

a sweet romcom

BATTLE *(Shipped)*



SAVANNAH SCOTT

BATTLE(SHIPPED)

A SECOND CHANCE, ENEMIES-TO-LOVERS SWEET
ROMCOM

PATTY SCOTT

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

None of the characters in this book are actual people. Any resemblance to real individuals is coincidental. The character of Rob was inspired by several YouTube influencers and the trend on YouTube to attempt inventions and experiments and share them with followers. No single YouTube celebrity inspired this character.

The mention of actual celebrities and songwriters is included as the characters in this book have ideas or feelings about those characters. None of the opinions or representations necessarily reflect the author's actual feelings or ideas about those individuals.

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*For Jon
(the man who invented silly-ever-after)
I love you.*



*For everyone who ever laughed
at something I said or did.
Making you laugh makes my day.*



*The greatest freedom
we can find for ourselves
comes in setting another soul free
through forgiveness.*



A note to you ...

WELCOME to the quaint and quirky town of Bordeaux, Ohio. If you've already visited here through Lexi and Trevor's story in Friend(shipped), welcome back! If you haven't been to our town yet, you're in for some fun times, heartfelt friendships, and sweet romances.

AS LEXI SAID IN FRIEND(SHIPPED) ... We're talking about Bordeaux, Ohio, not the port city along the coastal southwest of France.

We don't pronounce our town name like our French sister city either. Some bright ancestor of mine who settled this valley in the 1800s pronounced our town name, bored ox.

Yep. Like some bull standing out in a field wondering what to do with his day. And, believe me, we have plenty of fields with plenty of oxen who, from what I've seen, look pretty bored.

So, welcome to Bordeaux ... where the oxen might be bored, but you will not be!

PROLOGUE

LAURA

Six years ago

The floorboard on the third step from the top creaks as my foot lands too heavily on it. I stand stock still, waiting to hear if anyone woke from the noise.

My parents usually sleep like the dead, but my mom has an uncanny ability to detect anytime I try to get away with something sneaky. Her sensitivity seems to have only increased since she and Dad have been fighting more often this past year. Maybe she's not sleeping as deeply due to all their conflict.

No one seems to have heard me, so I softly pad the rest of the way down the stairs, carefully avoiding the spots I know groan upon impact. Once I'm in the foyer, I gently glide the lock open and count to ten in my head after the clicking sound echoes through the room. Why are noises so amplified in the dark?

I don't always sneak out at night, especially because Rob's such a rule follower—well, at least when it comes to my parents and making a good impression. But with only three weeks left until graduation and then two months after that before Rob leaves for MIT, I want as much time with him as possible.

I'm staying here in our tiny town of Bordeaux to finish out beauty school and claim my own station at the Dippity Do as a hairdresser. Rob and I have

already talked about how we'll maintain a long-distance relationship. I'll visit him over long weekends at least once a term, and he'll come home between semesters and every summer.

I carefully turn the front knob and step out onto the porch, carefully shutting the door behind myself. Rob's sitting in the driver seat of his car with the lights out a few houses down across the street. I barely make out his silhouette as I bolt through the front yard toward him.

The passenger door flies open as I reach the car and hop in. I throw my arms around Rob's neck and kiss his cheek. I had aimed for his mouth, but he turned his head to start the engine, so I landed on the scruff that covers his jaw these days. It's so manly, and when he skips a day or two of shaving, the growth prickles my lips when we kiss. It's one of my favorite things in the world.

"Hey," Rob says, all serious and focused.

He's like this broody version of himself that makes him seem closer to twenty-five than eighteen.

"Hey there," I answer in my most flirty voice. "Thanks for picking me up."

"If your dad finds out we did this, he'll kill us."

"I know, but he's sound asleep at home and I stuffed my bed with a bunch of pillows, so it looks like I'm still in there. No one woke when I left. We're safe. He's got an early flight. They're leaving before I'd even be awake."

I reach over and place my hand on Rob's knee, giving it a little squeeze of reassurance. He returns the favor and his slightly calloused hand settles on my thigh right above the knee, which is uncovered thanks to the skirt I slipped into before I ran out of the house. The feel of his touch on my skin sends tingles through my body.

Rob's face remains uncharacteristically serious.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Just a lot on my mind with finals and wrapping up details with MIT."

I nod and stare out the front window. I know he's leaving. He needs to pursue his dreams. I only wish we weren't about to be eight hundred fifty miles away from each other. We've dated for two years now, and the farthest I've been from him in that timeframe has probably been for a day trip to Columbus or Cincinnati.

Even before we dated, we've hung out in the same friend group since

elementary school. I can't picture my life without Rob in it.

"Well," I huff out. "Let's not think about all that right now. We've got time to dwell on the future later. Tonight, it's you, me, and the Clawson's old barn."

His smile permeates through the darkness.

"Yeah. Okay."

I turn on the radio and fiddle with the channel until I hear Fifth Harmony's *Worth It*. I start dancing in my seat, waving my arms around and running my fingernails down Rob's neck and arm, teasing him and trying to cheer him up.

He gives me a begrudging smile, like he's trying not to enjoy my antics, but I can tell I'm totally getting to him. When the girls sing about being worth it, I repeatedly belt the line out with them as I sway and swing my arms overhead to the beat, emphasizing the oohs and touching him when I sing the word "baby."

Rob chuckles.

"That's what I'm saying," I tell him, looking through my lashes and exaggeratedly batting them at him. "Baby, you know I'm worth it."

He laughs out loud. "You're crazy. You know that, right?"

"Crazy for you," I say, still dancing in my seat to the rhythm of the song.

He just shakes his head and mutters something that sounds like *Didn't I hit the jackpot?*

I keep singing and bending toward him when I need to emphasize a line in the song, attempting to lighten his unusually dark mood. We went to all this effort to meet up. I don't want anything to ruin one minute of it.

Our days together are numbered, and I'm determined to leave my mark on Rob's heart before he goes off and meets all those young future female engineers with genius IQs and co-ed figures.

I study Rob's profile as we make our way down country roads to the barn that sits far back from the front house on the Clawson's property. Rob's face has become more mature over the past year, his jawline more defined, along with the rest of him. He's perfection and I love him with everything I am.

We park the car behind the barn, out of sight from anyone who would look out here from the front of the property. Then we take a blanket from Rob's trunk and climb the ladder leading into the rafters. That night I fall asleep on a plaid comforter in Rob's arms in the barn loft, surrounded by the smell of hay and him.

Little did I know my world was going to completely crash in around me within the next two months.



MY FRIEND LEXI and I lay by my parents' pool trying to perfect our summer tans. Okay, Lexi won't tan. She's coated in something like two thousand SPF sunscreen because she's one of those fair-skinned people who turn into a lobster just from thinking about the sun. But she's out here with me anyway and I love her for it.

Rob leaves next week for MIT. I should be with him right this minute and every moment leading up to his departure, but he said he had to go into Columbus to buy last-minute back-to-school items with his mom.

The past few weeks I've felt like I can't reach a part of him. He's always been like an open book to me, telling me his dreams, sharing his private thoughts, and kissing me like I'm the only person who really matters to him. But the closer he gets to leaving, it's as if he's tucking his heart away somewhere safe and distant.

My mom sticks her head out the back door and shouts to me, "Your phone is ringing in here, Laura!" I look up to see her face. She's been crying—again.

"Is your mom okay?" Lexi asks in a subdued voice even though Mom won't hear her with the porch door shutting behind her retreating back.

"I don't know. It's same as ever, maybe worse, I can't really tell. Dad leaves for his work trips and when he comes home the fighting picks right back up where they left off. I just put my headphones on or go over to your home or Rob's so I don't have to listen to it."

"I'm sorry," Lexi says.

"Me too," I mumble.

I stand up to retrieve my phone. When I enter the kitchen, my mom's still as a statue, staring out the side window as if a parade were passing by, only there's nothing there.

I clear my throat before reaching for my phone on the counter.

"Oh," Mom says. "I didn't realize you'd come in."

She sniffles and wipes at her nose with a Kleenex I hadn't seen her holding.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice reserved and careful.

“Your father isn’t coming home.”

“Was his flight delayed?”

“No,” she looks away from me, back out the window at nothing.

“His work asked him to stay on another day?”

“No, Laura. He’s not coming home—at all.”

A few beats pass before I realize the depth of what she’s telling me. Layers of truth pile on top of one another as I grapple with the fact that my father is leaving us for good.

“Where will he go?” I ask as plainly as if I were asking what’s for dinner.

“He has a friend.”

Mom pauses, straightening her back and then looking me in the eye.

“He’ll stay with her.”

We stare at one another as the unspoken reality floats between us. My father has another woman in his life, and he’s chosen her over my mom—over me.

“I’m so sorry, Mom,” I say numbly. “Does Julia know?”

Mom nods. My older sister, Julia, lives in Dayton, only twenty minutes away, but a continent may as well have divided us over the past few years. With all the discord in our house, she’s kept her four-year-old daughter at a safe distance and out of the family splash zone. I can’t say I blame her.

I glance at my phone as it vibrates with a text from Rob.

Rob: *Where have you been? I’ve called three times and you haven’t answered. I really need to talk to you.*

I let Rob’s text sit. Walking toward my mom, I extend my arms and she collapses into them. We hug. She sobs, and a few of my own tears fall down my cheek. I should be crying more, feeling something—anger, grief, confusion. But instead, it’s like I’m floating over the scene in our kitchen, observing everything from a detached vantage point.

After a minute, I pull back and tell my mom, “Rob called. I’m going to call him back.”

“You go. Yes. Yes. Of course. Call him. You should call him,” she rambles, blotting her eyes and straightening her shirt.

I pat my mom on the arm and then leave to step onto the porch. Lexi’s sitting on a chaise lounge at the other side of the pool. In the blur of my

mom's disclosure, I completely forgot she was here.

"Are you okay?" she calls over to me.

I hold up a finger and point to the phone while I dial Rob back.

"Hey."

Rob answers after the first ring. Just the sound of his voice makes me feel held, safe and secure.

He's nothing like my dad. And even though he's leaving I know we'll be good for one another, unlike my parents. Right now, he's a life raft while my whole family sinks under the weight of my father's choices.

"Hey," I say with less enthusiasm than usual.

"I'm right by your house. Can I stop by?"

"Sure. But come through the side gate. My mom's not feeling well."

I can't tell Rob about my dad over the phone. I wonder if I'll ever be able to say the words out loud. *My dad is leaving us.* I imagine what it would be like not to ever say that sentence out loud. Maybe we can live like he's always on a trip, never speaking about him or his absence. Life can go on without him here. He was already gone a lot anyway.

"Okay," I hear Rob answer.

"Okay. I'll see you in a bit."

I walk over to Lexi and sit on my towel next to her.

"Was that Rob?" she asks.

"Yeah. He's coming over."

"I should probably go," she says, sensitive as ever. "You two don't have much time left to be alone."

I force myself to smile. A part of me screams internally, telling me to break the news about my dad to Lexi. But the bigger part of me overrides that urge. I keep smiling and tell her I'll call her later.

A few minutes after Lexi walks out my side gate, Rob shows up, oblivious to my imploding family. He gives me a hug but breaks it off before kissing me.

He moves to the lounge where Lexi had been sitting and settles into it.

"Have a seat," he says, formally, as if we're just meeting one another for the first time, not like he's my first and only love. I obey him, still partially reeling from the bomb my mom dropped less than fifteen minutes ago, and now from this strange aloofness between me and Rob. I haven't even said hi.

As soon as I'm seated on the end of the chaise, Rob says, "I uh ..."

He looks at me, his stormy grey eyes wide and searching. Then he looks

away. He scans the back yard and I sit still, watching him struggle with whatever he's trying to say.

Finally, he looks back at me and then the words flow quickly, as if now that he's found the courage to say everything, he has to let it all out before anything stops him.

"I think it's best if we don't try to maintain our relationship long distance. I've given it lots of thought and we're too young to be tied to one another. The distance is too far, and we really both should focus on our futures for now."

I gape at him. But then I quickly school my features. I'm so flooded with emotions I can't even feel one of them right now. A strange numbness clouds my head like I'm in a dream.

I can only silently endure as he barrels forward making cliché comments like, *If we're meant to be, we'll get back together after college.*

He goes on, filling the void between us by saying *we're so young* a few more times along with other things I can't even process over the roaring of my thoughts and emotions.

Then he asks, "Can we still be friends? I hope we can still be friends. I know it seems like I'm coming out of left field, but you have to know I've thought this through. We're talking four years. We're so young. We're only eighteen. We need to give ourselves a chance to breathe and focus on what's to come. This is what's best for both of us. It may not feel like it right now, but it is."

I quietly nod while he unloads his seemingly well-prepared speech, unable to find purchase inside myself.

When he's finished, I stand.

The awkwardness between us feels like a living thing. We've never been clumsy or uncomfortable around one another even before we dated. But now, we're facing one another, fidgeting and unsure.

Rob reaches out and pulls me into his arms. We hug and I'm overwhelmed by the lack of reaction in my body, mind and heart. I'm a shell without any capacity to feel.

He releases me, starts to say something and then stops himself.

His brows draw together, and his mouth pulls into a thin line. Then he gives a light nod of his head and says, "I'll see you around, Laura."

"Yeah," I say.

It's the only word I've said the whole time since he got here.

I watch him walk away, turning the corner to head down the side yard and out of my life.

Within the span of less than an hour, my father left our family and my boyfriend blindsided me with a breakup.

Rob went from being the person I loved most in the world to the last man I hope I ever lay eyes on again.

LAURA

SIX YEARS LATER

“It’s coming down like cats and dogs out there,” Mrs. Roby says as she stands from the chair at my station, brushing a few loose hairs off her pants before grabbing her purse.

“I forgot my umbrella,” I say mostly to myself, as I look out the window of the Dippity Do salon into the deluge pouring down on State Street.

I guess I can grab a cape from the back and drape it over my head if it’s still coming down when I leave.

Mrs. Roby returns with the change Freida gave her from the register and hands me a five-dollar bill.

“Thank you, Laura. You always make me feel beautiful.”

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Roby,” I say, tucking the money into my apron and smiling. “Stay dry.”

“I will. Mac’s right out there to pick me up.”

She points to the dark green pickup idling at the curb as she walks toward the shop door. Then she pops open her umbrella before she twists the knob on the front door. The sound and smell of rain fills the room when Mrs. Roby exits to walk out toward her car.

I sweep up the clippings around my station while Frieda finishes tallying the register. Then she clicks the front lock and flips the sign in the window from OPEN to CLOSED while I carry my dustpan toward the trash can in the back room.

After I have my station in order and Frieda finishes the rest of our closing routine, she says, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She ducks out the service entrance to her parking spot adjacent to the

salon in the alley that runs behind our row of shops. It's the owner's prerogative to snag the prime parking.

As for me and the other stylists, we park in the common lot in the town square across the street, which means I'm about to make a mad dash through a rainstorm to get to my car.

I flick off the front lights, grab one of the capes we drape over customers for cuts and colors, unlock the door and step into the downpour.

The rain falls so heavily the sound feels oddly deafening as it pelts canvas awnings, shop windows and the sidewalk. Water descends as if it's being poured from buckets. I fumble with one hand to juggle my purse, using the other to secure the cape over my head while I hold the key out to lock the salon door behind me.

A gust of wind blows just as my grip on the cape loosens. It flies away like a witch on a broomstick, minus the stick, or the black cat. Basically, the cape looks like an overgrown bat wafting through the sky.

I barely watch it because in the same instant it lifts, I'm drenched as if I'm walking through a car wash with my clothes on. I can hardly keep my eyes open with all the water blowing at me and soaking me from above.

I lock the shop door, shove my work keys in my purse and then I hear the one deep, calm voice that always has gone straight through me. Why does he have to still have that effect on me?

"Do you need this?" Rob asks, extending his umbrella over both of us and smiling that half smile that makes my insides into molten lava or melted caramel—sizzling, tingling melted caramel, which yes, I know, doesn't exist, but go with me here. When he speaks, I sizzle and tingle and everything goes gooey. And I hate myself for being so weak.

I realize I'm staring at Rob, and he's smirking back at me. He's moved closer so we're probably only ten inches away from one another at the most. I can smell his familiar scent, like cut wood and metal and something slightly burnt, but delicious, resembling a campfire or toasted marshmallows. Come to think of it, Rob smells like a s'more.

Our eyes lock, almost without our consent. Definitely without mine.

I finally speak, "Uh. Thanks."

