

**ROCKIN'**  
**ADCOY**  
**HOCKEY**  
JONYA LYNN

# Bad Boy Of Hockey

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Do You Like Free Romance Books?

## Magic Mirror on the Wall-Snow White and the Seven Dwarves

Amber

A thud jolts me awake. I rub my forehead. Something heavy and rough presses against my head.

“Ow! What the—?”

I open my eyes and stare at the intruder. A sneaker—white and green with those eye-catching laces—just chilling on my pillow. It’s caked with mud and grass and has holes big enough for my fingers to poke through. It reeks of sweat and dirt.

“Emily!” I shoot her my best glare, standing in the doorway, grinning like she’s just pulled off the prank of the century. She twirls the other sneaker around by its laces, looking way too pleased with herself. “You’re an idiot,” I mutter as I slam my hand down on the snooze button of my alarm clock.

5:48 a.m. Groaning is all that’s left for me to do. I’m late.

“Sorry, but your alarm has been going off forever, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“Shit! How did I not hear my alarm?”

Emily shrugs and smiles. “I had to do something to wake you up. Throwing a shoe seemed like a good idea.” She cackles.

“You’re a genius, you know? Shoe alarms could be the next big thing!”

She flings the other shoe at me, and it smacks the other side of my head.

“Ouch!” I cry. “That hurt!”

I try to stifle a yawn as I roll out of bed, my body still dragging from sleep’s heavy embrace.

I grab Emily’s sneaker and toss it back to her. “Thanks for the wake-up call,” I say. “But seriously, I’ve got to get ready.”

Emily nods in understanding. “I just thought you needed a nudge,” she says. “You look really out of it this morning.”

I rub my eyes and manage a half-smile. “Yeah, it’s been a long week.”

She empathizes, smiling sympathetically. “I hear you. Listen, why don’t we hang out this weekend? Movie night or something?”

A genuine smile creeps onto my face. “That sounds awesome. I’m in.”

“Great.”

My arms stretch up towards the ceiling, and I take a second to check myself out in the mirror. It’s like a brief pause in time.



I see a girl with red curls, which are a tangled mess, and my green eyes look tired and bloodshot looking back at me. There are those freckles sprinkled across my nose and cheeks that probably make me look younger than twenty-six.

The memory of the bullies from school, and their words are always somewhere in the back of my mind, their words still ringing in my ears: “Ginger!” they’d yell. “Redheaded freak!”.

I sigh, I wonder if my life would be different if I had just been someone else. Someone smaller, prettier, or more graceful. Someone better. Than me.

But I’ll never know because the bullies at school made sure that never happened. They laughed and pointed at me, making fun of my red hair. I tried to ignore them, but they wouldn’t stop. They followed me around the school, taunting me and calling me names.

“Hey, matchstick, where’s the fire?” One of them shouted. “Yeah, fire crotch, do the curtains match the carpet?” Another one sneered. “Or maybe you’re just a carrot top, and you need some ranch dressing,” a third one chimed in, throwing ranch dressing at me.

One day, they cornered me in the bathroom. They grabbed my hair and cut it with scissors, leaving it uneven and ragged. They smeared glue and gum on it, making it sticky and hard to comb. They said they were giving me a makeover, but they were really trying to humiliate me.

They ran after me, grabbing my arms and face and digging their nails into my skin. I felt a sharp pain as they squeezed my

freckles, drawing blood and leaving purple marks. They said they were playing a game, but they were really trying to hurt me.

They spread lies about me, saying I was abused by my dad because of the bruises on my face. They said I was a liar, a freak, and a loser. They said no one liked me or cared about me. They said I deserved everything they did to me.

Their words were like hammers, smashing my self-esteem into pieces. I searched for a spark of confidence or acceptance in myself, but all I found was darkness and doubt. I wished I could escape from them, from myself, from everything.

When I would go home crying, my mother would wrap me in her arms and say, 'It is because you are different, and there is nothing wrong with being different. You are the red skittle in a bag of green and blue skittles.'

I hate fucking skittles.

Then, after another day of enduring their cruel words, their rough pushes, and their mocking laughter, I snapped. I'll never forget the moment when I clenched my fists and swore to myself that this was the last time they would bully me.

It was a Monday; I remember that because my journalism classes were on Monday. We were working on articles for the school newspaper, and I was the editor.

When the deadline came, I collected everyone's papers. They handed me their articles with smug smiles. 'Here you go, carrot top,' one of them said. 'We wrote about the most

important issues in our school.’ He winked at his friends. ‘Like who’s the hottest couple and who’s the most likely to fail.’ They snickered. ‘And of course, we included some juicy stories about your most embarrassing moments.’ He pointed at the article titled *The Awkward Moments Chronicles: Documenting Students’ Most Embarrassing Encounters*. He laughed. ‘You’re welcome.’

I giggled as I ripped their papers to shreds. I couldn’t help but find it amusing how the situation unfolded, with a twist that brought a smile to my face.

Over the last few weeks, I worked on my plan. I dug up any dirt on them that I could find. I scoured their social media accounts for hours. I snooped around their lockers when they weren’t looking. I bribed their friends with candy and money to spill their secrets.

I uncovered things that would make anyone squirm. Cheating scandals, drug habits, shoplifting records, family secrets, and more. Things that would ruin their reputations, their relationships, and their futures. Things that would make them regret ever messing with me.

I compiled all the information into a single article. I titled it: *The Truth About the Bullies: Exposing Their Lies, Crimes, and Secrets*. I printed out dozens of copies and hid them in my backpack. Now all I had to do was wait for the right moment to unleash my revenge.

The next day, I was so glad when the last period bell rang. Whispers and laughter filled the halls, echoing in my ears. I

saw them reading the article, their faces turning red with anger. ‘Who wrote this?’ one of them yelled. ‘Who exposed us?’ another one demanded. ‘Who’s going to pay for this?’ a third one threatened.

Desperate to hide, I stood before the door to the bathroom, my hand shaking as I reached for the doorknob. I twisted it and pushed the door open. I stepped inside, my heart pounding as I closed the door behind me. I took a few deep breaths, my back to the door. I stayed there for a few moments, my eyes closed and my breath coming in deep, shuddering gasps. I felt like I might faint; the fear was so overwhelming that it was almost unbearable.

Finally, I found the courage to open my eyes and look around. I stayed there for what felt like hours, my eyes wide and searching, my ears straining for any sign of life. There was none.

I could hear my own breath and the sound of my heart pounding in my chest as I opened the door.

My eyes were wide and searching, darting from side to side, looking for any signs of life. But there was none. The halls were empty, and nothing moved. It was a strange, eerie sensation, like I was the only living soul remaining in the world.

Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me.

“There she is.”

My heart stopped. I froze in my tracks, my body tensed with fear. I heard the sound of footsteps coming closer, and I ran.

I looked over my shoulder, my gaze darting from side to side. They were close. The school doors were still propped open. I took a deep breath and ran outside. I heard the sound of footsteps coming closer, and I quickly ducked behind a car. I crouched there, my heart pounding and my breath coming in short, shallow gasps.

The footsteps came closer and then stopped. I could hear the person breathing, and I could feel their gaze searching the parking lot. I closed my eyes, praying that they wouldn't find me.

Suddenly, I heard a voice in my ear. "Gotcha."

They grabbed my collar and slammed me against a car with a loud thud. 'You think you're so smart, huh?' One of them snarled. 'You think you can expose us and get away with it?' another one hissed. 'You're going to pay for this, you little freak,' a third one growled. and I felt their fists pounding me all over. One of them spit on me, while one of them had a firm grip on my hair, and I felt pain I never knew was possible. I screamed for help, but no one came, or maybe they were too afraid to help me.

I tried to fight back. I kicked, punched, and bit. But this only made them madder. One of them hit me in the face. Hard. I tumbled to the ground. I could feel blood gushing from my nose and arm where I'd cut myself badly when sliding on the concrete. I remember lying there with my eyes closed and

tears streaming down my face, wondering how much more I could take.

And then I heard a voice, gentle yet firm, say, “Hey,” and a hand reached out and grabbed mine, lifting me up from the ground.

A gasp escaped my mouth—standing before me was Emily Moretti. Emily was small, almost delicate. With wispy blonde hair that hung in loose curls around her and light blue eyes, her face was soft and round, like the moon. She smelled of orange blossom and rose petals, mixed with a hint of geranium.

Emily wasn’t like any ordinary girl. She was the youngest in a line of powerful mafia figures from New York. Emily’s mother didn’t want her daughter to grow up spoiled, and she thought that public school was the perfect place to give her an education away from the influence of money and power. So, at age thirteen, Emily began attending a public school.

She was the new girl in my class that year. She didn’t talk much, but when she did, I loved to listen to her. She had a soft voice that sounded like music to my ears. She would often sit alone, engaged in a book, or writing in her journal. She always kept to herself. Her silence made her mysterious, as if she knew things the rest of us didn’t. I would find myself admiring her from afar. She was everything I wished I could be. She was perfect, and nobody bullied perfect people, right?

“You’re Amber Knox, right?”

I nodded, amazed that she knew my name. I couldn’t speak, terrified of what would happen next.

“Hey there, I’m Emily Moretti.” She greeted me with a smile, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze and an awkward shake. “Are you okay?” she asked and grabbed my arm. “Stupid question, since I can clearly see you’re bleeding. Let’s get you cleaned up.” She wiped away my tears and blood with a piece of toilet paper, handed me a piece, and told me to keep it on my wound to help stop the bleeding.

“Shit, it looks like it might need stitches, but don’t worry, we’ll find someone to take care of you. And we’ll make sure they know who did this to you. These jerks need to be expelled or something.”

I managed to force a smile. “Thanks, Emily. But honestly, no one really listens to me. And it’s okay. I’m used to it.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her voice filled with anger. “No, it’s not okay.”

Turning her attention to the group of boys, she did something that no one else had ever dared to do.

“You know what’s really impressive?” She asked them. “Oh, the sheer terror you must have felt, summoning every ounce of your bravery to come face-to-face with a girl.” She emphasized the last word with a sneer, as if it were the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard.

“I mean, three against one. It must have been incredibly tough. It tells us the challenges you each faced before deciding it would be better as a group.” She looked at them one by one, as if daring them to say something. “But I’m curious. Do you all practice at home, like alone? Or do you all get together and

practice your skills in front of the mirror?” She paused; her eyebrows raised.

“Well, whatever it is you’re doing, kudos! You’re all killing it!” She clapped her hands sarcastically.

One of the guys snorted, trying to appear tough. “What’s it to you, Moretti? She’s just a weirdo with frizzy hair and ugly freckles. Do you want to join the circus? You can be the clown who hides behind all the makeup!” Laughter erupted from the three of them, their smirks dripping with ugliness.

The corners of Emily’s mouth twisted into a wicked smile, and her eyes sparkled with trouble. She let go of my hand and faced the boy squarely. “Yes, actually, I do. Well then, as a circus clown, it’s my job to make people laugh, right?”

The boy responded, “Yep. So, make me laugh, clown.”

“As you wish.” She looked around as if to make sure no one was listening. “A few minutes ago, Amber told me something fascinating about all of you,” she said confidently.

The boys exchanged curious glances. “What’s that?” one of them asked.

“Did you know that Amber is someone special who can see things and knows things about people, like a psychic or those people who see things in a crystal ball?”

The boys started laughing, and a few snickers could be heard behind them as we were all completely oblivious to the growing audience that had gathered around us, listening to every word.



“I swear.” Emily said it with conviction, holding her right hand up. “How do you think she knew all that stuff about you that was in the paper?” The crowd whispers could be heard around us, as Emily continued. “She told me she knows why you guys act this way and why you’re so mean. And guess what? She actually feels sorry for you.”

The boys muttered something, and the crowd went quiet, hanging on to her every word.

Emily pressed on, her voice dripping with sass. “It’s because deep down, you’re all insecure, little boys. That you’re trying to compensate for,” she pauses and continues when they don’t seem to understand what she is saying. “Well, let’s just say, Amber understands your secret struggles with your...” Her words trailed off.

The boys stood there, looking confused. “What the hell are you talking about, Moretti?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Okay, listen up. I don’t have the patience or the crayons to help you grasp what I’m trying to say without saying it, so let me just spell it out. You all act this way to cover up the fact that you all have... teeny, tiny, little...” Emily stood there, her fist held up with only her pinky finger out, wiggling it back and forth. She flicked her eyes and tilted her head towards their crotches, then back up with a grin. “Dicks.”

The crowd, having grown even bigger, burst into uncontrollable laughter. The boys stood there, their faces filled

with a mixture of anger and humiliation. Before they could speak, Emily continued.

“Seriously, guys, I’ve seen ants with bigger dicks than you three. Is that why you have to pick on others? Is it like a desperate attempt to compensate for what’s missing?” She asked, pausing to point with her finger, “Down there? But hey, we get it. Sometimes it’s hard to handle your insecurities, so you resort to picking on others to make yourself feel bigger. You should start a club. I have the perfect name for it! You can call it the ‘Itsy-Bitsy Teeny Weenie’ Club. I bet your folks will be so proud.”

The laughter surrounding us could be heard throughout the school parking lot. I couldn’t help but giggle too, enjoying their discomfort. Then I felt a twinge of sympathy. I knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of ridicule and mockery. It stung, and I knew it was wrong. Yet, at that moment, I didn’t care because I was being saved.

After that day, those guys seemed less eager to bully me. I don’t know whether they were more aware of how it felt to be on the receiving end of embarrassment or afraid of Emily or her family.

Emily and I became inseparable. And it was that day that my dad’s words echoed in my head: I wanted to be someone who changed the world.

As I grew older, my passion for helping others grew stronger. I chose a career in law, focusing on women’s rights and social justice. I am currently in my last year of law school,

finishing my final credits by interning at Albert & Associates Law Firm. They are a prestigious firm, handling only high-profile clients in New York City. Thanks to Emily, her family pulled some strings and got me in.

Emily and I are still best friends and roommates. We're like a real-life odd couple. She is all about practicality, running her own successful businesses, including a renowned floral shop in New York and a new makeup line. Despite us living in her family's luxurious penthouse in an upscale part of the city, she's determined to make her own mark. She radiates elegance, while I'm the epitome of chaos. She's the voice of reason, while I'm the dreamer.

I take a deep breath and run my fingers through my fiery red hair, admiring the way it falls in soft curls around my face. It's been a long journey to get here, but I finally feel like I've found my place in the world.

I shake my head, trying to erase the memories. I have to hurry now.

I rush through my morning routine of washing my face and brushing my teeth in an attempt to brighten my tired complexion. After finishing up, I secure my wild hair into a bun, leaving some wisps to frame my face. To complete the look, I add a hint of peach lip gloss, a few swipes of mascara on my lashes, and a light dusting of powder over my freckles.

My room is a mess as I frantically search for an outfit that portrays professionalism but appears as if I had time to put it together; instead, I end up with mismatched socks hidden

beneath black pants and low-heeled boots, paired with a slightly rumpled sea mist green blouse.

Perfectly imperfect, just like me.

Gathering the papers scattered around my room, I throw them into my satchel and run towards the door. Before leaving, I spot a steaming cup of coffee on the kitchen counter waiting for me—already in a to-go cup that reads “I love New York”—so I seize the opportunity, take a sip, feeling the caffeine warm me from the inside out. I shout goodbye to Emily and dash out the door.

## It's Up To You How Far You Go-Merlin

Amber

**T**he New York skyline is an awe-inspiring backdrop, snowflakes lightly hitting my face. I hurry down the sidewalk, across the street, down the stairs, just in time to catch the subway as it stops. “Must be my lucky day,” knowing five minutes of waiting could make the difference as to how late I am. With nowhere to sit and out of breath, I grab the strap and can’t help but think about the possibilities that lie ahead today.

As a female intern, I quickly learned that I am not treated as an equal; instead, I am surrounded by men who see me as a secretary. The owner of the firm, Mr. Albert, who probably doesn’t know my name, sent me a text last night, at 9:12 p.m. informing me to be at our office by 7 a.m. for an urgent meeting. Since it’s been a constant battle to prove myself, to be seen among the sea of men wearing Prada suits and dismissive glances, I couldn’t help but assume they wanted me to be there for my legal abilities—to finally be seen as an equal.

With no further details I simply replied, “Okay,” leaving me with questions.

Immediately, I reached out to the receptionist, Rachael, known in our building as “The Information Whisperer” and she usually lives up to her reputation. According to her, last night at the law firm, the room was filled with all the stuffy suit seniors, their voices hushed as they engaged in a secret discussion. The topic at hand seemed to be a pressing matter that needed immediate attention, prompting collaboration with a top public relations firm. She knew this because she had been instructed to contact someone named John from the firm and connect him into the conference call, and their meeting had stretched into the late hours of the night. She said this wasn’t typical, and my curiosity grew.

When I probed for more information, like who it was or why it was so urgent, her response left me stunned.

‘OMG, brace yourself! As far as I know it’s one of our clients and girl this guy is next level hottie famous! And he’s a big fucking deal. It’s the hockey guy, Beau Daniels! Can you even? 🤩 He’s so sexy he make unicorns blush. ☐☐ And he’s single again! I can’t even! I don’t get how those girls keep fucking up. Be pretty. Not hard to do. LOL. Rich and sexy? My kinda guy! 😊 Anyways, I heard he had made some comment to a reporter about women belonging in the kitchen and blah blah blah then something about fixing his image. IDK. I don’t think anything about his image needs fixing LOL I’m so pumped to meet him tomorrow. I should tell the stuffy suit seniors that he’s gonna be late cuz...well ya know!! I

wonder if his stick curves to the right? 😊☐ LOL Shitty they didn't ask you to be there. SSSS (stuffy suit seniors suck)! Got to go! #girlsniteout and we plan on getting #shitfaced! You should come!'

I didn't respond.

I wasn't completely shocked to learn who it was. The other night, as I scrolled through my social media, I stopped on a short clip on TikTok, where someone cleverly dubbed a picture of Beau with a voice over and a comical animation. His mouth was exaggerated and paired with the ridiculous motion of a fake foot going back and forth into a gaping mouth while repeatedly singing, 'I will bring home the bacon. You will fry it up in a pan. And never, never, never forget that I'm the man.'

Curiosity getting the best of me, I looked deeper into the story behind the video. Apparently, it all stemmed from his remark during a highly publicized press conference. His words had ignited a frenzy of reactions and discussions, leading to an explosion of memes and mockeries across social media platforms.

The press conference itself was a spectacle, with journalists and reporters fighting for his attention. Beau is known for his suave and confident attitude, drama and is always seen with a supermodel on his arm. But that night he stood alone before them, his face twisted, showing signs of annoyance.

In the video, he is surrounded by reporters and flashing cameras. As questions were shouted out among the crowd, you

can hear someone ask a question about his thoughts on the fairness of the gender pay gap in hockey, and his response sent shockwaves into every home in America.

“I mean, let’s face it, if you ask any seven-year-old to name a female hockey player, they’d probably draw a blank, right? And, hey, I’m just being real here, but maybe that’s because women don’t quite measure up. I know it might sound controversial, and I’ll likely get some flak for saying it, but sometimes, maybe our ancestors had a point, you know? Maybe women are better off sticking to the kitchen and all that traditional stuff.”

The room was filled with a mix of gasps and uncomfortable laughter, as if his words were meant to be a joke. He had this audacity, that trademark male arrogance, as if his unfounded opinions were somehow the universal truth.

The video spread like wildfire and became a topic everyone spoke about. Beau Daniels, the hockey sensation, had made a controversial statement that left a bitter taste in the mouths of many, me included.

As the subway comes to a stop, my coat over my arm and a cup of coffee in hand, I weave through the bustling crowd and make my way up the stairs. Suddenly, I feel a sharp push from behind, and I stumble forward, causing the lid on the coffee to come lose, and the scalding liquid spills all over my shirt.

“Shit!” I grumble, eyeing the damage. “Well, Amber, this is certainly the way to make a lasting first impression,” I mutter



sarcastically to myself. “Coffee stains, wrinkles, and hair that looks like a tornado hit it. Great.”

Taking a deep breath, I try to compose myself. “Okay, no time to wallow in self-pity,” I remind myself. “I can still salvage this. Tide pen, please tell me you’re in my purse.” Frantically, I rummage through the contents of my bag, relieved when I finally find the trusty Tide pen. I have no time right now, so I’ll attempt to clean up in the elevator.

Squeezing through the crowd, I can see the law firm’s office building ahead. Last night’s late hours and research hopefully prepared me for this moment. I did as much as possible, based on what Rachael shared with me, to be prepared. I even practiced in a mirror, trying to look studious as I readied myself for this crucial moment. Yet, I am not sure why they wouldn’t tell me the reason I was asked to be at the meeting. How could I be prepared? Maybe they want to see how I handle the unknown situations. And now that I am almost there, I start doubting myself and feel a wave of nausea.

“Suck it up girl. You can do this.” I tell myself. “Fake it till you make it.”

As I wait for the crosswalk sign to flash, I notice a huge crowd is blocking the entrance to the building. “Of course, just my luck,” I mutter. When the light changes and I dash across the street, I can hear voices getting louder. Just as I am about to elbow my way through the mass of people, I see him—Beau Daniels—stepping out from a sleek black car, looking as if he doesn’t have a care in the world.

I can't help but smile. It seems he's running late too. Perfect. This gives me a chance to make a mad dash ahead of him, and hopefully, if I am late, no one will even notice because the main attraction isn't there yet.

With a surge of energy, I push through, dodging through the crowd, leaving a trail of glares in my wake.

“Oops, sorry.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“Shit. Did I do that? Send me the cleaning bill!”

Finally, I arrive at the large, heavy glass doors and step into the polished lobby, a rush of warm air hitting my face. I run past the girl at the front desk and down the hall to the elevator doors. I can't shake the feeling of fear that grips me, wondering how this meeting will unfold. I press the button; my impatience is obvious in every jab of my finger until I hear, ding.

Sighing, I take once last quick glance at myself in the polished metal doors and can't help but chuckle at my reflection. I step into the empty elevator, glad to finally be alone. As the doors begin to close, I hear.

“Hold the door!”

I hear a man's voice, and I already know who it is. Seriously? Could this day be any more clichéd? It's like I'm trapped in some bad predictable comedy. Maybe if I pretend like I didn't hear him, I can avoid this whole awkward situation. I'll just put on my headphones, turn up the volume,

and immerse myself in the catchy beats of my favorite song, “Born This Way,” and let the doors close between us.

“Damn it!”

Reluctantly, I press the “door open” button. I remind myself that he’s the client, despite being drop-dead fucking gorgeous. I will be professional in our attorney-client relationship. I remind myself that Beau Daniels, who exclusively dates supermodels and has a reputation as a player, is just another man who thinks bullying women is acceptable. So, I should have no problem adding him to the long list of assholes I’ve dealt with before. I tell myself, easy-peasy. Right? Wrong. It would have been way easier to convince a toddler to eat broccoli instead of ice cream.

As the elevator doors open, I silently instruct myself not to look up, but instead, I look up. My breath catches in my throat. I tell myself to look away, but instead I stare at him. He gives me a charming smile and steps in. I felt a wave of excitement between my legs. My panties became wet and my body aching with desire. What the hell is going on? I cross my legs, needing to take control of my body but it doesn’t seem to be working. So I put on my headphones, close my eyes and immerse myself in my music.

Of course this guy had to be fucking gorgeous.

## A Tale as Old as Time-Beauty and the Beast

Beau

The sound of my phone vibrating on the nightstand jars me awake. I groggily reach for it, squinting at the screen. 6:15 a.m. Fuck, it's too early for this. I swipe the screen to silence the alarm, hoping to get a few more minutes of sleep.

I start to drift off again, when the door to my bedroom slams open, rattling the frame. "Beau, you're late!" Luke's voice pierces through the darkness. He yanks open the curtains, letting in the sunlight. "You have a meeting at the law firm in forty-five minutes!"

I sigh and rub my temples, hoping he'll go away. "Luke, can't you handle it?" I mumble.

He stands over me, his blue eyes wide with frustration. He acts like he's twice his age, always worrying about deadlines and details. "You can't afford to miss this meeting," he says, his Canadian accent more pronounced when he's angry. "Hopefully they can help with damage control after your dumbass gender statement disaster."

He grabs my sheet, which is tightly tucked over my head and rips it off my bed. I shiver as the cold air hits my skin. “Damn it Beau, get the fuck up! This is serious.”

Luke has been my assistant since I lived in Canada, and he moved to New York with me. He’s tall and athletic, with dirty blond hair that looks like he’s just come from surfing. He wears jeans and a button-down shirt, rolled up at the sleeves to reveal some tattoos from our wilder days in Toronto. He’s laid-back and confident most of the time, but he doesn’t take any shit from me.

He also has a weird fetish for leather. Whether it’s a messenger bag slung over his shoulder or leather suspenders. Shit, I bet he’d wear leather underwear if they breathed.

I drag myself out of bed and stumble into the shower, trying to wake up. The hot water washes over me, momentarily clearing my head. “Luke!” I shout. “Is my suit ready?”

I hear him reply faintly, “You know it is. I left it on the closet door. Now hurry up!” I find my suit right where he left it. It’s a slim fit, navy-blue wool Armani suit, paired with a crisp white shirt and a red silk tie and black loafers.

I glance at my reflection and I’m not sure who I see looking back. My charming smile that usually wins people over probably won’t erase the comment I made a few days ago. But I think this mess has been blown way out of proportion.

I had just broken up with Victoria, the woman who had been my girlfriend for the past year. She was everything I wanted, gorgeous, funny, independent, or so I thought. She wasn’t. She

got herself into a big mess and then tried to blackmail me for money. I hate her for making me feel trapped and betrayed. Needless to say, I did not take the breakup kindly as one can assume after one is blackmailed by someone they trusted.

Then only a few hours after dealing with the breakup, and I can't forget to mention we had just lost a game, I was forced to face the reporters. Word had spread quickly about Victoria and me through media and yet, no one bothered to ask if I was okay, or care that my life was falling apart. All they seemed to care about were the mind-numbing questions they threw at me, completely unrelated to me or my career for that matter. So when they asked me about gender equality in professional sports, I became extremely pissed off. It was as if they couldn't care less about the problems I was going through, or the pain I was dealing with. They didn't give a damn about what I needed so why should I give a damn about them?

Yeah, at that moment, I made a choice. I choice to prioritize me over everyone else. I wanted to inflict some of the pain I was feeling. I craved that rush of power, that momentary satisfaction of shocking everyone. Sure, it was a twisted way to regain some semblance of control, a moment of recklessness born from my own anger, but I didn't care.

Until I said it. But it was too late to take it back. But honestly, I can't say I didn't get a little enjoyment watching the reporter's eyes widen, their mouths drop open, even though I knew that they captured every word I said.

The next day, my stupid comment was all over the news, social media, and sports blogs. I had somehow offended millions of people, especially female hockey players who had worked hard to prove themselves in a male-dominated sport. Which, okay, I feel bad that the one time I snap, it just so happened to be centered around them.

I'm told I not only jeopardized my career, but my team, sponsors, and fans, they're all disgusted with me. Suddenly, I am the poster child for being sexist, ignorant, and a real piece of work. They're all demanding that I make things right, to say sorry, take back my words, and face the consequences. Blah, blah, blah.

And that's why I'm in this mess and why I was told to be at this meeting. It's not just any meeting, mind you. I'm meeting with some big-shot New York law firm who is on the leagues payroll and our PR team. They're supposed to be the damage control experts, the ones who clean up the messes celebs like me make. Whatever.

Deep down, I'm well aware that an apology would have probably smoothed things over a lot quicker. Yet, there's this stubborn part of me that doesn't want to give in. I mean, seriously, why should I say sorry? They don't care and unless it makes a good story, no one's got a second to listen to me.

"Get your ass in the car, Beau!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." I grumble.

As we make our way through the city, Luke is rambling on about what I should say and how I should handle things. I

don't hear him. I can't help but wonder, if I were just some regular Joe, would anyone even care about my two cents? Probably not. But because of who I am and one damn comment, I'm on the verge of losing everything. It's like I'm being dragged to a public square, ready to be pelted with stones for my so-called sins.

Everybody keeps asking me the same thing: "Why not just apologize and get it over with? Don't make it worse." Yeah, I get it – what I said was out of line, and not what I stand for. But I'm sick of feeling like no one gives a damn about what I want or need. I know Victoria's not the first gold digger to come my way, and she sure as hell won't be the last. But that doesn't mean that I'm not hurting from our breakup?

We finally arrive at the building, and as I'm about to step out of the car, a mob of reporters and cameras pounce on me. Fuck. It's like a hurricane of noise and flashing lights, and their "questions" feel more like pointed jabs than anything needing an actual answer.

"Beau, how can you say that about women's hockey? You're such a disappointment!" One of them yells.

"Your words show your true self, Beau. It seems like you don't respect female athletes at all. Or maybe you just don't respect any women?" Another mocks.

"Do you think your success gives you the right to put down women in sports?" A third person questions.

Their words hit me like a slap in the face, making me feel defensive. This is exactly what I mean. Even if I wanted to say



sorry, they're not giving me a chance.

“Enough!” I shout, trying to be heard above the chaos. “You think you know me from one damn thing I said? Well, you're wrong. I'm not the bad guy here. I'm not going to be blamed for the problems women face in sports.”

My words hang in the air, and they all stare at me, surprised and curious about what I'll do next. The tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife. I take a deep breath, trying to calm down but I can't calm the beast inside me wanting to come out.

“I won't let you make me feel fucking guilty for just one stupid comment,” I continue, my voice determined. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to attend.” With that, I turn away and walk off, Luke right behind me.

We push through the crowd, and as we reach the entrance of the law firm's building, I can still hear the reporters behind me. Just as I'm about to step inside, getting ready to face my shooting squad, another reporter can't help but say something else.

“Hey, Beau! I bet your mom is really proud of you—or maybe not. I mean, you've turned out to be such a disappointment. Do you treat her badly? Beau, was it your daddy who taught you how to treat women?”

The words hit me like a punch in the gut, touching a sensitive spot related to my complicated relationship with my dad. Memories and pain come rushing back, and rage takes over. I turn around, my fists clenched and ready to beat this

man to the ground. “What the fuck did you just say?” I scream back. But before I can do anything, Luke steps in front of me, pushing me away. I struggle against his hold, ready to beat this guy’s ass.

“Beau, What the hell is wrong with you? I don’t get it, man. This isn’t you. Why are you acting this way? First the comment then you won’t apologize and now this? It’s like you’re possessed.” Luke’s confusion was evident in his tone as he tries to make sense of my actions. “I mean, I get that you’re hurting over Victoria, but this just doesn’t add up with who you are. I know it’s tough, and those words they’re throwing at you, they’re like firecrackers. But remember, right now you’re not here to prove them wrong. Maybe just focus on this meeting and setting the record straight, okay? Come on man, pull yourself together. We’re all worried about you.”

Luke’s grip loosens and I pull away. “I’m fine,” I growl under my breath.

I walk into the lobby, feeling the stares and whispers of the people around me. The young attractive receptionist gives me a brief nod, clearly unimpressed by my presence, and points down the hall. A week ago she would had been undressing herself in front of me, now I am treated as if I’m the enemy.

Screw them. I make my way towards the elevator. Glancing at my watch, it’s 6:58 a.m., and I need to get my ass moving or I am going to be late for this damn meeting. I see a woman step into the elevator just before me, and the doors begin to close.

“Hold the door!”

I know she heard me; she better not act like she didn't.

The doors slide open, revealing a stunning young woman inside, I gasp, and my heart begins to race. What the hell is going on? I step inside, feeling my heart pounding in my chest and my palms become sweaty. Our eyes meet briefly, I smile, and she smiles politely back, staring at me for a moment before putting in her ear buds. I immediately sense a connection that shocks me.

She doesn't seem to recognize me. Maybe she doesn't watch sports, own a TV, or have access to the internet. Maybe she lives on a deserted island, away from the reach of fame and the media. Or maybe she knows who I am and what I said and is secretly plotting to kill me in the elevator. I chuckle at the thought. Either way, it's a refreshing change from always being nagged by fans and right now, that is what I need. For a moment, I can just be Beau, a regular guy riding the elevator, and it feels surprisingly nice.

I lean in front of her and press the button for the twenty-fifth floor, even though it is already lit up. Suddenly, my phone rings loudly, startling me and she jumps back, then glares at me.

“Sorry,” I say sheepishly. But I don't think she hears me.

She looks away.

I take out my phone from my suit pocket and look at the screen. It's Joe Toscano, my best friend, and a reporter for

ESPN. He's been there for me through thick and thin, especially during the hard times. But right now, I don't want his advice. I answer the call with sarcasm in my voice.

"Hey Joe. What's up, buddy? How about this weather we're having?"

"Beau, listen to me," Joe says, his voice straining. "I know you're angry, but this isn't about them getting to know the 'real' you. It's about how your words affect people. How they perpetuate harmful stereotypes. And trust me, it's not worth it. I've seen careers ripped away from guys for saying less. You're better than this, man."

I scoff, holding the phone away from my ear. Luke must've called him. "Better than what, Joe? Better than speaking my mind? Better than standing up for myself?"

"Better than stooping to their level. You're smarter than that."

"Look, Joe, I appreciate your concern, but I know what I'm doing. I'm tired of these people dictating who I am. I am tired of all their stupid questions, and I'm tired of no one giving a shit about me."

He sighs heavily on the other end of the line. "So, your hurt because no one cares about your feelings, so your solution is to do this? Man, that's just dumb. You may think you're being tough, but all you're doing is alienating yourself from those who support you. We all know you aren't a guy who views women that way, no matter how the media makes you out to

be. So don't add fuel to the fire, or there won't be anything left to put out."

I tense up at his words, my lips pressing into a thin line. "Support? Who needs support when you're constantly under scrutiny? No one cares about how I feel. They can take their support and shove it up their asses. I don't need anyone but myself." He doesn't reply right away. There's silence, a moment of stillness that hangs between us, heavy with unspoken truths and the weight of our friendship.

Finally, Joe speaks again, his voice now concerned. "Buddy, I care, and I know you're going through a lot of shit right now. But remember, there are people who believe in you and know the real you. Don't let anger and bitterness speak for you."

I clench my jaw. "I appreciate your words, Joe, but—" Suddenly, the elevator lurches, as if to interrupt us, my phone flies out of my hand and it clatters to the ground. I instantly reach for the rail, but instead I find her hand in mine, as she stumbles into my arms. The elevator smoothly continues up.

Her body is pressed against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through me. My arms are tightly wrapped around her breasts, and I momentarily forget all the shit that has consumed my thoughts all morning. It's as if the world pauses, and all I'm aware of are the two of us in this suspended moment. She smells sweet, like if cotton candy and chocolate had a baby, and their baby was now cradled in my arms.

I look down at her, and she gasps, her eyes wide with shock. My knees go weak. They're the most beautiful emerald, green

eyes I've ever seen, staring up at me—and she must sense my reaction because before she can fully regain her footing, she swiftly untangles herself from my arms and steps back, putting some distance between us. It's as if the sudden connection caught her off guard too and now she's trying to get away from it.

I offer a small, crooked smile, attempting to break the tension. “Sorry about that. I didn't mean to grab your... looks like the elevator had a different plan though.”

Amber's lips twitch, a blend of amusement and self-consciousness evident. “Yeah, it seems that way.”

I take a step toward her, my tone light as I try to alleviate the awkwardness. “I bet your glad you held the door for me now.”

Amber's gaze meets mine, a faint hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Or I bet *you're* glad I held the elevator door for you now.”

There's a flicker of humor in her eyes, and I can't help but feel drawn to her as if she holds some mysterious power over me. “Beau,” I offer, extending my hand toward her in a friendly gesture when I catch a glimpse of myself through the reflection of the doors, and notice a coffee stain spreading across my shirt. She notices it too, and her eyes widen in horror.

“Shit. I am so sorry!” she says. Without hesitation, she pulls a Tide pen from her bag and begins to gently dab at the coffee stain on my chest. Her touch is delicate, and her eyes are

focused on the task at hand. I watch her with a mixture of surprise and confusion.

I gently place my hands over hers, feeling the softness of her skin against mine and stopping her. "It's alright," I say softly. "Accidents happen." I wonder how soft her skin would feel naked against mine.

She looks up at me, a hint of a smile on her heart-shaped lips. I want to grab her face and taste those soft lips, running my tongue over them and in her mouth. "Still, Mr. Daniels, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to spill coffee all over you." She gestures to the stain on my shirt. "But hey, at least I can cross off 'share coffee with a stranger in an elevator' from my bucket list."

I can't help but chuckle. She bends down beside me, grabbing something off the floor. "Don't forget this," she says handing me my phone.

I couldn't help but notice the coffee stain on her shirt, and I couldn't help but laugh at the irony of the situation. I gesture towards her brown-stained shirt. "Maybe we're just targets of a coffee conspiracy and should form a support group for stain survivors."

She laughs, and I can't help but laugh with her. The elevator stops, floor twenty-five. "Glad we made it alive."

She steps out, and she turns to me, pausing for a moment, as if she is waiting. I am mesmerized by her green eyes sparkling like jewels in the light looking back at me and then she smiles.

A smile that makes me wonder if she's as sweet as she looks and says, "Thanks for saving me."

The elevator doors begin to close, and I yell, "Wait, what's your name"? But they close, cutting off her response. Who the hell is she? I have to find out.

As the elevator moves, I replay our time together in my head. Wait, she called me Mr. Daniels. I can't help but laugh. So, she does know who I am. My thoughts consume me, unable to stop thinking about her and it is not until the elevator stops and the doors open that I snap back to reality. Shit, I am back on the first floor.

"Ah, shit," I grumble under my breath. Chuckling, I realize I should had gotten off the same floor she did.

"Dammit." Cursing my own distraction, I am forced to stand here and wait for the elevator to fill up from the large group of people eagerly trying to fit inside, before making my way back up.

And so, with the lingering question on my mind, I wonder if fate will bring us together once more.



## Through the Looking Glass-Alice in Wonderland

Amber

I dash out of the elevator, my heart racing from the unexpected encounter with Beau. Of course I had to fall into, and spill coffee on, the one person I was supposed to impress. Not only that, but the awkwardness he must have felt catching me and my boobs. I am sure that isn't written in any law books teaching you how to act when you first meet your client. I check my phone; it's 7:01 a.m., and I sprint towards the conference room.

Rachael is sitting at her desk, her brown hair and makeup looking perfect, and she is wearing a low cut black silky blouse. When she sees me, I give her a nod and she looks confused but right now I don't have time to explain and push open the door.

I find a seat, trying to ignore the thick tension in the air. I can smell his cologne on me and can't stop myself from getting lost in my thoughts. Someone clears their throat nervously, and I glance around, hoping it wasn't towards me. Everyone looks anxious and impatient, wondering where Beau is. Time crawls

by, and I sneak a peek at my phone again—7:11 a.m. I wonder if Beau bailed since he didn't get out of the elevator with me, but then the door opens, and he arrogantly walks in.

