josh about my very specific requirements for a future boyfriend.

I still could not believe I’d agreed to this.

**JOSH: Yeah, but you’re looking for a fucking unicorn here, Kins.**

**ME: I have standards.**

**JOSH: You want a male you.**

**ME: I'd date the shit out of myself.**

**JOSH: Really? I wouldn't date me.**

**ME: Good thing I don't want to date you then, huh?**

**JOSH: Ouch.**

**JOSH: Tell me how you really feel.**

**ME: Sorry. \*grimace emoji\***

**JOSH: I suppose I asked for all this.**

**ME: Yes, and I'm going to make you suffer.**

**JOSH: I expect nothing less. I'm going to go find you a unicorn.**

**ME: I'd start in the fantasy section of the library.**

**JOSH: Shut up.**

I chuckled and put my phone back down. That would keep him occupied for at least the next few hours, and since he had work to do, it would be even longer.

I wasn't going to make this easy for him. Really, my demands weren't that unreasonable. I just wanted a kind, intelligent man who could handle basic tasks in the kitchen, was a little outdoorsy but not too much, and liked long, quiet evenings while I read my book.

Let's be realistic, I was only a little outdoorsy because I liked to find a quiet space to read.

Oh, and I also wanted him to be good in bed.

You bet your ass I told Josh that, too.

It'd taken him half an hour to reply to me on that one.

"Kinsley! Where's my book?"

I blinked and focused on the elderly man standing in front of me. I'd been in my own little world and hadn't even heard the bell over the door ring as it announced my grandfather's entry.

"Grandpa!" I jumped up and walked around the counter to hug him. He smelled like cinnamon and coffee, and I squeezed him as I breathed in the familiar scent.

"Hello, darlin'." He hugged me back tightly. "Where's my book?"

I grinned and retrieved Dean Koone's newest thriller from under the register. "Right here. It came in this morning, and I put it aside for you. It's not technically available until tomorrow, so don't you tell anyone I did this."

He took the bag with a gleeful giggle and peered inside. "You're my favorite granddaughter, Kinsley."

"I'm your only granddaughter," I replied with a hint of dryness. "How are you doing?"

"They keep finding the bourbon I smuggle in. With the amount we pay them every month to give me food and board, you'd think they'd at least let me keep my liquor."

Ah, we were back on that carousel.

At least once a week, Grandpa Randy was allowed an unsupervised visit to the center of town. Every single week he tried to sneak a little bottle of bourbon into his bedroom, and every single week the nurses searched him on his arrival back to the retirement community and took his alcohol.

He was much better off asking me to sneak it in.

They'd never searched *me*.

Granted, I usually brought them all new books so I think that worked in my favor, but still.

I rang up the sale on the register before I took his money from him. We only charged our grandparents wholesale prices, and that was because they insisted on paying us.

"Want me to bring you some bourbon when I come over this weekend?"

He tilted his head to the side. "How much can you bring?"

"Not sure. Depends on how many books they want this week."

"Bring me a fifth and you've got a deal."

Wow. Was this how drug dealers felt? It was almost as if I should have

been brokering this in the dimly lit forecourt of a gas station at two-thirty a.m., not my bookstore at eleven-thirty a.m.

“I’ll see if I can fit that in,” I promised, handing him his receipt. “What else are you doing in town?”

Grandpa shrugged, putting his aged leather wallet back in the pocket of his tan slacks. “I like cake. Wanna come get some cake with me?”

I grimaced. “I would love to, but I’m here alone today. I can’t really shut the door.”

He checked his watch—which matched the leather of his wallet, thank you. “It’s basically lunch. Surely you wouldn’t deny an old man a slice of coffee cake. And maybe another slice of carrot cake.”

A smile crept across my face. He knew there was no way I could say no to him, and he was right—it was almost lunch, and I’d be closing soon for half an hour anyway.

“Thirty minutes,” I said, getting up off my stool. “You go ahead and tell Ms. Donoho that I’m on a timer and I’m paying, okay?”

“No, I’m paying,” Grandpa insisted. “I didn’t get to see you yesterday, so consider this your birthday cake.”

Well, I wasn’t about to turn down birthday cake.

I grinned. “Give me five minutes, and I’ll be right there, Grandpa.”



## CHAPTER FOUR – JOSH

RULE FOUR: REAL WOMEN DO NOT, IN FACT, HAVE PILLOW FIGHTS IN THEIR UNDERWEAR.

*Make sure he's good in bed.*

How the fuck Kinsley expected me to find that out I'd never know. I couldn't ask him—he was a guy.

Of course he was going to fucking say he was good in bed. He was hardly going to admit if he'd never made a girl orgasm, was he?

I was regretting this already. I had no idea what I was thinking, offering to help her date people.

For fuck's sake, I'd had a crush on the girl for years.

A pathetic little loser crush that I'd never acted on because her brother was my best friend.

Maybe this would help me get over the crush. It was the only thing I had to hold onto right now, because fuck knows why I'd put myself in this position.

I'd lost my damn mind.

That was all I had.

I had no idea how to matchmake Kinsley. I had no idea how to matchmake anyone at all. I'd never done it in my life, yet she was now expecting me to find her future husband.

On the fucking internet.

Who found their husband or wife on the internet?

Although, in White Peak, you probably had a better chance of it than meeting them in the bar.

It wasn't exactly hopping here.

But that was the way I liked it.

I peered around at our work site. It was my break so I had a legitimate reason to be spending the next fifteen minutes on my phone, but that didn't mean I was going to enjoy it.

I logged into Kinsley's dating account on Stupid Cupid and checked the messages. Much to my chagrin, there were fifteen new messages since this morning when I'd last looked.

This was going to be a lot of work.

The first three guys didn't fit her parameters at all. One was a pro

snowboarder, and I'd never once seen Kinsley do anything other than grumble about mushy snow, much less do sports in it. The other two were just your everyday guys who were a one in a million.

A bit like me.

If that wasn't a fucking kick in the teeth...

I deleted their messages and moved on to the next. He was a potential match—he was an electrician and liked to read sci-fi and dystopian novels.

Whatever the hell a dystopian novel was.

His profile didn't show where he lived, but he otherwise lined up exactly with what Kinsley was looking for. I sent him a message explaining who I was and asking where he lived, then moved on.

By the time I was done, I'd identified three possible dates for her and become more than a little acquainted with some self-loathing.

The door to the trailer swung open and Colton walked in, blowing out a long breath. "Why do you look like your puppy just died?"

I blinked at him. "I'm tired," I lied. "Why do you look like a dust storm threw up on you?"

"Fucking new kid."

Ah. Yeah. Our newest recruit to the building site was inexperienced, but he made mistakes not many people who were *actually* builders would make. I was starting to wonder if he knew what he was doing at all.

It was becoming tiresome.

Colton fired up the coffeemaker and held up a mug in question. When I nodded, he put my mug under the machine first and fixed my coffee before he did his.

"What are you doing in here?" He sat down opposite me at the table and peered at my phone. "A dating site? Since when did you use fucking dating apps?"

"It's your sister's," I said dryly. "I agreed to help her find a date, remember?"

Colt wrinkled his face up. "I thought you were kidding when you told me that."

"Evidently not."

"Have you found anyone?"

"Three possibilities," I replied. "But I'm not showing you. She gave me specific guidelines, and I'm sticking to them."

He stared at me. "If you set her up with a fucking idiot—"

“Give me some credit, man. I don’t want to see her with an idiot either. She’s already got you for a brother; she’s idioted out.”

He reached over and slugged me in the arm. “Fuck you. We both know that most of the guys around here are assholes.”

“Yeah, well, none of these guys are from White Peak. They’re all nearby towns,” I explained. “They fit what she wants. She gave me some fucking tight parameters to work within, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Are you surprised?”

“No. Kinsley would eat romance novels if they’d give her the necessary nutrition to survive.”

“Exactly. She knows what she wants but, buddy, I’m not sure those men exist outside of the books she reads.”

I shrugged and checked the messages again. “Whatever it is, I’m gonna try and get her a date and if I fail, it’s down to her. She said she wants to date more this year.”

“I know what she said, but do you really think it’ll go well? Don’t get me wrong, I love my sister, but she’s a dating disaster. You could do a Meghan Markle and marry her off to a prince, but that doesn’t mean it’s gonna go well.”

“Well, that didn’t go well, either.”

“I have no idea. I’m not even sure that’s her name.”

I snorted. “My sister is obsessed with the British Royals. It’s painful when we have a family dinner.”

And that was no lie. My youngest sister, Piper, was twenty-six, and she’d grown up with Kinsley and the other girls. She was the only one who’d left White Peak and was currently living in Vegas. She was working as a promoter while she saved up enough money to open her own bakery.

“I really don’t care about those,” Colt mused. “But Kinsley is an introvert, Josh, you know that. She’s awkward and nervous and all that other shit, which is why her dating life doesn’t exist.”

He was saying this like I didn’t already know. Like I hadn’t considered this before I went ahead and said I’d help her.

All right, I fucking hadn’t, but Colt didn’t know that.

“Yeah, I know,” I said as I deleted a message from a guy who lived across the state line in North Dakota, at least two hours away from us on a good day. There was another guy from Canada, but she’d already told me she wasn’t into border control being necessary for a date, so I blew him off, too.

“I think you’ve lost your mind,” Colt said putting his cup down.

“So you’ve said before.”

“Well, you have. Why do you care so much about what my sister does?”

“It was a spur of the moment thing. I told you that. I took pity on her.”

Colt made a noise that was halfway between a grunt of acquiescence and one disbelief, but he didn’t argue the point any further.

I got it. It was weird that I was helping her, but it would be even weirder if he knew I’d crushed on his sister for years.

When we were thirteen years old, we’d promised each other that we’d never hit on the other’s sister.

So far, I’d kept that promise.

I just hoped like fucking hell I’d carry on keeping it.

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**KINSLEY: What are you telling these people on the internet?**

**ME: ???**

**KINSLEY: Someone just wondered why you aren’t dating me if I’m so great.**

Oops. Maybe I’d talked her up a little too much.  
Also, I’d promised her brother I wouldn’t.

**ME: I might have talked you up a little.**

**KINSLEY: I’m not sure what else you could have said. I gave a stunning account of myself in that bio, Josh.**

**ME: You tooted your own horn, Kins. It’s not that exciting.**

**KINSLEY: Well, excuse you.**

**ME: That’s not what I meant.**

**KINSLEY: What did you mean?**

**ME: That the internet is full of fakery and you know it. You were honest in your bio, other people might not be.**

**KINSLEY: Yeah, I know that. I read.**

**ME: You know your romance books aren't real, don't you?**

**KINSLEY: If they were, I'd have killed Alexandra by now.**

**ME: Who the fuck is Alexandra?**

**KINSLEY: This bitch who picked the wrong guy.**

**ME: So she's in a book.**

**KINSLEY: Well she's not trapped in an oyster, Joshua.**

**ME: You know people don't pick the wrong guy in real life, don't you?**

**KINSLEY: You are so freaking cute I could put you in my pocket and feed you to the wolves without a second thought.**

Well, that told me.

**ME: That sounded like a big old insult, Kinsley.**

**KINSLEY: Oh, good. You do still have some brain cells.**

**ME: If I were you, I'd be nice to me. I'm setting up your dates.**

**KINSLEY: Yeah, can you NOT set me up with people who do sports?**

**ME: I didn't.**

**KINSLEY: Yeah, no, you did.**

**ME: ????**

**KINSLEY: One of these guys is from Twin Peak and skis!!! SKIS, JOSHUA!!!!**

**KINSLEY: Do you know what I do with skis?**

**KINSLEY: I beat the people who displease me with them.**

**ME: Sounds painful.**

**KINSLEY: Why don't you come over and you can find out?**

**ME: I'll pass.**

**KINSLEY: Why? Are you naked? What are you wearing? Is it a little silky number with lace?**

**ME: WHAT. THE. FUCK?**

**KINSLEY: I was practising my sexting. No good?**

**ME: Men don't wear silky numbers with lace.**

**KINSLEY: Good to know. Neither do women. At least not when we're texting guys.**

**ME: Really?**

**KINSLEY: Really. We're usually on the toilet.**

**ME: That's more information that I needed to know.**

**KINSLEY: Relax, Cupid. I'm lying on the sofa without a bra on. I**

**don't like you enough to text you while I poop.**

**ME: Thank you for the visual.**

**KINSLEY: You're welcome.**

**KINSLEY: Do you think I should text that to the nice electrician guy who lives in Moose Knuckle?**

**ME: As your matchmaker, I think that's a little forward before a date.**

**KINSLEY: So should I arrange a date?**

I paused.

A massive lump had taken up residence in my throat, and I stared at the screen for a moment. I knew the answer there was yes, but there was a big part of me that couldn't bring myself to say it.

I was fucking this up already.

**ME: You've been signed up for ten minutes. Just hold on until you've spoken to some other people.**

**KINSLEY: Ugh, okay, DAD.**

**ME: I can't talk to you when you're like this.**

**KINSLEY: Should I go to my room?**

**ME: This is getting uncomfortable.**

**KINSLEY: I'm going to need a new friend to practice sexting with.**

**ME: If that was sexting, it was the worst attempt I've ever seen.**

**KINSLEY: Are you familiar with it?**

**ME: Goodnight, Kinsley.**

**KINSLEY: JOSHUA!!!!!!!**

**KINSLEY: Hello?**



## CHAPTER FIVE – KINSLEY

RULE FIVE: SPOILERS AREN'T A THING IN REAL LIFE.

BE PATIENT, KINSLEY.

Wow.

There was a lot of dick pics on the internet.

Yes, yes, yes. I knew I was only supposed to talk to Josh Approved Guys—capitalization necessary, if anyone should end up reading my inner monologue as a future novel—but I was intrigued by the kind of people who did genuinely contact women on these websites.

And holy moly!

I was so leaving this to Josh.

He wanted to do this, so he could spend his days staring at all the schlongs that found their way into my messages. This was definitely not in my job description.

I really didn't care how thick Johnny\_435's penis was, and nor did I care about the length of KasperTheHungGhost's dick.

Although I did enjoy Kasper's username. I was almost tempted to message him and tell him I found his pun amusing, but then... well, he'd probably take that the wrong way and think his dick pic had worked.

It had *not*.

Of course, none of that explained why I was standing before a dog crate full of ducks.

"But why are there ducks?" I asked, staring at them.

Saylor shifted uncomfortably next to me, presumably just as confused as I was. "They wanted ducks, so they got ducks, I guess. They do have the pond now."

That was true. There was a huge pond in the center of the gardens of the retirement community that had been recently built, more to be a nice communal seating area for the residents as opposed to a duck pond. Since they'd lobbied for the ducks—a little too successfully, judging by how many were quacking their annoyance at being confined in the crate—they were now building another, smaller pond that would have a fountain and lilies and all that pretty stuff.

I was starting to think they had too much outdoor space here.

And charged way too much for a room.

“What are old people going to do with ducks?”

“Dress them up and parade them around town on a yearly basis in The Great White Peak Duck Festival,” Mabel said from behind us.

“The Great White Peak Duck Festival? That’s not a thing,” I said.

“It’s about to be, child.” She hobbled over on the arm of Grandpa Randy and stopped next to us. “Those are some ugly ducks.”

“They’re ducks,” Saylor deadpanned. “What were you expecting, Grams? Peacocks with vibrant tails? Pure white doves? A parrot?”

“I was expecting pretty ducks.”

“Ducks are ducks,” Grandpa said. “They’re not swans, Mabel.”

“Then I want to speak to the manager.”

Saylor stared at her. “The manager is bored of your complaining. Why can’t you just appreciate the pretty pond?”

Mabel straightened as much as she was able to. “Because the ducks are ugly, Saylor Elizabeth, and I can’t parade ugly ducks around the town. Besides, why do I want to look at ugly ducks?”

“You look in the mirror every day,” Agatha said, approaching us from the other direction. “You tell us.”

Wonderful.

We were about to have us a good old-fashioned elderly throwdown.

I liked it better when it snowed. They all stayed inside. And I didn’t really like snow at all, so that said a lot.

I know.

I was so living in the wrong state.

“They’re not that ugly,” I said slowly, eyeing the ducks. “They’re really quite pretty, if you look at them with a slightly tilted head.”

Saylor did that. “They still look like a cross between a platypus and a chicken to me.”

Weird.

Also, kind of accurate.

“I like them,” Agatha said, bending over as much as she was able to look at them. “They have character.”

“So do you, but your character is awful,” Mabel said.

Grandpa rolled his eyes. “Quit bitching at each other.”

I snorted. There was always something amusing about my grandfather swearing—especially when he did it in front of my parents because it drove my mom insane.

Naturally, those were the best family meals.

Thankfully for Grandpa, my parents had moved an hour away a few years ago, so family dinners where he had to censor himself were few and far between.

I, however, fully welcomed his salty mouth when we had dinner, and everywhere else in between.

“I like the ducks,” Agatha announced once again.

“Well, thank goodness that was cleared up,” Saylor muttered. “We were all wondering.”

Agatha shot her a dark look. “When are we letting them out?”

“When Amanda gets here,” Grandpa said. “She’s in charge of the ducks.”

Agatha wrinkled up her leathery face. “I don’t like Amanda.”

“I doubt she likes you,” Mabel shot back. “Nobody else does.”

I pretended not to notice Agatha’s double middle finger salute to Mabel and turned to Grandpa. “Amanda? Who’s that?”

“New nurse,” he replied, letting Mabel drift over to the ducks to continue bickering with Agatha. He slowly lowered himself down onto the bench. “You know her. You went to school together.”

I shared a look with Saylor.

“Amanda Donoho,” Grandpa said. “Can’t remember her maiden name, but she’s a little older than you are.”

Saylor frowned. “Wait, you mean Amanda who moved away a few years ago?”

He nodded.

“Oh,” I said brightly. “She’s got three kids now, right? When did she get back?”

“Six months ago. Her grandma died and left her the house since she was the only grandkid, and she said her kids weren’t getting on in Dayton so they came back. Only been back a few weeks. Her husband is commuting until his office in Bozeman is set up.”

Made sense. I understood she’d moved for her husband’s job, but most people in town had always wondered when she’d come back.

Not if, when.

It was an occupational hazard of living in a small town.

Everyone was up each other’s asses all the time.

Nothing, and I mean *nothing*, stayed a secret. At least not for very

long.

It was slightly cumbersome.

We all jerked around as the sound of Ivy and Holley's grandma's voice carried across the gardens. Rosie was being placated by another familiar voice I knew was Amanda's, and they rounded the bushes to join us just as Agatha bristled.

"Oh, good," Rosie drawled, her lip curling as if she'd smelled a dead body. "The cats dragged in their prey."

Saylor dropped her head and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Yes," Agatha said, looking her up and down. "They did."

How on Earth those two had birthed daughters who were best friends, I'd never know. Much less how that had continued on down to their granddaughters, Ivy and Tori, who'd been inseparable their whole lives.

Even now that she was pregnant, I think Ivy spent as much time with Tori as she did Kai—but that was probably because Tori didn't tell Kai just how much ice cream Ivy was eating.

Mind you, I think she was playing them off against one another.

She was nothing if not resourceful.

"Shall we go?" I whispered to Saylor. "I don't really care about the ducks, and I'm not in the mood for a pensioner bitch fest."

"Yeah, we really need to get back to the store and give Holley a break."

"Always leaving me here," Grandpa mumbled.

I kissed his cheek. "The last of your tomatoes are ready. Give me a week and I'll have a huge bowl for you."

"You better leave, then. They need feeding with that tomato feed I gave you. And put a banana around the stems—"

"It'll help them ripen." I grinned. "Don't worry, I didn't forget. Most are ready to ripen in the bowl anyway."

Grandpa beamed. "I'll send you photos of the ducks later."

Wonderful.

I couldn't think of anything better.

"Good luck," Saylor whispered to Amanda as we made a swift departure. Our old friend gave us a wry smile as she immediately got in between the three arguing elderly ladies.

"Thank God for that," I breathed as we escaped the craziness of the retirement community.

“Don’t count your ducks before they’re lined up,” Saylor said, unlocking her car and looking at me over the top of mine. “It’s not over yet.”

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I groaned as I stretched my leg out to the side. I’d been sitting cross-legged on the hard, wooden floor of the bookstore for the last twenty minutes. Our new outdoor chalkboard sign had arrived, and Holley had printed out a bunch of ideas from Pinterest with the demand that the board was identical on both sides.

I’d only done one, and I wasn’t sure if I’d ever feel my ass again.

The chalkboard was now covered in dust and big, block letters that said, “BOOKS THAT WAY,” with an arrow that, when the sign was outside, would point to the bookstore, and another that would point toward the mountain trails in the other direction accompanied by, “THAT WAY, BEARS. WOULDN’T RISK IT.”

I chuckled to myself as I got up to stretch my legs. It was super cute, and I hoped it would make the tourists laugh so they’d come inside and give me their money.

No, really.

I did.

I flipped the board around and bent forward to stretch out my tight back muscles. I felt as though I’d been stapled to a wooden board for hours.

I was too old for this.

“Not the first thing you expect to see in a bookstore.”

I jolted at the sound of Josh’s voice, straightening back up so quickly I think I pulled something. “You’re not treading your building site dirt all over my store.”

He held up his hands. “Even if I had come from work, I think you’ve got the dust covered.”

A glance at the floor confirmed the truth. There was chalk dust *everywhere*.

“Oops.”

“What are you doing? Drawing a hopscotch on the floor?”

“No, don’t be stupid. I’m doing the new outdoor sign. Look.” I turned it so he could read the side I’d already done.

A laugh burst out of him. “Well, at least nobody can accuse you of not

being factually accurate.”

I clicked my tongue and tapped my temple. “What do you need?” I asked, grabbing the dustpan and brush from behind the register.

“Uh, Grandma said she wanted that new book.”

“Oh, well, *that* narrows it down.”

“Don’t be snarky.”

“I’m always snarky,” I replied. “Do you know who wrote it?”

He stared at me.

“Damn it, Josh. Do you know how many new books we get in every single week? We got twenty-five this week alone.”

“Shit. Okay. Hold on.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket, tapped the screen, then held it out in front of him. “This is going one of two ways.”

I grinned and tipped the chalk dust into the little trashcan.

“Hello? Joshua? Is that you?”

“Yes, Grandma. Move the phone from your ear, and you’ll see me. Yep, there you go.”

“Ooh, hello, handsome boy!”

I grinned, wiggling my eyebrows. *Handsome boy, indeed.*

Josh’s grandma was the most wholesome, sweetest lady I’d ever met in my life—a stark contrast to the majority of the residents at the retirement community.

“Hey, Grandma,” he said, acting like his cheeks weren’t tinged with pink. “I’m at the bookstore.”

“Let me guess; you forgot the book and one of those lovely girls can’t help you.”

Aw.

See? The sweetest.

Josh rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I forgot. Can you talk to Kinsley?”

“No. I can’t see her.”

“I haven’t handed her the phone yet, Grandma.”

“Ooh, that explains it, dear. Get on with it, then.”

I choked back another laugh.

Honestly, Vicki Carter was an absolute delight.

I took the phone from Josh and angled it so she could see me. “Hi, Mrs. Carter!”

“Kinsley! Hello, darling girl!” She was wearing her trademark pink lipstick that made her blue eyes pop, and her light eyelashes were caked in a

thick dark brown mascara that seemed as though it'd been present for the past twenty years. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you. How are you?"

"Alive," she chortled. "Now, darling, I want the new Amelia Cooper. Do you have it?"

I grinned. I was not surprised at all—I did have it, and in fact, Saylor had set it aside yesterday morning for her. "Yes, ma'am. Saylor set it aside yesterday for you."

"Are you kidding?" Josh asked. "You went through all that and you already know?"

"Of course I know," I said, looking over the phone at him. "Your grandma has been reading Amelia Cooper forever, and she's been getting her new books set aside since before I worked here. Do you really think I'd forget?"

Vicki cackled. "You're good girls. How much do I owe you?"

"Same as usual," I replied.

"Joshua, pay them seventeen dollars."

"Seventeen dollars for a book?" Josh all but gasped. "Good God, Grandma!"

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain with me, child. That's a hardback you're cussing about."

I looked pointedly at him. "One never takes the Lord's name in vain over a hardback."

"Is this town just full of bookworms?"

"Yes," both Vicki and I answered at the same time.

Josh muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

"Kinsley, he'll pay you and bring me my book. I'm going to take a nap ready to stay up all night reading," Vicki said.

With that, she hung up.

Goodbye to her, too.

"So rude," Josh murmured as he put his phone in his back pocket. "Seventeen dollars for a book and she doesn't even say goodbye."

I shrugged one shoulder. "When I'm her age, I expect I'll be exactly the same."

"That's not terrifying at all."

After shooting him a look that told him he should shut up, I told him to wait there while I fetched the book.

I grabbed *Under the Setting Sun* by Amelia Cooper from the ‘reserved’ section of the shelf in the storeroom and flipped it to read the back as I walked back through the store. It was the twelfth and final book in the series, and even though it sounded delightful, I wasn’t sure I had the time to dedicate to twelve books right now.

But we all knew I was going to buy book one later anyway, so it was a moot point.

“Are you...reading it?”

I jerked up and met Josh’s green-gray eyes. “Just the back.”

“So you’re reading it.”

“If the book isn’t open, I’m not reading it.” I slipped behind the register and lay the book on the white tissue paper we used to pack all orders. There was nothing worse than getting your book home and seeing bent pages or a damaged cover, and while the tissue paper wasn’t exactly a metal safe, it did the job.

I wrapped the book and secured it with a sticker before putting it into a small bag for him. “Seventeen dollars, please.”

Josh handed me the twenty with a sigh. “I’m not getting this money back from her, am I?”

“No, but you know she’ll have your favorite cake in her room waiting for you as a thank you, so don’t be so grumpy.” I handed him his three dollars in change.

Literally in change.

He looked at the coins. “Why have you given it to me in quarters?”

“To be annoying. Obviously.” I grinned and shut the drawer so he couldn’t ask me to change it for three one-dollar bills. “Will that be all, sir?”

“No,” he said slowly, dropping the coins in his back pocket. “One of the guys wants to go out with you tomorrow night.”

My eyes widened. “Alone?”

“No, he’s bringing his parents.”

“Joshua.”

“You asked a stupid question, so I gave you a stupid answer.” He shrugged. “It’s the engineer. He’s in town visiting his great-aunt tomorrow afternoon and wanted to know if you were free.”

“I am so not ready to actually go out with someone!”

“Then why am I doing this?”

“Well, I’m awkward and uncomfortable? I might climb out a bathroom



window? Maybe end up choking on something so he has to Heimlich me?"

"Stop panicking."

"I can't!"

He put the book down and took my face in his hands. "Stop it, or I'm going to slap you."

I stopped.

He was right in front of me, his handsome face barely inches from mine, and his gaze was holding mine hostage.

Something... *tingled*. Somewhere inside me.

Whatever it was, it was new.

And I was pretty sure it wasn't a good thing.

"Please let go of me," I breathed.

"Right." He stepped back. "I'm giving him your number. He'll text you so you don't have to worry about me reading your conversations."

"How else am I going to know if I'm being totally awkward if you aren't reading them?"

"It's called screenshots," he replied dryly. "But surely you can handle one dinner with a stranger?"

"The evidence up until now would say no."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jesus Christ. Right, okay. We're having dinner tonight and I'm going to teach you how not to be a blubbering mess into your main course."

"It's cute you think I'll make it past the starter."

"Kinsley, I don't think you'll make it past the door," he drawled, his eyes sparking with laughter. "But I was *trying* to give you some confidence."

"It didn't work."

"I know." He grabbed his grandma's book and stepped back. "I'll pick you up at seven and I'll see if I can't teach you a trick or two. Wear something nice, okay?"

"Nice? How nice? What kind of nice? Nice like jeans and a shirt or a fancy dress and heels nice?"

He backed toward the door with a grin. "Figure it out."

I opened my mouth to protest, but the bell dinged loudly as the door shut behind him.

He was gone.

Damn it to hell.

## CHAPTER SIX – KINSLEY

RULE SIX: YOU *DO* HAVE TO ASK ABOUT YOUR DATE'S INTERESTS.

To be fair, Jamie Pope—the engineer from Moose Knuckle—was a prompt texter.

His first message had come through at exactly five-twenty-eight p.m. with a note that he was sorry he hadn't messaged earlier, but he didn't finish work until five.

I wasn't an unreasonable person, and considering I was still panicking about what the hell I was supposed to wear to tonight's date trial run, I told him it was fine and thank you for texting.

It was a good start.

There was a lot that could go wrong between now and our date, but here I was.

Killing it.

If I weren't naked, I'd totally brush dirt off my shoulder like a cringey nineties' pop video.

My phone buzzed with a text message and I glanced down.

**JAMIE: So where's good in White Peak to eat? I don't get over there much, but my great-aunt just moved into the assisted living facility so I'll be there more often.**

It was so fun to hear all the names people called that place. Assisted living, retirement home, old people's home... I just thought it was a home for the insane elderly for the most part.

Judging by the upcoming duck parade, it wasn't like I was wrong.

**ME: Did you know they just got ducks?**

**JAMIE: There was a lady talking about duck-sized bonnets on eBay when I called Aunt Elizabeth.**

**ME: That'll be Mabel. My friend's grandma.**

**JAMIE: She sounds like a hoot. Doesn't help the food problem**

**though**

And this was why Kinsley Lane didn't date.  
She was a squirrel, ladies and gentlemen.  
She also apparently talked about herself in the third person.  
She was exhausting.

**ME: Sorry. I went off on a tangent. FYI, I'm prone to that.**

**JAMIE: Good to know LOL**

**ME: Umm, there's Bronco's bar which is owned by my friend's parents. Hot Stone Pizzeria does great pizza and you can eat in or takeout. Bella Italia is a great eat in place, and there's also an Indian called Moti Mahal that's really great.**

**JAMIE: What's your favorite?**

**ME: Casual or sit down meals?**

**JAMIE: A date, Kinsley.**

Oh. *Duh*. Idiot.

**ME: Bella Italia or Moti Mahal.**

**JAMIE: I'll check out their websites. If you're free tomorrow night for dinner?**

My cheeks burned even though he couldn't see.

**ME: I have to close the store at six, but I'll be good to go from seven-ish.**

**JAMIE: I'll let you know.**

**ME: Okay, great.**

Look at me go!

All right, it was a little touch and go when I brought up the ducks, but he hadn't balked and ran away at my awkwardness, so there was that.

Basically, I really did need Josh to help me after all.

Speaking of Josh... time had swiftly passed while I was texting Jamie, and I was now running late. *Quelle surprise.*

I dropped my phone and stared at my closet. Without knowing where we were going, I had no idea what to wear. Was it any wonder I rarely dated? It was all too stressful and confusing and that was before I'd even left my own house.

The one thing I could decide upon was heels. No matter where we went, a good pair of black pumps would be suitable, so I pulled out my favorite, most comfortable pair of black stilettos that I'd owned for three years.

Progress.

Unfortunately, I wasn't getting in any restaurants wearing just shoes.

Damn Josh. I knew why he was testing me like this, but I wasn't happy about it at all. At least with Jamie it looked like he would tell me where we were going so I'd know what kind of outfit to pull together.

This one was a crapshoot.

Okay, jeans. Jeans were good. Jeans were versatile. Jeans and heels didn't make one look like a whore, did they?

God, why weren't there guides for this? Dating guides for bookworms and introverts. That would make life so much easier than it was.

Josh and his attempt at advice didn't really cut it, did it?

I groaned and pulled out underwear. Now there were two items where it didn't matter—one, I wasn't going to have sex with Josh tonight, and two, I didn't have sex with anyone on the first date.

Fat panties it was.

Yessss.

My feet might be sore by the end of the night, but at least my vagina wouldn't be getting a wedgie from my panties.

Silver linings.

I eventually settled on a simple white tank top that looked good with the bleached blue jeans and a light pink blazer. It was casual yet still smart, and it was the kind of thing I was comfortable wearing to both Bronco's or

somewhere fancier like Moti Mahal.

Granted, I was literally asking to spill food on my shirt with it being white, but still...

I did my hair and makeup before I got dressed, just in case. I had been known to drop my mascara wand on myself more than once, and I wasn't sure I had another white t-shirt that wasn't languishing in my laundry basket.

What could I say? I liked to split my washes by color, and I didn't wear white often.

Except bras, but that probably explained why most of those so-called white bras were now a little on the greyer side of the color wheel.

I miraculously had five minutes to spare, so I slipped my feet into my heels and, after retrieving my phone from the mess that was my unmade bed, went downstairs. I was going to wait in the living room for Josh so I could see his car coming, but when I got there, I could see his black pickup truck pulled up on the sidewalk.

If he'd driven over my lawn, I was going to kick him.

And let me tell you, with these heels, it was going to *hurt*.

I dropped my phone into my purse and grabbed my keys from the door. I waited until a string of knocks hammered at my door before I swung it open.

Josh stood before me looking probably more handsome than I'd ever seen him. Honestly, if my life were a romance novel, this would be the moment when I'd look at my brother's best friend as anything other than, well, that.

But my life wasn't a romance novel, so here we were.

Or rather, here I was, standing in front of my brother's six-foot-two best friend, with his dark hair brushed to one side, his green-gray eyes staring down at me, and his full pink lips curled up in a smile.

And that was before you considered the white shirt that hugged his builder's body with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

Did anything below that matter?

I think not.

I shook off all those unwelcome thoughts and cleared my throat. "Well? Do I pass the test?"

His gaze danced over me, flitting from the top of my head to the tips of my toes and everything in between. It lingered for a moment on my chest where my cleavage was enhanced by one of Victoria's push up bra secrets,

but he jerked his head as if he were shaking those thoughts off.

He met my eyes, and his lips curved into a small smile. “You look great. Good choice of outfit. Very diplomatic.”

I mock-curtsied to him. “Shall we go?”

Josh nodded and took a step back. I joined him outside, pausing only to lock the door and double check it was secure, then I followed him to his truck.

He opened the passenger side door for me and gave me a helping hand into the cab. I wasn’t sure if he’d jacked it up or not, but it had definitely been touch and go there for a moment with my heels, so I was grateful for the hand.

“How was your afternoon?” he asked as he pulled away from the curb. “Did you speak to Jamie?”

I nodded. “We spoke some this afternoon. He’s looking at places for dinner, or he was last time we chatted.”

“Where did you talk about?”

“Bella and Moti.”

“Good choices. You’re avoiding Bronco’s, then.”

“The gossip train stops less frequently at the Bella and Moti stations, so yes.”

He chuckled under his breath and turned on his blinker as we pulled up at a crossroads. “True story. Why do you think we’re going to Moti’s tonight?”

“We are?” I was sure my face lit up because my cheeks strained with my smile. “I haven’t been in ages!”

He peered sideways at me, lips twitching. “Neither have I. And a little birdie told me Taarush has a new meatball kufta special debuting tonight.”

My mouth watered at the thought. Taarush Laghari was the patriarch of the family and a third-generation American, but the family still held true to their Indian roots and culture while seamlessly living with ours. No other Indian food compared to his, and his specials were just that—special.

I could not *wait* to try it.

“Put your drool away, Kinsley. It’s unbecoming.”

*Unbecoming*. Was I in Jane Austen’s England?

“Oh, shut up.” I nudged him with my elbow as he made the final turn in the direction of the restaurant.

“I won’t. This is a trial date, and you can’t go drooling over someone’s

car.”

“Well, if you want to talk manners, it’s rude not to tell a lady where you’re taking her for dinner. Do you know how much anxiety I had to deal with over what to wear? My bedroom floor looks like a mosh pit of clothing.”

“Not to be pedantic, but I’ve seen your bedroom. I don’t understand how that’s different to normal.”

I sniffed. “I cleaned yesterday.”

“Ah, so this time, the clothes are clean.”

“I see why you’re single. You’re a terrible date.”

“Yet here you are, getting advice from me on *your* terrible dates.”

“Oh, shut up, Joshua.”

He laughed and pulled into an empty parking slot outside the restaurant. “Wait there.”

I did as he said and waited as he rounded the front of the truck and opened the door for me. “Thank you,” I said as I put my hand in his and gingerly stepped down from the truck.

“Don’t mention it. I don’t want you breaking your ankle before your date tomorrow. A moonboot won’t go with those shoes.”

I shot him a withering look before I turned my attention to the restaurant. It was painted in white, and the arches that formed the doorway and the windows were lined with gold and shaped like the onion domes that were reminiscent of the roof of its namesake, the Taj Mahal. A sign that proclaimed the restaurant as Moti Mahal was large, gold, and backlit by bright white lighting.

It wasn’t so clear to see right now, but when it was dark, it looked *amazing*.

“Are you ready to go inside?”

I nodded and followed Josh to the front door. The doors were shaped in the same arch as the porch outside, and he pulled them open for me to step inside. The décor inside matched the colors outside, but there were decadent additions of red in the form of the tablecloths and rich tapestries on the walls.

“Good evening and welcome to Moti Mahal.” Priya Laghari grinned as soon as she laid eyes on us. “Well, well, well. Does Colton know about this?”

I shook my head at my former English study partner. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“It never is,” she sang, whipping two menus up. “Follow me.”

I glared at Josh.

“It really isn’t,” he asserted. “I’m teaching her how to date.”

Priya’s laugh tinkled. “Would you like me to see how many times I can book you in this week? I remember the high school attempts.”

Groaning, I sat down at the table she led us to. “Please don’t remind me.”

Another laugh as she set the menus in front of me. It was a miracle we’d been friends at all in high school—Priya was a full-blown extrovert who was entirely comfortable in her skin. It helped that she was tall and beautiful, with long, straight hair that was almost jet black, and her amber eyes complemented her gorgeous dark skin perfectly.

If I looked like her, I’d probably have been a lot more confident back then, too.

“That bad, huh?” Josh’s eyes danced with laughter.

I buried my face in my hands. Yes, my high school dating record was bad. Terrible. Embarrassing. So much so that one day, it would be used to teach people what *not* to do.

No joke.

She took our drink order without another comment about my dreadful dating life and disappeared off to pass it to a waitress for it to be filled.

I hid my face behind my menu.

“You can’t hide, Kins,” Josh said, perusing his own menu much more casually than I was. “People in town know you. They won’t know most of the guys you’re considering going out with, so you’re gonna have to deal with a little ribbing here and there.”

“No, I don’t.” I dropped the menu. I already knew I was ordering the kofta special. “I know my dating life is dismal. I know I’m awkward and introverted and bookish and all those other things that can make doing normal people stuff hard because people are just *exhausting*, but—”

Josh dropped his menu on the table with a ‘thwack’ and met my eyes. A fierceness shone in his eyes, one I hadn’t seen before, and I swallowed the thick lump in my throat.

“Stop it,” he said in a low voice, his gaze never wavering. “All of those things—your introverted nature, your awkwardness, your endless love of books—make you who you are, Kinsley. And if you go out with a guy who can’t appreciate that those things are what make you a great person, then he doesn’t deserve to go out with you. Got it?”

“Then why are you here, helping me hide those things? Isn’t that a



waste of your time?”

He dropped his eyes back to the menu that was now flat on the table. “I’m not helping you hide anything. They’re clearly things that make you feel uncomfortable, and if I can give you tools that help you feel more comfortable when you’re dating, then so be it. But don’t discard them as flaws. They’re not your flaws. They’re your strengths. They’re what make you, you.”

I stared at him for a moment, but when it became obvious he wasn’t going to meet my gaze, I snorted. “Thanks for that, Dr. Phil.”

“Anytime, ma’am. That’ll be one hundred dollars, please.”

“Would you like me to shove it up your behind or choke you on it?”

“Direct deposit is preferred.”

“Sorry, I don’t do banks.”