Yeah. That's what Rob does to me nowadays. He renders me speechless. I usually have words. Lots of them. Most of my friends would say you can't shut me up. They mean it in the best of ways. If you look up timid in the dictionary, it might just say, *Not Laura*.

And I never ever get nervous in front of men. I've been what my friend Lexi calls "boy crazy" since I figured out guys existed. What can I say? Men are my hobby. Not that I serial date, although I get asked out regularly. I simply enjoy the male species like a bird watcher loves all things feathered and flighty. I mean, what's not to love? Men fascinate me.

But Rob is more than a man to me. He's the one guy I ever let close enough to really matter. Leave it to me to pick the man so far out of my league it's like pitting a peewee ball player against Mike Trout. I hear his famous last words from the afternoon he broke up with me, *If we're meant to be, we'll get back together after college.*

We're obviously not meant to be.

And believe me, I've tried to move on. I haven't done anything crazy, but I've gone out with guys here in town, and even from other surrounding cities. Not one of them comes close to measuring up to the man standing in front of me, looking good enough to eat, holding an umbrella over my saturated body. Darn his s'more-smelling self.

"You're welcome," he says. "Want me to walk you to your car, or are you saving money on laundry by washing your clothes in the rain?"

I sneer at him. I don't have time for his holier-than-thou attitude, even if I am basically getting baptized by the elements. Then I realize I'd rather have an umbrella than not.

"A walk to my car would be great," I concede. "I forgot my umbrella, so I grabbed a cape. It blew away, so ... here I am."

"Here you are," he says, looking me over.

I'm quite sure I look like a drowned rat, but the perusal Rob gives me tracks across my skin despite my clothes as if he were warming me with his eyes. I feel his touch every place he glances. It's disarming and comforting all at once.

No. Not comforting. Only disconcerting. Very, very disconcerting.

"Well, let's go," I say abruptly, looking through the rain toward my car. It's scarcely visible even though it's only probably only fifty yards away.

"Run or walk?" Rob asks.

"Let's run for it!" I shout and then we both take off while Rob tries to keep the umbrella tilted against the wind and water coming at us like we're being hosed down by the fire department.

We reach my car and I fumble in my purse for my keys. Reaching around items into the depths and feeling around. I can't find them. I jostle my bag

while Rob stands patiently holding the umbrella over both our heads.

We're tucked together seeking some sort of false sense of protection from the elements. His chest presses against my shoulder. Heat radiates off him like a fire in a cozy cabin—one where you snuggle up in your favorite jammies and drink cocoa—and have s'mores, oh the s'mores.

Anyhooo.

I look up at him. "I can't find my keys. Give me a minute."

I keep shaking the purse, peering into it like a magician looking into his hat, about to pull out a rabbit.

I see my work keys, a pack of gum, a few wadded receipts, my wallet, lip balm, an origami swan, a fortune cookie, a mini bag of sour patch candies and a Wonder Woman Lego character. Don't ask.

The more I shift and tilt the purse, the surer I am they aren't there.

"Grrrr," I say, frustrated at myself for being forgetful and for giving Rob a front row seat to my incompetence. First, I didn't bring my umbrella, now I can't find my my keys.

My phone pings with a text alert. I tuck my purse under my arm and swipe the screen, trying to avoid eye contact with Rob.

Angie: *I have your car keys from when I borrowed your car to go grab lunch for us! Sorry! I'll pop them by the salon right now.*

"Don't worry, Jellybean. I've got you," Rob says from over my shoulder, obviously snooping on my text.

I think my breath stops for a full three beats when he uses my nickname. He lost that right six years ago.

I've got a thing for Jelly Bellies and Rob used to buy them for me, starting in junior high when he noticed my obsession. During our senior year, when he got his acceptance letter to MIT, Rob brought me a care package to celebrate. It was filled with a pound each of orange sherbet and cream soda flavors so I could make my favorite combo, orange cream.

"I can wait in the salon for Angie," I tell Rob.

"She could bring the keys to your house just as easily. I'll drive you home," he offers. "Do you have a key to get in your apartment?"

"I hide one under the mat," I tell him.

He shakes his head at me and the side of his mouth twitches up. "Of course, you do. Okay. Well, let's go. My truck's in front of Bud's Liquors."

I shoot Angie a text telling her a friend offered to drive me home. No, I don't mention it's Rob. She answers that she'll drop my car and keys to my place later tonight.

The rain isn't pouring quite as fiercely as it had been when I locked up the Dippity Do, but it's still coming down like it's on a mission to remind us all why Noah built a boat.

Rob puts his hand on the small of my back and turns us so we're walking toward Bud's. I used to love when he put his hand on my back like that. I felt like nothing in the world could harm me.

Still, right now he has to stop.

I'm not safe, and he's not my protection. As a matter of fact, he's the very thing I need to guard myself against.

Seeing Rob regularly can't be helped. We live in Bordeaux, a small Ohio town of two and a half thousand people. And we share a friend group. But we're rarely, if ever, alone together. I make sure of that.

Calling me Jellybean and touching me like he's my boyfriend messes with my heart. And I can't afford a messy heart. I can't even allow my heart to get a little bit mussed up. Rob and my heart need to stay far from one another in very tidy, very separate spaces.

I wiggle slightly so Rob's hand falls away from me. He looks me in the eyes, clears his throat, and then checks both ways down State Street. Cooter Schartz drives by in his oversized pickup truck sending an arc of rainwater spraying in our direction.

No one else seems to be foolish enough to be downtown at dusk in this rainstorm, so once Cooter passes, Rob and I cross and make our way to his truck. He opens my door and I collapse onto the seat, shivering and dripping wet. I'm getting water all over the interior of his car.

"I usually have towels, but ..." he lets his voice trail off.

"It-t-t's f-f-fine," I stutter out through chattering teeth.

Rob turns up the heat and I fold in on myself trying to generate warmth even though that's a lost cause at this point. I pull down the visor and regret it immediately. My mascara has pooled under my eyes and streaked down my face. I look like Billie Eilish singing *When the Party's Over*.

Opening the glove box, where Rob always stows enough takeout napkins to stock his own fast-food restaurant, I grab a few.

While I'm dabbing at my eyes, I sense Rob glancing over at me.

"You're still beautiful, even with makeup running down your face. You

don't need to worry about what you look like. It's just me."

Is he trying to take a wrecking ball to what's left of my resolve and self-respect? It already takes every ounce of self-control I have to be around him and not touch him, lean into him or kiss him. And I need to have a serious talk with myself about that.

He's the one who left, remember? And he came back without even trying to reconnect. That's all I need to know. Rob's not mine and I'm for sure not his anymore.

But, tonight, for some unknown reason, he's pulling out the stops.

"Why are you being so nice to me? Do you need a haircut?"

"Nah. I got one last week."

I noticed. Besides, word around town is that Rob goes to a place in Huber Heights just so he doesn't have to sit at my station or upset me by going to one of the other stylists at the Dippity Do.

"So, I heard," I say, unable to keep the snark out of my voice.

"No surprise there," he says. "Who told you?"

"Ella Mae. But she heard from Meg, who heard from her mom, who heard from your mom, I think."

"That I got a haircut?" he asks, huffing a slightly amused, slightly aggravated puff of air out through his nose while his lips twist into a pinched expression.

"That, and that you won't come inside the Dippity Do because you don't want me cutting your hair anymore."

"Ahh," he says.

Just ahh. No explanation. No defense. Just a noncommittal answer.

"So, is it true?" I ask.

Rob turns onto my street.

"What?"

"That you're avoiding me."

He keeps his eyes on the road, but waves one hand up and down his torso and then makes the same gesture up and down me.

"I'm driving you home after sharing an umbrella. I'd hardly define that as avoiding."

He's avoiding. He's even avoiding this conversation.

Fine.

Fine.

No, really. It's fine.

“Fine, Rob. You aren’t avoiding me. And that’s good news.” I tell him with more gusto than necessary.

The windshield wipers slap out a rhythm as Rob turns into the driveway.

Maybe it’s the overwhelming feeling of coldness running all the way to my toes, or it could be the aftermath of standing so close to Rob that I could smell him, or it might be how his hair is curling just the slightest on the ends the way it always does when it’s damp or he goes for a run. Maybe it’s the whole rescuing me while I’m freezing in the rain thing, but I’m approaching my breaking point.

“I’m glad you’re not avoiding me,” I say in a sudden rush of insanity. “I’ll write you in for a trim in four weeks. Sound good?”

He glances over at me, and he has the nerve to grin widely. “Sure, Jellybean. Whatever you say.”

What am I thinking? Cutting his hair means standing close to him for almost a half hour, straddling his knee with my legs, or at least that’s what I used to do when we were dating. It entails running my fingers through his hair. He’s got magnificent hair the color of dark chestnut with a hint of almost mahogany streaked through it. It’s thick and wavy without being curly. And it’s soft as the down of a duckling.

I miss running my hands through Rob’s hair. And I’ve just set myself up to do just that in one month, only it won’t be while I’m kissing him into next week. It will be while I’m remaining more professional than the palace guard at Buckingham Palace. Yippee.

He keeps calling me Jellybean. I won’t call him my nickname for him. I won’t. I won’t even look at that lock of hair flopping forward onto his forehead that I want to wrap around my finger. I’ll also completely ignore the way his stubble shadows across his jaw, causing me to have an almost irrepressible urge to run my hand across it.

I rub my palms on my wet jeans and then I throw the door open as soon as the car is in park, not giving Rob a chance to say one more complimentary or thoughtful thing while piercing me with those silver-grey eyes of his.

“Thanks,” I shout as I shut the door and run toward my staircase.

I live upstairs in an apartment over my aunt and uncle’s garage. My living arrangement gives me privacy and allows me to save money. I never imagined being here as long as I have been. I moved in the summer after my dad left us, so it will have been five years this month.

I vaguely hear Rob shouting up at me. “Do you want the umbrella?” as I

grasp the rail and climb the stairs, careful not to lose my footing.

At the top landing, I lift my mat.

No key.

Seriously? What in the world?

This day seems to be out to get me.

I look down at Rob, who's sitting in the driver seat of his restored red Ford pickup, looking back up at me through the steamy and rain spotted windshield.

He's patiently waiting to be sure I make it inside. It's just one more thing on the *Yes, Rob is Perfect* list. He would never leave me stranded. Except, he did just that six years ago, on the day I needed him most.

I fully lift the mat off the ground, which is no small feat considering it's probably holding several gallons of rainwater which come pouring off the back corner like I'm draining it through a funnel onto the porch.

Still no key.

Agh. That's right! I told Jayme she could use my place to write since her apartment has been too noisy to focus. She lives with Shannon, who tends to keep to herself. But their neighbors have five kids who play outdoors most days making tons of noise.

Plus, Jayme and Shannon have two Persian cats and a bulldog who all make it their mission in life to congregate around Jayme whenever she sits to write. It's distracting at best, especially when they try to sit on the keyboard—usually that's the cats, not the dog.

My place sits empty all day while I work at the salon.

Maybe Jayme took the key?

I drop the mat back onto my porch. I can't get any wetter than completely soaked to the bone—which I am. I make my way back down the stairs to Rob's truck, open the passenger door to lift myself in and plop onto the seat with a squishing sound.

"What's up?" he asks.

"My key is gone. I think Jayme has it. I'll just text her."

The lights are out in the front house, as they always are on Friday nights. My aunt and uncle have a standing dinner and Euchre night with their best friends in town on Fridays unless the high school has a home football game. Otherwise, they are at the Satterson's every Friday, rain or shine.

I pull out my phone and shoot Jayme a text.

Laura: *Do you have my key? I'm here and I couldn't find it under the*

mat.

Jayne: *Oh, no!*

Jayne: ...

Jayne: *I have it here.*

Laura: *Can you bring it by?*

Jayne: *One slight problem. I'm in Columbus at my cousin's birthday party. I'm so sorry, Laura. I'll be back tomorrow morning. Do your aunt and uncle have a spare?*

Laura: *Nope. But they will after today.*

Jayne: *I feel awful. Forgive me.*

Laura: *You're forgiven. No worries. I'll figure it out. Have a good visit with your family.*

I stuff my phone back in my purse and collapse back against the headrest.

"What's the verdict?" Rob asks.

"My only key is in Columbus, whooping it up in a very dry, very warm room at Jayme's cousin's birthday party."

"I hate when my key has a more thrilling social life than I do."

I chuckle.

I miss Rob. Everything about him.

I squeeze my eyes shut and Rob turns the ignition.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Taking you to my place," he says—as if that's a good idea.

"Maybe Lexi's home. Or Shannon."

"Forget it, Jellybean. Just come hang out. I'll show you one of the projects I'm working on, and you can dry off and eat. Then I'll grab my tools to break into your apartment. When you're dry and fed, we'll come back here, and I'll get you in safe and sound."

"The fact that you can break into my apartment so nonchalantly should scare me."

"It should," he says with a smile that brings out his dimples and those crinkles around the sides of his eyes.

I look away. Rob's charm is like one of those conveyor belts that lead to an incinerator. The ride might seem fun until you realize you are about to be burnt to death. I can't afford to enjoy Rob's looks or his kindness. I have to shore up or my heart will be roasted like last week's trash.

ROB

I can't blame Laura for being on edge around me. We've been through a worse breakup than the Spice Girls. At least they got back together ... oh yeah, and broke up ... and got together again.

I pull my jacket off and hand it across the truck to Laura. She looks at it like I'm trying to pass off something that expired in the back of my fridge.

"It's just a jacket, Jellybean. You look cold."

"I am cold," she says with a stiff upper lip, like she's cold, but she'd rather freeze to death than wrap herself in my coat.

She finally relents and grabs it. I watch her out of the corner of my eye as I turn to back out of her driveway.

"Thanks," she says softly, pulling my jacket around her until it doubles over in the front.

When she thinks I'm looking over my shoulder to reverse, she bends her head down toward her chest and inhales quietly, probably hoping I won't notice. I know the feeling. I barely kept my hands to myself sharing the umbrella. Laura always smells so feminine, even though that's a term that doesn't exactly apply to her.

The word feminine conjures images of a dainty and demure woman. Laura, on the other hand, embodies boldness, certainty, a hilarious sense of humor, confidence and fierce loyalty.

Laura immediately draws every eye when she walks into a room. Her long dark hair and high cheekbones, those full, pouty lips and her big doe eyes pull the attention of every man around, and many women too. When Laura moves through a crowd it's like dropping a raw steak in front of a pack

of dogs.

Only, right now she's showing a side of herself she rarely lets anyone see. It's the side that doesn't have everything together and actually allows others to support her. She hates being dependent. Whereas I love her needing me.

We drive through her neighborhood, back onto the country road that leads out to my section of town a few miles away. I own my one-story brick ranch-style house.

After going to MIT on a full ride, I sold a few inventions and patents and made enough to be better off than I appear to be. Then my dad's mom passed away and left me a quarter of her unexpectedly lucrative estate. Apparently, Grams had been quite the day trader.

I keep my finances private because my friends already think I don't fit in here anymore based on my education and my intellect.

Laura pops open the passenger door almost before I kill the engine, pulling my jacket over her head and running toward the front porch. I leave my umbrella in the truck and jog up behind her. She's staring at the screen door. I have to reach around her to open it. The urge to tug her back into my arms overwhelms me. I could easily turn her to face me and kiss her soft lips.

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to bring her here. I think we both know I could have picked her lock on the spot. I just wanted more time with her, which in all fairness might not be the kindest to her since I was the one to call things off between us when I left for college, and she stayed here to become a full-time hairdresser.

I fix my eyes on my fingers as I turn the key in an attempt to focus anything other than Laura. It doesn't work, but I get an A for effort.

"Come on in," I say, holding the screen door and gesturing for her to walk ahead of me.

She smiles an uncharacteristically shy smile at me and steps up into my living room.

"It seems like ages since I've been here," she says.

"It has been," I agree. "Make yourself at home."

"I better not," she says.

There's the woman I know and love, speaking her mind regardless of how her words land.

"Touché," I say, mocking a stab to the heart and pantomiming removing a dagger.

Laura stands on my entry mat and takes my coat off, dangling it from one

finger.

“This is wet. Where do you want me to put it?”

“I’ll just take it to the laundry room. Why don’t you go to my room and grab a T-shirt from the closet? I think you’ll find some of Karina’s sweats in the bottom drawer of the guest room dresser.”

“You can change in the hall bath.” I suggest.

“Really, Rob? You keep women’s sweats in your home? Aren’t you afraid your next girlfriend might get the wrong idea?”

She shakes her head, and her left eyebrow raises while she gives me the side eye.

“I’ll put on cocoa and food,” I say, disappearing into the kitchen.