I didn't really look at him in the elevator. I was too shocked and embarrassed. I've seen his pictures online, but they don't do him justice. Now, as he stands under the harsh lights of the room, I can't help but stare at him. I've got to stop doing that.

I watch as he unbuttons his jacket, revealing a hint of the muscles under his shirt. His eyes are a golden brown with a hint of yellow, like the rich autumn colors of fall. They draw me in and hold me captive. His wavy chestnut brown hair falls into place with ease and catches the light with subtle highlights. His jawline, strong and chiseled, enhances his masculine features, and his beard is short and well-groomed, hiding the dimples that I bet would show if he smiled.

Standing tall with an athletic build, he exudes confidence and strength. He holds himself with impeccable posture, commanding respect.

His eyes sweep the room, mumbling a weak apology to the stern-faced executives at the main table, and stop when they meet mine. I instantly feel heat in my cheeks, and my palms are damp.

What the hell is wrong with me?

My heart pounding in my chest as I curse myself for being such a klutz. I hope no one can hear it, as it is beating so loud in my head. Beau smiles, but not a full smile, and I squirm in

my seat, wondering what he's thinking. Is he surprised to see me here? Amused? Whatever it is, it makes me uncomfortable.

Standing in front of Beau, John Roswell, the head of publicity at Stellar Sports Management, shoots him a disapproving look. He taps his watch and says in a low voice, "You're late, Mr. Daniels. This is serious." There's a hint of darkness in John's eyes, a reflection of the toll this job and the pursuit of success have taken on him. Despite what appears to be an attempt to look his best, both he and his suit carry traces of wear and tear, revealing years of hard work and dedication.

In a clear display of annoyance, John waits for Beau to sit down. Passing numerous empty spots, he finds one directly across from me. I shift uncomfortably in my seat. Why is he staring at me?

John takes charge and begins his presentation on the projector screen. He outlines the steps that the law firm will take regarding Beau's recent comment. Representatives from the hockey league, coaches, the owner, as well as associates from my law firm, are present, along with stockholders and advisors. Each person offers their own valuable perspective on handling delicate matters.

Throughout the meeting, I notice something – snippets of snide comments and sarcastic mumbles seem to escape from Beau's lips under his breath. It's as though he's trying to share his discontent with the proceedings. The remarks are faint, almost drowned out by the discussions but my ears catch enough to realize that his patience is wearing thin. A part of

me is irritated by his behavior – his dismissive attitude is hardly conducive to helping him.

I can't help but wonder if this guy is a grade A asshole. For a moment in the elevator I thought maybe it was all a misunderstanding but now, watching his behavior, maybe I am wrong. But for a moment, when we were alone, I could have sworn I saw something completely opposite than the man who sits here now.

I can sense Beau's eyes on me, like fire on my skin. It's like he's watching my every move, even when I'm focusing on what's being discussed. His gaze on me feels strong, but I refuse to acknowledge it. I must stand my ground – he's a client, and nothing beyond that. Even if I were interested, pursuing anything with him is out of the question. There's a professional code to uphold, especially at this early stage of my career.

As the meeting seems to be wrapping up, Mr. Albert, the head of the law firm, clears his throat and gets everyone's attention. The room falls silent as everyone looks at him, drawn by his presence. He carries himself with grace, his face marked with lines that tell stories. The lines around his eyes are soft but deep, and his hair is a mix of gray and black, styled to give him a distinguished look. He smiles warmly at me, and I can't help but feel nervous. This is it. The moment I have been waiting for.

“Amber,” Mr. Albert begins, “we have a proposal to discuss with you.”

A proposal? I don't recall learning this in law school. I glance behind me, expecting to see another person. I look back at him and he is looking directly at me. My stomach tightens.

“We have devised a plan that we believe will be the most effective and expedient way to improve Beau's public image. Given the urgency surrounding the ongoing games and the need to retain sponsorships and our broadcast rights, swift action is of the utmost importance.”

My mind races to grasp where he is headed with this. The room remains in tense silence as he continues.

“In previous cases resembling Beau's, we have successfully managed similar scenarios using a strategy that involves a brief and purposeful relationship between our client and a carefully chosen individual who embodies the opposite of our client's current image.”

Mr. Albert pauses, then looks at me with a serious expression.

“This method has consistently yielded positive results in reshaping public perception. Normally, we would recruit and train an actor to assume this role. However, given the pressing nature of the current circumstances, time is not on our side. After careful consideration, we believe that you perfectly embody the qualities we are seeking and can fulfill this role expeditiously and professionally.”

I pinch myself, hoping this is a bad dream. Or am I being subjected to a prank, like those TV shows where people jump out and shout, “Gotcha!”

I feel everyone's eyes on me, burning holes in my skin. I feel an overwhelming dizziness washing over me. The sheer audacity of it angers me. Is this why they asked me to be here? And if so why couldn't they have asked me in private, instead of in a room full of suits? Instead of in front of Beau Daniels? And what the hell does he mean by a brief and purposeful relationship? Like a relationship? With Beau Daniels?

This has got to be a sick joke.

As I try to process this absurd proposal, someone in the room yells, "Amber, are you okay?" I can sense that my facial expressions must mirror those of a character in a horror movie, as if I'm being chased by a monster, and then the camera zooms in for a close-up. In response, I simply nod, unable to find my voice. John calls out, "Can someone please get her a glass of water?"

Mr. Albert clears his throat, bringing attention back to him. "Amber, the PR agency is willing to offer you a substantial sum of money for your participation." He slides a folder across the table, then smiles at me. "We understand the weight of this decision and the challenges it may bring."

I gulp down some water, letting the wetness fill my dry mouth. Did he just say they wanted to pay me? How much are we talking about here? My head is spinning. I open the folder and gasp.

He leans in closer, then says, "But I also want you to consider something important. By stepping into this, you have a unique opportunity to make an impact."

He pauses, allowing his words to sink in, before continuing.

“Imagine the power of your voice. By standing beside Beau and showing him what respect and equality truly mean, you have the chance to change his perspective and inspire others. You can be a role model, not just for girls but for everyone who believes in fairness and justice.”

He places a hand on my shoulder, his touch reassuring. “It won’t be easy, but this is your chance to make a difference. To take a stand and to show the world that everyone deserves to be treated equally.”

John interrupts, “Tell us what you’re thinking, Amber.” He looks at me expectantly, his eyes eager and hopeful.

I take a few moments to let the weight of everything sink in, allowing it to seep into the depths of my thoughts. In that instant a surge of emotions floods through me, and the thought of fleeing, of grabbing my passport and hopping on the next flight to Bora Bora holds a certain attraction. But as I pause, my mind racing with possibilities, I realize that this moment, this very opportunity, could be the beginning of me making a difference.

Across from me, Beau leans back in his chair, crossing his hands behind his head. He huffs lightly, a hint of amusement tugging at the corners of his lips. “So, you expect me to play along with this little scheme?” Beau’s voice cuts through the room. “Forgive me, but I don’t believe I need to defend myself or alter anyone’s opinion. Let them think what they want.” But then he adds, with a wink at me, “If I were to entertain such an

idea, it certainly wouldn't be with someone as uptight as her." His words hang in the air, teasing and taunting, as if daring anyone to prove him wrong.

The team owner, Wyatt Roberts, a man known for his gentle nature, speaks up abruptly. "You will do as instructed, *and* you will do it with grace, gratitude, and a fucking smile. Am I making myself clear, Mr. Daniels?"

Beau leans back in his chair, a subtle shift in his posture signals his relaxed demeanor. He folds his arms against his chest, the lines of his suit jacket accentuating his confident stance. The mischievous smirk that tugs at the corner of his lips and his eyes, lock onto mine, and hold a flicker of amusement, as if he finds great pleasure in the madness. It's as though he's savoring the unexpected turn of events, taking satisfaction in the chaos, and enjoying the opportunity to test the limits of the situation.

My heart racing, I summon my courage and stand up. I adjust my stance, meeting his gaze head-on. The tension in the room feels almost electric as I move closer, bridging the distance between us. My determination is unwavering, driven by a need to challenge him. Without fully considering the consequences, I declare, "I'm in. I'll take the offer."

Beau chuckles under his breath, "Typical woman, all about the money. Just looking for an easy way out."

My jaw tightens at his words. The room seems to hold its breath, waiting to see what happens next, as our eyes remain



locked in a silent battle of wills. His gaze is unwavering, as if he's trying to figure me out.

I take a deep breath and roll my eyes dramatically. “Wow, it's like you know me already. Because it's every girl's wildest dream to star in a fairy tale where the prince is a textbook arrogant, chauvinistic asshole who has no respect for women. I can practically hear the stampede of women lining up for this amazing opportunity. Oh dear, I hope they remembered to wear their aprons. You know, to be ready for all that bacon you'll be bringing home. That's because every woman's rightful place is in the kitchen. Right, Mr. Daniels?”

Beau leans back in his chair, offering me a slow, mock applause. “Well done, Miss—?” He waves his hand as if my name isn't worth knowing. “Feisty, I like that. But don't expect me to change my views just because of some ‘staged romance.’ And I've given enough of my money away to princesses like you, so don't expect me to dip into my pockets for your fairy tale. But I would still love it if you cooked me some bacon, sweetie. That's if you know how to cook?”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, my nails digging into my palms as I struggle to contain my rage. In my mind, I imagine my fist meeting his smug mouth.

Mr. Albert's voice slices through the tension. “That's enough.” Defeated, I slump back into my seat, anger pulsing through my veins.

“Amber, we value your dedication to the firm, and your efforts won't go unnoticed,” he affirms with a nod, his

expression warm. “Both of you need to be present at John’s office tomorrow, by 8 a.m. The specifics will be ironed out and shared with you. Additionally, Amber, given the circumstances, we’ll be temporarily placing your internship on hold and transitioning you onto our payroll. You’ll receive compensation, effective today, to cover any necessary expenses or personal needs. It’s been a long day, and we are all tired, but before we wrap things up, do either of you have any questions?”

Beau clears his throat and leans forward in his chair, putting his elbows on his knees and his hands together. “Yeah. When do we kick off this shit-show?”

John answers with a knowing smile, “Right away.”

There’s no turning back now.

## The Snow Queen's Spell-Snow White

Beau

I step out of the building, my head aching from the meeting. As a light drizzle falls from the dark clouds, I tilt my head back and close my eyes, enjoying the cool air on my face. Luke pulls up in my BMW 3 Series, and I open the back door, sliding into the seat and releasing a heavy sigh.

“Rough day, boss?” Luke asks, his voice laced with concern.

“You don’t want to know,” I grumble.

As we drive through the busy city streets, I can’t help but dwell on the meeting. It’s infuriating to think they believed this stupid plan would solve everything. What did they take me for? Their puppet on a string, ready to dance whenever they wanted me to? And why her? In the elevator, we had a connection, and now that connection is ruined with offers of money and a chance to boost her career.

I grip my fist, my knuckles turning white with anger. I shake my head, trying to forget it all but I am unable to control my

anger any longer. I call Joe, needing to sort through this, but he doesn't answer. "Damnit!"

"Hey, man," Luke finally speaks up, his voice gentle yet determined. "You seem like you could use a distraction. How about you share that story about how you met Joe?"

I glance at him, surprised by his suggestion. He's heard this story numerous times before.

I let out a sigh, realizing his reason, allowing a small smile to creep onto my face. "Joe, huh? Alright."

As I start recounting the tale of how Joe and I met, I notice Luke's attention is fully focused on me. I chuckle, impressed because he knows it's a temporary escape from the frustration that's building up inside me.

"I was still new to New York—two seasons maybe—so I didn't know my way around town," I begin. "One evening, feeling pissed from the game we lost, I needed some fresh air and started walking. I wasn't sure where I was and didn't care. When I turned down this back street, I heard all this shouting coming from this sports bar. It looked like a low-key kind of place, and there was a sign in the window that said, 'Ice-cold beer and live sports.' Just what the doctor ordered. I went inside, grabbed a beer from the bartender, which was ice cold by the way, and found an empty seat in the corner. I had a clear view of the TV, but I was sitting next to a large group of guys who were very loud and very drunk."

I pause for a moment, remembering that night. The atmosphere, the chatter, and the unexpected turn of events.

“As I sipped my beer, trying to focus on the game on the TV, I realized something.” I chuckle, “The group beside me were talking about me without realizing I was right there next to them.”

Luke, acting genuinely surprised, “No shit! What were they saying?”

I shrug, “Well, one guy said something like, ‘That Daniels, he’s quite the character, isn’t he?’ Another guy responded by saying he couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that they actually signed me. Another guy jumped in and said I was a loose cannon, a liability, and a waste of money. And then they all started to list all the things they hated about me: my attitude, my style, my accent, my hair, you name it.”

Luke, shaking his head in disbelief, says “Wow, that’s harsh. How did you handle it?”

I grin, “I decided to have some fun with them. I pretended to be a big fan of Daniels and joined their conversation. I said things like, ‘Hey, come on, guys. Beau Daniels is freaking awesome. He’s the best thing that ever happened to this team. He’s got skills, good looks, and a sense of humor. I was laying it on thick. I said he’s a legend in the making and shit like that. And as I continued I watched them get more and more annoyed and angry with me.”

Luke, now laughing harder, “What a bunch of dumbasses.”

“Right! Then they tried to argue with me and prove me wrong. They called me names and told me to shut the fuck up. They even threatened to kick my ass if I didn’t stop defending

Daniels. But I didn't back down. Hell no, I kept on praising myself and annoying them until they couldn't take it anymore. Even a woman at the bar couldn't help but saying something about how good-looking I am, like a magazine model, and how she'd let me puck her any day."

"And not one guy knew they were talking to the legendary Beau Daniels?"

"There was one." I can't help but pause, remembering that night like it was yesterday before continuing. "As I continued to instigate and annoy them, that is when this guy walked over to my table and introduced himself as Joe Toscano, saying he recognized me when I walked in. He said he wanted to buy me a beer as a way to thank me for providing him with some entertainment for the evening. He said he was starting to feel bad for his idiotic friends and asked me to end their suffering."

Luke is hanging on to my every word, trying to keep his laughter under control, knowing the best part is coming.

"We laughed about it for a minute, and I told him I would put them out of their misery. So, I leaned forward and cleared my throat until I knew they were all paying attention. Making sure I was very loud, I said, 'Let me tell you guys a story. I remember this one time I was at a game, and we were tied in the final minutes. I was so focused on defending our net that I got disoriented. Devin Wheeler passed the puck right to me, and in a split second, confusion took over, and I made a rookie mistake.'"

I shake my head at myself, recalling the moment. “Luke, I even paused for dramatic effect, but they still didn’t realize who I was. However, before I could tell them, Joe shouted out, ‘You guys must be the worst fucking sports fans in New York.’ He then pointed directly at me and continued, ‘This guy, right here, Beau Daniels, shot the puck in the wrong direction, directly into our own team’s net, costing us the chance at the championship.’ He grinned at me and winked. But the expressions on their faces...that was absolutely fucking priceless!”

Luke bursts into laughter, his shoulders shaking. “Oh man, that’s golden! You trolled them so hard, and they didn’t have a clue they were dissing you to your face.”

I can’t help but laugh, the memory is still vivid in my mind. “Yeah, their reactions were worth it. You should’ve seen their jaws drop when Joe said who I was.”

Luke wipes a tear from his eye. “That’s gotta be one of the best stories I’ve heard.”

I nod, a fond smile on my face. “He’s been an incredible friend ever since that moment,” I say under my breath.

“You’re damn lucky to have a buddy like that. He’s not afraid to call you out on your shit and sticks with you through the good, the bad, and the downright messy. That kind of friend is rare.”

As Luke focuses on the road ahead, it hits me like a ton of bricks. I don’t just have one friend like that; I’ve got two—ride-or-die buddies—right by my side.

.....

The next morning comes too quickly. As I catch sight of the PR firm up ahead, I ask Luke to stop the car, hoping the walk and cold air will wake me up. Last night, instead of sleeping, my mind was consumed by thoughts of her. I can't stop thinking about the connection we had on the elevator. She entirely consumes my thoughts. The scent that lingers in the air when she's near, the way her lips curve in a smile, the depth of her eyes – every aspect of her exerts an irresistible pull on me. I also can't help but wonder what secrets she might be hiding. Sure, she comes off as sweet and innocent, but I've learned that no woman is entirely what she seems. There's always a hidden story beneath the surface, and I'm determined to uncover hers. One thing's for certain – she's using me for financial gain, and it's a mistake I won't repeat. I won't let her get close to me, or let her in. So why, then, do my thoughts relentlessly circle back to her?

As I step into the elevator, the memories of our shared moments before discovering her true identity as one of my attorneys, a puppeteer pulling my strings, flood back to me. I really got to stop doing that. She is the enemy, and I got to keep her across enemy lines.

As I walk down the carpeted, empty hallway, I stop and take a deep breath before entering the PR firm reception area. My eyes instinctively scanning the room for Amber. The receptionist, a young, bubbly woman, maybe nineteen, dressed in a tight skirt and a see-through blouse, approaches me with



an overly enthusiastic greeting. “Oh my God! You’re Beau Daniels! I’m such a huge fan! I’m from Canada, eh. And I’ve watched all your games on TV! You’re amazing!” She gushes, batting her eyelashes at me. I force a polite smile and nod along to her talking to me, pretending to be listening.

After politely declining her offer of coffee or breakfast, I agree to take a picture with her for her Instagram page, trying to appear patient in the process. Only after the photo is taken does she finally instruct me to follow, her constant chatter now fading into the background. All I hear is the echo of my footsteps resonating off the floor as I fixate my gaze on the dark green tile stretching down the corridor. I can’t help but chuckle as flashes of “The Green Mile” movie play through my mind. The irony of the situation is humorous, as it feels like a journey toward my own doom.

The walls of each office are made of glass, one after another with a path in the center, and I catch a glimpse of Amber in a nearby room, engaged in an animated discussion with John. They seem engrossed in something important, and their expressions are serious. The sight of them together, secretly talking, I can’t help but assume they are plotting and scheming against me behind closed doors.

Suddenly, a surge of anger pulses through me. Clenching my fists, and holding my breath, hoping to not appear angry. “Excuse me, miss, could you please point me in the direction of the restroom?” I interrupt, as she is still talking ahead of me. She stops and turns around. “Sure, it’s just down the hall, to your left. I’ll wait for you here.” She says, smiling politely.

I assure her that I can find my own way to the meeting afterward. I force a smile and nod and make my way down the hall, realizing the importance of regaining control over my temper.

I step into the restroom, closing the door behind me. Standing in front of the sink, I turn on the faucet and let the cool water run over my hands and splash onto my face. As I look in the mirror, I confront the reflection staring back at me. Where did everything go wrong? I won't be their puppet. I have to confront them.

I smooth out the wrinkles on my jacket and take one last look in the mirror, not sure who I see looking back at me.

I open the door and walk out and as I turn the corner, I come face-to-face with Amber, and our bodies collide. Instinctively, I reach out and grab her by the waist, preventing her from falling backward, causing her coffee to go airborne. This is the second time we've bumped into each other like this.

As she attempts to steady herself, she asks, "Are you alright?" Her worried gaze meets mine, and I feel a surge of confusion and amusement. She always seems to be wearing coffee instead of drinking it, and she's genuinely concerned about my well-being? It's as if the universe is playing a cruel joke.

I look down at my shirt; it's clean.

Still holding her, a grin spreads across my face. "I should be the one asking you that," I reply, chuckling softly. "Are you alright?"

She pulls back from my grip on her, blotting her blouse with a tissue, and gives a slight laugh. She shrugs, “I’m fine, just a little startled.” She meets my gaze with her green eyes, crinkling at the corners. “I obviously didn’t see you coming around the corner.”

A smirk plays on my lips as I shake my head, the tension dissipating. “Well, I guess we really need to start that stain survivors’ group, huh?” I remark, the irony of the situation is not lost on me.

She looks at me and giggles—a sound that puts me at ease. “Definitely.” She pauses before continuing, “Do you know why the coffee stain joined the stain survivors’ group? Because it wanted to *expresso* its support for others who’ve been through tough spills!” She snorts with a laugh, a playful glint in her eye.

I can’t help but laugh. “Ah, the coffee stain, the true survivor here,” I say in a dramatic tone. “But I must admit, I’m impressed. It takes a special kind of person to withstand the perils of hot beverages not once but twice and still come out with a sense of humor. You’ve truly mastered the art of wearing your stains with pride.”

“Well, Beau, I guess I’ve found my calling then—superhero of coffee stains. I shall conquer the world, one spilled cup at a time, spreading laughter wherever I go.” Her hands are on her hips, standing like a superhero.

We both laugh and for a moment I forgot why we are here.

We walk together to the conference room, and John is standing there, arms crossed, waiting for us. The air in the room feels heavy as we take our seats. John starts outlining the plan to reshape public perceptions.

“Our main objective,” John declares, “is to change the narrative surrounding Beau and present him in a new light—one that emphasizes his compassion, understanding, and support for important causes. We want to highlight his growth and willingness to learn from his past mistake.”

He goes on to explain the strategic importance of this relationship, emphasizing that it’s not just about rehabilitating my image but also about shifting societal attitudes toward women and promoting gender equality.

John presents a detailed timeline of planned events and public appearances. He emphasizes the need for authenticity in our relationship, urging us to build a genuine connection.

The public needs to believe in your chemistry,” John emphasizes. “We’ll create carefully staged encounters that must feel natural and unscripted. We’ll leverage social media to share glimpses into your lives, highlighting shared interests and values. But remember, it’s not just about appearances. We want both of you to genuinely connect.”

“And what if people see through us? What if they don’t buy into the relationship?” Amber asks.

“Then this plan will fail. We’ll work closely with you both to craft a story that feels genuine. We’ll monitor public reactions, adjust our strategies, and remain flexible throughout the

process. The key is to stay true to yourselves while presenting a united front.

I scoff at his words. “So essentially, you’re suggesting we be honest while we present a lie.”

Ignoring my comment, John continues the meeting with discussions about the need for discretion, potential challenges that may arise, and how to navigate the inevitable scrutiny from the media. Every aspect is carefully scheduled, from coordinating public appearances to managing a social media presence.

I interject, “I suppose our restroom breaks are scheduled in this plan too, right?” Amber shoots me a look. “I prefer to shit at 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m., if that is okay with the plan?”

Amber laughs, “Of course, your Majesty. We shall schedule the royal restroom breaks at 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m., sharp!” She winks playfully.

I raise an eyebrow, pretending to be serious, “Oh, absolutely. We can’t disrupt the sacred schedule of the restroom breaks.”

Amber bursts into laughter, and I can’t help but join in.

“Alright, back to business,” John says, “Let’s tackle the rest of this agenda like the grown-ups we are.”

I find myself irresistibly drawn to her, unable to stop myself staring at her. She has a unique beauty that sets her apart from the women I usually date. Her fiery red hair cascades in waves, framing her face with a touch of untamed wildness. The freckles scattered across her cheeks only enhance her

natural beauty. Yet it is her eyes that truly captivate me—a pair of deep, enigmatic green eyes that hold a glimmer of defiance, drawing me in like a sailor enticed by a siren’s song.

A mix of emotions stir up within me—a bittersweet blend of admiration and regret. I can’t help but imagine how different things could have been if this all started from the moment we met in the elevator and not under these circumstances.

But I push those thoughts aside, to be used as a constant reminder of the blurred lines between truth and fiction and to shield myself from the lies, knowing all too well that

Amber is no different than all the gold diggers I’ve date and the only reason she is doing this is for the money.

## The Ugly Duckling's Transformation-The Ugly Duck

Amber

**T**he past few weeks have taken a toll on me, both physically and emotionally. Meeting Beau in secret, spending hours together every day. The PR firm has us do role-playing and actual homework, and it has been exhausting. Beau has not helped either; one moment he's cold and sharp-tongued, and the next, he reveals glimpses of a gentle and caring man. It's a constant tug-of-war, trying to understand his different personalities.

The PR firm has crafted the perfect story to sell to the public and strategically leaked news of Beau meeting a new girl, an attorney who advocates for equality. They start by making the world believe that we met in a bookstore and are the ideal couple, sharing our passions and values through social media.

I stare at the fake photos that fill my Instagram feed. They show Beau and me doing things together, such as hiking through scenic trails, cooking fancy dishes, and having romantic dinners in cozy restaurants. The captions and

comments below each photo praise our chemistry, our compatibility, and our devotion to each other.

I can't believe I agreed to this. This has to be the craziest, stupidest, and most ridiculous thing I've ever done in my life. Pretending to be in love with the most arrogant, sexist, and annoying jerk on the planet. All for the sake of my career and his reputation.

But it's too late to back out now. We've signed the contract, we've met the PR team, and we've started the charade. And we have to keep it up for at least six months, or until his image is restored and my law firm is satisfied.

So far, we've managed to fool everyone into believing that we're the perfect couple. We've done everything that the PR team suggested and more. We've gone on dates and posted on social media. And we've acted like we're head over heels for each other, even though we can barely stand each other.

But it's not easy. It takes a lot of effort, a lot of patience, and a lot of acting skills. And sometimes, I wonder if it's worth it.

Like last night, when we went on a double date with one of his teammates and his girlfriend. We had to act affectionate and attentive to each other, even though we have nothing in common. We had to complement each other, hold hands, and share a dessert, even though we don't like each other's taste. We had to tell stories about how we met and what we liked about each other, even though we are lying through our teeth.

It was exhausting. And boring. And annoying.



And then there was the time when we attended a housewarming party for another of his hockey buddies. We had to help out with the preparations and the cleanup, showing that we were a team.

It was awkward. And stressful. And embarrassing.

And then there was the time when we posted pictures and videos of ourselves on Instagram, doing romantic things like going to the beach, watching a movie, or having a picnic. We had to use hashtags like #couplegoals, #love, and #bestboyfriendever. We had to comment on each other's posts, saying things like "I miss you so much" or "You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

It was fake. And cheesy. And cringey.

Since this was now my full-time job, I would help Emily at the flower shop, and he would send chocolates and cards to me, and I had to make sure that everyone saw them. And we have to call and text each other frequently, using pet names and emojis. We had to make plans to meet up after work or school, saying things like "I can't wait to see you" or "I have a surprise for you."

It was expensive. And wasteful. And annoying.

And then there was the time when we faked a fight and makeup in front of our friends, showing that we had passion and drama in our relationship. We argued about something trivial, like what to eat for dinner or what movie to watch. We raised our voices, stormed off, and slammed doors. Then we

apologized, hugged, and kissed, saying things like “I’m sorry, baby” or “You’re the only one for me.”

It was loud. And childish. And ridiculous.

But somehow, we pull it off. Somehow, we convince everyone that we are madly in love with each other. Somehow, we make them believe that we are the happiest couple in the world.

Reality is nothing like the pictures we post. The smiles we flash and the poses we strike are staged, scripted, and fleeting. The truth is buried under layers of lies, and every day is a struggle of egos where we hurl insults and snark at each other.

“Amber, can you shut up for once?” Beau interrupts me, his eyes shooting daggers at me, as I passionately argue for a cause I care about.

I don’t back down; I glare back at him with equal force. “Unlike you, Beau, I have something to say that matters. I won’t let you brush off everything with your smug attitude.”

He smirks coldly and shakes his head. “Oh, please. Spare me the lecture. You’re just trying to show off again, aren’t you? Stop acting like a fucking nun.”

I feel a surge of anger in my chest. This man drives me absolutely crazy. “This isn’t about showing off. It’s about speaking up for what I believe in. Something you obviously don’t seem to know how to do. And don’t forget, you’re the reason we are in this mess in the first place.”

The room goes quiet, our words hanging in the air like a thick cloud. These meetings are supposed to help us get along, but they only make things worse. We're stuck in this fake relationship, and we have to pretend to like each other, but we can't stop fighting. He acts like a jerk, taking out his anger on me. But sometimes I see a different side of him, a glimpse of something more.

But those moments are rare and short-lived, and he always goes back to being his usual rude self. But there is also a different tension between us. We balance on the thin line between hate and lust, ready to fall, unable to find stability.

"Amber, you're unbearable," Beau whispers, his voice dripping with disdain as I question his opinions again.

"And you're a soulless jerk," I retort, my frustration boiling over. "You may think you're so smart with your witty remarks, but deep down, you're just a little coward."

His eyes flash, and his brows furrow. "Coward?" He scoffs, his hand on his chest. "Me? Don't make me laugh, woman. I'm not afraid of anything or anyone. Especially not a woman as insignificant as you. You couldn't scare a fly, even if you were covered in blood and running around with a knife. You would still be pathetic. And little? Why don't you ask some of those supermodels who will tell you otherwise? Or better yet, would you like to find out for yourself, sweetie?"

His words cut me, leaving a mark on my soul like a scar. How dare he? Why does he act so cruel and then so unexpectedly sweet? This man takes me to the brink, bringing

out the worst in me without caring about the consequences. “If you vanished tomorrow, Beau, I doubt anyone would care. In fact, the world might even rejoice at the loss of another stupid, ignorant pig like yourself,” I blurted out, my voice laced with poison.

Beau’s face pales, his eyes clouding with a mix of rage and pain. The room goes silent as my words echo in the air, their weight hitting him hard. I instantly regretted the comment that escaped my mouth, knowing that I’d gone too far.

“I’m sorry, Beau. I... I didn’t mean that,” I stutter, my voice filled with genuine regret. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say something so cruel.”

Beau grinds his teeth, his jaw locking in place. “Is that what you really think, Amber? That the world would be better off without me.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” I quickly respond. “I was just... angry, and I spoke without thinking.”

“Well, congratulations. You’ve succeeded in hurting me more than anyone ever has,” he snaps, his voice filled with hurt.

My voice shakes as I speak, trying to show him how sorry I am. “That was never my intention, Beau. I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you.”

His gaze turns cold, and his body language becomes closed off as he steps back. “It’s funny how you pretend to care about people by being their advocate, yet you throw words like

daggers. If this is how you really see me, then maybe I was right about seeing who you really are.”

“No, Beau, please,” I beg, the desperation clear in my voice. “I didn’t mean to say that. I was angry, and I said something I regret. I’ve seen glimpses of the person you can be—the person you are behind all the walls you’ve put up.”

He sneers, a hint of mockery in his voice. “Oh, have you now? And what makes you think you know anything about me?”

“Because I’ve seen the nice side of you when you think no one is looking. I’ve seen how you defend others, even if it’s in your own rude way. And I know that under your hard shell, there’s a soft spot that you’re too afraid to show. I know there is a good man inside of you, waiting to come out.”

Beau remains guarded; his defenses are too strong to break. “You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know the fights I’ve been in or the crap I’ve dealt with.”

I soften my voice, full of empathy. “Let me in. Show me the parts of you that you’ve hidden for so long. I want to understand you, not just your favorite food or color.”

He pauses, his defenses wavering. I see the conflict in his eyes. “Why? Why do you care so much?”

His question pierces my heart. I struggle to find the right words, but I’m overwhelmed by a mix of emotions, fears, and desires. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Silence fills

the room, and I watch as his expression shifts from vulnerability to defeat.

My phone rings, and for a split second, I'm relieved, but it rapidly turns into regret. Without another word, he turns away, his steps heavy with disappointment. The weight of his departure echoes through the room, leaving an emptiness in its wake.

I'm left alone with my thoughts, regretting my silence.

Why couldn't I answer him?

.....

The next evening, we're back at the PR firm, in the dark office. We're the only ones here, working late on our meeting, making sure we are both ready for our first public appearance. Yesterday's incident still haunts me as a reminder of the pain I caused.

We've run out of things to talk about. We've only scratched the surface of who we are, avoiding the deeper truths. I wonder if we should give up, accept what we have, and hope for the best.

However, just as I'm about to suggest leaving, Beau breaks the silence. "You know, there's more to me than what you see. I may have a reputation, but that doesn't mean I'm not capable of genuine feelings."

"Then tell me, please." I sit across from him, eagerly ready to listen.

With a deep breath, he begins to recount the painful memories that have shaped him. “Growing up wasn’t easy. My father was a tough man, strict and unforgiving,” Beau confesses. “He had a vision for my life, and anything or anyone that deviated from that path was met with harsh consequences.”

He pauses, his eyes on mine, but not seeing me. He speaks in a low whisper, as if reliving the past. “One day, I witnessed something that changed everything. I grew up in a modest suburban neighborhood with my parents. I had a happy childhood, or so I thought. My father was a hardworking man who provided for us. But behind closed doors, he was a different person. One day, when I was eight, I came home early from school because I was sick. We lived next to the school, so I walked home by myself. As I approached the house, I heard my parents arguing in their bedroom. I was curious, so I peeked inside the window. What I saw shocked me. My father was hitting my mother, and she was crying and begging him to stop. I couldn’t stand it. I ran into the room, trying to protect my mother from him.”

His eyes are shiny with unshed tears. “That night, my mother and I left. We had nothing but each other, a few clothes, and barely any money. She made huge sacrifices to ensure I could play hockey. At first, we lived in cramped apartments, and she worked long hours just to provide for us.”

He pauses, and I hear a faint chuckle. “I would tell her I would quit hockey and get a job to help, and she would chase me around the apartment, trying to beat my ass. She said she

would work ten more jobs if she had to because she knew I loved hockey. I remember countless nights when she would come home from work, sometimes barely able to keep her eyes open, and sit with me at the kitchen table and help me with my schoolwork, even though she was exhausted. She would then do the dishes and clean the house, making sure everything was ready for the next day.”

I watch as a smile tugs at the corners of his lips. “She was the only one who ever attended every one of my hockey games, cheering me on from the stands with a pride that lit up her face. She gave me the strength to push through any obstacle. I never realized how much she gave up for me until I was an adult.”

“She sounds like she was an incredible woman.”

“My mother is an incredible woman. She taught me how to stand up for myself. She taught me self-value and the importance of never allowing anyone to bully me, just like my father did to us.”

He pauses, his voice filled with anger. “Like you did to me.”

His eyes are locked onto mine, and I shift uncomfortably in my seat, feeling the weight of his words.

“You hurt me yesterday,” he continues, his gaze piercing. “Do you know what you are, Amber?”

I shake my head.

“You’re a bully. You don’t know what I’ve been through. You don’t know why I’m in this situation, and you never



bothered to ask. You have no right to judge me or call me names. You can't just walk into my life, see what you want to see, and expect me to change for you. I don't owe you anything. Nothing at all."

My heart sank, and I stood frozen, my heart pounding in my chest as I replayed what I said. The weight of my words crashed down on me like a wave of guilt and remorse. I had said something I could never take back, something that had cut deep into Beau's soul.

I could see now how wrong I had been and how my words had only perpetuated the cycle of pain I had experienced in my life. I had always prided myself on being compassionate and understanding, but in that moment, I had become the very thing I hated—a bully.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I struggle to find the right words to apologize.

"I'm so sorry, Beau," I stammer. "I can't believe I said such terrible things. I let my anger get the best of me, and I lashed out without thinking about the consequences of my words. It was inexcusable. I'm not here to hurt you."

I watch him walk to the door, his shoulders slumped and his steps slow. He reaches for the knob, but then pauses and turns to face me. His eyes are dull, and his face is pale.

"I agree," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "You're here for the money. You're here to use me, just like everyone else. You don't genuinely care about me. You don't see beyond the media's bullshit. You see an opportunity to fix a

broken man—to be the one who saves me. All for the sake of money and your career, and to be a role model for those without a voice.”

He shakes his head, a bitter smile on his lips. “But what about my voice, Amber? Did you ever consider that someone like me could be voiceless?”

His words hit me like a punch in the gut, knocking the wind out of me.

I let my need to help others blind me to his pain. Even someone as chauvinistic and ignorant as Beau Daniels deserves a chance to be heard.

I judged him without seeking understanding or listening to his voice.

I open my mouth to speak, to defend myself, and to tell him the truth. But before I can say anything, he turns away and walks out of the door, slamming it behind him with a loud bang.

I flinch, feeling a sharp pang in my chest. Tears sting my eyes, and a lump forms in my throat. I reach for the door, wanting to stop him, to apologize, and to explain.

But I can't.

I sink to the floor, clutching my chest, as if trying to hold together the pieces of my broken heart. I sob, letting out all the frustration that I've been holding back for weeks. I don't know how long I stay there, crying and shaking, until I have no more tears left.

I wipe my eyes, feeling numb and empty.

I wonder if he'll ever forgive me. But worse, I wonder if he's right.

Am I a bully?

## Love Doesn't Have to be Perfect-The Beauty and the Beast

Amber

The next day, the late afternoon sunlight filters through the window, casting a warm and gentle glow over the cozy living room. I tried to stay hidden in my bed, away from the world. I wondered if I could rewind time to return to that day when I overslept and I think about the possibilities of what my life would be like right now if I had blissfully slept through my alarm that morning, and Emily's shoe alarm.

But Emily, true to her persistent foot up my ass mentality, refuses to let me wallow in self-pity. Reluctantly, I allow myself to be dragged, both physically and emotionally, to the living room. With a sigh of defeat, I plop down onto the plush tan couch, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. Emily, ever intuitive, places a glass of wine and a box of tissues in front of me, understanding that sometimes tears and a little liquid courage can go a long way.

Emily sits beside me, curls her legs up on the couch, and waits patiently for me to speak. As I take a deep breath, my eyes remain fixed on the swirling wine in my glass. But Emily,

with her unyielding patience that rivals that of a child, leans in closer and whispers, “Amber, talk to me. What happened?”

With a heavy sigh. “Emily, there’s something I need to tell you. Something I haven’t told anyone else,” I confess.

Emily raises an eyebrow, a mischievous smile playing at the corners of her lips. “Oh, do tell. I’m ready for anything. But remember, I have more tissues and wine on standby, and if things get too crazy, I have tequila and Rocky Road.” Her playful remark brings a smirk to my face, momentarily easing the tension that has been building within me.

“Thanks for always being prepared, Em.” I chuckle. “So, remember when I mentioned that absurdly large sum of money the PR firm offered me?”

Emily nods, her eyes filled with curiosity. “Yes, I do. And honestly, it seems like a great opportunity considering what they’re putting you through. You could do a lot with that much money. Pay off your student debts, maybe start your own shelter for abused women like you’ve always talked about.”

I take a deep breath, my finger nervously tapping against my thigh. “Well, here’s the thing. I declined it.”

Emily’s surprise is evident, and she leans in slightly, her eyes widening. “You what? Are you serious?”

I nod, my gaze focused on the floor as I continue to chew on my bottom lip. “Yeah, I turned it down the next day before our meeting at the PR firm. John tried to talk me out of it. It just

didn't feel right to accept it. And I also asked him to donate the money to a charity of my choice.”

Emily's eyebrows shoot up, her voice filled with a mix of disbelief and admiration. “Wow, Amber, that's... unexpected.”

I let out a sigh, my fingers absentmindedly playing with a loose strand of hair. “Well, not as unexpected as I'm starting to have feelings for him. For Beau.”

Emily's eyes widen even further, her surprise evident. “Wait, you mean you're actually falling for him?”