He glanced up, a smile playing on his lips. “That makes two of us. Are you ready to order?”

“I’ve been ready since you mentioned that special. Bring it on.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN – JOSH

RULE SEVEN: NOBODY CARES THAT YOU'VE BEEN WAITING A YEAR FOR THAT SEQUEL.

“This is the point in the night where I’d ask a date questions about her life.”

Kinsley peered at me over the rim of her wine glass. “Are we doing that deep into it?”

“Yes. Jamie will do the same, and you need to have your answers prepared. And I need to know that you’re not going to go off on a tangent.”

“I don’t go off on tangents.”

“You’re almost always off on a tangent,” I corrected her, picking up my beer to take a sip.

She muttered something under her breath.

I grinned and excused myself to the bathroom while she complained to herself. We’d finished our starters not long ago and had at least another twenty minutes until our mains were brought out, so this was the perfect time to go over some basic questions and get her awkwardness in check.

I just needed a minute to get my own brain focused.

Being at dinner with Kinsley was wreaking havoc with my mind. She was fucking gorgeous anyway, but seeing her all dressed up like this... Jesus, it was messing with me.

And I was the idiot essentially training her to be the perfect date.

For another man.

I did my business, washed my hands, and headed back out to the restaurant. Kinsley was tapping away at the screen of her phone with a furrow in her brow, and she rolled her eyes as she put it back in her purse.

“Everything okay?”

She looked up as I took my seat. “Holley’s having a mental breakdown.”

“What did you do now?”

“Ha ha.” She stuck her tongue out at me. “She’s undecided between three window displays. Saylor told her she’d surprise her and she flipped out.”

“How do you survive not only having a control freak as your best friend, but your co-worker?”

Kinsley ran her tongue over her lips. “I spend a lot of time reorganizing the books.”

I choked back a laugh. To say they were sisters and only ten months apart, Holley and Ivy really were like night and day.

“All right, let’s do this,” I said, pushing the thoughts of her upcoming date out of my mind. “So, what do you do?”

Kinsley’s eyes widened for a split second before she caught herself. “I own a bookstore,” she said quietly. “With two of my best friends.”

“That’s cool. Is it here in White Peak?”

She blinked—too quickly.

“I’m just asking about your store, Kinsley. You’re not going to go to jail if you don’t answer.”

“If I could reach, I’d kick you under the table,” she muttered. “Yes, it’s in town. Bookworm’s Books.”

I fought the smirk that wanted to take hold of my lips. “Cool. So you’re a bookworm.”

She opened her mouth then froze. “I’m not falling for that, Josh. That’s a trick question.”

This time, I didn’t bother to hide the smirk. “Ah, but what would you say in real life?”

“Obviously, it’s written like five times in my profile.”

“Wrong answer.”

“So now I have to hide my snark? Boy, whoever makes it past date three is going to be in for a shock if they think I’m a polite, slightly nerdy chick who likes to hike.”

“Slightly nerdy? You’re selling yourself short.”

“Exactly. I don’t see why I can’t go all in and let them know they’ll always be my second love behind books.”

“Because, Kinsley, when you start talking about books, nobody else can get a word in. You need to talk to your date about their interests, too.”

She snorted and picked up her glass. “Being a considerate human being is so overrated.”

Well, if this was how her date was going to go, I didn’t have to worry about Jamie at all.

“Okay, we’ve established you own a bookstore. Now is where you return the question,” I said. “Ask me about my job.”

“I know what you do.”

“Pretend I’m Jamie.”

“I know what Jamie does.”

“Jesus Christ, woman, work with me here.”

“Fine.” She took a deep breath and plastered a fake smile on her face. “So, you’re a builder.”

It would have been more sincere without the smile, but at least she was trying.

I think.

“I am,” I replied. “I got an apprenticeship with Watts and Sons Construction out of high school, and I’ve worked there ever since.”

“Cool. What are you working on right now?”

This was good. She was getting somewhere. “Building a new special education building at the local middle school. We should be done in a week.”

“Awesome.”

Silence.

My lips twitched. “Run out of questions?”

“Ugh, yes! Why is this so hard?” She slumped forward onto the table.

“Because if it were easy, nobody would be single,” I answered. “Look, there’s always going to be an awkward part in the date. It’s not going to be flawless conversation the whole way through, and if we were on a date for real, I’d jump in now with a question that’s relevant to what I already know about you. So I’d ask about the bookstore or if you’ve been to the restaurant before.”

She blew out a long breath, but she was rescued from furthering the conversation by the arrival of our food. It was placed in front of us by a waitress neither of us recognized, and after assuring her that we were fine for drinks, she left us.

We passed the next few minutes in silence as we both ate. Kinsley had her meatball special, and I had the Prawn Madras. It was a comfortable, companionable silence, only broken when we both reached for the last poppadum before we split it.

Honestly, I’d say it was like something out of the movies where two people’s eyes met over the table, but no. It was more like the poppadum snapped as we grabbed it, and she got two thirds while I got the smaller portion.

Such was my life.

“Are you an only child?”

I jerked at her question. “What?”

“Damn it, Josh. I’m trying to be a good date and pretend like I’m interested.”

I choked back a laugh. At least nobody could fault her for her honesty. “Okay, sorry. You took me by surprise. Go again.”

She sighed dramatically, dipping her cheese naan into the sauce left on her plate. “Are you an only child?”

“I’m not. I have two sisters,” I replied. “Technically.”

She frowned. “Technically? I thought there was only you and Piper.”

Why had I said that? The loss of my youngest sister as a baby wasn’t something I really shared—only Colton really knew, and he clearly hadn’t shared it with *his* sister.

“Uh.” I stopped, putting down the last shred of my poppadum. “My mom had a baby after Piper. She died when she was a month old.”

“Oh, my God,” Kinsley breathed. “I had no idea.”

“Why would you? It’s not something I put on billboards and spread around town. I was young and she was only a baby, so I don’t really talk about it. I don’t even know why I am now.”

“I’m so sorry, Josh.” She reached across the table and laid her hand atop mine. “I can’t imagine how that feels.”

I looked down at our hands, her fingers almost linking through mine. “She had severe heart issues from birth, and my parents knew when Mom was pregnant. When it became obvious that she wouldn’t survive, they brought her home. We had two amazing weeks with her before she passed peacefully in my mom’s arms in the hospital. It’s hard, but it’s been twenty-four years.”

“That doesn’t make it easier.” She paused. “So she’d be close in age to me and Piper if she were alive now.”

I tilted my head to the side with a small smile. “I like to think you’d be friends. You’d definitely piss me off on a regular basis.”

Kinsley visibly fought her smile. “I bet she’d be a bookworm like Piper who didn’t want to date.”

“Given our grandmother, that’s a given. She’d probably be a part owner in the bookstore. If not literally, she’d probably keep you open.”

She gave up all pretense of fighting. “What was her name?”

Sadness enveloped me for a moment. “Celeste. It means angel. It’s why Mom chose it.”

“They always knew.”

Slowly, I nodded. “I think so.”

“It’s a beautiful name.” Kinsley’s blue eyes met mine and they were full of sympathy and love. “And if I know anything about being a little sister, I bet she’s cringing at your awful attempt to teach my sorry ass how to date.”

Despite myself, I laughed. Chances were, she wasn’t wrong. After all, Piper probably was, and she had no idea what was going on.

That reminded me. I had to text her and check in tonight.

I shot a fleeting glance toward the ceiling with a smile.

“All right, rate me,” Kinsley said after a moment. “Tell me what I need to fix and what I’m good at.”

*Nothing. You’re perfect the way you are.*

*Talk books to me, Kinsley.*

I swallowed back those thoughts and shook my head. “You’re a little slow to react, but that’s nothing that can’t be written off as nervousness. Just keep your snark to a minimum and remember he’s only being polite. Don’t tangent about your books. Do that, and you should be fine.”

“Really? All this to learn that I just need to tone down my attitude?”

I shrugged. “What can I say? He might find your awkwardness endearing.”

She snorted. “Chance would be a fine thing. Now, how are we splitting this bill?”

“We aren’t.” I smiled and pulled out my wallet. “I got it.”

“Josh—”

“I said I got it.”

She clamped her lips together, but she didn’t argue further.

Thank God.

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“Are you sure this is the new one?”

I stared at Grandma. “I have no idea, Grandma. I took the book Kinsley gave me and ran with it.”

She sniffed. “It took you long enough to bring it here.”

“It might surprise you, but I do have a life.”

“And it’s a vibrant social one, given that you visit me three times a week.” She raised her teacup to her pink lips and sipped. Her penciled-on

eyebrows arched uncomfortably. “How exciting.”

“The last time I came once in a week you yelled at me for neglecting you. I’m being a good grandson by visiting you even though you interfere with my dating life.”

She snorted, setting her teacup back on the saucer. “Dating life? What dating life?”

“I have a lively dating life, thank you very much.”

“Yes, so much so that you’re half in love with Kinsley.”

“I am not half in love with Kinsley.”

“I apologize, I misspoke. You’re entirely in love with Kinsley.”

“I am not in love with her.”

“I might be losing my hearing, child, but I’m not losing my mind.”

Well, given her current narrative, that was debatable. Yes, I had a highly inappropriate crush on her, but I was not in love with her.

“Hmph. Fill up my teacup.”

I took it to the dresser at the far end of the room and set it down on the lace cloth she had covering the walnut surface. The teapot was a calming shade of cream with an alarming pattern of blue spreading across it. I was sure it was probably some antique she treasured, but until she bothered to tell me, it was a blue patterned teapot full of English teabags with the little tags hanging out.

Then again, it was just as likely to be something she’d picked up at a thrift store.

“How are the ducks?” I set the teacup and saucer down in front of her on the coffee table.

“Nice change of subject. Your subtlety needs work, though.” She leaned forward and delicately spooned two small heaps of sugar into the cup, then stirred. “The ducks are a great point of contention between Agatha, Mabel, and Rosie. Mabel stands by her assessment they are the ugliest things she’s ever laid eyes on, Agatha is entirely in love with them and spends at least three hours a day sitting by the pond, and Rosie flip-flops between loving or hating them depending on which one of them she wants to piss off.”

“How does Rosie actually feel about them?”

Grandma raised her cup to her lips and peered at me over the rim. “She doesn’t give a damn, dear.”

I wasn’t surprised at that at all.

“So it’s livened things up around here.”

“Mm. Not that it needed livening up, mind you. It’s not exactly quiet here anyway. If you ask me, they’ve provided more problems than they have anything else. The pond was supposed to be a nice area for us to sit, but now the ducks are here, they’re building another one. Another one! It’s nice to know our exorbitant fees are being used well,” she finished dryly.

I couldn’t help but agree with her on that. I was privy to the costs of staying in this place, and it was horrifying. Unfortunately, Grandma’s bad hips meant she had limited mobility, and since both me and my parents worked, there was nobody to look after her.

But at least they had ducks.

“So when are you providing me with some great-grandchildren to snuggle with?”

I blinked at her. She was a fine one to talk about a lack of subtlety in a subject change—she went from one to sixty in half a second.

Light was jealous of her speed.

“I need a girlfriend first,” I reminded her. “So it’s gonna be a while.”

“You’d have a girlfriend if you’d tell Kinsley you love her.”

“I knew you’d find a way to come back to that.”

“Well? You didn’t deny it.”

I stared at her. “You’re not going to change your mind, so what’s the point?”

“The point is if you told her now, you’d be engaged in a year, married in two, and babies at least in four.”

“I’m sure Kinsley will be thrilled to know you’re planning out her life,” I drawled. “You only want me to marry her so you have a granddaughter-in-law who owns a bookstore.”

“Darn right I do.” Grandma chuckled. “Free books!”

“That’s what a library is for.”

“Yes, but I can’t keep those,” she pointed out. “Well? Are you going to tell her?”

All right. I was done here.

“You’re welcome for the book, Grandma, but I have to get going. It’s nearly time for your dinner.”

“Are you going to tell her now?”

“No, she has a date.” I stood and kissed her powdered cheek. “Goodbye, Grandma. Call me if you need anything.”

“Wimp,” she muttered as I opened the door to her room.



“Love you, too.” I tossed a grin over my shoulder and left her to her fantasies.

The biggest issue with her plan to marry me off to Kinsley was this: there was no guarantee that, even if I did tell her I had feelings for her, she would reciprocate them.

And Colton was an issue, too.

*The* biggest issue. God only knew I’d be pissed if I knew he’d slept with my sister.

Not that Piper would sleep with him.

He’d accidentally killed her hamster when she was eight, and she’d barely spoken a word to him since.

I waved goodbye to the nurses at the front desk and stepped out into the sunlight. I could hear the ducks quacking and splashing in their pool on the other side of the building.

Shit, they were noisy little fuckers.

I rubbed my hand down my face and pulled my keys out of my pocket so I could unlock my truck. I got into the cab and grabbed my phone from where I’d left it in the center console.

Kinsley’s date was in half an hour. She was meeting Jamie at Bella Italia at six-thirty, and she’d already texted me twenty times this afternoon panicking.

Mostly about what to wear.

Like I fucking knew.

I was about to lock my phone and put it back in the center console when it buzzed with a new message from her. I pinched my nose when I saw the preview said ‘view attachment,’ because I knew that meant she’d sent me a picture.

Of her clothes, no doubt.

I clicked the message and, after a few seconds for the attachments to download, I knew I was right.

Three pictures of outfits.

In the first one she was wearing a similar outfit to what she’d worn last night—jeans, heels, and a simple blazer and shirt combo, although this blazer was black. The next one was a plain red dress paired with the same jacket and heels, but it was the final one that made me groan.

A skin-tight, white dress that hugged every inch of her damn body, from the high neck to the knee-length skirt. She’d paired that one with a set

of bright red heels.

If I were ten years younger, I'd have a boner on the spot.  
I wasn't sure I didn't, to be honest.

**ME: I'm really not qualified to answer this.**

Mostly because if I told her not to wear the third one, it wouldn't be because she looked bad. It would be because Jamie would take one look at her and get an erection.

Like I was currently sporting.

In my car.

In the parking lot of the old people's home.

Fan-fuckin'-tastic.

**KINSLEY: Omg you have to help me!!!!**

**ME: Don't you have friends for this????**

**KINSLEY: JOSSSSSHHHHHH**

**ME: What can I tell you that Holley, Saylor, Ivy, or Tori can't? What did they say? Have you even asked them?**

My phone rang with her name flashing on the screen. With a sigh, I answered, and it automatically connected to my car via Bluetooth, but Kinsley spoke before I had a chance.

"Of course I asked them!" she said down the line. "I'm not an idiot!"

I started the engine and backed out of my parking spot. "What did they say?"

"Holley and Saylor voted the red, Ivy said I looked more comfortable in the jeans, and Tori told me to wear the white dress and hike it up two inches."

"That sounds like a scarily accurate representation of them all," I mused, pulling onto the main road.

"I know, but I need a guy's opinion and it's not like I can ask Colton. I'm nervous enough without you making this decision harder."

"Don't you have to be at the restaurant in half an hour?"

“Yes! So help me!”

“Jesus, no need to shout. I’m driving, you know.”

“Good. Drive over here and help me.”

“Can’t. I just left tea with Grandma. I won’t get there in time.” I flicked the indicator in the direction of my house. “All right. What do you want me to tell you?”

“Which one should I wear?”

“Whichever one you feel most comfortable in,” I replied honestly. “There’s no point wearing the white dress if you’re worried it’s too much. The red is great, but Ivy’s right and you seem more comfortable in the jeans.”

She groaned. “Can’t I cancel it?”

“The date? No. It’s too late.”

“Damn it all to hell.”

“What would someone in your book do?”

“What?”

“If you were a character in a book, what would she do right now?”

“Well, probably fall over her dog’s rope and sprain her ankle,” she answered. “But I don’t have a dog, so...”

“What kind of books are you reading?” I muttered, mostly to myself, then said, “What are you going to wear, Kinsley? You’re running out of time.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Rain boots and nipple pasties!” she snapped.

There was a dull click as she hung up, and the car filled with an uncomfortable silence.

Well, if was going to wear that, it was definitely worth stopping by the restaurant to see the looks on their faces...

## CHAPTER EIGHT – KINSLEY

RULE EIGHT: DATES ARE NOT YOUR SOAPBOX. HE DOESN'T CARE HOW MANY THINGS THEY GOT WRONG IN THE THIRD HARRY POTTER MOVIE.

“It can't have been that bad.”

I pulled my face up out of my hands and looked at Saylor and Holley. “Our table was booked for forty-five minutes ago and yet I'm here, at the bookstore. I ordered spaghetti. I'm wearing white. You add it up.”

Saylor grimaced. “Okay, it could have been that bad.”

I sat up straight and let them see the state of my white dress. It wasn't the dress I'd sent to them earlier—I definitely hadn't been comfortable with the tightness of that—but it didn't really matter at this point.

Right in front of my dress, smack bang on my boobs, was a big, orange smear.

Holley pressed her hand to her mouth. “Oh, my God.”

Saylor didn't even bother to hide her laughter. “How did you do that?”

I slumped back on the table. “It was a nightmare from the very beginning.

His photos were definitely a little old, but whatever, he was nice. Until we started talking. He talked a lot about his job, and when I was finally able to steer the conversation away from it, we started talking about movies.”

“That's not... so bad,” Holley ventured, coming back from the staff room with three wine glasses and a cold bottle of wine.

“Where did you get that?”

“I had a hunch.” Saylor snorted as she took the bottle from her.

Great. Even they knew this would go wrong.

“Okay, carry on.” Saylor slid a glass in front of me.

“He asked me what my favorites are, and when I said the best ones to binge are Harry Potter, he went on a rant about how shit the movies are and how he had no idea how anyone could enjoy them.”

Both of their eyes widened. They were the literal image of a deer in headlights.

“When I said they weren't bad, they just weren't as good as the books because they obviously missed a lot out—*especially* Azkaban—he told me he'd never read the books but they were probably garbage, too.”

Holley gasped, clutching her hands to her check. “He did not!”

“He did!”

Saylor shot to her feet and planted her hands on the table. “Give me his number. Nobody talks shit about Harry and gets away with it.”

I held up my hands and shook my head. “It gets worse.”

She slowly sat back down, but she had murder in her eyes.

“After I changed the subject *again*, our food came and thankfully stopped another painful conversation. There was a crash somewhere in the restaurant, it spooked me, and I dropped spaghetti on my dress.” My cheeks burned at the memory of how shock and disgust had filled his eyes. “I excused myself to the bathroom to try to fix it—”

“Unsuccessfully,” Holley added brightly.

“Unsuccessfully,” I drawled. “But when I got back to the table, he was gone and had paid for his half of dinner. Rihanna said he’d had a phone call about a family emergency and rushed off, but even she rolled her eyes as she said it.”

“What a dick!” Saylor said, sipping her wine. “And Josh thought this guy was worth your time?”

“Well, people aren’t always the same in real life as they are on the internet.”

I pointed at Holley and nodded. “I don’t spill spaghetti on myself on the internet.”

She smiled sadly. “Sorry your date went badly, Kins.”

“It’s fine. It happens. I’m sure there’ll be another one that won’t be so terrible next time.”

“And you won’t be wearing white *or* ordering the spaghetti,” Saylor said with a grin.

“And I’ll find out how he feels about Harry Potter before I go.”

We all laughed and quickly moved on. It wasn’t that late and the store was technically still open, but it was so quiet that I helped them close up while we finished the bottle of wine.

When we were done, I waved them goodbye and got into my car, where I promptly kicked off my shoes to drive barefoot.

Yes, yes, don’t worry. I’d only had one glass of wine.

And a half.

I didn’t get a chance to drink the one I’d paid for at the restaurant.

My phone rang just as I pulled away, and I hit the button on the built-in screen on my dashboard. “Hello?”

“Oh. I didn’t expect you to answer.”

“Then why did you call me?”

My brother chuckled. “Bet with Josh. He bet you’d still be on the date, but I knew you’d left already.”

“How did you know?”

“I saw your car outside the bookstore.”

“Ah, so you cheated.”

“I omitted some truths,” he admitted. “Was it that bad?”

I relayed the story with a little less detail than I’d shared with the girls.

“Shit. You really know how to pick ‘em, huh?”

“I didn’t pick him. Josh did.”

“You need a new matchmaker.”

“I concur,” I muttered, pulling up to the intersection and flipping on my blinker. “What are you doing right now?”

“Outside Bronco’s, avoiding my girlfriend. We just grabbed dinner.”

“You and Josh or you and Amber?”

“Why would I have had dinner with Amber if I’m avoiding her?”

“I don’t know, you weren’t exactly clear in your last message.”

He huffed, making my speakers crackle. “Me and Josh. Amber is on the other side of Bronco’s with a friend. She doesn’t know I’m here.”

I shook my head. I’d said it a thousand times and I’d probably say it a thousand more: I didn’t know why they didn’t just break up. It wasn’t like they were eighteen anymore. Colton was almost thirty and Amber was twenty-eight.

How much more time were they going to waste on a relationship that was going nowhere?

*That was the thing we should have all been betting on.*

“Right,” I said slowly. “I’m trying not to judge you for that, but you’re really rather pathetic.”

“Says the woman who can’t have a date without getting spaghetti sauce on her white dress,” my brother shot back. “Hold on.” His voice became slightly muffled. “Yes, I said white... I don’t know, Josh, ask her yourself.”

Great.

“What? Jesus, okay, but it’s your funeral.”

“I’m still here,” I said, pulling onto my street.

There was a rustle and then, “Are you still at the store? Or are you at home? Your matchmaker wants a debrief.”

“I’m about to get home. And tell my matchmaker that if he’s coming over, expect me in pajamas, and I expect wine. I’m traumatized he thought

someone who has never read the Harry Potter books has any right to trash my boy.”

“You’re so fucking weird.”

I laughed as Colt hung up. Perfect timing, I thought as I pulled into my driveway. I didn’t have to worry about disconnecting the call and messing around with my phone while I went inside.

I grabbed my things from the passenger side seat, including my shoes, and walked barefoot to my front door. After locking the car, I let myself into the house, dumped the shoes and my purse, and went straight for the stairs.

I was going to have to work some stain-removal magic on this dress the second it came off.

I hadn’t worn it in more than a year, but I was reminded how cute *and* versatile it was. One of those rare dresses you could dress up *or* down and it looked adorable either way.

If nothing else good came out of tonight, at least I had that.

I quickly changed into some sweatpants and a tank top that proclaimed me to be ‘bookish’ and took my dress into the kitchen. I ran cold water on the inside of the dress and scrubbed to loosen the stain, then flipped it over and scrubbed with both laundry detergent and white vinegar separately.

It smelled freaking awful.

I repeated the process until the stain was gone, holding it up to the light periodically to check it. When it looked as though it had disappeared, I pulled some regular, store-bought stain remover out of the cabinet under the sink and applied it.

Three knocks sounded at my door, and I yelled a, “Come in!” over my shoulder at Josh.

At least I hoped it was Josh.

“You know, you really shouldn’t leave your front door unlocked when it’s late,” was how Josh announced himself to me as he joined me in the kitchen. I glanced at the clock. “It’s barely eight-thirty. Hardly late, unless you’re the other side of seventy.”

“Seventy? That’s generous. I know people the other side of thirty who call that bedtime.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did you bring wine?”

He stepped into my line of view and held up two bottles. “I thought this seemed adequate, especially given that I’m apologizing for a Harry Potter hater and not the fact he bailed on you when you used the bathroom.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” I checked the stain on my dress. “I just need to throw this in the washing machine. Wine glasses are in the cabinet by the fridge.”

He nodded to indicate he’d heard me. I took my dress to the utility room and shoved it in the washer alongside the few other white items I had. I threw some stain remover in there just for good measure and set the machine going, before I padded my way back into the kitchen.

Where Josh was nowhere to be found.

“Josh?”

“Back porch!”

If he didn’t have my wine...

I’d steal his.

Thankfully, he did have it.

“I locked your front door for you,” he said as I settled down on the sofa next to him. “You’re welcome.”

I rolled my eyes again and took the glass of wine, pleasantly surprised to find that it was already chilled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he repeated.

“All right, Maui, calm down.”

“Maui?”

“From *Moana*?”

“What’s *Moana*?”

I blinked at him. “The Disney movie?”

“Believe it or not, Kinsley, I don’t watch Disney movies in my spare time.

I’m more of a sport guy than a princess one. Not that there’s anything wrong anyone who does watch them,” he finished hurriedly.

Snorting, I said, “Don’t worry, Joshua. Nobody is going to think you’re homophobic because you don’t watch *Cinderella* or *Tangled* in your spare time.”

Never mind that they were actually aimed at seven-year-old girls.

“I don’t know. Have you been on the internet lately? There are people who’d get offended if you said you didn’t like bananas.”

“Why wouldn’t you like bananas? Personally, unless they rise up and try to take over the forest, I think we should live and let live.”

His gaze, firmly on mine, didn’t waver, even as he shook his head and fought a smile. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“I think that’s a compliment,” I said dryly, lifting my glass to sip.



Mm, he'd bought Sauvignon. The good stuff, too.

"It was really that bad? The date?"

I shrugged and looked out at my yard. It wasn't quite cold enough yet for a jacket, but it wouldn't last much longer before I'd feel a chill and have to go inside. That also meant it wasn't completely dark yet, and it was one of the things I loved about living in Montana.

Granted, winter could be grim, but summer was lovely and bright.

"I just didn't click with him," I said after a moment of reflection. "Pretty much straight away, I knew it wasn't going to work. I don't know why. As soon as we sat down and he opened his mouth, I figured out why."

Josh choked back a small laugh. "Sometimes it happens like that. Getting along online and in person are two different things."

"You can say that again."

"What went wrong?"

"I really don't know. He was just... God, he was so full of himself. Like he was God's fucking gift to women, and I should bow down at his feet and lick his dirty little boots." I shuddered. "It was all him-him-him, and even talking about movies circled back around to his likes, his dislikes, his what-the-fuck-ever. Even Harry Potter! The only person I've ever known to make Harry Potter about themselves is Saylor."

"Did you tell her what he said?"

"I did make that mistake. She demanded his number, and I think it was so she could use it to track him down, find his address, turn up at his door, and deliver a solid beatdown."

Josh nodded slowly. "Sounds about right."

"Mhmm." I sipped my wine again. "Anyway. He wasn't fooling anyone when he slipped out after spaghettigate, so he's never getting a date in White Peak."

"Who was your server?"

"Rihanna."

"Ouch." He winced. "Yeah, he's never getting a date in *Montana*. For a teenager, she's got one hell of a gossip network."

"No kidding. She figured him out straight away. I expect she's already gotten his full name from the reservation list and found out everything except his birth weight."

Josh chuckled quietly, and we fell into a comfortable silence. Literal silence because there wasn't even the sound of wildlife. It was eerie and a little

disconcerting, but no sooner had I finished my wine than the sound of birds scattering from the trees at the end of the yard filled the air.

I set my empty glass on the table in front of us, and Josh immediately reached to pour me another. Sensible Kinsley on my right shoulder whispered that I should stop him because I was opening the store in the morning, but Naughty Kinsley on my left shoulder told me to go ahead and drink all the wine because hey, I deserved it.

I'll let you guess which Kinsley I obeyed.

After a few sips of my second glass, a breeze filtered through the yard. It carried a light chill that elicited goosebumps from me and made me shiver.

"Do you want my sweater?"

I glanced across at Josh and shook my head. "Then you'll be cold."

"I'm not cold right now."

"Because you're wearing the sweater."

"Here, it's fine."

I stood before he could remove one arm from it and headed for the back door.

"Coming?"

With a heavy sigh, Josh grabbed his glass and the bottle and followed me inside. Since he was *so good* at locking doors, I called the request for him to do that over my shoulder and went into the living room.

When he joined me, he filled our glasses with the last quarter of the wine bottle and sat on the other end of the sofa. "So... More research next time?"

I nodded slowly. "Yes, please. Maybe I'll spend a little more time talking to them, too."

He shrugged one shoulder, taking a big mouthful of his wine.

"Don't you have to drive home?" I knew he would have had a beer at Bronco's and he was already one glass of wine in.

Josh paused. "Shit. I'll call a cab and come get my truck in the morning. Is that okay?"

"As long as you're not blocking me in. I have to be at the store at seven-thirty." I leaned so I could see out of the window where I had a view of the driveway. "It doesn't look like it."

"If I am, just call me. I'll be awake anyway."

I looked pointedly at his glass and raised my eyebrows. "How often do you drink wine?"

"It's not my beverage of choice," he said dryly. "But I still have to go to work."

“Okay, fine.” I waved my hand dismissively. “Is this my life now? I have bad dates and commiserate with you instead of my girlfriends?”

“I felt the need to apologize.”

“A smart man would have brought chocolate. Or cake. Or pie.”

“You requested wine.”

“A woman always needs snacks with wine.”

“And here you thought I was the one teaching you about dating,” he said dryly.

I knocked my fist into his arm, but there was no heat behind it. “I’ll have you know I was an excellent date tonight! I was courteous, I didn’t talk about my books, and I definitely didn’t rant about how badly they fucked up the third Harry Potter movie.”

“Yes, but by the sounds of it, you literally couldn’t do any of those things.”

“And? After that date, I know how I sound when I do, so I won’t do it again.”

“Ah, there we go. It wasn’t a waste of time after all.”

“Personally, I think anyone who actually thinks they made a good job of that third movie is someone who should be weeded out early. Make sure you ask my potential dates that in future. It’ll save us all some time.”

He laughed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Why do you hate it so much? You have a complete vendetta against that movie that I’ll never understand.” I shifted on the sofa so my back was to the arm and I was facing him. “Did you ever read the books?”

“Years ago, and only once. Not enough times to ever remember what really happened.”

“They butchered the book, Josh. This wasn’t a ‘oh, we had to cut things out for time.’ It was an honest-to-God shake up of the entire book, so much so that half of it doesn’t even make sense!”

“That doesn’t explain it.”

“Okay, in the movie, Harry gets his Firebolt at the end, right?”

“Yeah. Sirius sent it, didn’t he?”

“Exactly! In the books, he gets it in the middle, and it’s confiscated *because* they thought Sirius had sent it to harm him. It’s a whole plot point in the narrative about how evil Sirius is and how badly he wants to hurt Harry, and do they bother to include it? No, no. They don’t. They just couldn’t be bothered. And the worst part is that Azkaban is actually the best book of the entire series.”

Josh leaned over and wrapped his fingers around my wrist, then made me lift

my wine glass to my mouth. Dutifully, I sipped, but in my efforts not to laugh, ended up snorting the wine up my nose.

“That didn’t go as planned,” he deadpanned.

“No shit.” I laughed, wiping my nose with a tissue from the box on the coffee table. “Thanks for that.”

“I was trying to soothe you. You got a little worked up. Even had a vein popping just here.” He tapped the side of his forehead. “It was equal parts alarming and fascinating.”

“Yes, well. Now you know firsthand why I’m a terrible date. I can’t stop when I get started.”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t that bad listening to you rant. You’re passionate about it. If everyone had an ounce of your passion about something in their lives, a lot of people would be a lot happier, I reckon.”

## CHAPTER NINE – KINSLEY

RULE NINE: NOT ALL DATES ARE MADE EQUAL. LOOK AT FEBRUARY 29<sup>TH</sup>, FOR EXAMPLE.

I opened my mouth to reply, but no words came out. Instead, my cheeks suddenly got hotter until I was sure that I couldn't hide it even by dipping my head and letting my dark hair fall around my face.

I'd never really thought about it like that, but he wasn't wrong.

"Not that I'm saying that's a rant for the first date. Maybe ease them in a little before you go nuts."

I peered up through my lashes and caught his grin. It was contagious and, alarmingly, a little butterflies-in-my-tummy inducing.

I swallowed and dropped my gaze before I gave anything away. That was a new feeling, and one that wasn't particularly welcome.

Josh was my brother's best friend, for God's sake.

What was I doing getting butterflies when he smiled at me?

I had *no* business feeling like this. For real. None at all. This was so wrong. I coughed and shivered right after. It was the only way I could shake off those feelings before they went too far.

The next thing I knew, I'd finished my wine.

"Want another?" I asked Josh as I got up.

His glass was still pretty full, so he shook his head.

With a shrug, I headed into the kitchen and pulled the new bottle from the fridge. The screw cap opened with a satisfying series of clicks, and I filled my glass, then put the bottle back in the fridge door.

I was definitely drinking my feelings away tonight.

Despite what I said to the girls and Josh, my bad date *had* bothered me.

Finding someone who fit my very specific parameters didn't seem to be all that hard, all things considered, but getting them to like me and not be a jerk? That, dear Watson, was *not* elementary.

How many dates like tonight would I have to suffer through before I found someone who'd listen to my rants about bad book-to-movie adaptations?

Who'd discuss whether or not Kiera Knightley was a good Elizabeth Bennett or not? Who wouldn't care that sometimes I couldn't text you back because 'just one chapter' had turned into 'just two hundred pages?'

I sighed, slumping against the counter.

Maybe it was me.

Maybe I was the problem.

Wait—no.

No, fuck that.

This was who I was, and I wasn't going to change that for anyone.

Jesus, I needed to get a grip.

I pulled a box of popcorn from the pantry and opened it. It was a brand-new box, so I grabbed one of the pouches, pulled it from the plastic, and put it in the microwave to make it pop.

I sipped my wine as the kitchen filled with sporadic pops. Within twenty seconds, the sporadic popping turned to frantic as the kernels fulfilled their dreams to become little salted bursts of goodness.

Sigh.

I really, really needed a life outside the bookstore if that was my thought process about freaking *popcorn*.

“Oh, it's popcorn.”

I turned and met Josh's green-gray eyes. “What did you think it was? A terrorist heist?”

“With you, anything is possible.”

I rolled my eyes and popped the microwave door open as the popping slowed. The bag was massive and full of air, and I pinched the corner to slide it out to open it. Steam wafted into the air as I pulled it open, and I let it dissipate before I poured it all into a bowl.

“So you wore the white dress?”

“Huh?” I grabbed the bowl and my wine glass.

Josh filled his glass.

You know, the one he'd just turned down.

“The white dress. To the date. The spaghetti?”

Oh. *Oh*. He thought I wore the one in the picture I'd sent him.

“Oh, no,” I said as we both sat back on the sofa. “I wore a white dress, but not the one you saw.”

“Oh.” If the way his shoulders sagged was anything to go by, he was relieved.

I frowned. “Why do you look so happy about that?”

“Happy about it? What do you mean?”

“Well, you went from looking like I'd kicked your puppy to telling you I'd *bought* you a puppy.”

“I just thought the dress was a little much for a first date, that’s all.”

“You didn’t say that earlier.”

“I was trying to be diplomatic.”

“So you’re saying it now?” I raised an eyebrow. “So much for being my guide through all things dating.”

“It just... isn’t a very *you* dress, that’s all.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Josh rubbed his hand down his face. “Shit, that came out wrong.”

I put my glass down and glared at him. “Wrong? How was that supposed to come out that wasn’t almost entirely insulting?”

“I—” He clamped his lips shut, meeting my eyes. An emotion I didn’t recognize swirled in his gaze, and I tore mine away. I didn’t want to look at him right now.

I was freaking pissed.

I downed the last huge mouthful of my wine and stomped into the kitchen. If I wasn’t drinking my feelings before, I sure as shit was now.

It wasn’t a very *me* dress?

What the hell kinda crap was that?

Was it any wonder I read romance? Guys didn’t say that nonsense in books.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Josh said, following me in and standing next to me.

I returned the half-empty bottle to the fridge door, putting a barrier between us. It swung shut after, revealing him to me, and I glared at him. “Then how did you mean it? Did the dress look that bad on? Is it something I should burn so I never wear it again?”

“No, shit—you didn’t look bad.”

“Then why was it a bad thing if I wore it?”

“It wasn’t a bad thing.”

“Then it must have looked terrible.”

“You looked fucking beautiful.”

I froze.

So did Josh. Almost like he wasn’t expecting those words to come out of his mouth.

I know I wasn’t.

“What?” The word left me on a whisper.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You looked beautiful,” he

repeated, his voice a lot softer this time. Same with his gaze. It no longer held the edge it had a moment ago, but it was just as intense.

Intense and scary.

I swallowed and looked down at my bare feet. My nail polish had chipped on my big toe, and it was easier to focus on that than what Josh had just told me.

He thought I'd looked beautiful.

"Thank you."

"I should go."

We both spoke at the same time, neither of us looking at the other. Whatever it was that'd just happened had put in a kink in our easy friendship, even if I didn't know what that meant for now.

"I should go," Josh repeated, scrubbing his hand across the stubble that coated his jaw. "Work, you know."

"Uh-huh. Um, you want me to call you a cab?"

He shook his head. "I'll walk. It's not far."

"Are you sure?"

He gave me a tight smile and nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure. I'll come get my truck in the morning."

"Okay."

He offered another smile before he turned, running his hand through his hair. "Kinsley? I am sorry about your date tonight."

I stared after him for a moment. The lack of sincerity in his voice astounded me, but I just didn't know why. He'd already expressed that sentiment once or twice this evening, and I'd genuinely thought he was sorry.

So why wasn't he now?

The front door opened, and I rushed after him.

"Josh."

He stilled in the doorway. "What?"

Swallowing, I asked, "Are you really sorry? That my date was terrible?"

He didn't move for a long, agonizing moment. Then he slowly turned his head so he was looking over his shoulder. His gaze caught mine, a storm swirling in his eyes.

And he said one word.

"No."

Then, before I could say another word, he was gone.



My front door clicked shut. It was such a gentle sound, yet it seemed to echo through my hallway.

What the hell did that mean?

\*\*\*

**JOSH: I have another guy for you.**

I stared at my phone. Twelve hours ago, he'd basically said he was happy my date had gone badly and that I was beautiful, and now...

Well, now, it was like none of that had ever happened.

If we'd both been super drunk, I'd have written it off as a slip of the tongue. But we weren't. Sure, I'd been solidly on the other side of tipsy when I'd gone to bed after I'd polished off the rest of the wine, but Josh had been nowhere near that.

Judging by the hole he'd dug himself just before he'd said those things, he'd been trying *not* to say them.

I had no idea what any of it meant and, honestly, it was easier to ignore it today.

I was slightly hungover and eating my body weight in salted chips.

I shoved some chips into my mouth and brushed the crumbs off my fingers on my jeans, then grabbed my phone to reply.

**ME: You have?**

He responded quickly. I glanced at the time—twelve-fifteen. He'd be on lunch.

**JOSH: Yeah, he messaged late last night. He just moved nearby a month ago. Works at the Montana Bears.**

**ME: Sports? Really? Did I ever tell you how much I hate sports?**

**JOSH: He doesn't play. He's a physio for the team.**

**ME: Oh. Does he travel with them?**

**JOSH: Yeah, but he mostly works with the injured players who are in recovery so he's here most of the time.**

**ME: Oh. Okay.**

**JOSH: Interested? He's 29. Fits all your parameters. Never read the HP books but likes the movies.**

**ME: He's already better than the last one.**

**JOSH: If you say so.**

**ME: He can't be much worse. And if he is, I'll know you did it deliberately.**

**JOSH: Why would I deliberately send you on bad dates?**

**ME: I don't know. Why are you happy last night went badly?**

Welp. So much for not bringing it up.

Nothing. No quick reply. It'd only been a few minutes since we'd struck up our conversation, so there was no way he'd suddenly had to finish lunch and get back to work.

I wasn't buying it.

**ME: You're the one who said it.**

**JOSH: Actually, I said I wasn't sorry it went badly.**

**ME: That's the same thing.**

**JOSH: Technically not.**

**ME: Technically is.**

**JOSH: Do you want me to give you his number or not?**

**ME: I want to know why you aren't sorry my date went badly.**

I was well and truly in the trenches now.