“Woo me, why don’t you?” Laura says over her shoulder as she walks toward my guest bedroom with an ease that comes from years of being together and the numerous hours she’s spent hanging out at my home even after we stopped dating.

All of those times have been in a group setting when we hung out with friends, but still, she knows her way around and I like that more than I probably should.

We’ve all heard the saying, *Can’t live with them, can’t live without them*. That would be me and Laura. We’re both strongly opinionated, determined, and ambitious in our own way. I’m probably more of a dark horse. I’m comfortable in the shadows, but then I pull ahead when you least expect anything from me.

Somehow the combination of all those traits causes both friction and insecurity to rise between us. But give me a few weeks without seeing Laura and I always concoct a random reason to be near the salon when she’s closing, or to gather our friends just so I can see her in the safety of a group setting.

This habit explains my convenient presence tonight during the rainstorm. But she doesn’t need to know why I happened to be downtown in the middle of a stormy Friday evening when all the shops were closing.

I’m not quite sure what to do about our push-pull.

After I’ve changed into some dry clothes while Laura changed in my bathroom, I open a cabinet and take down two mugs, put on a kettle of water and grab my cocoa mix canister from the pantry. Then I turn the oven to preheat.

I’ve got leftover lasagna which happens to be Laura’s favorite. I’ll heat us

each a slice and then I'll take her home. No harm, no foul. I'm just being neighborly.

Old lovers can be friends. I'm determined to push that hypothesis until it becomes a proven theory. The only variable I can't seem to control is my heart.

I wonder if Laura struggles trying to be rid of her attraction to me as much as I'm constantly fending off old feelings for her. She's a closed book emotionally, often using humor and her bold personality to keep people from digging below the surface.

The only piece of information I know about how our breakup impacted her came from my best friend, Trevor. He told me she had a girls' night the weekend after I left and "got me out of her system," whatever that means. Trevor says it entails dancing to breakup songs and having a good cry while watching *Legally Blonde* and eating copious amounts of pizza.

Since our breakup, I've watched Laura sporadically date nearly every available bachelor in Bordeaux and the neighboring towns. She's always got her choice of men asking her to dinner or movies and God knows what else. Aside from this guy she went out with last fall named Joe, I don't think she's given many of them more than one night out.

It's not like women don't show an interest in me. I had a relatively serious girlfriend for two years in college. She wasn't my forever, no matter how much I wanted her to fill that spot.

I've taken a few women on dates here and there since I've been back in town, but until I can go out with a woman without dragging the ghost of Laura along, I don't really want to get serious with anyone else.

And she's in my bathroom changing right now. That fact makes me want to go out and run a few laps in the freezing rain just to cool off.

"Hey," Laura says, coming down the hall toward the kitchen.

She's wearing a red T-Shirt on that says *Naughty List* and she apparently found Karina's grey sweats. She gave me the shirt when she was my secret Santa in our friend group a few Christmases ago as a joke. I stashed it in the back of my closet and only wore it around the house when Laura came over.

She's drying her hair with one of my bathroom towels as if she lives here.

I rub my palm to my chest and then I turn and brace my hands on the counter. The tea kettle mercifully squeals, giving me something to do.

"It feels divine to be dry. I put my wet clothes in your bathtub. I hope that's okay. I'll scoop them up before we leave so I can take them home with

me.”

“No need,” I tell her. “I can hang them and then I’ll bring them to you once they’re dry.”

She’s quiet—thoughtfully studying me like she’s trying to solve a puzzle. I’m right there with her. What am I doing? I was the one to break things off and tell her we were over, and now I’m calling her Jellybean, rescuing her in the rain, fixing her favorite meal and promising to do her laundry.

“So,” she says, taking charge of the awkwardness stretching like a taut wire between us. “What is it you are working on these days?”

“Oh, you have to see this!”

She giggles. And Laura isn’t a giggler, but she always did appreciate the way I come to life like a Saint Bernard being let loose in a snowdrift when it comes to talking about my inventions and experiments.

“I’m trying to make a flying contraption for cell phones, so the phone can be converted into a droid recording device. I’m working on a miniature telephoto lens attachment so the phone camera will take long distance videos and photos. With a remote Bluetooth mic on the ground, the audio can be picked up as well as the video. I broke a few phones so far, but then I designed a cushioning system for landing.”

“Does the CIA know about you?” Laura asks playfully.

I’m pretty sure they do keep tabs on people like me, but I return her question with a lighter answer. “I’ve got my whole home covered in a scrambling cloak. They can’t track me.”

Her eyes go wide.

“I’m kidding. And I’m harmless, so even if they know, they probably couldn’t care less.”

“You’re not harmless.”

The words come out on a breath, almost so quiet that I could miss them. But I don’t.

Laura drapes the towel she used to dry her hair over the back of one of my kitchen chairs. I dump cocoa mix into the mugs, top them with water and stir, handing one over to Laura. She holds it with both hands and blows across the top, causing steam to move over the surface. Then she takes a sip and hums.

“Why is your cocoa the best? It’s not fair.”

“Secret ingredients,” I tell her with a wink.

She leans back on the counter across from me.

“Tell me. I’m good at keeping secrets.”

“You so aren’t,” I tease her.

“I keep secrets all the time when my customers confide in me, and I didn’t tell Lexi when Trevor was madly in love with her.”

“Because you were in on setting them up with one another,” I remind her. “If I divulge my secrets here, you can bet half the senior citizens in Bordeaux will be making my cocoa before spring. You’ll be giving the recipe to every woman who comes in for her weekly style.”

“Have a little faith, Rob.”

Her eyes hold mischief. I’m like a sailor off the shore of her island and she’s the siren singing the song that lures me near. She may not mean to slaughter me, but there are rocks between us, and my bet would be I’d crash before I make it safely to her.

It’s not about the recipe. It’s her. I want her, and yet I know she’s keeping me out. I may have called things off, but she’s barricaded all openings between us ever since, making it clear what we had stays in the past for her.

“Promise not to tell anyone?” I ask.

She nods and makes an X motion over her heart.

“It’s dehydrated butter and salt,” I confess.

“What?” Laura says, holding her cup away from her face as if I poisoned her. “I’m drinking butter? Rob! That’s gross!”

I smile. “But is it though? You just finished telling me it’s the best. I simply explained why.”

“Dehydrated butter? What in the world? Is that a Massachusetts thing?”

I laugh. “No. It’s just butter that’s been dehydrated. You could add in a pat after mixing it, but for convenience’s sake, I just blend in the dehydrated powder when I’m making my mix. It gives the cocoa a creamy texture and taste. And the salt makes all the flavors stand out a little more. It’s just science.”

“Just science,” Laura says with a little disdain in her voice.

She walks toward the back of my kitchen and looks out the window, cradling her mug again like it’s a buckler, protecting her from me.

Science is another bone of contention between us. Not science per se, but the fact that I went off to MIT while she stayed here, by choice, to pursue her life as a beautician. She chose that path, but now she acts as if we’re unequally matched. It’s ridiculous to me. But it’s a big deal to her. She jokingly called science, *the other woman*, on more than one occasion when

we were dating.

She turns from the window with a more evasive look on her face. But then her expression softens when she says, “Do I smell lasagna?”

LAURA

Rob's lasagna. If I'm ever on death row, this is the meal I want brought to me before they electrocute me. I want to be full of noodles and sauce and all the spices and cheese that stretches when you pull your bite away. Then they can zap me good. I won't even mind.

I take my last bite and lean back in my chair with a sigh. Rob's dining chairs are more like club chairs. Nothing about this moment says, "Get up and leave."

The two of us have fallen into an ease ever since we sat down to eat. My feet are propped on the chair adjacent to mine, a pair of fluffy socks Lexi's memaw made for Rob on my feet. He got up in the middle of the meal, grabbed them and slid them on me. He treated it like an innocent act, but I nearly passed out from the sensation of his hands on my skin.

Now I'm sitting here blissed out from food, warmth, and a healthy dose of denial.

I know we're not a couple, but tonight feels too much like old times and I've let my guard down. For whatever reason Rob showed up outside the shop, and he's been breaking me down one nickname and one kindness at a time ever since he held his umbrella over my head. I'm pretty sure I'd say yes to whatever he wanted right now. I'm in a lasagna-induced state of euphoria.

I've got two inner voices. Maybe they are like the proverbial angel and devil on someone's shoulders. Only mine are more like Lucille Ball and Gordon Ramsay.

My inner Gordon claps his hands and says, *You know better! Snap out of it.* Inner Lucy crosses her arms and pouts. You'd think my inner Gordon

would be sympathetic to the power of a well baked lasagna. But he's not.

"Are you ready to drive me home?" I ask as I reluctantly stand from the comfort of my chair at the dining table and grab both our plates.

"I'll get those. You can leave them," Rob says.

"No. You've done everything for me tonight. Let me at least rinse these and load the dishwasher before I go."

Rob lifts his hands in surrender and walks over to stand near me while I rinse. He turns and rests against the counter, watching me. Too close. Too overwhelmingly manly. Too Rob.

"Tonight was nice," he says.

"Yep. Thanks again," I say with a bit of staccato to my voice. "I'm glad we can still be friends after all the water under our bridge."

He nods and crosses his arms across his chest.

I used the F word: Friend.

I had to.

We were getting way too comfortable. I was close to climbing into Rob's lap to thank him for the lasagna in ways that are definitely not the approach a friend uses to thank another friend for dinner. We both needed the firm reminder of his decision. He put us in the friend zone.

And despite all the sweet gestures tonight, he never gave me any indication he wants to commit to more. And even if he did, I can't trust him not to leave me when the next big opportunity comes his way—as it inevitably will. Rob needs to set his sights on someone more suited to him. And I need to distance myself from his immediate, intoxicating presence as soon as possible.

"I'm ready to go home," I say after sliding the last plate into the bottom rack of the dishwasher and shutting the door. "Are you up for breaking and entering?"

"Always," Rob says with a teasing tone, but his eyes look a little less cheery, maybe even hurt.

I suppress the urge to shove Rob. He doesn't get to stand there looking wounded when he's the one who decided we can't be more than pals. And after he left, it became clear to me his decision was right on so many levels.

I should never have come here tonight. It only reignited feelings I've been trying to annihilate. I know better. Even if he wanted to get back together, I'm well aware I'm not the woman for him.

Rob grabs a few things out of the back mudroom and walks to the front

door.

“Here you go,” he says, handing me a pair of rubber boots about three sizes too big for me.

He plops my wet shoes in a crinkled plastic grocery bag and hands it over. I grab my purse off the hook on the wall. The rain has abated to a drizzle, so when Rob opens the door, we make a dash for the truck. The oversized boots make me clop along like baby Dumbo in the Pink Elephants on Parade scene.

We ride to my apartment in silence. When Rob pulls into my driveway, I look over through the dark at him. His face has an expression I can't decipher.

I'm catapulted back in time to the first night Rob drove me home and parked in my parents' driveway in tenth grade. We sat awkwardly fidgeting and glancing at one another until Rob finally reached across and put his hand on the back of my neck. That move only meant one thing. He was going to kiss me.

We were in Rob's dad's Camry, so there was a bit of clunking around and bumping things as we tried to make our way to kiss one another. Just as our lips connected and we were getting the hang of kissing, my dad turned on the porch light and we whipped apart so fast I hit the back of my head on the passenger door window.

I broke into hysterics, probably from nerves. Rob caught the laughter, and we couldn't stop. My dad stood on the porch with his arms crossed until I said goodnight to Rob and hopped out.

I don't know why I say the next thing I do.

“Remember the first night you drove me home?”

“When we were sixteen?” He chuckles. “Best kiss ever.”

That makes me laugh. “Hardly.”

It was a pretty great kiss, all things considered.

“My dad!” I say, laughing a little more.

Rob shakes his head as he unbuckles.

“I couldn't look him in the eyes for at least a month after that.”

Rob opens his door and walks around to my side of the truck. I've already opened my door and hopped out, so we end up face to face. Our eyes lock and there's this moment where I wonder if we're going to move toward one another. Rob clears his throat.

“Well, let's get you into your home.”

Once we're on my porch, Rob jimmys the lock with a paper clip and something he calls a tension wrench. It takes under a minute and my door flies open.

"That was way too easy," I tell him.

I walk in and he follows me. I don't tell him to leave, even though I think my Rob-o-meter is in the red tonight.

"It's easy to pick a lock when you have the right tools. You really ought to have a deadbolt and chain lock on the inside of your door."

"Rob, we live in Bordeaux. Are you worried Cooter will end up here all drunk and disorderly after staying out too late at Cues and Brews?"

"Nah. He wouldn't even make it up the steps if he showed up here drunk. Plus, you're scrappy. You could take him. I'm just thinking. You live alone."

"In Bordeaux Ohio," I remind him. "I think I'm more likely to be killed by a cow than an intruder. Half the time I don't even lock my door."

"I can come install inside locks if you want."

"It's fine," I tell him. "And thanks for tonight. You were a lifesaver."

I toe off his rubber boots and hand them to him, then I set my purse on the table near the back window.

My whole apartment consists of one room with a kitchenette at the back wall and a full bathroom behind the door next to the kitchenette. My bed is right there, out in the open against the far wall. The back of the couch blocks it from being in plain view, but it's not completely hidden. The apartment has always felt like a cozy space, but with Rob standing here tonight it's a little too small and stuffy.

I don't sit down, afraid if I do Rob will follow suit. Having him on my couch would be ill advised with this cauldron of emotions brewing inside me.

He twirls the wrench thing in his hand.

"Okay then. Well, I'll head home. Let me know if you change your mind about those locks."

"Will do," I say, walking toward the door, but keeping a healthy distance between us.

Rob reaches the door and looks over at me.

"And Laura ..."

"Yeah?"

He looks at me for a few seconds, then looks down. "Sleep tight."

"Uh. You too, Rob. Drive safely. I'll see you."

"Yep."

He opens the door and shuts it behind himself. I stare at the vacant spot where he just filled too much space in my home. Running my hand through my hair, I squeeze my eyes shut. Then I turn and grab my phone out of my purse to dial Lexi.

A part of me wants to stew alone, to sort through my thoughts and feelings and overanalyze it all without any witnesses or input. But the more mature half of me knows I'd better get everything out in the open and hash it out with someone else before I blow a gasket.

Lexi answers right away.

"Hey, Laura. What's up?"

"Nothing much. Are you alone?"

"No. Trevor's here. Why?"

I flop on my couch.

"I need girl talk, but he can't hear anything I have to say, not even accidentally overhear it."

"No problem. Give me a minute."

I hear Lexi cover the mouthpiece while she explains to Trevor that she's going upstairs for privacy. Trevor gives her the go-ahead, and Lexi comes back on the line.

"Okay. I'm walking upstairs. What's up?"

I fill her in on Rob being outside the shop with an umbrella, how I forgot my keys, was locked out, and then spent the evening at his house until he brought me home and picked my lock.

"So?" she asks when I'm finished.

"So what?"

"So, where's your heart?"

My heart.

My heart is locked up, safe and sound. It's in a sturdy wooden box inside a bulletproof metal safe in the back corner of the basement in my chest, where I have padlocked the doors, set a guard dog on duty, and electrocuted the floor in front of the entry.

Picture some crazy scene from Home Alone with every booby trap imaginable. That's what a man's got to traverse to get near the sensitive organ that is my heart. He'd better be a genius with obstacle courses, because there's a doozie in front of my heart.

But Rob happens to be an expert at finding his way around locks and obstacles. Just my luck.

ROB

“So, what’s got Laura making covert calls to my fiancé in the middle of our date night?” Trevor asks from his position sprawled across the couch in my basement. “I overheard Laura say your name before Lexi absconded upstairs to keep me from listening in.”

“Your date night?” I ask, twisting my lips into a smirk. “Isn’t every night pretty much date night for you two?”

“Jealous?”

“No. I’m happy for you.”

I’m honestly thrilled for my best friend. He and Lexi danced around their feelings for one another since probably preschool. Last year they started dating, and now they are officially engaged with a May wedding scheduled in less than three months. One where I’ll be a groomsman, and yes, Laura will be a bridesmaid.

I’ve pictured Laura walking down an aisle to me many times, but not like this. In my fantasies she was wearing an amazing white dress that hugged her curves while she smiled at me through her veil, and we locked eyes ...

I shake my head and grab a pair of tube cutters and my measuring tape.

Trevor’s hanging out while I make another pass at my biggest project to date. It’s an invention I’ve wrestled with for over a year. With any luck I could do a status update for my YouTube channel, *Make It Don’t Break It*, and show the progress in the coming week.