I nod, my cheeks growing warm. “Yeah, I guess I am. But that's not even the biggest issue. He thinks I'm doing this whole fake relationship thing for the money, that I'm using him to further my career. And, honestly, it's starting to mess with my head. One minute he's sweet and charming, and the next he's cold and distant.”

Emily lets out a gasp of disbelief. “Wait a minute. Why would he think that, especially when you turned the money down?”

Still twirling my curl around my finger, and looking at it in the light, my red appears more amber than usual. My mother would tell me the story of how I was named, sharing the details as if it were her first time telling me. She would theatrically begin from the moment I was placed on her chest, the umbilical cord still attached to us, and she looked down at me, my hair as red as fire, and said, ‘This little firecracker shall be called Amber, like the vibrant resin that captures the

essence of the crimson flame.’ This is what happens when your parents are hippies.

“Because,” I hesitate for a moment, “he doesn’t know,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

Emily gasps and jumps to her feet, looks me square in the eyes, and yells, “He doesn’t know?”

“No.”

Emily’s eyes widen, a mixture of surprise and concern crossing her face. “Well shit, this changes everything.” Emily’s face softens as she grasps the reason, understanding why. She continues, “Then he needs to know how you feel. He needs to see the real you, not the misconceptions he has in his mind.”

I shake my head, a mixture of frustration and determination bubbling within me. “Emily, I appreciate your advice, but I don’t think he needs to know about the money. That’s not the point. The point is that he should care about me, regardless of whether I accepted the money or not.”

Emily’s eyes narrow slightly, her voice firm. “Amber, relationships are built on trust and honesty. If you’re going to be in a real relationship with him, he needs to know the truth. Keeping something like this from him will only create more distance between you.”

I sigh, realizing that Emily might be right. “I know, Emily. I just...

Emily leans closer, her gaze unwavering. “But I also believe if he’s worth it, he’ll see past the money and see you.”

I nod, tears now streaming from my eyes.

Emily, pausing for a moment, “Can I ask you a question? If he is everything you say he is, then what is it that made you feel this way about him? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not judging you; I just don’t understand what you see in him that no one else does.”

I sigh, trying to gather my thoughts. “It’s hard to explain, Em. I know he can be a jerk—a big jerk—but there’s something about him that pulls me in. Despite his ‘I am so tough’ exterior, there are times when his walls come crashing down, revealing a softer side that only I can see.”

Emily leans in closer, her eyes filled with curiosity. “Like what?”

A small smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I recall the memories. “Well, for starters, there was this one time during a photo shoot. The photographer wanted us to strike a romantic pose, so he asked Beau to put his arm around me. But, just as the camera was about to click, I looked down and saw something utterly ridiculous.”

Emily’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What was it?”

“He had black olives, of all things, shoved onto the tips of his fingers!” I burst into laughter. “The photographer and his assistant were furious, thinking he was mocking them. But in reality, he had done it purely to make me laugh.”



Emily laughs, “Oh shit, that is funny.”

“I know. It was such a ridiculous sight, but it made us both start laughing so hard that I thought I was going to pee myself. The photographer’s face was a shade of red, and his assistant started chasing Beau around like a mad man, trying to retrieve those damn olives. And all the while, he was holding his fingers up, making silly voices for the olives, and pretending they were begging for their lives.”

Emily’s eyes soften. “It sounds like he knows how to let loose and have fun, despite him being an asshole at other times.”

I nod, a warmth spreading through my chest. “That’s exactly it, Em. It’s in those moments, when his guard is down, that I see glimpses of the person he could be. The person I believe he truly is deep down.”

Emily reaches out, squeezing my hand gently. “You deserve someone who sees you for who you are, someone who brings out the best in you. If Beau can do that, if he can make you laugh and show you his vulnerable side, and of course change his cave like way of thinking, maybe there’s hope for him yet.” She jumps up, grabs a pillow and pretends to be a caveman, hitting me with the pillow,” I caught bacon woman. Go cook. Me hungry.”

We are both laughing, until the tears of laughter turn to tears of pain. “But there’s more.”

Plopping back beside me, her eyes as wide as quarters. “More? Shit, hold on, I think we both need the tequila if

there's more." Emily returns, bottle in arm, and two shot glasses filled to the top. The liquid feels warm in my belly.

As I sit across from Emily, I babble on telling her the story of what had happened between Beau and me. As each word leaves my lips, and I recount the events, I couldn't escape the harsh reality.

"I couldn't believe what I said to him," I confess.

Emily listens intently, her eyes filled with empathy. "It's not too late to make things right," she says gently, offering a comforting hand on mine.

"I know," I reply. "But I can't shake the feeling that I've become the bully. I let my anger cloud my judgment, and now I've hurt him deeply."

Emily's gaze softens, and she pours me another drink, her voice a soothing presence. "Amber, it's okay to feel remorse. It means you care about your actions and their impact. But you're not a bully, and one mistake doesn't define you. You've been going through a lot, and sometimes emotions get the best of us."

I nod, appreciating her understanding and the comfort she's providing. "I know, Emily. It's just that things were supposed to be simple, but they've gotten so messed up."

She leans in, her eyes full of empathy. "Life has a funny way of doing that, doesn't it? We start off with a plan, and before we know it, we're sitting here on this couch, drinking tequila

and wondering how the hell we got here. But sometimes, those twists and turns lead us to exactly where we're meant to be."

She is right. I couldn't hold back my tears and I lay my head down in her lap and cry. As I wipe away the last of my tears, taking a deep breath, I quickly find myself sprawled out on the hard wood floor. Emily is now on her feet standing over me, her hands on her hips.

"What the fuck are you doing down there?" Emily exclaims with a playful smirk, reaching out to pull me off the floor. "Enough of this sad shit, Amberella! We're not going to let a really dumb mistake ruin your chance of happiness. The charity event is in one day, and we're going to make sure you have a stunning dress and find your prince charming! Now go take those nasty pajamas off," she continues with a playful wink, "and let's go shopping. We have a mission, and we won't stop until you're ready to shine on that red carpet."

## You Only Need Someone to Accept You Completely-Rapunzel

Beau

I blink awake, squinting at the rays that sneak through the curtains. As I lay here, the events of last night at the gala flood my mind, replaying the night over and over and trying to remember something I might have missed. Everything seemed good, and even at times, it felt as if we were the only two people in the room. She looked beautiful; those eyes—I couldn't take my eyes off hers. And the way she looked at me with a playful glint, I felt the spark between us.

I barely slept last night, restless and unable to shake this feeling of uncertainty. I grab my phone and dial Amber's number, needing to talk to her and feeling like I deserve an explanation for her sudden disappearance. But just like last night, the call goes straight to voicemail.

I toss my phone on the bed, frustrated and confused. I replay every single moment in my mind, desperately searching for that one crucial detail. And as I reflect, it becomes clear that it must have been after I asked her to dance because everything leading up to the end of the song felt absolutely perfect.

We were at a charity gala, one of the first events that we had to attend as part of our fake relationship. We had to act like we were madly in love with each other, even though we barely tolerate each other. We had to smile, mingle, and pose for the cameras, even though we hate every minute of it.

But then something changed.

I don't know what it was. Maybe it was the way she looked in that green dress, or the way she laughed at some joke, or the way she spoke to those I introduced her to. But suddenly, I saw her in a different light.

I saw her as the most beautiful woman in the room.

I saw her as the most captivating woman I had ever met.

I saw her as the woman I wanted to be with.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I studied her features, noticing how her eyes sparkled, how her lips curved, how her hair flowed. I followed her movements, watching how she walked, how she gestured, how she talked. I felt a warmth in my chest, a tingling in my skin, a fluttering in my stomach. I wanted to get closer to her, to touch her, to talk to her, to make her smile. I wondered if she felt the same way about me or if she would give us a chance. I hoped she would.

When I asked her to dance, she had a look of surprise on her face, but she didn't resist. When she placed her delicate hand in mine, it sent a shiver up my arm. As we moved together on the dance floor, she gracefully followed my lead, and I held her body close to mine. The scent of her hair, a captivating

blend of patchouli and lavender, surrounded me, creating an intoxicating atmosphere. Resting her head on my shoulder in that very moment, I felt an overwhelming urge of desire.

But this is where my memory starts getting fuzzy. When the music came to a stop, she looked up at me, and her eyes had a mesmerizing effect on me, making my knees weak. She was driving me crazy, and honestly, I love every minute of it. Sure, she drives me crazy, always being so good and kind, but I'm starting to love that about her. After the song finished, she leaned in, and whispered something softly into my ear, but the words were lost in the music and the buzz of the crowd. With a nod, I pretended to hear, not wanting to disrupt the moment we were sharing. And then she politely excused herself and slipped through my grasp like a slick pass on the ice. Not knowing what she said is now eating at me, leaving me feeling anxious.

What did I miss? Was it something she whispered to me? Did I agree to something important?

With a heavy sigh, I decide to call Joe, hoping that he might shed some light on the situation. I dial his number, and as the call connects, I am relieved to hear his voice.

“Hey, Beau, what’s up? It’s too damn early, so this better be important,” Joe grumbles from the other end of the line.

“Joe, you know everything I say is important.”

He chuckles. “Alright, spill it. The only reason anyone calls me this early is because of a woman or money. You have money, so I’m guessing problems in paradise already?”

I sigh, finally able to release the weight of last night from my chest. “Man, I’ll never understand women. Something happened with Amber last night. We had that charity event, our first public appearance as a couple.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot it was last night. Wait, this was the first time out together, and something already went wrong?”

“Yeah..., I guess so... I mean, I don’t really know,” I stumble over my words.

“Ok man, just start at the beginning.”

“I picked her up at her penthouse, and when she opened the door, man, she looked amazing. Completely caught me off guard. When we got in the limo, I could tell she wanted to talk, but I was still a little pissed off about it. Deep down, I knew she didn’t mean it the way it came out.

“Understandable.”

“I decided not to say anything about it, because I didn’t want to ruin the evening. So, the ride there was kinda quiet, a bit awkward actually, but I didn’t want to ruin the night or insert my foot in my mouth, like I’ve been doing lately so I kept my mouth shut. But Joe, she looked so damn sweet and innocent sitting beside me, and for some reason, I felt this urge to protect her.”

“I’d say that’s progress,” Joe replies encouragingly. “So, what happened next?”

“When we arrived, there were crowds of people surrounding us, and in an attempt to shield her from the media circus, I

made a scene. I thought diverting attention away from her would be the right move, but it only upset her. I quickly realized my mistake when she pulled me aside and gave me a piece of her mind.”

I pause for a moment, remembering how angry she was.

Joe interjects with a questioning tone. “How on earth did you try to steal the attention away from her? This should be good.”

I chuckle, acknowledging the absurdity of my actions. “Don’t judge, and looking back, it has to be the stupidest idea I’ve ever had, but I grabbed her, picked her up, spun her around, thinking they couldn’t talk to her if she’s in motion. It was a ridiculous idea, and she rightfully got mad. And then, for some reason, when she snapped at me, I felt the urge to snap back, which I regret.”

Joe speaks with understanding. “First of all, I get why you did it, and it may not have been the dumbest thing you’ve done,” Joe coughs while saying ‘puck in own goal,’ “but you definitely can add that to your top five list.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“Second, we’ve talked about this. Don’t take your frustrations out on her. She didn’t ask for any of this.”

“Yeah, but when they offered her money, she didn’t say no either,” I retort, my frustrations showing.

“Brother, if I had to fake date you, I would have asked for *way* more money.”



“Yeah, that’s because you’re a gold digger; everyone knows that already.”

We laugh, and it feels good to lighten up a bit. “So, I straightened up and finished the red carpet walk to the entrance of the gala. When we were about to enter, I looked down at her, and you should have seen her face, Joe; her face lit up. Right then, everything seemed better. Later on, I even asked her to dance.”

“You danced? Beau Daniels, danced? Man, I wish I could have seen that. I’ve seen you dance, and you dance like you play hockey. I can’t imagine there were any survivors left on the dance floor.” He laughs at his own joke. “How’d that go?”

“It was good.”

“Just good?”

“Yep, just good.” I lie. It was more than that. It was amazing. But I didn’t want to sound like a sap. Joe would probably understand, but I wasn’t even sure I understood what I was feeling, let alone explain it.

“Once the song ended, she whispered something to me, and I couldn’t hear her, so I just nodded and agreed. I watched her walk to the bathroom, and that’s when she vanished. I’ve been trying to call her, but she won’t pick up.”

There’s a brief pause on the other end of the line, as if Joe is weighing his words. Finally, he says, “I’m sure whatever she said to you is the reason she left. Also, relationships are hard enough, but being in a fake relationship adds another level of

difficulty. Without talking to her, it's hard to know why she left. You agreed to something without knowing what it was. Rookie mistake. Look at me and Tawnya. That woman drives me nuts, and half the time, I find myself nodding just to avoid a long conversation about 'our feelings.' But we've been together a while. As for Amber, who knows? Maybe she needed some space or had something else going on. Maybe she said she was leaving, and you agreed. Are you worried that something might have happened to her? Like, a ransom situation?"

I chuckle, appreciating Joe's attempt to inject humor into the situation. "You always have a wild imagination."

Joe responds, "Well if she left without saying anything, that's not a great sign. You'll have to talk to her and get to the bottom of it. Communication is key, even in fake relationships. Let's just hope she made it home and is alright."

I sigh. I hope so too. I don't want to tell Joe the truth. How I drove to her penthouse, hoping to see her. Hoping to talk to her, to find out why she left. But I never saw her. The lights were off, and the curtains were drawn. She was either asleep or avoiding me. Either way, I felt like a stalker, sitting in my car outside her building, watching and waiting.

I decided to leave, feeling defeated and hopeless. I tried calling her one last time before I drove back to my place, but she didn't answer. I didn't leave her a message, but I knew she would see my missed call. But she never called back. I spent

the rest of the night tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Unable to stop thinking about her.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I don't want Joe to know how desperate I am. How much I care about her. How much I want her.

“Yeah, I'm sure she's fine. She's probably just busy or something.”

Joe sighs. “Beau, listen to me. You need to sort this out with her. You can't keep lying to yourself or to me. You can't keep pretending that this is just a fake relationship. You can't keep pushing her away or hurting her with your words or actions. And you can't keep running away from your feelings.”

I feel a surge of anger and fear, mixed with denial and confusion.

“What are you talking about? What feelings? This is just a fake relationship, Joe. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Joe laughs bitterly. “Are you kidding me? Beau, you're falling in love with her.”

“No, I'm not. That's ridiculous.”

He sighs again.

“Beau don't be stupid. It's obvious to anyone who sees you two together. The way you look at her, the way you touch her, the way you talk about her. You're not fooling anyone, especially not yourself.”

I feel a flush of heat in my cheeks, remembering the moment I felt something change last night. The way she makes me laugh, the way she challenges me, the way I feel right now, as if a part of me is missing when she is not around me.

But I push those feelings down, telling myself they mean nothing. They are just part of the act, part of the deal. They are not real.

“Yes, I am,” I snap back. “This is all fake, Joe. A contract. A business arrangement. Nothing more.”

He groans.

“Beau, stop lying to yourself. Stop being afraid of your feelings and stop hiding behind this fake relationship bullshit. You’re only hurting yourself and her.”

I feel a pang of guilt in my stomach, knowing he’s right. I have hurt her, more than once. With my words, with my actions, with my silence. I swallow hard, trying to sound calm and confident. “I’m not lying, Joe. I’m not afraid. I’m not hiding. I’m being realistic. This is not love and this is not real.”

“Beau, you’re being stubborn and foolish and blind. This is love. This is real.” He pauses for a moment, letting his words sink in. “And you know it.”

But I don’t want to admit it.

I don’t want to face it.

I don’t want to deal with it.

I don't want to love her.

Because love is dangerous.

Love is painful.

Love is risky.

Love is not for me.

## I Have To Leave. It's Midnight. - Cinderella

Amber

As I step out onto the red carpet, all eyes are instantly drawn to my exquisite green gown. The emerald silk drapes gracefully over my form, hugging my curves in all the right places, making me feel like a true goddess. The subtle sheen of the fabric catches the camera flashes.

The intricate beading and sequins on the bodice and the gown cinches at the waist with a satin ribbon sash, accentuating my hourglass figure and the plunging V-neckline reveals a little cleavage.

The dress has a high slit in the skirt and offers a glimpse of my legs, making me feel like a true Hollywood star. The strappy, high-heeled sandals in a matching shade of green.

My hair is styled in loose, cascading waves that fall over my shoulders and down my back. Sparkling hairpins twinkle like diamonds in my hair and add a touch of old glamour to my look. Emily made sure I feel like a modern-day Cinderella, ready to capture the heart of Beau.

As I pose for the cameras, I can't help but feel like I'm living a fairy tale. The dress, the shoes, and the hairstyle all come together to create a look that is not only gorgeous but also undeniably sexy. In this moment, stepping onto the red carpet, I feel like I'm the belle of the ball, and my happily ever after is just beginning.

When Beau arrived at the penthouse earlier, there was a brief moment when I opened the door and thought everything was a little better between us. He had this genuine look of surprise, as if seeing me for the first time. "I knew you'd look...but this...you look... as if you stepped right out of my dreams. You look absolutely beautiful, Amber." His words sent a shiver down my spine, igniting a flicker of warmth within me.

I offered him a shy smile, my heart fluttering in my chest. "Thank you, Beau. You clean up pretty nicely yourself." He looked handsome in his black tuxedo, his wavy brown hair neatly combed. He held out his arm for me to take, and I slipped my hand into his elbow.

Tonight was going to be magical. Maybe for the first time we could leave all the fake shit behind us and be real.

However, during the quiet ride to the event, Beau's silence told me otherwise. I wanted to talk about what happened the last time we were together, but I sensed that it wasn't the right time to discuss it. Beau's signals were mixed, and I decided to hold off for a better moment.

Now, walking the red carpet, I feel overwhelmed from the relentless clicking of cameras and the shouts and questions

from reporters makes my head spin.

“Amber, how did you and Beau first meet?”

“Beau, can you tell us about your upcoming projects?”

“Amber, what are you wearing tonight?”

“Beau, what attracted you to Amber?”

The walk is relentless, with reporters and cameras at every turn. They’re all shouting questions at once, and it’s hard to focus on any one voice.

“Beau, tell us about your recent success on the ice!”

“Amber, how does it feel to be here at the gala?”

“Beau, any plans for the upcoming season?”

“Amber, what do you think of Beau’s comment about women?”

“Beau! Amber! Over here!”

Beau doesn’t respond but then what he does next takes me by surprise. He lifts me off my feet and twirls me around. His eyes filled with a kind of eagerness, as if he’s reveling in this opportunity to play to the cameras. I’m shocked, and it’s humiliating.

“Let’s keep them guessing, babe,” he says with a playful grin.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, trying to keep my voice steady. “Put me down.”



His expression shifts, and I wonder if he understands how important this night is for both of us.

He grins, his lips close to my ear. “I thought this was how I was supposed to act. It’s a performance for the public, right, lovebug?”

“Beau, this is serious. Stop making a joke out of it.”

Still spinning me around, he kisses my cheek, making me blush. His warm breath tickles my ear as he adds, “Don’t worry, sweetheart. Just go along with it. Trust me.”

“Please put me down,” I plead.

He places me back on my feet but keeps his arm around my waist, pulling me closer as we navigate the crowd. He smiles at the reporters trying to approach us, but we keep moving forward, avoiding their questions.

But I can’t take it any longer. I don’t understand why he’s treating me like this, but it feels like a slap in the face. I pull away from him, my frustration bubbling over.

“What’s your problem, Beau?” I snap, my tone sharp. “Are you trying to make a spectacle of us?” My voice drips with irritation. “This is supposed to be a serious event, not some kind of circus act! What’s wrong? Is it because of what I said? I’ve already apologized. Please don’t embarrass me.”

He chuckles. “Don’t embarrass me in there, okay? Just smile and nod and let me do the talking. You’re not used to this kind of thing, and I don’t want you to make a fool of yourself or me.”

Tears well up in my eyes, but I push them away. His words stung, making me feel small. I know I had hurt him, and I need to let him heal in his own way. I nod silently, feeling a knot form in my stomach.

We finally reach the entrance of the gala, where a security guard opens the door for us.

As we step inside my breath catches in my throat. It's like entering another world.

The grand hall is a masterpiece of extravagance. Crystal chandeliers hang from the lofty ceiling, casting a warm, inviting glow. Their light dances off the marble floors, making them sparkle like a starlit sky. The walls are decorated with priceless works of art, and I'm sure I recognize a few famous paintings.

To my right, a cascading staircase leads to another level, where elegantly dressed guests converse in hushed tones. I swear I saw Mathew McConaughey. On my left, a lavish buffet displays culinary creations that are nothing short of artistry.

The guests themselves are a sight to behold. Women in breathtaking gowns that shimmer and flow like liquid silk, their jewels sparkling like stars. Men dressed in impeccably tailored tuxedos, exuding an air of effortless sophistication.

The music from a live orchestra fills the air, its melodious strains adding to the enchantment of the evening. And the laughter and chatter of the guests create a symphony of their own.

As I take it all in, I can't help but feel as if it holds the promise of a thousand dreams. It's a world I've only seen in movies or dreamed about, and now I'm part of it, even if just for one night. I feel Beau's eyes on me, and I ignore him, silently enjoying the way I feel as I walk into the gala.

As the night unfolds, I find comfort in Beau's moments of genuineness which makes me forget his harsh words and his cold attitude. He makes me feel appreciated, wanted, igniting feelings that I've been trying to ignore.

Towards the end of the night, he approaches me, a small smile graces his lips, and his voice softens, "You are absolutely gorgeous, Amber. I'm the luckiest guy here tonight."

Heat rises to my cheeks, and I offer a shy smile in return, "Thank you, Beau. You're looking quite handsome yourself."

Leaning in, he plants a soft kiss on my cheek, sending a flutter through my chest. "Dance with me." He takes my hand and leads me to the dance floor, where a slow song is playing. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me close to him. I rest my head on his chest and feel his heartbeat. Taking a deep breath, lost in this moment, he smells of lemon, musk, and wood. He sways with me to the music, his breath tickling my hair.

His touch against my skin sends tingles down my spine as his hand slides under my chin, our eyes lock. It's like he's peering into the deepest corners of my desires. "Amber," he murmurs,

his voice soft but filled with a question that resonates deep within me, “do you ever wonder if this could be more?”

His words hang in the air, and my heart skips a beat. It’s as if he’s plucked the very thoughts from my mind. For so long, I’ve contemplated the possibility of us, of this charade turning into something real, something meaningful. I want to scream, “Yes!” I want this to be more. I’ve dreamt about it, yearned for it, and tonight, it feels within reach.

“S-sometimes,” Is all I can manage to say.

He leans in, his lips brushing softly against mine, igniting a spark that courses through my veins and a tingling sensation between my legs. “Me too. I wish we could run away and discover the truth that lies between us. I wish we could start from the moment we met in the elevator.”

His openness and sincerity shocks me. I want to tell him right then and there, how I feel about him, how much he means to me. I want to kiss him and feel his lips devour mine. But as the music slows down, I realize I need a moment to gather my thoughts. I pull him close to me and whisper in his ear, “Meet me outside, in the gazebo. I have something important to tell you.” He nods at me. I force a smile and excuse myself, making my way to the restroom. I need to calm myself down and prepare myself for our talk.

As I walk out of the restroom, I hear a reporter’s voice piercing through the gala, demanding his insight into his ideal partner. I feel a twinge of confusion and curiosity, wondering what he will say. And then, in a heartbeat, everything changes.

I stop in my tracks, my heart sinking as I hear Beau's voice carrying through the air, his words reaching my ears, shattering the calm I had just felt. "Well, I'm used to dating supermodels. They have this beauty that catches my eye and intrigues me."

A wave of shock and embarrassment washes over me, leaving me speechless. The world around me fades as those few words slap me in the face. The pain is too much, and the walls close in, and suddenly I feel as if I can't breathe. Panic takes over, and I look around the room. I need to escape this suffocating tomb, away from the prying eyes and judgmental whispers that are sure to follow.

I know they will all be looking at me with pity in their eyes, at the girl who thought she was different from all the others. They will say things like, "Poor Amber, she thought she would be different. She thought she was special but she's not even a supermodel." And they will all point and laugh at me. The gala now feels like a cage, confining me to a world of a thousand shattered dreams.

I see an exit sign and I quickly make my way out; one I assume is for staff, but I don't care. The cold air hits my face and I run until I find myself alone in the dark night, gasping for air. I see a tree down the hill, and I run towards it, hoping to hide beneath its willow tree's branches and the darkness, away from prying eyes where I can finally give in to my overwhelming emotions. Hot tears instantly stream down my face, unable to stop the pain that grips my heart. With trembling hands, I reach for my phone and call Emily.

I can barely speak as I say her name, my voice cracking as I struggle to form the words. “Emily,” I gasp for air, feeling a lump in my throat. “Something...something has happened... I don’t know what to do.”

“Amber, what’s wrong?” Emily sounding frantic on the other end of the line. “Are you okay?”

I inhale sharply, trying to calm myself enough to talk. “No. It’s Beau. He... I overheard

Beau talking to a reporter. He said something about how he preferred dating supermodels.” My voice trembles, and my eyes sting with tears that spill over my cheeks.

There’s a brief silence on the line. “Are you fucking kidding? What the hell is wrong with this guy?”

“Oh, Em,” I can barely hear myself or her over the sound of my own breathing, sobbing, and sniffing.

“Amber, honey, It’s okay.” Emily’s voice is soothing in my ear. “Just breathe.” I follow her instructions, feeling my chest rise and fall. “That’s better.” She pauses for a moment. “So, are you sure you heard him right? Maybe he didn’t say what you think he said,” she says carefully.

“No, Em.” I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. “I heard him loud and clear. Everyone did. It felt like a knife through my heart. I was ready to tell him everything. I told him to meet me outside at the gazebo, and when I came out of the restroom, that’s when—how could he say something like

that? At least now I know he would prefer a model over someone like me.”

Emily’s voice hardens. “Someone like you? Amber Knox, you are better than a fake ass skinny supermodel. You are a unique, beautiful masterpiece.” That was the same tone she used on the day we met, and I had not heard it since.

She continues, “There must be more to this. Have you spoken to him about it?”

I exhale shakily, brushing off tears that sting my cheeks. “No, I couldn’t confront him. Not in the middle of the event, not with all those people around, feeling sorry for me. I just... I just got outta there.”

“Okay, so you’re outside now? Just come home, and we’ll figure this out. Being in this situation is tough—it’s both real and fake. You’re sharing experiences and forming a connection, but you’re not being honest about your intentions or feelings. It’s like playing Russian roulette, never knowing when the trigger will be pulled and if the chamber will be empty.”

“I know.” I whisper.

“And how the hell can he be that heartless to hurt someone trying to help him? Shit, if he is, then don’t worry, girl, I’ve got your back no matter what. You know, my family has a unique way of solving problems and I already have our alibis ready. If anyone asks, we were at my cousin Tony’s ‘wine tasting’ event. You know, the one where we sample every bottle on the table. It’s a tough job, but someone’s gotta do it.

Now, come home. Tomorrow we'll order some unhealthy comfort food, get hella drunk and we'll talk about what to do next or where to bury the body." She snorts at her own joke. Even though I don't feel like laughing, I couldn't help but laugh with her. "But seriously, girl, you deserve better than this emotional rollercoaster."

A warm glow fills my chest because I never feel alone because I know Emily has and will always have my back. "You're the only one who gets me."

"Ditto. Now get your ass home." She hangs up the phone and I tuck it into my purse, feeling like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Determined to distance myself from the gala and Beau, I head to the bus stop.

As I walk through the unfamiliar streets, my head is filled with nothing else but him. The city's dimly lit alleys and busy streets seem to blur together and each step away from him feels heavier than the last one. I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, my fingers trembling with a mixture of cold and sadness. I must keep my shit together. I can deal with what I feel later, I just need to get home.

I reach the empty bus stop, feeling the chilly wind rustle my dress, making me shiver. I curse under my breath. Dammit! Why didn't I bring a sweater? But why would I? Perhaps I should write a dating handbook: Chapter One, "Always Carry a Sweater in New York, Just in Case Your Date Says Something Utterly Stupid, Forcing You to Flee the Scene and



Roam the Darkened Streets Alone. At Least You'll Be Warm. I giggle at the thought of it.

I check the bus schedule, planning my route home with my finger tracing the lines. It's lonely here, even in a busy city like New York, and that loneliness feels heavy on my chest. But it's the only way for me to take control.

Sitting on the cold hard bench waiting for the bus, I can't stop pulling out my phone to check if it is on, or if Beau has called or texted me. There is a message from Emily, so I know it is working but nothing from him. The evening's glamour vanished as I dashed out of the gala, leaving behind my dignity, my stilettos, and any chance of being Miss Congeniality. But for some reason I had this nifty little thought that Beau, in a grand display of romance, would chase after me, apologize profusely, and sweep me off my feet.

But guess what? This isn't a rom-com. Instead of racing after me, he was probably having a good laugh with the guests, sharing the story of the girl who disappeared faster than Cinderella's pumpkin.

So, here's Chapter Two's lesson ladies: "Don't assume that a guy will automatically chase you when you make a hasty exit. They might just take it as a sign that you've become a magician, and poof, you've vanished from their life. But hey, at least you'll have an unforgettable story to tell."

The minutes drag on and feels like hours, and my hands feel numb, my makeup has lost the battle with my tears. Finally, the bus arrives, and I choose a seat in the back, avoiding the

curious glances. Sinking into the cold worn bus seats, I stare out the window, watching the city rush by, but it all looks strange now, as if I'm lost in every part of my life.

I silently cry as the bus keeps moving, taking me away from Beau. This ride becomes a symbol of my journey to self-discovery, a bittersweet reminder of the strength I need to confront the painful truth.

When the bus reaches my last stop, I gather myself, wiping away the last tears. I unlock the door to my penthouse, glad to be home. I find my way to my dimly lit room, the city lights casting a soft glow.

I plop down on my bed and start to fall asleep when my phone buzzes. It's probably Emily, checking on me, not knowing I'm already home but when I see "Beau" on the screen, conflicting emotions surge within me. Should I answer? Should I face him? The choice is mine, and I must decide how to handle the storm waiting on the other end of the line.

I hesitate for a moment, my heart pounding, unsure of what to do. Part of me wants to hear his voice, to hear his explanation and find some reassurance. But I can't forget the pain and hurt I felt when I overheard his words. Maybe our fake relationship is just that – fake feelings, a fake bond in a fake reality.

With a deep breath, I decline the call, letting it go to voicemail. The weight of my decision is now settling on my shoulders. It's not an easy choice, but it feels right.

I can't let him treat me like this, hurt me, and then act like everything's fine.

My heart aches, my soul feels crushed, and my mind begins to wonder. Did I actually believe he had real feelings for me? Boy, I should get a tattoo on my forehead that says, sucker. Why do I easily fall for people's lies? Why can't I stop believing all people are good? Why am I so naive? All feelings and thoughts I can't easily shake off.

I slip out of my dress, letting it drop to the floor, and change into my cozy pajamas, the soft fabric comforting my skin. I wash away the remaining makeup from my face; the cool water feels soothing, washing away the last traces of tonight. I climb into bed and glance out my window, and for a moment, I thought I see Beaus car turning right into an alley down the street. I'm exhausted, and I'm sure my mind is playing tricks on me.

As I slip under the covers, I grab my phone and read Emily's earlier message again. "Remember, you're a queen who deserves a king. Don't let anyone make you feel anything less."



# I Was Wrong. I Shouldn't Have Run Off. I'm Ready To Be Your Pretend Boyfriend- Rapunzel

Beau

I get ready for our home game - an important one that could secure our spot in the finals - I lace up my skates, feeling restless and anxious. I can't stop thinking about her. The girl who hasn't answered any of my calls or texts. The girl who is supposed to be my girlfriend, at least for the public eye. I didn't think I would miss her this much, but the silent treatment and not seeing her is tearing me up inside.

I check my phone one last time, hoping for anything. Nothing. Just silence. I sigh and toss the phone into my bag, trying to push her out of my mind. I have a game to play, a game that could make or break our season. I can't let her distract me from my goal.

I grab my helmet and stick, and head to the ice. I join my teammates for the warm-up, skating around the rink, passing and shooting the puck. I need try to focus on the game, on the strategy, on the opponent. But I can't. Her face keeps haunting me.

She left me at the gala, she ran away, leaving me alone but mostly confused. Why did she do that? Why did she agree to do this lie in the first place? Was it all for the money? Did she ever care for me at all? She got her money and maybe she thought she did her part and was done.

I shake my head, trying to clear it of these thoughts. I can't afford to dwell on it now. I have a game to play, a game that could lead us to the finals. I have to focus on that, on my team, on my career.

The warm-up ends, and we head back to the locker room.

The coach gathers the team in the locker room before the big game. He knows the stakes are high, and it's time for a pep talk.

"Listen up, everyone," he begins, his voice firm and commanding. "This is the moment we've been working towards all season. It's a chance to prove ourselves and I have complete faith in every one of you."

He pauses for a moment, letting his words sink in. "I know we've faced our share of challenges this season. Injuries, tough losses, and even some stupid comments that have weighed on the team." Coach shoots a look at me, eyebrow raised. "But I've seen the dedication, the hard work, and the way you've come together as a family."

The coach's voice rises with passion. "I believe in each of you, but I also know that we're stronger when we play for each other. We're a team, and tonight, we play as one."

Remember our strengths, cover for each other's weaknesses, and never forget the power of teamwork.”

He takes a moment to let his message sink in. “Now get out there, play hard, play smart, and play together. Win this not just for yourselves, but for the person next to you. Let's go!”

We nod and cheer, feeling pumped and ready. We put on our jerseys and helmets, grab our sticks and gloves, and head back to the ice. We line up for the national anthem, then take our positions for the face-off.

The game begins.

I skate with speed, trying to make an impact on the game. But something is off. Something is missing. My mind is not in sync with my body. I make mistakes that I normally wouldn't make. I miss passes that I normally wouldn't miss. I take risks that I normally wouldn't take.

The other team notices my weakness, and they jump on it. They target me with their hits and taunts, trying to get under my skin, trying to throw me off my game.

“Beau, if your girl sees you play like this, she might break up with you and date a real player on the opposing team!” one of them says as he checks me into the boards.

I smirk, my words dripping with sarcasm. “Well, at least I've got a girlfriend, Jack. I heard you and your stuffed animal have become real intimate lately.”

“Hey, I heard he's in love. Don't worry, Beau, we'll keep the ice nice and cold. Ya' know in case your heart gets too warm.”

another one says as he skates past me.

I can't let it slide. "Better than playing with a heart as cold as yours."

"Watch out, boys! Beau must have the 'falling in love' flu. Symptoms include tripping over your own skates and weak shots!" a third one says as he blocks my shot.

Their relentless jabs are pushing me over the edge. "At least I don't need to attend 'How to Play Hockey 101.'"

"His shots are so weak, even my grandma could stop them with her knitting needles!" a fourth one says as he laughs at me.

"Oh, that's because I've been keeping her hands busy pal. Grandma knitted me a sweater; said she wants to keep me warm at night. Don't worry, I'll take *real* good care of her."

Their words sting, and as much as I try to ignore them, I can't. I can't shake it off, and I lose my temper, and I lash out. I hit them back, harder and dirtier. I talk back, louder and meaner. I challenge them more and more.

But it doesn't help. It only makes things worse. It only makes me lose control. Coach shoots me a look, as if to tell me to get my head in the game.

But it's a futile attempt. A descent into chaos. I've lost control. I cross the line, and I get a penalty. A minor penalty for slashing. A stupid penalty that could cost us the game.

I skate over to the penalty box, fuming with anger. I slam the door behind me and sit on the cold bench. I glare at the ice,



and at the other team.

I hate myself for being so weak, so foolish, so pathetic.

I hate myself for letting her get to me, for letting her ruin my game, for letting her break my heart.

I hate myself for still wanting her, for still needing her.

I check my phone again, hoping for something. And there it is, a text from Amber.

*Hey Beau, I hope you're doing okay. I need to talk to you and apologize for what happened at the gala. I made a mistake, and I'm truly sorry for how I handled everything. I understand if you're upset, and I just want you to know that I never meant to hurt you. Can we talk and hopefully work this out? - Amber*

Just as I'm about to respond, I hear the coach, his voice suddenly booms through the arena, breaking the silence of the penalty box.

“Put that damn phone away, Daniels! We need your head in the game, not in your fucking feelings! Get your shit together.” he yells, his voice loud and clear.

His words hit me like a slap in the face, snapping me out of my trance. They also remind me of my duty to my team. But Amber's text is probably the real reason I feel as if a boulder has been rolled off my chest.

I glance at the clock. There are only a few seconds left of my penalty. I have to get back in the game, back in the flow, back in the fire.

The buzzer sounds, and I'm free. With a surge of energy and determination, I skate back onto the ice. I join my teammates, who support and trust me. I face the opponent, who fear and respect me.

I feel alive.



## Kiss the girl - The Little Mermaid

Amber

I walk into the bustling arena; the game is now in the final quarter, and the corridor is echoing with the sounds of loud cheers. The smells of hot dogs and beer fill my nose. I merge into the sea of bodies, shoulder to shoulder, step by step, moving with the crowd, as if there's an invisible force guiding us.

As I look around, I see fans wearing jerseys and hats, supporting the New York Phoenixes and the Las Vegas Visions, filling the space. I can feel the excitement of the game all around me, but I can't shake off the feeling of guilt for how I handled myself at the gala. I need to apologize to Beau face-to-face and make things right.

I take out my phone, still deciding if I should tell him I am here, not sure if he will even want to talk to me after the game. I don't know what to say, and I find myself at a loss. It irritates me how much we rely on phones to communicate. Despite being raised in this technology-driven era, I've never cared to

use my phone as a means of communicating in my previous relationships, and I don't see that changing anytime soon.

As I reflect on my past relationships, I realize that I've never encountered a situation that required an apology through a text, let alone one that screamed "I'm Sorry", like surprising your partner at their workplace just to make them feel trapped and uncomfortable.

But I also knew something was missing from those relationships—something I couldn't quite explain. The handful of guys I dated were good guys, but I knew they were not 'the one.'

My first kiss was with a boy whose name I never knew. I was fourteen. However, since I never saw him again, I don't count him as a significant person in my life. Even though my mother shares my story with every person as if it was my greatest accomplishment.

There was Mark, a talented musician I met at a café. With his long dark blue hair, beautiful brown eyes, and a few tattoos, he had an undeniable charm. We connected deeply over our shared love for art and music, and he would serenade me with his heartfelt songs and poems. However, our life goals didn't match. Mark needed to travel the world, sing songs, and camp under the stars, while I wanted to finish law school and build my life in New York.

Then there was Bodhi, an adventurous soul with pale blond hair, bluish-gray eyes, and the most beautiful golden tan I have ever seen in my life. He had an infectious passion for surfing

and sleeping on the beach, under the stars. We embarked on incredible trips together and had an absolute blast. Yet, no matter how much fun we had, there was always a lingering sense of something missing, something I couldn't quite grasp.