*May as well keep going, Kinsley.*

**ME: And don't try to tell me it's just because you didn't like the guy. That's my brother's line.**

I didn't really expect a reply.

Which was just as well, because as I rung a customer up twenty minutes later, I still didn't have one.

"Thank you." I smiled at the customer and waved as she left with her adorable little boy. He waved back, and the bell over the door jingled to announce their departure.

It rang again almost immediately, and Holley's arrival was announced by an "Oomph!" as the heavy door bumped back into her. I got up and rushed over to the door and grabbed hold of it to open it.

"Thanks." She blew out a sigh, her bottom lip directing it up toward her bangs which fluttered. She stepped into the store with a huge cardboard box and a groan.

"What on Earth is that?"

"Books." She grunted as she put it on the tables at the front of the store.

"Why—never mind." I shook my head.

"Phew. That was heavy." She opened the box flaps and pulled out a book to show me.

I frowned as I took it. The cover was an adorable illustrated one with a bright pink background and a cartoon blonde girl texting. The blue title read, "How Not To Matchmake," and the author's name, Abigail Lyon, was in contrasting white. "Why do you have like fifty copies of it?"

Holley leaned on the box and looked at me. "She's a local and contacted me to do a signing here in a few weeks. She started off self-published and hit the big time a couple of years ago, and her publisher is finally sending her on a nationwide tour for her new book after the last one hit number two on The New York Times bestseller list. She said her publicist wanted her to go to Billings or Helena if she insisted on a Montana spot, but she wanted to come back home since her grandma is at the retirement home."

“Fair enough.” I flipped the book and scanned the back cover. It was a failed matchmaking novel where the heroine fell for her client in the process of getting him a date. “Oh, this is cute. I want one.”

“Have it. When I told her we like to read books together, she had an extra three added for us as a thank you. She said she’ll sign them when she gets here.”

*Yay, new books!*

“Awesome. Do you want a hand taking that to the back?”

“Please.” She winced. “I think I put my back out.”

Laughing, I set the new book on the counter and moved to help her. Together, we lugged the huge, heavy box out to the storeroom and nestled it safely in the corner.

“Why didn’t you mention the signing? We haven’t done one before.”

Holley grimaced. “I actually forgot. It was only three days ago I agreed. The publisher got the books here superfast. It doesn’t even release until next week, but Andi—that’s Abigail’s publicist—said she was going to email me some promotional posters to put up. Turns out we had the book on order from the seller anyway, so we can promote the hell out of it between now and the signing.”

“Sounds good. How are we supposed to set the store up?”

We both looked at the store. We had a large open area to the front where we had the tables set out and some armchairs, giving it a light, airy feel that was more reminiscent of a library than a bookstore. Our huge windows definitely helped with that, and a glance at each other said we thought this was the best spot.

“I think she’s going to do a reading of the book and take some questions,” Holley said, tucking her dark hair behind her ear. “So we’ll need some seating. I might have to call Andi and see if they can provide us with some extra chairs because there’s no way we can seat fifty people, and we can’t exactly ask them to stand.”

She tapped her chin with her pointer finger, and I didn’t bother to offer a response. I knew she wasn’t looking for one. She was figuring it all out in her brain and was probably ninety percent of the way to a solution by now.

I slipped back behind the register as a group of tourists in hiking gear came in through the door. Holley deftly stepped to the side to give them room, nodding absently when they asked if they could leave their backpacks on the table while they browsed.

They disappeared into the abyss that was Bookworm's Books, and Holley followed them, veering off to the staffroom at the last second. No doubt she was going to open her laptop and fire off a very organized email to Andi the publicist about what our small-town store needed to pull off this signing.

I, however, checked my phone.

Josh had replied, but he'd completely ignored my question. Just as I'd suspected, to be honest. If there was a genuine answer for it, I wasn't sure I wanted to know it.

Which was why I'd asked.

Obviously.

I was clearly an emotional masochist, because there was no way I was going to let it go.

Even if I didn't want to know the answer.

I saved the number that belonged to Elliott Anderson, physical therapist to the *Montana Bears* baseball team, and tossed back a flippant reply that I'd text him later when the store was quiet—like it a was a rave right now—and set my phone back down. His next reply was equally as flippant and dismissive, but I didn't have a chance to respond again because the phone rang.

"Hello, Bookworm's Books, Kinsley speaking. How can I help you?"

"Kins!" My brother's voice crackled down the line. "Grandpa wants a book on ducks. Do you have one?"

I blinked several times in quick succession like I had something in my eye.

Boy, today was *wild*.

"Fictional or otherwise?" I asked.

"I don't know, sis. I came to do an evaluation for the summerhouse they want to build and he accosted me at the site. I doubt he wants to read about the ugly duckling, though."

"All right. He wants an idiot's guide to raising ducks, basically."

"Basically." He chuckled. "Hey, did something happen last night?"

"Aside from the desperately terrible date?" I trapped the phone between my ear and shoulder as I hit the non-fiction section we kept. It was small compared to the fiction stuff, but big enough that we probably did have an idiot's guide to raising ducks.

"Nah, after Josh went to yours. He's been in the foulest fucking mood,

and I fought with Amber this morning, so I'm not exactly a ray of sunshine myself."

I paused. "No. Nothing happened." What? That was only a half lie. "Maybe he didn't sleep well."

Colt grunted down the line. "Well, he was texting at lunch, then told me to fuck off. Did you say something to him?"

"Why do you assume it was me?"

"Because he was muttering about 'fucking Kinsley,' and correct me if I'm wrong, but your name isn't exactly common enough to be on keyrings."

Ah, personalized keyrings and mugs. Or rather, the lack of.

The bane of my childhood.

"I have no idea what I could have possibly done to annoy him," I replied. Again, only half lying.

Well, a quarter.

Colt grunted again.

"You should get that grunting thing seen to," I said whimsically, browsing the animal section. *Chickens, guinea, more chickens—ah!* "I found the duck books."

"Great," he said dryly. "Can't wait to hear all about it."

"We have one idiot's guide to ducks. Want me to put it back for you?"

"Is it actually called idiot's guide to ducks?"

"No. It's called *How to Raise Ducks And Other Poultry*, but it's all we've got."

"Fine. Put it aside. I'll swing by after work and get it for him. Unless you want to drop it over?"

"That's a negative," I replied. "I have to make money, and I have tomato plants to prune and feed tonight."

"Such a cop out."

"Speak for yourself. I'm the one carrying an idiot's guide to ducks through the store." I stepped back behind the register and tucked it under the counter with my Abigail Lyon book. "Gotta go. Let me know when you're coming in."

And with that, I hung up and saw to the hikers who were all holding armfuls of books that varied from how-to guides on the trails locally to romance and even murder mysteries.

I did it all with a damn big smile, too.



## CHAPTER TEN – JOSH

RULE TEN: AS HEMINGWAY SAID, ‘WRITE DRUNK, EDIT SOBER.’

REPHRASED: CHAT DRUNK, DATE SOBER.

MOSTLY.

**KINSLEY: U mad, bro?**

I stared at my phone. What the fuck was that?

**ME: What?**

**KINSLEY: U mad, bro?**

**ME: You need to get off the internet.**

**KINSLEY: I know. Even writing that hurt me.**

**KINSLEY: Colton said you’re in a shit mood. What did I do?**

Nothing, I wanted to say. *Lie*. I wanted to lie.

Tell her she’d done nothing. That all her stupid fucking questions earlier were unfounded, that I was just being nice when I’d said she was beautiful, and the reason I’d said I was glad her date went badly was because I genuinely didn’t like the guy.

“That’s my brother’s line” be damned.

**ME: Nothing. Slept bad, that’s all.**

**KINSLEY: You’re so full of crap even politics doesn’t want you.**

Her brain was a strange place. Wonderful, but strange.

**ME: Might make a good journalist though.**

**KINSLEY: Doubt it. You’d get bored in five minutes.**



**ME: I take offense at that.**

**KINSLEY: I take offense at you ignoring my questions.**

I sighed. I should have known better than to avoid her. She was like a rabid dog with a bone when she wanted to know something.

**ME: Fine. It just wasn't your usual style and it took me by surprise.**

**KINSLEY: Try again.**

**ME: It was very revealing.**

**KINSLEY: Negative, it was actually very demure. Try again.**

**ME: I didn't like him. I thought he was a dick.**

**KINSLEY: Three strikes and you're out, asshole.**

**ME: Fine. I thought it was too sexy for a first date and you gave me a hard on.**

**KINSLEY: Are you serious?**

Yes.

**ME: Of course I'm not serious. But you might have given him one and it's not a good look for a first date, trust me.**

**KINSLEY: You're lying.**

**ME: Fine. You gave me a hard on when I saw the picture. It made me uncomfortable.**

**KINSLEY: Speak for yourself. I feel like I need to burn that dress now. I can definitely never wear it around you.**

**ME: Not if you want me to rip it off.**

**KINSLEY: This conversation is getting uncomfortable.**

**ME: You insisted on it, not me.**

**KINSLEY: I regret that decision greatly.**

**ME: All you had to do was accept my stupid lie originally and none of this would have happened.**

**KINSLEY: I can never look you in the eye again.**

**ME: The feeling is mutual, trust me.**

**KINSLEY: I wish we'd never had this conversation.**

**ME: Well, there you go. There's your next dating tip. Leave shit the hell alone when someone doesn't want to talk about it.**

I put my phone face down on the sofa and grabbed my beer from the coffee table. As much as I hated that I'd admitted that to her, it'd shut her up. At least I hoped it had. The last thing I need was for this conversation to go any further than this.

I wasn't lying when I said I'd never be able to look her in the eye again.

I rolled my neck and shoulders, silently pleading with the knots in my shoulder muscles to loosen up. It had been a long ass day at work. Combine that with my frustration over last night, my slight hangover this morning, and having to set Kinsley up with yet another guy...

I was so fuckin' done today.

I needed a hot shower and a good night's sleep.

The hot shower I could guarantee. The sleep? Not so much.

I left my phone on the sofa, finished my beer, and headed to the bathroom to do just that. I turned on the shower and twisted the dial to the hottest heat I could stand. It took only a minute for the bathroom to be filled

with steam, and I stripped naked before I got into the large, walk-in shower.

The steaming hot water beat down on me like the massage my shoulders so desperately needed. I had no idea how long I stood there, letting it drain over me, before I washed my hair and scrubbed down my body.

I let the water wash the soap off for a few minutes before my crinkled fingertips told me I'd spent long enough in the water.

I got out of the shower and killed the water before wrapping a clean, blue towel around my waist. My house was deathly quiet, and for the first time since I'd moved in, I wished I didn't live alone.

Or that I wasn't alone right now.

I padded into my room, leaving wet footprints on the thick hall carpet on my way, then sat on the end of my bed. I had absolutely no desire to get out of this towel and physically dry myself off, so I didn't.

Kinsley Lane.

She was the bane of my fucking existence right now.

The worst thing was that I'd put myself in this situation. I was the idiot who'd offered to set her up, and now, I had no choice but to go through with it.

I was the idiot who'd been honest with her tonight.

Thankfully not entirely honest. Fuck knows what she'd do if she knew how I really felt. That I *was* sorry her date was shit because I wanted her to be happy, but I was glad it was shit because I wanted her to be happy with *me*.

I was one poetic line away from being a lovesick motherfucking puppy.

"Colton's sister," I muttered to myself as I got up and grabbed some boxers from the dresser. "Colton's. Fucking. Little. Sister."

If I said it enough times, maybe it would sink in, maybe it would smack me in the face enough that I'd forget all of this.

Or maybe I'd throw caution to the goddamn wind and tell Kins the truth,

No.

No, that wasn't a fucking option, and I knew that.

That was why I was doing this. Why I was her matchmaker. Why I was setting her up with guys I didn't think were worthy to lick her Ugg boots clean.

If she was happy, I'd be able to cut a knife through my feelings and

move on.

In theory.

In. Fucking. Theory.

The problem with theory is that it always needed a practical experiment to back it up and prove it.

And I was my own goddamn fucking experiment.

I tugged on my boxer briefs and used the towel to scrub the excess water from my hair. Maybe I needed to get on the dating site for myself and find someone to go out with.

Yeah.

I was gonna do that.

I tossed the towel to the floor and went back downstairs. After stopping into the kitchen to grab another beer, I uncapped it using the Montana-shaped fridge magnet I'd grabbed at Bookworm's Books several months ago and headed back to the living room.

I took a long drink from the neck of the ice-cold Coors bottle and grabbed my phone. I had a series of messages from Kinsley, and I reluctantly tapped on the notification to read them.

**KINSLEY: Sorry. I just wanted to know. I knew there was something you weren't telling me.**

**KINSLEY: Obviously if I knew what it was I wouldn't have asked.**

**KINSLEY: But if I knew, I wouldn't have had to ask.**

**KINSLEY: Anyway, I'm sorry.**

**KINSLEY: Why aren't you replying? Are you mad at me?**

**KINSLEY: Josh, I'm sorry. Don't be mad at me.**

**KINSLEY: You're mad, aren't you?**

**KINSLEY: Omg. You're so mad. I'm sorry. I'll forget you ever said anything. I'M SORRY!!!!**

I rubbed my temples. Fuck me.

**ME: I'm not happy, but I'm not mad. You're forgiven. Stop texting me every ten seconds. I was taking a shower.**

**KINSLEY: OH MY GOD YOU'RE ALIVE**

**ME: When would I have died in the last twenty minutes?**

**KINSLEY: Murderers are a thing, you know.**

**ME: You need to a: stop watching the ID channel and b: read a little less murder in your books**

**KINSLEY: Okay, first, you need to apologize for that.**

**ME: I won't.**

**KINSLEY: Well, now I'm mad.**

**ME: Thank God. I might get some peace and quiet to find myself a date instead of you.**

**KINSLEY: You're looking for a date?**

**ME: Is it that shocking?**

**KINSLEY: No. I just didn't know you were in the market for a girlfriend.**

**ME: I'm not looking for a potato stand, Kins. A nice dinner will do.**

**KINSLEY: Can I help?**

**ME: Absolutely not. Now go away.**

**KINSLEY: \*\*middle finger emoji\*\***

I took that as my cue to shut down the conversation. It seemed like a natural end, so I pulled up the *Tap That* app and logged out of Kinsley's account. It didn't take me long to create my own account, and after a few minutes of work on my profile, I started looking.

The app showed a lot of matches for me.

Good.

I scrolled through them, and after ten minutes, I'd matched with five different profiles. Within sixty seconds one of them had matched back with me, and I made the first move to message her.

*Josh\_395: Hi. How are you doing?*

*MTgirl: Pleasantly surprised at the lack of cheesy pick up lines. How are you?*

*Josh\_395: Good, thanks. Bit tired from work.*

*MTgirl: What do you do?*

*Josh\_395: I'm a builder in White Peak. You?*

*MTgirl: Cool. I'm a reporter for the Dartree Daily. Do you live in White Peak?*

*Josh\_395: Sure do. You live in Dartree Mountain?*

*MTgirl: Born and raised.*

*Josh\_395: Not too far to go for dinner, then...*

*MTgirl: Are you asking me out?*

*Josh\_395: Depends. Are you free tomorrow night at around 7.30?*

*MTgirl: Depends. White Peak or Dartree?*

*Josh\_395: Dartree works. Do you like Fleming's Steakhouse?*

*MTgirl: A man after my heart. I'm free. I'll meet you there at 7.30.*

*Josh\_395: I'll call for a table and let you know if there's a different time.*

*MTgirl: ;) can't wait.*

And just like that, I had a date for tomorrow night.

\*\*\*

Jessica Harper was wonderful.

She was tall, standing only two inches shorter than me without heels. She had long, blonde hair that curled over her shoulders and halfway down her back, and eyes so blue you'd think she was wearing contact lenses.

She was also absolutely beautiful, great company, and had a great sense of humor.

So why wasn't I planning on asking her out again?

Because I'd fucked up.

That was all I had.

I knew realistically that I didn't really want to go out with anyone. All I had to do now was get through the last twenty minutes of this date, drive home, and collapse into my bed.

This was what happened when I engaged my mouth—or my fingers—before my brain.

“Do you ski?”

I blinked and refocused on Jess. “I'm more of a snowboarder. You?”

“I love skiing. My dad owns the lodge on Harvest Mountain.” She beamed. “We could go soon.”

Great. Her dad was rich as hell. “Isn't it a bit early in the season for it?”

“Hmm, you're right. Sorry. I got ahead of myself.” Her smile stayed firmly in place. “Do you want to get dessert?”

I glanced at my watch. “You know, it's getting late, and I have to drive back to White Peak. Do you mind if we call it a night?”

“No, not at all. I understand.”

I motioned for the check and, as soon as it was brought over, fought off her insistence to pay her share. I finally won the battle, noted the tip, signed the receipt, and slipped my card into the wallet.

It took only a minute for our server to return with my card. After that, I helped Jessica into her jacket and guided her to the parking lot where I walked her to her car.

A slick BMW. Of course.

I'd love to see her drive *that* up a mountain track.

“I had a great time.” She beamed up at me, showing her pearly-white teeth. “Thank you.”

I forced a smile and hoped she didn't see how fake it was. Not that I'd had a bad night—I hadn't. With any luck, she'd write it off as me simply being tired.

“Me too,” I replied. “Thanks for a great evening.”

She tucked some of her long hair behind her ear. “Talk soon?”

I smiled and nodded. After I’d seen her safely into her car, I waited until she’d reached the edge of the parking lot before I got into my truck and followed her out to the main road. We took different turns at the next intersection, and I left tonight’s date behind me.

Figuratively and literally.

The knowledge that I wasn’t in a place to date right now was a punch to the gut. Tonight with Jessica was supposed to jolt me into action, to remind me that there were a million great women out there, but all it had done was reminded me that while I’m sure there were great women out there...

None of them were Kinsley.

And that really, really fucking sucked.

With my grand plan up shit creek without a paddle, I had no option other than to ride this out and hope she found a guy to go out with soon. If she was off the market, maybe it’d help me get back in it.

The rest of the drive home was painless, except for a random traffic jam just outside White Peak. Most of the cars had been heading up toward the other side of town where it was easy access to all the trails, and there were a bunch of cabins out there where the tourists loved to stay.

Bad for traffic, great for local businesses.

It was a catch twenty-two.

I pulled into my driveway and got out. I hadn’t checked my mail today, so I did a quick about turn to get to the mailbox and grabbed the mail in there.

It was all junk.

I let myself into the house and tossed it in the trash, then headed down to the basement. The man cave was everything you’d expect with a pool table in the middle, a makeshift bar and stools in the corner, and a dart board on the wall at the far end. A huge TV covered another wall, and I grabbed the remote to power it on as I passed.

I went behind the bar and grabbed a glass. It wasn’t Bronco’s, but I had enough liquor here to kill a grown man.

Or at least knock him out for a few hours—and that was something I needed.

I poured a double gin and tonic and sat on one of the bar stools. I’d



recently replaced the huge barrels that had served as stools when I'd moved in, and while the comfy stools didn't have the same cool effect, they were just that.

Comfortable.

Besides, I hadn't gotten rid of them. They were now side tables for the sofa I planned to buy.

One day.

I sipped the gin and tonic and flicked through channels on the TV. There was nothing I wanted to watch at all, so I turned it off and pulled out my phone instead.

I was twenty-nine, sitting on my own in my basement, drinking gin and tonic, and trying to decide if I wanted to play Candy Crush or not.

How fucking exciting.

I was saved from the decision by a text from Kinsley popping up at the top of my screen.

**KINSLEY: How was your date?**

How the hell did she know?

**ME: How did you know?**

**KINSLEY: Colt came in to get a book on ducks and told me.**

**ME: Ducks? What the fuck does he need ducks for?**

**KINSLEY: Grandpa.**

Ah, right. The new additions.

**KINSLEY: Well? How did it go?**

**ME: She was nice.**

**KINSLEY: Ouch.**

**ME: What?**

**KINSLEY: Nice? That's a polite way of saying it was a bad date.**

**ME: Nah. It wasn't a bad date. She was great and I had a good time, but I don't see another date.**

**KINSLEY: Why not? If she's nice, what's the harm?**

**ME: Just didn't feel a spark. Can we let it go?**

**KINSLEY: I was only asking. Pull your pants out your ass.**

**ME: Sorry. I'm tired.**

**KINSLEY: Then go to bed and stop being a grumpy little shit.**

I chuckled under my breath. It wasn't a half bad idea, but it was too early still. If I went to bed now, I'd be up at four a.m. and that wouldn't achieve anything.

**ME: Too early. Want me to find you another date?**

**KINSLEY: Meh. I've been chatting to that other guy and I don't really like him.**

**ME: What's wrong with him?**

**KINSLEY: He tried schooling me on Harry Potter.**

**ME: Whoops.**

**KINSLEY: I might have gone full bookworm on him.**

**ME: So do you not like him, or did you scare him off?**

**KINSLEY: Look, Cupid, if someone can't take me going full bookworm, they don't deserve me anyway.**

I was inclined to agree with her.

That said, my job was rapidly becoming a trek up Mount Everest. Maybe it was time for me to resign.

**ME: I can't keep getting you dates just for you to scare them off.**

**KINSLEY: He said the movies were better than the books, Joshua. I can't let that go. That's blasphemy. If I were Queen, he'd be hung for treason for saying that.**

**ME: Well thank God you aren't Queen.**

**KINSLEY: I don't know. I think I'd be a good Queen.**

**ME: So you can make Harry Potter required reading?**

**KINSLEY: Do I detect a hint of disapproval there, peasant?**

**ME: No, Your Majesty.**

**KINSLEY: That's better.**

**ME: So in other words, I have to do a full vetting of a future date's HP preferences.**

**KINSLEY: No, but just tell them not to argue with me.**

**ME: If men in general accepted that arguing with a woman was a terrible idea, we'd all be much happier.**

**KINSLEY: Keep saying that stuff, and I might just date you.**

I spat my drink all over my bar.

**ME: What???**

**KINSLEY: Don't sound so scared. I was joking.**

Yeah. And didn't *that* fucking suck.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN – KINSLEY

RULE ELEVEN: IT DOESN'T MATTER IF THE BOOK IS ALWAYS BETTER. EVERYONE IS ENTITLED TO THEIR OPINION. EVEN IF YOU THINK THEY'RE WRONG.

“Tell me again why you didn't tell Josh you're going out with this new guy he found?” Saylor blinked at me from across the table full of books.

I sighed. I knew she'd judge me for this, and the truth was, maybe I'd wanted her to. I really didn't know how to broach the subject of my last physical conversation with Josh and the subsequent text messages where things had gotten awkward, but this gave me an opening.

“Our last conversation was... weird.” I sliced open a box with a letter opener and set the tool down. “After my date the other night with Jamie, he came over, and it was... weird.”

“Yeah, weird, I get it.” She rolled her eyes as she started a stack of James Patterson's new release. “But why?”

“That white dress? He seemed to have a thing about it, and I thought it was because I looked bad, but then he finally admitted that he was glad I didn't wear it because it made me look beautiful.”

“That... goes against the point of his matchmaking,” she said, reaching up and tying her blonde hair into a loose knot. “What the hell?”

“Exactly. And then, before he left, he said he was sorry my date went badly. I asked him if he really meant it, and he said no.”

“So he was happy your date was shit?”

“Basically. I pushed it the next day when we were texting, and he didn't reply. I confronted him again and he admitted that when I sent him a picture of me in the dress it, um.” I blushed. “Turned him on.”

Saylor's eyebrows shot up so quickly, NASA was going to call her. “He *what*? He got a boner over a picture of you in a dress?”

My cheeks burned even hotter. “That's what he said. Why would he lie about that?”

“Why would he *tell* you that?”

“Well, I wouldn't leave it alone.”

“Naturally. I expect nothing less from you.” She flattened her hands on the table and leaned forward. “None of this makes any sense. I just—” She stopped.

I blinked at her, freezing myself. “What?”

“You don’t think...”

“Think what?”

She met my eyes. “You don’t think he has feelings for you, do you?”

I balked. “No. No way. That’s impossible.”

“I know, but it doesn’t make sense otherwise. I mean, sure. It could be that he’s protective over you because you’re his best friend’s sister, but the whole erection thing blows that out of the water.”

No kidding.

I dropped into the nearest chair. *Why* hadn’t that thought ever crossed my mind? It was the most logical answer, but it didn’t make sense.

It was Josh.

*Josh.*

There was no way he could have feelings for me, was there?

“Okay, but why would he offer to find me dates if he had feelings for me?” I asked after a few moments of silence. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I’ll give you that.” She waved a mass-market paperback in my direction before she set it on its stack. “None of this does, but there’s something going on.” She peered over at me. “Do *you* have feelings for him?”

“What? No!”

“Are you sure?”

I paused. Yes, I was sure I didn’t have any concrete feelings for Josh.

Absolutely so. But that didn’t change the fact I’d felt... *things*. Like those butterflies in my stomach when he got too close or smiled at me just right. But those weren’t feelings.

Were they?

“Well, that answers that.”

“No!” I protested, grabbing a stack of books from one of our most popular self-published authors and following Saylor to the new release table. “I don’t have feelings for him.”

“But there’s something.”

“Fine. Maybe there’s some highly inappropriate butterflies at inopportune times that don’t make any sense.”

“That’s how all good romance novels start, my friend.”

“I’m going to shove a romance novel up your ass,” I muttered, arranging the books I was carrying on the new release table.

Saylor laughed as she set a book stand on top of the stack of Patterson novels and put one on it so it was standing up. “I’m just saying, Kins. Either way,

we need to figure out what's going on."

"We? We?"

"Yes, we. I bet there's a way me and Holley can figure out how he feels about you without it being obvious."

"You? Not obvious? Try again."

"No, I'm being serious. Where are you going with this guy tonight?"

I straightened the books. "Bronco's."

"Really?"

"The fancy place didn't work so well, so I thought I'd try a little more casual," I admitted. I was already regretting that particular decision, because I knew exactly what she was going to say next.

"Okay, so what if me, Holley, Josh, and Colton come to Bronco's tonight? I'll watch Josh and see how he reacts to you dating literally right in front of him."

"There's a problem with that."

"What?"

"The entire sentence, Saylor." I turned back to the big tables to grab another stack of new releases to adjust. "Absolutely no way. My *brother* being there? That's a recipe for disaster."

She nodded slowly. "Maybe so, but it's not like me and Holley can take Josh for a drink. Then he'll know something is up. If I tell Colt I want to spy on you and tell Josh it's an ideal time to spy on you, nobody will suspect anything."

"Why? Because you're a nosy bitch?"

"Exactly that." She grinned, putting the new release sign on the table. "And I'm not even sorry."

Even I had to laugh at that. I did love the fact that Saylor was unapologetically who she was.

"Fine," I said after a few minutes. "You do that, but none of you are to come near us, do you hear? And you sit on the other side of the bar and arrive *after* we get there."

She rolled her eyes, but ultimately agreed.

By the time I turned my back on her, I was already regretting this like hell.

\*\*\*

Mondays at Bronco's were, thankfully, not insanely busy.

Usually.

Tonight was an exception.

There was some big hiking convention or something going on in White Peak this week, so it was busier than usual. Whatever it was, it was a new thing that didn't happen on a yearly basis.

Thankfully, Elliott had booked our table in advance, and since Holley and Ivy's parents owned the bar, Holley and everyone else had no problems getting a table either.

*Awesome.*

I wasn't going to lie, I'd had a moment of hope when I'd seen how packed this place was.

Elliott and I placed our food orders and handed the menus over to Rachel. She took them and flounced away just as the jukebox rolled over to *Don't Stop Believin'* by Journey.

That was Saylor's song.

If she was using the jukebox to get near us, I was going to string her up from the town square clock by her ankles while she was naked.

"So you own the bookstore in town?" Elliott asked, genuinely looking interested. "What kind of books do you sell?"

I gave him a brief recap of how we came to own the store. "We sell just about everything. Fiction, non-fiction, kids books, local guide books. And, apparently, books on raising ducks."

He fought a smile. "Do I want to know?"

"No. Probably not," I said honestly. "It's a long and slightly alarming story."

He laughed, and I had to admit, it was a nice laugh.

You know. If you measured laughs.

Was there a laughter scale? If not, why not? Surely there had to be parameters for what made a good laugh, a good laugh.

"You work for the Montana Bears?" I asked after a moment of awkward silence. "As a physical therapist?"

"That's right. I actually used to play baseball, but I was in a car crash when I was fourteen and suffered some pretty bad injuries that put an end to my dreams of going pro."

"Oh, that sucks. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I grew close to my own therapist, and through him, grew to love and respect what he did and decided to follow a similar path. I'm lucky I get to work with my boyhood team." His smile said he meant it. "There's a lot of



travel involved, but I don't mind it."

"Do you travel a lot?"

"A fair amount, but not as much as some of the others on the team. I'm mostly based here and deal with players who've had an injury and are rehabbing at home."

"Cool. Anyone I might know?"

"Depends. Do you follow baseball?"

"Not at all." I laughed.

He bit back a laugh of his own. "Our pitcher just injured his shoulder, so I'm working out a recovery plan for him right now. Sebastian is getting surgery next week, and he'll probably be out for all of next season unless he has a miraculous recovery."

I paused. "Did you say Sebastian?"

"Yeah. Sebastian Stone. I bet you've heard of him."

"You could say that. We went to school together."

Elliott's eyebrows shot up. "No kidding."

I nodded slowly. "We used to be pretty good friends. He was really close with one of my best friends, Holley."

"Like a relationship?"

"Oh, no. Just really close friends." Even if Holley had been half in love with him when we were teenagers—and given how that friendship had ended, I wasn't going to tell her about his injury. "So he's out all season?"

"The doctors seem to think so. He'll probably come home to do his rehab since I'm here anyway."

*Yikes.* Maybe I would be telling Holley. The last thing I needed was her on my ass if she found out I knew he was coming home.

"Cool." I smiled.

"You're not really interested in sports, are you?"

I shook my head. "I hike the trails when the tourists aren't around, but that's mostly just an excuse to listen to audiobooks."

He laughed, and our conversation devolved into what was, admittedly, a completely comfortable discussion. We covered everything from *his* favorite books to our favorite movies, and we only stopped talking when our food was delivered.

Of course, that was when I became acutely aware of the eyes pinned to my back. I didn't need to turn around to know there were four pairs of eyes trained my way, maybe five if Saylor had grabbed Tori. I doubted that

because she was building a new website for a client, but I wasn't going to turn around and let Elliott know we were being watched. Especially by my brother.

## CHAPTER TWELVE – JOSH

RULE TWELVE: YOUR DATING LIFE IS NOT A ROMANCE NOVEL TROPE.

“I don’t like him.”

Holley rolled her eyes as she looked at Colt. “You’re only saying that because she’s your sister.”

“Why the fuck am I here?”

“Because we wanted to spy on her and didn’t want to make it obvious,” Saylor answered honestly, sipping her vodka and cranberry juice through the straw. Her gaze was focused solely on the table where Kinsley and Elliott were sitting, and I was glad I had my back to them.

I didn’t want to see her.

If I’d known she was here on a date with the guy she’d told me she didn’t like, I never would have come.

Although, judging by the way Saylor kept glancing at me, I think she knew that.

I didn’t know how she knew that, but she was smart as a whip, and I was seriously starting to think that she suspected I had feelings for Kinsley.

I didn’t know where she’d gotten the idea, but here I was—wondering when she was going to spit it out.

“They seem like they’re getting along,” Holley said, capturing her own straw between her lips. “Better than the other guy, anyway.”

“That’s hardly competition,” Saylor replied, never looking away from them. I wasn’t going to turn around. I wasn’t going to turn around. I was *not* going to turn around.

I fucking turned around.

Kinsley’s back was to us, but there was no denying that she was having a good time. Her dark hair hung down her back in loose waves, and she shook it out while she laughed at something he’d said.

“Thought you said she didn’t like the latest guy,” Colton said, nudging me.

“Don’t tell me she’s finding dates on her own.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, man.”

And I didn’t. I knew this was Elliott, the physical therapist guy she’d told me she didn’t click with over text. I’d seen his fucking picture, for Christ’s sake.

“What’s wrong with you?”

I turned at the sound of Saylor’s voice, frowning at her smirk. “What do you

mean?”

“You look like you’ve been kicked in the balls.” She sat back and sipped her drink again.

“She told me she didn’t like him. I’m just wondering why she lied, that’s all.” I shrugged and finished my beer. “Anyone need another drink?”

Colton and Holley both said yes, but it was—unsurprisingly—Saylor who decided to join me to go to the bar.

“I’m hungry,” she said by way of defense, even though I hadn’t asked her why she was coming. “And I don’t trust you not to fuck up my food.

Actually, I don’t trust anyone to not fuck up my food.”

I shook my head as we got in line for the bar. It was stupidly busy in here tonight, and I wasn’t holding out much hope of food anytime soon if the packed tables were anything to go by.

We stood side by side as we waited. Saylor wasn’t exactly someone I’d ever spent a lot of one-on-one time with. We didn’t have a whole lot in common except for our friends, which made her eyeing me right now extra suspicious.

“Say it,” I said after a long moment of her pretending like she wasn’t looking at me.

“Say what?” Innocence tinged her tone, but her wide-eyed stare wasn’t fooling me.

Mostly because I knew Saylor was anything but innocent.

“Say whatever is on your mind, because if this carries on much longer, I’m going to leave and stiff you with my bill.”

She barked out a laugh. “What a gentleman you are, Josh.”

“Never claimed to be,” I muttered. “Spit it out.”

A moment of silence, and then, “You like her.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I took a step forward in the line.

So did she. “Yes, you do.”

“I really don’t.”

“Kinsley.”

“What about her?”

“You like her.”

“Of course I like her. She’s a great girl. Known her a long time.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“Like I said, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I stepped forward again.

Saylor was displaced by a few people trying to shove in the line, but she shut

them out with a sharp, “Hey! Fuck off to the back of the line!” and muscled back in next to me. “Fucking tourists,” she muttered.

At least that bought me a moment of reprieve.

“You like Kinsley. You have feelings for her.” She said it very matter-of-factly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I repeated again, staring at the bar that was approximately three people away from us.

“Yes, you do.” She grabbed my bicep and forced me to look down at her with a rough tug. “I can see it, Josh. You think you aren’t watching them, but you are. You’ve had a face like thunder all night, and you’re absolutely horrific company. What do you expect me to think?”

“I think you lured me here tonight under false pretenses so you can fit me into whatever narrative you’ve built in your mind.” I stepped forward again.

“I don’t know where you got these ideas, Saylor, but you couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Oh, fuck off. You’ve got feelings for her. You were mad when you thought she wore that hot as hell dress, happy when she didn’t, thought she was beautiful, got a boner, and were glad her date went to shit.”

“Why don’t you just put all that on a billboard in the town square, hmm?”

“So I’m right.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it.”

“Saylor. Fuck off.”

She shuffled forward and pressed her side against mine as a waitress with a tray full of drinks passed us by. “No, I won’t. Why don’t you just admit it? I can see you have feelings for her. It’s not a crime.”

She wasn’t going to let this go.

Fuck sake.

“She’s Colton’s sister,” I said in a low voice. “It’s all irrelevant.”

“I don’t think it is.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not me, so what you think doesn’t matter.”

“Are you admitting you have feelings for her?”

“I’m not admitting shit,” I snapped. I didn’t mean to, but apparently tonight had put me in a foul mood. “Just because you put something in my mouth doesn’t make it true.”

She eyed me, but she didn’t say a word as we stepped up to the bar. Ivy and Holley’s mom, Jasmine, was on the other side, and she greeted us with a

beaming smile that was reminiscent of both her daughters.

“Josh, Say!” Her tone matched her smile. “How are you both?”

“We’re well, thank you, Mrs. Stuart,” I replied. “Can we get some drinks and food to our table?”

“Sure can, darlin’. And I’ve told you—call me Jasmine.” She whipped a notebook out of thin air and leaned on the bar. “What can I get you?”

Saylor rattled off the order for the entire table, and I added my own food order of loaded dirty fries. Jasmine called it through to the kitchen and turned to do our drinks. Within a few minutes, she’d added everything to our tab and had all four of our drinks on a tray in front of us.

“I’ll take that,” Saylor said, grabbing the edges of it. “I’d hate if you fell over staring at Kinsley.”

“I’m not going to fall over with our drinks,” I drawled.

“Yeah? Then stop looking at her.”

Fuck sake. I was looking at her again.

Why did Saylor know everything?

She was really starting to piss me off.

I focused my gaze back on the table. “Don’t talk about this in front of Colton, yeah?”

She eyed me like she thought I was an idiot. She probably did, to be honest.

“I’m not dumb, Josh,” she said, clearing a path for me. “You are, but I’m not.”

“Thanks.” My tone was dry, but if she noticed, she showed absolutely no signs of caring. I wasn’t surprised by that at all.

That said, I was already regretting pseudo-admitting my feelings about Kinsley.

Not that I thought Saylor would tell Colton anything—or anyone else for that matter. She was a pain in the ass, but she was a loyal pain in the ass.

She’d keep it secret for Kinsley’s sake, if nothing else.

We rejoined the table, and I slid the tray on the sticky surface. As Saylor and I took our seats, both Holley and Colton grabbed their drinks and turned their attention back to Kins and Elliott on their date.

They were eating, and so there wasn’t a lot of conversation going on by the looks of things. Thankfully, I was fully able to stare at them since everyone else at the table was, too.

And I hated it.

Really fucking hated it.

I was pissed that she'd lied to me. I was pissed that I was here. I was pissed that I'd been *tricked* into being here.

To see her out with the guy she'd lied to me about.

This was never going to work if we couldn't be honest with each other.

I almost snorted. That was rich, coming from me. It wasn't like I'd ever been truly honest with Kinsley, and there wasn't a chance that I could be.

I'd already toed the line one too many times in the last few days.

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"You're about as subtle as a snowstorm." Kinsley sat next to me in the booth and shoved me with her elbow so I'd move up.

I moved up.

"It was her idea," Holley said, cocking her thumb toward Saylor.

"It was her idea," Saylor repeated, copying Holley's motion.

Kins looked at me. "Well? Whose idea was it?"

I sipped my beer. "Not a fucking clue."

Colton grunted. "I don't care whose fault it was, the next time you ask me to come for a drink, I'm gonna tell you to fuck off."

All three girls rolled their eyes—simultaneously, I'd fucking swear it.

That was some skill.

"Where's everyone else?" Kins asked, looking at Holley and Saylor.

"Ivy and Kai are at dinner with his parents, and Tori is at home undoing some mess one of her clients made of her website," Holley answered. "She used a lot more fucks when she told me."

Now that I could believe. Fuck was Tori's favorite word.

"So how was the date?" Saylor leaned forward on the table, using a napkin to wipe away some water. "It looked like you were getting along well."

I was going to kill her.

Colton looked how I felt, though. I was glad one of us didn't have to keep that cooped up.

Kinsley glanced at both me and her brother. "It went really well, actually. It was a little awkward at times, but I think we might go out again."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really."

She turned to me and stared. "What's with the tone of voice?"

"You told me you don't like him."

"I changed my mind. Is that illegal?"

“No, but I don’t know why you didn’t tell me.”

“Because I wasn’t aware I had to tell you every single little thing,” she said, reaching for her glass of wine. “Evidently, I was mistaken.”

I fought the urge to clench my jaw in annoyance. “No, but it would have been nice to be made aware since I’m the one who’s supposed to find you a date.”

“Well, you found me one.”

“It would have been nice to have been told.”

“Am I missing something?” Colton looked between us. “What’s up with you two?”

“Nothing.” I swigged from my beer bottle. “I just don’t appreciate being lied to.”