Even when I’m working on easier projects, I always come back to this bad boy right here—my flying contraption. It’s more of a hovercraft, or it will be, once I stabilize it enough that it can hover over both land and water

and sustain flight longer than fifteen seconds.

I've configured it seven different ways so far. None of them pass my criteria. Only one of my attempts injured me seriously when I broke my wrist in the fall during a test flight.

My mom freaked out, which I admit, from her vantage point was a totally legitimate response. Though, having raised me, you'd think she'd be slightly immune to the fallout of my experiments and innovation.

I measure off a length of aluminum pipe and set my clippers to cut it.

"So, any idea why Laura called Lex about you?" Trevor persists.

"I gave her a ride home in the rain last night."

"Ahh."

Trevor leaves an opening for me to say more. Usually, I don't. But ever since I left Laura's apartment last night, I've felt like someone put itching powder under my clothes. Maybe the persistent prickly sensation is actually the result of the bargain detergent I switched to this week, but I'm pretty sure it has more to do with my ex-girlfriend getting under my skin.

"Where were you that Laura needed a ride?"

"Downtown," I say as nonchalantly as possible.

Trevor has a rightfully quizzical expression on his face.

"I happened to be at the hardware store when she was getting out of work."

"Convenient," Trevor says, arching his brows and looking at me sideways.

"Anyway, she didn't have an umbrella, so I walked her to her car, but then she couldn't find her keys, so I offered her a ride home. And then it turned out Jayme was in Columbus and had Laura's spare apartment key with her, so ..."

"So?"

"So, I brought Laura home with me, gave her dry clothes, fed her lasagna, and drove her back to her place."

I clear my throat and slice through the pipe.

"I never ask you," Trevor starts in.

I sense our conversation could quickly lead to the topic I've neatly avoided for the past two years. I start to question the wisdom of even having said the little I did so far. I'm a scientist at heart. As rogue and daring as I can be, I take a logical and methodical approach to life.

I've run all the possible scenarios with Laura through my head since the

day I arrived back in our small hometown after graduating from MIT. She wants nothing to do with me. She seems content playing the field.

“What happened with you two?” Trevor asks.

“You know all the pertinent details. I broke up with her when I left for college. She stayed home to be a hairdresser. She appears to have been dating her way through the Montgomery County phone book ever since. Laura and I are as much a part of the Ohio history books as Orville Wright or Neil Armstrong. We’re finished.

“Besides, I’m focused on my inventions. We still may have lingering chemistry, but there’s no long-term potential for anything more than friendship between us.”

I’m making my case to Trevor. And, if I had any sense when it comes to Laura, I’d stop finding ways to show up where I can catch a glimpse of her. Only, I can’t seem to put our relationship behind me and move on. I picture how comfortable it felt sharing a meal with her, and how adorable she looked in my T-shirt last night.

“I keep feeling there’s more to the story you aren’t telling me, but you must have your reasons for keeping the details to yourself.”

“Ever the news reporter,” I tease.

“I’m a food critic, not an investigative reporter, otherwise I’d get to the bottom of this. Believe me. As you know, my future wife is the one who loves a good story.”

Future wife.

We’re at that stage in our lives when everyone around us is married or getting married. And in a town of 2,600 residents, single people basically walk around with neon signs over their heads.

As my mom reminds me weekly, I’m not getting younger and I’m not going to be very likely to find a match in Bordeaux. Actually, when she points this out, she always says “suitable match,” since she categorically never thought Laura fit that description.

Good thing I’m not looking for a match.

“Yoooo hooo,” Lexi’s singsong voice echoes down into the basement from the top of the stairs.

“Down here,” Trevor answers before I get a chance.

She makes her way down to us and Trevor lights up like a meteor shower. He sits upright and makes room for Lexi on my couch. She takes a seat next to him and he wraps an arm around her shoulders. She casually leans toward

him and plants a kiss on his cheek. It's so natural between them. Still, I feel like an intruder.

"What are you working on?" Lexi asks me.

"Same old."

"You know," Lexi teases. "They already mastered flight. In fact, they've even sent men to the moon. One of them was from Ohio. You may have heard of him?"

"Funny, Lex," I say while Trevor belly laughs. "This is different. Did you ever see *Back to the Future*?"

"I love that movie!"

"Yeah, well, I'm working on hovering transportation. If I perfect my design, we'll be whizzing around on flying hoverboards in years to come."

Lexi smiles. "If anyone can do this, you can."

I smile back. Lexi's always cheering people on or cheering them up.

Trevor and I exchange a look. He's got everything we thought I'd have at this stage of our lives. Funny how things can go that way. I'm the one who went to a prestigious school and was voted most likely to marry my high school sweetheart. Yet, here he sits, about to marry his best friend with a job he loves. He's living the dream.

Lexi's phone pings with a text. She looks down at the screen. After reading the message, she looks at Trevor and then me.

"That was Laura."

I smile what I hope comes across as the world's most neutral smile, something enigmatic, like the male version of Mona Lisa, only not so constipated looking, I hope.

I turn to pick up my measuring tape so I can cut the next length of pipe. Anything to keep from making eye contact with Lexi. If you happened to see me right now, you'd think cutting pipe took a special certification. I'm focused like I'm about to do brain surgery, not make a routine snip of a length of metal tubing.

I wonder what Laura just said to Lexi. And why did Laura call Lexi right after I left her apartment last night?

I keep my eyes on my project while Lexi explains, "Her car's having issues, so she needs me to pick her up. Sorry guys. I have to go."

"Her car is having issues?" I ask.

"Something about the brake pedal going all the way to the floor. Don't worry about it. I'll get her."

Trevor looks a bit disappointed.

“Sorry, Trev. I’ll make it up to you.” Lexi says as she stands to leave, turning and giving him a quick peck.

“Wait,” I say. “Did you two have plans?”

“Nothing much,” Trevor says. “I just planned to take Lexi with me to a new Thai place in Dayton. I have to review it for the paper.”

Trevor turns to Lexi. “You think Laura might want to come?”

“I can ask,” she says. Then looking at me, she suggests, “Why don’t we all go?”

I attempt to channel my inner Mona Lisa, but I’m pretty sure I end up looking more like Ivan the Terrible.

The four of us hang out at times—Lexi, Laura, Trevor and me. Usually, it’s with a group of our friends, not for something that feels a whole lot like a double date, and not the day after Laura spent the evening at my home, wearing my shirt and making me want her more than ever.

Maybe time with our best friends is just what we need—to recalibrate everything and bring us back to normal after yesterday.

“Sure,” I say. “Let’s all go out together.”

LAURA

I sit in my car, pulled over to the side of the road drumming my fingers on my steering wheel while I wait for Lexi to come pick me up. My car didn't stop right away when I hit the brakes. This whole drive the pedal has been going all the way to the floorboard super-fast, and the brake seems to consider whether it wants to work or not.

I'm renowned for being impulsive and strong-willed at times, but I know better than to try to drive when a vehicle is being this sketchy.

Jesse Heinz pulls up in his squad car next to me. I roll down my window as the passenger window on his cruiser lowers.

"You doing alright, Laura?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. My brakes are acting funny. Lexi's on her way to pick me up. Thanks."

"I could call you a tow. Or you could ride home in my patrol car."

I bet that line works on half the single young women in town. Jesse's asked me out ever since Rob took off for college. I don't think I encourage him, unless the answer *No, thank you* serves as some sort of green light in his mind.

"I'm good. Thanks. Lexi's already on her way."

Jesse smiles and nods, running his hand along his jaw. He's a decent looking guy, strong, and he has a kind heart. He's also a bit bossy, which certain women are really into. He's just not my type.

And just like that, my mind pictures Rob with oven mitts on, bending over to take lasagna out of the oven for me. Yes, that's my type alright. But nope. No. It's not.

Because, the one thing Jesse has on Rob is roots. It's ninety-nine percent certain that Jesse will marry a local girl, raise his kids here in Bordeaux, and be laid in the Heinz family plot at our own Eternal Acres cemetery when his life is over.

Whereas Rob can't stick around long enough to keep his word. He's chasing his dreams, especially when ambition calls for him to leave small-town Ohio for more promising horizons.

Lexi's car pulls up behind mine.

"Welp, there she is, the future Mrs. MacIntyre," Jesse says. "I'll let you'uns get to it."

"Thanks, Jesse."

He rolls up the window and pulls back into the one lane heading East. I glance at my rearview mirror before grabbing my purse off the passenger seat. Trevor's sitting shotgun in Lexi's car. I thought Lexi would come here alone.

I step out of my car, locking the door behind me. I'll have Duke Satterson check the brakes over tomorrow at his garage.

Lexi walks toward me.

"So," she says. "I was going to Thai with Trevor before you called."

"You should have said something. I would have called my mom."

"No, it's okay. I wanted to come out to help you. Trev thought you might want to join us for dinner. Have you eaten?"

"I haven't," I say as I walk toward the car to climb in the back seat. "I'd love to be your third wheel."

I'm almost to the door when I see him. Rob's scooting over to make room for me behind Trevor.

"On second thought ..." I start to say, but Lexi cuts me off.

"You'll technically be our fourth wheel."

Lexi smiles an overly eager grin.

She softens her expression and then says, "It's just four friends. We don't have to make it weird. Just four friends getting Thai in Dayton. You'll get your peanut sauce fix and then we'll drop you home."

I take a fortifying breath and open the door. Lexi's right. I don't need to make this weird. So what. I ate dinner at Rob's house last night. We're not dating—not again—ever. We can go out with friends to dinner, even if two of the friends are actually engaged and can't keep their hands off one another, and one friend is my ex-boyfriend. I'll just block all that out and focus on the

Tom Yum Goong.

“Hey,” Rob says sheepishly as I duck my head to climb into the backseat.

“Hey,” I answer with my best attempt at a this-isn’t-awkward-at-all voice, which, I’m pretty sure comes out sounding a lot like Minnie Mouse if she swallowed helium.

Rob shakes his head.

“Say it,” I goad him in almost a whisper meant for just the two of us.

He gives another little shake of his head.

Then his face gets serious when he asks, “Is your car okay?”

Change of subject. Cool. Good. Yep. Let’s evade the whole we’re going on what looks like a double date situation.

“It’s fine. Just the brakes are loose or something.”

I hate that Rob is seeing me in yet another needy circumstance in less than twenty-four hours. “I’ll have Duke look at them tomorrow. Don’t worry your pretty little head.”

He smirks. And it looks beyond sexy. He could be the cover model for Sexy Smirk magazine if there were such a thing.

Rob needs to stop all the smoldering, smirking, smiling, and swaggering. It’s not right. No more S words for you, Rob.

“My pretty little head will always worry about you, Laura,” he says, emphasizing the word pretty.

“Well, don’t,” I say in far too huffy a tone.

“How about we draw a line down the middle of the backseat or neither of you will be getting mango sticky rice tonight,” Trevor says from the front seat.

Rob shakes his head and laughs lightly.

I cross my arms across my chest and consider whether I could fake a random illness or fatigue to get Lexi to drop me home even though we’re already on the outskirts of town and headed for the highway to take us to Dayton.

After a twenty minute drive, we pull up to a small building sitting on a street lined with other shops and restaurants. The lit sign along the front walk says O-Thai-O. Gotta hand it to whomever thought that one up.

I hop out of the backseat like Lexi’s car’s on fire. Trevor looks at me like I’ve officially lost my mind. He’s probably right.

Trevor moves toward Lexi, putting his hand on her back to guide her into the restaurant, leaving Rob and me gaping at one another. Rob’s lips draw

into a thin line and then he walks ahead of me, following Trevor and Lexi, leaving me feeling more like a spare tire than a third or fourth wheel. He put his queen to my rook, but it's not checkmate by a longshot.

I look down the street in both directions, take a breath and tell myself to stop all this nonsense. Rob's like a pebble in my shoe rubbing and making me notice him when all I want to do is move forward. I need to take the shoe off, shake it out and be free of the little lump that won't stop poking at me in tender places. I can be the bigger person. I don't need to let him affect me.

Up ahead, Lexi leans in toward Trevor. He nods and they separate. She walks back toward me.

"I should have thought tonight through more thoroughly," Lexi says as she stops by my side, looping her arm through mine.

"No," I tell her. "I need to grow up. Rob was my high school boyfriend. We've got to live around one another until he leaves."

"He's leaving?"

Lexi's surprised tone makes her voice carry.

I look ahead at Rob and Trevor who are walking into O-Thai-O with their unassuming confidence and good looks. They both have no clue how handsome they are. Well, Trevor might know. The way he prances around shirtless half the year says he's aware of his assets, but Rob seems oblivious as to just how incredibly good looking he is.

The fact that they just keep walking tells me they didn't hear Lexi's outburst about Rob leaving.

"I don't mean he's leaving, leaving. He's just bound to leave. You know. He's got huge dreams and visions. And he left to pursue MIT. He'll leave when he outgrows us. I just have to learn to live around him until he goes."

"I see what you're saying," Lexi says. "He does dream big—bigger than this town, for sure. But Rob loves Bordeaux. He loves us—his friends. I'm not sure you're right about him planning to leave at some point. I've never thought of him leaving until now. I guess it could happen. Anyway, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I should have told you he was coming. I think I secretly hoped it would be like old times."

"Old times when Rob and I couldn't stop making goo-goo eyes at one another while you and Trevor sat in the friend zone watching us be all lovey-dovey?"

Lexi giggles. "Well, you know what they say. Payback's a bear."

"I guess I owe you that much. We were awful back then."

“It wasn’t so awful,” Lexi says softly.

“No,” I reluctantly agree. “It wasn’t.”

I square my shoulders a little. “Let’s go eat Thai.”

Lexi loops her arms around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. “You’re the best. Someday a good man will scoop you up and make you happier than you’ve been in years. But I get to give him the stamp of approval before he does.”

“Yeah, because I’m so good at letting people tell me what to do,” I joke back.

“There’s the spunky Laura I know and love. Come on. A glass of Thai Iced Tea is calling my name.”

ROB

Lexi must have given Laura a pep talk. By the time we reach the hostess stand, Laura's smiling and laughing. All the prickly attitude she had been shooting my way has fizzled out. I have to admit I sort of miss it. Not that I want Laura all riled up and agitated, but I can't say I hate our banter.

At least Laura pays attention to me when I'm the object of her irritation. Verbally sparring with her is almost as fun as kissing her. No. Scratch that. It's nowhere near as fun. Kissing Laura again would be better than perfecting the hovercraft.

We're seated in four chairs with red vinyl cushions at a small free-standing table with a fake flower centerpiece. The ambiance is a little kitschy.

A few too many paper fans, statues of bejeweled elephants, upright praying cats and plump Buddhas, line the walls. Ornamental lanterns and tassels dangle down from the ceiling. It's like someone capitalized on the Asian party store's going out of business sale.

Conversation flows between the four of us once we're seated. Mostly we're focused on Trevor as he explains how each of us need to order different items so he can sample more than one dish. He's not simply out for a good meal with friends. This dinner is business, and Trevor aims to gather enough material so that he can give a solid review.

After about ten minutes our waiter approaches our table.

"Hey there, or Sawadee as they say in Thai. Welcome to O-Thai-O. I'm Steve. I'll be your waiter tonight. Can I get you water?"

Water's sort-of a given. We all nod.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Steve disappears quickly. He doesn’t return quickly. He doesn’t return at all—for a while. I look around the restaurant. There’s the young woman who welcomed us at the hostess stand. Customers at various tables and booths fill the rest of the room. I don’t see another waiter anywhere.

“Did you want me to go ask the hostess where Steve is?” I volunteer to Trevor.

“Nope. I always let the night roll out how it will. It’s part of the dining experience and I want to reflect an authentic representation of the restaurant. Just hang out and wait.”

We wait.

And wait.

“Steve’s giving new meaning to the word waiter,” I say after a while. “If waiter means someone who keeps you waiting.”

As if on cue, Steve comes out of the back with four glasses of water. No ice. Just water.

He ceremoniously sets a glass in front of each of us. We sit quietly waiting for him to finish distributing our drinks so we can order. When he’s placed the last glass, he turns to walk away without saying anything. I want to ask him if he’s going to take our order, but Trevor gives me a look. Let it roll out. Okay.

“Well, at least we won’t die of thirst,” Laura jokes.

“I have protein bars in my glovebox, but I didn’t drive,” I joke back. “Hopefully we won’t have to resort to cannibalism.”

Laura laughs and I take her in, from my vantage point sitting to the left of her I can’t study her face without being obvious, but the sound of her laughter washes over me. Maybe I don’t miss her prickly side too much.