I want to feel like my soul is on fire, ignited by being near them. I want his touch to send shivers down my spine and make me feel complete and whole, as if I've found the missing piece that I never knew was missing. I want the kind of love that consumes every fiber of my being. To a devouring kiss, and sure, a man who will ride in on his white horse to save me, profess his love and take me away back to his castle where we live happily ever after. Okay, maybe it is a tad overboard, but it is what I want to feel when I find the one I love.

Still holding my phone in my hand, not knowing what to say and feeling quite defeated, I let out a big sigh, give up and put my phone away.

Yesterday, when John sent the group message, congratulating us on our first night out and how responsive the media was to Beaus interview, I immediately searched online for the article, and then I freaked out and kept freaking out. I was so wrong.

*Amber Knox: From Mystery Woman to Beau's Leading Lady —The Inside Scoop by Dylan Roberts, Gossip Queen's Magazine.*

In a recent exclusive interview, Beau Daniels, the charismatic heartthrob of the sports world, opened up about his relationship with Amber Knox, shedding light on their remarkable journey from mystery to romance.

Dylan Roberts (Gossip Queen's Magazine): Good evening, Beau. Our readers are eager to learn about the woman who has captured your heart. Could you please share how you and Amber Knox first met?

Beau Daniels (All Star Hockey Player, New York Phoenix): Well, Dylan, it's an amusing tale, though a rather lengthy one. In a nutshell, we crossed paths at a bookstore.

Dylan Roberts: Could you describe the qualities you value in your ideal partner?

Beau Daniels: Certainly. You see, Well, I'm used to dating supermodels. They have this beauty that catches my eye and intrigues me. However, Amber stands in a league of her own. She isn't just stunning; she surpasses any supermodel I've had the pleasure of knowing. Her intelligence, her passion, and her unwavering determination to make a difference in the world... that's what I find incredibly sexy. Being with her, it's like I've discovered a whole new level of attraction. She turns heads, yes, but she also ignites a fire within me. She challenges me, inspires me, and makes me want to be a better man.

Dylan Roberts: That's quite a profound sentiment, Beau. What sets your relationship with Amber apart from your previous ones?

Beau Daniels: Well, Dylan, it's all about the depth of our connection. With Amber, it's more than appearances or superficial charm. Our connection is deeper because we share a vision for a better world. Both of us are committed to

helping others, and that shared mission has brought us closer together.

Dylan Roberts: Thank you, Beau, for offering our readers insight into your relationship with Amber and your joint mission. We eagerly anticipate witnessing the positive impact you'll make in the future.

Beau Daniels: Thank you, Dylan. It's been a pleasure to share our story.

Dating handbook Chapter Three. "If you suddenly, out of nowhere, are struck by the urge to flee the scene like a runaway convict from a crime movie because of something you heard your guy say, you might want to wait until he's finished speaking, otherwise you'll feel like the dumbest person on the planet."

Feeling unable to breath and desperate for advice, I called John, tears streaming down my face as I poured out the reasons behind my actions on the night of the gala. His comforting voice on the other end of the line offered a glimmer of hope.

With a mixture of concern and a hint of personal gain, John proposed a plan: he would arrange a ticket for me to attend Beau's upcoming game. It would provide the perfect opportunity for me to confront him face-to-face and express my heartfelt 'I am so sorry' speech. But not only that, it would also serve as another chance for us to be seen together in public, standing by each other's sides and showing my support, particularly during one of his crucial games.



In my vulnerable state, my guilt thought it was a good idea.

After I got off the phone, I panicked and thought this wasn't a good idea at all.

Why, you ask? Simple.

I know nothing about hockey. Growing up, sports were never a topic of discussion in our household. We were always laughing and talking, never lacking in excitement. And even if I wanted to watch sports at home, I couldn't because my practical mother transformed our TV into a display for flowers. Yes, you read that correctly.

There was a moment that became a legendary tale in my family, one that my parents would recount to anyone who would listen. It became the story that defined my adolescent years—the tale of a silly but unforgettable kiss. They would tell it with a mix of pride and amusement, as if it were the greatest accomplishment of my life as if their daughter won a gold medal. So, unless you consider a kiss a sport then my parents didn't talk about sports, so I know nothing about hockey.

According to Emily, my parents resembled the quirky parents from the movie "Meet the Fockers." They had an unconventional approach to parenting, teaching me the importance of being true to myself, finding joy in the little things, and accepting and loving others for who they are. They taught me that family extends beyond blood ties—it encompasses the people who love you unconditionally and stand by your side through thick and thin.

Our house was always bustling with people. I was surrounded by a multitude of “aunts”, “uncles,” and “cousins” as my mom referred to them. Growing up, my childhood was never boring. Being surrounded by like-minded individuals who shared my parents’ perspective made for an interesting childhood.

And it was during one of those family gatherings that the story of my first kiss began. It was a warm summer day when a few of us kids decided to walk to the local ice cream stand. Laughter and excitement filled the air as we approached, eager to satisfy our sweet cravings.

As we took turns ordering, things got a little hectic. The ice cream stand was busy, and everyone seemed to be ordering at the same time. When it was finally my turn, I leaned in ready to order, and that’s when it happened. Another person, a boy I didn’t know, leaned in at the exact same moment. We ended up blurting out our orders simultaneously: “strawberry swirl,” our favorite flavor.

We stood there for a moment, laughing at the coincidence. The lady behind the counter handed out one of the cones, but just as we both reached for the ice cream, our hands collided. It was like a scene in slow motion. I watched in surprise as the cone slipped from my grip, and in my attempt to catch it, I only managed to grab one scoop of the ice cream before the rest fell to the ground. Pink strawberry swirl ice cream flying everywhere.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry!” I exclaimed, wide-eyed and a little panicked. Sticky streams of pink strawberry swirl dripped down my fingers, making a mess of things. I couldn’t believe what had just happened.

The boy, equally startled, let out a nervous laugh; his cheeks turned as pink as the ice cream that was now all over my hands. He looked at me and said, “Sometimes the best things come in messy packages.”

I thought I was going to melt right alongside the strawberry swirl ice cream and be a puddle of goo on the cement beside it.

As we waited for a wet paper towel, he pointed to a smudge of ice cream on the corner of my mouth. With a mischievous grin, he said, “Hey, you’ve got a little something there. Let me help you with that.”

I playfully raised an eyebrow and asked, “Oh really? What are you going to do?”

He leaned in closer, his voice barely above a whisper, and said, “Well, they say the best way to clean up ice cream is with a kiss.”

My heart skipped a beat as I realized his intentions. I somehow got the words to leave my lips, responding, “Um, well, if they say it’s the best way, um, who am I, um, to argue with that?”

His face came closer to mine, our lips almost touching, and I closed my eyes tightly. Then, with a gentle and confident

touch, he kissed me. His lips felt soft and wet with the scent of strawberries, making my heart race with excitement.

Just then, a voice suddenly pierced through the air. It was the boy's mom calling out from her car, "Get back in the car champ. We've got a long drive home!"

With a playful wink and a nod, he grabbed the other ice cream, turned and hopped into the car, leaving me with a whirlwind of emotions—butterflies fluttering in my stomach and a hint of sadness in my heart. "Wait, I don't even know your name!" I called out, but it was too late. He was already gone.

I stayed up late last night and watched countless videos and interviews and read countless articles. I realized that the values in hockey aren't much different than the values of family. I watched as the players cheered on their teammates, offering words of encouragement and support. It reminded me of a family as every team showed kindness and support to each other, and like family, they fight battles together, share victories and defeats, and form an unbreakable bond that goes beyond the game.

Maybe Beau and I are not so different after all.

Finding my row, I weave my way past legs and bodies, perhaps accidentally causing a minor beer spill along the way. I settle into my seat in the front row, surrounded by a roaring, sold-out crowd, with only a transparent barrier of plexiglass separating me from the ice.

Today, I'm feeling absolutely adorable. My choice of outfit – a warm tan sweater that hugs me just right, paired with my favorite worn-in jeans that fit my curves perfectly, and these cute brown boots that add a touch of flair – has me strutting with confidence. More than I can say about my insides.

From my seat at center ice, I have an unobstructed view of the entire rink. The adrenaline courses through my veins as I take in the spectacle before me. The players glide across the ice with incredible speed and precision, their movements graceful yet powerful. The sound of blades slicing through the ice and the thud of bodies colliding resonate through the arena, adding to the intensity of the experience.

The cheers and chants of the fans create an electric atmosphere that fuels my excitement. It's an awe-inspiring sight, and being so close to the ice, I find myself instinctively following the action, my eyes locked on the players as they maneuver with skill and elegance. With each pass, shot, and save, I can't help but cheer and clap along with the fans surrounding me, caught up in the excitement of the game.

I sit on the edge of my seat, my eyes fixed on Beau, number eleven, as the intensity on the ice escalates. The opposing team seems relentless in their pursuit to bring him down, delivering bone-crushing checks and vicious hits against the boards. I find myself holding my breath with each punishing blow he endures, but he seems to be instigating the fights, and I am not sure why.

Finally, the whistle blows, and he is escorted to the penalty box. Seizing the moment, I realize it is my opportunity to text him. With trembling fingers, I pull out my phone and quickly compose a message, pouring my heart into every word. I hit send. I feel like I want to throw up. I am not sure he will even be able to read the text during a game. And if he could, would he even want to read it? Would he believe me about how sorry I am? Can my sincerity even be displayed on a screen?

But then I watch as Beau searches behind him and pulls out his phone, his eyes scanning the screen. The seconds stretch on, and I hold my breath, waiting for a reaction or response, but just as his fingers begin to move across the screen, his attention is abruptly redirected by the coach's booming voice, yelling at him.

Now leaving my message unanswered, my heart sinks with disappointment. I need to speak to him in person to see his reaction and gauge whether forgiveness is within his reach.

With a heavy sigh, I wonder if I should tell him I am here, but instead, I slip my phone back into my pocket and refocus my attention on the game. Beau's absence on the ice affects the game, and the opposing team is viciously starting to catch up.

I watch as he sits in the penalty box, his gaze distant and absorbed. The aggression on the ice continues to escalate, but he remains composed, seemingly lost in his thoughts. I wondered if it was me he was thinking about.

Finally, the whistle blows, and he is back on the ice. This time, he seems more determined and skates with purpose. As if a thousand weights had been lifted off his shoulders. But the opposing team is not playing fair, and the aggression between the teams escalates.

Suddenly, there is a loud collision right in front of me, against the glass, causing me to scream and jump up off my seat. I watch as Beau is forcefully slammed by an opposing player; the impact can be heard through the arena. The crowd erupts in gasps and rage, and with his face smashed against the glass, somehow, he looks up and sees me.

With his face still pressed up against the glass and blood pooling around his mouth, his eyes widen in surprise, as if he couldn't believe I was here. Lifting both my eyebrows, a small smile tugs at my lips as I give him a playful, subtle wave, silently expressing the 'surprise, it is me,' face. He smiles back, his half-smile sending a shiver through my body. Even with his face bloody and bruised, I still find myself holding my breath, and I can't help but think how sexy he is.

Seeing me sparks something within him, and I watch as he regains control, returning to the ice with a sense of purpose, as if he has found an untapped reservoir of strength. He is so beautiful and graceful, like watching an artist paint a masterpiece, and I can't help but be mesmerized as he glides effortlessly on the ice.

The tension in the arena is intense as the final minutes of the game tick away. The score is tied, and every play is met with

roaring cheers and anxious gasps from the crowd. I stand at the edge of my seat, my heart pounding in my chest, my eyes fixed on the players battling it out on the ice.

In an instant, the Viserions unleash a powerful shot, but Beau swiftly intercepts the puck and, with speed and skill, races towards the opposing team's net. The crowd erupts into a frenzy of excitement, their cheers echoing throughout the arena. I can feel the energy in the air as everyone holds their breath, anticipating the outcome.

Beau dodges defenders with ease, his stick-handling skills on full display. He maneuvers through the opposing team, his eyes locked on the goalie. With a swift, powerful shot, he releases the puck, and time seems to stand still as it soars through the air. I hold my breath, and a silence fills the arena.

I watch as the puck hits the back of the net, and the arena erupts in a deafening roar. The crowd leaps to their feet, cheering and clapping. Strangers embrace, high-fiving and hugging, united in the excitement of the moment. Some guy even grabbed me, lifting me off my feet and jumping up and down. After he sets me down, I watch as Beau is swarmed by his teammates, their triumphant celebrations a testament to their hard-fought victory. They pound their sticks on the boards, their unified display of camaraderie echoing throughout the arena.

In the midst of the chaos, Beau finds me, and a wide smile spreads across his face, showing a mixture of relief and



happiness. I can't help but smile back as we share a private celebration, a shared moment that goes beyond the game.

As fans slowly start to leave their seats, with only remnants of popcorn and paper cups left behind, I watch as Beau skates towards the bench, his teammates patting him on the back and offering words of congratulations. He glances towards the stands once more, our eyes meeting briefly, before he disappears into the locker room, carried away by the tide of victory.

I stand there, caught between the excitement of the moment and the anticipation of what lies ahead.

As I wait, sitting in the stands, watching the last of the few fans leave, I spot Beau alone, gliding across the ice. His movements are fluid, and his focus is unwavering as he sends pucks soaring into the net. I take a deep breath. Gathering my courage, I make my way over to the opening in the rink. Step by step, my nerves are getting the best of me. As I approach, I can feel the coolness of the ice in the air, preparing myself for what's to come. With each passing second, my heart beats faster, and I'm ready to put this behind us.

He stops in the middle of the ice, watching me with a playful smirk on his face. "Well, well, well, are you brave enough to join me on the ice?" he says, his voice filled with playful challenge. "Ready to put your skating skills to the test?"

I roll my eyes, trying to match his confident tone. "Please, Beau," I reply with a mischievous glint in my eyes. "I could

skate circles around you with my eyes closed. Don't think you'd stand a chance."

He chuckles, skating closer. "Is that a challenge I hear?" Beau asks, his playful smirk widening. "Alright then, let's see if you can keep up with this smooth operator on the ice. But remember, when you fall... for me, I'll be there to catch you."

I raise an eyebrow, a playful smirk mirroring his own. "Fall for you? Please, I don't fall that easily," I reply, as casual as I could be. "But if you insist on showing off your moves, I'll be right behind you, ready to catch you when you fall... for me."

I glance around and then look inside my purse. "Oh shit, you caught me on a day I didn't bring my skates," I reply with a sheepish smile. "Darn. I'll have to rely on my incredible talent for skate-less skating. I hope you're prepared for the show."

He chuckles, coming closer. "Ah, the art of skating without skates. A classic technique, I must say," he teases, his eyes twinkling. "Well, lucky for you, there happen to be extra pairs of skates here just for this occasion. I can't wait to watch as you gracefully stumble your way around the rink."

I raised my eyebrows. "You really think I can handle those skates without causing a total disaster?"

He nods, "Absolutely. Just remember, I'll be right there to catch you."

With a grin, I slip into the skates that Beau provides.

As I step onto the ice, my legs are wobbly as I try to find my balance. I stumble a little, and he watches with a mix of

amusement and concern.

“Are you okay there, Amber?” he asks.

I look up at him with a nervous smile. “I may not be as experienced as you, but I’m holding back just in case, as I don’t want to embarrass you.”

Beau chuckles and says, “Don’t hold back for my sake. But if you need me to, I’ll be your personal skating coach.” Grabbing my hands in his, “Just follow my lead.”

With that, he takes my hand, guiding me as we slowly glide across the ice. He helps me find my balance; his touch is gentle and supportive. I let myself lean into his guidance, pretending to be a novice skater but secretly reveling in the closeness between us.

As we continue our laps around the rink, I take a deep breath and gather my courage, ready to address the lingering tension from walking out on him. “Beau,” I stammer, “I owe you an apology for what happened at the gala.” I continue, my words mingling with the crisp air. “I didn’t stay to hear the whole conversation. All I caught was something about models and how you’re intrigued with their beauty. And, well, let’s just say my imagination ran wild.”

A nervous giggle escapes my lips, a hint of playfulness seeping into the moment. “I guess my mind went into overdrive, picturing you surrounded by supermodels and thinking I didn’t stand a chance. Silly, I know. I should have given you the chance to explain. I hope you can forgive my childish assumptions.”

As I speak, my foot falters, and I lose my balance, falling flat on my back and he tries to catch me, concern etched on his face. Tears threaten to spill from my eyes, not from the pain on my backside but from the uncertainty of his response. He scoops me up into his arms, our faces inches apart, a flicker of amusement in his eyes and a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Supermodels, huh?” he remarks, his voice tinged with amusement. “Well, I do have ten supermodels waiting for me in the locker room, so I guess I can see how you thought that.”

I playfully slap him on the arm, a mix of relief and affection coursing through me. “I’m being serious; this isn’t the time to joke,” I protest, though my smile betrays my true feelings.

He reaches out, and the tips of his fingers gently brush a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch sending a delightful tingle through me. My breath catches, and I look away. Beau takes his finger and lifts my face to find his. “Amber, this may have started as something else, but I really think that what we have is far from a joke,” he confesses, his voice filled with sincerity. “And showing up tonight meant a lot to me. More than you know.”

A surge of excitement fills me, the unspoken connection between us growing stronger. “I’m glad.” I was relieved that he accepted my apology. As I try to get up, my legs are weak, not from the fall but from Beau’s genuine words. I can’t seem to find my footing and fall back down. We both laugh, and I joke, “But I’ve got to stop falling around you.”

He looks me in the eyes and says, “You know, sometimes the best things come from you falling. I am now an expert at catching you. It’s almost become a sport for me. And I always win. And somehow, you’ve become an expert at falling at the right moment. And I can’t say I blame you. I know being around me makes your knees weak, and you can’t resist falling into my arms.”

In that moment, it feels as if I’ve known those eyes, that smile, and that touch before—a sense of familiarity washes over me. But I am not sure why.

Before I could respond, Beau leans in closer, his breath warm on my cheek, and his lips parted. My god. He is going to kiss me, and I want him to. I have been waiting for this moment for so long, and now it is finally happening.

With his eyes locked on mine, the wall that usually hid the truth deep in his eyes had crumbled, and his breath was warm on my face. He whispers, “I think I want to kiss you.”

I felt a surge of nervous excitement and a flutter in my stomach, and I could hear the soft tremble of my own breath. “Then do it.”

His hand finds its way to the back of my neck, pulling me closer. His lips touch mine softly and gently, sending warmth through my body, and I gasp. He kisses me gently at first, and then, as if he’s reaching for something more, he lays my head down on the ice and kisses me harder. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer, feeling his tongue slide into my mouth. I just whimper. As soon as the sound leaves my mouth,

he presses me harder against the ice. His left hand is caressing my cheek, and his right hand is gripping me by the waist, pulling me against him.

He tastes like mint and coffee, with a scent of sweat and sandalwood—a delicious combination. The gentle pressure of his lips against mine, the sensation I feel from his touch, and the taste and smell of him leave me craving more. He senses my desire and kisses me harder. I feel his heartbeat against my chest, and we kiss for what seems like an eternity, exploring each other's mouths and savoring every sensation.

A wave of happiness washes over me, thinking we are finally past the bullshit. He begins to slow, teasing me with his tongue, gliding gently over my lips, and I open my eyes. He smiles at me tenderly. I smile back, feeling a warm glow in my chest. Nervously, I start talking, wanting to make sure we were okay, and he kisses my forehead and whispers in my ear, “Amber, do you ever stop talking?” He says this, his eyes playfully squinting. “I like you.” I giggle and whisper back, “I like you too.”

As Beau lifts me to my feet and we make our way off the ice, I am ready to lay everything on the table, I announce. “There's something I've been meaning to tell you.”

But before I can finish, his teammates surround us, their celebrations drowning out our conversation. Grabbing Beau, they lift him up on their shoulders as they carry him off.

I shout out at him, “Maybe we continue this conversation tomorrow night at the party.” I suggest it, hoping he hears me.

He nods, a large smile spreading across his face and lips, and yells back. "I'll see you there," he says before he and his teammates disappear into the arena.

As I wait for the taxi to arrive, the weight of the day's events lifting from my shoulders, a sense of relief and excitement warms me like a ray of sunshine after a storm.

I can still feel his lips on mine, the way they softly brushed against my mouth, sending sparks of desire through my veins. His kiss was gentle and sweet but also passionate and deep, awakening a hunger I never knew I had. I smile, knowing that it changed everything between us.

I can't wait for the masquerade party tomorrow night. It's the most mysterious and exclusive event in town, held only once every thirteen years. No one knows who organizes it or who gets invited, except for the lucky few who receive a mysterious invitation. Some say that the ghosts of Isabella and Alexander, the star-crossed lovers who once lived in the mansion where the party is held, are the ones who choose the guests through a séance.

I still can't believe that I got an invitation. It was delivered to my doorstep, with no sign of who sent it or how. It was addressed only to me in beautiful and elegant handwriting that looked like it belonged to another era. The envelope was sealed with a red wax stamp with an intricate design that hinted at a secret history. When I opened it, I smelled a faint fragrance of old paper and flowers, as if the invitation had been preserved for centuries.

Home and now sitting on my bed, as I hold the invitation in my hand, I feel excited.

Tomorrow night, I will enter a world of masks and mystery, where fairytales can come true.





# Right in the Middle of an Ordinary Life, Love Gives us a Fairy Tale-Walt Disney

Invitation

*E*steemed Guest,  
You are cordially invited to an enchanting evening of magic and mystery at our Haunted Midnight Masquerade Ball. Join us as masks conceal identities and secrets linger in every shadow. Delve into the world of romance and intrigue, guided by the ghosts of the past.

The Hour of Mystery awaits a game of chance and destiny. Within the opulent mansion, each woman will enter a room filled with elegantly dressed men wearing identical masks. Discover your chosen partner through the language of presence, touch, and chemistry. Let the secrets of the night unveil your path, leading to fate's whims and delightful surprises.

To keep the mystique, we kindly request discretion. Gentlemen, be clean-shaven and don a classic black or white tuxedo, while ladies should grace the occasion in elegant gowns reminiscent of a bygone era. Your unique black mask will add an air of intrigue and anonymity to the proceedings.

*On the day of the Masquerade Ball, a special package will arrive at your door at noon, containing your beautifully adorned mask. Embrace the unknown, let the magic of the night come alive, and be whisked away in style by a Rolls-Royce or a horse-drawn buggy.*

*At the stroke of midnight, the bewitching hour, choose your partner, and together, remove your masks, revealing the faces that have remained hidden throughout the evening.*

*A green ribbon within the envelope signifies those already in love, while those without ribbons may seek new connections.*

*For the brave at heart, explore the hidden chambers of the haunted mansion, where untold tales and secrets lie in wait. But beware, not all secrets are meant to be uncovered, and some may prove deadly.*

*The Hour of Mystery promises an exhilarating night of excitement, romance, and discovery. We eagerly await your response to this captivating invitation.*

*Kindly RSVP by February 10th to secure your spot for this enchanting event.*

*The Haunted Midnight Masquerade Ball will take place on February 14th at Hawthorne Manor, a historic estate located in the heart of New York. The address and directions will be provided upon confirmation.*

*Yours sincerely, in both life and death,*

*Alexander Hawthorne and Isabella Collins*



# Once Upon a Time-Every Fairytale

## Part One

In an old mansion with a mysterious history, lived Alexander Hawthorne—a wealthy industrialist known for his extravagant parties and charm. One day, he met Isabella, a talented artist with a pure soul who refused monetary gain for her art. Captivated by her principles, he commissioned her to create a masterpiece on his ballroom ceiling.

As Isabella painted, a love blossomed between them, their connection going beyond art. They shared laughter, love, and promises of forever, but their happiness was short-lived. Isabella's devout family disapproved of their relationship, forcing her to choose between Alexander and her family. Heartbroken, she chose to end things and left Alexander devastated.

Tragedy struck when Isabella fell ill and passed away, leaving behind rumors that Alexander was responsible for her death. Falsely accused, he faced a wrongful conviction and was put to death, forever haunted by the memory of their love.

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## *Part Two*

The mansion's legend continued, with some believing its hidden rooms were used for occult practices. Others saw the rooms as a testament to Alexander's love for Isabella, a sanctuary for their forbidden passion.

Now abandoned, the mansion carried an aura of mystery and ghostly whispers of Alexander and Isabella, forever bound to their love's sanctuary. The mansion was said to hold thirteen secret rooms, each representing moments of bliss for a loving couple. Only five rooms had been found, but every thirteen years, the mansion hosted the Haunted Midnight Masquerade Ball.

At the ball, chosen guests embarked on a journey to uncover the forgotten rooms. Each room offered a reward—a glimpse into Alexander and Isabella's love story. But for each reward, there was also a risk, and those who failed faced a terrible fate.

The mansion's enigmatic history continued to captivate imaginations, passing through generations like an enchanting fairy tale of love, courage, and haunting mysteries.



## Some People are Worth Melting For-Olaf

Beau

I step outside my house at 10:00 p.m. sharp, feeling a surge of adrenaline. The evening breeze hitting my clean-shaven face. Luke stands beside me, fussing over my appearance. He smooths out a wrinkle on my coat, straightens my tie, and adjusts my cufflinks.

“Will you relax?” I say, laughing. “You’re acting like you’re my mother.”

“I can’t help it,” he says, beaming with excitement. “I wish I could be there with you. This is a big deal, you know?”

I glance at my watch, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Rolls-Royce that will take me to the mansion. In the distance, I hear the revving of an engine growing closer and soon, a sleek black Rolls-Royce Phantom appears. The driver, a distinguished gentleman with white hair, steps out and opens the back door. I nod and slide into the luxurious interior.

The car’s plush seats cradle me in comfort as I settle in. I can smell the leather and polished wood. Soft lighting casts a



warm glow, highlighting the car's timeless features.

As the car glides smoothly along the winding road, I lose myself in the fantasy of her. Her body is a masterpiece that I long to admire, touch, and taste.

I trace every curve, every line, every inch of her. The gentle slope of her neck, the graceful arch of her back, and the curve of her hips.

I can almost feel the warmth of her skin beneath my touch, my mouth savoring the softness of her skin; the rise and fall of her chest until I reach her nipples. I work my way down, kissing the dip of her navel and then the curves of her waist, my tongue exploring, enjoying the thrill of the unknown. A hidden treasure waiting to be discovered that promises a world of pleasure. The mere thought sends shivers down my spine.

But doubt begins to creep into my mind. I wonder if her feelings are genuine, or is this all just an act? Does she see me for who I am? Or am I merely a job and only doing it for the money?

“Fuck.” I mumble under my breath.

I have got to push those thoughts aside, at least tonight. The masquerade ball is a game of masks and secrets and since no one knows who is on the guest list it's a rare opportunity to escape the public eye and be whoever we want to be. Tonight might be the night for truths.

A low chuckle escapes my throat as I reflect on the irony of Alexander and Isabella's story: the mansion being a safe haven

from outsiders.

“Sir?”

I didn't notice the driver glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

Clearing his throat, “Are you alright? You seem burdened.”

I take a moment to gather my thoughts before responding. “Life can feel so damn overwhelming at times,” I whisper, lowering my guard. “I often find myself searching for an easier path, a way to avoid the bullshit.”

“Indeed,” he hums, nodding in agreement. “Life has a funny way of spinning us around, leaving us dizzy and uncertain.”

I lean back in my seat, contemplating his words. “But what if there's an easier path, one that is simple, less hard?” I wonder aloud.

“Ah. Well sir, the secret lies not in finding a simpler path, but in embracing the harder path. Life is a journey of ups and downs, filled with moments of joy and moments of pain. It is through these experiences that we learn, grow, and discover who we truly are.” He pauses, letting his words sink in.

“So, it's not about avoiding the hardships but facing them?” I ask, seeking further clarity.

He smiles gently, his eyes sparkling with approval. “Precisely, sir. We find our strength and resilience through difficulties. Life's true beauty lies in its kaleidoscope of experiences.”

“Hm.”

“You know, sir,” he continues, his voice now filled with sadness, “My late wife of 69 years, God rest her soul, was a remarkable woman. We faced many challenges together, but it was through those most difficult times that our love grew stronger. We grew stronger.”

I lean forward, eager to hear his story. “Was that what kept you together so long?”

A small smile graces the driver’s lips as he reminisces. “Partly. But it was her unwavering belief in the power of love. She had an ability to see beauty in the most difficult moments. She used to say, ‘In the darkest of nights, our love will be the stars that guide us home.’”

I am frozen by his words. “That’s a beautiful way to put it. But what happens when we can’t see the stars to guide us home?”

The driver chuckles softly, “Ah. Well in those moments, sir, you rely on your heart. You let it be your guiding star, even when the night sky seems clouded. Trust your heart; it will always show you the way.”

“So, it’s about trust, even when everything else feels uncertain? How can you trust your heart when your head says something completely different?”

“Trust is not about certainty or seeking something solid to hold onto. No, trust is a leap of faith—a daring jump into the unknown, trusting that someone will catch you. It’s about

believing in the goodness of their heart, an intangible force that you can't see or touch, but you know it's there.”

As I absorb his words, I feel the car beginning to slow and come to a halt in front of an enormous old iron gate. A man dressed in elegant period attire steps forward, taking a card from the driver and with a swift nod, he disappears into a booth. I begin to hear a creaking sound, mesmerized by the giant gates slowly opening, revealing a narrow-paved road lined with flickering lanterns, their soft glow casting shadows in the trees.

We begin to make our way up the winding path, and on each side there are ancient oaks standing, their branches reaching out like arms of protection. The soft whisper of wind and the sound of a violin echo through the air. My eyes widen as I see the mansion for the first time. It's a spectacular sight of dignity, radiating riches and charm. It looks like a castle, the ones you see in old Dracula movies, hidden from the world by the large iron gates and the giant trees. A secret in the heart of New York.

The mansion is made of aged white marble, with tall columns and intricate carvings. The windows are large and bright, reflecting the moonlight. The massive front doors are a rich mahogany, with a golden knocker. The property is covered in a soft snow and the lights from the mansion and moonlight adds to its mystery. I wonder how much property there is. How it has stayed so hidden and desolate from the overcrowded city of New York.

As the car comes to a graceful stop, the driver promptly opens the door, his hand extended towards me. I accept his gesture with a nod of appreciation and step out onto the ground, feeling the cool evening air caress my skin. It carries a sense of purity, a rarity for a place nestled in the heart of the bustling city.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice filled with sincerity. “I appreciate your advice more than you know. I didn’t get your name?”

He nods, his eyes are kind. With his hand still holding mine, he places his other arm over my shoulder. “Son, your life is full of choices. Choose the path that calls to your heart. It may not always be easy, and at times it will be the hardest thing you will ever face but the rewards that await you...ah,” he sighs, “those will make it all worthwhile.”

The driver stops before getting back in the car, turns to me, “My family calls me Jitu.” And with a nod and a slight bow he continues, “It has been my honor to be your driver, son.”

With that, he gets back into the car and drives away.

As I stand there, watching the taillights disappear into the night, I find myself speechless, touched by the unexpected guidance of a stranger. In that moment, I feel a sense of connection, as if the universe has aligned to offer me the support and encouragement I needed.

Following the red carpet under my feet, I stop at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the mansion. Taking a deep breath, I

pause to steady my nerves before placing on my mask and adjusting it with care.

The mask arrived earlier today, delivered in a wooden box. Opening it released a scent of musk, and inside, the mask rested on soft blue velvet.

The mask itself is a stunning piece of art. Intricate patterns along the edges, showcasing skilled craftsmanship. It's as if it were made for my face, with a combination of black and silver and a single red stone in the center. Inside the box, I discovered a note, a reminder of the significance of this event. It also spoke of making a purchase, a token of honor, for the fair ladies who choose us. The color of the stone in our masks would guide our selection.

When Luke saw the note, he excitedly volunteered to help me find a gift for her. He called Joe and invited him to join us. They dragged me to Tiffany's.

As soon as we stepped inside, the salespeople swarmed around Luke, who quickly took charge and Joe, always the flirt, had already started chatting with a gorgeous girl behind the counter, leaving me to look around by myself.

My eyes scanned the displays until they landed on a single necklace in a glass case. The pendant gently held a red stone, which was in the shape of a heart, hanging from a chain of yellow gold. It was stunning.

“Hey, guys, come check this out,” I called out to Joe and Luke, my voice full of excitement.

Luke pulled himself away from the salespeople and rushed over, his eyes wide with awe. “Holy shit, Beau, that’s—”

Joe joined us with a grin on his face. “—that’s a freaking gift that’s going to get you la—... he paused. “brownie points.”

I pictured Amber’s face when I’d give her the necklace. “Are you guys sure you think she’ll like it?”

Luke nodded. “Beau, that necklace is going to make her feel like a princess.”

I asked to see the piece, and the saleswoman smiled with enthusiasm. “Ah, this,” she said, “The Heart’s Desire necklace is more than just jewelry. It shows love, passion, and commitment. It is for someone who wants to share their deepest feelings and treasure the one they love.”

I reached out and took it gently, feeling its weight and meaning in my hands. The red diamond shone with a light that matched the stars.

“This is the one,” I said quietly, feeling a rush of excitement. I had never bought such an expensive piece of jewelry before, but I knew it was meant for her.

We left the jewelry store, and Joe slapped me on the back, his eyes shining with mischief. “Beau, my friend, you’ve hit the jackpot with this gift. Amber won’t be able to resist falling for you, just like she will for that necklace.” He winked playfully.

I nudged him back and laughed.

Now standing at the bottom of a grand staircase, I take a moment to compose myself, feeling the small box in my pocket. The anticipation builds within me as I follow the red carpet leading up the stairs. At the top, two gentlemen dressed in period attire greet me with welcoming smiles, taking my coat with utmost care.

As I step into the foyer, the space overwhelms me. To the left, I catch a glimpse of the grand ballroom and to the right, large iron doors and I wonder what lies behind them. Straight ahead, a staircase that commands attention, split off left and right, leading to the unknown.

As I am led to the ballroom, I first notice the ceiling, adorned with a breathtaking mural that leaves me momentarily breathless. The marble floors, a striking contrast of tan and black, shine under the lights of chandeliers. Large floor to ceiling columns fill the space, their carved details adding to the rooms timeless decor.

An orchestra plays in the background, and I see there is a well-stocked bar of finely crafted beverages and spirits. Elegant tables and chairs are arranged in a separate section, divided by a wide walkway that serves as a pathway between the two rooms.

As I take in the surroundings, I see servers walking through the crowd, delicately carrying trays of appetizers and glasses of champagne. One server approaches me, offering a selection. With gratitude, I accept a glass of champagne and choose an appetizer from her tray, thanking her and admiring the work



they put into recreating the atmosphere of Isabella and Alexander's era.

I feel as if I have stepped back hundreds of years.

I sit at a table in the corner, my eyes scanning the crowd of masked men, each one with a unique colored stone on their masks. Despite my initial confidence, I realize that Amber recognizing me might prove to be a challenge. And coupled with our clean-shaven faces, makes it difficult for me to notice differences between anyone.

As time seems to stretch on, I find myself surrounded by a group of men engaging in a lively conversation. Discussions about the recent hockey game, and I can't help but laugh.

Really? What are the chances of this happening again?

"It was an intense game, wasn't it?" one guy says. "Daniels really showed some skill out there."

"Yeah, that final shot was unbelievable," another guy responds, a note of awe in his tone.

"He's definitely a force to be reckoned with."

As they continue talking, their discussion takes an unexpected turn. I listen intently, my curiosity piques, when I hear Ambers name mentioned. Leaning towards them, eager to hear what they have to say.

"Did you see Amber in the stands? That chick is hot as fuck," one-man remarks.

“Hell yeah she is,” another man chimes in. “Although I heard she’s only with him for the money. Can’t blame him, though. I’d let a girl like that use me for my money any day.”

They all laugh.

My fists clench just when the resonating sound of the clock chimes throughout the room, echoing with each powerful strike.

Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong.

11:00 p.m. The grand doors swing open, revealing the elegantly dressed women as they glide into the ballroom. My eyes scanning the crowd in search of her. With each passing woman, doubt creeps into my mind.

Did I miss her? Did I fail to recognize her?

I try to push aside my anxiety, reminding myself to stay patient. But doubt gnaws at the corners of my mind.

What if she’s not coming at all? What if some accident has kept her away?

I take a deep breath, trying to push away the rising panic within me. I can’t stop glancing towards the entrance, hoping to catch a glimpse of her familiar figure.

As the doors to the ball begin to close, I rise from my seat, ready to go out and search for her but just as I am about to move, the doors begin to reopen, my heart skips a beat, and there she is—Amber.

She walks gracefully into the ballroom, her vibrant red curls cascade down her back as her eyes scan the room with a mix of curiosity and excitement. The soft glow of the chandeliers casts an angelic radiance upon her, enhancing her natural beauty. Every step she takes, every move she makes, captivates the attention of those around her. The room seems to hush in her presence, the vibrant colors of her dress commanding attention.

The top of the gown, a shimmering gold, accentuates her neckline, drawing my eyes upward to the gentle curve of her shoulders. But it's the skirt of the gown that truly captivates me. Layers upon layers of fabric cascade like molten lava, flowing and swirling with each step she takes. Shades of crimson and fiery orange intertwine, creating a mesmerizing dance of colors that mirrors the flickering flames of a roaring fire. The gown seems alive, as if it possesses a magical energy that radiates from within Amber herself.

She moves gracefully and confidently, her dress waving like fire. The embroidery sparkles in the light, creating dancing patterns on the fabric. I blink, wondering if I'm dreaming. She's so beautiful and enchanting. I can't tear my eyes away from her as she glides across the ballroom, drawing the admiration and awe of those around her.

The air seems to crackle with electricity, and I find myself wanting to grab her, kiss her, to take her in my arms. In that moment, I realize that she is more than just a woman in a gown. She is a force of nature, igniting a fire within me that I never knew existed.

The men beside me exchange quick glances, their conversation shifting to a more hushed tone. I strain my ears, eager to hear what they say about her.

“Did you see that girl? Absolutely fucking gorgeous.”

“Yeah, she’s hot. Wonder who she’s here to find. Do any of you see a green ribbon?”

“I don’t know. I bet she’s a model or something.”

“Imagine having a beauty like that on your arm.”

“You think she’s single?” one guy whispers, his eyes fixated on her every move.

One guy responds, “Who cares. Women are all cheaters, nothing but money hungry users.”

“Check out that server coming our way. Just another pretty face and all she is good for is to serve us. Nothing more.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen these types before. They think they’re so special, but really, they’re just here to be eye candy.”

“Why do they even bother hiring servers like her? They should know their place. Beau Daniels was right, women like her should stay in the kitchen, not getting involved in anything important.”

“She’s probably desperate for attention. Just like Daniels said, they don’t measure up to us. She’s probably not that smart and this is the only job she can get.”

They snicker as they watch her, their eyes raking over her body with contempt.

“Look at her, acting like she’s someone special. I bet she thinks she can be more than just a server. Well, she better wake up and find a guy to settle down with before she loses her looks.”