“Yeah, well, neither do *I*.” Kinsley finished her wine and got up, taking the empty glass with her.

A hush fell over the table with her departure, and everyone stilled for a moment until Holley and Saylor rushed after her in the direction of the bar. Colton stared after them, then looked at me. “Seriously. Am I missing something?”

I said nothing, because I knew the answer was yes. But nobody else other than Saylor knew I had feelings for his sister, and even then she didn’t know just how deep they ran.

I didn’t even know myself until I saw her having a good time with another guy tonight.

And that fucking sucked.

I rubbed my hand down my face and blew out a long breath when I dragged my fingers over my jaw. “I’m glad I’m a builder and not a professional matchmaker.”

Colt snorted. “You and everyone else, man. You know you can just tell her you don’t want to do it anymore, don’t you?”

“I might have to. If she’s not going to be honest with me, I can’t help her.”

He grunted, looking away, and we fell into a silence that was only broken by our respective sipping of our beers.

I needed to get ahold of my shit. I’d come too close tonight to letting my true feelings be known in front of him.

Thankfully, it didn’t take long for the girls to return from the bar. They also came bearing two more bottles of beer, but both Colt and I rejected them. We were already on our second drinks and both had to drive home, so Saylor and Holley shrugged and kept them for themselves.



Kinsley sat next to me again even though I was pretty sure she wanted to be anywhere else but here. She peered over the table at her brother. “Spoken to Amber today?”

Colt let loose another grunt, but this one held more frustration than the last. “I’m heading over there after this beer. I found a house I want to look at this week, and I’m buying one whether she likes it or not.”

“Oh, that conversation is going to go well,” Saylor muttered, drinking the beer she’d intended for him.

Just to rub salt in the wound.

Colt opened his mouth, but Kinsley beat him to it. “Yeah, yeah, we know. She wants you to move in with her so you can have a baby, but her apartment is smaller than yours and she doesn’t own it, so what’s the point when you’ve saved up enough for your dream house?”

“His dream house is going to be completed next week,” I said dryly. “And he only wants the house because he wants to steal my idea of a man cave in the basement.”

At that, Colt smirked. “Who wouldn’t want a man cave in the basement?”

“I’d take a library,” Kinsley said.

“But not in the basement,” Holley added. “In a castle. With ladders. And enchanted teapots that talk and tell me I’m pretty.”

“Hell, I’d take the beast for all that.” Saylor finished the detour with a raise of her bottle, and all three clinked their drinks.

“What are they talking about?” Colt asked me.

“*Beauty and the Beast*,” I replied without missing a beat. “What? Piper used to love that movie as a kid. At one point, she used it for blackmail. Like if I watched it with her, she wouldn’t tell our parents I’d cut all the hair off her Barbie again.”

“You used to cut the hair off her Barbie?” Kinsley’s eyebrows shot up.

“That’s low.”

“No, I didn’t,” I said. “Didn’t mean my parents believed me when she told them I had, though.”

“Aw, man, that’s genius. Why did she never share that with me?”

Colton frowned. “Hey! You were way more of a little shit when we were kids than I was.”

Holley snorted. “No.”

“Yeah, no,” Saylor agreed.

“She used to beat me with books!”

“And you deserved it every time.” Kinsley calmly sipped her wine. “As Lisa Kleypas once said, “A well-read woman is a dangerous creature.” But not because she’s smart, but because she’s always got a weapon on hand.”

“Who’s Lisa Kleypas?” Colton asked.

“And did she really refer to a book as a weapon?” I followed up.

She blinked at us both. “An author, and no. The latter is a Kinsley original, thank you. And a warning.”

“Terrifying,” I muttered.

“Watch it. I’ll beat you with a dictionary.”

“She will,” Holley assured me. “She might not look strong, but I’ve watched her haul encyclopedias around like they’re nothing.”

“Let me guess—a hidden talent of bookworms? Superhuman strength?”

Saylor grinned.

“No,” Kinsley mused. “But we do have extraordinarily strong fingers.”

“I don’t think I want to be part of this conversation anymore.” Colt drained the rest of his beer and got up. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said to me, throwing a wave over his shoulder to the girls.

I waited until he’d gone. “Why do you have strong fingers?”

All three of them mimed licking their fingers and flipping the page of a book.

“And now thumbs, thanks to e-readers,” Saylor added brightly, mimicking the tapping of a thumb on the side of a device.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said dryly.

This conversation had gotten weird.

Like Colt had a few minutes before me, I finished my beer. “Well, this has been enlightening, ladies,” I drawled. “But I’m leaving. This is getting a little strange, even for you.”

They all laughed.

“Oh,” Kinsley said, looking at me. “Um, would you give me a ride home?”

I blinked at her. I opened my mouth to tell her no, but instead what came out was, “Sure. If you leave now.”

Like a pro, she downed the rest of her wine and put the empty glass down.

“Thanks. Holley, I’ll text you when that shipment arrives tomorrow.”

“Should be by ten. Let me know if you need help with it.”

She waved her hand and slid out of the booth ahead of me. “I’ll be fine. Have fun.”

I bade them goodbye and beat Kins to the door, holding it open for her. “Are they staying?”

She nodded. "I left the store early tonight so I could get ready for my date, and they're both supposed to be off tomorrow. Holley's just panicking because we're getting a big delivery of books and her inner control freak won't let it go."

"Inner control freak? I don't think she's containing it very well," I said, letting go of the door.

She laughed, the same laugh she'd given Elliott earlier tonight. The laugh that had reared my little green monster. "I know, but nobody really wants to point it out to her. It's just the way she is, but me and Say aren't control freaks at all, so she keeps us on the straight and narrow."

"Well, you're the awkward introvert, so what's Saylor? The rebel? Is she going to have a bright purple mohawk next time I see her?" I unlocked the truck and got the door for her again.

"Rebel is a little too far. Rebels don't hide in libraries from bullies. They punch the bullies." She hopped in.

"You've just been telling me about how dangerous books are. Don't tell me you've never smacked a bully with a book before." I closed the door and rounded the front of the truck and got in the other side. "Well?"

She mulled it over while I started the engine. "Once. It was seventh grade and Charlie Fisher was teasing me about being the only kid in the class who got full marks on the reading test that morning."

"Really? Not even Holley and Saylor?"

"I don't think I was in the same class as them that year. Anyway, I was trying to read and it was getting to the good bit. He wouldn't leave me alone and actually kept tugging on my hair and touching my leg, so I whacked him. In the face. With my hardback."

"Did you break his nose?"

"Does it matter?"

"For my personal safety, yes. Just trying to ascertain how far away I should be from you when you have a hardback book in your hands." I glanced over at her and caught her smiling at me.

It was one that reached her blue eyes, making them shine.

Stupid fucking smile.

"Did you get in trouble?"

"Yep. I was hauled to the principal's office, and when my mom showed up, she asked him what the hell he thought he was doing to a girl who was clearly defending herself against unwanted attention from a male student."

My eyebrows shot up. “Woah.”

“Yeah. She basically talked him around in circles until he admitted he’d made a mistake, and as long as I knew that it wasn’t acceptable to hit people with books, he’d be calling Charlie’s father in immediately.”

“What did your mom say?”

“Nothing. I told him I understood it was unacceptable, but if he did it again, I’d hit him harder. He didn’t know what to say to it, so he sent me back to class with a sigh.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. That was such a Kinsley thing to do—behind her quiet, introverted exterior, there was a strong hardass who didn’t take any shit.

Which was probably why she struggled with dates so much.

“Is that why you hate dating?” I said as I pulled up outside her house.

“What? How is that even remotely related to this conversation?”

“You’re all soft and nice and quiet on the outside, but on the inside, you don’t take any crap from anyone.” I looked over at her, my hand still resting on the steering wheel.

She peered down at her hands in her lap. “I guess. Maybe people think I’m a pushover, and when they realize I’m not...”

“They realize you’re not the kind of woman they’re looking for.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t know what goes on in people’s heads, and I’m definitely not going to change myself to fit someone’s idea of what makes their perfect partner. And that’s that.”

I stared at her. “I know. And when you find the person whose perfect partner *is* you, and he gets to have you, he’s going to be one lucky motherfucker.”

She jerked her head up. Her eyes met mine, and a mixture of uncertainty and shock danced in the blue of her irises. Her full lips parted just enough that she could draw in a sharp breath.

It felt like time had frozen. Here, in my truck, everything was completely still, and I was sure she could hear the way my heart was thundering against my chest.

“You mean that, don’t you?” she asked softly, her eyes never leaving mine. Her words didn’t cut the tension in the truck, either.

If anything, they heightened it.

I nodded. It was a tiny, jerky movement that I wasn’t even sure was noticeable.

Kinsley looked down once more, her throat bobbing as she swallowed hard.

Without another word, she left the truck, taking all the air with her. It rushed out into the darkness of the late evening, but not even the sound of the truck door slamming behind her cut through the tightness that had my stomach in knots.

I squeezed my eyes shut and hit the button to roll the window down.

“Kinsley?”

I opened my eyes in time to see her peer over her shoulder, her features illuminated by the dim porch light over her head.

“What?”

“I’m not working for the next few days. Got some vacation days. If you do get a huge shipment, call me. I’ll come and help.”

“I can’t call you on your days off.”

“Yeah, you can, and please do. Otherwise, I’m just gonna have your brother riding my ass about the house five down from mine that he wants to buy.”

A smile slowly spread across her face. “Okay. If I need help, I’ll call you.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” She tucked some hair behind her ear. “Night, Josh.”

I didn’t reply, but I did wait until she was inside and I’d heard the faint click of her lock being turned, followed by the flooding of darkness as her porch light went out.

What in God’s name was I doing?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN – KINSLEY

RULE THIRTEEN: YOU WOULDN'T STOP READING MID-CHAPTER. DON'T STOP TALKING MID-CONVERSATION.

The next time Holley told me there was a big shipment coming in, I was going to come down with a violent stomach big.

This shipment wasn't big. It was freaking *huge*.

There were boxes upon boxes in the back doorway of the store. I wasn't even sure I could move amongst them, and the one box I'd managed to lift had weighed at least three sumo wrestlers and a school bus.

Yes, those were valid units of measurements.

Pound and ounces weren't going to cover this.

I hadn't wanted to call Josh. I really, really hadn't, but I was left with no choice. There was no way I could move these boxes, unpack them, and open the store at midday.

I looked up at the sound of four rattling knocks against the front store door.

"It's me." Josh's muffled voice carried through to the storeroom door where I was standing and contemplating all my life choices thus far.

I crossed through the shop and grabbed the keys from the register so I could let him in. The key was large and clunky, and it took me a good thirty seconds to wrestle the old bolts loose before I could even unlock it properly.

Josh looked the door up and down when I opened it. "Is that door to keep people out, or keep bookworms in?"

"If I told you that, I'd have to kill you," I answered breezily, stepping back to let him in. "But if the worldwide takeover by bookworms originates in Montana, you know the answer."

He grinned, and it did stupid things to my stomach.

Stupid things I was going to steadfastly ignore today.

*Trust me.*

"I'll keep it in mind," he mused through his smile. "Where are all these boxes again?"

"Out the back. Hold on." I turned and locked the door, then reached for the top bolt.

"Ah, must secure Fort Bookworm."

"You're awfully cocky for a man who knows how dangerous I am with

a book.” I raised an eyebrow and shot him a look. “Since we’re in a bookstore, you might wanna tone that down a little bit.”

“And you’re awfully cocky for a bookworm who needs my help to move said books.”

I slid the final bolt across and clicked my tongue. I straightened up and turned on my heel, pausing to pull a large hardback from the nearest shelf. Tucking it under my arm, I whistled a merry little tune and headed for the storeroom.

Josh’s laugh filled the entire store, sending an unwelcome tingle down my spine. I didn’t want to react to him the way I did because it was *wrong*.

Not to mention I hadn’t stopped thinking about what he’d said last night. What he’d meant by saying whoever got me was lucky.

I mean, I knew what he meant, but not what he *meant*.

He hadn’t just said it. He’d *said* it with feeling, with something I hadn’t been able to pinpoint.

Something I didn’t understand.

But now, I was wondering if Saylor was right.

Was there something happening between us? Something that had no business happening?

Were there feelings I couldn’t explain? *He* couldn’t explain?

We didn’t want to explain?

Because as nice as Elliott was, his laugh hadn’t sent any kind of tingles anywhere last night, and we’d laughed together a lot.

One little laugh from Josh this morning and it was like I’d dipped myself in a vat of damp popping candy.

“Holy shit. Is this a delivery, or are you setting up a second store we don’t know about?”

I sighed and set the heavy book down. “I know. I can’t move and organize all these by myself.”

“Jesus.” Josh shrugged off his jacket and tossed it over a chair in the corner, revealing a form-fitting black t-shirt that clung to his toned body. I kind of really wanted to run my hands up his front just to see if there were as many dips and crevices as I imagined.

That was not helping the tingling.

“Where do we start?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “They all need logging and storing, but I don’t know which box is which.”

“Don’t you have a system to log them all?”

I grabbed the scanner from one of the shelves. “The software connects to the laptop at the front and logs it all, but I just don’t know which box to start with.”

He scanned the room. “Well, the room is huge so there’s no shortage of space. Are there packing slips in the boxes?”

“There should be, but they’re sometimes shoved to the bottom.”

“Haven’t you opened any of them yet?”

“I moved one box, realized I was out of my depth, and called you.”

“I expect to be fed for this.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Swedish-style multi-tool, then flipped out the knife.

“I’ll buy you lunch.” I rolled my eyes. “Do you often carry a pocket-sized toolbox around with you?”

“Only if I know I might have to help out a needy bookworm with an abundance of boxes.”

“Funny.”

He sliced open three boxes and looked. “Right. The packing slips are on top. I suggest we go through them all, find the ones with packing slips, and set them to the side. That way we can work on the ones without the slips, log them, and then do the easy stuff after.”

I stared at him.

“Is that too organized for you, Ms. Bookworms Are Gonna Take Over The World?”

“No, but I’m considering which book to use to break your nose with,” I muttered, carrying the scanner across the room to where he was.

He grinned, moving one of the boxes. “You won’t break my nose.”

“I don’t know. I bet I could get a nice swing with an encyclopedia.”

“Yeah, but then you’d probably put your back out and need a trip to the ER yourself.”

“Well, at least we could share an ambulance. Split the cost.”

He looked at me, his lips twitching as if he were fighting the biggest laugh.

“What? I’m just being sensible. Those suckers are expensive.”

Out came the laugh.

I was right. It was a huge belly laugh that rocked his entire body, making his shoulders shake to the point he had to lean on a huge stack of the boxes to catch his breath.



“It wasn’t that funny,” I muttered, folding my arms to sulk.

“You just looked so serious,” he said after a moment, straightening up again. “Ouch, shit!”

I looked down at his hand. Red was pooling on his finger, and my eyes widened. “If you bleed on my books, I’ll kill you!”

He instantly stuck his finger in his mouth. “Gee, thanks for your concern,” he said around his finger.

“That’s karma.” I pointed my own finger at him and turned away.

“Where are you going?”

“To get the damn first aid kit, you baby. Sit down and be quiet a minute.”

I had no idea if he did as he was told right away because I’d already left the room. I knew we had a kit under the sink in the staff room, and a quick peek behind the cleaning tub proved me correct. I grabbed it and the roll of paper towels.

I took the little white box back through to the storeroom. Josh was perched on the windowsill, his finger still shoved in his mouth.

“Ugh, stop licking your own blood. You’re not a vampire.” I shoved a wad of the paper towels at him.

He took them, putting them over his cut instead of his mouth. “Vampires don’t drink their own blood.”

“Whatever. Just stop. It’s gross.” I rifled through the box for some Band-Aids.

“It’s really not bleeding that badly,” he said as I took them over and laid them out on the nearest box. I had a selection of sizes so I could pick the best one.

“Whatever. Let me see it.”

He didn’t.

I grabbed his wrist and flipped his hand over, then slapped his other hand away. The paper towel was already coated in blood, and although it didn’t look particularly deep, it was almost the length of half his finger.

With a sigh, I told him to hold the paper towels there again and went back to the first aid kit.

We were gonna need a bigger Band-Aid.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have that, but I did have absorbent gauze and medical tape. That would do for now.

It was more sanitary than paper towels, anyway, and I still needed

these boxes moving.

“Trust you to cut yourself right before we’ve even got anything done,” I said, quickly replacing the paper towel with the pad. “Hold that there.”

“I didn’t mean to cut myself,” he replied. “It’s your fault for making me laugh.”

“I’ll remember to add ‘being funny’ as a toxic trait on my dating profiles,” I drawled, tearing off some of the tape. “Thank you for the information.”

“You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know, but you should feel bad for blaming me. You were the one laughing at something that wasn’t all that funny.” I finished wrapping his finger. “There. If you bleed through, tell me. Holley will murder you if you get blood on the books.”

“Is that how you’re going to take over the world?”

“I’ve already told you that I can’t tell you.”

“You’ll never take over the world. You’ve got to read one more chapter first.”

That was annoyingly correct. “Oh, shut up,” I muttered, gathering up the Band-Aids we didn’t need.

Josh pushed off the windowsill, bumping into me right as I turned. We both froze, and I stared a hole in his chest as I desperately tried not to let my breathing go out of control.

He was *right there*.

I think my nose was touching his shirt.

Which was touching his chest.

Oh, God. It was. I was touching his chest. With my *nose*.

So why the hell wasn’t I moving?

Because I was an idiot. That was the only answer.

I wobbled a little, unsteady thanks to our closeness, but it had the opposite effect on Josh. He gripped my upper arms so I wouldn’t wobble anymore because, let’s face it, I was liable to fall on my ass in the mood I was in.

“Any reason you’re sniffing my shirt?” A hint of amusement tinged his tone.

“Smells like lavender. And coffee. And hot buttered toast.”

*Oh, crap! That wasn’t supposed to come out!*

I cleared my throat and jerked back, making his hands fall to his sides.

“No. No reason at all. Gotta—gotta put this away.”

I shoved the Band-Aids in the medical box in a way that would get my ass whipped next time Holley opened it and walked out of the storeroom a little too quickly.

This was going terribly.

Why, why, why was my mouth so stupid? Why had I said all that? Was there something missing between my mouth and my brain today?

I should have let him bleed on the books and let Holley murder *me* instead.

This.

This shit right here was why I was single.

I took a deep, steadying breath and headed back out to the storeroom. I couldn't hang about in the staff room because I knew he'd come looking for me, and that would make this already awkward situation one even worse.

I didn't need the ground to swallow me up today, thank you.

Josh had his back to me, and his arm moved as if he was slicing something open.

“Should you be doing that with your finger?”

He looked over his shoulder at me. “I cut it open, Kinsley, not off.”

I gave him the middle finger.

Well, at least it was normal now.

“Here.” He whipped a sheet of paper out of the box. “Here's your inventory slip. Where do you want this box?”

I took the sheet from him and looked at him for the longest moment. When it looked as if he was about to question why I was staring, I shook it off and looked at the note, grateful that he didn't continue with whatever I thought he wanted to say.

“You sure you want to carry on?” I questioned.

“Again, it wasn't cut off.”

“Okay.” I handed him back the sheet. “Put it over there, and I'll mark it up to do after.” I grabbed a Sharpie from the pot on the nearest shelf—we had them all over the place—and uncapped it.

Josh moved the box, and I wrote a shorthand note of the title inside on the side of the box that was facing us.

He frowned.

“So I know what it is,” I explained.

“But what is...” He leaned forward, squinting. “BYCA?”

“Before You Came Along.”

“Right. And what’s that?”

Deadpanning, I said, “A book.”

He blinked at me, looking unfairly hot even though he had no expression on his face. “This is going to be a long day, isn’t it?”

I capped my pen with a grin. “Yep.”

And it was.

We worked steadily for the next two hours. He opened them and moved them to where I needed them, and I marked all the boxes up. The ones with the inventory note at the top were labeled with their shorthand titles and the ones without it got a big fat X on the side and were deported to the other side of the space we were working on.

It wasn’t until my phone dinged with a text message that we both stopped and looked at each other. Josh’s stomach rumbled so loudly it’d set an avalanche off, and I giggled as I grabbed my phone from the bookshelf workstation we’d set up after I kept losing my Sharpies.

I didn’t say I was organized.

I pressed my thumb against the screen to unlock the phone and opened the text.

**ELLIOTT: Had a great time last night. Dinner one night this week?**

Josh came up behind me and snorted.

“What’s that for?” I asked, stepping away so he could no longer read over my shoulder.

“It’s a bit offish, that’s all.”

“Offish? How is it? It’s to the point.”

“They’re not even full sentences, Kinsley.”

I looked at the text again. “Maybe he’s busy. I know Sebastian is coming home for his rehab. He’s looking after him.”

“Look at you with the insider knowledge about a sport you don’t care about.”

“Did you sit on a stick over there?”

“No, why?”

“Then you need to go to the bathroom to check for one that’s wedged itself up your ass by magic,” I snapped. “What’s your problem?”

“Your brother doesn’t like him.”

“Oh, and he’s the authority on relationships. He still can’t break up with Amber even though they both know it’s over.”

“Well, apparently she’s a freak in bed.”

“So am I. I sometimes read while I watch Netflix. What’s your point?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant, Joshua. I just don’t want to think about my brother naked and getting it on with someone, thank you.” I wrinkled my nose up and locked my phone without replying to Elliott. I’d text him back later on when I was alone. “It’s eleven, and I have to open the store in an hour. We should break for lunch.”

Josh grunted, but he didn’t elaborate on that.

I rolled my eyes. “Or you can leave and I’ll eat a nice, peaceful lunch without you.”

It was his turn to roll his eyes. “You go get lunch and I’ll keep moving these around. I’ll mark the boxes, too.”

“Fine. What do you want?”

“Where are you going?”

“Sandwich shop.”

“Steak sub with lettuce, tomato, cucumber, and mayo.”

I stared at him.

“Please.”

“Thank you.” I spun on my heel and left him alone in the storeroom to get on with it.

I grabbed my purse and phone and let myself out of the Fort Bookworm door—I’d never be able to call it anything else now—and basked in the fresh air for a moment. It was so strange to be in such close quarters with Josh like this.

Not like we’d never spent time together before, but something had changed between us. It was back to that gray area I couldn’t pinpoint, and I knew there would be a conversation sooner rather than later.

We had to figure out what was going on so we could figure everything out, because this couldn’t continue for very long.

And for him to use Colton as an excuse for why his mood went to shit after Elliott texted me...

Well, it was at the top of the list for things that were pissing me off.

By the time I’d been in the sandwich shop, ordered, waited, collected

our order, and walked back down the street to the bookstore, I was all kinds of worked up.

I'd totally thought myself into a corner. I was pissed at his behavior, pissed at his attitude, and pissed at his all-around vagueness when *he* was the reason I was going on these dates that he seemed to have a real problem with.

There were only two solutions to this.

He saw me as a little sister, the way I thought he always had, or Saylor was right and Joshua Carter had feelings for me.

But I would be damned if I was going to wait any longer to find out the answer to that question.

Never mind that I'd only been seriously asking it for fifteen minutes, I was *done*.

Ever since he'd stood at my front door and told me that he was happy my date had gone badly, I'd had too many questions I'd ignored and pushed under the rug, and I was about to pick up that rug and shake it all out.

Then, and only then, could I keep my sanity about me.

I entered into Fort Bookworm, paused to relock the door, and carried the food out into the storeroom.

"Oh, good, you're back. The phone rang, and—"

"What's your problem?"

Josh stilled, surprise flashing in his eyes. "What?"

"I said, what's your problem?"

"Jesus, what happened at the sandwich shop?"

I dumped the bag along with my purse and stood with my hands on my hands. "I got abducted by aliens and thought I'd come in with an attitude problem."

"Seems reasonable." He put the multi-tool down and crossed over to me. "Is it still hot?"

"Why don't I choke you with it and you can find out?"

"Whoa, whoa." He stopped mid-stride and held up his hands. "Kinsley, what's the matter?"

"You. You're the matter."

"Words no guy ever wants to hear from an angry woman," he muttered. "What did I do?"

"Everything!"

"Well, I'm sorry?"

"Damn it, Josh!" I stepped forward and shoved his chest. "What's your

problem? Did I do something? Did I not do something? What could I have done to make you make this all so hard for me?"

Unfazed by my uncharacteristic show of aggression, he merely steadied himself and blinked at me. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Me dating. You offered to find me dates, but you're happy one failed and then when one goes well you're pissed off about it. The literal opposite of what you're supposed to be feeling. What's your damn problem?"

His eyes darkened, and he shook his head. "Doesn't matter."

"To who? It matters to me, because you're driving me insane. You don't like the revealing dress," I said, ticking it off on my fingers. "You were happy when I didn't wear it. You were glad that date went badly. You were happy when I said I didn't like Elliott. You were super pissed when I went out with him, and you were just super pissed when he texted asking for another date. So I'll ask you one more time, what's your damn problem?"

He said nothing. He cricked his neck, looking away from me, and swallowed so hard his Adam's apple bobbed violently.

"Because Saylor thinks you have feelings for me. She's adamant you do, but that can't be possible, can it? Because I'm your best friend's kid sister and that's it. Nothing more."

"Stop trying to bait me into fighting with you, Kinsley. It's not going to work." His jaw ticked to the contrary.

"No, I want you to fight with me. Go on. Answer me. If she's wrong, it's not an issue, is it?"

He said nothing.

Nothing.

*Nothing.*

Oh, my God.

My heart jumped into my throat and lodged itself there until I thought I would choke on it.

No. He wasn't getting out of this.

"Tell me she's fucking wrong, Josh!"

"I can't!" The words burst from him in a yell, and he stared at me like I'd just sucker-punched him in the gut. "I can't tell you she's fucking wrong, Kinsley, because she's fucking not."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN – KINSLEY

RULE FOURTEEN: LIFE HAS CLIFFHANGERS, TOO.

I swallowed. My mouth resembled a desert, and I wasn't sure any amount of water would stop this feeling. "What?"

Josh ran his hand through his hair and puffed out his cheeks as he exhaled. "She's not wrong."

"But that—that—"

"That means I have feelings for you," he said with a hard edge to his voice. "There. Are you happy now? You know the truth."

I said nothing.

"No? I didn't think so. There's a reason I've never told you, and it's because you're Colton's sister, not because that's how I see you. I would have lived the rest of my life never telling you because he's my best friend and I'd be pissed if it was the other way around, but you just keep pushing and pushing and—"

"My brother has no say over the choices I make! After all this, don't you think I have a right to know if that's how you feel about me?"

"No. Because this would happen. Because it changes everything and we both know that nothing can ever happen."

"Why? Because Colton says so?"

"No, because I respect you far too much to ever put you in a position where you could get hurt."

"Sounds like you don't want to get punched by my brother."

He shrugged a shoulder. "I've seen his right hook. I can't say I'm interested in feeling it for myself."

"Don't make this a joke, Josh."

He threw his arms out. "What do you want me to do, Kins? I thought setting you up would mean you'd find a guy you could go out with and be happy with and that would be the kick I needed to accept it would never happen."

"So why don't you let me?"

"Because I'm a fucking dumbass idiot who didn't think through the consequences of seeing you date other men."

I looked at him for a long moment. Realization set in with a heavy cloud, and the lump in my throat was almost unbearable. "Because the guy



I'd be dating isn't you."

His nostrils flared, and he stared at the books the right of us. "Two guys. Two guys, and I'm done. I can't do it anymore, all right? I can't set you up on anymore dates."

*What if I don't want anymore?*

The question lingered on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't quite spit it out.

"I can't see you go out with these guys, Kins. I can't. And—I can't do this either." He threw his hands up in surrender and walked past me.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

He stilled. "I told you—"

"No, you gave me some bullshit. Tell me the truth."

He turned back to me. "Because if I told you, I'd have to tell Colton, and telling him that I have feelings for his sister is the biggest betrayal I could dish out to him. And I won't do that. I won't betray him like that."

"You're acting like you made a pact not to date each other's sisters." When he didn't answer, I knew. "Oh, my God. You did."

His chin jerked in response. "We promised each other we'd never do it. And I won't break my promise to him."

"And do I not get a say in this?"

"A say in what? The mistake I've made of telling you? Of setting you up with other guys? Of not keeping my mouth shut?"

"Of what happens in *my* life?"

"Don't—"

"Don't what?"

Josh turned back to me and met my eyes. His green-gray gaze was greener than usual, and his eyes were blazing with pent-up frustration that told me just how long he'd kept this to himself.

"How long?" I asked, pressing my hands to my stomach. "How long have you kept this to yourself? How long have you lied about how you feel about me?"

"I'm not answering that." He laughed, and it was sad. Hollow. Almost broken.

And in that, I knew the answer.

*Too long.*

My stomach flipped and my chest tightened and my skin pimples with goosebumps. And I gave a command I'd never given in my awkward,

introverted life.

“Kiss me.”

He blinked at me. “What?”

“If you really feel like that, you’ll kiss me.”

“I just told you why I can’t do that.”

“Fine. Then I’ll have to kiss you.” I stalked over to him, fully intent on slapping my lips against his.

He caught my upper arms, holding me at arm’s length. “Kinsley…”

“Don’t you Kinsley me!” I shouted. “You stand in front of me and tell me all this stuff and everything suddenly makes sense and now you want to be a freaking white knight, Josh? No. If you feel all those things for me, if they’re real, then you’ll kiss me and—”

“I won’t do it to Colton. He’s your brother. He’s my *best friend*.”

“And I’ll tell him.” The petty threat escaped before I could stop it. When he froze, I knew I’d hit my mark. “Kiss me, or I’ll tell him everything you just told me.”

“That’s below the belt, and you know it.”

“I don’t care.” My throat bobbed with emotion. “I don’t care if it makes me petty. Because sometimes I feel things, too, and I don’t understand them, because it’s *you*, and I need to know I’m not insane.”

He softened. “Kins…”

“And if you don’t kiss me right now, I’m telling Colton and going on a date with Elliott tonight and I’ll make out with him instead.”

His lips pulled to one side. “Do you know how utterly ridiculous that sounds?”

My own lips twitched, and I nodded. “Really, really petty.”

“I can’t do it, Kins,” he said in a voice that was barely above a whisper. “I can’t do it to him.”

“Then don’t.” My lower lip trembled. “If I kiss you, and you just stand there and do nothing, then technically speaking, you didn’t kiss me.”

His jaw clenched, and his fingers twitched on my upper arms. “Do you really believe I can stand here and do nothing?”

“I don’t really care.” I shrugged his arms off and closed the distance between us.

Our bodies were almost pressed together. Josh dipped his head, and his breath fluttered over my lips as I hesitated in front of him. His fingertips danced against mine, and I swallowed, breathing in that mix of lavender and

coffee and hot buttered toast that made up the scent of his shirt.

My heart thundered in my chest. There wasn't a part of my body that wasn't on high alert with what I was about to do. Panic flushed through me because this wasn't who I was, I wasn't the kisser, I was the kissee. I definitely wasn't the forceful, demanding person I was being right now, but he wasn't going to do it.

And I needed to know.

I needed to know if my heartbeats and my butterflies and my goosebumps were really because of him.

Because if they were, I'd deal with my brother myself.

"Kinsley," Josh breathed. "This is a terrible idea."

"I know," I whispered right back.

"You don't know what you're doing."

"Actually, I do."

I proved the truth in my words by pressing my lips against his.

He froze completely, and I just held my mouth there, savoring the way the warmth of his lips flooded through my body. There was a shuffle as he moved closer to me, and I slid my hands up his chest like I'd imagined earlier.

It was solid muscle, all dips and valleys and hardness that guided my hands to the sides of his neck.

His lips twitched.

There was no denying it.

The butterflies in my stomach were staging a breakout. My heart was the ringleader of that as it pounded against my ribcage, and my skin was prickled in preparation for their great escape.

I was feeling things for Josh, and there was no way I could hide that from myself any longer.

Or him.

I fell back onto my heels from my tiptoes, breaking the seal of our lips.

"There," I said softly, letting my hands fall away. "I have my answer, and you didn't break any promises."

"What's your answer?" he replied in a low, gruff voice I'd never heard before.

I raised my eyes to his briefly before I turned away. "I'm not insane."

"But I am."

He grabbed my hand and spun me right back into him. I squeaked as

my body collided with his, but there was barely any time before his lips covered mine.

Like it was second nature, he wrapped one arm around my waist, holding me against him, and I circled my arms around his neck.

He kissed me thoroughly, like he'd dreamed of doing it a thousand times. Maybe he had. I didn't know, and I didn't care. All I cared about was that he was kissing me like he'd die if he didn't.

However long he'd felt the things he felt right now, this was it. This was the release of all those feelings. This was the dam that broke and flooded the whole damn river.

We staggered back toward the bookcase, and for the first time in my life I was glad it was bolted to the ground. The shelves pressed against my back, but I didn't care. I could feel nothing but the ferocity in Josh's kiss.

This was wrong. My brain was screaming at me to stop, but my body wouldn't let me. There was no possible way I could pull away from him right now, especially since I'd technically instigated it.

I was on fire everywhere.

Head. Toes. Fingers. Shoulders. Thighs.

Clitoris.

Hey, I said *everywhere*.

We shuffled to the side until there was no more bookcase but there was plenty of desk. I fell backward like the awkward turtle I was, and before I knew it, my ass was planted on the desk and Josh was standing between my legs as my dress rode up my thighs indecently.

The chill sent more goosebumps over my skin, but the sensation of his rough palm running along my skin dispelled them quickly.

I cupped the back of his head and kissed him with the same hunger he was kissing me with. My body had taken full control now, and it didn't matter how many times my brain whispered that this was wrong and this was Josh and this was *wrong wrong wrong wrong*.

I no longer had control of myself.

And I'd never been more thankful of that.

Kissing Josh was... God. It was the kiss I'd waited my whole life for. It was the kiss I'd read about a thousand times over in my books. It was the kiss that romance novel heroines said was everything and more, the one they felt in their bones, the one that would stay with them for the rest of their life.

But quite simply, kissing Josh was one thing.

It was right.

The situation may have been wrong but kissing him was oh so right.

It was shelter in a snowstorm. Dry socks after wading through a puddle. Sunlight breaking through clouds after the rain. Reading in front of the fire. Marshmallows in hot cocoa. Chocolate on strawberries. Cheese in sandwiches.

The click of your key as your front door unlocked after being at work all day.

Kissing Josh was like coming home.

The safest space you could ever have, the one place you felt truly happy.

That was it.

That was how I felt right now.

As his fingers probed my skin and his erection pressed against my clitoris through his jeans and his tongue stroked mine and my entire body went into wildfire mode, I knew.

This was right.

It would always be right.

“Oh, shit!”

At the sound of Holley’s voice, we broke apart like we’d literally set fire to one another.

She stood in the doorway with her phone in her hand, staring at us wide-eyed as her wide-rimmed glasses fell down her nose. “I just—”

I opened my mouth, but nothing at all came out.

Josh did the same.

“Hello,” Holley finally said after a moment of the world’s most uncomfortable silence. She fought to contain the smile that was stretching across her face, but she wasn’t doing a very thorough job because she lost.

Josh rubbed his nose. “I... I should probably go.”

Wide-eyed and wide-smiled, Holley nodded in agreement.

I didn’t move. I couldn’t. Had we been so caught up in kissing that we hadn’t heard her come in? Was that possible?

Damn it.

I was so screwed.

Josh grabbed his jacket and bolted out the back door, and I yelled a very succinct, “Coward!” after him only to be rewarded by the sound of his laughter.

Holley slid her gaze to me. "Put your damn dress down."

I shoved it down and hopped off the desk. "It was an accident?"

"I'm sure it was," she drawled. "At least you got most of the boxes sorted before your teen orgy session."

"I can explain."

She looked at me, adjusting her glasses before she tightened one of her pigtails. "Kins, you don't owe me an explanation for anything. Besides, Saylor told me everything she knows last night. This just happened a little faster than I expected."

I paused.

"If you're about to ask me if I'm going to tell your brother, the answer is no. I'm no snitch." She tilted her head to the side. "Knowing Josh, you've got more than enough issues in that department."

I got up as my shoulders sagged. If only she knew. None of that would have happened if I hadn't forced it, but I didn't blame him for it.

I guessed.

I understood where he was coming from, but that didn't mean I was willing to let some years' old pact control my life.

I had a say in it, too.

"Is this his lunch?" Holley dug into the bag. "Smells like steak."

"I don't think he's coming back for it right now," I said, grabbing my own sandwich. "Go ahead."

"At least he moved all the boxes before he let his dick take control." She raised the sandwich. "I'll eat to that."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN – KINSLEY

RULE FIFTEEN: DON'T KISS AND TELL. EVER. UNLESS YOUR BEST FRIEND SEES YOU, THEN YOU DON'T HAVE A CHOICE.

More than twenty-four hours after what I was referring to as the incident in the bookstore, I hadn't heard from Josh.

Now, don't look at me like that.

It wasn't like I'd reached out to him, either.

It was all well and good for kissing and yelling to happen when you were all kinds of frustrated and annoyed, but it was another thing to have to deal with the aftermath.

Especially when I was faced with the reality that I maybe hadn't been as understanding as I should have been.

Josh and Colton had been friends their entire life, and if they'd made a promise to each other that they wouldn't cross the line with each other's sisters, then maybe I had to respect that.

But I also didn't like the fact decisions like that had been made *for* me.

It wasn't like I was a naïve fifteen-year-old girl doodling names on my math book. I was a twenty-six-year-old business owner and capable of making my own decisions.

Not that I wanted to date Josh. The semantics of the whole thing gave me a headache. He'd been so adamantly against it until I'd crossed the line and kissed him that the thought of taking anything any further just felt like a huge angst fest.

I liked angst in my books, not in my real life.

I didn't have the patience for it in real life. Although, judging by how many books I'd thrown at walls, I didn't have much for it in fiction, either.

But still.

I was getting off topic.

Josh and I had to talk about this. We had to address what had happened and what it meant before anything *else* could happen, and that was exactly why I was standing outside Bookworm's Books with my phone in my hand and my thumb hovering over his name.

It was easier said than done.

Instead of calling him, I took the wimp's way out and texted.

**ME: We need to talk.**

I would stand here for ten minutes, and if he didn't reply, I'd get in my car, pick up my pizza, and go home.

If he agreed, I'd pick up my pizza and head to his place.

A part of me was hoping he wouldn't. That he wouldn't text back. That he would never speak to me ever, ever again.

I mean, I'd practically been dry humping him.

I didn't know what the etiquette was for a conversation after dry humping someone,

Not to mention that the person who was supposed to help me with those things was the person I'd dry humped.

What a clusterfuck this was.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I tilted it to see the notification.

**JOSH: We do. Are you at home?**

**ME: No. I just finished work and am grabbing food. I can bring it over.**

**JOSH: I don't mind coming over.**

**ME: Pizza is closer to your place.**

**JOSH: And you can't run away when it inevitably gets awkward if we're at your house?**

**ME: Exactly.**

Well, this was going to be horrible, but at least we both had the same expectations of the conversation.

I tossed my phone in my purse and exchanged it for my keys. I was only parked a few feet away since I'd opened this morning and got the coveted front parking spot, so I got into my car and headed in the direction of Hot Stone Pizzeria.

Now I was really glad I'd thought to add a few extras onto my order.

When I got there, I only had to wait a few minutes for everything to be



boxed up. Since Josh lived in the new build neighborhood nearby, it only took a few more for me to turn out of town and head in that direction.

His truck was parked in his driveway, but there was enough space for me to pull up behind him, so I did just that.

Josh was already at the front door when I got out of the car, and I groaned silently. He was wearing a white t-shirt and *gray sweatpants*.

Literal porn for a woman right there.

As if this situation wasn't hard enough, I was going to have a lady boner the entire time.