We wait another fifteen minutes, during which I’m completely distracted by the feeling of Laura sitting so close to me. Maybe if I hadn’t swooped in and brought her home with me last night, I wouldn’t be so hypersensitive to her nearness. I keep fighting the urge to loop my arm behind her chair or hold her hand under the table like we did so many years ago.

Finally, Steve finds his way out of the kitchen to bring meals to another table. Then he makes his way over to us. He moves slowly, like he’s got all the time in the world. I think of that cartoon movie with the snails in it. Steve’s definitely not the snail who put a jetpack on. Maybe I could make him one, though. We’ve been here forty minutes. With only water.

Steve hands us each a menu, and we prepare to order. We're ever the optimists that being in a restaurant means we'll be getting food at some point this evening.

"We're a fusion place," Steve explains.

I can't help but ask. "So, what does fusion mean here? I know it can vary place to place."

I look at Trevor and he gives me a light nod indicating my question didn't mess up his authentic experience.

Steve explains, "Well, since we're here in Ohio, we fuse the flavors and cuisine of the Midwest with traditional Asian food."

The words Midwest and cuisine never seemed to be compatible before this moment. An image of pineapple tater tot casserole sitting next to a Jell-O salad crosses my mind and I stifle a chuckle.

We open our menus. Items like Pan-Fried Walleye Guay Teow (a soup of fried fish which sounds like it might be oddly mushy), Curry Corn Dog on a Stick, Cashew Nut Chicken Sloppy Joes, and Cheesy Pizza Pad Thai Casserole fill the page.

"Wow," I say, looking at Trevor.

"I'm going with the corn dog," Laura says as if she's rushing to claim the only relatively normal food on the menu.

"I was going to get the corn dog!" Lexi says.

"We have more than one," Steve assures her.

He's unaware of our pact to order a variety of food so Trevor can eat as many selections as possible.

"I'll take the country fried chicken coconut soup," Lexi relents.

Again, with the fried food in soup. I order the pizza noodle casserole because I like to live on the edge and I can't fathom what noodles, pepperoni, cheese and peanut sauce will even be like when combined, but I have to see this with my own eyes.

Trevor orders the chicken sloppy joes and a side of French fries and rice—together, as in, one dish of fried potatoes and rice all mixed in with one another. Does that come with ketchup or fish sauce?

"Fusion at its finest," I say to Trevor as Steve gathers our menus and walks away into the mystery that lies beyond the kitchen door, which may just be a portal into another world considering how long it has been taking him to return to us. I wonder for a moment if we'll ever see him again.

It's another forty-five minutes before Steve reappears. While we wait,

Lexi hands out gum. I consider swallowing my piece after a while just to fill my stomach with something.

“We passed a 7-11 on the way here. I could borrow your car and run to pick up hot dogs and slushies,” I offer.

“Don’t say hot dog,” Laura says, her stomach growling. “No mentioning food.”

We all laugh. Somehow, we’re bonding over the horrendous service like survivors of a common tragedy often do. It feels good to have Laura wave the white flag between us, even if it’s only temporary, like that night the soldiers all laid down their arms to celebrate Christmas together before returning to their foxholes to defend themselves again.

Eventually our food comes. Laura’s corndog sends her into coughing fits from the heat in the spices. We haven’t gotten water refills, so I give her mine since she drank all hers already while we waited to be served. The chicken sloppy joe appears to be the winner of the night. The pizza casserole, well, let’s just say I’m used to experiments gone crazy and this may be one for the record books.

After a full three hours, some interesting food, what I can only hope is the poorest service in Montgomery County, and more laughs than I expected, we pay our bill and leave O-Thai-O.

“Well, that was memorable,” Lexi says as we make our way to her car.

“I can’t wait to read your review,” I tell Trevor.

Laura moves toward the back door, and I hold it open for her. She passes by me to duck into our seats and she looks up for a moment. Our eyes lock and I can’t help but smile warmly at her. My skin hums to life, and I get a whiff of her scent.

I just spent three hours an inch away from her, bumping elbows accidentally at the table, and soaking up her laughter and smiles like a beggar. The exhilarating intensity of this moment easily eclipses all those one hundred and eighty minutes combined.

Laura doesn’t give me a stink eye, so I count that as a win. She climbs across to the other side of the car and I slide in next to her. She’s seemingly oblivious to the impact she has on me. Her chocolate brown eyes track the scenery, her long dark hair cascades down her back. I study her while she watches the farms and fields pass by in the darkness outside the car window.

I’ve assumed Laura shut the door on us for good. She’s made it extremely clear for the past two years since I came back to town that she distrusts me,

and definitely holds me in contempt for our breakup.

After last night and this evening, I don't think I can settle for giving her space like I've been doing. I want to see if the spark that's obviously coursing between us could lead to something more. The whole drive home while we sit silently side-by-side in the back of Lexi's car, I'm strategizing ways to win Laura's heart again. I had her once. If I play my cards right, I might just be able to convince her to come back to me.

LAURA

“Can we talk after the shop closes?” Frieda asks me Monday afternoon.

She hasn’t been her usual upbeat self all day.

“Are you okay?”

“I am. I will be. I just need to give you some news and talk through a situation with you.”

We’re standing by the cash register, slightly removed from the rest of the beauticians.

“You’re making me nervous. Can you give me a hint?”

Frieda smiles with a slight effort. She’s about to say something when the bell over the door rings and my best friend Shannon walks in.

Shannon works at her father’s accounting office full time, but she does makeup and nails here at the Dippity Do as a little side hustle. Shannon’s the Robin to my Batman, only she looks way better in tights than Chris O’Donnell.

“What’s going through that head of yours?” Shannon asks me, taking a big bite out of a Payday and then pointing the rest of the candy bar in my direction to accentuate her question.

Shannon lives on chocolate bars, Fritos and tabloids. You’d think she’d be exceedingly superficial with all that junk filling her stomach and head, but she’s the most down-to-earth, reliable woman I know. And she’s got a killer dry sense of humor.

“I was just thinking how you look better in tights than Chris O’Donnell.”

“Say it isn’t so. First off, random. Secondly, I’d give my next rent check

to see him in tights in real life. Who would pay that for a look at me?”

“No one,” I admit. “Well, maybe Duke.”

She rolls her eyes. Shannon’s had a thing for Duke for years, only she doesn’t let anyone know—not even herself. She likes to pretend she’s disgusted by the thought of him. I’ve seen him look at her and I’d bet my brake job the feeling’s mutual.

The hitch: Duke’s best friends with Shannon’s older brother, so she’s off-limits. Big time. If Clint ever heard of Duke going after his baby sister, he’d come flying home from Pittsburgh and ... well, let’s say I know why Shannon resists her attraction.

“So,” Shannon says as she walks toward my station. “What have I missed today?”

I shoot Frieda an apologetic look over my shoulder as I follow Shannon. Frieda waves me on. We’ll talk later.

“Gossip?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Nothing much. But hang in there. Ella Mae has an appointment in fifteen. She’ll bring all the latest news with her.”

Shannon screws up her face as if she just ate one of those extreme sour candies. “You could have warned me it was her day for a cut.”

“I didn’t know you were coming in today,” I say.

I grab my broom and go over the floor to sweep up the clippings from my last appointment.

“I wasn’t. But Dad gave me the afternoon off and Jayme’s working out a scene in her current book back at our place, which means she wants total silence.”

“She could use my place again.”

“She feels badly about the key fiasco. So, tell me about your evening with Rob.”

“Which one?” I ask before I think better of it.

“Which one? Have you two been hanging out? Has there been more than one evening? I thought I was your BFF. You need to keep me in the loop.”

“I’ve definitely not been hanging out with him on purpose. I already told you about Friday during the storm. I thought that was it, but Saturday my car decided to have brake issues. Lexi came to pick me up—with Trevor and Rob in tow. The four of us went to Thai in Dayton.”

“Sorry about your car. That all sounds very datey.”

“It wasn’t datey. Trust me. He’s still on the list of Bordeaux’s most unreliable bachelors. I’m not touching him with a ten-foot pole.”

“Your face tells a different story,” Shannon says with a light wag of her eyebrows.

Does it? Probably. The truth is Saturday surprised me. The longer the four of us spent together at that horrible restaurant, the more relaxed I felt. I laughed like I haven’t in a long time, and I felt entirely too comfortable sitting next to Rob. He looked amazing in his button-down shirt and jeans. I fought the urge to lean into him on more than one occasion throughout the meal.

I spent the whole ride home trying to sort through my thoughts and feelings. Still, the bottom line remains the same. Rob will leave when opportunity knocks—which it will. And he will not break my heart in the process because I won’t be giving it to him this time around.

The trouble with best friends is you can’t hide things from them. And Shannon knows me better than anyone. She and I have been friends for as long as I can remember. She knows me well enough to see through my vain attempt at denying my feelings for Rob.

I lower my voice to keep nosy coworkers from overhearing our conversation. “I can’t help it. He’s still Rob. And my stupid heart still pants at the sight of him like some Pavlovian dog hearing a bell.”

“That,” Shannon says with a point of her finger in my direction. “Is exactly what I thought. You’ve still got feelings. And I think he’s not over you either.”

She doesn’t elaborate, and then the bell rings again and Ella Mae walks in. Shannon rolls her eyes, stands up from my chair and walks over to the little desk Frieda set up for her near the front window so she can do manicures. Shannon props her feet up on the desk and pulls her latest tabloid out from her purse, hiding her face behind it as she reads.

“Hey, Laura,” Ella Mae says as she takes a seat in front of my mirror.

“Hey, Ella Mae. What’s the plan today?”

“Wait a minute,” she says, pulling her phone out of her purse. “I want to go live during my appointment.”

“You want to go live?”

“My fans and followers will want to see you work magic on my hair. I’ve been sharing a lot of beauty tips lately on my socials.”

Great.

Ella Mae has a superficial Instagram account that grossly misrepresents her life here in Bordeaux. Everyone in town talks about the skewed way she portrays herself to her fifty-eight thousand followers who hang on her every word and swoon at her shabby-chic filtered renditions of life.

One of last week's posts featured her trip to the local ice cream parlor in town where Ella Mae shared that she "moaned with the joy of a dying cow" when she got her first lick of the flavor of the month—Granny's Apple Crisp. She went on to talk of her special bond with her grandma and how the flavor reminded her of fall afternoons eating crisp fresh out of the oven in her grandma's kitchen.

There was so much wrong with that post, starting with the minor detail that Ella Mae is lactose intolerant, and ranging to the fact that I'm almost certain the moan of a dying cow never exudes joy.

Not to mention, Ella Mae's grandma is better known for bringing grown men to tears than anything else. And, unless it's her apple moonshine, I'm pretty sure the last thing she baked to a crisp was a casserole she left in the oven too long.

I honestly felt for Ella Mae as I scanned the responses to her post, all from strangers around the country who don't know her from old man Satterson who runs the gas station and service garage.

Her followers gush on about how wonderful Ella Mae is, how amazing our town must be, and how lucky her grandma is to have such a doting granddaughter. It would all be sweet except it's built on a foundation of phoniness—her version of filtered reality.

"I'd rather not go live," I say with a smile I reserve for difficult customers.

"Oh, but Laura, imagine the free advertising you'll be getting."

"Fine," I relent. "Go live."

I don't want free advertising. The majority of our town wouldn't know Instagram from an Instapot, so it's not like I'm going to drum up business from her post. I also know it's no use refusing her. With people like Ella Mae, I've learned it's better to go with than go against. I save my battles for the big issues worth fighting over.

Ella Mae gives me a nod and then she turns to the camera on her phone.

"Hey, peeps! It's me, Ella Mae here at our darling local salon, the Dippity Do."

She pans the phone around to film the interior of the salon, capturing all

of us in the process. Shannon raises her magazine just in time, but then lowers it long enough to send me an eyeroll that would rival any teen at Bordeaux High.

“Here’s my adorbs stylist, Laura. Say hi to my peeps, Laura!”

I wave.

“She’s shy,” Ella explains to the viewing audience.

I’m not shy, as we all know. But, whatever. Let a bunch of strangers think I’m shy.

“But isn’t she beautiful? Am I right? That hair, those eyes, and her figure. Hashtag goals, girlfriends!”

Kill. Me. Now.

“So, let’s do a little poll here, shall we? I’m thinking I want to do something different. Should I cut four inches, get bangs or go for a color?”

She didn’t book a color, so I’m a *no* vote on that part of her impromptu poll. Ella Mae’s on a roll and I’m oddly unsettled by the fact that we have a world of witnesses to this moment.

“I’ll put the poll up in my story. You vote and in ten minutes we’re going to do this thing!”

Ella Mae turns off the camera, takes a deep breath and says, “Well, there were over twenty thousand viewers to that live. We’ll have our answer in no time.”

I murmur, “Twenty thousand.”

“Yep. It’s Monday, so it’s slow on the gram.”

I give Frieda a look while Ella sits waiting to hear from the adoring crowd who have nothing better to do than vote on a stranger’s hairdo in the middle of a Monday afternoon. The vote comes in ten minutes later. Survey says we’re cutting bangs and doing highlights. Yippee.

I don’t have a customer scheduled after Ella Mae, so her extra service fits in. I don’t know what I’d do with her if I had booked back-to-back appointments. I’d have to disappoint her tribe. Maybe they’d stage a revolt. I picture one of those pitchforks-in-hand scenes from the *Scarlet Letter*, but it’s a mob of hipsters in go-go boots and cork wedges swinging their Prada and kate spade accessories overhead as they hunt me down.

I busy myself putting the foil on Ella Mae’s hair as she drones on to her phone camera about her day and the various people in our town. My mama bear protective side rears up when she starts going on about Cooter and his antics the other night.

“Folks,” Ella Mae says. “This man Cooter drinks enough to sink a ship. And the other day, he walked into the wrong house on his street. Word has it he went right into the master bedroom, crawled into bed and curled up to fall asleep. No one knew he was there until the owner of the home pulled back the covers. Crazy, am I right? Lock your doors, people. Lock your doors.”

At least she doesn’t say whose house it was. Before I have too long to dwell on the sanctity of our town business and Ella Mae’s need for discretion, she turns the camera on me.

“So, Laura,” she asks. “You dated a famous YouTuber here in town.”

My stomach twists inside out. She’s not doing this. Shannon’s eyes go wide over the top of her magazine. A woozy sensation engulfs me like I might pass out. No way do I want to talk about Rob in front of Ella Mae, let alone thousands of strangers.

“I had a serious boyfriend in high school,” I answer her in a monotone voice I hope sounds cheery and unaffected. “And he went off to MIT and started a YouTube channel during his college years. But I never dated a YouTuber.”

“Oh, that’s right,” she says, undeterred. “You two are not a thing anymore. So, he’s available.”

Ella Mae’s well aware Rob and I haven’t been together since the summer after high school.

She turns to her camera and says in a conspiratorial voice, “Girlfriends, take note. This man is single and has a sort of Ian Somerhalder post-Vampire-Diaries vibe.” She gives a low whistle that makes my temples throb.

“If you could see him,” Ella Mae continues. “Well, you can, actually. Check out *Make It Don’t Break It* on YouTube to see our very own Rob Baldwin. You won’t regret it. Hashtag swoon. Hashtag drool. Hashtag dreamy. Am I right, Laura?”

She points the camera right at me.

My thoughts whir.

“He’s definitely swoony.”

What?

Not swoony. Not hashtag anything. Except hashtag danger. Hashtag caution tape. Hashtag batten down the hatches. And I just called him swoony to a whole bunch of people—and to Ella Mae. I don’t know which is worse. She’s got a knowing glint in her eyes.

I finish folding the last foil on Ella Mae’s hair.

“Let’s get you under the dryer.”

“Okay, peeps. I’m going under the dryer. I’ll be back with the results of my transformation in a bit. Meanwhile, put the YOU in fab-YOU-lous and don’t forget to like and follow if you aren’t already.”

She turns off the camera and follows me to the back of the salon where a row of dryers sit along the wall.

“What was that?” I ask her, against my better judgment.

“It’s called clickbait, Laura. People love love. They love good looking men. They love drama and story, and face it, they love me. They are going to eat Rob up with a spoon. And your endorsement of his attractiveness will only boost this post—and his channel.”

I’m tempted to turn the dryer up to a setting that resembles a broiler, but I know that would go viral and the trendy pitchfork mob would definitely descend on me for being the hairdresser who set Ella Mae’s head ablaze. I take a breath, turn on the machine and walk back to my station.