As I stand there, listening to their insults, the realization slams into me, knocking the breath out of me. Regret, guilt, and a burning desire to make things right course through me. It’s all my fault. My toxic mindset that day, what I said, has created assholes like these guys, who think it’s okay to belittle and demean others.

It’s a humbling moment, as I see myself mirrored in their ignorance. How could I have been so blind? How could I have allowed myself to perpetuate the same disrespect that I now witness firsthand?

Shit. I’ve really made a mess of things. There’s no one to blame but myself. My words, my actions—they are the reason I’m in this mess. And now, listening to these ignorant assholes, I realize Joe was right. It wasn’t just about my truth, it was about the impact my words had on people, how they hurt and influence them. I can’t bear the thought of Amber, or any woman for that matter, being subjected to such disrespectful treatment.

I scan the room for Amber in the crowd. When I finally see her, she looks so peaceful. I want to talk to her, to apologize but I will let her have her fun right now. I can see she is searching the crowd of masks, trying to find me. I chuckle at her attempt. I will wait until she finds me and then talk to her.

As time ticks by, I look at my phone, 11:52 p.m. and I see Amber walking towards me. I know she sees me. A crowd blocks my view, and minutes go by, and she has not approached me yet.

Maybe I was wrong. The clock is ticking, and I need to talk to her before the clock strikes midnight.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I make my way through the masked faces. I can't erase the past, but she needs to know that it was a mistake, and I am not the man who was overcome by the ignorance and arrogance that had clouded my judgment.

I finally spot her, and I pause, feeling nervous. I need to tell her the truth.

As I walk towards her, I hear her voice. The crowd clears, and I see a man standing in front of her. He's one of the guys who was insulting Amber and women earlier.

He has a hold of her arm, and she appears to be pulling back.

I stand behind her and reach out, my fingers grabbing his, pulling him away from his grip on her.

"Hey buddy," he says, smirking behind his mask. "What do you think you're doing? You can't just barge in here when she's already talking to me."

I feel a surge of anger rising in me, but I try to keep calm. "Excuse me, sir, but I believe this lady is spoken for."

"Who are you?" he asks, his tone cold.

“Does it really matter who I am. It also looks like she is not interested in talking to you.”

He laughs scornfully. “Oh yeah? And why should she talk to you?” I flinch at his words.

“Look,” I say firmly. “I just want to talk to her so please kindly walk away.”

He shakes his head dismissively. “Too little too late buddy,” he says snidely. He pushes me back with his hand, making me stumble.

“Leave us alone,” he warns me. “Or you’ll regret it.”





# The Little Mermaids Voice-The Little Mermaid

Amber

I enter the ballroom, feeling a rush of excitement. The air is alive with laughter and music, and the decorations take my breath away. I glide through the crowd, sensing the curious gazes of masked strangers on my gown. My eyes wander, looking for him. The man who makes me feel a pull I can't resist.

I spend some time talking to some strangers, and enjoying a glass of champagne, which is wonderful, by the way. All the men look a lot alike, all stunning in their tuxedos and masks. I finally notice one that stands out, in a white tuxedo that fits his muscular body perfectly. My Beau.

I start to make my way over to him when I feel a tap on my shoulder. A young man in a black suit stands before me, his mask sparkling with a green stone. He flashes me a charming smile and says, "Hello, beautiful. May I have this dance?"

I shake my head and point to the green ribbon around my wrist. "I'm already spoken for."

He doesn't seem to care. "He's a lucky guy. But I don't see a ring on your finger, so it must not be that serious. What's your name?"

I give him a fake name, hoping he'll leave me alone but wanting to be polite. "Ashley. And yours?"

He grins and firmly grasps my arm, leaning closer. In a hushed whisper, he says, "You'll find out soon enough."

I shiver, feeling his breath on my neck.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I've been watching you, and honestly, I think I want *you* to be my chosen one." His words come out in a rush; his arrogant confidence in his voice.

I try to push him away, but he holds me tighter. Before I can scream, I feel another hand on me, breaking the grip the man had on my arm.

I turn around and see a man wearing a white tuxedo and a mask with a red stone. My heart leaps as I know it is Beau, and even with his mask on, I can see he is angry.

Beau shoots a harsh look at the guy, and I'm left standing there, clueless about their conversation. The tension in the air makes me feel uneasy and vulnerable. Out of nowhere, the man pushes Beau, causing him to stumble. Panic washes over me, and I quickly reach out to steady him, fearing he might fall or lash out in anger. But before things escalate further, the ballroom falls silent, all eyes drawn to the stage as the sound of trumpets resonates through the hall.

A man in a red coat and mask steps forward, holding a microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he begins, his voice carrying through the hushed crowd. “Thank you for joining us tonight. Now, it’s time for the moment you’ve all been waiting for. When you hear the final chime of the clock, please remove your masks, and reveal your identities to your chosen partners.” He pauses, allowing the suspense to linger, savoring the moment. “And if you wish to continue on with the night, then, my dear guests, gather in the entrance hall, where the fun begins. You have fifteen minutes. Then the iron doors, closed off from the world but every 13 years, will open, inviting you to explore the hidden wonders of this magnificent mansion until the first light of dawn.”

A wave of excitement and whispers fills the ballroom. Then the loud chime of the clock begins until the last chime strikes midnight. I watch as the masked strangers all around us start revealing their identities with giggles, gasps, and surprises and I can’t help but smile.

I look at Beau, and he leans down, and gives me the sweetest, softest kiss. I can see his face is now relaxed, and he looks deep into my eyes as he gently lifts my mask and then takes off his own. It’s like we’re shedding our disguises, revealing our true selves to each other. Without saying a word, he reaches out and clasps my hand in his, and we start walking towards the great entrance hall, the rest of the crowd following behind.

Facing me, his hands holding mine, Beau's gaze is intense and sincere, like I've never seen before. I find myself drawn to his lips, still tingling from our earlier kiss. I want to feel them against mine again, to explore every inch of him in return. But before I can say anything, he starts speaking.

"Amber," he begins, his voice tender yet uncertain, "there's something I need to explain to you."

Suddenly, among the chaos in the grand hallway, we are interrupted as a familiar face approaches us. It's the same jerk from before and his friends who recognize Beau and boldly approach him. The tension in the air is thick as I stand by Beau's side, watching nervously.

The man's face contorts into a sly grin, clearly not bothered by the previous confrontation. He extends a hand, seemingly trying to keep up appearances. "Hey, aren't you the hockey player, Beau Daniels, right? Man, I never guessed I'd see you here." He pauses and then realizes it was Beau he pushed earlier. "Shit, man, had I known it was you back there, I would never had pushed you."

Beau glances at the outstretched hand and then looks the man in the eye. "Yeah, that's me," he replies, his voice calm but firm. "Everything cool now?"

The man shrugs, his arrogance evident. "Oh, you know how it is, man. Things get heated sometimes. No hard feelings, right?"

I feel my blood boil as the man shrugs off Beau's words with such disregard. "No hard feelings?" I snap, trying to keep my

voice steady.

He chuckles condescendingly, dismissing my words. “Relax, sweetheart. It’s all in good fun.”

I bite my lip, trying to keep my composure, but his comment stings. “My name is not sweetheart; it’s Amber. And this is not fun for anyone on the receiving end of your disrespect.”

He smirks, glaring at me. “Ashley, Amber, sweetheart, whatever. You don’t need to be so serious. Just lighten up a little.”

Beside me, I watch as Beau’s jaw tightens, his eyes burning with anger. “Stop,” he says, leaning forward, his voice low and intense. “Address her by her name or don’t address her at all.”

The man’s shrugs it off with a laugh and pats Beau on the back. “Alright, alright, no need to get all defensive, man. Just trying to have a little fun here.”

Beau takes a step closer, his presence commanding. “Fun at whose expense? It’s time to grow up and treat people with the respect they deserve.”

The man looks like he’s about to say something else, but before he can, another person from the group interrupts. “Come on, man, just drop it. They’re not worth the trouble.”

The man taunts, his eyes narrowing with a cruel glint. “I see what’s going on here,” he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “You’re the biggest hypocrite I’ve ever seen. Didn’t you say women belong in the kitchen and all that traditional bullshit? So she must be a fantastic cook or using you for your

money, right? I mean, what else could possibly make her want you? Unless she's a nymphomaniac. Is that it?"

I feel my cheeks flush with anger, but before I can respond, Beau steps in, his voice firm and steady and his voice cuts through the air like a knife. "You want to play games and provoke a reaction? Well, congratulations, you got one. But let me make this crystal clear. I won't tolerate disrespecting women, and I won't stand by while you spew shit out of your mouth. Your behavior is fucking despicable, and you're only making a fool of yourself."

He takes a step even closer to the man, his gaze unwavering. "Unlike you, I don't judge people based on superficial things. I see her for who she is, and that's someone who is caring, intelligent, and genuine. She's not interested in my money *asshole*; she's interested in me."

The man's smirk wavers for a moment, caught off guard by Beau's response. But he quickly regains his composure and shrugs nonchalantly. "Whatever you say, man. But you can't deny that money, sex and a clean house makes things a whole lot easier."

I step forward, unable to stay silent any longer. "For your information," I say, my voice steady despite the anger simmering beneath the surface, "I've worked hard for everything I have. I'm not some gold-digger looking for a rich guy. My guess is that you're a scared little boy. You're scared of strong, independent women because they challenge your

fragile ego. Well, you better start saving those pennies and leave the real money to the grown-ups.”

One of the men tries to shift the blame back onto Beau. “You’re the one who started this whole mess with your little news announcement. Now you’re playing the victim card?”

Another chimes in with a mocking tone. “Yeah, who made you the moral police? You think you’re better than us because you’re suddenly woke?”

Beau stands tall, unyielding in the face of their resistance. “I’m not claiming to be perfect, but I won’t stand by and allow this behavior to continue. We need to take responsibility for our actions and the impact they have on others.”

The man smirks again, clearly enjoying getting under our skin. “Sure, sure,” he says dismissively. “Believe what you want. But we all know the truth.”

But Beau refuses to back down, his voice firm and resolute. “ I don’t care if you don’t believe me or what you think is cool. I regret my past actions, and I’m determined to make things right. If I see any of you assholes disrespecting a woman, you’ll have to answer to me. Women deserve respect, and that’s non-negotiable. Have I made myself

clear, *friend*?”

The man, clearly done with the conversation, mutters a half-hearted acknowledgment, “Yeah, yeah, sure.”

I hear it—his words that strike me like a lightning bolt. Beau is passionately defending women and expressing his disdain

for the derogatory remarks made by those guys. I watch in awe as his eyes blaze with a fire I have never seen before.

My heart races, my thoughts a whirlwind of confusion and disbelief. Just a few weeks ago, I met the Beau who had been the subject of controversy for a sexist comment he made to the media. But now, here he is, standing up for women in a way I could never have anticipated. It's a stark contrast to the persona he projected before, and a behavior I had come to expect from him. I feel a surge of conflicting emotions—surprise, confusion, and a trace of something I can't quite put my finger on.

I take a sip of my champagne, and stare at him. I notice his eyes have more passion; his voice has more sincerity. But can I truly trust it? Can I allow myself to be swept away by his sudden change of heart?

My mind is a maze of questions and uncertainty. I can't deny that his actions have me seeing him in a different light. I find myself grappling with the enigma that is Beau—the man who infuriates me, and now, in a single moment, the man who defends me.

Beau turns away, not bothering to engage further with someone who doesn't seem to care. As he walks back to me, I notice the crowd giving him approving nods and acknowledging glances. Standing beside me, he takes my hand in his. And right now, as I look into his eyes and feel his hand squeeze mine, I know that everything I went through was



totally worth it because it brought us both to this place of growth, understanding, and respect.

It's like when you finally solve a puzzle that's been bugging you for ages.

It makes me think about everything I've been through—It has taken up so much time and energy, time I could have spent on my internship and my career helping others. My dreams were put on the back burner, all for one jerk and it's been hard to accept that.

There were moments when I questioned if I was doing the right thing. Was helping Beau change worth sacrificing my internship? Would all my efforts even make a difference in his life?

But right now, as Beau stands beside me, showing everyone that he's changed, I get it.

I take a moment to look around the room, finally aware of my surroundings. I notice that the group of guests has dwindled, and it's now much smaller. It dawns on me that the instructions explicitly said that each person must have a partner to enter the mansion for safety reasons. No solo adventures allowed.

A woman appears out of nowhere in front of the iron doors, making me jump and clutch Beau's arm. Her pale face and dark eyes stare at me like a ghost. Beau chuckles and wraps his arm around me. "Don't worry, I got you," he whispers in my ear.

Dressed in a modest, bland dress, the older woman stands out from the other employees in the ballroom. She holds a lantern that casts a dim light on her wrinkled face. She addresses the group in a low voice, explaining the rules and safety measures for exploring the mansion. She says the house has not been touched or renovated since Alexander Hawthorne owned it, and we should be careful.

Next, each guest is provided with a goodie bag with flashlight, a map, clothing and a walkie talkie as the mansion's walls have rendered cell phones useless. The walkie talkies offer a means of communication should anyone need assistance or wish to share their discoveries with others.

“Alright, folks, gather 'round!” The woman calls out, her voice carrying a mix of excitement and authority. She holds up the lantern, the flame casting a warm glow on her face, making her look like a character from a historical movie. “Welcome to Hawthorne Manor, a place frozen in time!”

A few nervous chuckles ripple through the group, including Beau and me. It is hard not to feel the thrill of the unexpected, wondering what mysteries this untouched mansion holds.

“Now, listen up,” she continues, her eyes locking onto ours as if to ensure we are paying close attention. “This place is a time capsule, practically untouched since the days of Alexander Hawthorne. So, for your safety and the preservation of this historical gem, we've got some ground rules.”

Beau squeezes my hand reassuringly, and I can't help but smile back at him, feeling a different connection between us.

It feels real for the first time.

“No running, no pushing, no wild antics. We want everyone to leave with a great experience, not a twisted ankle!” She winks, lightening the mood.

“And remember,” she adds, her tone turning more solemn, “while you’re here, show respect to this old beauty. It’s seen a lot, and we want it to remain standing for generations to come.”

“Alright, let’s get to the good part!” she exclaims, clapping her hands together. “The iron doors are officially open!” The excitement among the guests surges, and she motions for us to follow. “Feel free to roam anywhere and everywhere you desire. You’ve got flashlights and walkie talkies to keep in touch since cell reception is a big fat zero in here.”

A few guests chuckled, and the woman grins. “But hey, who needs a phone when you’re about to explore a real-life haunted mansion?”

Beau and I exchange eager glances, my heart pounding.

This is unlike anything I have ever done before, and the thrill of the unknown is intoxicating.

“Oh, and if any of you want to feel more like it did when Alexander and Isabella did back in the day, we’ve got clothes for you to change into. They are the evening clothes similar to what they wore, so they are very comfy. No shame in wanting

to ditch those formal duds! “ She laughs, and a few guests sigh with relief.

“Food and drinks are also on the house,” she announces, and a cheer erupts from the crowd. “But alcohol’s limited to the common areas, folks. We don’t want anyone tripping down a centuries-old staircase!”

Beau smirks at that, and I playfully nudge him. The woman seems to catch the subtle exchange and winks at us.

“Alright, you’ve got the rundown. Now if no one has any questions then get going and have fun!” With that, she claps her hands one more time, and moves aside and the group disperses, each person setting off on their unique adventure.

As Beau and I exchange a knowing glance, we step through the open iron doors and find ourselves in a long, dimly lit hallway.

He shines his flashlight on the vintage wallpaper, and I chuckle. “Looks like something straight out of a scary movie.”

“Yeah, it’s like we’ve stepped back into an Alfred Hitchcock movie,” he replies, taking in the flickering candle sconces.

We walk along the creaky wooden floor, passing by mysterious paintings. Beau jokes, “I hope these portraits don’t come to life at night.”

I laugh, playfully nudging him. “That would be quite the plot twist.”

In the distance, we hear the hushed chatter of other guests exploring. We come across a grand staircase leading upward.

“Shall we check out the upper floors later?” I suggest.

“Definitely,” he agrees, but for now, we decide to explore the ground floor.

As we move through the mansion, we find ourselves in elegant parlors and a charming library. “I could get lost in here,” Beau admits, gazing at the shelves of ancient books.

I notice a fireplace crackling and suggest, “Let’s take a break here for a moment.”

As we sit down, we hear voices on the walkie-talkies. Other guests are sharing their own discoveries and excitement. Someone found one of the hidden rooms, already previously discovered and they share its location on the walkie talkie. “Sounds like everyone’s having fun,” I comment.

Beau smiles, his eyes never leaving mine. “Earlier, I wanted to talk to you, before that asshole started his shit. But first, I want to give you something I got for you. Today, in our box with the masks, we were instructed to buy our ‘chosen one’,” he says, air-quoting the word ‘chosen one’, “and since I didn’t get to give it to you in the ballroom, I want to give it to you now. Then maybe we can talk afterwards?”

I nod as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a box, wrapped in the most beautiful paper and bow. He hands it to me, and I carefully unwrap it. Inside the box, there’s the most gorgeous, stunning red heart-shaped stone necklace with a note. The note reads, “This necklace might not be as beautiful as you, but it’s a little reminder of how much you mean to me. Beau”

“Beau, I’m... I’m speechless. This is... I can’t even... it’s too much money to spend on me.”

Beau grins, that mischievous look in his eyes. “Amber, when I saw this necklace in the case, I just knew it was meant for you. And hey, even if what we have is fake, you’ve made me happy, drive me crazy, and everything in between. So, for all those reasons, I want you to have it.”

My heart flutters as I stare at the stunning necklace in my hand. I’m overwhelmed by Beau’s gesture, but deep down, I know this man is more than just a fake boyfriend. “Well, then I guess I have no choice. There is a bathroom over there, can you put it on for me? I want to see it on!”

Taking his hand in mine, we head towards the bathroom. Inside, we can’t help but notice the unique tiles adorning the walls. “Check these tiles out,” he says, pointing at the intricate stone-cut designs.

“Wow,” leaning in to inspect them closer. “They’re incredibly detailed and different from anything I’ve seen before.”

“Yeah, it’s like each tile tells a story,” Beau remarks, equally fascinated by the intricate designs. “Look at these ones, they seem to form a pattern of intertwining vines, and over here, it’s like a mosaic of swirling stars. It’s cool.”

As I run my finger over the tiles, I notice the subtle differences in texture and depth. “You’re right, some of them are cut into the surface, while others seem to pop out,” my

curiosity growing. “I wonder if they hold any significance or if it’s just an artistic choice.”

“I don’t know but it is definitely cool. Come on, let me put this necklace on you. Unless you don’t want it?”

“No, I don’t want that hideous necklace. Tsk.” I say with a coy smile, pretending to be snobby. Beau shrugs and starts to walk out with the necklace, and I grab him and scream, “Beau, stop. I want it!”

“Then stop talking and turn around.”

I giggle and watch him in the mirror, with his trembling hands he gently places the necklace around my neck. I can’t stop staring, it takes my breath away. Tears well up in my eyes as I look at him with overwhelming emotions. I grab his face and kiss him, hard, feeling an indescribable rush of gratitude.

He stops and looks at me, a long deep look as if he is searching my soul. “Can we talk now?”

“Of course.” Beau walks out of the bathroom, and I follow him.

Back in the library, I find myself drawn to an ancient-looking globe in the corner of the library. As I reach out to spin it gently, my dress unexpectedly catches on the corner of a slightly wobbly wooden table nearby. I take a step back, unaware of the mishap, and inadvertently pull the table along with me.

With a soft creak, the table tilts, setting off a chain reaction. A stack of old books teeters, and one of them topples to the floor with a thud. The sudden noise startles me, and I instinctively take another step backward, and my foot collides with an out of place knight's helmet on the floor, and I lose my balance, flailing my arms to stay upright. Beau quickly reaches out to catch me, but his hand lands on a tall, slender vase sitting precariously on a nearby shelf. The vase wobbles, and for a moment, it seems like it might fall.

My eyes widen in panic, trying to catch the vase and regain my footing but instead in a final desperate attempt, I grab onto a nearby drapery, yanking it down in the process. The heavy curtain tumbles down, engulfing both Beau and me in a sea of fabric and the vase hits the wooden floor, shattering into pieces.

Laying there, unsure of what just happened, I look at Beau, and we can't help but burst into laughter. He carefully helps us get disentangled from the curtain, both of us trying not to knock anything else over, and both of us back on our feet. We stand there, frozen by the mess before us.

I look up at Beau, a sheepish grin on my face. "Welp, there ya' go."

Beau looks at me and starts laughing, then playfully brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "Yep. There ya' go." He quips, his lips pursed together, hands folded on his chest, "but ya' know what, I wouldn't have it any other way."



As I begin to clean up the broken pieces of the vase, Beau attempts to put the curtain back up, and we both can't help but chuckle at the mess we've made.

While I gather the scattered fragments, I notice some of them rolled under the desk on the opposite side of the room. I lean down, and reach for them, and I spot a small carving on the desk's underside – it's shaped like a key with an arrow pointing left. It's an unusual find, and I can't help but wonder if it's connected to something more.

“Hey, Beau, check this out,” I call him over, pointing to the carving. “Isn't it weird to find a key-like carving under a desk?”

Beau joins me. “That's definitely unusual. Maybe it's a clue to a hidden compartment or something.”

Following the arrow's direction, we come across a cleverly disguised wooden box nestled within the desk. With a bit of gentle wiggling, the box opens, revealing an old, mysterious metal ring.

“Wow, doesn't it kind of look like the same designs on the tiles? Do you think it's just a coincidence?” I wonder aloud.

Beau crouches down to examine the ring closely, his eyes widening with surprise. “No way, this can't be a coincidence. It must be some kind of clue or hidden mechanism. Let's check the map to see if anyone had found any hidden rooms in here,” he suggests.

I retrieve the map from the bag, tracing our path to the library with my finger. “Nope, nothing marked on the map,” I report.

“Then let’s start searching around the bathroom,” Beau proposes.

Together, we carefully inspect each tile, running our hands over the surface, feeling for anything unusual. Some tiles have elaborate floral patterns, while others form geometric shapes. Each tile seems to hold a secret, and my heart races with excitement.

After a short while, and I am starting to feel defeated and a little disheartened, I sit down on the bathroom floor, watching as Beau continues to investigate the tiles inside the giant tub. “We must be missing something,” I mutter with frustration.

“Or that thing is just nothing, Amber,” Beau replies, sounding a bit skeptical.

As I sit there, my back leaning against the vanity, I absentmindedly fiddle with the odd-shaped metal object in my hand. Suddenly, a thought strikes me, and my eyes widen in excitement. “Beau, I think I know what it is!” I call out, my heart racing.

Beau rushes over, and I place the metal object into the tile where the decorative piece matches its shape. To my amazement, it fits perfectly. Before we know it, the room seems to come alive, rumbling and shaking. Beau quickly pulls me towards the doorway, and we watch in awe as the

giant tub moves aside, revealing a hidden room beneath the floor.

Unable to contain my excitement, I stand there screaming with joy, “Oh my god, we found a hidden room! Holy shit, Beau, we actually found one!”

Beau laughs, his eyes sparkling with excitement too. “This is incredible! I can’t believe it worked!”

As the tub comes to a halt, Beau and I look at each other, and at the same time, we blurt out, “Holy crap!” Our eyes wide as we witness the amazing sight that awaits us.



## Adventure is Out There!-UP

Beau

**A**s we step into the tub, my heart pounds with adrenaline, and I take Amber's hand in mine. Beneath us, a rustic wooden spiral staircase beckons, its weathered steps waiting to be explored. As we descend, the old floorboards groan in protest, adding a haunting soundtrack to each step. Our flashlights pierce the darkness, revealing the secrets hidden in the shadows, while the faint scent of aged wood mingles with the damp earthiness of the underground.

Then, as if driven by some unseen force, the bathtub above us begins to close, its massive lid descending with an ominous creak. Panic courses through me like a wave, and my hearts race as I can't help but think we might be trapped in this eerie underground world, surrounded by the musty scent of secrets long buried.

“Shit!”

Feeling as though my heart might beat right out of my chest, I run back up and desperately push on the floor, trying to stop

it from sealing us in. The room feels like it's closing in on me, and I can't help but feel shear panic come over me.

“Beau, calm your manties.” She yells out to me and giggles. “We have the walkie-talkies and other supplies in the goodie bag they gave us. We'll be fine.”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. “Fuck. Okay, you're probably right,” I say, managing a chuckle, realizing how pathetic I must look. “I just hate confined spaces. I'm glad we changed our clothes before coming down here. Dying in a tuxedo is not exactly my idea of a good time.”

Amber's laughter fills the chamber, easing my nerves. “Well, try doing it in a gown. Not the most comfortable way to go, I bet. Plus, getting down these stairs in that gown probably would have been another disaster anyway. But we have comfy clothes, water, flashlights and some snacks. And of course, each other. What more could we need? Probably survive a week or two down here.” She giggles.

“You always find the silver lining in everything, don't you?”

She smirks playfully. “It's a talent; what can I say? Life's too short to dwell on the negatives. Gotta keep things positive.”

I nod, realizing that Amber's attitude is exactly what I need in this situation as I feel as if the walls are closing in around me.

As we finally reach the bottom of the spiral staircase, there's a door and thank god, it is not locked. Swinging it open, a loud creak echoes in the dark and we find ourselves standing in a

small, dusty room. We both move our flashlights around the room. The walls are made of plaster and inlaid bricks, giving it an ancient look. The ceiling arches overhead, and the wooden floors add to the room's rustic charm. A small desk sits in a corner on one side, filled with aged parchments and forgotten trinkets. There is also a lantern sitting on the table.

I turn to Amber my. "Do you happen to have a lighter?" I ask, unintentionally shining my flashlight into her face.

She responds with an amused expression, silently asking, "Seriously?"

She points to a ceramic bowl filled with sticks nearby. "I'm pretty sure those are matches. I'd wager that's what he would have used to light this place. I may not be a time-traveling professional, but I'm fairly certain lighters weren't a thing back then and that there is something down here that would light the lights." She giggles playfully.

I play along, offering a whimsical theory. "Well, you never know. Maybe he was the inventor of lighters, and he tragically departed this world before he could share his brilliant creation. There might be a few Bic lighters scattered around here somewhere."

Amber's laughter fills the room, and I can't help but join in.

After a series of attempts at striking a match, and a temporary loss of confidence in my fire-starting abilities, one of the matches ignites. I quickly light the lantern. A warm, soft glow burns, pushing back the darkness and revealing the secrets hidden in this room.

Amber gasps. “Can you believe this place, Beau?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty unbelievable,” I reply. “I never thought we’d actually find a hidden room in this old mansion.”

On one side of the room, there is a door. Opposite that, there is an archway leading into another room. I try the door, but it’s locked. Alexander Hawthorne wouldn’t have made it easy for anyone to find his sacred sanctuaries. If there’s one lock, there are likely more.

With no other choice, we walk through the archway, and enter a room where dusty old books, antique furniture, artifacts, and paintings hang on the walls. Amber picks up an old photograph of the mural painted on the ceiling from the ballroom—the photo is a close up of two angels and then we clearly see it is Alexander and Isabella, the two of them hand in hand, together as in death as they were in life.

“Look at this,” Amber says, a mix of fascination and irony in her voice. “She added them to the mural to show her love, and now, just like her painting, they are together as angels, flying above and free.”

I can’t help but smile. “It’s like they were the ultimate power couple, tearing through history and making everyone else look like amateurs.”

“This is so crazy!” Amber exclaims, her eyes wide with excitement. “We are the first people to see these things since Alexander. How freaking cool is this?”

“It’s pretty damn cool,” I laugh, amused by her enthusiasm.



She looks at me, her gaze lingering for a moment. “Do you think we should let the staff know we found this?”

I shake my head, a mischievous grin forming on my lips. “Not yet. I think we should keep this our little secret for a while longer. Just you and me, exploring this hidden world together.”

Amber’s eyes light up, and she smiles. “I like the sound of that.”

We lose track of time, occupied by all the things to look at. After what feels like forever, I finally suggest, “Hey, we’ve been down here for quite a while, Amber. Are you ready to keep exploring other areas of the mansion or if you are tired, we can call it a night?”

Amber lets out a sigh, torn between her fascination and not wanting to call it a night. “I could spend hours exploring this place, but I’m a little hungry. Let’s head back up and take a break and then decide from there.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I reply, a smile playing on my lips. “Let’s first check the top landing to see if there’s any way to open the door before we walkie for help.”

Grabbing the lantern, we start to make our way up the creaky wooden stairs, when Amber suddenly stops in her tracks. “Whoa, Beau, look at this!” she exclaims, her finger tracing a heart-shaped carving on the stone wall, bearing the initials AH and IC. “It’s like a bittersweet symbol of their love.”

We didn't see that when we first walked down the stairs, but the lantern casts a glow filling the entire space, so everything is more visible now. "Yeah. It makes you wonder what could have been if they had the chance to stay together." I mull over the thought.

As Amber traces the hearts with her finger, we both hear a soft click. Our eyes meet, and the realization dawns upon us simultaneously. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely!" she exclaims with a grin. "It must be the way to the locked door. What else could it be?"

In a mad rush, we race back down the stairs, my hearts racing and the thoughts of the unknown swirling in my head. We both stop and stand before the grand wooden door; our breathing is all I can hear. Amber looks up at me, her eyes silently urging me to open it. Without hesitation, I reach for the knob, turn it, and gently push. To our surprise, it glides open effortlessly, unveiling a breathtaking sight—a bedroom fit for royalty, frozen in time. The air holds a faint, sweet scent, as if preserving the memories of a bygone era.

Neither of us seem to be able to move. Frozen in the doorway. "Beau, do you think this was going to be their secret sanctuary?" Amber whispers in awe.

"I'd bet my life on it. If she had returned, it would have been a place where they could truly be themselves." I can't help but think how much he must've really loved her. "She was his queen." I say under my breath, lost in thought.

Amber's eyes well up with tears, touched by the romanticism of it all. "Yes, and now it's like we've stumbled upon a part of Alexander and Isabella's story that never got to be lived out."

Grabbing her hand, we step into the room, a room where no story was made, or none would ever be told.

I can't help but wonder if our story will unfold differently, defying the odds and standing the test of time.

Or be victim to the same fate as Alexander and Isabella.



## If You Wish Upon a Star-Pinocchio

Amber

**A**s we step into this magnificent room, my breath catches in my throat. It's like something I've never seen before.

Beau moves through the room, and finds the wall sconces, and lights them, now that he is a pro at striking a wooden stick. This casts a warm, magical feel throughout the space. A gasp escapes my lips.

The walls are decorated with elegant tapestries and large paintings. The furniture is nothing short of regal. Plush red velvet chairs beckon you to sink in and relax. Exquisitely carved wooden cabinets and tables add a touch of old-world charm. The rug is a tapestry of colors, a vibrant mosaic of deep reds, regal blues, and earthy browns, each shade carefully chosen to create a balanced yet mesmerizing palette. Every corner of this room seems to hold something special, as if each were designed for a specific purpose.

The grand bed is a true work of art. It's tall with four posts, and the wood is carved in designs, shimmering with gold accents. The bed is covered in fancy, rich-colored fabrics that

flow all the way to the floor, making it look like something fit for a king or queen.

The headboard is high and comfy, covered in soft velvet and decorated with pretty buttons. There are silk curtains all around the bed, tied back with silk cords and tassels, making it feel cozy and private.

On top of the bed, there are lots of pillows and cushions with silky and velvety covers in matching colors. The sheets and blankets are super soft and smooth.

The best part is the canopy that hangs over the bed, like a big, billowy curtain. It's made of sheer fabric with delicate lace and pretty embroidery. I bet when you're inside, it feels like you're in a magical, magnificent world.

As I walk along the walls, I notice that the paintings are not just images; they come to life when touched, displaying scenes from different stories and landscapes. It's like Alexander wanted to bring the magic of his love to life through these captivating artworks.

Moving further into the room, I find a cozy library nook filled with personalized leather-bound books. With each book carefully chosen, Alexander has thoughtfully selected stories that resonate with Isabella's interests and passions. He even wrote a few books himself. It's a heartfelt gesture that speaks volumes about his love for her.

As Beau and I stand in awe of the hidden bedroom, it's not until then that we both notice the ceiling above the bed. It's like staring at a flawless painting of the night sky,

meticulously crafted with intricate stars that seem to twinkle and dance under the soft glow of the lights. The artistry is stunning, and I find myself getting lost in its beauty. I can image them lying in bed, staring up at the painting, giggling and sharing their dreams.

As Beau explores the room more, he suddenly exclaims, “Hey, check this out!” Intrigued, I walk over to him, and he shows me a concealed lever cleverly disguised beside the bed.

“Pull it.” I nudge him teasingly.

“Really?” He looks at me sideways and laughs. “Why don’t *you* pull it?”

He grabs it with a gentle tug, and this is when the magic happens. We watch as the ceiling begins to slowly move, hearing gears cranking as we watch the ceiling open. I can hardly believe my eyes, when suddenly a glass dome emerges, revealing an intricate system of gears and mechanisms in motion. It’s like nothing I have ever seen before.

When the dome fully extends, the soft moonlight streams into the room, casting a silvery glow over everything. “Holy shit, Beau. Are you seeing this?” I whisper, my eyes wide with surprise. “It’s incredible.”

He chuckles softly, clearly impressed by the sight before us. “Yeah, it’s something else,” he murmurs. “Alexander really went all out for her. This place is beyond anything I could’ve imagined. Man, he must’ve been whipped.”

“Beau!” I scold, slapping his arm. But he’s right and I can’t help but be touched by the romantic gesture. “It’s truly extraordinary. It’s just a shame she never got to experience this room, to truly see how much he was...” I pause and giggle. “Whipped.”

Beau laughs, his gaze lingering on the dome and the stars above us, and he lets out a wistful sigh. “Yeah, it’s a damn shame,” he agrees. “But hey, at least we get to enjoy it, right?” He winks at me.

His comment catches me off guard, and I can’t help but giggle. “You’re right,” I say, feeling a mix of emotions swirling inside me. In my thoughts, I think, yes, we can enjoy it for her, in her memory.

As we continue to explore the room, Beau calls out to me. “Hey, come look at these. I think these are their love letters.” Saying the last part in a sexy hush tone.

I walk over, standing beside him, and we both lean in to inspect the envelopes. “These are Isabella’s letters she wrote to him and probably after she was forbidden to see him anymore.”

I spot another stack of letters on the opposite side of the shelf, curiosity gets the better of me, and I walk over, gently picking them up. “And I would guess these are Alexander’s,” I remark, a mixture of excitement and guilt swirling inside me. It feels like I’m prying into someone’s intimate thoughts, but the thought of reading the letters that no one else has ever laid



eyes on is too hard to resist. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Hell yeah! Let’s do this.”

We find ourselves seated on the floor, surrounded by love letters that once bridged the gap between Alexander and Isabella. Among them, we found a note from Isabella’s father sternly urging Alexander to cease his correspondence. As we read through the heartfelt messages, a mixture of purity and heartbreak fills my thoughts.

After a while, I glance up at Beau, and he looks at me with a mischievous smile as he playfully reaches for one of Isabella’s delicate envelopes. Suddenly, he jumps up and in a high-pitched, exaggeratedly girly voice, he begins to pretend to read a letter.

“My Dearest Alexander, from the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew I was doomed.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, I jump up beside him, eager to play the role of Alexander. Leaning in closer, I lower my voice, playing along, my eyebrows pinched. “Doomed, you say. How so?”

Beau responds with mock dramatic flair, “Ah, my dear Alexander, your rugged good looks and sweet personality have caught me in your enchanting web. I am forever spellbound by your charms.”

I giggle at his playful performance, “And what if I told you, fair maiden, that your charms have not gone unnoticed?”

He raises an eyebrow in amusement, “Oh? Do tell me, my succulent beef cake, what have you observed?”

Stifling a laugh, and trying to remain in character, “Well, my dear lady, I have seen the glint in your eye whenever you look my way, and I am aware of how my charms have...” I wink twice, ... “won you over.”

Beau leans in even closer, his voice a mere whisper, “Ah, it was not your charms that won me over. No, my dear hunk of love, not that at all.” Beau raises his arm as if to add to the finality of the show, “It was your ass! Your ass is a wonder of the world, a marvel of nature, a miracle of creation. It deserves a medal, a statue. No! It deserves a holiday in its honor! We will call it Alexander’s Ass Day!”

His unexpected response catches me off guard, and I start laughing. We collapse on the bed, laughing uncontrollably, lost in our silly and goofy fantasy.

As the laughter subsides, we find ourselves lying side by side, close enough to feel the warmth of each other’s bodies. The atmosphere has shifted, and a sense of intimacy lingers between us.

Beau pulls me close to him, wrapping me in his strong arms. I melt into his embrace, feeling his skin burn against mine. I feel small, but safe. His heartbeat pounds in my ears, his breath tickles my neck. My body shivers with anticipation, my heart flutters with excitement and fear.

Our eyes lock for a moment, silently acknowledging the gravity of what was about to happen. And then, with a surge of

primal instinct, we come together. Our mouths colliding eagerly, tongues exploring each other with intensity.

The taste of his lips sends electric shocks through my body. I can feel myself getting lost in the sensation as we press against each other, and I want more. Beau's hands roam freely over my curves, igniting sparks along every inch of my exposed skin.

My mind races as his hand lingers on my thigh, his touch igniting a fire within me, one I have never felt before. I had always prided myself on being independent and strong-willed, able to remain in control but there was something about this man that both excites and scares me. And for the first time, I don't think I can control myself. It was like stepping into the unknown, a forbidden territory where pleasure and uncertainty intertwine.

My body trembles with anticipation, the yearning for him is becoming too strong to ignore. The connection between us, the passion that ignites whenever we're together, is impossible to deny.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, torn between wanting to push him away or surrendering to the undeniable attraction pulsating through my body. All I can hear is my heart pounding in my chest. Beau pulls me closer, his lips grazing against my ear. "You have no idea how much I want you," he whispers his voice low and confident.

I bite down on my lip, fighting against the sensations running through my veins.

Beau rolls on top of me. I closed my eyes and feel lips move across my neck, feeling the moisture linger on my skin from where his lips touch. My mind was racing, it feels as if I am dreaming and everything is happening in slow motion. His lips find mine, I grab his neck, feeling as if I can't get him close enough, but pulling him closer to me. He tastes sweet, like champagne, and strawberries. He kisses me deeper. Hotter.

My body is on fire. My soft heat is throbbing, and all I can think about is him inside me. I have never wanted anything more than I wanted him in this moment. I can feel him growing between my legs, as I arch my hips into him and the pressure of his stiffness against me. I whimper, softly, trying to hold back the urge to rip his clothes off and succumb to the intense desire I am feeling. I almost feel desperate. I almost feel out of control. It is as if I am starving, and I am desperate to find food and will do anything to get it.

He can sense my desire and stops and looks at me.