I should have brought alcohol instead of pizza.

"Let me take that." He cut me off halfway to the front door and took all the food.

"Thanks." I locked my car and followed him inside, closing the door behind me. He led me down to his man cave basement where I said, "Ooh, the man cave. Must be serious."

His chuckle lessened the tension somewhat. "There's a dart board down there. I thought you could throw darts at it when you get mad."

"Any books?"

"Absolutely not."

"Then what makes you think I'm going to throw angry darts at a board instead of you?"

He stilled, and I almost walked into him. "You're right," he said. "Not a good idea."

Laughing, I gently nudged him in the back. "Keep going."

We walked down the remaining stairs to the basement. It'd changed since I'd last seen it after he'd bought the house. The barrel stools had been replaced with actual stools, even though the barrels remained as what looked like side tables. There still wasn't a sofa, which meant we had no choice but to sit on the stools.

Josh set the food down on the bar and walked around it. "Drink?"

I scanned the bottles. It was mostly hard liquor, and that was going to result in one of two things: rapping Kanye or doing something I'd regret. Since I'd already done the latter—and the former actually counted as a regret, too—I decided not to add any more things onto Kinsley's List of Big Mistakes.

"I'm not sure any of that is a good idea."

He gave the bottles his own glance. "Good thinking."

Together we opened the boxes, filling the room with the rich, cheesy scent of pizza and spiced potato wedges.

I didn't know how to start this conversation and judging by the way the uncomfortable silence thickened the air, neither did he.

But it had to be done.

We both started to speak at the same time.

Josh grimaced. "Go on."

"I'm sorry," I said, wiping my fingers with a napkin and not making eye contact. "I never should have pushed you yesterday morning. I should have respected your feelings and your loyalty to my brother. I just want to clear the air so we're on the same page and we can move on and put it behind us."

He nodded slowly, an action I caught out of the corner of my eye. "I appreciate the apology, even though it's unnecessary."

"No, it's not. You made a promise to my brother, and I made you break that. I said some dumb stuff I never should have said, and I just want you to know that I didn't mean it." I peered up at him, letting my hair fall down as a sort of curtain over one eye. "I would never tell Colton what happened. Aside from it being between us, I can't imagine how I'd begin to broach the subject of me practically dry humping you with him."

His tongue flicked out and wetted his lower lip as he fought back a smile. "Not exactly one for the dinner table, is it?"

I battled my own laugh. "Not really. Just... As long as we both agree it was a stupid mistake and won't happen again, it's okay."

"Is it?"

"What?"

"Is it okay?" He rested his forearms on the bar and leaned forward. The action made his biceps pop, and it was really hard to concentrate knowing he was wearing the equivalent of sexy lingerie back there.

I frowned. "Of course it's okay. I was wrong to act the way I did, and I respect the pact you made with my brother."

"So you don't regret kissing me?"

*Oh, boy.*

That was a loaded question.

"I regret that my actions led to you doing something that you felt would betray your friendship with my brother."

"That wasn't what I asked you, Kinsley."

I shifted. This wasn't the way this was supposed to go. He was supposed to agree with me, shake my hand, and let me leave.

Not... this.

"Do you regret kissing me?" His eyes bore into mine, and the intensity of his green-gray gaze was electrifying.

I swallowed. "I don't see how me answering that question furthers this conversation."

"Because here's the thing." He straightened so his hands were flat on the bar and his entire upper body was tensed. "I've been thinking about some of what you said. You said it was wrong that you didn't get a say in the pact we'd made, and you were right. Both you *and* Piper should have been told about it, even if you wouldn't have cared then."

It was my turn to nod. "It would have been nice to have been made aware."

"And when we made that pact, we were young. If I knew then that one day I'd get feelings for you, I never would have made it."

I jerked. "What?"

"I didn't want to feel this way, Kinsley. Hell, I don't even know how you feel about me. I'm not sure I want to know, if I'm honest with you. But this isn't my choice." Something flashed in his eyes. "And you were never supposed to find out. I was supposed to find you an Elliott that you'd be happy with and then I could move on, but it..." He trailed off.

"Didn't work that way," I finished for him softly.

"Exactly. It didn't work that way." His jaw ticked. "It didn't matter than you didn't have a say in the pact because you were never supposed to need one."

I looked away from him for a moment before I flitted my gaze back to him. "And now? Do I need one now?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"Would it matter if I wanted one even if I didn't?"

"If you don't know if you do, then you don't need one."

"Damn it, no, don't look at me like that." I hopped off the stool and pointed my finger at him.

"Like what?"

"Like, like, I don't know! Just this!" I threw out my arms, then jabbed my fingers into my own chest. "Do you know how guilty I feel? I know how much my brother and his friendship mean to you, and *I* was the person who

made you do something that could compromise that. You've literally been best friends your entire lives, and *I*, me, my actions—my selfish, impulsive, thoughtless actions—made you do something you didn't want to do.”

“I wanted to kiss you, Kinsley. Don't mistake loyalty for a lack of wanting to do something.”

“Well, you weren't being very loyal when you were grinding your erection against me.”

“Yeah? And you know what? If Holley hadn't walked in on us, I'd have fucked you there and then on that table and not given a damn about anyone other than you.”

I froze. “You wouldn't have.”

“I would have.” His fingers clenched into fists on the bar, his knuckles whitening. His jaw tightened and he looked away. “This conversation is going nowhere but in circles. Nothing is getting solved. Like you said, it's probably best we write it off as a mistake and move on. Maybe you should go.”

“Uh-huh.” I stepped forward and grabbed my purse, turning toward the stairs to leave. The stupid lump that was forming in my throat was constricting my ability to breathe, and the deep sting at the back of my eyes told me I really had to go.

Now.

I needed to leave.

Something pooled in my stomach and tightened in knots. It was an unfamiliar feeling, but it didn't take me long to recognize it.

It was the soul-sinking feeling that I would never again feel the way I had yesterday when he'd kissed me.

I would never feel that all-encompassing magic I'd felt when I'd been wrapped in his arms and his lips had been on mine.

And that?

That hurt a little part of me I didn't know existed.

“Josh?” I paused halfway up the stairs, my fingers gripping the rail tightly as I looked to the open door at the top. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry I put us in this position because I let my temper get the best of me.”

He didn't respond.

“And for what it's worth,” I continued in a softer voice. “I wish I had a say.”

On those words, I ran up the rest of the stairs, desperately holding back

the tears that threatened to form. This was so fucking stupid because it really wasn't worth crying over. It wasn't like we had anything beyond a kiss or anything that was worthy of tears.

But maybe that was worth some emotion.

The fact that we'd never get the chance to was pretty darn sad.

I dismissed the tears with a steely resolve, but that didn't get rid of the ringing in my ears. I guess that was what happened—the emotion had to go somewhere, so why not my ears?

I pulled open his front door, but just as quickly as I had, it was shoved shut from behind me. Josh yanked me around and dipped his head to kiss me, circling one arm around my waist to hold me to him.

Shock jolted through my body, and I dropped my purse so I could hold him to steady myself. The kiss was hard and needy, but he softened it as I sagged against him.

He broke it off and buried his face in my hair as I pressed my forehead against his solid chest. He smelled like coffee and lavender again, and it was the weirdest thing to think, but I realized it was lavender because that was what his detergent smelled like.

I had no idea why my brain thought now was the appropriate time for that realization, but here we were.

“Why?” he grunted into my hair. “Why do you need a say?”

“Because it's a stupid freakin' pact.”

“Kinsley.”

“Because if I don't have one, I'm afraid I'll never get to feel like this again,” I whispered truthfully into his t-shirt. “And it's not just because you're wearing gray sweatpants and I've been a little turned on ever since you opened the door.”

He stilled, then laughed. The vibrations from his traveled through his whole body and, by extension, mine. Before I could stop it, I was laughing right along with him.

“What do we do now?” I asked after a few minutes of us laughing together.

He reached up and pushed my hair away, smoothing it around my neck so one side was exposed to him. His nose tickled along my skin, and his hot breath danced over the sensitive area, making my heart pound inside my chest.

“I think,” he murmured, ghosting his lips over my neck. “We've come

this far now, so we might as well stop talking and think about it all later.”

I drew in a deep breath and let my eyes flutter shut as he kissed my pulse point. I knew that was, technically, the wrong answer, but every single part of my body was screaming at me to listen to him.

We’d already crossed enough lines.

One more really, really wasn’t going to matter at this point.

Not now we’d both admitted to there being something between us.

“Are you sure?” I whispered.

“I’m sure I’ll hate myself if I let you walk out of my door right now.”

Then he kissed me. Deeply and hungrily, and his fingertips dug into my skin where he held me against him.

This was a terrible idea, and I knew it, but I still couldn’t stop myself.

I fell into his kiss, completely losing myself in him for the longest moment. It didn’t last long before he released me, only to grab my hand and pull me after him. Josh dragged me up the stairs to his bedroom and tugged me inside, kissing me again.

We stumbled together across the room. His bed came too soon, and I fell back before he did.

Using his hands to stop his fall, he covered my body with his and once again took my mouth under his control. He was already between my legs, and as I wrapped them around his waist, my dress rode up to my hips.

Josh sat up and pulled his t-shirt over his head, revealing his lightly tanned body and the muscles that made up his stomach.

God. Gray sweatpants *and* abs.

Romance novels were definitely fiction, but that combination was definitely not.

He smirked for all of a second as he watched my eyes dart over his body, but he kissed me again, and all I could focus on was the softness of his skin beneath my fingertips.

My body reacted enthusiastically; my heart hammered against my chest and my skin puckered in thousands of goosebumps that covered every inch of me. Heat flooded through me and pooled between my legs, making my hips buck up toward him as I silently begged for this to move on.

I wanted this.

I wanted Josh.

I was lost to the moment as he moved to remove my dress. He pulled me to sitting and tugged it up my body and over my head, revealing my

mismatched off-white bra and blue panties.

All right, the bra was gray.

It was supposed to be white, but we all had *that* bra.

If he noticed, he didn't say a thing. Instead, he slid down my body and pulled off my boots, then came back. My bra was unclipped in a flash, and my head had hit the soft blankets before I could register the fact he had his tongue circling my nipple.

Desire burst through me, and I moaned. Josh worked my body like a magician, moving from my breasts to my mouth and down my neck, back to my mouth again to kiss me like he needed me.

Every single second was gloriously wonderful, and when he moved lower, peppering kisses across my tensed stomach down to the band of my underwear, I drew in a deep breath.

He dropped kisses on the inside of my thigh, edging closer and closer to my pussy where I was wet and aching. He dragged it out, annoyingly so, palming my thighs with his fingertips and kissing my skin.

Then he finally moved, pulling my panties down. He dragged them down my legs and let them drop to the floor, then moved back up and parted my thighs.

I gasped as his tongue made contact with my clit. He worked his tongue against me, exploring me, teasing me, offering me nothing but pure pleasure.

I fisted the blankets at my sides, and my back arched as Josh closed his mouth around my clit and sucked.

Pleasure bolted through me, not quite an orgasm but not quite not, and I cried out. Josh released me and covered my body once again, slipping himself fully between my legs. His fingers slid between mine as he kissed me, making me taste myself on his tongue.

"I know you didn't come," he murmured against my lips, once again moving his mouth to kiss my neck. "But I'm greedy and want that all for me."

My breaths were all heavy and needy, and I gladly took the next kiss he offered me.

"Condom," he whispered.

I inhaled deeply through my nose. "I'm fine if you are."

Groaning, he kissed me again, moving one hand down my body and gripping my thigh. The deepness of his kiss enthralled me, and I moved with

him as if I was made to.

In reality, it was messy and hungry, nothing remotely romantic about the way we both fought to be closer to one another. It was pure passion and desire, and when Josh finally pushed inside me, I cried out desperately, a cry he swallowed with his kiss.

It was so good.

We moved together, him thrusting deep inside me and me responding to it all. We were almost completely in sync. My fingers dug into his shoulders, and I was sure my nails were leaving marks in his skin where I grabbed him so enthusiastically.

He pounded into me, every single thrust pushing me closer to the edge. Every single thing about this was almost carnal, and I was loving it all.

My orgasm hit so ferociously I could barely breathe through it. All my muscles clenched, and I cried out loudly as it rippled through me. The pleasure built again before I could stop it, and another rush of euphoria spread through me. Josh's groan only just broke through the pounding in my ears, and the only clue I had to the fact he'd also come was the fact he was buried deep inside me and had his face pressed into my neck.

I was covered in sweat and barely able to breathe. He was heavy and muscular, and I slowly released my vice grip on his shoulders so he could move.

He rolled over, pulling out of me, but didn't let me go.

Happily, I snuggled against his naked body to feel the heat from him. The heat we'd made together, the heat that meant we'd really done this.

The heat that said there was no going back from this.

This line could never be uncrossed.

But here, in his arms, I felt completely safe and wanted and content.

I never wanted to leave them.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered against the top of my head.

I moved one knee between his thighs and paused as my foot scraped his. "Josh?"

"Mhmm?" he responded sleepily.

I was glad he was sleepy—I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to move past this moment.

"You left my socks on."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN – JOSH

RULE SIXTEEN: IT'S NEVER, EVER LIKE IT IS IN THE BOOKS.

I was going to Hell.

There was no doubt about it. I'd booked a one-way ticket to whatever level of Hell Dante decreed you should go to after you'd had sex with your best friend's sister.

Clearly I'd been thinking way too hard with my dick.

That was all I could think of as I washed off in the shower, leaving Kinsley lying in my bed and getting my pillow soaking wet. She'd already showered, but since I didn't own a hairdryer because I had no use for one, my pillow was now acting as if it were one.

It was a good thing I had extra pillows.

On one hand, this was all a good thing. Kinsley finally knew how I felt about her, and she clearly had feelings for me she was trying to work through. It was everything I'd wanted for a long time, and maybe that was why I felt so fucking shit.

There was no going back from all of this. I'd broken my promise to my best friend, and I wasn't sure he'd give a damn how I felt about her if and when he found this all out.

The only good thing I could think of right now was that we'd both agreed to ignore it until tomorrow and for now, we'd just pretend we weren't the eye of an impending storm.

There was nothing like a little post-sex avoidance to solidify a relationship.

I rinsed the soap from my body and shut off the water. I wished I could shut off my brain as easily as I could the shower. All it was doing was sending stupid little ideas to my emotions that instead of feeling happiness and satiation, all I was allowed to feel was guilt.

Soul-deep, never-ending motherfucking *guilt*.

This situation was so fucked up.

I'd finally done what would make me happy, and all I could feel was that damn guilt.

And I was already over it. Unfortunately, I didn't think it was going to go away anytime soon.

I wrapped a towel around my waist and went back to my bedroom.

Kinsley was leaning against the headboard with both pillows propped up behind her, her phone plugged into my charge cable, and a pizza box on her lap.

She didn't even glance up when I came in.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading," she replied, her eyes never leaving her phone screen.

"On your phone?"

"I don't have a book or a Kindle here and I was bored." She took a bite of pizza.

"You look comfortable."

This time, she did look at me, a big grin spreading across her face. "I am. Thanks."

"And now both my pillows are wet."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, shoot."

"It's fine." I smirked. "It's just pillows. I have more in the cupboard."

"Oh, good." She nestled back down and pressed the back of her head against the one I was pretty sure was mine. "Are you *sure* you don't have a hairdryer here?"

I stared at her for a moment before I ran one hand through my hair, making sure to do it slowly to emphasize the shortness. "No, you're right. It's in the bathroom. I regularly dry it over the sink."

"There's no need to be snarky."

"You'd know. You're Queen Snarky."

She poked her tongue out at me. "I'm trying to read, you know."

"How can you read on your phone? Isn't the screen too small?"

"It's a screen. There are words. It's not terribly hard to understand how it works, Joshua."

"Now who's being snarky?"

Her eyes flitted from side to side as she read. "You can't call someone Queen Snarky and expect them not to snark."

"You know, for someone who just had two orgasms, you should not have this much attitude."

She tapped the side of the screen with her thumb and reached for another slice of the now-cold pizza. "Josh, I'm lying in your bed stark naked, reading, and eating pizza."

"I had noticed."

"Then why do you have so much attitude?"

“Touché,” I muttered, adjusting the towel at my waist. “So you wouldn’t be bothered if I get into bed and put the TV on?”

“It’s your TV,” Kinsley said absently.

“And watch sports?”

“Again, it’s your TV.”

I tilted my head to the side. “And you don’t care?”

“If you don’t stop talking to me while I’m trying to read, I’m going to shove the TV so far up your ass your sports will play directly into your brain.” She glared at me just to prove her point.

Well, I wasn’t going to argue it any further.

I shrugged and headed out of the room. I’d barely made it to the top of the stairs when I heard Kinsley call my name and I turned around with a, “Yeah?”

“Are you going to the basement?”

“I am.”

“Do you have wine?”

“I thought you didn’t want any alcohol.”

“I didn’t want any alcohol so I didn’t make a stupid decision,” she called. “But I already did that, so...”

I laughed and took to the stairs. I wasn’t going to argue with her there. We had made a stupid decision, but I’d rather it be a stupid decision than a stupid mistake.

Although the latter was still up for discussion in time.

I made my way into the basement and grabbed wine, glasses, and my pizza. I lost my towel halfway up the stairs into the hallway, meaning I was butt naked, right as car lights shone in my hallway windows.

I froze. They were right outside my house, and I knew those lights.

Shit.

It was Colton.

I darted into the kitchen, dumped the pizza, wine, and glasses, and ducked into the laundry room. I grabbed some clean boxers from the drying rack and some black sweats from the floor that I didn’t have a chance to sniff test, so it was anyone’s guess if they were clean or not.

I paused in the kitchen to shove one glass of wine in a random cabinet in case he came in here and froze.

Shit.

Colton.

My best friend was here.  
And his little sister's car was on my driveway.  
And she was upstairs.  
Naked.  
In my bed.

*We were so fucked.*

And not in the way we'd been less than an hour ago.

I hoped like hell she'd heard the car pull up or seen the lights, but it wasn't guaranteed since my bedroom overlooked my backyard, and I didn't have time to yell up at her.

Three knocks sounded at my door followed by the ding of my bell.

God, I hated that bell.

I reached up to touch my hair. It was now dry, thank God, and I walked to the door and opened it.

Colton stared at me. "Why is my sister's car in your driveway?"

"Hello to you, too," I said dryly.

"Hey," he said. "Why is Kinsley's car in your driveway?"

"Because she's here, obviously." *Way to go, Josh. That's not suspicious at all.*

"But why is she here? It's like nine p.m." He frowned.

"Because, brother dearest," Kinsley said from somewhere behind me. "Josh owed me."

I had absolutely no fucking idea where this was going.

"Owed you?" He peered around me at her. "Why the fuck are you wearing one of his shirts?"

"He owed me," she repeated. "Now are you going to shut up and let me talk, or gawk at me like I'm a zoo exhibit?"

Colton opened his mouth before he shut it again.

Thank fuck for that. I wanted her to talk, too.

And when had she gotten dressed so quickly? And why was she wearing one of my old Montana Bears baseball t-shirts?

Not that it didn't look good.

It did. Too good.

*Fuck.*

"He set me up with some jerk in Creek Hill. I went on a date with him at the diner halfway between here and there."

Genius. I was close to the edge of town and only ten minutes away

from that diner.

“The guy got stupid drunk and accidentally spilled half his beer on my shirt.” The lies rolled off her tongue easily as she towel-dried her still-wet hair over her right shoulder. “I called Josh from the car but he didn’t answer, so I showed up here to yell at him since I was passing anyway.”

“That was fun,” I drawled.

“You deserved it.” She shot me a dark look before turning her attention back to Colton. “I was wet, smelled like beer, and my shirt was ruined. He told me to take a shower and gave me this shirt so I didn’t have to drive the rest of the way home smelling like a brewery.”

“Oh,” Colton said after a moment. “Makes sense. Are you sure he should be setting you up anymore? I thought you liked Elliott?”

“We went on one date, Colt. I’m free to see whoever I like.” She finished drying her hair—something she could have done half an hour ago, but what did I know?—and folded the towel in two. “What are you doing here?”

He faltered for a moment, as if he’d expected the question to come from me and not her. “I left Amber’s and thought I’d drive by the house down the street. I’m going to call the realtor tomorrow.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You’re actually doing it?”

Colton nodded. “She’s not going to change her mind, but neither am I, so I’m just doing it. I only stopped because I saw your car, Kins.”

“Oh.” She folded the towel over her arm. “Well, sorry to disappoint you with a boring story.”

Colton grunted and turned around. “Gotta get a better matchmaker, sis.”

“Totally agree!” she called after him as he headed for his car.

“Aren’t you leaving?”

“Yeah, I’m just waiting for my phone to charge. And he has pizza.” She shrugged. “I didn’t get to eat thanks to drunk smurf at the diner, and you’re not letting me eat either, so bye.” She swung the door shut as soon as she was done talking.

I stared at her. “What are you doing?” I hissed.

“Getting rid of him,” she whispered back, clutching the towel to her chest. “I almost shit my pants when I saw his car out there!”

“You weren’t wearing any pants.”

“Exactly!” She clapped her hand over her mouth as a car door opened.

When it closed, she dropped it. “Now aren’t you glad I didn’t?”

I did my best to glare at her, but it wasn’t possible. I rubbed my hand down my face and turned away as I choked back a laugh.

“That was so fucking close,” I muttered after a moment.

Kinsley blew out a long breath. “No kidding.”

“That was some quick thinking.” I met her eyes. “And thanks for making me look bad.”

“Well, it was either you set me up on a bad date or you bent me over the end of your bed,” she said dryly. “You didn’t come out looking good either way, but you’re pretty, and I didn’t want to see you get a right hook tonight.” She patted my jaw and turned away.

“Where did you come up with that story?”

“Oh, I read books.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

She looked over her shoulder at me with her hand on the banister. “I’m smart. Duh.”

Laughing, I followed her up the stairs and back into the bedroom. “I’d like to repeat my last question.”

“Joshua.” She stood in the middle of my bedroom, wearing my fucking t-shirt still, and put her hands on her hips, fixing her bright blue eyes on me. “I’m a reader. Not only have I lived more lives than you can begin to imagine, but I’ve been in thousands of fictional relationships that I have judged to high heavens. I’m smart, I’m quick-witted, I have tons of absolutely not-real life experience, and—”

“You’re good in bed?”

“I wasn’t going to say that, but thank you.” She bounced on the balls of her feet with a grin. “And I know what to do in almost any circumstance.”

My lips twitched. “Dead body in the backyard?”

“Call the police and examine the scene before they get here.”

“Burned cake?”

“Go to Walmart and get another one.”

“There’s a vampire at the window.”

“Throw you at him and run.”

I laughed and perched on the edge of the bed. “What the hell are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Her smile dropped, and she toyed with the hem of the shirt she was wearing. “But I know I have to go now in case he gets

suspicious. I'm already not entirely sure he bought my story."

I sighed. "You're right. Fuck. This sucks."

"We'll figure it out," she said in a tone that belied her uncertainty.

Forcing a smile on my face, I got up and wrapped my arms around her.

"Sure we will, book girl."

"Book girl?"

I grimaced. "Sounded cuter in my head."

"It's not the worst thing I've been called." She let out a little chuckle and nestled into my embrace, pressing her cheek against my bare chest. Her eyelashes tickled my skin every time she blinked, and I touched my lips to the top of her head.

I reveled in the moment for a little longer, just appreciating the way it felt to finally hold her like this. Even though I knew the hardest part was ahead of us, maybe if we just figured it out between us, we could handle the rest together.

"Josh?"

"Yeah?"

"You know you're never getting this t-shirt back, don't you?"

I smiled, hugging her a little tighter. "I figured as much."

\*\*\*

The next morning brought little to no relief from my guilt.

It was unseasonably warm today, so after I had coffee, I went to the backyard and pulled my mower from the shed. The weather was definitely turning as we crept toward the end of September, and if I could get my lawn cut two more times before the snow inevitably set in, I'd be happy.

I set to my task. I didn't have a massive yard, but I had a sizeable front one along with the back that was more than enough for just me. I hadn't done a damn thing to either of them since I'd moved in earlier this year. Partly because I didn't have time, but mostly because I had no idea what to do with them.

They were boring old hunks of grass.

Today, I was grateful for it. It didn't require a tremendous amount of brain power to fire up the mower and walk around the flat, boring yard.

It did allow my brain to go into overload.

I'd never thought about something so much in life as I was about

Kinsley and our new situation. We hadn't spoken since she'd left last night except for me texting her goodnight and her telling me to shut up, she was reading.

I hadn't expected anything else, to be honest.

Colton appearing last night out of the blue was a bit of a reality check. Yes, we'd crossed all the lines we had left to cross, but that didn't mean we'd actually discussed where our relationship stood.

Or what the hell we were going to do now.

In theory, it was simple. We could pursue a real relationship and Colton would have to deal with it.

But if reality was as simple as a theory, we'd all be friends with aliens by now.

Kinsley and I both knew that wasn't going to happen. We couldn't just walk into Bronco's holding hands and have everything be fine. There was a whole storm we had to weather, and that didn't even include us.

Did I regret it?

No. How could I regret something that made me so happy? Even if we tried then failed, that was better than us never trying at all. A part of me—a big fucking part—wished I'd told her before all this shit happened, but the rest of me was happy it'd happened this way.

If I'd told her a year ago, would she have felt the same?

Was she only open to this because we'd spent a lot of time together lately? We'd hung out at her place, at the bookstore, at the bar. Hell, we'd even had dinner.

We'd never done any of that before.

Not alone, anyway.

I sighed and shut off the mower. I'd finished both yards, and now I had to deal with life outside my little bubble of a house.

I locked the shed and went back inside where I took a shower. It was quick and hot, and I scrubbed my body so hard I took off a good couple of layers of skin in my never-ending frustration.

I was almost thirty, for fucks sake.

Why was all of this even an issue?

Fucking stupid schoolboy crush.

I dressed in my room, tossed the towel in the laundry, and headed downstairs. I had nothing to do now that job was done, so I threw myself onto the sofa and turned on the TV. My phone was flashing with a message from



its spot on the coffee table and I grabbed it to check.

**KINSLEY: Don't tell ANYONE. I told Saylor and Holley the same story I told Colton.**

**ME: Shit. I need to cancel that billboard.**

**KINSLEY: Hardy har har.**

**ME: Make sure you don't hurt yourself laughing too hard.**

**KINSLEY: At your jokes? Not likely.**

**ME: Oh, how she wounds me.**

**KINSLEY: Be quiet.**

**KINSLEY: We need to talk about this.**

**ME: Absolutely. Let's do it. I'm free now.**

**KINSLEY: I mean actually talk, Joshua, not have sex.**

**ME: I see no reason why we can't do both.**

**KINSLEY: I started my period this morning.**

**ME: That'll be the reason.**

**KINSLEY: Thank you.**

**ME: You know people do do it while on their period.**

**KINSLEY: I am not those people.**

**ME: I've never done it myself, but apparently it's better than normal.**

**KINSLEY: Let me put this in a way you can understand.**

**KINSLEY: If you come near my vagina at any point during the process of the shedding of my uterine lining and the cramping of the same uterine walls, so help me God I will grab your balls with a metal nutcracker and twist so hard that they'll retreat back inside you and you'll taste your own sperm.**

**ME: So that's a clear no, then.**

**KINSLEY: You're hard work.**

**ME: You're not exactly a walk in the park yourself. Your brother is the reason for this.**

**KINSLEY: No, your immature and misguided teenage pact is the reason for this.**

**ME: If you want to be specific...**

**KINSLEY: When am I ever not specific?**

**ME: I can't think of any situations. Even during sex. It's slightly distracting.**

**KINSLEY: If I don't tell you, how will you know where my clitoris is?**

**ME: I believe my tongue located it pretty swiftly last night.**

**ME: Or you need an Oscar nomination.**

**KINSLEY: Shut up.**

**ME: You're welcome for that, by the way.**

**KINSLEY: Shut up!**

**ME: Are you getting embarrassed? Are you blushing?**

**KINSLEY: I'm going to kill you.**

**ME: But then you'll never have another orgasm again.**

**KINSLEY: Hey. Until last night, I hadn't had sex in a year. The middle drawer of my nightstand says I most definitely WILL have orgasms. With or without you.**

**ME: Now we're talking.**

**KINSLEY: I didn't mean to say that out loud.**

**ME: I'm snooping in your drawers next time I come to your place.**

**KINSLEY: Don't you dare!!!!!!!!!!**

**ME: Shoulda thought about that before you told me you have a sex shop in your nightstand. What other kinky things don't I know about you?**

There was a knock at my door, and I threw my phone down, chuckling at myself. Winding her up was more fun than I'd realized.

Dirty banter was the best banter.

I pulled open the front door and stopped short.

Colton's eyebrows shot up. "Expecting someone else?"

"Like who? Santa Claus?" I dropped my grip on the door handle and moved aside to let him in. "I thought you were at work."

"The realtor had an opening for this morning," he explained, closing the front door behind him. "I'm not in until after lunch, so I thought I'd stop by. You don't have my sister hiding in your bathroom again, do you?"

I was going to ignore that.

"How'd it go?"

"The viewing, or my sister in your bathroom?"

"The viewing. I have no knowledge of your sister's bathroom habits," I said

dryly. “Coffee?”

“Please. It went well,” he said, skipping over my response. “There’s not a lot left to do to get it finished, and the asking price is the same as you paid even though the yard is a little smaller.”

“End plot,” I said. “That’s why I borrowed the last couple grand from my grandma to get this place.”

He grunted. “It’s big enough. I’m gonna call and make an offer a little under this afternoon citing the yard size.”

“Awesome.” I put a mug under the machine and pressed the button. “The developers are fair. I think they’ll understand.”

Another non-committal sound came from him.

“Is this it, then?” I asked, glancing over at him. “Is it finally the end for you and Amber?”

“It’s been over for a long time. Neither of us wanted to give up the sex.” He took the mug when it was finished. “But even that’s not great anymore.”

“Thanks for the visual.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Sadly. Are you ending it, then?”

“Gonna wait until I know for sure about the house, but yeah. It’s coming. We want the same thing but in different ways.”

“Sorry, Colt. You’ve been together a long time.”

He shrugged and poured creamer in his mug. “Win some, lose some.”

A relationship that had lasted as many years as his wasn’t something I’d quantify as ‘losing some,’ but hey.

He’d already resigned himself to the end.

“So what are you doing about my sister?”

I choked on my coffee. “What?”

“Dating.”

“*What?*”

“Her dating thing.” He looked at me as if I was stupid. “Matchmaking. Setting her up.”

Jesus Christ.

“Oh, that. I don’t know.”

“Thought you were giving it up.”

“Tempted to,” I said vaguely. “But I kinda owe her for last night.”

*Owed her round two... when she wasn't on her period.*

“Her shit date? Isn’t she fed up of those yet?”

I shrugged and perched on one of the bar stools at the island. “Obviously not.”

“I thought she liked Elliott.”

“She does, but like she said, she’s keeping her options open.”

“Doesn’t sound like Kinsley.”

“Just repeating what she’s told me.”

“Mm. I was just saying.”

*I wish he wouldn’t.* “Don’t ask me, ask her.”

“I will.” Colt paused. “Is something wrong? You’re acting weird.”

*Yeah, I fucked your sister last night. You could say something’s wrong.*

“Didn’t sleep well,” I replied, sipping my coffee for good measure.

“I saw you mow your lawn.”

“What are you? My keeper? Fuck.”

Colton held up his hands. “You really didn’t sleep well last night.”

I shook my head and walked into the living room with him hot on my heels.

My phone was still unlocked and on the text screen of my last conversation with Kinsley, and I snatched it up right as Colt sat down and looked at it.

“Who are you talking to?”

I shoved the phone in my pocket. “Just some girl I met online. Why?”

“I thought I saw something about my sister and sex.”

“Her name is Kelly. Probably misread it,” I answered, sitting in the armchair instead of my usual spot on the sofa. “You only glanced at it.”

“You’re right.” He shook it off and looked at the TV, catching the breaking news scrolling across the bottom of the screen on the sports news channel.

“How about these shit fucking trades then, huh?”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – KINSLEY

RULE SEVENTEEN: UNLIKE MOST HEROINES IN ROMANCE NOVELS, MENSTRUATION IS A THING. AND YOU WILL BLEED LIKE HELL AND BE A CRABBY BITCH WITH CRAMPS AND AN UNRELENTING NEED FOR SUGAR AND CARBS. YOU'RE WELCOME.

In all seriousness, anyone who wished to end their day with their life still able to be lived needed to fuck the hell off away from me.

One year.

One year. That's how long it'd been since I last had sex.

Did Mother Nature give a shit about that? Nooo, she did *not*. I didn't know who pissed in her Cheerios, but it was not justifiable by giving me my period the morning after I'd finally had sex.

And damn good sex, at that.

No matter what I said to Josh, that man knew his way around the genital area, and he really *had* found my clitoris with his tongue without any direction.

Seriously.

He could teach a class on locating the clitoris.

Not that he'd be locating mine for the next few days.

Ugh.

Being a woman really, really sucked.

Look, don't think I was being ungrateful. I really was thankful that I wasn't pregnant, but at this point in history, Mother Nature probably had WiFi. An email would have sufficed.

Long story short, I was pissed.

Admittedly, it did make things somewhat easier. With sex off the table, there was less reason for us to spend a night together which meant less instances for Josh and I to ultimately explain.

Since we were officially sneaking around.

Not that he knew that yet.

But if your best friends didn't know the truth, you were definitely sneaking around.

Despite my bitching, I was happy, in a weird kind of way. Now we'd successfully crossed all the lines and dotted all the corners, removing the sexual element of the relationship meant we had to connect on another level.

An emotional one.

The same one that scared the ever-loving crap out of me.

Mostly because, given my current emotional state, I was liable to cry at a bread commercial.

Don't judge me. We've all been there.

"When was the last time you had sex?"

I stared at Ivy. She was sitting at one of the tables at the front of the store, her swollen ankles up on another chair, and a torn-open bag of chips resting on her swollen stomach.

"That's a random question," I replied, right as the baby kicked and almost knocked her snack off her stomach.

"Stop that," she said, tapping her belly. "I was just thinking, that's all."

"About the last time I had sex?"

"People in general."

"Pregnancy is weird," I muttered, finishing up arranging the shelf I was working on.

"You're telling me," she retorted. "Yesterday, I couldn't stand the smell of these chips. Now I can't stop eating them."

I wrinkled my nose up at the strong onion smell that was emanating from her direction. "There's a reason you couldn't stand the smell of them, Ives."

She paused, her mouth open, chip held in mid-air. "I'm sorry. Am I stinking out your store?"

"Yes, but it'll just give your sister an excuse to put potpourri everywhere." I brushed my hands on my jeans and walked over to her. "Do you need anything?"

"Do you have any water?"

I held up a finger and went into the staffroom to grab two bottles from the fridge, then took them back out.

"You're my favorite person today," Ivy said, uncapping the ice-cold water.

"Because I'm letting you eat those chips to annoy your sister?"

"Yes!" She sipped, then eyed me. "And you're going to tell me about the last time you had sex."

I frowned, toying with my own bottle. "About a year ago. Nothing special. Probably why it was the last time I had sex," I lied.

"Liar!"

My mouth dropped open. "I am not lying!"

I was, obviously, lying.

And apparently not very well.

It wasn't *really* one of my strong points, if I was honest with myself.

I couldn't believe I'd gotten lies past Holley and Saylor already. Either I was a better liar than I thought, or they were really, really dumb.

Ivy gasped, dislodging the empty chip packet from her bump. "It was Josh!"

"Sssshh!" Frantically waving my arms, I looked around the store. Which was stupid, because I knew the store was empty except for us. Saylor and Holley were on their lunch break while I kept Ivy company.

"Oh, my God!"

I drew a chair up next to her and pleaded with her. "Don't say anything."

"Who am I going to tell?" she asked, holding her hands out. "Well, Kai, but you figured that."

"You can't tell Kai! He'll tell Colton!"

Her lips drew into a little 'o'. "Ooh, he doesn't know."

"Of course he doesn't know, Ivy! It only happened last night!"

That 'o' became an 'ooh.' "How did that happen? Holley told me you kissed, but I thought that was the end of it. Because, you know. Your brother."

I winced. "Can we stop bringing him up? This is a sensitive subject."

"Tell me, tell me!"

I ran through everything that had happened. It wasn't until I got to the part about everyone being at Bronco's that I realized she was *really* out of the loop, so I delved into a little bit more detail until I'd finished the entire story.

"What are you doing to do?" Ivy asked after a moment.

I shrugged. "We don't know. As far as everyone—and I mean *everyone*—is concerned, he's still setting me up on dates."

"How the hell are you going to date other men and then go home and bang him?"

"Ivy. That's not helpful."

"I know, but I'm hardly a relationship expert myself." She pointed to her bump. "Hello. One-night stand baby."

"Yes, but you're now engaged to him, so that's irrelevant."

"Ssh, Kins, don't be picky." She flapped a hand at me. "Have you spoken since?"



I shook my head. “I had to open the store this morning. We’ve texted, but we haven’t had a chance yet. I don’t know how much time we can spend together before someone gets suspicious.”

“Hmm.” Ivy tapped her finger against her lips. “Well, tonight is easy. If he owes you a date, you can have him go to your place under the pretense of you both working together to find a date and reevaluate your wants and needs like you did before.”

Slowly, I nodded. That could work.

“Then at the very least you can talk and decide where you want to go from here. I don’t think anyone will be suspicious about that.” More finger tapping. “After is where it gets questionable. You obviously don’t want to date other guys right now, right?”

I shook my head a little. “At least not until we’ve figured everything out.”

“You’re probably gonna have to go out of town to spend time together until you come clean. If he’s dating too, you can lie and say you both have dates, but use towns in the same direction. You won’t be able to hide it forever, but for now... You can probably buy yourselves a couple of weeks to get a handle on everything.”

“It might not even come to anything,” I said, getting up and straightening the new releases table at the front. “So it’ll all be moot.”

“Do you want it to?”

“To what?”

“Come to anything.”

I shrugged one shoulder, doing my very best to look unbothered. “I don’t know,” I replied, spending way too long fiddling with this book stack. “Maybe.”

“That’s a yes.”

I peered back at her over my shoulder. “That obvious?”

“Yes.” She grinned.

With a sigh, I turned back to her. “It’s just... weird. Like this is Josh, you know? He accepts all my little weird quirks and doesn’t care that I’m awkward and love books and go on bookish tirades about Harry Potter and all the other things that matter to me.” I paused. “I know it’s not like I’m old, but I feel like I’ve waited forever to meet someone who just... gets me. It’s strange to think he could have been there all along.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s been there all along, Kinsley,” Ivy said, meeting my gaze in earnest. “Maybe that’s why he gets you. Nobody but him ever took the time to figure you out. Even if neither of you realized it was happening.”

\*\*\*

I was dying.

It was the only explanation for the cramps that had me doubled over and hissing into my throw pillows on the sofa.

Seriously. Nothing was touching these cramps, and I was about to get a coat hanger and rip out my own uterus and flush it down the toilet.

Ooh, no.

It’d probably clog the pipes.

The point remained, regardless of the method of disposal.

I was so over it, and it was day one.

My dinner had consisted of an entire bag of salt and vinegar chips—a family sized one, thank you very much.

And I wondered why I bloated on my period.

Really.

The familiar sound of Josh’s truck pulling up outside my house made me groan. I’d told him not to come over because I wasn’t feeling well, and I wasn’t in the mood to figure out our clusterfuck of a situation tonight.

If he wasn’t going to listen to me, this relationship—or whatever it was—wasn’t getting off to a good start.

The truck engine went off, and a minute later, there were three knocks at my door.