My phone buzzes in my purse. Good, a distraction from this dumpster fire of an appointment.

Except, it’s Rob. Of course, it is.

Rob: *Hey.*

Laura: *Hi.*

Rob: *So, I’m swoony?*

I look up at Shannon who’s watching me like a red-tailed hawk watches a small rodent. Except she doesn’t want to eat me for dinner. She probably wants to save me from myself. How I wish she could.

I walk over to her, trying to remain inconspicuous.

“Look at this,” I say quietly, handing over my phone.

She reads the three texts, smiling up at me when she’s done.

“What do I say to that?” I ask her.

“Give me your phone again.”

“Um. No.”

“Come on. I won’t send anything without your permission,” Shannon says in a hushed tone.

The timer is ticking on Ella Mae’s dryer, so I hand the phone over to Shannon.

She types in a message and hands it back to me.

Laura: *Did you text me to tell me you are swoony, or to ask if you are?*

“That’s good,” I tell Shannon before hitting send.

“Can’t blame you if your witty comebacks are slow on the draw right now. She’s too much.”

Shannon tips her chin toward the back of the salon where Ella Mae sits under the loud noise of a dryer, scrolling through her phone.

“That she is,” I agree.

My phone buzzes instantly.

Rob: *I’m just quoting someone who is doing Ella Mae’s hair. According to that woman, I’m swoony.*

I hand the phone back to Shannon. Her fingers fly over the keyboard and she hands it back to me.

Laura: *Don’t believe everything you see on social media.*

“Good one,” I tell Shannon, hitting send again.

Rob: *I have to agree with Ella Mae for once.*

I don’t need Shannon for my reply. I type a response quickly and hit send.

Laura: *About what?*

Rob: *Your hair, your eyes, your figure ... you.*

I blush and then I don’t know what to do.

“What did he say?” Shannon asks right as the timer for Ella Mae to come out from under the dryer goes off.

“I’ll tell you later,” I say, walking toward the back of the salon. I shoot a quick text to Rob in an attempt to nip this off at the bud.

Laura: *Speaking of Ella Mae, I have to finish her hair. I’ll talk to you*

later.

Rob: *Looking forward to it.*

He's not allowed to look forward to it. But I'll deal with that later. Right now, I need to get through this haircut and figure out what Frieda needs. Rob will have to wait.

ROB

Swoony. I can work with that. There are definitely days I could kiss our town's grapevine. Usually not, but today I'm grateful for the way juicy news travels through our small town.

Ella Mae was being her over-the-top self, going live during her hair appointment. It's basically the last thing I'd voluntarily submit myself to watching. That was until my mom got a call from a neighbor who had been told by someone else about my name and my channel being discussed.

I know Ella Mae spouting off about my looks doesn't hold any depth or sincerity. She's all about showing off. And I couldn't care less about her or her opinion of me. But when Laura said, "He's swoony," I froze. I rewound that part and played it a few times. Self-indulgent, I know.

I've been dying to push for more with Laura. Her profession on the live made me feel like the checkered flag dropped at a racetrack. My over-revved engine took off when I heard her say those three simple words. Not just *he's swoony*, but *he's definitely swoony*.

"Oh, how do you really feel, Laura?" I ask out loud to no one, allowing myself one fist pump into the air. I cannot wipe the smile off my face. For two years she's acted like she's either unaffected or bitter. And she may be bitter, but she's not unaffected. Today I saw a crack in the façade. Maybe it started Friday. I know one thing, where there's a crack, there's a possibility to break through.

I'm squirrely and hyper-charged. I sit to check my email. I have editing to do for this week's episode, and I have to call one of the volunteers who assists me for certain projects, but my mind's too amped up to focus.

I scroll down my email, and one catches my eye. John Silverberg. He's a big name in the television industry, I recognize him because he worked on a few edutainment programs over the years. Education with entertainment. Aside from inventing things, that's my jam. I open the email and read it twice.

Hi, Rob,

Let me introduce myself. I'm John Silverberg. I've been following your channel for a while, and I have a proposition for you.

I'd like to do a collaboration project. If all goes well, we might be looking at a syndication with your content being at least partially bought out and a show being developed along the lines of what you've been doing on YouTube.

Discovery and Disney have both expressed initial interest in doing something with us and your name seemed to strike interest with each of them.

Respond to me as soon as you are able so we can set up a time to connect to discuss the details.

John

He probably had his secretary write that, but still. John Silverberg wrote to me. Disney? Discovery Channel? And I'm definitely swoony. This day couldn't possibly get better.

I dial Trevor. He's still at work, so I call his office line.

"Trevor MacIntyre. How may I help you?"

"I want to complain about your piece on O-Thai-O," I say in a twangy voice.

"Which hasn't been published yet. Nice try, Rob."

I chuckle.

"Seriously, what's up?"

"Get this," I say. "John Silverberg just sent me an email saying Disney

and Discovery Channel have an interest in me and my show.”

“Dude. That’s awesome.”

“I know. I’m kind of floored.”

“Destined for greatness.”

“No one’s destined. But thanks for that vote of confidence. It’s surreal right now. He wants me to answer the email and then arrange details.”

“Let’s celebrate. I’ll be home at six.”

“That’s not all,” I say.

“There’s more than Disney being interested in you?”

I chuckle, feeling like nothing can topple me today.

“Yeah.”

“Well, spill it.”

“Laura was doing Ella Mae’s hair and of course Ella Mae had to post her hair appointment on social media. Anyway, long story short, Laura said she thinks I’m definitely swoony.”

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. I’ll never live this down.

“You’re sooo swoony. I’ve always thought so.”

“Shut it, MacIntyre.”

“Seriously, though. I had a hunch you were still into her. You’ve been so quiet about her for years. I always wanted to know where you stood, but I gave you room. You noticed that right?”

“Yes. Five stars for that.” I say laughing lightly.

“What’s your plan?”

“I don’t know. Just because she said that doesn’t mean she’s open to dating again. She’s been more than clear that I’m the last man in Bordeaux she wants to date. And we all know that includes Cooter and Jesse among other fine options.”

“Have you asked her out? Directly?”

“Not directly. No.”

“Take it from the man who wasted years he could have been with the woman he loved. Ask her out.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe about it. I’ve gotta run. We’ve got a staff meeting before Lexi and I drive home. I’ll call you and we can go out to celebrate. I’m proud of you. Ask Laura out. That’s all I’m going to say.”

I thank Trevor and we hang up. I compose an email to John Silverberg

telling him I'd be interested in hearing his thoughts and discussing options. I delete the email, write a new one, and repeat that four more times. Okay, closer to twenty. I'm like the virtual version of the guy with wads of paper across his desk and surrounding his trashcan.

Finally, I have something I'm happy with. Until I hit send. Then I sit questioning myself and the email. Did I sound too eager? Did I tell him what he wanted to hear? This whole thing is a dream of mine—being acknowledged and included at a national level for the approach I use to bridge the scientific and entertainment communities.

It's one thing to have a faithful YouTube following. It's a whole other level to have professionals seeking me out.

I turn my computer off and focus on a project I already have lying out on the table in my basement. I need to channel all this energy. Trevor's words roll through my head.

Maybe he's right. I need to ask a certain hairdresser out. Or maybe I need to take a different approach. Knowing Laura, the direct route will send her into hiding. I need to ease her into a yes answer.

LAURA

It's closing time. Freida and I are the last two in the salon. She walks over to my station after tallying the register.

"Have a seat, Laura. Please."

I sit in my station chair, and Freida takes a seat at Angie's station next to mine.

She sighs and looks warmly at me. Her eyes seem more drawn than usual.

Her gaze travels around the room and then lands back on me. "When I started here. It was back in the eighties. I had a dream. I was just a young hairdresser then, but I wanted to own this place."

I smile imagining Freida as a young, ambitious woman with her whole life ahead of her.

"Burt and I saved and when the original owner decided to retire, I made an offer and took it over. Of course, we weren't at this location yet. I got this spot before you were born.

"Our town's been good to the Dippity Do and to me. When Burt had cancer, they rallied, like they do. I don't think I cooked more than ten or eleven suppers that whole year. When I had my knee replaced, all the stylists pitched in and covered my clients until I could bear enough weight to cut hair for a whole day again. And then I hired a few more of you and now look at us."

"It's amazing," I tell her.

Freida's obviously got more than a history of the Dippity Do on her mind. Her brow furrows and draws upward. She looks at me with a silent plea. Tears form in her eyes. I reach across from where I'm sitting and rest my

hand on her arm. She places her hand over mine and gives it a squeeze.

“This morning I got a call.”

Her voice thickens with emotion.

“My mom had a stroke. She lives in Daytona. In Florida, you know. And she’s alone there with the exception of a few friends in the community. Thankfully she was at a Bunco game when it happened.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. My mom’s everything to me. You’d love her. She’s nearly eighty, but always so full of life. Now that she’s had the stroke, well, I need to go be with her.”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll cover for you. You know that. It’s a no brainer, Frieda. You need to go be with your mom. She needs you. Don’t give it another thought.”

Frieda smiles at me. She glances around the salon again, and it’s like she’s seeing a movie reel filled with years’ of customers and beauticians. She lets out a sigh when her eyes find mine again.

“I’m not going to visit my mom, Laura. Burt and I are moving to Florida. We don’t know how many more years we have on this earth, and I want to spend as many moments as I can with my mom. She needs me now. And if she bounces out of the stroke even for a little bit, I want to gobble up the good days with her. I don’t want a thousand miles separating us anymore.”

“So, you’re leaving?”

The reality settles in slowly. People leave. I should know that more than anyone. But Frieda has been an anchor—a second mom to me. And this shop.

“What’s going to happen with the salon?”

“I’m going to have to sell it. I lease the space. But the business will be up for sale. That’s why I wanted to talk to you, Laura. In a perfect world, I’d hand the salon over to you. You’re like a daughter to me. I know you’ve got the brains to run this business and still cut hair. And you love the customers and our town like I do.”

I can’t help the few tears that leak out my eyes. Frieda was my hairdresser the day my dad left us and Rob announced our breakup. I couldn’t turn to my mom. She was an emotional basket case. I came to get my hair cut the next day and poured my heart out to Frieda. She listened.

Frieda made me stay around the salon after my appointment, and then she took me to her home, gave me cookies and sat with me while I cried my eyes out. I couldn’t feel a thing the day Rob dropped the bomb on me. But as soon

as I saw Frieda, my emotions flooded me. She walked me through my darkest days and then she hired me.

She made me see what a salon really was. It's so much more than a shop where you get a wash and a trim. It's a gathering place, a place to find comfort and a listening ear, and a place where you might walk in feeling down or lonely and walk out feeling a bit better than when you came. And I wanted all that. I wanted to be the one to provide those comforts for others.

"I can't afford to buy this place from you," I tell Frieda. "I have a decent savings, but my brakes just went out and even a setback as small as that's a hardship on my bank account. I'm driving a loaner from the shop until it's fixed. I'm not rolling in the kind of money I'd need to take over."

"I know you aren't, sweetie. I just wanted you to know where things stood. We've paid the lease through May. You've got a little over three months here. Then we're going to have to sell. In the best case someone local will buy us out and keep things running like they always have."

I don't even let my mind travel to the worst case—even though Frieda and I both know it means the Dippity Do will close and we'll all be out of work.

"And when do you leave?"

"Burt's been on the phone with Gene at the real estate office today. We're putting the house up for sale tomorrow. We're leaving Friday to fly out and we'll travel back and forth to settle things, but after Friday we won't be in Bordeaux much—only as we're needed to wrap things up."

I take it all in. As much as I can.

"Thanks for telling me."

"Of course. I wanted you to know first. If we didn't need the money, I'd give you this place. You know that."

I smile reassuringly at her.

"I know you would. And I probably wouldn't let you."

"I know that too. You're too independent for your own good sometimes."

"What happens if no one buys the business from you?"

I hate the question as soon as it exits my mouth. I brace myself for her answer.

"Well, then we'll have to close."

I nod. I knew it but hearing the reality from her makes the tight weight that had been forming in my chest plummet into my stomach.

"I'm telling the rest of the girls tomorrow. I wanted you to know first."

“Thank you for that,” I say.

Frieda stands. She looks weary. I wonder what I’ll be like at her age. Would I travel a thousand miles if my mom had a stroke?

We close together. Frieda sees me to the front door, and I turn to give her a hug. She squeezes me tightly and tells me she loves me, and then says they’ll have a guest room in Daytona for me if ever I want to visit. I swallow hard, let her go and walk to my car while she locks the door behind me.

I glance at the darkened window of the shop as I drive down State Street. The decal saying Dippity Do always felt like a fixture in my life even before I worked here. I can close my eyes and see it, the way the scissors perch on the curl in the Y like they’re about to snip it off. I force myself to take deep breaths as I turn toward home.

The next day Frieda announces her situation to all the hairdressers before our first customers arrive. Everyone cries except me. I’m going through the motions like I do when anyone important leaves me behind. I shove all my pain in the safe in the basement of my chest and push forward. It’s what I do.

LAURA

The announcement about the Dippity Do dominates my thoughts all week until Friday comes. I don't have a minute free all day because it's spring formal and every high school girl in Bordeaux has an appointment to go the extra mile to look their best.

Frieda didn't come to the shop today. Her flight left this afternoon out of Columbus. We said our goodbyes yesterday after closing. All the beauticians threw an informal going away party for her at the salon. I don't have time to think about her being gone for good with the stream of customers coming through all day. Finally, at seven, I close the front door, lock it and drive home.

My feet hurt. My back aches. My fingers feel stiff like I'm a crustacean. Yep, I'm officially turning into a crab after holding scissors, curling irons and a blow dryer all day. Spring formal could be the death of me. I can see my tombstone now:

*She died after pinning the last updo in place.
Single and reportedly still secretly in love
with her high school sweetheart.
But her ultimate sacrifice was not wasted.
The senior class girls never looked better.*

Okay, that's more of a eulogy than an engraving for my headstone, unless I get one of those giant gaudy stones that take up two plots. Not likely on a hairdresser's salary.

I park my car and look up the stairs at my apartment over the garage. Did I leave the light on? I can't remember. Thoughts of a warm bath override all others.

A warm bath with lavender Epsom salts and my chill playlist of Kate Melua, Adele, Norah Jones, and Michael Buble.

Yes. A bath with Buble. A Buble bath.

I'm chuckling at my own joke when I stick the key in the lock. I twist the doorknob, but the door barely budes open when it seems to hit something.

Not something. Someone.

I scream a shrill cry that could wake the dead.

A man is in my home.

Staring at me.

With his hands up in the surrendered position.

Holding a power drill.

"Rob?" I ask in a raspy breath as my head clears and the scene before me comes into focus.

Then I shout, "What in the ever-living love of all things buckeye are you doing in my apartment? With a drill! After dark!"

"I'm just ... I was ... I thought ..."

He's shaking his head like he's confused when he's the one surprising me in my apartment. The door remains open behind me. I haven't moved since I stepped over the threshold. I think I'm still in shock. Rob starts moving around picking up tools like he's Thing One or Thing Two and I'm the parents in Cat in the Hat.

I fold my arms over my chest. "You haven't answered me."

The bottom step outside makes that loud creaking sound it always does when someone puts their full weight on it. A chill runs through me. I thought Rob was an intruder. Maybe he just beat the guy to it.

I move quickly to stand behind Rob, who instinctively pushes me the rest of the way behind him while he blocks me like a human shield. He holds the drill up as if it's a weapon. What's he going to do, pierce the burglar's ears?

The steps outside creak again and my aunt's voice filters up to us. "Laura, are you alright? We heard you scream."

My body presses against Rob. We both let out a relieved breath and I instantly shift from feeling petrified to being hyperaware of him. He's all warm and muscly and he smells like his familiar scent of campfire and chocolate. How fair is that—a man who smells like chocolate?

I push off him quickly.

“I’m fine,” I shout down to my aunt.

I step around Rob and make a wild flapping motion directing him to move out of the way so Aunt Margaret doesn’t see him. I don’t need us to be the topic of town gossip.

“I’m fine” I repeat as my aunt takes the final step onto the top landing.

I walk toward the doorway and stand in a way that hopefully fills the entry to my apartment. One arm is raised toward the top of the door jamb and my other arm bows out so my hand rests on my hip. I look like I’m posing to be the next Miss Threshold. All I need is a sash and a crown.

Aunt Margaret gives me a suspicious appraisal. Maybe she’s weighing my mental stability right now. I know I surely am.

“I’m sorry. I screamed because I ... I thought of something scary. I’m fine now.”

Really? That’s the best I can come up with?