“What’s wrong?” I am breathing heavily. I lift my head, trying to continue what he started.

He isn't saying anything, not responding, just looking down at me with a look I have yet to see from him. I am not sure exactly what it means. Shit, maybe he isn't really attracted to me. Maybe he knows if we do this, the whole fake relationship thing is not fake anymore. Maybe he is not as into me as I think he is? How can I be so naïve all the time? I want to run. I want to hide. How could I be so stupid!

But before I could do any of that he looks at me with a gentleness in his eyes, and asks me, “Are you sure you want this? I don’t want you thinking you have to, as if it is part of the fake relationship bullshit. And I need to know, because once I start, I won’t be able to stop.”

Without speaking, I start to undo the buttons on my top. He watches me, and I can hear his breath quicken as I continue. When I am at the third button, he moves my hand away, and continues. I could feel his fingers brushing against my skin. I smile at him when he finally finishes. I focus on his fingers now on my bare skin, touching me, and moving across my belly with a light touch as he continues to explore my body. He leans in and kisses me softly and I can’t stop myself as I eagerly grab his shirt and pull it over his shoulders, and then his head.

Beau sits up, as I lay there before him, my shirt laying open, my bra is all that is covering me. He gently grabs the back of my neck and effortlessly pulls me up to him and I wrap my arms around him, feeling how strong he is under my fingers. He takes my face in his hands and pulls my eyes to his. I close my eyes and he kisses my eyelids, my nose, my cheek until his lips find mine and devours them in his, momentarily filling the hunger inside me.

My skin is tingling, as if on fire but also as if a cool breeze is in the air sending goosebumps all over my skin, yet I am not cold. Prickly and hot. I feel a warmth, a numbness that starts at the top of my head and travels all the way to my toes, my heat is throbbing, and I can feel my breasts swell in response, and I

moan. I have never wanted anything or anyone more than I did right now. I am screaming in my head, 'Take me!' But the words don't come out.

With that, he slowly reaches behind me, removing my shirt, unhooks my bra and slips it off onto the floor. I immediately place my hands over my breasts.

He takes my hands in his and moves them, and whispers, "Don't cover yourself, Amber. You are absolutely perfect."

Leaning in, he kisses my neck, grabbing my arms and locking them above my head and lays me back.

I feel short of breath. I feel like I stop breathing.

He lowers his head and kisses me between my breasts and slowly runs his tongue up to my neck. He kisses and nibbles me gently as his hand moves down to my waist as I lift my hips and allow him to pull off my panties.

I am trembling. I am surrendering.

He stops and takes in what he see laying naked before him. I feel a vulnerability that I have never felt before. I like it.

Now back on top of me, he runs his tongue along my neck while his hands move over the smooth hot skin of my breasts, down my belly, past my navel, and up again.

My heart races with excitement as Beau stands up as I continue to lay on the bed surrounded by the soft glow of the flickering candles. He removes his pants, his eyes never leaving mine and I can't stop from looking at him, naked

before me. I gasp at the size of him, standing there hard for me to see.

“Are you sure?” he asks, his voice soft and caring.

I nod, trying to steady my breath. “Yes, I trust you,” I reply, feeling a mix of nervousness and anticipation.

Beau gets on top of me, his skin is hot against mine. He takes a deep breath, and I feel every inch of his hardness slowly slide inside of me. The feeling sends a shiver down my spine. With slow deliberate strokes, he moves in and out of me as I melt into the mattress. A soft moan escapes me as his rhythm increases and he leans down to place a tender kiss on my lips. I close my eyes, savoring the sensation of his lips against my skin.

My body arches in response to his motion, applying just the right amount of pressure to make me scream in bliss. He moves deeper inside me, and then pulls away from me. Before I can pull him back inside me, I gasp as his fingers brush lightly against my clit, teasing me. I drive my hips towards him, grabbing his hand to press firmer.

Beau senses my reaction and whispers in my ear, “Relax, I want to make you feel good.”

His words send a surge of excitement through me, as he searches every curve of my body and I submit myself completely to him. He continues to work his magic, his tongue, and fingers deep inside me, teasing me, stroking me, one or the other or both, until he begins to apply firmer pressure that leaves my body humming with pleasure.

“Come for me,” he orders and on cue, I do. I shake, a warm force now surging through me, my hands gripping the sheets and for a moment I lose myself.

He gently turns me over, making sure I’m comfortable before entering me again. His hands touching every part of my body, tugging on my hair, my throat, grasping my shoulders before moving down to my hips. Every touch feels exhilarating, sending signals of pleasure through me. Grabbing my hips, he moves inside me with more intensity. I push into him, feeling every inch of him swell inside me, and an intensity that makes me weak.

Still inside me, I move myself up towards him, now both of us on our knees, our lips connect with a raw passion, and the world around us fades away as our bodies move together in perfect harmony. I can feel him growing harder inside me, the heat and moisture from his chest on my back.

We are both making filthy noises, his breath hot against me as he wraps his arms around me, gripping me as he explodes.

Breathless, we both collapse on the bed, side by side. For a moment, we lie there, catching our breaths, our bodies close but not touching.

A sense of peace washes over me, a feeling of connection that I hadn’t expected when this evening began. The pretense of our fake relationship has faded away, leaving behind two souls who share something intimate and profound.

Beau turns his head to look at me, and I meet his gaze with a content smile. “That was... incredible,” he says.



I nod in agreement.

As I lay there, my chest heaving and heart racing, I feel a mixture of exhaustion and exhilaration. Beau wraps his strong arms around me, pulling me in and I feel safe and secure.

I stare up at the glass dome above, mesmerized by the stars, the moon, and the snowflakes. It's all like a dream and feeling a calm I have not felt in a long time as I watch the display above, before falling into a deep sleep.

Abruptly, I jolt awake, and look at my phone. It's 5:30 am, and we only have half an hour before we need to leave the house. "Beau, wake up!" I shake him gently, urgency in my voice.

"Wha... what's going on?" He stirs, still half-asleep. He looks so sexy laying there. I want to experience again what we had last night but we have no time for that now.

"We need to leave! It's almost 6 a.m.!" I yell, feeling the pressure of time.

Beau jumps up and gets dressed and we make a mad dash up the stairway, searching for the way back up. "Hopefully we can find something, or we need to walkie-talkie the staff to save us."

"Well, stop talking and keep looking." He laughs.

We both are pulling and pushing every stone, every bolt and panic is building inside me. I know we are not going to be stuck in here forever, but I don't want to wait for the staff to

figure out how to get down here either. “Beau, maybe I should call for...”

“I think I found something.” He points to a curious-looking ornament on the wall. Giving it a twist, “fingers crossed,” and to my relief, the passage begins to open.

“Shew. I was ready to freak out.” I announce.

He grabs my hand as we make our way back into the bathroom. Passing by the mirror, I can’t stop myself from laughing as I catch a glimpse of my reflection. My red curls were a wild mess, and I looked like I had just had sex. Well, I guess I had.

“Hold on. My hair looks like we just had sex,” I giggle, running water over my curls in an attempt to tame them.

Beau grins, looking just as disheveled as I do. “Yeah, and it’s not over yet.” His eyes sparkling mischievously as he pulls me close, kissing me passionately.

For a moment, time stands still, and all that matters is the feeling of his lips on mine.

When he finally pulls away, I can’t help but laugh again. “Don’t start something you can’t finish,” I tease, my heart still racing from the kiss. I don’t want him to stop. I want him to take me right now, but we are already late.

Beau smirks, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “I couldn’t resist. You just look so damn beautiful, even with your crazy hair all over the place.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “You always know what to say, don’t you?”

He shrugs nonchalantly. “What can I say? I’m a smooth talker.”

I laugh, and a wave of happiness washes over me. This whole night has been a roller coaster of emotions and I feel like I’m floating on air.

As we head back to the entrance of the mansion, we see the staff waiting for us with eager smiles. We share with them the story of the hidden room we found and all the marvels we uncovered inside.

We thank them for their warm hospitality and start to leave. But as we do, I glance back one last time at the majestic mansion. It looks different in the daylight, like a fairy tale castle. It’s a night I’ll never forget, a night that marks the beginning of a deeper connection between us.

With Beau, I feel seen. I feel adored. I feel love. Beyond measure.



## Sometimes the Right Path is Not the Easiest One-Pocahontas

Beau

**W**ith Amber by my side, life has taken a wild turn. Amber has this way of bringing out the best in people, mostly in me, and it's like she's opened my eyes to a whole new world of possibilities. I never thought I'd find myself in a situation like this, but with her by my side, it feels like anything is possible.

But it's not just my personal life that she's had an impact on. Amber managed to completely transform my public image, and I can't quite believe it myself. The media used to portray me as this carefree, shallow guy, always caught up in some scandal. Now, the public sees me in a whole new light. They even call me a family man—someone who's selfless and caring. It's like Amber has shown the public the man I always wanted to be seen as. And you know what? It feels pretty damn good.

I never thought this fake relationship act would go beyond the surface, but here we are, weeks later, and it's everything I

never knew I needed. It's like we fit together perfectly, and every moment we spend together just feels right.

We've been dining in fancy places and rubbing elbows with celebrities, but it's not all about the glitz and glam. We've also gone on spur-of-the-moment trips, road-tripping to little towns, and even ditching city life for the great outdoors. Hiking, biking, you name it—we're doing it.

And when Amber wants to do cultured shit like art shows and museums, I'm right there with her, taking in all those paintings and sculptures, pretending to be all cultured. But truth be told, I hate it, but I just like being with her.

One thing's for sure, we're always laughing.

Sundays, though, are my favorites. They are when things slow down, and it's just me and her, without media or reporters. Game nights get intense, and we trash-talk to each other like pros. We read books or just lay around and watch old movies, and in those moments, it's like the world fades away, and it's just us in our little bubble.

And speaking of bubbles, ever since the night in the mansion, stargazing has become a thing we do now. We head up to the rooftop of my penthouse and lie under the night sky, looking up at the stars. It's during these moments that the fake shit or the performances fade away, and it's just us being real with each other.

Today's Sunday, and we're just chilling on my couch, talking about our week. She has her head on my lap, her hand playing with the string on my shorts, and I can't help but twirl my

fingers through her curls. She looks up at me, her gaze meeting mine with those captivating green eyes. “You know, you’re nothing like the guy they make you out to be in the media.”

I grin, pulling her a bit closer. “Yeah, well, those idiots wouldn’t recognize the real me if it smacked ’em in the head.”

A smile tugs at her lips, and there’s a warmth in her eyes that melts me. “Well, the real you is pretty damn amazing,” she says, and I can’t help but feel a wave of affection for her.

Leaning in, our lips meet in a soft kiss, my fingers tracing her cheek gently. “You think so?”

Amber returns the kiss, her grip on my hand tightening, she says softly, her words resonating deep within me. “You just needed someone to help find the real you.”

The real me? It’s a truth I can’t keep locked away any longer; every second I wait only delays the guilt and burden I am carrying around. Rising from the couch, Amber sits up, her eyes finding mine. I start pacing back and forth, mentally preparing for what I’m about to spill out.

“Beau, what’s on your mind?” She questions, her eyes searching mine.

Pausing in my pacing, I turn to face her fully. I take a deep breath. “Amber, there’s something I’ve got to tell you.” I notice a shift in her expression, as if she’s bracing herself for some kind of bombshell. I stop for a second, gathering my thoughts, realizing that this moment could define our future.

“You know that speech I gave the reporter about women and their pay?”

She nods.

Amber’s unease hangs in the air like a heavy fog, and I can’t bear to see her in this state any longer. It’s time to confront the truth, or at least a version of it. I clear my throat, my voice taking on an unusual somberness. “Well,” I begin, my heart pounding against my chest, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

Her reaction is immediate, her body tensing, and I can sense the fear and uncertainty that courses through her.

“I haven’t been entirely honest with you,” I confess, my eyes avoiding her gaze. The weight of my words feels like a boulder on my chest, threatening to crush me. “I mean, this whole fake relationship thing, it started as a way to get back at someone who hurt me. But then... then, I felt this connection with you, and I couldn’t resist it.”

Amber’s brows furrow in confusion, her eyes searching mine for answers. “What are you saying, Beau?”

I take a deep breath, searching for the right words to explain the mess I’ve created. “I acted like someone I’m not, Amber. I pretended to be this person who needed your help and support, and I watched you put your dreams on hold for me. But in reality, I’m not that guy. I’m not the wounded soul who needed rescuing. I’m just a guy who got caught up in his own drama.”



Amber's eyes glisten with unshed tears as she struggles to process my revelation. "So, you're saying everything we've been through was just a lie? That you've been using me?"

My shoulders slump and sit down beside her and finally muster the courage to meet her gaze, my own eyes filled with regret. "No, Amber, it's not like that. I never meant for any of this to happen. I genuinely care about you, and I didn't expect to. But I couldn't keep living this lie, watching you sacrifice so much for a person who doesn't exist."

A tear escapes Amber's eye, and she wipes it away with a trembling hand. Her voice quivers with hurt as she speaks, her words piercing my heart. "Beau, you have no idea how much I've given up for this. My career, my dreams... I did it all because I thought you needed me. And now you're telling me it was all a sham?"

I reach out, aching to touch her, to offer some form of comfort, but she pulls away from my touch, and I'm left with the painful reminder of the distance I've created between us. "I'm so sorry, Amber," I whisper, my voice heavy with remorse. "I never wanted to hurt you like this. I just had to be honest with you, even if it means losing you."

Amber rises from her seat, her heart heavy with the weight of disappointment and betrayal. "I need some time to think, Beau. This is a lot to take in."

As she walks out the front door, leaving me alone with the consequences of my actions, I can't help but wonder if I've

just destroyed the most meaningful connection I've ever known.

Just as I thought things couldn't get any worse, my phone rings, an unfamiliar number lighting up the screen. I hesitate for a moment, a glimmer of hope flashing through my mind, thinking it might be Amber reaching out to me.

I answer cautiously. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello?" I repeat.

"Beau? It's Dad." The voice on the other end is shaky, and a shiver runs down my spine.

"Dad?" My mind races, and a knot forms in my stomach. His voice sounds different, strained.

"It's your mom, Beau." Dad's voice wavers, and a cold dread settles over me.

My heart feels like it's stopped, and the world around me blurs into insignificance.

"Mom?" The words barely come out. "Is she...? What's wrong?"

"I'm so sorry, son. She's..."

There is a long pause before he continues. "She's gone."

Those words slam into me like a powerful force, and I stagger backwards, feeling like my whole world just fell apart.



## You Have to Learn to Trust Yourself-Walt Disney

Amber

**A**s I walk away from Beau's place, his lies weigh heavily on my heart. Everything he said feels like a betrayal, casting doubt over all our moments together. Was he ever genuine, or was it all an act? And what does that say about me for falling for it?

This isn't how I pictured things going down between us. I didn't sign up to be part of his twisted game. But under the anger and hurt, there's a question nagging at me: were there any real moments in what he showed me? Can I find something real in all this mess?

I need time alone to think, away from home where I'd have to face Emily's questions. Tears fill my eyes, and I can't hold them back anymore. I spot a quiet park nearby, with a bench under an old tree. It's pretty empty now, just a couple of kids playing in the distance. I sit down on the bench, feeling the roughness of the wood under my fingers as I trace random patterns on it. I'm lost in thought, trying to make sense of

everything that happened. A gentle breeze rustles the leaves, a reminder that the world keeps moving even when I feel stuck.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see Beau's name. My heart skips a beat, but I'm not ready to talk to him yet. I let the call go to voicemail, still not sure what I want to say, or what I feel.

A voicemail notification appears on my screen. I stare at the screen for a moment, torn between curiosity and anger. I'm not ready to hear more of his excuses, not after everything. But despite my reservations, I decide to listen, bringing the phone to my ear to hear what he has to say.

“Hey, it's me. I... I don't know how to say this, but my mom passed away. It's been a rough day, and I know things are messed up between us, but I could really use someone right now. And I know this is sudden, and I don't expect anything from you. But... but if you could just stay with me tonight... Call me back when you can.”

The news slams into me like a wrecking ball, crushing my chest and knocking the wind out of me. The feelings I had been consumed by moments ago suddenly felt insignificant in the face of this heart-wrenching reality.

As I sit here, torn between my own emotions and the realization that Beau is going through a difficult time, I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I try to shut out the noise of doubt and confusion, focusing on what I know to be true – that despite our complicated situation, Beau's pain is real. Our

relationship, whatever it is, suddenly feels less important than being there for someone who needs me.

Slowly, I type out a message on my phone. “I’m so sorry to hear about your mom. I’ll be right there.” It’s short and simple, but it carries the weight of my decision. I hit send.

I stand up from the bench, wiping away my tears. I start walking back in the direction of Beau’s penthouse, my heart pounding in my chest. As much as I’m not ready to face him, I know he must feel so alone and it’s not like I stopped having feelings for him, I just am afraid I won’t be able to control myself around him.

As the elevator doors open, I see him standing in front of me, his shoulders slumped and his expression weary. Our eyes meet, and there’s a flicker of surprise before a hint of gratitude crosses his face. I step inside.

I don’t know what to say, how to offer comfort. Instinctively, I reach out and wrap him in a tight hug as he starts crying in my arms.

After a few moments his gaze, heavy and sincere, meets mine. “I didn’t expect you to come back.”

I can’t help but sigh, my anger is now a mess of complicated emotions. “I didn’t expect it either, but... I can’t ignore what you’re going through” I pause, gathering my thoughts. “I’m so sorry about your mom, Beau.”

His nod is filled with gratitude. “Thank you.”

I nod, not trusting my voice in this moment. We stand there for a while, the silence between us is a combination of awkwardness and understanding. Finally, he gestures for me to sit on the couch, and he takes a seat beside me.

He starts talking about his mom – memories, stories, moments that paint a picture of the woman she was. As he speaks, I can see the pain in his eyes, the love he had for her, but I can see how much respect he had for her as well. She wasn't the type of woman who would allow her son to be disrespectful to anyone. Despite everything, it's a reminder that there's more to Beau than the surface-level image he portrayed.

We sit in a heavy silence, the weight of his grief palpable in the dimly lit room. It's strange; despite the lies, the pain, and the betrayal, there's an undeniable authenticity to this moment. It's as if the layers we had both hidden behind have peeled away, leaving only the raw, naked truth.

Hours pass like mere minutes, and our conversation weaves through memories of his mom, tales of shared moments, and the profound ache of loss. I find myself not just hearing his words but feeling the painful emotions behind them. In this moment, I see Beau for who he truly is, a man who loved deeply and now grapples with the profound void left by his mother's passing.

In the quiet of the night, I can't deny that I'm witnessing a different side of Beau, one that makes me rethink my earlier judgments. The anger I felt earlier in the day begins to fade,

replaced by a deep understanding for the man sitting beside me. Life has a way of unearthing truths, even when they're buried beneath layers of deception.

As the night stretches into early morning, I stay by his side, offering a presence more than anything else. We don't discuss our own complicated relationship or the doubts that still linger. It's a break from the mess of emotions, a chance to simply be there for each other.

Beau's exhaustion is evident. He looks at me, his eyes filled with tears. "You should get some rest. You can sleep in the guest room down the hall."

I hesitate for a moment, unsure if I want to stay with him so soon after what happened. But there was something about the way he looked at me that made my heart skip a beat, and before I know it, I find myself nodding in agreement.

Beau walks me to the guestroom, and there's a pause before our eyes lock. The tension between us is intense, and the unspoken emotions are obvious.

And then, in a moment that feels both unexpected and inevitable, our lips meet in a harsh, ruthless kiss of lust, frustration and anger. It's a collision of emotions, a release of everything we've been holding back. In that kiss, I can feel his pain, his vulnerability, and the undeniable connection that's been growing between us, which pierces through my own pain.

The kiss was different this time - deeper, more passionate than before. As our bodies pressed together, I feel a heat



building within me unlike anything I had ever felt before.

Without breaking our kiss, Beau scoops me up in his arms and carries me inside the bedroom. I am tired and an emotional mess, but I don't care. I don't want to sleep. I don't want to think. I want him in me. I have never wanted anything more than I do in this moment.

As we stumble towards the bed, he throws me down on my back and lifts my dress up, revealing my lacy blue thong. He stands over me, staring at me laid before him. Placing his hand between my thighs, his touch feels hot against my skin, and he pushes my legs apart. He is not taking his eyes off me; I feel the intensity of his power. I feel as if I am under his spell.

I turn my head away from him. I shouldn't do this. I can stop right now. I can straighten up and ask him to leave. But I don't. I just lay here and spread my legs for him.

He takes a finger, placing it on my chin and moves my face to look at his.

“Look at me.”

But I need to take control. If I am in control, it means I have the power.

I can feel his eyes on me, moving down to my full breasts bursting out of my low-cut dress. I raise one of my feet and place it on his thigh.

His cool demeanor doesn't hold. He gasps when he sees my sheer panties are already wet. I could see him looking now. Noticing how the wet fabric outlined my groomed lips.

I trace one finger from the bottom of my wet patch to the top. Then bring it to my lips for a taste.

He inhales sharply and reaches for my thigh, pushing my skirt higher.

Biting his lip, he grabs my finger and brings it to his mouth, sucking it. "God you taste good."

I lean back further and lift my other leg, placing it on the other side of him.

"You've got no idea how good," I tell him as I pull my panties to the side inviting him in. "But you're welcome to find out."

His strong hands grab my bottom, and he pulls me towards him. He doesn't hesitate. He rushes at me with his tongue. Ploughing it into me and sucking me like he is ravenous, and I am the only thing that will satisfy his hunger. His tongue is warm, soft and wet, taking every inch of my most sensitive area and I lose every ounce of sanity.

I lay back and moan as he devours me. My wetness dripping down his chin and neck. He lifts me into his strong arms, and I could feel his rock-hard erection through his pants against my bare lips.

"Please," I beg him. "Please fuck me."

"Are you sure?" Beau says gruffly. But he and I both know; I need and want him.

"Yes..." My voice wobbles.

Confidently, he says, “Maybe.”

He lowers me back down onto the bed, grabs my thighs and with one swift move, turns me onto my stomach, my feet now flat on the floor. He has his hand on my hip, the other on the back of my neck and he pushes me down, my face flush with the bed. Grabbing the small piece of lace connecting my panties, he takes them in his fist, ripping them off. I try to push up on to my elbows, but his hand on the back of my neck forces me to remain where I am. He kicks my legs apart and smacks my ass and I can't help but moan with pleasure.

Then, without warning he shoves three fingers inside me. Pounding me with them furiously as I yell out in pleasure and frustration. With his other hand he takes off his pants. His fingers, still inside me, he leans over, and I can feel his hot breath on my neck.

“Tell me what you want.” He growls.

“I want you inside me, please, please.” I beg.

He pins my hands down on the bed, the other pulling one of my breasts free of my dress and rolling my nipple between his fingertips. I am begging him to fuck me. The pressure is so intense, and I just want to release every bit of tension that is building up.

Suddenly, he kicks my legs out wider and quickly pushes himself inside me and I let out a scream as he pounds me as hard as he can. Then holding himself as deep as possible, his weight is on top of me, he whispers in my ear “You are mine.”

I push back, forcing more of him into me. I ache for more of him.

“No, I am not.” I giggle. Being defiant feels good.

A surge of energy courses through me, like a rebirth. It’s as if all my pent-up rage is finally breaking free, liberating me from the shackles of naivety and excessive niceness.

I arch back, now standing up, I turn around and throw him onto the bed. He’s surprised. I am too. Lifting my dress up around my waist, I climb on top of him. I’ve never done this before and I couldn’t really believe I was doing it. It feels new, like I’m inventing something. I hold his arms down and slowly put him in, feeling every inch of him and watch as he groans.

“You are mine.” I whisper in his ear. I am in charge, and he likes it. He pretends he is trying to break free, and I tighten my hold on him. I let my tits tease his face as I move up and down, then slowly rocking my hips back and forth. The sensation inside me is growing, and I feel myself swelling, as sweat drips from my face onto him. He easily pulls one of his arms free, and with one finger he flicks over my ass, sending me into pure ecstasy, and I come. My body trembles, every muscle tightening and tingling. Feeling unable to hold myself up any longer, I collapse on top of him.

“I’m not done with you,” he growls in my ear.

Still inside me, he grabs me and rolls me over, he’s now on his knees. I feel like a ragdoll as he grabs my hips, swiftly yanking my bottom towards him, and pushing himself deeper inside me. I can’t help but scream out loud, both from the pain

and desire. He grabs my ankles and slams into me. I grip the pillow in my fists, feeling his sweat dripping onto my stomach, and the wetness running down between my legs.

I don't understand what I am feeling. I want to hurt him, I want to love him, I want to hit him, I want to kiss him. Unable to contain my feelings, I taunt him, "Is that all you got?"

I watch his face, it changes as he picks up the pace, determined to prove me wrong. I can see his muscles tensing and I can feel his cock swell inside me, his breath quickening. His entire body strains and he pulls out, gushing forcefully on to my stomach and face. I open my mouth and let it in. A groan escapes from his throat and then silence returns as the last few remnants are released.

Collapsing on top of me, he gently kisses my nose and then my forehead, then let's my hair slip through his fingers.

He gazes deep into my eyes, his hand warm against my cheek. The dimmed lights cast a soft, intimate glow, and the crackling logs in the fireplace fill the room with gentle warmth. Our fingers, intertwined, tighten the connection between us. We lie there in silence, our unspoken emotions charging the air, the weight of his sincerity settling around us like a warm, comforting blanket.

"Amber, I didn't..."

"It's okay, Beau."

"No, please, let me say this." His voice barely rises above a whisper. "I didn't call you back here for this," he continues,

his tone filled with raw vulnerability. “But I also don’t regret it. I care about you, more than you know. Then losing my mother...” he pauses, “losing my mom made me realize what real loss feels like and possibly losing you is an unbearable thought. I’m not asking you to forget what I did, but can you find it in your heart to forgive me? That is, if you’re still interested in me beyond being a fake boyfriend.”

His voice carries a shift, a genuine sincerity that resonates deep within me. For the first time, I hear the message of his unspoken words. There’s a softening, a reaching out, and I believe him, and I finally see him for the first time.

Grabbing his face in my hands, tears streaming down my cheeks, “Beau, I see you.” His eyes, now filled with tears, reflect surprise, as if he’s never felt truly seen. “And I forgive you.” It surprises both of us, but I mean every word.

“But promise me, no more lies, ever. Real love for me is built on trust. I’d rather say I trust you than I love you because it means more to me. So if you can promise me that, we can start healing us.”

He catches my hair with his fingers – a gesture I’ve grown to adore – and kisses me with a slowness that feels like an eternity. It’s paradise, and I can taste the bittersweet mixture of tears and kisses. As long as we keep moving toward each other, we’ll meet in the middle. It’s inevitable.

“Ms. Amber Knox, I promise to never lie to you again, as long as we both shall live.”

I can't help but giggle as I playfully smack his arm. "Well, Mr. Beau Daniels, then till death do us part."

His expression shifts as if he's considering mortality. "I'm sorry, Beau. That was insensitive of me. I got caught up in the moment and didn't think."

He lies there, lost in thought, tears streaming down his cheeks, and I'm not sure what to say. I reach out and tenderly wipe away his tears, planting a soft kiss on his cheek.

"Will you go with me to Canada?" he asks, still gazing at the ceiling.

"Of course, Beau. I'm here for you, whatever you need."

"Thank you. It means a lot to me. I've never taken a girl home to meet my mother before." He laughs softly, his laughter tinged with sorrow. "I knew the day I met you that you were going to be the first. I just wish I had taken you home sooner."

Beau begins to sob, curling into a ball, and I pull him close, wrapping my arms around him tightly. His pain becomes my pain, his loss my loss, and I feel helpless, unable to make it better.

Tears stream down my face, and for the first time since I met Beau Daniels, I see the real man. A man who is good. A man who is kind. A man I can envision standing beside me. And for the first time in my life, I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

And it feels perfect.





Goodbye May Seem Forever; Farewell Is  
Like The End. But In My Heart, Is The  
Memory, and There You Will Always Be-  
The Fox and the Hound

Beau

The flight is long and exhausting, and I can't sleep. I keep thinking about my mom, and how much I miss her. I wonder what she would say if she could see me now. Would she be proud of me? Would she approve of Amber? Would she have any advice for me?

I look at Amber, who is sleeping peacefully next to me. She looks so beautiful and serene, and I can't help but smile. She has been nothing but supportive and caring since I told her the news. She has been my rock, just like my mom was.

I lean over and kiss her softly on the cheek, careful not to wake her up. She stirs slightly and snuggles closer to me. I wrap my arm around her, and whisper in her ear. "I love you."

She is asleep and I know she doesn't hear me.

I close my eyes and try to relax. Maybe everything will be okay, as long as we have each other.

We land in Canada, and my dad is waiting for us at the airport. He looks older and sadder than I remember, and I feel

a pang of guilt for not visiting him more often. He hugs me tightly, and I can tell he is holding back tears.

“Beau, I’m so sorry. Your mom...she was a wonderful woman.”

“I know, dad. I know.”

He lets go of me and looks at Amber. He smiles warmly and extends his hand.

“Hello, you must be Amber. I’m Beau’s dad. It’s nice to meet you.”

Amber, without hesitation grabs him and hugs him.

“Hi, Mr. Daniels. It’s nice to meet you too. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, dear. And please, call me Wes.”

Mom and dad had made amends years ago. I recall the conversation with my mom, telling me they were talking again and how upset it made me. But she assured me that it was for the best, that holding onto grudges only brought more pain. And she was right. Over the years, I saw my parents rebuild their relationship, slowly but surely. It wasn’t easy for any of us, but they did it because they loved each other. Dad stayed at his own house, and mom lived at hers, but they were only a few houses apart.

We get our luggage, and head to my dad’s car. Along the way, he tells us about the funeral arrangements, and how my mom’s friends and relatives have been sending their condolences. He also asks us about our lives in New York, and

how we met. I never told my parents our situation because I was told not to tell anyone so it would appear real at all times. Especially my parents, with the possibility of reporters hounding them.

I just sit and listen as Amber answers most of his questions, still too numb to talk much. She tells him about her job as an attorney, how we met at a bookstore, and about finding the hidden room in the mansion.

She also tells him about our relationship, and how much we love each other. She says it with such sincerity and conviction, that I almost believe her.

But then the doubt that has been nagging me from the beginning creeps in. The doubts that constantly seems to be there, especially when I am alone in my thoughts. I don't know why because I know she truly cares about me. But these thoughts are ones that make me wonder if she is really here for me or is she only here for the money. She came with me to Canada, and I'm grateful to have her by my side as I navigate the difficult process of saying goodbye to my mom, but I can't stop myself or help but question her motives.

When we finally arrive at my mom's house dad says, "I wasn't sure if you would be more comfortable here or at my place. Mom's place is, well, cleaner so I just assumed."

"It's fine Dad, thanks."

I take Amber's hand and step into the familiar surroundings of my childhood home, the memories of growing up here flooding back.

I lead her down the hallway and stop in front of the door to my old room. Pushing it open, I step inside, and a rush of homesickness hits me. The room looks almost the same as I left it – the posters on the wall, the old desk cluttered with books and papers, the hockey trophies lining the shelves.

Amber stands in the doorway, her presence a reassuring anchor. I turn to her, offering a small smile. “This was my room, where I spent most of my teenage years.”

As Amber steps into my old bedroom, her eyes roam around the familiar surroundings. She turns to me with a playful grin and says, “You know, I was expecting more posters of hot women in bikinis on the walls.”

I chuckle and pretend to look offended. “Hey now, I’ll have you know that my taste in posters was very sophisticated. I had posters of hockey players, not half naked women.”

Amber giggles. “Oh, my mistake. Hockey players are definitely a step up from women in bikinis.”

I smile at her response. “Absolutely. But you know, my teenage self might have appreciated a few bikini posters too.”

Amber raises an eyebrow teasingly. “Oh, really?”

I chuckle softly. “Ah, yes, I’ve heard that bikini posters are like a secret weapon for improved slap shots.”

“Well when we get back home, I will make sure your penthouse is filled with women in bikinis, you know, to help improve your slap shot.”

“I think my slap shot is already perfected.” I chase her around my room, smacking her bottom, laughing and we fall onto my bed.

Laying there looking around my room, I pick up a photo of my mom and me from my nightstand, and I can't help but feel a rush of emotions. The photo captures a moment of pure joy, frozen in time. My mom's infectious smile matches mine, and her arm is slung around my shoulders in a playful half-hug. “I remember one time, Luke and I decided to sneak out at night and meet up with some friends. We thought we were being so sneaky.”

Rolling to her side, her elbow propped up under her head. “What happened?”

I can't help but laugh at the memory. “Well, little did we know, Mom was a lot sneakier than we were. She followed us out of the house and, right when we were about to head to the woods, she jumped out of the bushes and scared the crap out of us.”

Amber laughs. “She must have been so much fun to be around.”

“She definitely was,” I say, my voice filled with fondness. “She had this way of keeping us on our toes.”

“I love that,” Amber says, her eyes sparkling.

I nod, the memories of my mom warming my heart. “And you know, she loved to cook, but she wasn't exactly the best in the kitchen.”

Amber grins. "I'm sure she wasn't that bad."

"Oh no, she was." I chuckle, "There was the infamous rubberloaf incident. She decided to make meatloaf one day, but something went wrong in the cooking process. It turned out rubbery and nearly impossible to chew."

"She had no idea?"

"No," I say, joining in her laughter. "But we all sat around the table, trying to eat it with straight faces. Mom took one bite and just burst out laughing, realizing what had happened."

"Your mom sounds like she knew how to turn any situation into something memorable."

"She definitely did," I say, my heart feeling a bit lighter as I recall these moments. "I already miss her a lot."

Amber's expression softens, and she reaches out to squeeze my hand. I am so glad she is here. "I'm going to look around. Mom kept all her important papers in the safe and I want to make sure everything is in order."

As Amber unpacks and freshens up, I walk through the house, and memories of my mom flood my mind. Her smile, her laughter, her warm hugs - all the little things that made her so special. I remember how she used to make my favorite cookies for my birthday every year, coconut macaroons, and how she would always be there at every one of my games.

But now, she's gone, and I can't believe I'll never get to see her again. The tears come again, and I bury my face in my hands, trying to hold back the sobs.

Amber comes to my side, offering her silent support. She knows that there are no words that can ease my pain right now. All she can do is be there for me, and I'm grateful for that.

"Thanks, Amber," I say, my voice hoarse. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

She gives me a small smile. "You don't have to thank me, Beau. That's what friends are for, right?"

Her small smile brought a mix of relief and uncertainty. "Friends?" I echoed in my head. Does she see me as just a friend after everything we have been through?

I nod, trying to mask my true feelings, but it is hard to ignore the ache in my chest.

"Yeah, friends are important," I reply, forcing a smile. "I'm glad we have that."

"Beau, I didn't mean it like that." She whispers.

But I was already walking away. This is not the time for that, and I just want to get through this as painlessly as possible.

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Standing beside my mother's casket, I feel an odd detachment from the world around me. It's like I'm inhabiting someone else's body, going through the motions of a funeral that's become a blur of unfamiliar faces.

Amber and Luke are my lifelines keeping me tethered to reality. In a sea of mourners, they're the only ones who matter.

I manage weak smiles, accepting condolences from strangers, but my heart isn't in it.

Then, a familiar voice calls my name, snapping me out of my daze. It's Joe coming toward me with open arms. I hug him tightly, tears flowing for the first time since the funeral began. "Thanks for being here, buddy," I whisper, overwhelmed by the warmth of his embrace and the weight of my loss.

Joe's arrival was a surprise and means a lot to me. I introduce him to Amber, who greets him with a genuine smile. She hugs him, a gesture that doesn't surprise me. "Nice to finally meet you, Joe," she says, her voice holding empathy. "Beau has told me so much about you. I just wish it were under happier circumstances."

Joe hugs her back and agrees and then introduces Amber to Tawnya, his girlfriend. Amber extends her warmth to her as well. "Nice to meet you too, Tawnya," she says.

Tawnya's sympathy is evident as she turns her attention to me. "Beau, I'm so sorry for your loss," she offers sincerely.

As the funeral continues, I can't help but feel a strange mix of feelings. Grief, of course, but also grateful for the people who've shown up in my life when I needed them the most.

After the funeral, we head back to my mother's house, the atmosphere heavy with grief as friends and family gather to pay their respects. Overwhelmed with emotions, I find solace sitting alone in the corner in my mom's favorite chair. Amber, on the other hand, moves gracefully through the house,



offering comfort to my family, ensuring food and drinks remain filled, and meticulously cleaning up. She even keeps my whiskey and coke glass full, knowing today is not the day to lecture me about drinking.

As I watch her, a nagging doubt creeps into my mind. No one can be this perfect, this nice, without expecting something in return, right? I scold myself for allowing such cynical thoughts, but they persist, like shadows I can't shake. My mother would have known how to handle this, how to set my mind at ease. But she's gone, and I'm left to navigate my confusion alone.

Later that night, the house falls silent with everyone gone, the weight of my grief and the alcohol combining into a heavy fog. I watch as Amber gets to work. She tidies up, puts away the food, and washes the dishes, leaving the house as clean as my mom kept it. I've barely moved from mom's chair since we arrived, lost in my own thoughts, but now the emptiness in the house, mixed with alcohol becomes suffocating. I gasp for air, clutching my chest in a panic.

Amber rushes to my side, concern etched across her face as she places her arms around me. "It's okay, Beau. You're not alone. I'm here for you, just breath."

My emotions churn within me, raw and unfiltered, and I can't keep them bottled up any longer. In my head, a voice screams, "Don't! You're about to say something you'll regret." Instead, my voice emerges as sharp, unintentional venom dripping from my mouth.

“Are you really here for me, Amber? Or are you here, as you put it, as my so-called ‘friend,’ and let’s not forget the large sum of money they’re paying you.”

Amber visibly flinches, hurt evident in her eyes. She’s caught off guard, her surprise obvious. Inwardly, I berate myself, thinking, “You’re hurting her, and she doesn’t deserve this. Just stop talking.”

“Of course, I am. You know I care about you,” she retorts, her voice straining with hurt.

A bitter laugh escapes me, a defense mechanism against the whirlwind inside me. I think, “Shut the fuck up. Why are you doing this to her?” But the words keep flowing, and I am unable to stop myself. “Do I? Because all I heard is how we’re ‘friends’. You know, Amber, if you really cared, maybe you’d have shown it better than just some kind of business deal.”

The pain in her eyes cuts deep, but my own pain and the alcohol has clouded my judgment. I stand up and take a step back, avoiding her touch as if it’s toxic. Inside, I’m screaming, “Stop! Stop hurting her!” But my emotions are a tangled mess, and I’m lashing out because I’m hurting, even though every word feels like betrayal to the true feelings I hold for her.

Amber’s eyes widen in surprise and hurt. She takes a deep breath, trying to collect herself before responding. “Beau, you know that’s not true. I care about you deeply, and I’m not here for the money,” she says firmly. “You’re not being fair. You know I’ve been there for you, through everything.”