“Go away!” I yelled.

I never said I had manners.

“Kinsley!” Josh knocked on the door. “Let me in.”

“I said go away!”

The handle jiggled. “Damn it, Kinsley!”

I hissed out a curse. Damn my terrible habit of forgetting to lock my doors during the day.

Not that it was the day.

All right, fine, I was awful at locking my doors all the time.

“I’ve told you about—what are you doing?”

I turned my head to the side and stared at him. “I have no idea what you mean.”

I did. I knew what he meant. I was in the universal period pain position. You know the one. Head flat on a pillow, ass up in the air, thighs drawn as close to my stomach as I could get them, and my arms wrapped around my clenching lower stomach. The occasional rock back and forth to try and coax the muscles into relaxing.

Totally normal.

“Why are you—you said you didn’t feel well.” Confusion marred his handsome features, clouding his gaze.

“I don’t feel well. I’m dying,” I confirmed. “My uterus is staging a coup and trying to murder me.”

His gaze darted across my body before he shrugged. “Good thing I came then.”

“What on Earth makes you say this is a good idea?”

He held up two brown paper bags in triumph. “I brought supplies.”

“Supplies.”

“Uh-huh. And don’t worry, I went to Dartree Mountain so nobody saw me.” He grinned. “Are you ready for this?”

“No. No woman will ever be ready for a male savior when she’s on her period. She doesn’t want to be looked after. She wants to curse the world and damn all reproductive systems forever. Cry. Scream. Shout a little. It’s worked for centuries. I see no reason to change the system now.”

He paused. “So, I’ll start, then.”

I rolled my eyes, and he took that as his cue because one by one, he unloaded things from his grocery bags.

“Chocolate. Chips. Muffins. Ice cream. Lemonade. Wine. Cookies. Cheese. Ibuprofen. Tylenol. Aspirin. And—”

“Are those *sanitary pads*?”

He looked down at the green cube and frowned. “That’s what the woman in Walgreens said.”

“You asked a woman in Walgreens about *sanitary pads*?”

“I wasn’t going to ask a man.” He met my eyes. “Are they the wrong ones?”

Weirdly, no. But then everyone I knew used them, so...

I pushed myself up to sitting and crossed my legs. My lips pulled to one side as I stared at the little packet in his hand. “No, they’re the right

ones.”

He visibly relaxed. “Thank fuck for that, because there was a lot of colored packages in that aisle, and I was starting to feel like I was on the boat in Willy Wonka's damn factory.”

It took all my self-control to bite back the laughter that threatened to bubble up. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“You said you didn’t feel good. You said you were on your period. I put two and two together.” He shrugged. “I know you told me not to come, but I’ve bullshitted your brother enough today that I figured I may as well come over and make the lies worth it.”

“And here I was, thinking you were coming to make me feel better.”

“Kinsley, I bought you sanitary pads. If that isn’t making you feel better, I don’t know what to tell you.”

I grinned. I couldn’t help it. The smile burst from me with a giggle that overtook my entire body. The thought of him standing in a women’s health aisle buying sanitary products was just too much.

His own smile broke out across his face, and I grabbed a throw cushion to bury my face into because if I didn’t, I was going to explode into peals of uncontrollable laughter.

Not that it stopped me, actually. All it really did was muffle the inevitable as I curled up like a turtle retreating into its shell and let the cushion take the brunt of my amusement.

“Well, it beats being yelled at.”

I looked up in time to see him pick up a grocery bag and head for my kitchen with it safely in hand.

Thank God. Otherwise I’d eat that before I tucked into everything else.

Honestly. I was like a rabid bear. You’d think I hadn’t eaten all day.

And I had.

Boy, I had *eaten*.

Between my incessant hunger and the zit that was rapidly turning into Mount Vesuvius on the underside of my chin, the junk food was a welcome addition to my day.

Josh wasn’t exactly a terrible one, either. In fact, he was an annoyingly delightful one, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

He walked back into the living room, drawing on a beer.

“I don’t have beer,” I said, frowning.

“I know. I brought my own.”

“You’re efficient,” I said appreciatively, taking the empty wine glass he held out.

He set his bottle on a coaster on the coffee table—be still my heart—and poured me a glass of the chilled wine.

Now I knew he’d been to more than one place. The grocery stores around here didn’t stock cold wine—or really wine at all, to be honest—but the liquor store *did*.

That, my friends, was almost enough to make me fall irrevocably in love with him right here, right now.

What?

I liked romance.

It wasn’t all lavish displays of flowers and fancy dates and grand gestures.

Sometimes, romance was cold wine and sanitary pads.

There was a sentence I never thought I’d say.

I sipped the wine—it was my favorite, after all, and nestled into place when he sat on the sofa. Josh grabbed my legs by the ankles and lifted them so he could get as close to me as possible. My legs hooked over his thighs, and he let them settle on his lap as if they were meant to be there.

He displaced me slightly as he leaned forward to grab his beer and drop the chips in my lap, but it was by no means uncomfortable. I already had Netflix pulled up on the screen when he sat back against the cushions and had the remote pointed in anticipation.

“What are we watching?” Josh asked, balancing the beer between my legs so he could open the chip packet.

“I don’t know. I was waiting for you to decide.”

“Are you going to watch anything I say?”

“Depends what you suggest, but there’s a high chance I’ll argue everything.”

“Why don’t you just pick then?”

“Because I was trying to be polite,” I replied. “I won’t bother next time.”

His lips twitched, and his amusement was in his eyes. “Just don’t turn on something that was a book once,” he said after a moment of stifling his laughter. “You’re feisty enough tonight without the rage of a book-to-screen adaptation to rile you up.”

“Carry on with that attitude, and I’ll put Harry Potter and the Prisoner

of Azkaban on.”

“If you do that, I’m leaving.”

“Excellent. Harry Potter it is!”

Laughing, he whipped the remote control from my hand and held it at arm’s length. “You’d miss me if I left.”

I snorted. “I told you not to come. I was going to wallow in my own self-pity all night.”

“Yeah, but I brought food.”

“If you really wanted to cheer me up, you should have brought books.”

He paused. “You own a bookstore. You can get any book you want. I can’t top that, Kins.”

“Fine. A notebook. Pens. Post-It notes. Pencils. Ooh, or bookmarks. I love bookmarks.” I sighed. “I’m a simple girl.”

Josh looked at me as if I were anything but simple. “Seriously? That’s the way to your heart? Stationery and bookmarks?”

“No, it’s books, but you just told me why that won’t work.”

“And you think you’re a simple girl,” he muttered. “Here. Schitt’s Creek. Have you watched the latest season?”

“Damn, no! I didn’t know it was on!” I sat up a little straighter, almost knocking his beer over myself.

He grabbed it before I could cover myself in Eau de Coors Light. “I haven’t had a chance to start it yet. I’m behind. Shall we?”

“Okay, but before we do this, you have to remember we’re officially entering into a binding agreement.”

“It’s a TV series, not a marriage, Kinsley.”

“No, Joshua, you don’t understand. If we start watching this series together, we’re obligated to only watch it together. We can’t watch it with anyone else or while we’re alone unless we’re buddy watching.”

He blinked at me. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. If I find out you’ve watched it without me, I’m going to be furious.”

“What are you going to do? Make me sit through Harry Potter?”

“No. I’ll make you sit through Twilight. I know you *hate* those movies.”

He visibly shuddered. He really did—his sister had been obsessed when they came out, and since he was older than us, he’d been forced into chaperoning us to the theater along with my brother.

I don't know why they'd complained. They'd both been paid for the chore of it, *and* they'd been able to take their girlfriends at the time.

It really wasn't the end of the world.

"All right, all right," he finally acquiesced. "Besides, if I had the time to watch it, I'd have started already."

"You live alone with no dependents. How do you *not* have time to watch TV?"

"Sports," he deadpanned. "And finding you dates."

"Yeah, that went well." I rolled my eyes and plucked the remote back into my possession. "I mean it. You can't watch it without me."

"I solemnly swear not to watch any of the final season of Schitt's Creek unless it's with you," he said in a serious tone. "Is that good?"

I dropped the remote and held out my pinky finger. "Nope. Pinky swear."

"Pinky swear? How old are we?"

"Old enough that I watched the new Trolls movie for fun by myself last week and felt no shame," I said, wiggling my finger. "Now, *pinky swear*."

"I remember why I'm single now," he muttered, looping his finger around mine.

"You're not single." I unhooked my finger from his and slapped his chest with the back of my fingers. "Technically."

He raised his eyebrows. "Ooh. Are you claiming me?"

"Do I *look* like I'm the type of girl who claims anyone? I was merely pointing out that, technically, we're..." I trailed off.

What *were* we doing?

"We're..." Josh waited, amusement curving his mouth into a smirk. "What are we, Kinsley?"

"You're about to be dead," I replied. "I don't know. What are we?"

"You can make that decision."

"Wrong answer. I'm going to give you a romance book. Read it."

"I'm sorry. Was I supposed to put down our drinks, pull you on top of me, and kiss you until you got your answer? Demand that we're dating and that you're mine and you will be forever?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll kill you before forever comes."

"Or am I supposed to drag you into bed and fuck your brains out to answer the questions?" He quirked one eyebrow. "For what it's worth, I'd be

okay with that, but you've made your feelings on period sex abundantly clear."

"Yeah, well, if you passed tiny, bloody squish balls every time you wiped, you wouldn't be so excited about period sex," I said flatly.

He stared at me. Just stared. For what felt like *ever*, and I knew he was processing my words.

"And there goes any desire to ever have sex with anyone on their period," he deadpanned.

"Seriously. Have you ever popped a blood clot? They're like those zits that squirt all over the mirror. One minute you're living your life, then the next, it's all, *whoosh*. Like stepping on a grape. Complete with the pop and everything."

"Kinsley."

"It's gross. So gross. Not to mention the *mess*."

"Kinsley, shut up."

"I buy nice sheets, Josh. Normal sex is messy enough without—"

He interrupted me by taking my wine and setting it down on the coffee table with his beer. Just as I opened my mouth again to say something, he cupped the back of my neck, leaned forward, and kissed the shit out of me.

It was so. *Damn. Good.*

Hey, maybe he didn't need the romance novel after all.

He pulled back just enough that the tip of his nose brushed mine. "We're dating, Kinsley. Secretly, but still dating. And exclusively. I'm not going to see anyone else, and neither are you. Does that narrow it down for you?"

A little shiver cascaded down my spine. Josh brushed his thumb over my jaw, bringing it close to my lower lip where he gently pulled it down before he released it.

"That was a weirdly sexy kiss to follow such a conversation," I murmured.

"That's your response?"

"Yes, it narrows it down. And most people would have run away at my very graphic description."

"I would appreciate not reliving that."

"It wasn't enjoyable to describe," I said dryly. "But I had to get drastic."

He sat back in the same manner someone would sigh—heavily, with a



long-suffering undertone that said they couldn't believe my shit.

It was fine.

I couldn't believe my shit, either.

I grabbed our drinks from the coffee table and handed him his with a smile, then selected Schitt's Creek from the menu.

Maybe him coming wasn't such a bad thing after all.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – KINSLEY

RULE EIGHTEEN: NEVER, EVER HIDE YOUR RELATIONSHIP FROM YOUR BEST FRIENDS.

AND YOU CAN'T HIDE IT FROM OLD PEOPLE.

The duck was wearing a dress and a bonnet.

I really wished that was an opening line to a joke, but it wasn't.

It was, sadly, reality.

It was a lot sadder for the duck than it was for me. That wasn't to say I wasn't alarmed, because I was. So, so alarmed, and wondering if it was time for Mabel to see her doctor.

This wasn't normal.

"What do you think?" she asked, smacking her over-lined light pink lips together. "Isn't she cute?"

I blinked at the poor, ugly brown duck who looked like she'd stepped out of a children's novel set in the English countryside, like a Beatrix Potter one.

I was half expecting a rabbit in a little blue jacket to show up any moment.

I glanced around for said rabbit, but when it didn't appear, turned my attention back to the fancily dressed duck. The bonnet was a frilly white concoction that was an insult to fashion, and I wasn't even going to focus on the crochet dress with a little apron that matched the bonnet.

"I don't know what to say," I said slowly.

"You don't like her?" Mabel sounded hurt.

"I just don't know what purpose the dress serves." I chose my words very carefully. "Isn't it uncomfortable?"

"No. I made it especially for her."

Oh, damn. No wonder she was so hurt. "Is that more?" I pointed to the big wicker basket on the nearest bench that looked like it was full of a bunch of duck clothing.

"Yes!" She hobbled over using her cane and sat next to the basket, then pulled out the top outfit. It was a blue floral dress with a matching bonnet, and there were even little pockets on the dress that were adorned with lace and little blue bows.

"You made all these?"

“It was a joint effort,” she said proudly. “We had a sewing class and made these dresses.”

“A sewing class? You needed to be taught? I don’t want to be rude, Mabel, but even *I* can sew.”

I turned at the sound of Josh’s voice and fought the smile that desperately wanted to break out on my face. “When did you get here?”

“I brought Grandma some things from the store,” he explained, grinning a little too enthusiastically at me. “She told me I had to come and see the ducks and Mabel’s outfits. She’ll be here in a minute.”

“I can sew, young man,” Mabel said before I could reply. “But we needed a printer for the patterns. Duck dresses aren’t in our books, believe it or not.”

I could believe it.

“And if you two keep grinning at each other like that, people are going to figure out you’re sleeping with each other.”

My stomach dropped.

Josh recovered faster than I did. “What on Earth are you talking about, Mabel? You’re insane.”

“I’m not insane.” She dutifully laid the dress on her lap and folded it carefully. “Your faces lit up when you saw each other in a way they haven’t before.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then why can’t Miss Talks-A-Lot over there say a word?” She raised one heavily penciled eyebrow at Josh, nodding in my direction. “She’s the first to tell me I’ve lost my mind if my granddaughter isn’t here to do it for me.”

“I have never told you that you’ve lost your mind,” I protested.

“Interesting that that’s the thing you choose to argue,” Josh said dryly.

I glared at him.

“I knew it!” Mabel fist-pumped and pointed at us. “You *are* doing the dance with no pants.”

“Mabel, you have to be quiet.” I held out my hands and took a step closer to her. “Please. Nobody knows.”

Her eyes widened. “I was right?”

Josh shot me a look as if to say, *well done, idiot*. “Yes, you were right. We’re figuring things out and nobody knows. You won’t say anything, will you? We don’t want Colton to know until we’re ready.”

“Oooh, this is scandalous.”

“What’s scandalous?” Grandpa Randy said from behind me.

I turned and saw him approach with Josh’s grandma with her arm looped through his.

“Your granddaughter is sleeping with Vicki’s grandson.” Mable’s eyes narrowed when she saw them together. “Why is *she* with you?”

“Mabel!” Josh and I both said at the same time.

“About time,” Vicki said, releasing Grandpa’s arm and taking Josh’s. Her light-gray hair was pulled up into an elegant chignon, and I admired her ability to do her hair even with her arthritis.

If I tried that now, I’d have birds nesting in it.

“Thank you for the visual,” Grandpa said, coming over and kissing my cheek. “I assume your brother doesn’t know.”

“No. And we’d prefer to stay it that way,” I replied. “Until we’re ready to tell him.”

“He’ll not hear it from me.” He paused and looked at the duck. “The duck looks ridiculous, Mabel. He shouldn’t be wearing a dress.”

“It’s a she!” Mabel argued.

“No, she’s a he,” Grandpa continued. “Trust me. He doesn’t quack as loud as the other girls, and I requested a brown drake.”

“Why would you have a male duck?” Josh asked. “They don’t lay eggs.”

“To get ducklings.” Grandpa grinned brightly.

“Why else would he have a male duck?” I turned to Josh.

“To eat him?”

All three pensioners gasped. “We are not eating our ducks!” Mabel shouted.

She really needed a nap.

“I’d eat them,” Grandpa said, but I couldn’t tell if he was being serious or just stirring the pot. “And take that godawful dress off Benjamin. He looks ridiculous.”

Vicki shook her head and settled onto a bench. “It’s like living in a preschool. Except the preschoolers are all geriatric and need a concoction of drugs three times a day.”

I wasn’t going to argue with that. Old people were an awful lot like toddlers—they required constant supervision, placating with bribes, and tried to run away.

And dress up ducks.

Yep.

Oversized toddlers for sure.

They settled into arguing about the gender of the duck and the functionality of the clothing they'd made for the ducks, and Josh and I took a few steps away from them so we could talk.

"Do you think we need to tell Colton?" he said in a low voice. "You know what Mabel's like."

"I don't think so," I replied just as quietly. "It's pretty out there, and both our grandparents will say it's not true. If she does, I think he'll just brush it off as Mabel being, well, Mabel."

Josh grunted. "I have to go back to work tomorrow and I have no idea how I'm supposed to be around him all day long."

"How do you think I feel? He's my brother. I can't lie to him."

"We don't have to."

"No, you don't understand. I *can't* lie to him. I'm terrible at it. If he asks me, I'm going to break."

"I don't know what you want me to say to you, Kins." Josh ran his hand through his hair. "This is so fucked up."

I dragged him a little further away to where we had more privacy. "Well, what do you want me to do? We agreed to keep this secret until we had it all worked out."

"I know." He averted his gaze. "Guilt is a shit thing."

"You started this," I reminded him. "When I went to leave your house, you're the one who came after me."

"Because feeling guilty doesn't change how I feel about you." His voice was low, and he met my eyes once again. "It doesn't mean I regret what we're doing or wish it would change, all right?"

"Then we tell him," I said after a moment. "Tonight."

Josh stared at me for a long moment. "Are you sure?"

"You can't say all that and ask me if I'm sure. No, I'm not freaking sure, but you clearly need to clear the air for your sanity, so we have to tell him."

"Fine. Tonight, then."

I nodded.

Great.

\*\*\*

Spoiler alert: we did not tell him.

We'd planned it out and everything. I would be the one to break the news, and we'd deal with it from there. Halfway through dinner, I chickened out and told Josh it was up to him.

He hadn't said it, either.

So all our issues had been for nothing. We were back to square one.

Right now, I was at the bookstore picking out baby shower gifts for Ivy and Kai while Josh was at work with my brother. Saylor had been rearranging the new release table ready for tomorrow's new release display, and Holley was taking stock in the non-fiction section.

My mind was whirling at one thousand miles an hour. It wasn't like Josh was the only one keeping a secret from his best friend. Hell, Holley had walked in on us kissing in the storeroom and I hadn't told her more.

She hadn't asked, granted, but still. If he were anyone else, she and Say would know everything by now.

I really hated that I didn't have anyone to talk to about this.

Well, I did, but Ivy had enough on her plate with her due date coming in a month or so. She didn't need to be babysitting me.

Look, it wasn't like I thought Holley or Saylor would tell anyone. In fact, I was absolutely certain that they wouldn't, but that didn't mean I felt like it was something I could talk about to them.

To say that I was in a relationship for the first time in four years, I was feeling pretty damn lonely.

*Because of it.*

I guess it was my own fault for getting feelings for someone I shouldn't have.

I selected the final book I wanted and took them to the register to set them aside. Saylor had eventually decided on buying some baby clothes in the next sizes up, which had meant I could circle back to my original idea of baby books ready for this weekend.

I blew out a long breath and perched on the stool behind the register.

Saylor glanced over at me with a frown. "What's up?"

"Tired," I replied, fiddling with the magnet stand to straighten up a few that had been put in the wrong places. "I didn't sleep well last night."

She grunted. "I feel that. I was up all night."

“Why?”

She waved a hand and sat on one of the armchairs by the window, slumping back into it. “I’ve been seeing this guy for a few weeks and ended it last night.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Say.”

“Don’t be.” Her eyes sparked with anger. “He was a jerk. Turns out he had a girlfriend I didn’t know about until last night when I stumbled on them together at dinner.”

I winced. “Ouch.”

“Not as ouch as it was for him,” she said smugly. “When I say it turns out he had a girlfriend, I mean he *had* a girlfriend.”

“Oh no. What did you do?”

“Told her he’d been texting me pictures of his dick for the last six weeks and that he was clearly a master cheater, because he’d never once said her name when he slept with me. Then I told him he wasn’t a very good cheater if he couldn’t even make a girl come.”

“*Ouch.*”

“Not as ouch as when his now ex-girlfriend literally punched him in the face. Turns out she’s a kickboxer and that really hurt.”

“You made friends with her, didn’t you?”

“Yep,” she said brightly. “We mutually disparaged asshole men, said a prayer that his dick would rot, and got drunk.”

“You are the only person I know who could tell a girl you’d slept with her boyfriend and then make friends with her.”

“Hey, I had no idea. He lives in Creek Hill and she lives in Dartree Mountain. It’s not like we were sneaking around. I thought he was being nice by coming here to take me out.” She shrugged. “Technically, I wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

“I never said you were. Just amazed that you could charm her after all that. And that he hid an entire relationship from both of you.”

“Yeah, well, I guess it’s easy when you don’t live in the same town.” She swung her legs up onto the table. “The chances of any of us running into each other while together was slim. It just so happened that I had to go pick up Grandma’s prescription for her last night and she asked me to bring her some sushi from that place over there. If we lived in the same town, it’d be way harder to hide a relationship.”

She was preaching to the choir.

“I guess so.” I trailed off after that and stopped messing with the magnets that I had now apparently rearranged.

Talk about a nervous tic.

“Seriously. What is wrong with you?” Saylor asked after realizing what I’d done.

Thankfully, a huge family of nine people spanning at least three generations entered the store right at that moment, saving me the need to reply.

Thank God.

I was about to spill it.

We both spent the next fifteen minutes helping them find everything they needed—everything from books on the local area to activity books for the four kids with them. When they left, Saylor followed with our lunch orders and headed to Bronco’s to order and pick it up.

Holley was still busy in the non-fic section, but she’d now moved from the cookbooks to the autobiographies. She was wearing her headphones and listening to an audiobook, so I wasn’t even sure she’d realized we’d just sold something like eighteen books to that family.

It would have been more, had the dad not cut off the eleven-year-old girl who wore a t-shirt that proclaimed her a book nerd.

Hmm.

Maybe we needed to stock bookish t-shirts.

I opened my mouth to shout for Holly, but a large gasp followed by a, “No!” sounded from the general direction of where she was, so I decided against it.

If I interrupted her during this book, there was every chance she might kill me.

The store stayed mercifully quiet for a few minutes, and it was only broken by the muffled mumbling of Holley as she expressed her disbelief at the audiobook and, finally, the short, sharp buzz of my cellphone as it indicated a text message.

**JOSH: This is hell.**

**ME: Speak for yourself. Saylor just broke up with some guy who was two-timing her and talking about secret relationships just made me almost spill it.**



**JOSH: Your brother had a huge fight with Amber this morning. He's yelling at everyone and just dared someone to give him a reason to punch them.**

**ME: Why doesn't he just break up with her?????**

**ME: AND DON'T DO IT. Remember the right hook.**

**JOSH: Are you kidding???** I'd rather be hit by a freight train than tell him I'm fucking his sister.

**ME: You fucked me once.**

**JOSH: Thanks to Mother Nature. I'll be rectifying it the moment you're done.**

I rolled my eyes.

**ME: You could say dating me.**

**JOSH: Yeah. That's not how he's going to see it.**

**ME: I'm so drained today.**

**JOSH: I know. We should have told him last night.**

**ME: Well, we didn't. Either of us. And we can't keep showing up at each other's houses or he's going to get suspicious.**

**JOSH: What's the weather doing tonight?**

**ME: Do I look like the local news channel?**

**JOSH: So full of attitude.**

**ME: It's one of my better qualities.**

**JOSH: I just checked. Little chilly, but dry.**

**ME: What does that have to do with us seeing each other?**

**JOSH: I have an idea, that's what.**

**ME: ...I'm going to go gray before you spit it out, aren't I?**

**JOSH: Meet me at Peak Point at nine-thirty tonight.**

**ME: Nine-thirty??? It'll be cold and dark!**

**JOSH: So bring a coat and a blanket. Do you want us to see each other or not?**

**ME: Fine, but you better bring hot chocolate. With marshmallows.**

**JOSH: You're so demanding.**

**ME: If I'm hiking a mile up a trail to see you when I should be in bed eating my weight in cheese puffs, it's the least you can do.**

**JOSH: If you eat your weight in cheese puffs, maybe you should be hiking a mile.**

**ME: Watch it. I know where to hide a body up there.**

**JOSH: You look so pretty today.**

**ME: Oh, piss off.**

## CHAPTER NINETEEN – KINSLEY

RULE NINETEEN: DATES AREN'T ALWAYS HEELS AND FANCY RESTAURANTS.

It was pitch freakin' black out here.

This was ridiculous. Cheese puffs aside, I really needed to be in bed right now. It was dark and cold and dark. Did I mention it was cold, too?

The weather was definitely turning in Montana, and an exposed hillside was not where I wanted to be tonight.

At least it wasn't windy.

I clicked on my little flashlight and began the mile-long trek up to Peak Place. It wasn't actually the peak of this mini mountain, but it was the only place that was flat enough where you could sit and hang out. It was also one of the safest because the fall wasn't steep or rocky.

Actually, calling it a fall was somewhat of an exaggeration, too.

It was more of a... slip. Eight feet down, where you could easily access the trail.

Either way, I wanted to be in bed.

I couldn't deny the thrill of this, though. I wouldn't be here unless I really wanted to be, and there was a gentle buzz of excitement that only increased with every step I took up the trail. Knowing that Josh was meeting me at the top made the pitch-black hike worth it, even when I stumbled on a tree root that was sticking out of the ground.

It was a good thing I knew this track like the back of my hand, or I'd have ended up on my ass.

I shook all my feelings out of my head and focused on the uneven path. It wound through the fir trees and bushes, and it felt as though it took forever until I saw the wooden sign that said Peak Point was just ahead.

I paused for a moment to check my phone. I was five minutes late and had no reception on my phone, so I tucked it back into my coat pocket and redirected my flashlight to the end of the trail. The entrance to the peak was overgrown, but an orange haze was visible through the branches as they parted.

Sometimes, it was a little like Narnia up here.

I pushed through the last of the branches and stilled. A small fire was burning in a pit surrounded by rocks, and Josh was sitting in front of it. His features were illuminated by the dancing flames when he turned his face

toward me. A smile spread across his face the moment our eyes met.

I felt like I was the only person in the entire universe who mattered to him.

And that feeling was worth the hike.

“Hi,” I said softly, stepping into the clearing.

“Hey.” He got up on his knees as if he were going to stand for me, but I waved a hand, so he patted the blankets next to him instead.

Two large picnic blankets were laid out on the ground with a couple of cushions, and I eyed the duffel bag next to him as I joined him. “Are we camping?”

“Did you want to camp?”

“God no. I hate camping.”

“Thank God. I don’t own a tent.”

Laughing, I accepted the fluffy blanket he gave me and put it over my legs, grateful for the warmth of the small fire. It was letting off a surprising level of heat, and it warmed my chilled fingers.

“I do, however, have hot chocolate.” He pulled a large thermos out from the duffel bag that was, actually, a large hiking backpack. Two travel mugs followed, and so did a packet of marshmallows, graham crackers, and a bar of chocolate.

“S’mores!” I gasped, clapping my hands to my cheeks.

Josh looked at me. “Shit. If I knew it was that easy to get you excited, I’d have made you s’mores years ago.”

“Shut up.” I nudged him and grabbed the huge flask of hot chocolate. Using my legs as cup holders, I carefully poured the steaming liquid into each one and secured all the necessary lids.

Josh pulled skewers from his bag and gave me one. “You know these things stabbed me like ten times in the back on the way up here, right?”

“Then you need a new backpack because yours is crap,” I retorted, taking the skewer he offered. “A good hiking backpack is made for skewers. S’mores are a vital part of hiking.”

“Since when?”

“Since we live in Montana and it’s cold all the time.”

“It’s not cold all the time.”

“Most of the time.”

He paused. “That’s fair.” He opened the marshmallows and handed me one with a grin. “Pretty good date, huh?”

I peered at him. I really didn't want to admit it, but it was. It was pretty perfect, actually. "It's not too bad."

"If you weren't grinning, I'd think you were trying to hold out on me."

"Shut up." I looked down because, yep, my dumbass was grinning. "Although a fire up here is pretty risky. What if someone sees and comes up? Or calls the fire department?"

He pressed a finger to my lips and pulled his toasted marshmallow from the fire. "I hiked up here last night. You can't actually see this specific spot from the ground because of the tree cover. And nobody will be hiking up here."

"How do you know that?"

"Because it's due to rain."

"You brought me up here knowing it's going to rain?"

A hiss filled the air, and I turned to see my marshmallow splatted on the edge of the firepit.

Aw. Damn it.

"Here." Josh's lips curled up, and he pointed his skewer at me. He'd already made the s'more, and his smile only widened as I pulled it off and took a bite.

"Thank you." I wiped some goo from the corner of my mouth. "But it doesn't excuse you bringing me up here when you know it's going to rain."

"Oh, it's not for like an hour. Chill out." He put another marshmallow over the fire. "I just gave you my s'more. You're not allowed to shout at me."

"Like that's a rule."

"I'm making it a rule. Anytime I give you food, you can't yell."

"I didn't yell. Technically."

"Semantics, Kinsley. God."

I laughed, taking another bite of the sweet treat he'd given up for me.

I don't know about anyone else, but that right there was a true sign he was a keeper.

I mean, I wasn't about to give up my food for him.

I didn't play that game.

My food was *my* food.

"How was your day?" He put his s'more together as I reached for another marshmallow.

"Could have been worse," I said, putting the skewer over the fire. "Sold a bunch of books, found out Saylor could befriend her own murderer,

and didn't get yelled at by Holley. Yours?"

He snorted, almost choking on the food in his mouth. "Didn't get punched by your brother, so I'll call it a win."

My lips twisted into a wry smile. "I texted him earlier, but he didn't respond. What happened?"

"He had his offer accepted on the house. He was at Amber's when the realtor called before work, and she listened in on the call, meaning he couldn't tell her. I know we joke about them not breaking up, but I think this could be the real thing this time."

My eyebrows shot up. "Was it that bad?"

Josh nodded solemnly, flicking away a burned bit of marshmallow. "Huge fight. Me and Kai took him to my place after work and finally got it out of him after three shots of vodka."

"Wow." I put together my own s'more. "That explains why I didn't get a text back."

"Yeah. He's passed out in my spare room. He's gonna feel rough in the morning." He chuckled. "Seriously, though, I think they're over. She's pissed he bought the house without her saying yes."

"But he told her he was going to."

Josh shrugged and sipped his hot chocolate. "I don't know, Kins, but it makes me feel bad for him. All he wants is to settle down, but Amber is so against everything he wants. I don't know how they've actually made it this long without imploding the way they did this morning."

"I don't know why she doesn't want a house. Your house is amazing, and I'm sure Colt's is, too. Why wouldn't you want to raise a family there instead of in her apartment? It's not like she has a huge one."

"I don't know. That's why I bought my house. I'm thirty next year—I need some security in my life, and Colt feels the same." He leaned back and looked at the fire. The light from the flames danced over his features, and for some reason, he looked more handsome than I'd ever seen him.

The sharp line of his stubbled jaw, his full lips. His enviable cheekbones and long, dark eyelashes that framed eyes that shone in the firelight.

God, he was unfairly, ridiculously, stupidly, romance-novel level handsome.

Worry fizzled in my stomach. If, after ten years, Amber and Colt couldn't get their shit together, what did that say about us?

I loved my house, and now Colt was buying his, Grandpa's would likely go to me. It was large enough to raise a family in, but Josh loved his house, too.

What if we ever reached a point where we wanted to get serious like that?

What would we do?

"Hey." Josh cupped my chin and met my eyes. "Why are you frowning?"

"You own your house," I said softly. "And now that Colt is buying his house, Grandpa's will probably be mine when he dies. What if we make it through all this secret stuff and eventually, we need to decide this stuff, then what happens?"

"Stop it." He moved everything from between us and shuffled over the blanket to be right in front of me, then rested his hands either side of my face. His palms were warm against my cold cheeks, and the look in his eyes was nothing but earnest. "For one thing, this between us is still new. Not that I have any doubts about how I feel about you, but that's absolutely not anything you need to worry about, you hear me?"

I nodded.

"And for another thing, I don't care where I live, Kinsley. If it meant I'd get to live with you, I'd live wherever you wanted, however you wanted." He dipped his face to mine until the tip of his nose kissed mine. "Because I would never ask you to give up a house that means as much to you as your grandpa's does."

Warmth rose in my cheeks, but I couldn't tell if it was a blush or just a general effect of being near him when he was saying the things he was.

And I didn't know what it was.

Maybe it was the fire. Maybe it was the darkness that made me feel safe or maybe it was the feeling of his hands either side of my face, but it finally hit me.

He really, really cared about me.

Butterflies exploded in my stomach as I leaned into his kiss. My hands crept up to grasp his jacket, the zippers cutting into my palms as the overwhelming sensation of falling hit me.

Not literally.

Emotionally.

It was a wave. Nothing extravagant like a tsunami. It didn't hit me with

a sudden wash of understanding that changed everything I knew in a minute.

No, it was a gentle wave. One that crawled up and covered my toes, breaking as soon as it hit my ankles before dissipating. It came again, this one with a little more power, and the awareness of how I truly felt for Josh spread through my body.

Each wave accompanied a kiss. One after another they spread through me, pushing my feelings for Josh deeper into my bones, into my very soul, until I had no choice but to admit the truth to myself.

I was absolutely, definitely, wholly, undeniably, teetering on the edge of falling in love with Joshua Carter.

Irrevocably so.

Because if I fell, if I was pushed, if I crossed the line, there would be no coming back from it.

If I fell, there would be no way back from loving him.

And I had no choice but to admit to myself that being loved by him would be nothing short of amazing.

A big, fat drop of cold wetness hit me on the cheek, and I jerked back with a squeal. Josh's alarm quickly turned to bemusement as it kept coming, and it took me far too long to realize it was the rain he'd told me was forecast.

Sizzling filled the air as the rain hit the fire, and the hot wood hissed with every drop that made contact. I understood how the fire felt—my coat wasn't waterproof, and if I stayed up here any longer, I was going to be a drowned rat by the time we reached halfway down the hike path.

"We have to go!" I squealed, trying to escape his hold.

Laughing, Josh grabbed me harder and, using his body weight, pushed me back. I fell onto the blanket with an 'oof' that I felt through my entire being, but it was short-lived. Josh was so much bigger than I was, and he covered my body with his, acting like a human umbrella.

The last thing I saw before he kissed me was his grin.

It split his face and danced in his eyes, and I felt that smile in every single touch we shared. His fingers slid into my hair and around the back of my head. His kiss was heady and consuming, and it was almost enough to make me forget that it was raining.

Almost.

My jeans were soaked through, after all.

Not that it stopped me from kissing him back. I wasn't sure there was



anything that could stop me from kissing him back. It was almost a compulsion. I was beginning to crave the way I felt when his lips were against mine, and it was absolutely terrifying.

Especially when my heart was hammering against my chest the way it was now.

“Josh,” I whispered.

“Yeah?”

“I’m wet.”

He pulled back to look down at me, his lips curving into a smile. “Oh, yeah.”

I ran my tongue over my dry lips. “My clothes. My clothes are wet.”

He wiggled his eyebrows.

“From the *rain*, Joshua.”

With a laugh, he got up and rummaged in his duffel bag. As I sat up, I saw the tell-tale sight of an umbrella being undone and opened, and I glared at him.

“Are you kidding? What? You couldn’t make out with me under that instead?”

He positioned it so it was over my head. “I thought women liked to be kissed in the rain.”

“We do, but if there’s an umbrella available, we’ll take it.”

“You say it like you’re speaking for all women.”

“I am.” I nodded and took the umbrella. “Trust me, I am.”

“Well, sue me for trying to book-woo you.”

“Book-woo me? What on Earth is book-wooing?”

He moved the umbrella so we were both covered by it. “Book-wooing: the art of applying fictional romantic notions to real life to woo someone.”

I blinked at him, fighting back a smile. “You made that up, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. It’s cute, huh?”

“Yes,” I muttered. Begrudgingly. The last thing I needed was for him to start swiping random scenes from books or, worse, scenes he’d read about on the Internet.

If he walked into my bedroom with a flogger and nipple clamps, we were going to need a come-to-Jesus moment.

“So what is this so-called art?” I leaned against the huge log behind us and nestled into Josh’s side when he wrapped his arm around me. Despite the

fact we were now cloaked in darkness aside from the dying embers of the fire and it was raining, it was weirdly cozy up here.

“I just told you.” His shoulders shook with his laugh. “Putting fictional things that make you love romance so much into action so I look like a nice romance hero.”

“Oh, yeah. I can just see you on the cover of some historical novel, shirtless, with long hair flowing like a majestic highlander.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’d be on one of those sex books on Amazon.”

“If you refer to romance novels as sex books again, we’re breaking up.”

“What should I call them?”

“Romance novels,” I said dryly. “You know, their name. What they are, instead of a derogatory term designed to diminish their place in society and the women who read them.”

“But they have sex in them.” I could almost hear his frown.

“It’s also a billion-dollar industry, and arguably the only one that truly empowers female writers. Usually, they’re dismissed as wannabe authors with no credibility and left to write under an alias with initials so nobody knows they’re female. Ironically, it’s also the most viciously attacked, and that’s probably because of the fact it’s primarily female led. If sex in a fictional novel bothers you, I’d like to introduce you to the porn industry which is far more questionable than novels about two consenting parties.”

Josh paused, shifting almost uncomfortably. “Well, that’s the last time I call them sex books.”

“Thank you. If you’d like a sex book, I’m sure I can find some in the non-fiction section in the store. Or, you know. Buy you a Playboy.”

“I haven’t used Playboy since—well, never.”

“Liar.”

He laughed again. “Okay, we’re off topic.”

“You got us there.”

“Anyway,” he said, steering the conversation back to where we were before our little detour. “I did some research about romance novels and the most popular scenes. And, I’ll have you know, rain kisses were one of the most popular kiss scenes.”

“Look at you, Mr. Romance.”

He dipped his head to meet my eyes, grinning. “I’m trying.”

My lips pulled to one side. “Shall we go?”



## CHAPTER TWENTY – JOSH

RULE TWENTY: SOMETIMES, THE BEST CONVERSATIONS ARE THE ONES WHERE YOU DON'T SAY A WORD.

“Why? This is nice.”

Kinsley pouted a little. “Because it’s wet and getting cold.”

I sighed. I wasn’t really ready to go back to the world just yet, but she clearly was. “All right, let’s go. I just have to pick this all up.” I shuffled out from under the umbrella and stood up.

Kins didn’t move. “We don’t have to. The rain seems like it’s stopping.”

It wasn’t a lie. It was getting lighter all the time, and it did look as though it was about to stop any moment.

“No, you’re cold. You don’t need to get sick. Come on.” I held out my hand for her to take so I could pull her up. She slipped her hand in mine, and as soon as I tightened my grip on her, she yanked me back down.

“What are you doing? You just said you wanted to go.”

“Well, you don’t want to, so we don’t have to. And it’s nearly stopped raining. We can relight the fire if it does. There’ll be dry wood around here somewhere.”

I blinked at her. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.” She smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear, only for it to fall back free. “Besides, it’s nice to be up here alone. Kinda feels like nothing else exists, huh?”

My lips pulled to the side. I felt exactly the same, which was why I didn’t want to go back down the trail yet. Up here, in the dark, where there was nobody and nothing else, there was just me and Kinsley.

Where I could pretend like this wasn’t all a secret, like we weren’t hiding our relationship from everyone else.

By hiding up here, we didn’t have to hide *us*.

“That’s how I feel,” I said softly, tucking her hair away again. “With you. Nothing else exists when I’m with you.”