I’m now claiming to be a woman who screams like she’s starring in a horror movie when she merely thinks about something scary. Fabulous.

Aunt Margaret shifts her weight, staring at me with a look of thorough confusion. Rightly so.

“But I’m fine. Really.”

“So you’ve said. Three times.” She laughs a light laugh.

“Yep. That’s me. Fine, fine, fine,” I joke back. “I’m just tired from the long day. I think I styled half the senior class today.”

My arm is getting a little tired of being raised over my head, especially after cutting hair all day. My fingertips feel a little tingly and my tricep is making its presence known. I’m trying to look casual while maintaining the posture of an orangutan holding an overhead branch. It’s worse than a contest on Survivor.

Aunt Margaret looks up at my hand. I drop it and shake out the tingles.

Her brow crinkles momentarily and then she asks, “You must be exhausted. Are you hungry? I could bring up some dinner. We had steak, salad and rolls. I’ve got plenty left over. I could make you a plate and we could hang out and chat while you eat.”

“Thanks. Do you mind if I take a rain check? I’m actually about to get in a bath.”

I make the mistake of barely glancing over at Rob. He’s about two feet away from me, hidden behind the open door. When I say bath, he waggles his

eyebrows playfully. He's in so much trouble.

Then again, maybe I'm the one in trouble.

"Okay, dear. You relax. And if you need anything, you know where to find us," Aunt Margaret says, giving me one last glance with her eyebrows raised.

Then she touches my arm and says, "... and maybe keep the screaming reserved for genuinely threatening situations if you can."

"I'll be sure to only scream in truly scary situations—like if a real person were up here when I got home."

"Oh, God forbid!" Aunt Margaret gasps. "Of course, we're in Bordeaux. No one would be up in your apartment unless you knew 'em. Well, maybe if Cooter were to have too much to drink and accidentally make his way up here. You know he wandered into the Anderson's house a few nights ago and crawled right into the master bed as if he were some tipsy Goldilocks!"

"I heard," I say, putting on a smile on my face that hopefully says *I'm okay*, instead of *I'm hiding my ex-boyfriend behind this very door right here. You know, the man who actually did break in while I was gone.*

Thankfully, Aunt Margaret nods and then turns to walk down the steps. "I'll let you rest now."

"I'll pop by for coffee in the morning," I say to her back as she walks down the steps.

The door is almost closed when I hear her holler up from halfway down. "That sounds great. I'll send your uncle Allen out for Donut Hole donuts. He'll get you that cream filled one you like."

I shut the door. The click of the latch seems to echo through my apartment.

That's when I notice the new deadbolt assembly on my door jamb and the back of my door.

I point to them with one hand while putting the other hand on my hip as I face Rob.

"You broke into my house to install locks?"

"I kept thinking about what you said about Cooter coming here drunk. Even your aunt thinks it's possible."

"I was joking, Rob."

"I know. It just got me thinking and I couldn't let go of the idea."

He shifts his weight a little, running his hand across the stubble on his chin.

“I just wanted to make sure you were safe.”

My eyes lock on his. No one has ever taken care of me like Rob. And he knows what it does to me. I don't let people take care of me, which may explain his need to break in to protect me.

Our eyes haven't left one another. Rob steps closer to me.

I think I may stop breathing, but I know that's not true because I feel my chest moving up and down and my heart thrumming at a more rapid rate than usual. My word, he's a beautiful man—the way his defined cheekbones and square jaw angle like they were carved from stone, the gleam in his misty grey eyes that are bordering on sky blue today. His tongue darts out across those lips of his—full, broad and so tempting.

This day took everything from me. And Frieda leaving weighs on me. I'm supposed to be in my Buble bath right now, not inches away from the man who unknowingly owns my heart. He's not allowed to possess it, but it seems he's stolen it anyway.

The air between us feels charged with tiny pinpricks of electricity. Rob's eyes rove across my face. Close. He's so close. And he smells good and looks even better.

You know when you're driving along, and you suddenly realize you accidentally took the wrong turn because you started driving somewhere you usually go instead of going where you were supposed to be headed?

That's me right now.

I'm taking a turn toward the familiar.

I move an imperceptible step closer to Rob. Neither of us speaks. We're staring into one another's eyes. His breath flutters across my face. It's heavy, almost labored, but so soft and careful.

I'm in a trance. All warning thoughts sound like voices somewhere on shore being drowned out by the waves of longing washing over me. I've fought my feelings for two years. I've wanted Rob since the day he said I couldn't be his anymore—really it's been since the day he asked me out and became my high school boyfriend—only we're not in high school anymore. He's a grown man—all man.

I've held back and pushed him away since he came back from college. But right now, there's a riptide pull between us, and I don't want anything except to be swept up by it.

Rob's hand comes to my cheek so slowly and tentatively, I wonder if I'm imagining it. But then I notice my hand mirroring his as I cup his face. The

stubble on his cheek grazes my palm. I rub my thumb in a gentle caress across his jaw as I allow my head to lean into his hand. This is home. He's everything familiar. The totality of what I lost is standing here in front of me and I don't have it in me to push him away anymore.

"I've missed you, Laura."

He says it on a whisper, his voice barely audible.

I don't answer him, but my eyes say it all. *I've missed you too. More than anything.*

Rob leans in, a question written on his face. I answer him wordlessly, moving the last few inches to close the gap between us. He kisses me, feather light, a ghosting across my mouth. Still, that delicate connection elicits a light moan from me. The sound must encourage Rob because he steps closer, putting his hand behind my neck, lacing his fingers through my hair and kissing me more fully.

He kisses my lips, my jaw, my cheek, tiny kisses peppered along my skin, each one like a small electrical pulse, leaving me warm and humming. I comb my fingers through the edges of his hair, cupping his neck and pulling him closer.

We're acting on muscle memory now, our bodies falling back into old habits as I respond to his kiss, and our mouths and hands pick up where we left off years ago.

When Rob's lips near my ear, he breathes out my name on an exhale.

"Laura."

The word snaps me out of my dreamlike state. I let out a huff of a breath as reality floods me.

What are we doing? What is he doing?

I place my flat palm on his chest. Bad idea. His heart beats double time beneath my hand and my fingers catalog the strength of his muscles through his T-shirt. He feels too good.

In a breathy whisper, I say, "We can't, Rob. We can't."

I push away and take a step back from him.

Regaining my bearings, I look Rob squarely in the eyes, "You can't just come up here and let yourself in and do all this!"

I wave my hands toward the locks and then at myself hoping he understands by *this* I mean all of it. Caring for me, tearing down my well-constructed walls and making me feel again.

"I'm sorry, Laura. I didn't mean to overstep. I just ..."

“You can’t,” I say, cutting him off. “We can’t. Our time is up. We hit the expiration date. You and I are whatever we are. That’s all we can be.”

He stares at me for a long moment. I stare back. I think he’s searching me for some chink in the armor—some loophole where he gets to justify kissing me even though nothing will ever come of it. But there’s none.

I don’t want to be Rob’s fling or his fill-in-the-blank girlfriend until life offers him something more. Most of all, I don’t want to be the anchor holding him back from greatness. He was made to sail. I’m just a small-town hairdresser and that’s all I’ll ever be. Which is fine. It’s what I chose. It’s what I love. It’s just not what he needs.

And Rob will leave. Lexi may not think so, but in my soul, I know it. Rob will chase his dream when it comes knocking, and I won’t be enough to keep him from leaving again.

I slipped up. But I’m not going to fall and I’m definitely not taking him with me if I do.

After a few long moments, Rob’s lips pull into a thin line and tuck inward. Those lips that I was kissing with abandon only moments ago like a starving woman at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Rob runs his hand down his jeans as he nods his head at me. “Okay,” he says. “Sorry.”

He packs up his tools, muttering *I’m really sorry* a few more times while avoiding eye contact, and then it sounds like he says *I messed up*.

Great. I’m Rob’s mistake—again.

He silently heads to the door, pausing with his back to me for the briefest second before turning the handle and walking out.

I crumple onto my couch as I listen to his retreating footfalls down my outside steps. My fingers absently run across my lips and cheek. The echo of his breathless voice whispering my name lingers in my ear.

Run after him! Something almost urgent nudges me to bring us back to that kiss where I could lose myself in the warmth of him holding me and the passion surging between us. I ignore the pull, reminding myself of everything I know about Rob—about people in general. Even the best of them end up leaving. Getting attached only ends in heartache.

ROB

My feet hit the pavement with a force and speed twice my usual exertion for a morning run. If there's one thing I can't stomach it's messing something up. I'm a problem solver by nature.

I'm so stupid. What made me think breaking in to install locks was any part of winning her heart?

And that kiss.

It felt right. We fit back together like two pieces of a puzzle. I can still feel her on my lips, in my arms. Laura was mine again for a moment. But I moved too fast, and I might have ruined it all in my rush to win her back.

My breath comes in gulps, so I slow my pace, pausing to lean my arm on a wood fence that lines the road while I bend over gasping until my breathing levels out a little. Trevor and Lexi's new place is out this way—the old Finch house. We've been doing renovations on it but had to put everything on hold over the winter and now everyone's focused on the wedding.

A truck slows and starts to pull over. Great. The last thing I want to do is socialize with some meddlesome local right now. This town feels claustrophobically small today. I look up and see whose truck it is. Aiden. Trevor's older brother. He owns a ranch a few miles out from here where there's nothing but fields and acreage properties.

"Morning," he says in that slow, easy way of his.

"Hey," I answer.

"Out on a run?"

"Yep."

He studies me, narrowing his eyes as if he sees my life story and watched

what went down last night. In a town like Bordeaux, I wouldn't be surprised if Laura pushing me out of her apartment Friday evening wasn't Saturday morning news.

"I could use a hand with a few things if you've got an hour or so," Aiden says. "Looks like you could use someone to talk to."

"Or not."

"Or not," he agrees. "Maybe just some place to channel all that pent up energy. Your call."

Is it that obvious? I need to work on my game face.

I walk over to the truck, open the passenger door, and put my foot on the running board to pull myself onto the bench seat. Aiden and I drive along in silence until we reach his long driveway. He bought this place after he and Milly Green broke up a few years back and now he's got goats, a crazy llama, and a thriving remote tech consulting business.

"You haven't been serious with anyone since Milly?" I ask.

"Don't need to be."

I look over at him. He's calm, steady and seems content.

"Why not?"

The question sounds out of place as soon as I say it.

Aiden looks at me and laughs. Full on laughter fills the cab of his truck. He shakes his head and brings it down to a chuckle.

"Laura, huh?"

"What?"

"You don't care about me and Milly. So, this has got to be about Laura."

I shake my head lightly and look out the passenger window at the pasture alongside Aiden's driveway. Alfalfa grows in neat rows up until a fence divides the crops with an uncultivated field.

"You're good," I say. "Yeah. It's Laura. But I do care about you and Milly."

"Milly was my first love, but it was young love. We grew up and apart. Our breakup hurt for a while. But I got over it—over her. Believe me when I say she doesn't haunt my memories or tempt me in any way. I think she's dating someone in Beavercreek now. Not that I keep up with her, but even living this far removed from Bordeaux, I still hear all the scuttlebutt when I come into town on errands."

"This place," I shake my head.

"Gotta love 'em. Or you'll end up hating them."

“I do love it here—mostly. I had so many opportunities when I graduated.”

“I bet you did.”

“I came home, though. At the time, I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. Massachusetts was amazing. But it always felt like I didn’t quite belong. Now ... I just don’t know.”

“And Laura’s here.”

Back to Laura. All roads seem to lead to her, at least where I’m concerned.

“She is.”

Aiden cuts the engine and looks over at me.

“So, is Laura your Milly?”

“She was my first love. So, in that way, yeah. But being over her the way you are over Milly? No. Not in the least.”

“What are you doing about that?”

“Messing up big time,” I confess.

“Well, knock that off.” Aiden hops out of the truck and walks around to open the back hatch.

We spend the next hour carrying bails of hay into Aiden’s barn, feeding his animals, and walking his property to check fences. He didn’t need me in the least. But I guess I needed him. We don’t talk much during our work. Being out here stills something inside me.

As we’re walking back toward the main house, I ask Aiden, “So you don’t have a future with Milly. Why don’t you date anyone else?”

“I date here and there. Sometimes some well-meaning senior citizen fixes me up with her granddaughter or I meet a woman through my work, and we decide to grab a meal together, but I’m not pushing it right now.

“I’ve got the ranch and my family, including my niece and nephew who come out here whenever Karina needs a break. And you’d be surprised how many other people make their way out here on a regular basis. I’m far from lonely.

“Would I like to be married someday? Probably. But I don’t feel like it’s time to put the effort into getting to know someone new right now.”

I look around at Aiden’s place. He’s one of the most easy-going, self-contained men I know. And he’s happy being single. I wish I could be, but as long as I think there’s any hope of being with Laura, I’m not going to settle or look for someone else.

“Why don’t I drive you home now?”

“Sounds good.”

We jump in the truck. Aiden does a three-point turn and we drive back out to the main road.

“You solve problems for a living,” Aiden says as we near my neighborhood.

“I do. Sometimes it takes a while. A lot of trial and error.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

I give him a quizzical look.

“Trial and error. You can’t do anything significant without it. So, you messed up? Fix it. Try again. Go at it from a new angle. You know how to solve problems. So, you know how to solve this one.”

Aiden pulls into my driveway and puts the truck in park.

“I’m not sure winning Laura’s heart comes anywhere near solving a scientific problem with an invention.”

“No. I wouldn’t figure it was. But that part of you that doesn’t let up and keeps at something until you get it right ...” He looks over at me with a confident nod of his head. “That will be the part you need most. Don’t give up. It’s not your style.”

He’s right. I tried installing locks. I ended up kissing her. But, before that, hanging out at my place in the rain, going out to Thai—or whatever that was—with Trevor and Lexi, those things were working. Laura had been softening to me. I can treat pursuing her like a scientific process. Trial and error. I’ll see what works and do more of it.

“Thanks, man.”

“You know it. Thanks for lending a hand this morning.”

“You know I didn’t do much.”

Aiden just nods.

I open the door and hop out. Then, leaning into the cab of the truck, I say, “And I did have something exciting happen yesterday.”

“What?”

“John Silverberg sent me an email. Disney and the Discovery Channel both have separate interests in something he’s putting together, and they are aware of my YouTube channel. He wants to at least do a collab with me for starters.”

“Whoa. That’s big. And they say nothing good comes out of Ohio.”

“Whoever said that hasn’t heard us spout off the list of our famous and

influential people.”

“We’re a well-kept secret. Well, we were until you got noticed by Hollywood.”

“It’s nothing yet,” I assure Aiden—and myself.

“But it could be.”

“It could,” I agree.

“And then you’ll have some big decisions to make.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

Aiden tips his chin at me as I shut the door to his truck and walk into my house realizing everything in my life is uncertain right now. My future isn’t one straight path away from this moment. I’m at a roundabout and I don’t know which road to take or whether some lanes are even open to me. The most important one seems barricaded and impassable.

LAURA

The lights are low in my apartment after a long day at work. I'm indulging in an episode of reality TV featuring a single man on an island with twelve women. It's basically a reenactment of my worst nightmare, but it's an entertaining diversion from the heavy dose of daunting reality I've been dealt this week.

I've spent the past two days rewinding and replaying the kiss and how Rob and I left things between us. My thoughts fluctuate from fretting over the future of the salon to what I'm going to do when it inevitably closes.

But I invariably find my mind looping back to thoughts of Rob's hands on my hips, stroking my hair, caressing my cheek, and our lips connecting after all these years like we never stopped kissing, and never stopped meaning something life-altering to one another.

My phone buzzes from across the room and I begrudgingly haul myself off the couch to grab it. Shannon's name flashes on my notifications.

Shannon: *What are you doing?*

Laura: *Eating cocoa puffs for dinner and putting my feet up in front of the TV.*

Shannon: *You live like a sixty-year-old when you're only in your mid-twenties.*

Laura: *I feel like a sixty-year-old these days.*

Shannon: *We're ordering pizza and having a girls' night. Come over. We've even talked Lexi into prying herself away from Trevor for a night so we can all be together.*

Laura: *I'm already in my fluffy socks and sweats.*

Shannon: *We love fluffy socks and sweats. Don't change, just come. You need this.*

I debate saying no and staying home, but Shannon's right. I'm living like a spinster and I'm only twenty-four. I'm only missing a rocking chair and a clutter of blind and hairless cats to complete the experience. Time with girlfriends is probably just what I need to take my mind off everything serious.