“Have you, though?” I retort, my voice laced with a harshness I don’t recognize. I’m thinking, “What the hell is wrong with you? You just lost your mother and now you’re pushing her away.”

“Beau, I can’t believe you’re saying this. After everything we’ve been through, after the connection we’ve shared.”

I feel a massive pang of guilt, a brief moment of clarity piercing through my clouded emotions. But I can’t back down now, not when my pain has taken over. “Connection? Don’t make me laugh. Maybe it was all in my head. Maybe you were just enjoying the attention.”

Her voice rises, her own frustration matching mine. “You think I wanted attention? You think I’ve been pretending this whole time?”

“Just calling it like I see it.” I’m desperate for her to understand my pain, and it is the reason for acting like this, but I know I’m only causing more.

My chest tightens, my anger giving way to confusion, the room is spinning. The words hang in the air between us, heavy and charged with emotions that I can’t control. I sit down, my head fuzzy and my mind unable to accept the pain I feel inside me.

Amber’s voice trembles, her anger coming through. “If you really think that low of me, maybe we need to reconsider everything.”

A part of me wants to reach out, to pull her close and apologize for the words that have escaped my mouth. But another part, the part that's still hurting and struggling to make sense of my own feelings, pushes me away from her.

I take a deep breath, my voice softer now, but my head hurts. "Maybe we do." The second those words come out of my mouth; I regret it.

The room is heavy with tension, and I'm left grappling with the storm of hurt and regret I've unleashed. Deep down, I'm wondering, "Have I just pushed away the one person who means the most to me?"

Amber looks at me, her vulnerability showing. "I understand that this is a difficult time for you, and I want to be here to support you. But I won't stay where I'm not wanted," she says, her voice shaking with emotion.

Before I can respond, she turns away and starts packing her bags. "I'll book a flight home. I think it's best if we both take some time to think about things," she says, her voice breaking.

As Amber's taxi disappears from sight, I collapse to my knees, crushed by the double loss of my mother and my love. "What the hell is wrong with me?" I mutter to myself, trembling.

Slowly, I rise to my feet. My steps are heavy as I drag myself back to my mom's favorite chair. The room is dark and silent, reflecting the turmoil in my heart. I sink into the chair, a whirlwind of emotions tearing me apart.

There are no tears left to shed, only a deep, gnawing ache in my chest. The loss of my mom and the mess I've made with Amber suffocate me like a leaden cloak. I reach for a half-empty bottle of Captain Morgan, hoping to drown my sorrows. As I gulp down the liquid fire, I feel the numbness creeping in, pulling me away from the pain. I close my eyes and let the darkness surround me.

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The next day, we go to the lawyer's office to hear the reading of my mom's will. My dad is there, along with my mom's sister and brother. They are all somber and respectful, and they greet us politely.

The lawyer is a middle-aged man with glasses and a suit. He looks professional and serious, and he speaks with a clear voice.

"Thank you all for coming. I'm sorry for your loss. Your mother was a wonderful person, and she left a generous legacy for her loved ones."

He opens a folder and takes out a document.

"This is her last will and testament, dated February 5th, 2023. She made some changes shortly before her passing, so please pay attention."

He clears his throat and begins to read.

"I, Linda Sachs, being of sound mind and body, hereby declare this to be my last will and testament..."

He goes on to list the various assets and properties that my mom owned, and how she wanted them to be distributed. She left the house to my dad, some money and jewelry to her siblings, some donations to her favorite charities, and some paintings and furniture to her friends.

And then he gets to the part that concerns me.

“...and to my beloved son, Beau Daniels, I leave the remainder of my estate, including all bank accounts, stocks, bonds, investments, and any other assets not otherwise specified. This amounts to approximately fifteen million dollars...”

I gasp in shock and feel everyone’s eyes on me. I can’t believe what I just heard.

I look at my dad, who looks equally stunned. He shakes his head in disbelief.

“Beau...I had no idea...”

Why did my mom leave me all this money? Where did it come from? Why did she never tell me?

We leave the lawyer’s office, and head to my dad’s house. I’m still in shock from the news, and I don’t know how to feel. I have just inherited fifteen million dollars from my mom, and I have no idea what to do with it. I don’t need it. I make more than enough playing hockey.

That night I had a dream. I am walking through a vast field, surrounded by wildflowers swaying in the gentle breeze, their sweet fragrance filling the air. In the distance, beneath a

massive oak tree, stands a figure. As I approach, I see her - my mom, but younger. "Mom?" I try to call out, but no sound comes out of my mouth.

Her smile brings comfort, a sense of peace washes over me. Facing her, I whisper, "Mom, I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

"Beau, my baby boy, no need for apologies," she replies gently. "My time had come, and I'm alright. This place is beautiful, I wanted you to know. But I'm here to make sure you're okay."

I confess, "I really fucked things up, Mom."

"Beau," she says, her voice filled with wisdom, "judging others is a heavy burden. You questioned Amber's motives, but have you considered what it means to her?"

Her words hit me hard, and I lowered my gaze, feeling the weight of my own narrow-mindedness.

"She accepted the money not for herself but to make a difference," my mother continues. "To change perspectives, to help. People aren't just one thing, Beau. Sometimes, you need to look beyond the surface to see their true intentions."

Tears fill my eyes, both from her profound words and the overwhelming love and acceptance I feel. I've let my insecurities blind me to the goodness in Amber's heart.

"Love is about forgiveness, Beau," she says, her words sinking deep. "It's recognizing our flaws and striving to be better for those we care for."

I realize the truth in her words. My pride and stubbornness pushed away the person who means the most to me.

My mother's hand touches my cheek, warm and reassuring. "You have the strength to make things right, my dear. Don't let fear of loss keep you from gaining something far more precious."

The field shimmers around us, and I wake up, the dream fading like morning mist. But the message remains clear – it's time to set things right, and fix my mistakes, seek forgiveness and show that I am stronger than my pride.

And just then, it hits me, and I know exactly what to do with this money.





We Keep Moving Forward, Opening Up  
New Doors and Doing New Things,  
Because We're Curious...and Curiosity  
Keeps Leading Us Down New Paths-Walt  
Disney

Amber

The plane ride back home felt like a blur, the raging emotions that plagued me during the last few days still swirling within. I had left Beau in Canada, his pain and confusion mirroring my own. The breakup had been inevitable, the conclusion of our unresolved issues, and the weight of his distrust.

As I step off the plane, the familiar sight of my hometown greets me. The bustling city, with its honking horns and crowded streets, feels strangely comforting, a stark contrast to the quietness of Beau's mom's house.

I retrieve my luggage and head to my parents' house, needing their comforting presence more than ever. As I walk up the front steps and ring the doorbell, I take a deep breath, trying to prepare myself for the inevitable questions.

My mom opens the door, her eyes instantly fill with concern as she sees my tear-stained face. "Amber, sweetheart, what

happened?”

Without a word, I hug her tightly, the tears I have been holding back finally spilling over. My dad appears in the doorway, and they both wrap their arms around me, providing the support I so desperately need.

After a few minutes, we move to the living room, where I tell them everything that has happened over the past few months, from Beau’s derogatory remark to our fake relationship and then our heated argument after the funeral. But I don’t tell them about the money because I’m not sure they would understand. My parents listen without interruption, their expressions a mixture of understanding and worry.

My mom spoke first, her voice gentle and comforting. “Amber, it sounds like you’ve been through a lot. Breakups are never easy, especially in such challenging circumstances.”

My dad nods in agreement. “You did your best, sweetheart. Sometimes, love isn’t enough to overcome the baggage someone carries.”

I wipe away my tears, grateful for their support. “I know, Mom, Dad. It’s just... It’s been so hard. I thought I could help Beau change, but I couldn’t.”

My mom squeezes my hand. “You can’t change someone who doesn’t want to change, Amber. And it’s not your responsibility to fix him.”

I nod, taking in their words. “I’ve decided to stay here with you guys for a while. I need some time to heal and figure

things out. Is that okay?”

My dad smiles warmly. “You’re always welcome here, sweetheart. It will be like old times.”

As the day turns into night, exhausted, I say goodnight, ready for some time alone. I feel a sense of relief in my old room and laying here in my old bed surrounded by a massive array of stuffed animals, I can’t help but think of Beau and his childhood room being left the same. A feeling of sadness washes over me as I wonder why my mom never got rid of them or changed my room and right now, I’m glad she didn’t.

The next evening, as I sit on the back porch, my dad joins me, bringing two cups of steaming tea. We sip in silence for a while, the only sound being the logs crackling in the fire pit in the background, as we watch the sun starting to set which looks so beautiful against the snow.

Finally, he breaks the silence. “Honey, how are you holding up?”

I sigh, setting my cup down on the patio table. “Honestly, Dad, it’s been a rollercoaster. I still can’t believe Beau and I broke up. I thought we could make it work.”

My dad nods, his expression filled with understanding. “Sometimes, love isn’t enough, sweetheart. And sometimes, people say things they don’t mean when they’re hurting. He had just lost his mom. Not that it is an excuse, but maybe more of an understanding.”

I look down at my hands, memories of Beau's hurtful words echoing in my mind. "He said some horrible things to me, Dad.."

My dad places a reassuring hand on my shoulder and takes a deep breath, as if gathering his thoughts. "Amber, sweetheart, I know this is hard for you. But I want you to remember something very important—you've always had a special gift."

I look at him, puzzled. "What do you mean, Dad?"

He continues, "You have this incredible ability to see the good in people, to put yourself in their shoes, and to believe in their potential, even when they don't see it in themselves. It's one of your greatest strengths, but it can also make you vulnerable to those who don't deserve it."

I nod slowly, understanding what he's getting at. "I believed in Beau. I saw the good in him, even when others didn't."

Dad smiles gently, his wisdom shining through. "And that's a beautiful thing, Amber. Don't ever lose that. But remember, not everyone you meet will be as genuine as you are. Some people might take advantage of your kindness, and that's their flaw, not yours."

Tears well up in my eyes, and I look at my Dad. "But how do I move on from this, Dad? How do I trust anyone again?"

He reaches across, placing his hand over mine. "You take this as a lesson, my dear. You learn to be cautious without losing your faith in people. Not everyone will deserve your

trust, but when you find someone who does, it will be all the more precious.”

As I contemplate his words, my mom joins us. She brings with her a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, a comforting aroma wafting through the air.

“Mom, Dad,” I say, taking a cookie and savoring the taste. “I haven’t been completely honest about what Beau said and the real reason I left Canada.”

My mom sits down beside me, her gaze warm and compassionate. “We figured as much but didn’t want to pry. Dad and I knew you would tell us when you were ready, sweetheart.”

“When I was asked to be his fake girlfriend,” I begin slowly. “The firm offered me a large compensation and I didn’t accept it. I mean, yes, I accepted the money, but not for myself. I asked them to donate the money to a charity. I saw an opportunity to make a difference, plus to help change Beau’s caveman way of thinking and the money wasn’t important. Helping others was my motivation.”

My mom smiles, her eyes filled with pride. “That’s the Amber I know, always striving to make a positive impact.” She pauses, and I can see she finally hears what I said. “So if you gave the money away honey, why did Beau say that to you?”

Rolling my eyes, I sigh. “I never told him.”

My dad leans back in his chair, sipping his tea, and before my mom can respond, he says, “It sounds like there was a lot of miscommunication and assumptions on both sides. When people are hurting, they can say things they don’t really mean.”

His words hit me like a tidal wave. In the past, I have said things to Beau because I was hurting and now, here I am in his shoes. I try to rationalize my actions, telling myself it was before we really got to know each other but I know I am only lying to myself.

My mom nods in agreement. “It’s true, sweetheart. Perhaps Beau misunderstood your intentions, and in the midst of his grief after losing his mother, he jumped to conclusions.”

I take a deep breath, appreciating my parents’ perspective. “I guess I should have been more open with him from the start, but I thought he would see me as more than all the other girls in his life.”

My dad places his hand on mine. “Hindsight is always clearer, Amber. What’s important now is how you choose to move forward. But honesty isn’t just about telling the other person the truth; it’s about being true to yourself. But really, darling, your mom and I, we’ve always been honest with each other. It’s like that time I tried to surprise her with a homemade birthday cake, something called a...what was that called, dear?

“A Cherpumple, dear.” Mom says, looking at me with wide silly eyes.

“Yes, yes, and I ended up baking something that looked more like a pile of poo. But I was honest about my baking skills, and she was honest with me on how it turned out, but she appreciated the effort.”

Mom chimes in with a chuckle, “That’s right, dear. We’ve always said that honesty is the glue that holds a relationship together. Like the time I accidentally dyed our white sheets pink, and instead of hiding it, I came clean. Your dad didn’t mind, though; he said it added a bit of pizzazz to the bedroom.”

I can’t help but laugh but also feeling the warmth of their bond.

“But I didn’t lie; I simply didn’t share it with him.”

Mom’s eyes twinkle with understanding as she places a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Sweetheart, that’s the beauty of honesty. It’s not just about telling the truth when asked; it’s about being open and transparent with the people you care about. When you hold back important information, it can create misunderstandings.”

I pull the blanket that is wrapped around my legs over my head and scream. “Ahh!” I peek out the top of the blanket, “I guess I’ve always seen honesty in black and white, but you’re saying it’s more like shades of gray, right? It’s about sharing, not just waiting to spill the beans when someone asks. Right?” My voice muffled.

My dad pulls the blanket down and smiles at me. “That’s our girl. And when you are with the right person, it’s not shades of



gray because it's easy to tell them everything. Right, dear.”

“Well, not everything. Just remember, even the best relationships need a little mystery. Like when he asks me where did all the ice cream go? I tell him I have no idea!” She winks at me, and Dad jumps up, chasing her through the snow, trying to playfully swat her behind. Watching them, I can't help but wonder if I will ever be as lucky as my parents.

As the evening continues, we talk and laugh about stories from the past, like the time dad was running towards the house, ripping his clothes off until he was naked because he mowed over a beehive or the time when I broke my arm and my hysterical mother kept calling 411 instead of 911 and didn't understand why the emergency number would be disconnected. My mom, ever the pain in my ass, then brings up my first kiss story once again.

“Mother, you and your gossip. It was just a kiss,” I scold her, though my laughter betrays any real irritation.

In her eyes, this simple tale carries a deeper meaning, as she often finds connections where others see none. She starts her usual spiel about cosmic alignments and spirit guides.

“But it is significant, dear,” she insists with a dreamy smile. “Your lunar was in line with the moon, and my spirit guide whispered that there is going to be a connection between your past and your present. The universe has plans for you, my love.”

Dad, ever the voice of reason, interjects with a teasing tone, “Well, I hope the universe's plans include dinner and a little

less moon gazing. I'm starving."

Mom swats playfully at Dad, her laughter filling the night air. "Oh, you old skeptic! Amber, never underestimate the power of serendipity and the magic of the universe."

Mom warms up her famous homemade pierogies, with warm butter and onions, served with a glass of wine and we continue talking late into the night and for the first time since the breakup with Beau, I feel a sense of peace wash over me.

That night, as I lay in bed, my stuffies hugging me like a warm blanket, I wonder if maybe, just maybe, there's some truth to Mom's mystical beliefs. Perhaps my past, even that childhood kiss with the boy from the ice cream stand, holds a more significant role in my future than I ever imagined. It is a nice thought, as I drift to sleep.

.....

That morning, I jump out of bed, get dressed and run out the front door. Mom is yelling something at me, but I am too excited to stop and ask what she said. I walk down the wooded path and to the street until I am standing in front of the old ice cream stand, a weathered but cherished leftover of my childhood. Its rainbow-colored sign, slightly faded from years of sun and rain, still evoking the same feeling as when I was a kid. I make my way behind the building, and look at the pond, which usually served as a summer backdrop for my family's ice cream escapades, now lay frozen and pristine beneath a fresh blanket of snow.

As I inhale the crisp, wintry air, I can't help but smile at the memories that flood back. The sound of the families laughing, the taste of double scoops on hot summer days, and the memories of my first kiss—all of it wrapped in a cocoon of love and happiness.

But today, I'm not here merely for nostalgia. I have a vision, a dream that has taken root in my heart and now blooms with determination. I want to create something beautiful, something that will make a real difference in the lives of children who need it most. And this place, with all its sentimental value, is where it will happen.

My parents, worried I had lost my mind, join me by the pond. My father, with his talent for reading people says, "You've got that look, Amber. What's brewing in that head of yours?"

I turn to him, my eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Dad, I want to organize a charity event right here, and I need your help."

My mother nods in agreement. "What's the cause, sweetheart?"

I explain my vision—a charity event centered around ice skating, appropriately named "Skate for Smiles." The event would raise funds for underprivileged children, ensuring they have access to educational resources, warm clothing, and a chance to create their own cherished memories.

My father leans in, his eyes filled with pride. "That's a wonderful idea, Amber. This place is special, and you've just found a way to make it even more so."

My mother adds, “We’ll support you in any way we can, sweetheart. It’s a beautiful concept.”

We make our way back to the house, and I run and grab my planner. As I begin jotting down ideas in my notebook, my parents help brainstorm. Conversations about logistics, permits, and contacting local businesses fill the crisp winter air. The warmth of their encouragement fuels my determination, and it’s clear they believe in this dream as much as I do.

I envision the pond transformed into a winter wonderland, families skating hand in hand, laughter ringing through the air. We talk about partnering with the ice cream stand, which my parents have frequented as long as they can remember, to offer a special charity-themed ice cream flavor.

I need more help and who is better than Emily and Luke? They both say yes.

As I sketch out my plans, I can’t help but feel that this event, merging cherished memories with a noble purpose, is the perfect way to honor this place and all the happiness it has brought me. Plus keeping my mind on something other than Beau.

In the days following, Emily and Luke arrive and stay with me at my family’s home. It’s something my parents welcome wholeheartedly. They miss the days when everyone gathered at our house, and they welcome the chaos. Plus mom always fusses over Emily as if she’s their own daughter, and Emily loves it. Her life in the spotlight can sometimes be

overwhelming, and she always loved being here since she never really experienced what she calls a “normal childhood.” She says coming to my family’s home is like a vacation. If spending time with my family is considered a vacation, then it’s like a rollercoaster ride in paradise, complete with its ups, downs, and the occasional loop-de-loop of craziness but nonetheless, she loves it.

Over breakfast, my mom can’t contain her enthusiasm. “Emily, dear, you look positively radiant. It must be from the vaginal exercises I taught you yesterday.”

Luke just then walks into the kitchen, and by his expression, I can see he heard the tail end of the conversation, looking big eyed, then a chuckle, sits down beside my father who is reading his paper and chuckling.

“MOTHER!”

Emily, with a genuine smile, sips her coffee, not looking up from what she is working on. “I am sure it is Mama Knox. Me and my vag thank you. Either way, it’s a welcome change from my usual routine. I’ve missed this.”

My dad speaks without looking up from the newspaper. “You’re like family, Emily. This place is your home too, whenever you—or your vag need a break.”

How could we all not burst into laughter hearing my dad say that.

Emily being here becomes a welcome break from my own thoughts. It feels like we are thirteen again and immerse

ourselves in the simple things like baking cookies with my mom, which was a riot. Emily has no idea how to bake so needless to say, none of us could eat the cookies.

Luke and Emily are working side by side, helping me with the event.

As the days pass, we don't discuss what happened between Beau and I and I'm grateful to not think or talk about us.

One evening, we are all sitting by the bonfire in the backyard, roasting marshmallows and sharing stories under the starlit snowy sky, and music playing in the background. I can't help but feel a sense of sadness, wishing he were here with me, enjoying this feeling of being with those who care about you the most. I hear Emily giggling like a schoolgirl and watch her and Luke engulfed in their own conversation, and a smile plays on my lips. They've been an incredible help in planning the Skate for Smiles charity event, and it is obvious that there is chemistry between them.

"So, Luke," Emily begins with a playful twinkle in her eye, "what's your strategy for winning the ice-skating race?"

Luke grins, his eyes locking with hers. "Ah, Emily, I can't reveal all my secrets, but let's just say I've been practicing my triple axel, camel spin, death spiral combination in secret."

Emily leans in closer, her voice dropping to a sultrier tone. "A secret triple axel, you say? Care to show me your moves sometime, on or off the ice?"

I don't hear his response, but it's clear that their conversation has taken a flirtatious turn. Luke reaches for a marshmallow, skewering it on a stick. "Speaking of secrets, Emily, do you have a secret hot cocoa recipe you're planning to use to bribe the judges?"

Emily's laughter fills the air, and she leans even closer, her voice huskier. "You caught me, Luke. It's all about the secret ingredient—a dash of this and a pinch of that. But the real secret," she adds, her eyes locking onto his, "is this." Now pointing to her lips.

They exchange smoldering glances, and I can't help but be entertained by the flirting between them. As they continue chatting, their knees occasionally bumping into each other, I feel a warmth in my heart but also some jealousy. I wish Beau were here, beside me, as we made fun of our friends flirting together, laughing at how silly they are.

Just then a sudden sound breaks the conversation. Our heads turn simultaneously to the source of the sound – Emily's phone resting on the table, its screen illuminating with the caller's name – "Beau Daniels."

My heart skips a beat, and I exchange a quick glance with Emily.

She looks at me with an arched eyebrow, as if silently asking, "Should I answer it?" It's a loaded question, one that hangs heavy in the air as to whether she should answer it or not.

With a subtle nod from me, Emily picks up the phone and answers, her voice tinged with a sarcastic tone. “Well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Foot-in-Mouth himself. What can I do for you?”

I watch, my stomach a tangled mess of anticipation and nerves, as Emily engages in a conversation with Beau. Though I can’t hear his words, Emily’s reactions reveal a mixture of sternness, exasperation, and a hint of seriousness.

Finally, Emily ends the call, her expression unreadable. We both know that this conversation is far from over, and whatever Beau has to say, it’s bound to have a significant impact on the path my life will take next.





## Help Me... I'm Feeling-The Grinch

Beau

**A**s the phone rings, my heart races, unsure of how Emily is going to react to my call, or if she'll even answer a call from me. After a few moments, she picks up, and her voice sounds warm but angry. 'Well, well, well. If it isn't Mr. Break-My-Best-Friend's-Heart guy. What can I do for you?'

Taking a deep breath, I reply, "I deserve that. And I'm sure you already know what I said to Amber." I pause, hoping for a response, but there's none. "She won't take any of my calls, and I was hoping you could help me find her or at least talk to her for me. Or, at the very least, just let me know if she's okay."

Emily's voice hardens, her anger noticeable. "Yeah, I'm aware of what you did, and even though it's none of your business, she's okay." She hesitates for a moment before her tone becomes even harsher. 'So, what the hell were you thinking? Why would you talk to her like that? She's done nothing but help you. She's bent over backward for your stupid ass, and this is how you repay her? If I have any say in

this fight, I won't hesitate to tell her to drop you on your ass. But no, she cares about you, and I don't know why. But I'm warning you now, you'd better be damn serious about fixing this, Daniels. Or don't you dare even call her if you're not."

My heart sinks as Emily's words sting. I know I messed up big time. I need to explain. "Listen, Emily, I know I fucked up. Big time. We were talking about her being here for me after my mom's funeral, and I was hurting so much. My emotions were on overload, and the alcohol didn't help. I said some terrible things about her being with me for the money," I confess, my voice filled with regret.

There's a moment of silence before Emily sarcastically giggles and responds, "You're a dumbass."

Caught off guard, I stammer, "Excuse me?"

"You...are...a...dumbass," she says each word slowly and pronounced. "You've got it all wrong. She's not with you for the money."

I sigh, my voice heavy with remorse. "But why would she be with me if not for the money? She's a beautiful, strong woman, and the nicest person I have ever met, and I'm just an asshole who treats her horribly. It doesn't make sense."

Emily's tone, now firm yet gentle, "Beau, Amber declined the money they offered her the next day at the PR firm office. Before your meeting, she went in early and told John she didn't want it."

Confused at what she's saying, my head is spinning. "What? Are you sure?" I pause. "Are you telling me she did not take any of the money the PR Firm offered her? Why in hell would she do that?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Emily confirms. "She told me herself. She did it because of you. She believes in people, not money or fame. She said she couldn't accept the money because helping you and helping others wasn't about the money. She saw something good in you and wanted to help you through all the shit you're going through. She had John donate the money to an abuse shelter."

My heart sinks further. How could I let myself and my feelings for her get clouded? How could I hurt the one person who has been here for me through it all?

"Shit, I'm a complete dumbass," I mutter, my voice heavy with remorse. "I need to find her and apologize. I can't believe I doubted her like that."

"Yes, you are being incredibly stupid! And even if she did it for the money, can you blame her? After all, it wasn't your money! So why are you so worked up about it?" She exclaims, her frustration with me evident in her voice.

Emily's tone softens. "Honestly, Beau, I don't think you deserve her; I think she's way too good for you. But she cares about you, so I won't get in your way. I don't know if she'll even want to talk to you. If she does, just don't... just be honest with her, I'm sure she'll listen. But remember, she cares

about you deeply, and she's hurting too, and if you screw up again, you'll have me to deal with. Got it?"

"I won't screw up this time. I promise," I reply with determination. "Just tell her I want to talk to her, please. Can you at least tell me where she is?"

"She's...she's at her parents' house. I'll be heading there next week to help her with a charity she is having but Beau, I can't promise you anything," Emily warns. "She also asked Luke to come help with the planning. I am not sure if you knew that since you are still in Canada dealing with...I'm really sorry about your mom, Beau"

"I didn't know that but thank you, Emily." Clearing my throat, "I have something important I must do first and then I'll get a hold of you. I really appreciate this."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't thank me yet. You still have a mountain to climb, and only time will tell."

"You're the best. We'll talk soon."

As I hang up the phone, the realization of what I did hits me like a punch in the face. It never should have mattered whether she took the money or not. She is the kindest, most sincere woman I have ever met. The shame I feel is suffocating me, but I must remain focused. I have other problems to fix first.

***And what happened, then? Well, somewhere in Canada they say –Beau's small heart grew three sizes that day. And then – the true meaning of true love came through, and Beau felt the love of ten hearts, plus two!***

In the following days, I got busy. My inheritance is going to be used to fix what I ignorantly screwed up. My mom had always been the rock in my life, my guiding light. Now, with her money, I had an opportunity to honor her memory in a profound way.

The core of my idea was simple yet powerful: giving back. It was a value my mother had instilled in me, the belief that those with privilege had a duty to help those less fortunate. With this inheritance, I had the means to turn that belief into action.

My comment about women's hockey had been made in anger. It was a mistake that has weighed heavily on my conscience ever since I said it. Now, I have the chance to fix that mistake.

I envision creating an association, one dedicated to promoting and maintaining women's hockey. It is a cause that resonates now deep with me, and I believe it is my path to redemption. I am going to invest in grassroots development programs, nurturing young talent from an early age. Scholarships will be offered to gifted female athletes who can't afford the steep costs of training and competitions. And yes, I dare to dream of creating a women's hockey league to rival the men's.

The moment I decided to allocate my inheritance to this association, I felt something I had not felt in a long time. Purpose. It was as if my mother's spirit was guiding me, nudging me to seize this opportunity and make a real impact in

the world of sports and begin healing from the ignorance I have inside me.

I had Luke schedule a meeting with a few influential ‘friends’. The meeting is today and in my mother’s old study, surrounded by her cherished hockey memorabilia from my entire career. It’s a room filled with nostalgia and inspiration, a place where her love for me and hockey is evident, and now it will serve as the birthplace of a new legacy. Among those guests is Harley, a former women’s hockey player, and it took a lot of begging and pleading to get her here. I knew if Harley came, the rest would follow. She’s respected in the industry and will be perfect to lead the sport and take their initiatives to the next level.

“First, I would like to thank everyone for coming at the last minute. As most of you know, my mom recently passed away. Little did I know she had started investing in stocks and bonds for a long time and left me some money. Also, as most of you know, I made an ignorant comment about women in hockey... actually about women in general. I would first like to formally apologize for my comment. The reasons don’t matter as to the why but please know I am truly sorry. I will also be making an apology publicly as soon as this meeting is over. Mr. Toscano, sitting in the seat to my right, is a reporter for ESPN. He will air my apology tonight and it will be broadcasted worldwide. Next, I’ve decided to use my inheritance to start a women’s hockey association,” I announce. “An association that not only promotes women’s hockey but also works on creating a sustainable league. We need to invest in grassroots

development, advocate for more sponsorships, and showcase the incredible talent female athletes possess.”

Harley nods enthusiastically. “Absolutely, Beau. We can also organize workshops and coaching clinics to encourage more girls to take up the sport. And let’s not forget the power of social media in spreading our message and garnering support.”

Whispers can be heard throughout the room and conversations buzzing around me as the group realizes the magnitude of what we can achieve. They discuss ideas and see the possibility of it becoming real. As the discussions continue, ideas start flowing freely. They talk about hosting tournaments, partnering with schools, and reaching out to potential sponsors. Everyone is genuinely excited about the prospect of making a real impact on women’s hockey.

Over the following weeks, we tirelessly work long hours. Harley reaches out to former women’s hockey players, organized fundraising events, and uses social media to rally support. Slowly but surely, our efforts begin to pay off and our vision is becoming a reality.

With each small success, the association gains more traction. People start to take notice and support pours in from various corners. It isn’t long before we are able to establish a sustainable women’s hockey league, complete with dedicated coaches, enthusiastic players, and a growing fan base.

As the funds are transferred, and I witness the positive impact on our mission, I know I am on the right path. My mother’s legacy will now live on through these actions, and I



couldn't feel prouder. It isn't about redemption for my thoughtless remark anymore; it is about using my privilege to create a more complete and fair future for women in the sport.

With each step forward, I feel my mother's presence, her love, and her teachings surrounding me. It is a journey of healing, of turning a painful chapter into a story of positive change. And as I see the progress we are making; I can't help but feel as if I had a small part in making a change in the world. And you know what? It feels damn fucking good.

I kept my promise and publicly apologized for the comment I made. It goes viral.

I know that my mother would be proud of the man I'm becoming.

I can't help but wonder if Amber is too.



## When You find Out Who You Are, You Find Out What You Need –The Princess And The Frog

Amber

With just a few days remaining until the event, I do my best to stay occupied, pouring myself into preparations and last-minute details. But despite my efforts, my thoughts keep circling back to Beau, or more accurately, his apparent lack of effort to win me back.

I gather everyone into the kitchen to go over the final details. However, there's a gap in the schedule, and every time I ask about it, Emily and Luke seem to brush it off, assuring me that everything is under control.

“Why isn't this part of the program complete?” I point to the empty spot and eye Emily and Luke, seeking an explanation. It's unlike them not to have every minute of this event meticulously planned, so I'm puzzled and eager to get an answer.

“Whoa, girl,” Emily begins, pretending innocence. “When did you become such an organized control freak?” She laughs. “We've got a few surprises up our sleeves to make the event extra special. But you'll have to wait and see.”

I shift my gaze to Luke, hoping to get a straight answer from him, but he avoids eye contact and maintains a poker face. “Surprises, huh?” I shoot them both a questioning look. “What kind of surprises?”

Emily chuckles mischievously. “Well, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise if we spilled the beans now, would it?”

I playfully reply, “I swear, Emily, it better be good and fit perfectly into the event. If it’s not Disney on Ice, like I wanted, then it had better be bigger than that. I don’t want the ‘Schuler’s Surprise Puddle-Jumping champions’ showing up to show off their skills or the ‘Golden Girls’ in a dance-off contest’!”

They laugh at my exaggerated expectations.

As we wrap up the final details, I can’t help but wonder about Emily and Luke’s secret plans. Their closed lips hopefully means it will add an element of excitement to the event, and I’m sure whatever it is will be great. Speaking of excitement, Emily and Luke have grown closer over the past weeks. While a part of me feels a tad of jealousy, I’m genuinely happy for them. They can’t seem to keep their hands off each other, and right now, they’re the adorable couple who’d make anyone blush watching their playful behavior.

Surrounded by perfect couples—my parents and now Emily and Luke—I’m reminded of how much I miss Beau. I want to ask Luke about him, but I’m not ready to hear the answer. Calls and texts from Beau have slowed, and it’s probably because I haven’t responded to any of them. I’m just not

prepared for it. His words hurt me deeply, and I don't know what he could say to make things right. I'm avoiding social media and the news; the fear of seeing him with someone else is too much to handle right now. Thankfully, my parents still don't own a TV, unless you still count the one my mom transformed into a flowerbox. Oddly enough, TVs make excellent planters.

Luke doesn't bring up Beau either. When his phone rings, he usually excuses himself. Once I overheard him talking about women and the hockey league. Maybe Beau's in the news again, but I can't worry about it; I have too much on my plate with this charity event.

Later that night, Emily visits my room. She's dressed in comfortable sweats, one of Luke's oversized T-shirts, and pink fuzzy slipper boots. Her strawberry blonde hair is tied up in a ponytail, and she's makeup-free. Even without makeup, she's gorgeous.

She plops belly down on my bed, her legs bent, swinging her feet back and forth crossed in the air, and flips through a magazine lying there. She's happier than I have seen her in a long time, and I can tell that being with Luke suits her.

"Do you know what you're wearing?" she asks, not looking up but with one eyebrow raised.

With everything else on my mind, I hadn't even thought about it. "Oh shit, no. I haven't thought about it. I suppose I'll go shopping tomorrow. Want to come with me? And we both

know you're way better at this than me. I have no idea what to wear."

Emily grins, and I recognize that mischievous look in her eye. "I know that look, Em. What evil plan are you brewing?"

"Evil?" She jumps up and places a hand dramatically over her heart. "Me? Never," she replies, pretending to be innocent.

I giggle and playfully jump onto the bed, tickling her. "Yes, you. You little devil. Spill the tea, or you might just give me a heart attack with all these secrets you're keeping from me lately."

"Okay, okay. I'll share one secret, but you must agree to it first."

"Agree to what?" I'm intrigued.

"Just say 'yes,' and I'll reveal everything."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Fine, 'yes.' Now, tell me! What's this big secret?"

"Perfect!" Emily exclaims, now sitting cross-legged in front of me. "I'm going to handle your outfit, and, of course, I've arranged for professionals to do your hair and makeup. There will be paparazzi and major news channels, along with influential people attending. I want you to look simply gorgeous," she says in a snobby tone. "Are you ready for the spotlight? Or the questions about you and..."

I hesitate, feeling the weight of the upcoming event press upon me. "I'm not sure if I'm ready for all the questions. You

know, considering..." I trail off, not quite ready to talk about my recent breakup.

"Do you want to talk about it yet?" Emily asks gently.

I sigh, twirling my finger around one of my curls, "It's just... I thought Beau might do something, you know, big to win me back. But he hasn't done anything. It's like he doesn't care."

"Well, maybe he's planning to write your name in the stars with a meteor shower. Or perhaps he's organizing a flash mob with a marching band playing your favorite song."

I rolled my eyes, playfully swatting at her arm. "Come on, Em, be serious."

She smirks, "Okay, okay. But you know, sometimes the best things in life happen when you least expect them. Maybe Beau's working on something special behind the scenes."

I groan, resting my face in my hands. "It makes it sound like I'm waiting for a knight in shining armor."

Emily grins, "Well, you know what they say about a man who rides in on a big white horse. He needs a big horse to compensate for his little..."

"Em! You are impossible."

Emily patted my hand, her tone softening. "Amber, just remember, love isn't always about grand gestures. It's about being there for each other, day in and day out. And who knows, maybe your surprise is just around the corner."

Just then Luke peeks his head in the room. “Exactly. Sometimes the little things mean the most.”

We both look at him, surprised. “What? I was looking for you when I overheard you guys. Plus, I was missing my baby a little, and thought I’d give you a kiss before I go to bed,” he says, running in and giving her a gentle, sweet kiss before disappearing back into the hall.

Tears start to fill my eyes, but I can’t help but giggle at Luke. “Go. You don’t have to stay here and babysit me, I’m fine. I promise.”

Emily pulls me into a hug and whispers softly, “I promise you; your prince charming will come someday. And who knows, maybe he’ll be at the charity. How romantic would it be to have your last first kiss at the same place you had your first, first kiss?”

I manage a smile through my tears. “Since when did you become such a romantic?”

Emily laughs. “Well, it’s all thanks to Luke. I’ve never felt this way before. I know we’ve only just met, but it feels different with him. I can’t help it. I know what you’re going to say, so don’t even start.”

I giggle. “Okay, I won’t say anything. Does this mean you’re going to be the mushy, romantic one now, and I’ll be the voice of reason?”

Emily pretends to gag. “Oh, please, none of that gooey, gushy romantic shit for me. I’ll leave that all to you,” she



jokes, poking me in the arm. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I got a lot of work still, and I’m guessing it will take all night. But that’s the kind of friend I am. Take one for the team.”

“Oh my god, get out of here.” I throw one of my stuffed animals at her.

“Thanks! This is the perfect size to shove into his mouth. He’s a screamer girl.” She says in her sexy voice and runs out of the room, stuffed animal in hand.

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The day of the event arrives, and the sun is shining bright in the crisp morning air, making it the most perfect weather. The house is already busy, everyone is running around doing their part. After drinking my coffee, then answering questions tying up some loose ends, I make my way over to the venue. As I step out of the woods, I stop dead in my tracks. The once so familiar area has been transformed into a winter wonderland.

My eyes catch a whimsical sign in front of the ice cream stand. “Berry Bliss Delight,” it reads, and beneath the bold words, a description and a picture. Velvety creamy vanilla ice cream, swirling with luscious strawberry ripples, and tiny chips of white chocolate. My mouth waters at the mere thought of this creation, and a reminder of a kiss once shared so long ago.

I offer a friendly wave to the stand’s owner, a warm acknowledgment of their dedication to our cause. It’s amazing to see how the community has rallied behind this event, a

testament to my parents' relationship with the community. Their request for supplies and volunteers was met with an overwhelming response; it seems like every acquaintance and friend they asked has stepped up to contribute their time and resources, a flood of support that leaves me both touched and humbled.

A large, white tent with sparkling fairy lights strung on the outside stands beside the ice cream parlor. Inside, long tables are adorned with blue and white tablecloths, and centerpieces made of ice skates filled with fresh flowers. The soft glow of votive candles hang from pieces of wood which creates a warm and inviting atmosphere and portable heaters are placed in each corner to warm the guests when needed. It's a breathtaking sight that instantly puts a smile on my face.

Behind the tent is the centerpiece though, the pond. The sight of it causes me to gasp. It gleams like a crystal-clear diamond in the winter sun. Its surface has been transformed into something simply magical. In the middle of the frozen pond, a mesmerizing surprise awaits. The Tree of Dreams ice sculpture stands majestically atop the glistening ice, as if its crystal-clear trunk is rising out from the frozen waters below which represents life even in the coldest times. Each of its delicately carved branches extends gracefully outward, and each branch perfectly chilled and infused with a unique flavor.

One features a refreshing lemonade, another a berry-infused iced tea, the third offers a sparkling champagne, and the last is lavender-infused water. Beneath the tree is a glass-encased, heart-shaped donation display crafted from clear, frosted glass

and adorned with delicate snowflake etchings, it resembles an enchanted crystal heart.