She dipped her head, briefly breaking eye contact, and I knew she was blushing. I reached out and cupped her chin, drawing her attention back to me. Even though it was dark, almost pitch-black, I could still see the shine in her eyes.

Kinsley covered my hand with hers. “We can do this, can’t we?”

“We’re not going there again, are we?”

“No, I mean... We can do this. No matter what my brother says or what anyone else thinks. We can make this work.”

The rain had stopped, so I took the umbrella from her and closed it before I put it down on the other side of the log that we’d all long used as a bench.

Then, leaning down, I rested my hands either side of her face and looked down at her. “Kins, I *promise* you that I’ll do everything I can to make this work. No matter what your brother says. No matter what anyone says. I don’t give a fuck about anyone else. I only care about you.”

“It’s going to be really hard, isn’t it? Like, being up here, it’s just reminded me how easy it should be, but it’s not like that normally.”

“Yeah, it’s gonna be hard, but all relationships are. It doesn’t mean they’re not worth it. The things that matter the most to you are always the hardest.” I brushed my thumbs over her soft, cold cheeks, and lowered my face to hers so our noses brushed. “And you have no idea how long I’ve wanted this. To be here with you. Like this. How *hard* it’s been to never do anything about how I felt. But now I have, and there isn’t a damn thing in this world that feels more worth it than this moment right here.”

I felt the bob as her throat swallowed.

“Do you love me?”

They were the quietest words I’d ever heard her speak. Like she was more terrified of asking than she was of me answering.

Impossible. There was no right answer to that question.

Not yet.

“I don’t know,” I lied, tilting my head so my nose brushed her cheek and my hand cupped the back of her neck. “Maybe. Maybe not.” I kissed her cheek. “Not yet.”

*Lies. Lies. Lies.*

*I am so in love with her it fucking hurts.*

But she didn’t need to hear that right now.

She needed to hear what she wanted to hear.

I moved and my lips grazed her ear. “I don’t have to be in love with you right now to know that you’re the only person I want to be with.” My lips ghosted along her jaw until they hovered above her parted ones. “But I know that I will. One day. When you’ve let down the last wall you’ve got built up,

that'll be it for me.”

“I don't have a wall.”

“You do. A little one. And that's okay.” I gently kissed her.

“Oh, God. It's the shape of my brother, isn't it?”

I laughed and touched my forehead to hers. “Way to ruin the moment.”

She sat back with a grimace. “Sorry. Shall we go now or stay a little longer?”

“It's quiet. It's not raining. The clouds have cleared. I think we should ignore the world a little longer.”

She dropped her head back and looked up at the sky. “Wow. I forgot how beautiful it was up here.”

Wow indeed. The wonder that stretched across her face was more beautiful than the sparkling of the stars in the sky as the clouds cleared, and I did the only thing I wanted to do right in that moment.

I lay down on my back, using my duffel bag as a pillow, and patted my chest. She jerked around to look at me, and her face lit up when she realized what I was telling her to do.

Kinsley crawled over and lay down next to me. The blanket was on the wetter side, but so were we. It didn't matter a bit as she curled into my side, rested her head on my shoulder, and we looked up at the night sky as the clouds really moved to unfurl its beauty.

I wrapped my arm around her and rested my cheek against the top of her head. I reveled in the sensation of her against me. I wasn't sure this was a feeling that would ever get old, and if it did...

Well, I needed a slap upside the head.

I just hoped this feeling would never, ever go away.

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I watched as the sign at the end of the street was changed from ‘FOR SALE’ to ‘SOLD,’ and a smile crept across my face.

The house really was Colton's, then.

It was a bittersweet sight. I knew that meant he'd done two things: called the realtor and confirmed he was going ahead with the purchase... And broken up with Amber.

I hadn't seen him all day at work. He'd been gone before I'd left this morning, and I assumed that had been so he could go home, shower, and get

ready for work. He'd never showed, so he'd likely called in sick while he sorted his personal life out.

Or, you know.

His hangover.

I let myself into my house and tossed my jacket to the side. It slumped over the shoe rack and onto the floor, but I groaned and ignored it as I turned to the kitchen. I was starving and exhausted from a full day on site, and all I wanted was a coffee, some good food, and a hot shower.

I doubted any of those three things would come easily, because that was just the kind of day I'd had.

I fired up the coffee machine and pulled my phone from my pocket. I had to stifle a yawn as I struggled to get my thumb on the right spot on my screen to unlock it. Three new texts showed up—one from my sister, checking in to make sure Grandma hadn't killed any of the ducks, one from Colton asking if they'd changed the sign on his new house, and one from Kinsley that was a whole bunch of fucking gobbledegook.

I put the mug under the spout, hit the button, and leaned against the island. I started with my sister, replying that Grandma had not killed any ducks to my knowledge but it was a possibility. I told Colton they'd changed it as I'd gotten home and I'd send a picture when I took the trash out in a bit, then texted Kinsley back a very adult, "What the fuck?"

Her reply came first.

**KINSLEY: FUCKS. TOMORROW.**

I raised my eyebrows. Oh, yeah?

**ME: I'm listening.**

**KINSLEY: Stupid autocorrect.**

**KINSLEY: I meant ducks.**

Maybe not.

Fucking ducks.

**ME: Thanks for getting my hopes up.**

**KINSLEY: LOL, but seriously. The duck parade is tomorrow.**

**ME: I am not going to the duck parade.**

**KINSLEY: Yes, you are. If I have to go, you're going.**

**ME: That only works when everyone knows about us.**

**KINSLEY: Fine, your grandma said you had to go or she's telling Colton.**

**ME: Low blow.**

**KINSLEY: I know. So you have to come.**

**ME: Not the kind of coming I was hoping for.**

**KINSLEY: Joshua.**

**ME: What?**

**KINSLEY: We have to figure out how to handle this because Colt will be there and Mabel runs her mouth faster than Usain Bolt after a world record.**

**ME: Fuck.**

**KINSLEY: EXACTLY. Are you at home?**

**ME: Yes.**

**KINSLEY: Have you eaten yet?**

**ME: No. I just walked through the door like five minutes ago.**

**KINSLEY: I'm bringing dinner. I'll be there in half an hour.**



**ME: You know your brother brought the house right? He could show up at any moment to see it and probably come by.**

**KINSLEY: Then I'll have to keep my pants on this time, won't I?**

**ME: Whoa. Don't go *that* far.**

**KINSLEY: Go away. I'm going to get food.**

I laughed and grabbed my coffee to take it upstairs. If she was coming over, I desperately needed to shower since I was covered in grime from work, but I was glad I didn't have to cook.

Or order my own food.

This having a girlfriend thing was really working in my favor.

I downed half the coffee before I got in the shower. After a hot rinse and a hard scrub, I shut off the water, wrapped a towel around my waist, and headed downstairs to the laundry room for some clean sweats.

I was almost entirely dry by the time the rumble of Kinsley's car filled the air. I looked out of the window to see her pull up behind my truck. She got out of the car and walked around the front of it to the passenger side where she opened the door and bent forward, offering me a full look of her ass clad in dark gray yoga pants.

I groaned. If yoga pants were my fucking kryptonite, and Kinsley in yoga pants was a walking wet dream.

I adjusted my boxers over my now half-hard cock and walked to the door to let her in. "Did you have to wear yoga pants?"

"I'm sorry," she drawled. "Was I supposed to pick up dinner in my underwear?"

"No, but feel free to eat in it." I grinned and stepped aside to let her in, then closed the door behind her.

"But if my brother stops by, I can't talk myself out of that one." She returned the smile as she put the bag of food on the kitchen island. "Get some plates."

I pulled two dinner plates from the cupboard and set them down. "Tell me about this damn duck thing."

Kinsley's groan reverberated through the entire kitchen. "I picked the

last of Grandpa's tomatoes from the garden this morning and dropped them off when I had my lunch break. Mabel has organized the duck parade to be marched through the gardens of the retirement home tomorrow lunchtime. Apparently, they're even putting on food."

"Do they know how insane this is?"

She shrugged one shoulder and reached up to tie up her hair into a loose bun. "I have no idea, but it's absolute carnage over there. Rosie and Agatha have both tried to appoint themselves as 'Chairwoman of the Parade,' much to Mabel's irritation, and your grandmother has just been drinking gin and tonic and leaving them to it."

My lips pulled to one side. Rosie and Agatha's rivalry was somewhat legendary, and I wasn't surprised to hear that they were now arguing with each other over something they thought was completely stupid.

Nor was I surprised to learn that my grandmother was drinking her way through the process.

If you asked me, she had it right.

"Isn't this Mabel's thing?" I asked, emptying mushroom ravioli onto my plate. "Why wouldn't she be the... chairwhatever is it."

"That's the point." Kinsley said, opening her own takeout container of spaghetti bolognese. "She believes she should be, so nothing is really getting done. Or at least it wasn't an hour ago when Amanda called me and passed on a request from my grandpa to get balloons."

"Balloons?"

"Yeah, and not little ones either." She picked up her fork and sat on the stool nearest to her. "Those big ass helium things. They found a store in Creek Hill that sells duck and chicken-shaped balloons and want me to go and pick up twenty of them."

"Twenty of them?" My eyes bugged. "How the hell are you supposed to get twenty of them in your car?"

"That's what I said!" She paused.

I didn't like that.

"What did you do?" I asked, staring at her with my fork paused mid-way to my mouth.

"Um." She scratched the back of her neck and looked away as she shrugged off her sweater. "I volunteered you."

"Kinsley, I am not going to drive to Creek Hill to pick up twenty balloons that are shaped like chickens and ducks."

“I kind of promised I would make you.”

“You’re coming with me.”

“I can’t! I have to open the store!”

“I have a job.”

“It’s Saturday. You’re not working this weekend.” Kins folded her arms across her chest. “You have to. They already called the store and bought them.”

“Jesus Christ.” I rubbed my temples. “Why am I always getting dragged into this shit?”

“Because our grandparents are ridiculous,” she said without batting an eyelid. “You should be thankful you didn’t have to see the argument about which duck was going to wear the bow tie.”

“Wouldn’t it be the male?”

“You’d think.” She picked her fork back up and twisted it in the spaghetti. “Mabel still insists it’s a girl. Problem is, ducks can be hard to sex. It’s usually when they start quacking or laying, and they’re too young to lay yet.”

“Why do you know so much about ducks?”

She blinked at me. “Our grandparents are insane, Josh. And I have access to Google. I was settling an argument.”

“Didn’t they already have that?”

“What part of them being insane don’t you understand?”

That was a very good point. I also had no doubt they would still be arguing about the gender of the damn duck for the next six months. Mabel would probably set a camera up in their duck house and make sure it laid to be right, and even then she’d still argue it.

“So what is happening tomorrow?”

“You have to drive to Creek Hill at nine to pick up the balloons at nine-thirty and drop them off at the retirement home. Then we have to show up again at eleven-thirty to be ready for the parade at midday.”

This was so fucking ridiculous, and I said as much.

Sighing, Kinsley set down her fork. “I know that, but what can we do? We have to go and pretend like we care so they’ll move onto something else.”

“Do you really believe they’ll do that?”

“Absolutely not,” she replied. “But it’s all I have left to hold onto, Josh. Don’t ruin this for me.”

She looked so forlorn all I could do was laugh at her. She pouted for a moment before she laughed right along with me, and we ate the rest of our meal in an amicable silence that was broken only by the clinking of our forks against our plates.

When we were done, I collected them both and put them in the sink while she disposed of our trash in the can. We moved through to the living room where we unanimously agreed on putting the next episode of Schitt's Creek on. We were on episode three of season five, and Kinsley nestled in next to me so we could watch.

"I can't believe you signed me up to buy a ton of balloons," I muttered, trailing little circles on her forearm with my fingertip.

"I want to say I'm sorry, but I'm really not." She choked back a laugh and tilted her head back to look up at me. "I am not doing it. I don't care."

I sighed. "You're really lucky I like you, you know that?"

"Oh, yeah? And what would you do if you didn't?"

"Well, I wouldn't be getting twenty poultry-shaped balloons in my truck tomorrow," I said dryly. "But here we are."

She jabbed her elbow into my thigh, making me wince. "Shut up."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes." She scrambled to sit up and faced me. "You're very argumentative today."

"So would you be if you had to pick up twenty—"

"Oh, my God. They're just balloons and they won't fit in my car. Stop being a baby."

"Make me."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – JOSH

RULE TWENTY-ONE: THERE'S ONLY SO LONG YOU CAN HIDE BEFORE YOU GET FOUND.

“Make you shut up?” Kinsley raised her eyebrows. “What? By like stuffing a sock in your mouth?”

“Not exactly.” My lips twitched, and I pulled her onto my lap so she was straddling me.

She pouted, flattening her hands against my chest. She barely needed to wriggle before I felt my cock hardening against her, and that made her pause.

“Don’t say it,” I groaned, dropping my head back against the back of the sofa. “If you wore those yoga pants over here, and I can’t rip them off you, I’m gonna need another shower.”

Laughing, Kinsley pressed her forehead against my shoulder for a moment, then sat back up again. “I’d prefer if you didn’t rip them. These were pretty expensive, and I like them a lot. You can... peel... them off.”

I jerked my head up. “Peel them off? Does that mean—”

Another laugh came, and she slid her hands up my chest to cup my jaw. She dipped her head and kissed me, answering my question without words.

I groaned into her mouth, moving my hands up her thighs until I grabbed her ass. My fingers dug into the soft material of her yoga pants, and my cock hardened against her as she nestled right in against me.

Kinsley deepened the kiss, using her tongue to part my lips. Every part of my body was alive, and my heart hammered against my ribs when she wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing her body entirely against me.

Her hips ground against mine, and my cock throbbed as it fought against the constraints of my sweats. I palmed her ass cheeks as she moved her hands across my shoulders and down my biceps, her entire body flexing and moving against me needily.

All I wanted to do was tear off her clothes and push my cock inside her. Keep her on me, like this, grinding against me while she rode me. With my fingers digging into her ass cheeks and her nails in my neck and her moans on my mouth.

*Fuck.*

I let go of her ass and grabbed the bottom of her shirt, lifting it up her body. The movement broke our kiss, and as she lifted her arms for me to pull it off, it revealed her bare breasts.

She had no damn bra on.

*Fuuuck.*

Groaning again, I cupped the back of her neck and drew her mouth to mine. I kissed her hungrily, reveling in every sweep of my tongue against hers. Already my skin was covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and Kinsley's skin was just as hot under my touch.

I dragged my lips from hers and over her skin; peppering kisses down her jaw and over the curve of her neck. She tilted her head back so I had easier access, and I dropped tiny little kisses all over her collarbone down to the swell of her chest.

Wrapping one arm firmly around her, I splayed my fingers between her shoulder blades and pushed her back. Her nipples were already hard, and there was a sharp intake of breath when I flicked my tongue over her right one.

She reached between us. My muscles clenched as her fingers brushed my lower stomach, and she curled them so she was able to slip them under the waistband of my sweats and pull them down.

"No underpants!" she muttered.

I brought my lips to hers and said back, "You're a fine one to talk."

She giggled into the kiss and adjusted herself so she could free my cock. It jerked with a mind of its own when she wrapped her hand around it, and in that moment, I was entirely at her mercy.

If she demanded I come, I'd do it on the fucking spot.

"You're still wearing pants," I murmured, fighting back a moan at the sensation of her thumb rubbing the head of my cock and spreading the precum that was there. "You should have worn a dress if you were gonna do this."

"You dragged me on you." She took my lower lip in her mouth and gently sucked.

The moan escaped.

*Jesus fucking Christ, I was going to die.*

"Take off the damn yoga pants, Kinsley, or I *am* going to tear them off you."

She climbed off my lap, holding onto my cock for a second longer than

necessary, and turned around.

I lifted my hips to pull my sweats down, and Kinsley carefully hooked her thumbs in the waistband and slowly pulled the thick band down over her hips. The movement revealed black cotton panties lined with lace—panties that wouldn't look sexy on anyone but her.

And she was taking fucking *forever* to pull them down.

Slowly, slowly, slowly. It felt like an age before I saw the light flesh of the tops of her thighs, and it was only then, when her yoga pants were wrapped around her thighs, that she moved to the panties.

She did that even slower.

Over the curve of her ass.

“Keep it up,” I said gruffly, wrapping my hand around my throbbing cock. “And I'm going to turn you around and bend you over the back of the sofa.

Her head jerked and she looked back at me. “You wouldn't!”

Sounded like a challenge.

I wasn't one to pass one of those up.

I got up and grabbed her, wrapping my hand around her lower arm to shove her around to the sofa. She put up no fight thanks to the fact she'd fucked about so much taking her pants off, and it was easy for me to bend her over the sofa.

Then yank down the clothes that were in my way.

I removed them entirely, tugging them over her feet and throwing them to the side. She wriggled in front of me, something I wasn't completely sure wasn't deliberate, and the desire I felt for this woman flew through the roof.

I grabbed her ass so firmly it was almost a slap, and I climbed onto the sofa next to her, using one leg and my hand to keep her in place. My fingers slid easily between her legs to where her pussy was wet and ready, and she gasped when my finger made contact with her clit.

I toyed with it for a moment, enjoying the way she reacted so fervently to my touch. It was how I'd felt when she'd had her hand wrapped around my cock—like she could ask me to blow up the world and I would.

I kissed her neck as I moved my hand and positioned it to slip my finger inside her. I eased one finger inside her, testing it, and then used a second. She moaned and arched her back, angling her hips so I could fuck her easier with my fingers.

So I did.

I pumped my hand, pushing my fingers inside her, sliding through the wetness of her pussy as if it were nothing. Her breathing was so heavy she was almost gasping, and her muscles clenched around me again and again.

She reached down and wrapped her left hand around my cock, jerking her hand in response to my own movements.

Mother. Fucker.

Her hand around my cock felt so fucking good.

I gripped her neck and kissed her hard, pumping my fingers into her. Her moans vibrated across my lips, and my balls tightened as she stroked my cock quickly.

No.

I wasn't going to come like this, and neither was she.

I slid my fingers out of her pussy and moved, making her release my cock. Moving so I was behind her, I took my cock in my right hand and palmed her ass with the other, maneuvering her into position so I could fuck her properly.

Kinsley dropped her forehead onto the back of the sofa, and I eased my cock into her wet pussy. She took it easily. She was more than ready for me, more than ready for me to fuck her into oblivion where nothing but she and I mattered.

My fingers curled into the skin at her hips and dug in deep, holding her hips in the position I needed them. She arched her back, perfecting the position, and I thrust into her, burying myself deep inside her with each jerk forward.

She cried out in pleasure, clenching her pussy around my dick. It was like a trigger switch, and all pretense of control flew out of the window. I pounded into her like it was the last time we'd ever be together, like I needed to brand myself onto her, as if I would have to remember this for-fucking-ever.

I fucked her hard and ruthlessly, unforgivably, and she responded in kind. She ground her hips and pushed into me and took everything I gave, giving it all right back for the split seconds I hesitated.

My orgasm hit me hard, clenching every single muscle in my body until I could barely breathe. My balls felt like they were in an iron vice, and I was a second away from stopping when Kinsley cried out and pressed her ass against me.

I pumped into her a few more times, just as firmly, and rode her



orgasm out with endless clenching around my cock. It was almost enough to make me come again, but she sagged onto the cushions in front of me, her body falling limp.

I was as spent as she was. I relaxed on top of her while still trying to hold my own body weight so she wasn't crushed. My forehead rested against the back of her shoulder, and my hot, heavy exhales spread across her upper back as I tried to regain control of myself.

Her own were muffled by my sofa, and I reluctantly pulled back after a minute so she could raise her head and breathe again. Pulling out of her was like losing a comfort blanket—she was so hot, so wet, so comfortable, that if we were in bed, I'd have happily fallen asleep buried deep inside her pussy.

I dropped to the sofa, and she did the same, falling in the same direction I had. I caught her as she flopped and held her against me, laughing breathlessly as I did so.

Kinsley groaned as she pressed her face into my neck. “Now I need a shower and I have no clean underwear.”

“Didn't stop me earlier,” I murmured into her hair.

“Be quiet. You didn't wear underwear in the hope you'd get laid.”

“Same reason you didn't wear a bra, then.”

“Nope.” She moved and nestled further into me, resting one arm over my body. “I didn't wear a bra because bras are prison devices.”

“I completely agree.”

“You would.” She poked me. “I'm stealing your shower. And your clothes. And leaving in the dead of night.”

“Excellent.” I smoothed my hand over the top of her head, pushing wayward wisps of hair from her face. “Plenty of time to do that again, then.”

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There were so many fucking balloons here that I had whiplash.

Mind you, there were so many ducks that I had it, too.

I resented every single second that I was here. It was the first time Kinsley and I had been around Colton since we'd solidified our relationship, and we'd barely spoken two words to each other.

We'd always been friends, so we were really running the risk of going too far to the other direction. If we didn't talk at all, it'd look weird.

Not to mention it didn't help that Saylor, Holley, Tori, and Ivy were

here. Not that Ivy was able to talk to anyone except all the elderly ladies who wanted to caress her pregnant belly, but she was well-guarded by her fierce grandmother, Rosie.

It was Tori and Agatha everyone was worried about.

Despite what Tori said, she and Agatha were two peas in a pod. If anyone was going to cause trouble, it would be one of them.

I slipped away from the crowd to where Kinsley was hiding on a bench behind some bushes. “What are you doing here?”

“Avoiding Mabel and her bonnets,” she whispered, tucking her hair behind her ear. “She wants me to help adjust some for the ducks, but the last thing I want is to stab her duck with a pin.”

“Yeah, for sure.” I looked around at the sight before us. “What’s going on?”

“You just got here?”

“Oh, yeah. I dropped those balloons and ran. Have you spoken to your brother?”

She nodded. “Yeah. He was here with Grandpa when I arrived. It’s over with Amber, and I think it’s for real this time.”

I blew out a long breath. “Is it bad that I’m happy about that?”

“No,” she said slowly, staring out in front of us. “I am, too. Their relationship was unhealthy and toxic. They’re in different places and want different things, and sometimes it doesn’t matter how much you love someone.”

I said nothing for a moment before I nudged her, drawing her attention, and winked. “Come on. We need to get back out there before someone gets suspicious that we’re both missing.”

Groaning, she let me pull her to her feet. “Only because you’re trying to hide with me. Talk about unfair.”

I laughed and walked out ahead of her, stepping into the carnage. I was swept away by my grandmother who looped her arm through mine and led me across the green to the other side of the pond.

“You’re being obvious.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I grunted.

“You and Kinsley,” she whispered, patting my hand. “You can’t go sneaking off when Colton is around unless you’re willing to let him find out.”

I let out a deep breath and looked around. My gaze found Kinsley instantly. She was not far from where I’d left her, surrounded by her friends,

and laughing.

And beautiful.

So. Fucking. Beautiful.

Her dark hair swung around her shoulders as she laughed, and she wrapped one arm around a now-sitting Ivy who had her hands rested protectively on her bump.

She was protecting her, too, keeping her safe from the well-meaning but invasive pensioners who loved nothing more than babies and bumps and little knitted booties.

“You look like you’re fallin’ in love,” Grandma said, lowering herself onto a bench to watch the duck parade. “You need a new poker face. Yours sucks.”

“If you weren’t my grandmother, I’d tell you where to shove that.”

“I know. It’s why I like being your grandmother.” She grinned, resting her hands on her lap. “Now sit here, shut up, and watch this stupid thing Mabel put together.”

I took a seat next to her as everyone else congregated in this area. Eventually, I was forced to the side to perch on the arm of the bench as the other older members of the group demanded the bench seats.

Seats I was happy to give up.

Kinsley stepped in behind me and leaned down. “They know,” she hissed into my ear.

“What?” I said out of the corner of my mouth.

“Holley and Saylor. Ivy knew, but Rosie let it slip. I couldn’t deny it.” She leaned forward on the back of the bench as if she just needed to rest, but her lips were right by my ear. “Rosie bullied me into admission,” she whispered. “She won’t say anything, but we need to figure this out and soon. Before it’s too late.”

In a risky move, I reached back and squeezed her hand. “I know, babe. I know.”

She straightened up, taking her hand back in a manner that wasn’t so obvious. Still, she held the back of the bench where her fingers still brushed against the back of my shoulder in a weirdly comfortable kind of way.

She was there.

Right there.

And it was nice.

Not as nice as having her curled up against my side as we watched this

stupid fucking duck parade, but here we were.

“Has it started yet?” Holley stepped up next to me and fiddled with the cap on her water bottle.

“Nope,” I said, leaning back into Kinsley’s hand.

“You’re being obvious,” she muttered.

Kinsley obviously heard because she snatched her hand away just in time for the parade to begin. I felt the loss acutely—it was a weird comfort to lose, but I knew why.

I was becoming attached to her in a way I’d never allowed myself to before.

Despite what I’d said to her, I was absolutely falling in love with her.

With her laugh. With her smile. With her eyes. With her touch.

With her rants about books that had been turned to movies.

Every single thing was ripe for the picking, and my stupid fuckin’ heart was plucking them off one by one.

I wasn’t about to say that out loud. It was only two or three days ago I’d told her that I wasn’t falling for her, that I didn’t love her, that I would one day but not yet.

This ‘one day’ was too soon.

“Grandma!” Saylor snapped. “We told you that one was a male! Why is he in a dress?”

I looked over toward the ugly brown duck we’d all insisted was a male—that our Internet searches had insisted was a male. He was in a pink dress and yellow bonnet that was undoubtedly Mabel’s pick, and he was hobbling along in the front of everyone else.

This was... alarming.

One duck wore a tuxedo-style outfit, complete with bow tie. The one that followed was in a floral blue dress and apron right out of Little House on the Prairie, and the one after that was a duckling in a pink tutu and—

A unicorn horn?

I was done here.

I moved to get up and disappear from this shitshow, but Holley and Kinsley both stopped me with firm hands on my shoulders. Instead, I was forced to watch the rest of what could only be described as duck abuse disguised as a parade.

Well, maybe abuse was a strong word.

The ducks looked happy.

You know, if ducks could fucking look happy.

The balloons were just a painful addition to it all.

Off they trotted, one by one, dressed in their stupid little outfits, all on their parade. I had no idea what I was watching, truly, or what the purpose of this whole dumb thing was.

It was pretty funny, yeah, seeing ducks toddle along like that, but still stupid.

Thankfully, not long after that, everyone else lost interest, too. The primary reason for it had been to raise funds for the retirement home. I wasn't going to comment on the fact that the pond and ducks probably cost more than they raised in this fundraising drive, but hey.

I was smart enough to know the pond and ducks would be written off as a tax expense somewhere or someway.

We all dispersed as the parade finished once and for all. Amanda appeared to round the ducks up and send them back to their huge pen that included their house and hopefully for them, their freedom from their costumes.

Poor little things.

The rest of the crowd congregated in various areas. Some by the food, some by the duck area, and some headed right to the parking lot.

I know which group I wanted to be in.

"Grandma, why don't we get you a cup of coffee?" I asked, looping her arm through mine.

She snorted. "You mispronounced gin."

"All right, let's see if there's gin out here." I knew better than to argue with her, so I took her inside to her room where I poured her a gin and tonic.

Grandma sat back and sipped, plopping the slice of lemon in by herself.

Well, it was a quarter of a lemon.

She sank back into her chair and glared at me. "I will never forgive you for putting me in this place."

I held up my hands. "Not my choice, Mom and Dad's."

She grunted and finished the rest of the G&T like it was water and lemon. "You're too obvious," she said, slamming the glass down and getting up. "Stop looking at Kinsley like she's the crown jewels before Colton finds out."

I stared at her for a moment before I walked out of her room. She was

in a bad mood today, clearly, and I wasn't going to listen to her.

She was right, but that didn't mean I had to abide by every word.

I headed back outside. There was a commotion over by the pond, and I rushed over there to help handle it.

"You stole my moment!" Mabel shouted, jabbing a knobby finger in Agatha's direction.

I'd missed something.

"You didn't get to the stage!" Agatha yelled back.

Rosie snorted. "Neither did you!"

"I pay too much for this abuse!" Mabel waved her cane in the air. "You hear that, White Peak? I'm moving out and I'm taking my ducks with me!"

"Ladies, ladies." Randy stepped into the fray escorted by Colton. "Let's calm this down."

"Can she do that? Take the ducks?"

I jerked at the sound of Kinsley's voice next to me. "Probably not," I muttered.

Agatha jerked in our direction. "What are you two whispering about? Your next soiree?"

I froze.

Kinsley recovered faster than I did and snorted. "Soiree? What are you talking about, Agatha?"

"We all know you're sleeping together!"

Every single person in the area froze.

"Do you now?" Randy drawled, covering for us. "Don't you think it's time for your meds, Agatha?"

"Oh, shut up, Randolph!" Mabel said. "You know your granddaughter is seeing your grandson's best friend! You've been keeping it secret like we have! Don't deny it, you traitor!"

Everyone in the immediate area froze.

At least that's how it felt.

Especially when Colton approached me.

"Colt—" Kinsley said weakly, taking a step forward.

He ignored her, his gaze laser-focused on me. "Is that true?"

I had no fucking answer for him.

"Yes!" Agatha shrieked in the background. "They've been—"

"Shut up, Hagatha, you shit-stirring old coot!" came Rosie's sharp tone as she rejoined the group.

“Rosie, I swear I will—”

“Is it fucking true?” Colton ground out every single word as he glared at me from barely five feet away.

Tori stepped forward, shoving me out of the way. “Of course it’s not.”

“I didn’t ask you, Tori.” Colt changed his trajectory until he was mere feet from me. “I asked Josh. I asked him if it’s true that he, my best friend, is sleeping with my sister.”

Kinsley’s blurred form appeared in my peripheral. “Colton—”

“Yeah.” I steeled myself for his response. “Yeah, it’s true.”

I heard her gasp before I felt the rock of his fist connect with my jaw in a sharp burst of pain that radiated throughout my entire skull. I staggered back and dropped to my knee, grabbing the side of my jaw.

Shit. That hurt like a motherfucker.

And you know what?

I deserved it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – KINSLEY

RULE TWENTY-TWO: SOMETIMES THE ONLY RESPONSE TO DATING IS, “OH, SHIT.”

“Colton!” My brother’s name escaped my lips as I pushed past my friends and into the circle that had apparently formed in the retirement home and kneeled next to Josh. He was cradling his jaw. “What are you doing?”

“You’re sleeping with him?” He turned on me with eyes that were pure black.

Eyes that belied his hurt through the anger.

Eyes I couldn’t lie to.

This was my brother, damn it.

All of it, all the secrets and all the lies... this was it.

This was the moment.

The grand reveal.

A fucking duck parade and a bunch of old angry people.

Awesome.

I said nothing in response. There was nothing I could say, really. Colt already knew the answer, and I could see that in his eyes, even as I let go of Josh and stood up.

My brother took a step toward me, pure anger radiating from his eyes. “Kinsley, I asked you a fucking question.”

“Enough.” Grandpa hobbled up next to me. “You will not talk to your sister this way.”

“Grandpa—”

“Boy, if you’re gonna tell me I can’t tell you what to do, I got a cane that’s gonna beat some reality into your backside,” Grandpa said in level tone that held just a terrifying amount of threat in. “This ain’t the time or the place for it.”

No shit. There were fifty old people plus a bunch of others all watching us like their favorite soap drama had come to life.

It kinda had, to be honest.

“Are you okay?” I whispered to Josh, cradling the side of his face again so I could check on him. “Let me see.”

“Kins... I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.” I tugged away his hand and looked. Colton had hit him so hard it was already bruising. I wouldn’t be surprised if he needed to be



checked over by a doctor, given the swelling that was forming in the mere minutes since the contact, either.

And it made me mad.

So fucking mad.

We'd joked about this, but I never thought my brother would actually do this to him. Never thought he'd actually *punch* his best friend in the jaw for this.

My nostrils flared with my anger, and I didn't care that everyone was staring at me. It'd be all around town by dinner, so who cared?

Not me.

"Kinsley," Saylor said in a soft voice. "Think about this—"

I shoved past her when she tried to stop me. This was my brother; my fight. "What is wrong with you?"

"Un-fucking-believable. You bang my best friend and ask *me* what the problem is!" Colton laughed dryly, shoving his head in his hand.

"Colton William Lane," Grandpa growled. "You will remember your manners, or I will beat them into you."

I passed my stalwart of a grandpa and stopped barely three feet in front of my brother. We glared at each other for the longest minute before I said the words that were boiling up inside me.

"Hit me, too."

He stared at me. "Are you fucking kidding?"

"No. If you can hit him, you can hit me." I jerked my chin up in defiance. "It's true. All of it. So go ahead. You asked me a question, and I'm answering it. It's true, Colt."

He stared at me for what felt like forever. The betrayal I saw in his eyes churned my gut, and the guilt that spread through my body like a wildfire physically hurt.

I knew he wouldn't hit me.

But I kind of wanted him to.

"Don't," he said, holding up one finger. "Don't talk to me."

Then he turned, stalking off in the direction of the gate that led to the parking lot. I moved to follow him, but Kai blocked me, his tall frame towering over mine.

"Don't." His voice was soft as he rested his hands on my upper arms. "You'll only make it worse right now. Let him calm down."

I swallowed and dropped my gaze. Rationally, I knew he was right, but

that didn't mean I wanted to.

I felt absolutely awful.

I knew it would hurt him when he found out, but he wasn't supposed to find out like this. Not surrounded by half the damn town when he was having his own relationship issues.

I would never be able to forgive myself for this.

Ever.

"Grandma, I can't believe you!" Tori exploded from somewhere behind me, breaking the silence.

"And you, Grams!" Saylor snapped, making me turn around. "Why couldn't you keep your mouths shut?"

At least someone was asking the important questions.

"That was not your information to share!" Tori continued, poking her finger at Agatha. "Regardless of it being the truth, it's *their* business."

Josh stood up and worked his jaw from side to side, wincing when he moved it to the right. "Jesus."

Oh, God.

I shook off Kai's gentle hold and rushed over to him, moving his hand so I could look. His skin was turning a fetching shade of blue and purple beneath his stubble, and another overwhelming wave of sadness washed through me.

"Come on. We need to get ice on that." I looped my arm through his and pulled him in the same direction Colton had stalked off in minutes ago. "Anywhere but *here*."

Josh grunted in agreement, and the last thing I heard was his grandma, Vicki, saying, "I knew those ducks would be trouble."

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"Here. This should help." I sat next to Josh and pressed the gel ice pack against his jaw.

He winced at the touch and took it from me. "Thanks."

I curled up against the back of my sofa and rested my head on the cushions, sighing heavily.

Josh reached over and rested his hand on my thigh. He slowly rubbed it in a reassuring move, but I didn't think anything would make me feel better right now.

“That was a shitshow,” he said in a tight, muffled voice. He was clearly trying not to move his jaw too much to talk, and I laid my hand on top of his. Our fingers linked easily together, and Josh turned to look at me.

I could see how much his jaw hurt by the pain in his eyes. “Let me get you some Tylenol.”

“Stop fussing, Kinsley,” he ground out. “I’ll be fine.”

“You have a baseball on your jaw! You are not fine!” I shoved his hand from my leg and got up, storming into the kitchen. I yanked the drawer open so hard I almost ripped it off the runners, then rifled through it looking for the Tylenol or any other painkiller I had on hand.

After finding a half-empty Tylenol bottle, I fetched a bottle of water from the fridge and went back to Josh in the living room. I threw them both on the sofa next to him, and he sighed.

“I don’t want to argue with you, babe. It won’t fix anything.”

Deflated, I sat back down and opened the Tylenol bottle to shake out two pills for him. “I know. I’m just—I’m so frustrated. We should have told him as soon as they figured it out.” I buried my fingers in my hair and looked past him to the window and out onto my front yard. “I feel so bad.”

Josh put the gel pack on the coffee table with another wince and took the pills I offered. I helped him by undoing the cap on the water bottle, then passed it over after he’d tossed the pills in his mouth.

He groaned through the whole process of swallowing them and drinking water.

“Should we go to the emergency room?” I asked, eyeing the bruising.

“And tell them what?” he said, putting the ice pack back on his face. “That my girlfriend’s brother found out about our relationship and gave me a fair right hook?”

Well, when he said it like that... “Should have hit me, too,” I muttered.

“Like he would do that. Come here.” He motioned for me to cuddle into him, and I carefully shuffled up the sofa and rested my head against his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around me and let his head fall so that his cheek was resting on top of my head.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath in, just focusing on the way it felt to be wrapped in his arms right now. It was comfortable and soothing, and as I felt the beating of his heart beneath my hand, calm began to move through my body.

“What do we do now?” I asked quietly. “He’s not going to speak to

either of us anytime soon.”

Josh blew out a long breath and pulled back the ice pack. “I think we have to give him a little time, then I’ll talk to him and explain.”

“Maybe I should talk to him. At least until your jaw is healed.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I’ll tell him to hit the other side if he has to.”

“Josh!”

“I’m kidding.” He squeezed me. “He’ll come to me when he’s ready, and probably not until you two have spoken. He really couldn’t have found out at a worse time.”

Of course. He’d finally broken up with Amber. “I’m going to kill Agatha and Mabel.”

“I think our grandparents might already be on it. I’m not gonna lie, I thought it would have been Rosie who’d spill it.”

I made a non-committal noise. “This is going to be a nightmare, isn’t it? He’s so hurt and angry and—”

“And you can’t change the way he feels,” Josh said softly. “As much as I know you wish you could. This was always going to hurt him, and he was always going to be mad. We knew that.”

“And we did it anyway.”

“Not lightly.” He hooked his finger under my chin and tilted my head back so our eyes met. “Yes, we did it anyway, but not with the intention of hurting him. We thought this through and talked it over a thousand times. I don’t regret this, Kinsley. I don’t regret you.” He touched his lips to mine in a light brush. “We can’t change what’s happened, so there’s no point in getting ourselves worked up about it right now. He’s more likely to talk to you than he is me, so you can always try tomorrow.”

“I can’t. I have Ivy’s baby shower. It starts at eleven-thirty, and I’m not sure when it ends.”

“Then try and find him after,” he said reassuringly, releasing my chin. He kissed my forehead, and I dipped my face to press it into his neck. Being wrapped up in him was my new favorite place to be, and even though I was full of swirling, conflicting emotions, just being with Josh dulled them somewhat.

“I know. I just—”

“Ssh.” He pressed his thumb to my lips and pulled me in tighter to him. “You can’t change it. Remember that. Colton will get over it, I promise you.”

I hoped he was right.

Because if he didn't, I didn't know what I was going to do.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE – KINSLEY

RULE TWENTY-THREE: NOTHING WORTH HAVING COMES EASILY. LIKE RELATIONSHIPS. OR LOSING THAT LAST SEVEN POUNDS OFF YOUR BUTT.

Ivy was glowing. Despite the fact she was bemoaning her swollen ankles and was exhausted, her happiness shone in her eyes. She and baby Tegan Rose had been spoiled, and there were piles of books and clothes and toys and all kinds of wonderful little baby things on the two large tables in the backyard.

The whole area was an explosion of pink and lace and frills, and there was a long table along the back of Ivy and Holley's parents' backyard that was filled with gorgeous white and pink flowers and a delicious array of food.

If only I were hungry.

I'd barely eaten a thing since the incident at the duck parade yesterday. I'd only eaten some soup last night because Josh told me he was going to force-feed me it if I didn't, but he'd left this morning while I was in the shower saying he was going to go back to the retirement home and see his grandma to find out what happened after we left.

"How you feeling?" Holley slipped up behind me with Tori on her heels.

I shrugged and leaned back against the tree trunk I'd been hiding by. "I don't know."

"He'll get over it," Tori said. "You know he will. Don't beat yourself up."

I gave her a weak smile. "I know, but it doesn't mean I don't feel guilty for keeping it from him."

"Yeah, but is the sex good? Because I'd keep good sex from your brother if I were you, too."

My cheeks flamed red hot. *Oh, my God.*

"Tori!" Holley choked back a laugh.

"What? It's a valid question." She looked at me and smirked. "And judging by that blush on your cheeks, Josh knows his way around the old g-spot."

"Okay, seriously." I held up my hands. "We are not discussing this right now."

“How boring.”

Holley shook her head. “I don’t know how she’s never been arrested.”

“The secret is to not get caught.”

“Or do anything illegal,” Ivy drawled, joining the conversation. “Oh, it’s quiet over here. I like it.”

“How are you feeling?” I asked her.

“Tired. Overwhelmed. Wishing everyone would let me go back to bed with my cheese puffs.” She grinned, cradling her swollen stomach. “How are *you* after yesterday?”

“Wishing I could see my brother and at the same time, wishing I would never have to again,” I admitted.

“You knew this would happen.”

“Wait, you knew about this?” Holley looked between us.

Ivy nodded, taking a seat at one of the cast-iron tables that was nearby and empty. We all joined her. “Yeah, I knew a couple of weeks ago. Is that about right?” she asked me.

I shrugged. “Maybe? Close enough.”

Holley harrumphed in annoyance.

She hated not knowing everything.

“I kind of forced her into admitting the truth,” Ivy admitted. “It was right after they’d taken a big step—”

“They fucked,” Tori said confidently.

“—And she was a little lost and confused, and I helped her out some with it.” Ivy turned back to me. “We knew this was going to happen. All right, not in this way, but it still did.”

“I just wish we could have been the ones to tell him,” I said softly, staring down at the intricate mosaic pattern on the table. “It might have been different if we were.”

“You mean Josh wouldn’t have taken a right hook to the face,” Tori said brightly.

“Tori.” Holley scolded her, frowning.

“Yes,” I replied dryly. “Exactly that.”

Ivy slapped the back of her hand into Tori’s arm. “Which one of you is talking to him first?”

I sighed. “Me. Josh’s jaw is still bruised and swollen, and the last thing I need is my brother seeing that as a target. He doesn’t want to go to the emergency room, but I think it’ll be easier if I speak to him first anyway.”

Ivy nodded slowly, leaning back in the chair with an ‘oomph’ and a frown at her stomach. “Leave my bladder alone,” she instructed her belly before she looked back up. “Sorry. I agree with Josh. Colton is probably feeling more betrayed by him than you, since they had that stupid pact and all that crap.”

“A pact?” Holley raised an eyebrow. “What the hell?”

I quickly explained the pact Josh and Colton had made years ago when they were teenagers. “I mean, I get it, but it just seems kind of childish with hindsight. How could either of them have known what would happen years later?”

“Because men are dumb.” Tori didn’t even bat an eyelid. “They probably *were* arrogant enough to believe that the other one would never get feelings for their sister. Teenage boys are the absolute worst and really think the world of themselves, but what Colt needs to realize is that they’re almost thirty. Even an agreement made five years ago would be different now. Where were you five years ago? Where will you be in five years?”

“Well, I wasn’t pregnant five years ago,” Ivy replied. “Nor did I have any plans to get pregnant until I was at least twenty-nine, and that plan went down the toilet and fermented in the sewers.”

Tori flung out her hand, almost hitting Ivy in the face. “Case in point. Five years ago, you didn’t own the bookstore. Probably never imagined you would, but here we are. Something they agreed years and years ago was probably never mentioned again and only lived in Josh’s brain because he was aware of his feelings for you. I’d bet you anything that Colt is more annoyed you never told him yourselves than anything else.”

“It makes sense.” Holley leaned forward and rested her chin in her hands. “I don’t think you’re both doing anything wrong by pursuing a relationship,” she mused. “In fact, if I had a brother, I’d be thrilled if he ended up with any one of you forever. I think Colt is probably just really pissed he had to find out from Agatha and Mabel of all people.”

“Freakin’ Grams,” Tori said. “I told her off, by the way. She wasn’t happy about it, but I wasn’t happy either.”

“Go and talk to him.” Ivy met my eyes, kindness shining in hers, and she smiled. “Go now. Go and see if you can find him and talk to him. You won’t rest until you’ve tried.”

“You don’t think it’s too soon?” I chewed on my lower lip.

“To explain to your brother the truth behind what you did?” She raised



an eyebrow. “No, Kins. It’s never too soon.”

“Are you sure? You don’t mind me leaving?”

“If you leave, I stand half a chance at leaving myself. Kai has been sitting in the car down the street for the last twenty minutes, but Mom won’t let me go.” She shrugged. “I just want a nap. Seriously, *go*. And text me later.”

Nodding, I said goodbye to Tori and Holley, stopping to give Ivy a hug around the shoulders as my farewell. It took me at least ten minutes to get through the house. After thanking her parents for having me at a lovely baby shower, I was accosted by almost everyone whose conversations ranged from asking about my relationship with Josh, to saying how sorry they were about yesterday, to asking me how Colton was.

I excused myself as politely as possible every single time, and when I finally extricated myself from the house, I all but ran into my car and locked myself in before anyone else could accost me.

I started the engine and pulled away. Kai was parked at the end of the street, and I pulled up alongside him with a grin and rolled down my window. “She needs rescuing.”

Smirking, he touched two fingers to his temples and saluted me. “On it. I’ll cite an emergency... Like the freezer broke and all the ice cream has melted.”

“Nailed it.”

“You left early. Going to find your brother?”

I nodded. “Have you spoken to him?”

“I headed over to his place last night. He was furious,” he warned me with a meaningful yet sympathetic look. “I told him I had no idea and was just as shocked as he was and he bought it, so don’t throw me under your betrayal bus.”

I flipped him the bird. “I appreciate you leaving him one friend.”

He nodded righteously, but his grin gave him away. “I know. Go easy on him.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to punch him as hard as he punched Josh.”

“He doesn’t regret that, by the way.”

“Yeah, well, Josh thinks he deserves it. They’re both weirdos.”

Kai laughed right as his phone rang. “It’s Ivy. Wanna go so I can get her?”

“Sure. I’ll text her later and let her know how it went.” With a wave, I

pulled away from where I was parked against his truck and rejoined the right side of the road.

Whoops.

I hit the button to wind my window back up and turned onto the road that would take me in the direction of Colton's place. My phone rang as I rolled up to an intersection, and Josh's name flashed on the screen on my dash. I hit the green button to accept.

"Hey," I answered. "What's up?"

"I swear I just saw your car. Aren't you supposed to be at the baby shower?"

I paused. He saw my car? "You saw my car?"

"Yeah, Grandma wanted some things from the store, and I took a detour to the liquor store because she asked for gin. Apparently, it was the least I could do as my relationship is the reason for her current entertainment."

I groaned. "Yeah, I just left. I didn't even notice you."

"Are you going home?"

"No." Another pause. "I'm going to Colt's place."

"Ah. Okay."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. Are you sure you want to go so soon?"

"Yeah." I briefly relayed my conversation with Kai. "He's my brother, Josh. I can't eat, I can barely sleep—I need to say my piece whether he wants to hear it or not. He has to hear it and know it wasn't meant maliciously."

"I get that. Want to come over when you're done?"

"I'll text you. I don't know how this is going to go."

"All right, just make sure you do. We're in this together, babe."

"I know. I'm nearly there. I'll talk to you later."

"Talk to you later." He hung up before I had a chance to, and I made the final turn onto Colt's street.

I honestly had no idea if he was at home or not. Even if I'd called, I knew he wouldn't pick up, so I had no choice but to just show up and hope for the best.

I pulled into the parking lot outside his building. His truck wasn't there, and my heart sank.

That didn't mean he wasn't here, but I wasn't going to keep coming back every hour to check.

I got out of my car and headed into the building. The stairs were a therapeutic hike up, and I turned off at his floor and stopped outside his door. No sounds came from within, and even though I was aware of the futility of the action, I knocked.

And knocked again.

And again.

Nothing.

I exhaled through my nostrils and leaned against the wall next to his door. Slowly, I slid down it until my butt hit the awful carpet floor of the hallway and I was staring at the plain, magnolia wall opposite.

I guess I was waiting.

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“I should have fucking known you’d be here.”

I looked up at the sound of Colton’s voice and locked my phone. “I just want to talk to you.”

He grunted and put his key in the door. “I don’t know what you think you can say to me.”

I scrambled up to my feet and held my phone to my stomach. “Come on, Colton. Please.”

“I don’t owe you anything right now,” he said over his shoulder. “I don’t even want to *look* at you, Kinsley, but I saw Grandpa earlier, and he’s one persuasive bastard, so...” He shoved his front door open and stepped inside, leaving it there for me.

I hesitated for a moment before I followed him inside and pushed it closed behind me.

Colt walked into the kitchen and pulled a beer from the fridge. He didn’t offer me a drink, nor did I expect one. I was under no illusions that I was a wanted visitor.

The look in his eye as he turned and looked at me was nothing short of chilling.

Ice-cold. Unwelcoming. Pure rage.

While I knew my brother would never hurt me, it didn’t change the fact he probably should have.

He was just using anger to mask his hurt.

He took a long drink from the beer, his lips popping around the bottle

top when he released it. “Well? You’re the one who wants to talk. You’re doing a shit job.”

I bit back the snarky response I longed to give. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, well that’s all right then. All is forgiven.”

“Colton.”

“No, no, it’s fine. You and Josh do your thing. Never mind me. Never mind telling me—”

“That wasn’t a decision we made lightly!”

“Oh, we! Is that the royal we, or are you speaking for him now, too?”

“Do you hear yourself?” I took a step forward and threw my arms out to the side. “Do you hear how utterly unreasonable you sound?”

“Unreasonable?” He raised his eyebrows and slammed down his beer. “You know what’s unreasonable, sis? Unreasonable is my little sister and best friend not having the fucking decency to tell me they’ve decided to fuck each other on a regular basis. It’s leaving me to find out by the ancient grapevine at a fucking duck parade, of all places. A fucking *duck parade*.”

“You say that like it was by choice!”

“It was by choice!” He slammed his hands flat on the kitchen island and glared at me, a vein throbbing in his neck. “You made the choice not to be honest with me! You had to know someone would find out about you screwing each other and—”

“Listen to yourself! Fucking this and screwing that!” I fisted my hair and threw my arms out in defeat. “You’re so mad over a situation that you perceive to be true that you can’t even listen to me for thirty seconds!”

“I don’t need to listen to you!” he yelled.

“Yes, you do!” I shouted back even louder. “It’s not sex, Colton!”

He flinched.

“But you won’t listen. You won’t let me tell you what’s happening or explain myself!” I rubbed my hands over my face. “You know what? This was a mistake. I can’t—I can’t talk to you if you’re not going to listen to me.”

I turned and stalked toward the door, my heart churning with a chronic ache I felt everywhere.

“Look, I get it,” I said, gripping the door handle and following the grain of the wood with my eyes. “I get that you’re angry. I understand that you feel like we conspired against you, but I didn’t ask for this to happen, and neither did Josh. We didn’t plan for this to happen. This isn’t just a fling,

Colt. This is real.” I dipped my head and looked at the floor. “I have a lot of feelings for him. Real feelings. Ones that scare me a lot. And I think I might—I might even be falling in love with him.”

Silence.

He didn’t respond. Didn’t even clear his throat or shuffle a foot.

My throat tightened. “But you’re my brother. And if this hurts you that much, if this really, really hurts you, then none of that really matters. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you, Colt.”

Tears stung the back of my eyes as I opened the door.

“Shut the fucking door, Kinsley.”

I did.

Behind me.

I swiped at my cheeks and barely registered the opening of his apartment door. His arms on my shoulders was a little too much to miss, and he swept me around and into his apartment.

Where he slammed the door, then wrapped me up in a huge hug with my face pressed into his chest.

And he let me cry, even though he was the one who was hurting.

But was he?

Was it only him?

Judging by the tears that were escaping my eyes and soaking his shirt, it wasn’t. I could be both happy and sad at the same time, and that was okay. I was allowed to be conflicted by the way I felt, but I just hated that I was discovering this right in front of Colton when he was the person I was trying to comfort.

“All right, stop this,” he grunted. “Crying won’t fix anything.”

“I know, but I feel awful.”

“I know you do, Kins.” My brother released me and looked at me. “I just—I was shocked. And to find out from fucking Agatha and Mabel was a punch in the gut.”

“I’m sorry. We were going to tell you, I swear.”

“But you didn’t.” Colt’s voice was gentle despite the bite in it. “You didn’t tell me, Kins, and that really fucking hurts. Honesty isn’t too much to ask for.”

I wrapped my arms around my stomach and looked at him. “I was going to, but I chickened out every time. I was so afraid of hurting you that it was easier to just... not,” I admitted. “Josh—”

“Josh can tell me himself,” he said with an edge. “He’s man enough to go behind my back and start seeing you. He’s man enough to justify his own position.”

Slowly, I nodded. I knew that, and I also knew that they had to have this conversation themselves. There was no way of getting out of that.

“You’re not gonna punch him again, are you?”

Colt looked a little sheepish for a moment. “Nah. He has a free shot at my jaw when he wants it.”

He even smiled.

“Are we okay?”

He wrapped me in another hug. “I’m pissed, Kinsley. I’m pissed you didn’t feel like you could tell me. I’m pissed he broke a promise he made. I’m pissed everyone but me seemed to know about your relationship, but you aren’t responsible for that. Those are my feelings to work through.”

“I am responsible. I caused them.”

“But you didn’t set out to hurt me, and knowing your dating track record, it’s not like you magically seduced him one random evening.”

I punched him lightly in the side and stepped back, sniffing. I wiped my cheeks to remove any remnants of tears now that I’d stopped crying.

“I really am sorry.”

“I know you are.” He walked back into the open plan kitchen and grabbed his beer. “Kins, what you said. Before you left.”

“What?”

He stared at the island counter. “You said you might be falling in love with him. Then you said it didn’t matter if I’m hurting.”

I swallowed, staring at a spot over his head. “I don’t *want* you to be hurting by this.”

“I am, Kinsley. And I’m going to hurt.” He looked at me. “But reconciling those feelings is my own issue, not yours. And if you were insinuating that you were going to end things with Josh because of me, then I might just punch you, too.”

I jerked my gaze down to him. “What?”

“My feelings are my own.” He said the words firmly, like he was speaking to a child. “Any hurt I feel now is temporary. I’ll get over it, and the anger doesn’t come from the fact you think you’re falling in love with my best friend.”

My cheeks warmed.

“In fact, there’s nobody I’d trust your heart with more than him.” His voice softened. “But I need time to wrap my head around this, all right? Just give me some time. And that goes for Josh, too.”

“Okay.” I backed toward the front door slowly. “I’ll tell him... What? That you’ll call him when you’re ready?”

“No, tell him I’ll see him at work tomorrow.” His lips twisted wryly to one side. “And that I’m going to fucking ignore the bastard.”

For the first time in what felt like all day, I fought a smile. “Duly noted.” I opened the front door and paused, looking back over my shoulder. “And, Colt?”

“Mm?”

“I’m sorry about Amber,” I said honestly. “But your house looks amazing, and I’m really happy for you.”

“Oh, yeah.” He lifted his beer. “Can’t wait to see you do the walk of shame from Josh’s front door on a regular basis.”

“Oh, shut your ass.” I slammed the door behind me, but that exchange was apparently enough to fully thaw the ice, because his laughter rang through the door and filled the hallway with a warmth that made me smile.

Maybe this *would* be okay after all.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – KINSLEY

RULE TWENTY-FOUR: HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY.  
UNLESS YOU ATE THE LAST CUPCAKE. THEN LIE.

“What did you *do*?” Holley looked at Saylor, aghast, over the top of her laptop.

Saylor touched one of her Princess Leia-style buns. “You don’t like it?”

“But you’re not blonde anymore!”

No, no, she was not.

Her hair was now bubblegum pink.

Maybe that break-up had affected her more than I’d thought...

Then again, it was a break-up, she was a woman... We did wild stuff after those.

“No shit,” Saylor drawled. “You must have had your coffee this morning to notice that.”

“I like it,” I said, admiring the tasteful shade of pink that coated every last previously blonde strand. “It’s very you.”

Holley looked at me. “Obnoxious and in your face?”

“Thank you for noticing,” Saylor said brightly, sitting on the table and swinging her legs. “I like it and that’s all that matters.”

“You’re welcome for the compliment.” I rolled my eyes and put the last sale sticker on the book on my pile. We had some old stock that needed clearing before the holiday books hit the shelves, and since we were at the very tail end of tourist season, we’d decided now was the perfect time.

“Thank you, princess,” Saylor snarked. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Yes, rein your attitude in and hang this in the window as you do so.” Holley shoved a huge, rolled up sheet of paper toward her and adjusted her glasses. She’d run out of contacts and wasn’t happy about it. “It’s the sale poster.”

“I guess that means I have to redo my board,” I said sadly. “I like that bear.”

Saylor grabbed the poster and the tape. “Your bear looks like it got in a fight with Mike Tyson and lost.”

“I take back my compliment about your hair.”

“I am trying to concentrate,” Holley sang.



“On what?” I grabbed the stack of books and carried them over to where she’d been diligently working on her laptop for the last hour.

“Our online store.” She said the words very carefully, never looking up from the screen. “Winter is always a little slow, and although we get by, there’s nothing wrong with expanding our horizons.”

“I was wondering when we’d finally enter the twenty-first century,” Saylor said, jumping back from the window. “I have ideas for that.”

“You do?” I looked at her. “Like what?”

“Mystery book boxes. Like a subscription where people sign up and fill out a questionnaire and each month we send them a new release that fits their likes, but they won’t know which book until they get it.”

Holley held up a finger, then set it on the trackpad, moved, and typed furiously. “Word document,” she said, answering our silent questions.

A lightbulb dinged in my brain. “Oh, hey, I actually had an idea a couple of weeks ago. We could sell merchandise, too. Like t-shirts and sweaters and mugs and stuff. We’re always buying stuff, so we know there’s a market for it.”

“I love that!”

Saylor clicked her tongue. “Yeah, but none of us can do design work.”

“Tori,” I answered.

Holley nodded. “She did the bones of the website for me. In fact, she set it up so all I have to do is add the products.”

Saylor wrinkled her nose. “Do we have to pay her?”

“Free books.”

I laughed and moved the sale books to the tall display table they were going on by the door. “There we go, then. Free books for Tori, free merchandise design for us.”

“I’d take free books,” Saylor acquiesced. “And I do like the idea of clothing. Can we sell that here, too?”

“I don’t see why not with a few mannequins,” Holley answered. “I bet we could get some cheap from eBay. I’ll write it down and take a look at everything tonight. The store is nearly done, but that’s my priority.” She leaned back and stretched her fingers out in front of her, popping her knuckles as she did so.

Saylor shuddered at the sound. “You’re so weird. Hey, did you see that Sebastian is coming back home?”

Holley froze.

My eyes widened. Damn it, Saylor! We weren't supposed to tell Holley.

"Sebastian?" Holley's eyes clouded in anger, and she fiddled with her glasses again. "Great. Maybe all his little groupies will follow him, and they can come buy a story about what a jerk he is."

And that was why we weren't going to tell Holley.

Saylor blinked. "That was eight years ago, Hol. Aren't you over that yet?"

Holley glared at her.

*Back away, Saylor, back away.*

"I'm just gonna..." She cocked a thumb. "Go somewhere you aren't." Smart.

"Did you know about this?" Holley turned to me.

There was no use lying about it. "I did," I admitted. "Remember that guy I had dinner with in Bronco's? Elliott?"

She nodded.

"He's the physical therapist there. Sebastian injured his shoulder in the first game of the season and is out for the rest of it. He's already had surgery, but since he's with the Bears, the team were happy for him to come home and commute to do his rehab."

"Ugh. I don't want to see him."

"I don't know that you'll have a choice. What if you run into each other?"

"Then I'll be an adult who pretends she doesn't know him," she ground out through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, that's the adult thing to do."

The bell above the door rang, and we both looked back at it. Josh walked through with two bags of what smelled like hot soup and fresh bread, and he stilled when he saw us both eying him.

"What did I do?" he asked.

"Nothing. Probably just stopped a world war," I muttered, motioning to Holley.

"Why? What's wrong?" He kicked the door shut behind him. "I can't stay long. I'm only here because when I went to get lunch, Johanna asked me if I was here to pick up your order. Apparently, you called it in this morning. She was about to remind you to come get it."

Oh, crap.

We'd been so busy we'd forgotten lunch.

That explained the all-around grouchiness. We were hangry.

"I smell food!" Saylor came running out from wherever she'd been hiding. "Josh, if you keep showing up here with food, I'm going to murder Kinsley and date you myself."

He blinked at her, confusion marring his forehead. "You changed your hair."

"Good God, you people are observant today."

"Looks good. Suits you."

She brightened. "Thanks."

"Are we just forgetting my issues?" Holley held out her hands. "Does nobody care about me?"

"About a stick you've had up your ass since you were eighteen?" Saylor raised her eyebrows and took the Styrofoam bowl of soup from Josh. "No." She grabbed another container that held the bread and disappeared again.

"She's sociable today," Josh muttered, emptying out the rest of the containers. "What's going on?"

"Sebastian's coming back to town," I said. "For his rehab."

"Oh, yeah, you told me that."

If this were a cartoon, Holley would have steam coming out of her ears by now. "Did everyone know except me?"

"Apparently Saylor didn't," I replied, opening my tomato soup. God, it smelled good. "And she's right. What happened between you was eight years ago. Haven't we all moved on?"

She grunted and opened her soup. The scent of French Onion soup filled the air. "Yes, we have, but that was also the last time I saw him. He tried to speak to me after and I refused."

"I like Seb," Josh said. "Been a while, but he's a good guy."

"Not the time," I muttered to him.

Holley snorted. "Good guys don't break girls' hearts."

"He didn't know he was breaking your heart. It's not like you ever told him you had feelings for him, and you literally waited until the last possible minute at prom to tell him," I pointed out.

Rather undiplomatically.

Maybe politics was a career choice if selling books went down the creek.

“Thank you, Jerry Springer,” she snapped. “I know that, but it doesn’t mean I’m excited to see him again. It doesn’t mean I want to.”

“Isn’t his sister getting married soon?” Josh frowned. “Yeah, Kate’s getting married the weekend before Thanksgiving.”

“That’s right. You guys went to school together.” I’d forgotten Seb had a sister. “Are you going?”

He shook his head. “Nah, I haven’t spoken to her in a couple of years. I think Colt was going to, but that was only because Amber got an invite.”

“Mm, Colton,” Holley mused. “Have you spoken to him yet?”

Josh shook his head. “We’ve acknowledged each other at work, but we’re on opposite sides of the site.”

I looked down, lamely dipping a bit of my crusty bread into my soup.

“Hey.” Josh pushed my hair away from my face and tilted my chin so I looked at him. “I’m not worried. It’s only been three days. He’ll come around when he’s ready.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because he didn’t give me the finger when he saw me this morning.” He dropped his hand and grinned, and even Holley snorted at that. “That’s progress right there.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Plus, on Monday, our boss asked me why I looked like I’d moonlighted in the UFC over the weekend, and Colt yelled, “Because he fucked my sister so I punched him!” He’s now moved to *fucking*, so I assume he’s slowly beginning to accept this relationship.”

Something told me that this reconciliation was going to take a while.

Holley laughed and choked on a piece of bread. She had to stop to thump her chest to free the bit that was stuck.

“At least Cora isn’t fussing over me anymore. If I take one more Tylenol, I’m going to need my stomach pumped.”

“Who’s Cora?” I frowned.

Josh grinned. “Are you jealous?”

I stared at him.

“Cora is the fifty-eight-year-old office manager and wife of my boss who mothers everyone within a twenty-mile radius,” he said after a moment. “She’s a good-looking fifty-eight, but she’s not my type. I prefer feisty, awkward bookworms who get me punched.”

I punched him in the arm. “Shut up.”

Holley looked between us. “Shakespeare couldn’t have written a better love story.”

“Did he write love stor—” Josh paused. “Oh, right. *Romeo and Juliet*.”

We both blinked at him and said at the same time, “*Romeo and Juliet* is not a romance!”

I even heard that echoed from Saylor from wherever she was.

Josh looked around. “Right. Okay. Why not? They fell in love.”

“And then they died,” Holley said slowly, looking at him as if he’d just told her all books should be burned. “He poisoned himself because he thought she was dead, then she woke up and stabbed herself because *he* was dead. In what world is that even remotely romantic?”

“Uh...” He hesitated. “It’s kind of romantic that they couldn’t live without each other?”

“No,” I said. “That’s romantic when you’re talking about ninety-year-old couples who’ve been together for seventy years. Not two obstinate teenagers who were, by all accounts, complete little shits.”

He blinked at me. “You wouldn’t do that for me?”

“Would I hell,” I replied. “I don’t like you that much.”

He tried to look hurt, but all that happened was he ended up laughing. “And I took a punch for you.”

“Your fault.” I dipped some bread in my soup. “Really, all you had to do was not tell me you had feelings for me and none of this ever would have happened.”

“So it’s all my fault.”

“Absolutely,” Holley agreed. “As a rule, it’s always the man’s fault.”

I inclined my head in her direction in agreement. “She’s right.”

“This is why I’ve been single for so long,” Josh said dryly. “You’re too much hard work.”

“Yes. You’re a regular walk in the park yourself.” I gently touched the bruise on his jaw. “Jurassic Park, maybe.”

He looked over at me, meeting my eyes, and his lips twisted in amusement.

Holley looked between us. “You two need a room.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – JOSH

RULE TWENTY-FIVE: DATING IS NEVER, EVER EASY. BUT IT'S WORTH IT.

I pulled up in the parking lot outside Bronco's and killed the engine. It'd been a long, tense week at work, and all I wanted to do tonight was go home, shower, and go to sleep.

Kinsley had other ideas.

Despite my suggestion that she could come over, she'd insisted on us having dinner at Bronco's.

I said no.

Which was why I was outside Bronco's.

Obviously, I lost that fight.

I was getting used to that.

At least I'd been able to talk her into letting me take a shower before I came.

I got out of my truck and headed inside, only pausing to lock the doors. I pushed the front door of the bar open and stepped into the foray of madness.

Why she wanted to do this on a Friday night was beyond me.

I scanned the room for her, and it took a good moment before I noticed her sitting in a booth and waving at me. I pushed my way through the throng of people who were absolutely everywhere, narrowly missing being soaked by a kid's juice, and finally made it to the table.

"Seriously? Here for dinner on a Friday night? What's wrong with—" I stopped when I saw Colton sitting in the booth. He'd had his back to me, and thanks to the high backs of the chairs, I hadn't known he was here.

And now it all made sense.

Colton clenched his jaw. "Kinsley..."

She held up her hands. "Don't yell at me," she said, looking between us. "Just listen? For a moment?"

Sighing, I slipped into the booth next to her and nodded. Colton nodded, too, and we both waited for her to talk.

"You have *got* to talk to each other," Kinsley said, pushing her hair from her face. "It's been a week, and I can't take this anymore. I can't talk to you about the other without both of you tensing up and saying it'll be okay, but it's not. It's not being okay. Nothing about all of this is okay." She looked at her brother. "If you've forgiven me, you can forgive him, too. So stop

pretending like you're waiting for him to talk to you first when you know he's giving you space." Then she looked at me. "And stop pretending he's going to talk to you first. He's not, and you know it. You're putting it off because it's the easy thing to do."

We both looked at each other, then at her.

"You're almost thirty years old, for the love of God. Stop acting like you're both sixteen and jerking off over the same girl in math class. Now move." She shoved at me, and I got up so she could step out of the booth, then sat back down when she gave me another push. "You two are going to talk. Right now. Or you," she said to Colton. "I'm going to tell Grandpa what a huge baby you're being about this."

Colton's eyes widened.

"And you." She pointed at me. "No sex until this is finished."

It was my turn to widen my eyes.

"Can we not?" Colt looked put out. "I don't wanna think about that."

"Then fix this." She grabbed her glass of wine and headed off into the bar, disappearing before it'd registered that she'd left us without a drink.

"She brings us to a bar to make us talk and doesn't even buy us a drink?" I said, staring at the empty table then up at Colton. "What kind of shit is that?"

"My sister," he drawled. "I got this." He pulled out his phone and texted. A moment later, it buzzed, and he smirked. "Done. I told her we aren't talking until she sends us two beers and some chili cheese fries."

The curve of my lips mirrored his. "Nice."

Colt looked around the bar. "She picked here deliberately, didn't she?"

"I don't think she wants you to give me a matching bruise on the other side."

His lips twitched a little. "I don't know if I should apologize for that or not."

"Nah, it's fine. I deserved it." I shrugged. "I should have told you."

"I get why you didn't."

"You do?"

"Yeah." Colt ran his fingers through his hair. "It's not something you drop over a beer, is it? There's no easy way to say that."

He paused as one of the servers put two beers in front of us and told us our chili cheese fries would be over shortly.

"I wish you had, and I'm pissed that you didn't, but I'm fine with it."

I sipped my beer. “You are?”

“Yeah. If she has to date someone, I guess I’m glad it’s you.” He shrugged and toyed with the damp label on the bottle. “I already like you and know you’re not a jerk for one. Mostly not a jerk.”

I fought a smile.

“I know you’ll look after her, and I have to admit that’s she’s been extra happy since you started dating.” He looked at me and said begrudgingly, “And you have, too. I noticed something was different, but I was too busy with the house and everything to think about asking you. If I had...”

“I would have told you,” I admitted, leaning back in the booth. “If you asked.”

“I figured. I really should have figured it out.” He leaned forward, still toying with the bottle. “Shit—fucking hell. That night I stopped by yours and she said she’d had a bad date and you let her shower.”

I grimaced.

“Not true?”

“Not true,” I confirmed.

“I don’t want to know, do I?”

“I’m gonna go with no.”

Colton nodded slowly as our food was brought over. We waited for a moment until we were alone again and then he said, “I’m okay with it.”

“Me and Kinsley?”

He looked up. “I know how she feels about you, Josh. But she was willing to give you up if it meant I would be all right.”

Of course she was. That was Kinsley to her core. “That doesn’t surprise me. She’s done nothing but worry about you ever since we decided to start seeing each other.”

“Then she ran out and burst into tears,” he said dryly. “And then I knew she was serious. That this isn’t just... a casual thing. At least not for her.”

I looked him in the eye. “It’s not for me either, Colt. I’ve had feelings for her for a long time.”

He stilled, and a bit of melted cheese fell onto the table. “A long time?”

“Yeah. Just never did anything about it.” I paused. “Never felt like I could.”

“You know that pact is dumb, right? Stupid shit we made when we



were kids.” He glanced away. “I only did it because I asked Piper out and she turned me down.”

I fought back a laugh. “Seriously? I’ve been feeling guilty this whole fuckin’ time because of it, and you already tried it with my sister?”

Colt rubbed his jaw, hiding a smile with his hand. “Yeah. I was feeling salty that day, but I never thought you’d stick to it after all these years.”

“For fuck’s sake. Kinsley’s gonna kill you.”

“We aren’t telling her,” he said quickly. “I don’t need a bruise to match yours.”

“She can’t punch.”

“Yeah, but she can throw a book, and that shit hurts.” He snorted. “Look, man, I don’t care that you’re together. Just that neither of you told me. But it’s done now, and we can all move on. But if you hurt her, I’ll make sure I break your jaw, not just bruise it.”

I grinned. “I’ll deserve that one, too.”

“Are you friends yet? We’re hungry and you’re eating all our fries.” Tori sat on the opposite side next to Colt and bumped him along the seat with her hip. “You ate them all! What the hell?”

“God’s sake,” Kinsley whined, sitting down. “I’m hungry.”

“We’re fine, thanks for asking,” I said, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. “Would you like some food?”

“You’re paying for it,” she replied, leaning into my side. “Are you really fine?”

Colton nodded. “It’s all good. Just don’t be all lovey and mushy in front of me. You’re still my sister, and I don’t wanna see it.”

Tori wrinkled her face up. “Nobody wants to see it, Colton, but it doesn’t mean they should keep six feet away from each other at all times.”

He side-eyed her. “Your attitude sucks.”

“Your attitude sucks,” she shot back. “Now come and order food with me.”

“I don’t want—”

“I wasn’t asking you.” Tori grabbed hold of his shirt and tugged, yanking him after her as she got up.

Colt muttered something under his breath, but he slid out of the booth and followed her in the direction of the bar.

“Do you think—” I stopped, frowning.

“What?” Kinsley looked at me. “Do I think what?”

“Do you think there’s something going on with those two?”

“What? Tori and my brother?” She leaned back, one eyebrow raised.  
“No. No way.”

“Think about it. They’re always bickering with each other, and it’s not that crazy. She’s pretty and funny and—”

“Carry on and I might start thinking you’ve got a thing for her.”

“Shut it.” I tapped the tip of her nose, and she wrinkled it up. “You don’t think so?”

She spun on the seat and peered around the side of the booth. “I don’t know. Maybe. But Colton? And Tori? No.”

“Why? Because he’s your brother and she’s one of your best friends?”  
I wiggled my eyebrows teasingly.

She knocked her fist into my arm as she straightened. “No. I don’t care about that. I just... wouldn’t put those two together.”

“Nobody would have put us together, but here we are.” I pulled her into me and kissed her. “Right?”

She tilted her head back and looked up at me, and her smile danced in her eyes as well as on her lips. “Yeah. Here we are.”

## EPILOGUE – KINSLEY

RULE TWENTY-SIX: FOR EVERY HAPPILY EVER AFTER, THERE ARE A THOUSAND OTHERS WAITING IN THE WINGS FOR THEIR STORIES TO BE TOLD.

NEVER GIVE UP.

### *One Month Later*

“*OhmyGodI’mgonnadie,*” Saylor gasped, staring at the picture on my phone.

“I know!” I breathed, drawing out the ‘w’ until I finally ran out of air. “She’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life!”

“I’m gonna dieeeee.” Saylor dropped to the stool before she stood back up. “Show me again, show me again!”

I flipped through the rest of the pictures Kai had sent over of baby Tegan. I couldn’t believe she was finally here, and she was the cutest little button-nosed baby I’d ever seen in my life.

All right, she was all red and wrinkled, but she was a baby.

I imagined birth was traumatic for them.

God only knew I got red and wrinkled after spending too long in the cold, never mind exiting a vagina.

It was Sunday, and me and Saylor were here at the bookstore and, theoretically, cleaning up after yesterday’s signing. *I say theoretically because we’re actually cooing over baby Tegan, but I digress.*

Abigail Lyon’s signing two weeks ago was so successful that her publisher had agreed to let some of their other authors come here, especially authors who were local to the general area. There weren’t a lot of authors from Montana, but White Peak was easily accessible enough from the big cities that it wasn’t an issue for them.

Her presence here combined with the online store had also sent our sales through the roof. There were some books we couldn’t get enough of, and our first small release of our offshoot business, Bibliophile Merch, was selling out on a regular basis, too.

Who knew book lovers liked mugs and sweaters *that* much?

Well, us, but whatever.

The bell over the door rang with the slamming open of the front door, and both Saylor and I took a step back. Holley stormed in, shoving the door

shut behind her so hard it made me wince.

“Gee, for someone who just became an aunt, you’re awfully angry,” Saylor said sarcastically. “Can I interest you in a sucker?” She held out our latest new addition—suckers that changed the color of your tongue, free with every purchase.

Or every kid she happened to think was cute.

That was costing a lot in suckers...

Holley turned on her with a glare. “Is my pain funny to you, Saylor? Does it bring you pleasure?”

“Yes.” She grinned, unwrapping a blue sucker and shoving it in her mouth.

“Saylor!” I nudged her and turned to Holley. “What’s wrong? Is something wrong with Ivy and Tegan?”

She shook her head, her dark hair swinging with the motion. She pushed her glasses back up her nose and sagged against the counter. “She’s fine. Tegan’s fine—I just left the hospital. Did you get Kai’s text?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “She’s adorable.”

“No. She’s small, she screams, she poops black crap, and she looks a little like a robotic monster from a nineties movie,” she replied. “But otherwise, she’s the best thing in the entire world and I love her so much.”

“Then why are you so angry?” Saylor asked.

“Because.” Holley’s nostrils flared. “Sebastian. Stone.”

Ah.

Seb was back in town.

“Where?” Saylor stood on her tiptoes and looked around, then dropped back to her heels with a grin. “Kidding. I remember when he was six and put mud down his pants. There’s no way I can drool over him.”

Yeah... I remembered that, too.

Kindergarten was fun.

“You are getting on my nerves,” Holley warned her, pointing at her. “I went to grab a sandwich and saw him in the parking lot taking pictures with a bunch of kids.”

“Was it definitely him?”

“Who else in this stupid ass fucking town is going to want kids to take pictures with them, Kinsley?”

I took a step back. “All right, settle your tea kettle. I was only saying.”

“Sorry. I just—” She blew out a long breath and sat back in the nearest

armchair. “It’s been a long time, and I guess it’s that thing where you think you’re over something but you aren’t.”

I looked at Saylor. “Did you think she was over it?”

“Never in a million years,” she responded. “Did you?”

“Not a chance.”

We both looked at Holley.

“All right, fuck off.” She pointed between us both. “I don’t care if he’s the hottest thing in baseball since, well, crap. I don’t know because I don’t know a thing about baseball! I don’t care if he’s our hometown hero! I don’t care if there are women all over this stupid country who want to get in his pants and if there are women who have!” She slammed her hands on the arms of the chair and pushed to her feet. “But I am *over* that night, and I most definitely am *over* Sebastian Stone!”

She stormed off toward the back room, taking her purse and her coat with her, and leaving a mess of slushy rain across the wooden floor behind her.

I stared at the greyish trail of mush she’d left as the only clue to her departure, then turned to Saylor. “She’s not over it, is she?”

Pursing her lips, Saylor shook her head, her pink hair flapping from side to side. “No. Not even a little bit.” Then, she met my eyes and grinned. “This is going to be so good.”

## THE END

Thank you for reading *The Bookworm's Guide to Dating*! If you liked it, you'll be happy to know the series continues with Holley's story in *The Bookworm's Guide to Faking It*, releasing everywhere on December 1<sup>st</sup>.

Read on for the blurb and pre-order links.

# THE BOOKWORM'S GUIDE TO FAKING IT

## The Bookworm's Guide, Book Two

*What I expected on Saturday morning: Books.*

*What I got on Saturday morning: my ex-best friend and first crush in front of me.*

Let it be known that I, Holley Stuart, do not give a single rat's behind about pro baseball's star pitcher Sebastian Stone.

I definitely don't care that he's standing in my bookstore.

Nor do I care that he seems to have forgotten about the last time we saw each other—senior prom, when he both humiliated me and broke my heart, albeit unknowingly.

Now, he needs a date to his sister's wedding.

Don't ask me how I ended up being it, because I have no idea. But that's the least of my problems.

His grandfather is adamant we're dating, and Seb isn't in a hurry to convince him otherwise, so I have no choice but to go along with it.

The problem? The only thing I've ever faked is... well, *you know*.

I've definitely never faked my feelings for someone.

And judging by the way I feel whenever Seb looks at me, it doesn't look like I'm starting now...

**Pre-order now: <https://www.emmahart.org/the-bookworms-guide-to-faking-it>**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Hart is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of over thirty novels and has been translated into several different languages.

She is a mother, wife, lover of wine, Pink Goddess, and valiant rescuer of wild baby hedgehogs.

Emma prides herself on her realistic, snarky smut, with comebacks that would make a PMS-ing teenage girl proud.

Yes, really. She's that sarcastic.

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