Inside this elegant display, guests will see a swirling snowstorm of sparkling, iridescent glass beads. The beads symbolize the collective dreams and hopes of the children the charity supports. Each time a guest donates, they drop a small, shimmering glass bead into the heart, creating a symphony of tinkling sounds that resonate with each act of generosity.

At the edges of the pond, there are delicate snowflakes painted with biodegradable paint adding a touch of whimsy, and strings of twinkling fairy lights crisscross above. Along the other side are bubble globes, each decorated with a different winter decor and plush seating, creating charming photo opportunities for our guests to capture their memories.

There are cozy fire pit lounges for guests to snuggle under fur blankets while toasting marshmallows and keep warm in the chilly air. Nearby, a network of hot cocoa stations, each offering a variety of flavors and toppings, warming the guests from the inside out. Food trucks are stationed nearby.

A stage sits at the end of the pond with a banner that reads “Skate for Smiles,” and musicians are setting up their instruments for the live performances scheduled throughout the day. The positive energy can be felt as I watch everyone running around, doing their part to make sure it is ready for when guests begin to arrive.

Pleased with what I see, I make my way back to the house to begin getting ready. I am still not sure what outfit Emily chose

for me, but I'm sure it will be perfect.

As I walk into my room, I see a very large black box with huge bow on top sitting on my bed. I can't help but smile and for the first time since Beau, I feel a sense of accomplishment. Helping others is something instilled in me, a part of who I am. Even though Beau was not the man he portrayed himself to be, maybe, just maybe, I made a difference in his life. I hold onto that thought, needing to believe being with him was not a waste of time.

There is a card on top of the box, and it feels oddly familiar, similar of the vintage-style letters that Beau and I discovered in the mansion.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I open the letter, I'm met with the faint, familiar scent of Beau's cologne. I pause, momentarily thrown off balance. Why am I smelling him when he clearly isn't the one who sent me this gift? What's wrong with me?

Pushing aside the confusion, I carefully unfold the delicate paper and begin to read the words inscribed on it. My breath catches in my throat.

*Amber,*

*There are so many things I want to say to you, and I've been trying to find the right words. I miss you more than words can express. I want to apologize for my actions and the things I said. I was wrong, and I hurt you deeply. You deserve so much better than that.*

*I've been busy working on my flaws and mending mistakes, and I want you to know that it is because of you. I've made a lot of mistakes, but I'm trying to do whatever it takes to make things right. Until I learned to love myself, how could I ask you to believe in me? So after a lot of soul-searching, healing, and forgiveness, I can now come to you as a man you deserve. I believe in us, in what we had, and I can't imagine my life without you in it.*

*I know I have a lot to prove, and I'm willing to take it slow and earn your trust again. But, Amber, I want to fight for us. Please consider giving me another chance. I promise you won't regret it.*

*Please accept this gift for you to wear at the charity event. I'm so proud of you. It's an incredible accomplishment, and I know you'll make a real difference in the world. Just as you did for an asshole like me.*

*Beau*

After reading Beau's letter, I'm overwhelmed with emotions, my heart racing, and tears blurring the words on the page. I feel a mix of shock, disbelief, hope, and a hint of fear coursing through me.

I can't deny that this isn't what I wanted, for Beau to realize his mistakes and come back to me, fight for me. The sincerity in his words feel real, and for a moment, I want to believe that he truly means everything he wrote. The part of me that loves him longs to embrace his offer of a second chance.

But then reality crashes down on me. The wounds he inflicted on my heart are still fresh and trusting him again seems like a dangerous path. Can I risk going through the pain all over again if things don't work out?

As the letter slips from my trembling fingers, I take a deep breath, attempting to steady my hands. I turn my attention to the elegantly wrapped box. I carefully lift the lid, revealing a stunning outfit placed inside.

My breath catches in my throat as I look inside. Beau's choice is impeccable, a testament to how well he knows me. The outfit oozes sophistication and style, a perfect blend of classic and modern.

There's a knee-length, white dress, that appears to be tailored to my body. Its simplicity is its charm, with a subtle V-neck and delicate lace detailing at the sleeves and hem. The iridescent fabric shimmers in the light, similar to icicles.

Beneath the dress lies a pair of above knee silver boots, ready to complete the look. They're not just stylish but

practical, considering the chilly weather and snow. Next is a white shawl that will drape over my shoulders and a fur lined hoodie. Under that is a matching hand muff to keep my hands warm. It's clear that Beau has thought of every detail to ensure my comfort and style.

I run my fingers over the fur, admiring the beauty and feeling the softness. The gift feels as if Beau's trying to say, "Remember who we were, and let's move forward."

What truly surprises me is the last item in the box — inside lies a small blue tiffany box. Upon opening the lid, I find nestled on a bed of velvet a pair of heart-shaped earrings. Each earring features a single, radiant red diamond at its center, perfectly matching the necklace Beau gave me at the mansion.

After I finish getting ready, my hair and makeup perfectly complementing my dress, I am once again alone in my room. Before heading over to the venue, I stop in front of the mirror and stare at the stranger staring back at me.

In front of me, I see a woman who has overcome difficulty. I see a woman who has found her strength. I see a woman who is determined to make a positive impact on the world. In this very moment, as I prepare to step into the spotlight, unsure of what is about to happen, I feel the heart-shaped pendant resting over my heart, and it reminds me that I am never alone.

I straighten my posture, my chin up in the air, ready to confront any challenges that may lie ahead. When I look at the stranger one last time, I see a woman who is beautiful, empowered and ready to conquer the world.





## I'd Rather Die Tomorrow Than Live a Hundred Years Without Knowing You. - Pocahontas

Beau

**T**he women's hockey league is now running smoothly, thanks to Harley and the capable hands overseeing it. Over these last few weeks, I have been on a journey to heal, take responsibility and learn to love myself. Only now my focus can shift, and I am now ready to focus on winning back the woman who means everything to me.

As much as I want to show Amber the man that I've become, I have to prove myself to those she respects and loves. So the first thing I need to do is speak to her parents. I know if they have negative feeling towards me then Amber would struggle forgiving me as well. Emily spoke to them for me and asked them if they would meet me privately, and they said yes. I need them to understand how deeply I care for their daughter and how committed I am to fixing the mistakes I made and how I am becoming a man who is worthy of their daughter.

But now sitting across from Mr. and Mrs. Knox, I feel the weight of this moment pressing down on me. Mr. Knox, appears to be a man of few words, eyeing me skeptically,

while Mrs. Knox, with her warm but cautious gaze, seems willing to hear me out. Before I can begin talking, Mr. Knox starts speaking.

“Beau,” his voice steady and firm, “What makes you think you deserve Amber? You’ve hurt our daughter deeply.”

I nod, acknowledging the gravity of my past actions. “Mr. and Mrs. Knox, I don’t expect you to believe me based solely on my words. I’ve taken concrete steps to become a better person. It started with seeking professional help. I started therapy, addressing my own issues, insecurities, and my impulsive behavior. I’ve learned to recognize my faults and work on them. I learned that it wasn’t the women I had dated, it wasn’t their fault for the way they treated me. I realized it was mine. I blamed everyone else for my shitty life and did not take any of that responsibility.”

Mrs. Knox, her eyes softening, “First, Amber’s dad and I would like to say how sorry we are about your mother passing.”

“Thank you, ma’am”

And then she speaks to me in a motherly tone, “ You can call me Sharon. Beau, we want what’s best for Amber. She’s been through a lot.”

“I understand, Sharon,” I reply earnestly. “I’m also committed to prove myself with Amber. I’m committed to show her how sorry I am for the pain I’ve caused her. I’ve learned that love isn’t just about words; it’s about actions. I’ve

been more attentive and considerate of others, trying to be a better friend to those around me.”

Mr. Knox leans forward, his gaze intense. “And what about your lifestyle? You were often in the public eye for being a playguy... or something like that.”

I pause, a bit baffled by the unexpected word choice, then manage to stifle a chuckle. “Not quite, Mr. Knox. I believe you mean ‘playboy’.”

He blinks, clearly not catching the mistake. “Right, right, one of those fellas.”

I nod, acknowledging my past behavior. “I’ve made major changes there too. I’ve cut down on the partying and focused on my career and fixing myself. I’ve become involved in charity work, like the women’s hockey league, as a way to give back and make a positive impact. And I have publicly apologized for the stupid comment I made.”

Mrs. Knox steps in, “Beau, Amber doesn’t know how to do anything without putting her whole heart into it. She loves deeply, trusts deeply and once invested, commits deeply. When she was a little girl, we took her to the roller-skating rink. She was maybe three or four years old. We put her skates on and as her father and I were putting our skates on, we notice she was missing. Panic took over and we ran around looking for her and to our surprise she was already on the rink. We both watch as she rolled then fall, get up and try again and fall. She did this for about two hours by herself, and when we thought she had enough because she was utterly exhausted,

bruised and even bleeding, we still had to drag her off the floor in order to leave. She deserves someone who can reciprocate that commitment. Fighting all the way to the end and not giving up just because it is too hard. We're willing to support your efforts, but you need to understand that our daughter's happiness is our priority."

"I understand completely, Sharon," I reply sincerely. "I care about Amber deeply, and I can't imagine my life without her. I want to fight for us, to make things right, all the way to the end."

They exchange glances, and after a moment of silence, Mr. Knox nods. "We'll support you, Beau, but actions speak louder than words. It's not up to us if she speaks to you or not."

"I appreciate your understanding and your willingness to give me a chance," I reply sincerely. "I understand that it's ultimately up to Amber, but I promise you both that I'll do whatever it takes to make things right."

Mrs. Knox, tears in her eyes, replies, "We just want her to be happy. She deserves that. If it is you that makes her happy, then we will love you and welcome you as part of our family."

I nod in agreement, "I want the same, Sharon, and I'll do everything in my power to make sure she is happy."

With that, the conversation shifts, and we talk more about the charity event, the impact it could have on the community, and how they've been helping Amber with the preparations. I tell them about the women's league and for a moment, as Ambers mom listens to me, I see my mom looking back at me.

A few hours later, all of us exhausted, but a feeling of a weight lifted off my shoulders, we finally say our goodbyes. I shake Mr. Knox hand and thank him for taking time to meet with me.

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Since we've been apart, I've felt the need to check up on Amber, not out of possessiveness but out of genuine concern and curiosity about her life without me. As much as it hurts me to see her blossoming without me, it also is a relief, knowing she is doing well.

It was clear to me that I needed to work on myself before I could hope to win her back and now I'm ready to focus on her. I spoke to her parents and sending her the outfit was meant as a kind gesture, but I still I have a long road ahead of me.

As a young hockey player, my coach said something that stuck with me for years.

“Beau, in hockey, you've got to skate hard, take your shots, and never back down. Remember, son, in the game of hockey, you miss 100% of the shots you don't take. So, give it your all.. If you want to win, you've got to take those chances and leave it all out there.”

Therefore, using that same advice, I am giving it my all, to show Amber just how much she means to me. I am putting all my eggs in one basket and putting it all out there. I can only hope that this surprise will touch her heart and possibly show her I've changed. Or worst case, she at least talks to me.

I call Emily and Luke and the conversation starts with a focus on the final details. “Alright, guys, let’s make sure all the plans are in place,” I say, trying to sound all businesslike, and of course, Emily laughs at me. “I just need this to be perfect for Amber.”

Luke chuckles and chimes in, “We know, Beau. But you trusted us to handle this, and it’s been a lot, dealing with helping you as well as planning this charity. Yeah, it’s been a challenge, but I think we are good.”

Emily chimes in with a playful yet serious tone, “Hey there, Mr. Better-Not-Screw-This-Up, you owe us big time. And let me make it clear, if you mess this up, you’re really not deserving of her.”

“I know there is the possibility that Amber might not be ready to talk to me or forgive me. It’s been a while, and maybe I’m too late.”

Luke, ever the voice of reason, responds, “Beau, we’ve been thinking about that too. However, if Emily thought there was not even the slightest chance, she wouldn’t go through all this for you.”

Emily continues. “I don’t know why, but she still cares about you. She’s been through a lot, and trust doesn’t come easy for her. Either way this goes, you have to respect her choice.”

“I’ve been working on myself, trying to be a better person. I can only hope she sees that, but if she doesn’t take me back or talk to me, I still want her to know the impact she’s had on me and the opportunity to ask for forgiveness.”

Luke, the true friend I know he is, responds, “We’re here to support you, no matter what.”

“Thanks guys, it means a lot to me. So, before we hang up, I have one more question. How the hell did you two end up hooking up?”

Luke starts laughing. “Well, Beau, it’s a classic tale of opposites attracting. She couldn’t resist my rugged good looks, and I couldn’t resist her impeccable taste in men.”

Emily laughs, “That’s one way to put it. Honestly, he wouldn’t leave me alone until I agreed to go on a date, and then I finally gave in.”

Luke adds, “Yeah, it took some serious begging. Thanks for reminding me, Emily.”

Beau chuckles, “Well, a little begging never hurt anyone. I am happy for you two.” And even though I knew I should feel jealous, I didn’t. I was genuinely happy for them. “Thanks again guys. Talk soon.”

After we hang up, sitting alone with my thoughts, I know I am ready for whatever lies ahead. Until this moment, I had never truly comprehended the importance of prioritizing someone else’s needs above my own. I was so self-absorbed that I never considered the impact my actions had on her.

I refuse to let her go without putting up the fight of my life.





# The Truth Does Set You Free-Pinocchio

Amber

**A**s I step onto the red carpet at the charity event, the cameras flash, and reporters call out my name. I'm instantly surrounded by a sea of microphones and flashing lights. The questions start pouring in, and I can tell that the reporters are eager to get a scoop on my personal life, particularly my relationship with Beau.

I take a deep breath, reminding myself of the purpose of this event. It's not about me or my past relationship; it's about the children we're here to support. With a graceful smile, I address the reporters.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here tonight. I appreciate your interest, but I want to emphasize that this event is about something much more important. It's about raising funds and awareness for children in need. Let's focus on the cause, on the impact we can make together. Any questions related to the charity; I'd be more than happy to answer."

I can see some disappointed faces in the crowd, but I hold my ground. This charity event means the world to me, and I won't let it be overshadowed by my personal problems. With a determined stride, I continue down the red carpet, trying to maintain my composure.

The skating relay races have already kicked off, teams of participants gliding gracefully across the ice, each lap bringing us closer to our goal. It's a friendly competition, but the true victory lies in the funds we'll raise to support the charity.

Live music and performances add to the festive atmosphere, and I'm grateful for the artists who have generously lent their talent to the cause.

Nearby, a silent auction and raffle are in full swing, with fantastic prizes up for grabs, all donated by local businesses and sponsors. The attendees eagerly participate, knowing that their contributions will make a significant impact on the lives of children in need.

Every so often, a gentle snowfall descends from an overhead snow machine. The turnout has far exceeded my expectations, and I'm humbled by the support pouring in from every direction.

As the day continues into dusk, I finally spot Emily and Luke nestled together under a furry blanket in front of a fire pit. A pang of loneliness tugs at my heart. I can't help but think about what it would be like if Beau were here with me. Imagining us laughing and sharing intimate moments under the blanket, it fills me with longing and warmth.

Making my way over to them, I chuckle as I squeeze in between them, feeling their warmth. Luke pulls the blanket out and drapes it over all three of us.

“So, any chance either of you are ready to share about the mystery event?” I tease, hoping for a distraction from my swirling emotions. “I don’t see any Disney on Ice characters or celebrity entertainers around, and the suspense is killing me.”

Emily laughs, her eyes squinting towards me. “Who said it was an entertainer, Amber? I was just about to head over to make sure everything’s in order. Luke’s going to keep you company and might even talk if you ask nicely.”

I raise an eyebrow at Luke, and he Cheshire grins back in response. Emily leans down to kiss me on the head and then Luke, before making her way toward the ice cream stand.

Now alone with Luke, I can’t resist asking the question that’s been plaguing my thoughts for weeks. “Luke, how is he? How’s Beau doing?”

Luke’s expression softens, and he turns to me, his eyes sincere. “He’s struggling, Amber. He’s been doing a lot of soul-searching and self-improvement. He misses you, more than he probably admits.”

I release a deep sigh, the weight of my anger slowly dissipating over the past few days. Perhaps it’s time to consider talking to him, a step toward healing. It doesn’t imply getting back together, but it could be a place to start. “Maybe we can talk. Could you help in arranging that?”

Luke smiles warmly at me. “Of course, Amber. I know he’d be happy to have the chance to talk to you.”

Just then, the sound of the microphone being adjusted catches our attention. I turn my eyes toward the stage, where Emily is now standing, ready to address the crowd.

My curiosity is now at an all-time high; I glance over at Luke for any clues about what’s happening. However, he remains focused on Emily.

Emily begins by thanking everyone for coming and highlighting the incredible success of the night. But then, she adds a mysterious twist that leaves me utterly baffled.

“There’s one more surprise in store for you all,” she announces with a sly smile. “But to reveal it, I’d like to introduce someone very special to the stage, a remarkable woman who’s leading a significant role in launching the Women’s Hockey League Association. Please welcome Harley!”

My heart races as a woman in a professional hockey uniform steps onto the stage. I’m completely confused.

Harley, standing tall in her hockey uniform, addresses the crowd. “Thank you, Emily, and thank you all for your incredible support tonight. I’m here to share something exciting with you. A few weeks ago, I received a phone call asking if I would consider meeting up with a group of investors and like-minded individuals like me. That day we came together with a shared vision: to build a future for women in hockey.” She pauses, allowing her words to sink in.

“These passionate individuals understood that women’s hockey deserves the same recognition and opportunities as men’s hockey. They saw the incredible talent, dedication, and determination of female athletes and believed it was time to provide them with a platform to shine.”

Harley ‘s words resonate with the crowd, and you can feel the energy as she continues.

“Through our collective efforts, the Women’s Hockey Association was born. It’s not just a league; it’s a movement. It’s a commitment to empowering young girls and women, fostering their love for the game, and giving them the chance to compete at the highest level.”

The audience responds with enthusiastic applause, and Harley ‘s passion for the cause is evident in every word she speaks.

“The Women’s Hockey Association isn’t just about competition; it’s about community,” she adds. “It’s about building a network of support, mentorship, and growth for female athletes at all levels. It’s about inspiring the next generation of players to dream big, work hard, and believe in themselves.”

As Harley speaks, you can sense the pride and determination in her voice. She goes on to describe the various programs, scholarships, and initiatives that the association has in place to support female athletes.

“And now,” Harley announces with a smile, “I’d like to introduce the person who’s made all of this possible, the

driving force behind this change. He's not just a talented athlete; he's a dedicated advocate for women in sports. Please welcome, Beau Daniels!"

My body goes weak, my knees nearly buckling under me just hearing his name. Luke catches me, gently lowering me back to my seat. My head is throbbing and it's as if my mind and ears aren't fully synced, struggling to process what is happening.

And then he appears. A man I've known for a while, but the sight of him now stirs something in me I almost forgot existed. He's undeniably sexy, but it's not just his looks that captivate me. His presence is transformed tonight, like a phoenix rising from its own ashes. He stands tall, a genuine smile gracing his face, and his eyes carry an earnestness I've never seen before.

In the time I've spent with Beau, I've witnessed various sides of his personality. But tonight, he's different. His presence commands attention, not through force or arrogance, but through authenticity. It's as if he's found a new depth within himself, and it's as if he's shed his old self and emerged as a natural, unvarnished side of himself.

His eyes sweep across the crowd until they meet mine, sending a surge of heat through my body.

As the applause gradually subsides he begins to speak.

"Thank you all for being here tonight and for your unwavering support of 'Skate for Smiles' and our new women's hockey league," Beau says, his voice carrying a note of sincerity.

“As many of you know, I’ve been deeply involved in creating this association because I believe in its mission, and I’m committed to making a difference in the lives of women in sports and also our children. Our women’s hockey league represents a significant step towards empowering young girls and providing them with opportunities they rightfully deserve.”

The audience nods in agreement, appreciating Beau’s dedication to the cause. But what comes next catches me completely off guard.

“But there’s something else I want to share with all of you tonight, something personal and important to me.” Beau then takes a deep breath. “Ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you tonight as someone who has made mistakes. And those mistakes, they hurt someone very dear to me.” He pauses, his eyes never leaving mine.

“A few months ago, I made a comment about women and hockey, and it was thoughtless, ignorant, and deeply hurtful. It was insensitive and for that, I’m truly sorry. I didn’t understand the impact of my words then, but I do now.”

Still looking at me, I can feel the pain and sincerity in his eyes.

“Shortly after my less-than-brilliant comment, a meeting was held involving our public relations team as well as one of New Yorks top law firms, aimed at fixing my mistake. Their idea? A fake relationship. They said that it would help improve my public image by presenting me as a more committed and

responsible person, countering my previous playboy image. It would show everyone that I was in a serious, committed relationship, which could make me appear more mature and responsible in the eyes of the media and my fans. Additionally, if my “girlfriend” were involved in charity work or had a positive public image, it would reflect well on me by association. That’s when I met Amber.”

“She represents everything I am not. Someone who fights for others, someone kind and selfless. But I believed at that time that I was the victim. Who the hell is she to act like she can save me? I truly believed I was the one needing saving and not this monster everyone was making me out to be. And to this day I don’t know why, Amber agreed to be my fake girlfriend,” Beau admits, “but what started as a PR move turned into something real, something deep. Amber changed my life in ways I never thought possible.”

The audience listens intently, captivated by Beau’s heartfelt words.

“I want to make something abundantly clear,” Beau continues, his voice unwavering. “I don’t blame Amber for walking away. What I did was inexcusable, and I understand why she left. I hurt her, and I’ve carried that guilt with me every day since.”

A hushed silence settles over the crowd as they hang on to his every word. It’s a vulnerability that few have seen from Beau, a candid admission of his faults.



“But tonight,” Beau continues, his voice steady, “I stand here not as a perfect man, but as one who has learned from his mistakes. I’m continuing on a journey of self-discovery and improvement. I’m in therapy to confront my issues, my insecurities, and my impulsive behavior.”

He takes a deep breath, his gaze moving across the audience. “I realized that I was quick to blame others for my shortcomings, and I never took responsibility for my own actions. That’s not the man I want to be.”

Beau’s words are met with a mixture of emotions from the crowd, some nodding in understanding, while others remain skeptical.

“Amber,” he says, his voice softening as he looks directly at me, “you have changed my life in ways I never thought possible. You’ve shown me what real love is, and you’ve made me want to be a better man. I’m not perfect, and I don’t have all the answers, but I know that I want to be imperfect without all the answers with you.”

Tears threaten to well up in my eyes as I listen to Beau’s heartfelt words. It’s a vulnerability that he’s never shown before, a side of him that I longed to see.

Beau’s words hang in the air, a genuine plea for forgiveness and understanding. A hush falls over the crowd.

Harley steps back up to the microphone, gives Beau a hug and then smiles warmly at the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm round of applause to Beau Daniels, and yourselves for being part of this incredible event tonight. It’s been a night filled with generosity, support, and a few surprises.”

The audience responds with laughter, cheers, and applauses.

“But before we move on to the final event, the one we’ve all been eagerly waiting for—the skate race for the kids—I have a special announcement to make,” Harley continues, her voice filled with excitement.

A hush falls over the crowd as they lean in, eager to hear what she has to say, afraid to miss another bomb drop similar to the one moments earlier.

Harley grins mischievously. “Our friend, Beau Daniels, has not only been instrumental in launching our women’s hockey league but has also offered a significant donation to our cause. However, in the spirit of sportsmanship and the true essence of tonight, he’s decided to make things interesting.”

She pauses for dramatic effect, letting the anticipation build.

“He’s offering to double his donation for anyone who’s up for a challenge, a one-time race around the rink. To participate, all you need to do is pay a \$100 entry fee, which will go directly to the kids. If you win against Beau, he’ll double his initial donation, offering an incredible one million dollars to our cause!”

Gasps of surprise and excitement ripple through the crowd. The proposition is met with both awe and enthusiasm, as

attendees contemplate the chance to not only contribute to the charity, potentially double Beau's generous donation, but also get the chance to skate alongside Beau Daniels.

"Think about it, folks," Harley encourages with a playful wink. "A fun race, a chance to win big for the kids, and the opportunity to challenge Beau Daniels himself. Who's up for the challenge?"

The crowd erupts into cheers and applause, and it's clear that many are eager to take on the challenge and support the cause in a thrilling and unexpected way knowing that their contributions will make a significant impact on the lives of children in need.

I feel like a deer caught in the headlights, emotions crashing over me like relentless waves. Numbness first, then embarrassment and confusion. My heart races, and I can feel all eyes are on me. I have to get out of there, away from the prying eyes, away from Beau.

Each step back to my car felt like an eternity. Why is he here? The charity event was supposed to be about making a difference, about helping kids in need, not about confronting our relationship.

Sinking into the driver's seat, I took a moment to catch my breath. My fingers clutched the steering wheel, knuckles white with tension. Part of me wants to just drive away, to escape this mess entirely. But then I thought about the purpose of this event, the kids who depended on it, and everyone who had dedicated their time to helping us.

Opening the car door, ready to step out, I look up and see Beau. Before he can even utter a word, I speak, my voice shaky but determined. “I can’t do this right now. I need a minute alone.” Without waiting for a response, I close the car door, start the engine and pull away from him, my heart heavy with unfamiliar feelings.

It is a quick drive home, and as I step inside my parents’ house, the darkness and silence provides some relief. The dizziness of what had just happened begins to fade but the anxiety inside me remains. I can hear the distant sounds of people cheering and screaming as the skate races begin, a reminder of what I just left behind.

My phone rings, and Emily’s name flashes on the screen. I answer, her voice filled with concern. She asks if I am okay, and I hesitate for a second before responding. “I’ll be back shortly.” I press end before she can respond.

Alone in my room, I can’t help but simmer with rage. “So, Mr. Daniels, you decide to swoop in and steal the thunder from the charity event I’ve been slaving over?” I grumble, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“And let’s not forget the grand finale: me high tailing it out of my own event because of your bold public display. I didn’t want to seem rude by ignoring your heartfelt speech, so I went for the dramatic exit which was clearly the best option,” I add with a sarcastic snort.

I clench my fists and unleash a furious scream, “AHH! Well, Mr. Daniels, if it’s a public spectacle you want, I’ll gladly

show you how it's done. Consider this your crash course in embarrassment.”

I start rummaging through my closet and after some digging, I find the oversized, neon pink snowsuit. It's puffy and outdated, complete with a faux fur-trimmed hood and chunky plastic zippers. I can't help but giggle at the sight of it. It's a far cry from the elegant dress I am wearing, but I decide that tonight, it's the perfect outfit. I continue digging until my eyes finally land on them, nestled in the corner right where I left them. With no time to waste, I change into the snowsuit, tossing everything else into a gym bag before rushing out the door.

Tonight, I'm ready to confront whatever challenges come my way, even if it means going head-to-head with Beau himself.



# I Finally Got What I Wanted, But What I Wanted Was Not What I Needed-The Princess and the Frog

Amber

**D**espite my best efforts to hide my feelings, anger simmers just beneath the surface as I storm back to the charity. I'm not going to let Beau's appearance tonight keep me from this event. But there are still unresolved issues between us, and I need answers.

As I make my way down to the rink, my presence is noticed. The crowd's eyes follow me as I walk. They whisper and point, wondering what I'm going to do next.

I pay my donation at the ticket counter, and the clerk hands me a piece of paper with the number twenty-nine in large black ink on one side. He tells me to pin it to my chest. I take a seat on the bench, waiting for my turn. Just then, my number is called, and I look up and see Harley, who smiles at me, followed by a courtesy nod. She gives me a sympathetic look and gestures for me to go ahead. She knows how I feel.

I pull out my skates, showing signs of age, yet when I slide them on my feet, they mold onto me like an old friend, and I lace them up tight.

Emily approaches me with a concerned look. “Amber, are you okay? You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

I meet her gaze and smile, though there is a fire in my eyes. “I’m not doing this for anyone else, Em. This is for me.”

I take a step onto the ice, the cold air hitting my face, and I’m instantly reminded of a time long ago and a girl who spent hours learning to skate on this pond. Growing up in a home with no TV and parents who believed being outside teaches us valuable life lessons, it was inevitable that skating would be a way for me to escape.

But I need to push the sentimental crap aside. I have a score to settle, and I’m ready to face Beau head-on.

Everyone’s attention shifts to me as I join Beau on the starting line. His expression is surprised as he looks at me, clearly not expecting me to be standing there or competing against him.

With a sly smile, I break the silence, mocking him. “So, Beau, just curious if you’re up for this? I mean, I know you’ve been busy soul-searching and stuff. You might be a bit rusty.”

Beau chuckles softly, his voice deep and smooth. “Oh, I’m sure I can keep up, sweetheart. After all, I’ve got a lot to prove to you, don’t I?”

I can’t help but look at him with a glare, taunting him. “Well, Beau, since you’re so fond of making grand entrances and stealing the spotlight, I thought I’d give you a taste of your



own medicine. Plus, I couldn't resist the chance to embarrass you publicly, just like you did to me."

I smirk, my anger fueling my competitive nature. "But don't worry, sweetheart, I won't blame you if you chicken out. After all, it must be tough to face someone who's not afraid to put you in your place," my words hanging in the air, challenging Beau to bring it.

I shoot him a challenging look, my eyebrows raised, and he responds with a knowing half smile and playfulness in his eyes. "Well, Amber," he begins, his voice dripping with confidence, "as much as I'm afraid of you "putting me in my place", and believe me, it's tempting to just chicken out, how about we make a little bet instead?"

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "What kind of bet?"

My inner thoughts start to battle it out, like a Mr. Yes and a Mr. No are plopped on each side of my shoulders.

*Mr. Yes*, one side of me whispers seductively. "The kind of bet where he wins, rips your clothes off, and takes you right now, here on this rink? Hell yes. Plus, this could be your chance to get closer to him again. Don't you miss those moments when he'd throw you around like a rag doll and have his way with you?"

*Mr. No*, on the other side, counters, "Don't fall for his charms, ruggedly good looks, or the way he smells. Pull yourself together, woman. Remember how he hurt you and how he made you feel?"

*Mr. Yes*, the tempting voice persists. “But what if he’s changed? What if he’s genuinely sorry? And look at those muscles and great ass. Come on, you know you want him.”

*Mr. No*, the cautious side warns. “Don’t let him back in. Protect your heart.”

I shake off the mental argument in my head, refocusing on the present. “So, what’s the bet?” I reply, my voice steady, as if I hadn’t just had a fight with myself.

“If I win, you go on a date with me. A real first date. And if, by some miracle, you win,” he continues, “I’ll triple my donation.”

Beau extends his hand towards me, and I seize the challenge without hesitation, shaking it firmly. “Let’s agree on two laps, and you’ve got yourself a deal, Daniels.”

As we both take our places on the line, preparing for the race, a different kind of tension fills the air. It isn’t just about the race anymore; it’s about the unspoken emotions, the unresolved issues, and the unknown of what lies beyond the winners circle.

The buzzer sounds, and as one might imagine two people in a race to start quick and fast, to everyone’s shock, we don’t. I move forward, my legs wobbling and my arms flailing around, and Beau skates ahead, turning around to face me. He extends his arms toward me.

Unable to hold back a smile, I ask him. “What are you doing, Beau?”

“I don’t want to beat you right out of the gate, so I thought I would help and give you a head start.”

“So you think I need help?”

“Well...”

Before he could finish the word, I dug my blades into the ice, propelling myself forward with a burst of speed that caught Beau off guard. His expression shifts from playful confidence to genuine surprise, his eyes widening as he watches me surge ahead.

The spectators around us, initially drawn in by curiosity, are now captivated by the unexpected turn of events. My movements on the ice are no longer clumsy; they are a display of skill and determination. I glide with grace, my strides long and purposeful, leaving behind a trail of shimmering ice shavings on Beau’s face.

I hear the gasps and cheers from the crowd, but I’m in my own world.

I glance back at Beau, who is boldly trying to catch up. His surprise has turned into determination, and he pushes himself harder, but it’s clear that I have the upper hand. In this moment, I am the master of the ice, leaving him in my wake, both shocked and impressed. I speed through the first lap as cheers echo through the air. Beau is not far behind me, and I push myself harder. As I reach the first bend, my skates gliding with ease, I see him come to the inside on my left, now side by side with me. Beau looks over at me; his tongue is

taunting me. My lips curl into a devilish grin, my fist curls up in a ball, and I extend my middle finger.

Suddenly, a young boy appeared out of nowhere, holding a huge ice cream cone. He tripped and dropped the entire cone on the ice, creating a slippery puddle right in front of me.

My skates hit the puddle, and I lose balance, my arms flailing as I try to stay upright. In a split second, Beau was right there, reaching out to grab my arm and keep me from falling.

“Thanks for saving me again! I laugh as Beau helps me regain my balance.

But as I don't seem to be able to steady myself, I grab hold of Beau's hoodie, and the sudden yank causes him to kick out a foot, and his blade tangles into my laces. As we fall to the ice, we both let out a yelp of surprise.

Now on our butts, we slide for a few feet before stopping past the finish line. We are both laughing uncontrollably, our faces and clothes covered in snow.

“Beau, are you okay?” I ask, still laughing.

Beau, a bit red-faced, smiled and couldn't help but tease, “You've been keeping your skating talents a secret, haven't you?”

“Well, maybe I was just waiting for the right moment to show off. You know, keep you on your toes.”

Beau chuckles, finding my witty response endearing. “You certainly had me fooled for a moment there. But, hey, if you

can teach me to skate as well as you do, I might just become a pro in no time.”

I playfully tug on his hand, pulling him down. “Consider this your first lesson on falling, Beau.”

“There’s no one else I would want to fall for, other than you.”

“Well, well, Beau Daniels, it seems like we have quite the history of accidents,” I say, wiping tears of laughter and happiness from my eyes.

“Yeah, we make quite a pair, huh?” he replies, grinning ear to ear.

Beau’s brown eyes staring down at me cause my breath to hitch, sending a warm shiver through my body. His voice took on a gentle tone, his thumb brushing ever so lightly against my cheek. “You have a little something...”

“What? Am I bleeding?” I shriek.

Beau laughs, taking his finger and dabbing whatever was on my face. “No, it’s just ice cream.”

“Great. Between the ridiculous pink outfit I’m wearing and the ice cream, I must look like a hot mess.”

“Sometimes the best things come in messy packages.”

“What did you just say?”

“It’s a phrase my mom would often share with me after I returned home from grueling practices, battered and bruised. She’d say that life’s greatest treasures often arrive in messy

packages and then she'd gently tend to my wounds with a healing kiss."

My eyes widen with shock, and my lips part in a soft gasp. "My first kiss, here at this ice cream stand, he said the exact same thing to me."

Beau looks around as if seeing this place for the first time. "It can't be. Could it? No. There is no way. One year, my mom and I were headed back to Canada, and we stopped at this ice cream stand." Beau pauses. "And this girl and I ordered the same ice cream..."

Simultaneously, we both blurt out, "strawberry swirl."

With my voice trembling, I whisper, "That ice cream stand... that was here, and that was me."

Beau's eyes never leave mine, and he murmurs in awe, "I can't believe it...it was you. It's always been you."

It was as if the universe had conspired to bring us together on this very spot, at this very moment.

My breath quickens, and I bite my lower lip with a wicked glint in my eye. "So, Mr. Daniels, what do we do now?"

Beau leans in closer, his warm breath teasing my earlobe. "I have a few ideas, but I'll let you choose."

"You know we both have a lot to make up for."

Beau nods. "That we do, Amber. But maybe we can start by giving each other a chance. I can't promise you a fairytale ending, but I can promise I'll fight for you. If you'll let me."

My heartbeat quickens, and I stare into his eyes, searching for any sign of deception. “I don’t know if I can trust you.” I admit, my voice barely went above a whisper.

He takes my hand in his, his touch sends a shiver down my spine.” I understand. But I’m willing to prove myself to you. Just give me another chance. How about we pick up where we left off? Beau chuckles huskily, his fingers trailing down my cheek, leaving a trail of fire on my skin.

“You mean like a rematch? “My lips brush against his ear as I whisper,

“More like a new beginning.”

Tears are streaming down my face, my fingers grip his hair, pulling him closer and our lips meet in a searing kiss, a fusion of pent-up desire. He tastes of ice cream and tears.

Breaking away for a moment, I whisper breathlessly, “You know, Beau, sometimes the best things do come in messy packages.”

Beau looks at me, and I can see for the first time that he truly sees me, his voice husky as he replies, “And sometimes, those messy packages lead to the sweetest surprises.”

.....

That night, as I drift off to sleep, I have a dream. Beau and I are old and sitting on our porch, enjoying the warm breeze that caresses our faces like a gentle kiss. I can smell a sweetness in the air, like fresh flowers or honey. As we sit there, we are joined by our children and grandchildren, who are laughing

and happy. I see Emily and Luke and their four children, Joe and Tawnya and their two dogs, and even our parents join us.

We welcome them all with open arms, thrilled to be with our family.

Beau squeezes my hand and whispers in my ear, “You’re still the most beautiful woman in the world, my love.”

I blush and kiss him softly. “And you’re still the most handsome and charming man I’ve ever met.”

As we look out at the world around us, I can’t help but feel a sense of pride and joy. We have built a beautiful life together; filled with love, laughter, and family. And we know that those with us are a testament to our love, growing and thriving with each passing year.

As we sit together hand in hand, watching our loved ones play and laugh, Beau and I exchange a loving glance. We know that our love has endured all the twists and turns of life, and it will continue to do so for many years to come.

As the morning sun gently peeks through the curtains, painting our room with a soft, golden glow, I realize that our love story is just beginning. I drift back to sleep in Beau’s arms, knowing that our journey together is the greatest fairytale of all. ✨ #LoveStoryInProgress



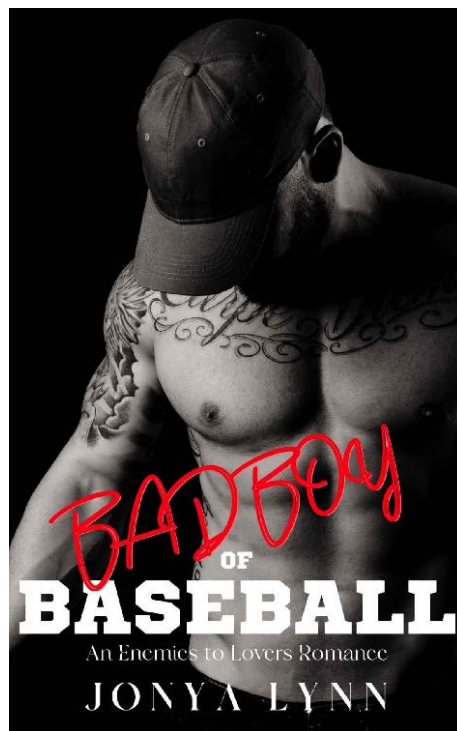
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