Laura: *Okay. I'll be over.*

I throw a pair of Uggs over my fluffy socks and drive to Jayme and Shannon's as soon as I hang up the phone. No use giving myself a chance to back out.

Jayme and Shannon rent a quaint three-bedroom house a few blocks from Main Street in a family-oriented neighborhood. They're like the team mascots for all the single ladies in town. Moms and grandmas up and down the block are constantly attempting to play matchmaker for them.

We went to school with most of these guys and weeded them out back then. The other half are probably related to us one way or another. This town is full of slim pickin's—except one man. The one I can't afford to fall for again and need to purge out of my system like I'm on some sort of liver detox cleanse.

The door opens before I even have a chance to knock. Jayme and Shannon's bulldog, Groucho, lifts himself slowly from the spot where he had been lying down. He plops the lower half of his body back onto the floor, splaying his rear two legs out to the side behind him, and drags himself over to me propelling with only his front legs. Crazy dog.

"You're here!" Jayme says in an unusually animated tone, totally disregarding the antics of their dog.

"In all my glory," I say, holding my arms out to my sides to show off my sloppy attire.

I walk in past her. A pizza box takes up the majority of the coffee table. Lexi's draped sideways across a stuffed chair with a plate in hand. Shannon's sitting cross-legged on the couch.

Jayne says, “You’ve arrived to the most chill group of bridesmaids and bride in the world. Do we diet? No. We feast!”

I love that about these women. They’re the antithesis to people like Ella Mae who constantly adapt and preen to gain some sort of validation. Being among my closest friends quietly unfurls something in my chest, releasing a big chunk of the stress I’ve been hauling around ever since Frieda shared her news with me.

Groucho sits at my feet waiting to be acknowledged. He lets out a low growl. It’s his way of saying *Hey, notice me*.

I bend down and rub his head. In my puppy-loving voice I ask him, “Who’s a good boy? Not you. That’s for sure. But you make up for it in looks.”

Groucho looks up at me with adoring eyes. We get one another. He’s like a little human sometimes.

“I knew you’d come!” Lexi exclaims.

She looks at Jayme and Shannon. “Fork it over.”

“I’m not getting up right now. I’m too comfy. I’ll pay up before you leave,” Shannon answers Lexi.

“You three bet on me not coming?” I ask.

“I bet you *would* come,” Lexi says with a boastful grin.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I tell her.

Pointing at the other two, I say, “I thought you had my back.”

“We do,” Jayme says.

“I know you too well,” Shannon says. “You always process the early stage of any crisis alone. I didn’t expect you to crawl out from your cave for at least another two days.”

I shoot her a look.

She smiles knowingly at me. “Am I wrong?”

“Not completely,” I concede.

Groucho walks over to the coffee table and starts sniffing the pizza.

“No, Groucho. No,” Jayme says firmly.

He shoots her a look and plops down on the ground, sulking as he stares under the coffee table, ignoring us now that it’s clear we won’t feed him pizza.

One of the cats proceeds to hop onto the coffee table and walks carefully around the outside edge of the pizza box like a taunting sibling silently telling Groucho, *Ha, ha. You can’t stand up here, but I can.*

Groucho snorts. Shannon moves the cat, who starts licking herself like she's been offended as soon as she's plunked on the ground.

"Those two should have their own sitcom," I say.

"Here, you sit down. I'll fix you a plate and get you a drink," Jayme offers. "And we're going to brainstorm the whole Dippity Do situation."

If I were the crying type, I'd tear up. Shannon hit closer to home than I'd like to admit. When big things happen, I turn inward, put on my big girl boots and muscle through—usually alone even though I have friends who would share the load with me if I let them. I might continue to be around people, but I'm not reaching out, and no one's getting past a certain point—except these three. Somehow, they know how to scale my walls.

As much as I despise needing people, I'm grateful for them and their meddling ways right now.

I take a seat next to Jayme, accept a plate of pizza from Shannon and relax back into the couch.

Groucho's still pouting under my feet.

"So," Lexi says. "The way we look at it, you need to raise the money for the business. After that, the shop should keep bringing in enough revenue to pay for supplies, rent, wages and all the other ongoing costs."

"You've been talking about the salon?"

"Of course," Jayme says. "We can't let the Dippity Do go out of business. And we for sure can't let you lose your job."

I look at each of them. There's probably nothing four twenty-four-year-olds can do to save this business, but the fact that they want to try means the world to me.

"Of course," Shannon adds. "You can always start a mobile haircutting business. But that would mean traveling to farms on the outskirts of town and going into people's houses. Heaven knows what you'd end up seeing behind the closed doors of this town."

I shudder imagining only a fraction of it.

"That's a last-ditch plan," I agree. "I figured worse come to worst I could pick up a job at a salon somewhere like Huber Heights or Beavercreek."

"And drive through snow, hail and thunderstorms to work?" Lexi points out.

"You do it. Maybe I could work in Corn Corners with you and Trevor."

"That's an option if all else falls through. But we've got a bigger mission," Lexi says. "We need the Dippity Do to stay open. It's a fixture in

our town. When local businesses die it's worse than a funeral. We're going to figure this out."

We spend the rest of the night talking about everything from legitimate business plans to what could happen if we found out one of the local farmers turns out to be a secret billionaire who can't tolerate the idea of losing his hairdresser.

We vacillate from seriousness to hysterical laughter. In the end, I don't know if we're any closer to solving the salon situation, but I'm feeling worlds better.

"How about this?" Jayme says. We're both lying flat on the couch now, our feet near one another's shoulders, our bellies over-filled with cheese and garlic crust. "We could start a campaign."

We're all so sated we quietly wait for her to expound.

"We'll call it S.O.S!" Jayme snaps up to a sitting position, nearly knocking me off the couch in the process. "Save Our Salon! The whole town can get behind it. We'll put little donation jars on all the store counters, do some fundraisers, involve everyone in the project."

"That's not bad," Shannon says.

"I like it," Lexi agrees. "No one pulls together like the people of Bordeaux when one of our own is in need. I can picture everyone getting behind this."

I can picture it too—only I picture a fiasco.

But what choice do we have? It's not like some farmer will actually come out of the woodwork confessing that he's a secret billionaire who wants to fund the local salon.

That's the stuff of romance novels, not real life. And if it were the case, that farmer would be all ripped and chiseled and he'd marry the hairdresser in the process. That's not my life. I'm a small-town beautician in love with a scientist whose destiny is to leave me in the dust as he rises to greatness.

There's no use trying to stop this S.O.S campaign now. I know these three women. Once they've embraced an idea, we're going forward with it no matter what I say.

The next day, Ella Mae stops into the Dippity Do while I'm giving Mrs. Milgarden her weekly wash and curl.

"Oh, Laura! You're just who I'm looking for!"

"Well, look at that. You found me. What're the odds?"

"You're so silly. Anyway, your video went viral. I put it on my IGTV, so

it didn't come down after twenty-four hours. It's still trending! People are luh-uh-uh-ving you. I'm not kidding. They simply love you. You've got men banging down the doors of my account asking how to reach you."

If Mrs. Milgarden were a dog, her ears would be up at a point, her paw tucked under and her nose aiming dead ahead. She's taking in every tidbit of what Ella Mae says, and I'm sure it will be spread around town like jam on toast and gobbled up twice as quickly.

"I'm not looking to meet a stranger online," I assure Ella Mae. "I'm glad your video did well for you."

"I tried tagging you," Ella Mae continues undeterred. "But I can't find your account."

I return my attention to my paying client instead of the boisterous and misguided interruption that is Ella Mae.

"Do you want me to comb this out like we did last week?"

Mrs. Milgarden answers me, "Oh, yes please, Laura. Besides, that'll give me time to hear all the details of what Ella Mae's sayin' to you about these men online and whatnot."

"I don't have a social media account," I tell Ella Mae.

"WHAT!?" Ella Mae literally shrieks. She stares at me as if I showed up to cut hair buck naked. Every head in the salon whips around to witness the source of the commotion. She gestures with her hands. Her eyes are wide. "How can you not be on social media?"

"Easy. I don't sign up. I don't go on it."

Ella Mae huffs. "You're so small-town, Laura."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"There's a whole world out there, a world full of handsome men who are interested in you."

"They don't know me, Ella Mae. They don't even know you. They only know what you put out there. That's not the same."

She has no idea how deeply that small-town comment hit below the belt. It's a peeve of mine when people say small-town like it's an insult.

"Well, aren't you a regular raincloud," she says. "I thought you'd be happy to hear that big name influencers were scoping you out."

I look over at Ella Mae. She genuinely looks concerned and flustered. I realize she's a lost cause. There's no reforming the unwilling. So, I back off. "Thanks for thinking of me," I say, hoping it puts a damper on her overzealousness.

“Well, you let me know when you see the light and want to set up an account. It could really be good for business.”

She piqued my interest with that comment.

“How would setting up a social media account help the salon?”

“People become invested. They want to support you. You never know how this could be a boon. As a matter of fact, yes!”

“Yes, what?”

Am I standing on a railroad track with a train aiming for me? Because that’s what this moment feels eerily akin to. Ella Mae is having an inspiration and I have a hunch I’m going to be expected to buy a roundtrip ticket on her crazy train or be flattened by it if I don’t get on board.

She prattles on, almost talking to herself, tapping her well-manicured finger to her chin as she iterates each point of her burgeoning plan.

“We develop a social media presence. People are already buzzing about my hair appointment. We start an online campaign including putting together a GoFundMe for it. We feature you, the stylist on my viral video. Girl, leave it to me. We’re going to save the Dippity Do!”

ROB

“**A**nd that’s it for me, Rob, here in the heartland. Remember ... make it, don’t break it!”

I hit stop on my videorecorder remote and walk toward the computer so I can review the segment I just filmed for next week’s YouTube upload.

I hear Trevor’s voice at the top of my stairs. “Is it safe to come down?”

“The sign that says *Filming in Session* would generally mean not to shout down the stairs.”

“Oh! Sorry! I didn’t see it,” Trevor says as he walks down into the basement. Then he whispers, “Are you filming right now?”

I whisper back, “No. I just finished before you shouted down at me.”

“Why are we whispering?”

I laugh. “What are you up to? And where’s your better half?”

“Girl’s night at Jayme and Shannon’s.”

“No wonder you’ve got that lost puppy dog look in your eyes.”

“Not a lost puppy.”

“Whatever you say.”

He’s a lost puppy. But who am I kidding? I’m no better ever since I left Laura’s the night of the kiss we shouldn’t have shared.

“What’s this?” Trevor asks, walking toward my brainstorming whiteboard.

“Um, an experiment I’m working on. Want something to eat?”

Usually, food is a good way to get Trevor’s attention, and I need him to walk away from that board stat.

“The Question: How to get her to fall for me,” Trevor reads aloud. “Well now, this is very interesting, Cupid. Who is *she*? Or do I already know?”

“You know,” I admit in a half-growl, half-mumble.

“And you’re working this out like an experiment?”

“It was your brother’s idea.”

Trevor hums. And keeps reading.

I consider setting off a quick chemical reaction to force us to evacuate my basement. Something like one of my stink bombs, but since I have to live here, that’s not the best of ideas.

“Background Research: Don’t repeat the mistakes of the past. Good call. We can all take a page from that book.”

“Yep,” I say, walking toward my computer to check out the film segment instead of indulging Trevor in his uninvited intrusion into my love life. Or lack-of-love life.

“Hypothesis: If I woo her well, she’ll fall for me. Woo? Are you sixty? Who says woo? Did Lexi’s Memaw give you input into your plan here?”

“Trevor,” I fully growl. “You’re not in a position to mock me right now.”

“You’re right,” he says, growing serious. “I’m sorry. I’ve just never seen anything like this before.”

“And you shouldn’t be seeing it right now.”

“It’s up on your wall.”

“In my home.”

“Where we all hang out from time to time.”

“True,” I concede.

“You might want to relocate this to a desktop file before Laura comes over unexpectedly and sees the scientific method applied to her directly. I’m pretty sure that will set her tail feathers on fire in ways we both would rather not witness.”

He’s got a point. Laura would totally misread my notes. She’d think I’m making light of something serious or turning her into a project when she’s the farthest thing from it. I’ll transfer it to my computer tonight. I should have done it earlier, but I didn’t expect company. Usually, Trevor and Lexi are cuddled on one of their couches every evening after dark.

“May I?” he asks, pointing to the board. Now he asks.

“Have at it, you’re already more than halfway through.”

“Variables: One: Laura’s perception of me, Two: my approach to her, Three: actions and words of people who influence Laura, Four: Laura’s

forgiveness for past mistakes.” Trevor scrubs his jaw. “What are variables again? It’s been a while since I’ve taken any science classes.”

“Anything that can be manipulated or changed in an experiment to alter the outcome.”

“So, you’re telling me if you could change Laura’s perception of you, or your approach to her, or things people around her say or do that will result in her falling for you?”

“You make me sound like a mad scientist.”

Trevor cocks a brow and looks at me without saying a word.

“In this case, I am not.”

I pick up a few of the items I had out from the shoot I just finished and stack them on the shelves. Then I grab a spray bottle of cleaner and a towel and start wiping down the folding table.

“Your brother suggested I not give up. He recommended drawing on the part of myself that persists until I solve a problem and applying that perseverance to how I pursue Laura. I started thinking about trial and error. In any project, I constantly construct hypotheses and test them. It’s all about changing variables until I find the sweet spot.”

“And you want to find Laura’s sweet spot?” Trevor asks with a wag of his eyebrows.

“I want to win her heart.”

He nods. “All joking aside, this is great. You’ve been so reluctant to talk about her. I’m glad to know where you stand. I’m all in for whatever you need. Just let me read the rest of the plan first.”

He turns back to the board.

“Test your hypothesis by changing only one variable at a time. Note what works. Don’t give up. Trial and error. She’s worth it. Step one: jellybeans ...”

A heavy silence hangs in the air while Trevor stands with his back to me, reviewing the rest of my plan quietly and nodding.

“You know, when I finally decided I had to do whatever it took to pursue Lexi, I took a round-about way. In the end, she took the initiative to push us over the line from friends to what we are now. I would have made a move, but she ended up taking the risk that made all the difference.”

“Friends,” I say.

“Yeah?” Trevor gives me a confused look.

“You’re a genius!”

“What did I say?”

“Friends. You went from friends to more. Laura isn’t even my friend yet. Not really. She treats me like I’m black death or the bubonic plague. She avoids me, shuts me down, and acts like she wishes she could be vaccinated to ensure immunity to me.”

Can’t say I blame her.

“I need to start smaller” I tell Trevor. “When I started testing my hovercraft concept, I built tabletop hovering devices. I didn’t try to fly over the reservoir in a life-sized contraption on the first go-round. I’m aiming too big trying to win her heart. I have to change my whole approach.”

“Can you tell Lexi I’m a genius?”

“That’s all you got out of what I said?”

“Nah. I heard you. But still. You called me a genius. You, Rob. Called me, Trevor. A genius.”

We both laugh. And for the first time in years, I feel like I might have a shot with Laura.

LAURA

I almost trip over the wrapped shoebox sitting on my porch when I walk out the door to leave for work. I look around. No one's in sight. Maybe it's a good thing Rob installed those locks if people can come so close to my front door without me knowing. Someone obviously walked up the stairs and set the box here last night or this morning while I was home, and I never heard a thing—not even the creak of a step.

Thinking of Rob installing locks makes me remember our kiss—the way he looked at me, the way it felt to be in his arms again. I sigh.

My inner Gordon starts waving his hands and shouting, “Don't get your knickers in a twist!”

Inner Lucy's eyes go wide as she says, “I can't help it!”

But my inner Gordon nailed it this time. Rob said the kiss was a mistake. Then again, my inner Lucy has a point. I can't bring myself to fully regret that kiss as much as I should, even though Rob's definitely more off-limits than ever.

But, man, oh man, can he kiss.

Our kiss was a slip, a fall off the wagon, a veering from the road onto the shoulder, with a fishtail of my heart, but I righted things and we're back on track. Rob's not anything to me. I'll chalk our kiss up as a momentary indulgence. I won't regret it. I simply can't repeat it.

I give my head a shake and realize I'm still holding the box in my hands. It's wrapped in white butcher paper with a wide turquoise bow tying it shut—my favorite color. When I jostle the box, something shifts around inside. Hoisting my purse higher on my shoulder, I pull the ribbon and unwrap the

package.

As soon as it's open, I see them: two bags of Jelly Bellies in orange sherbet and cream soda flavors. There's no note. Nothing but the candies. I obviously know who they are from, but what do they mean?

Closing the lid to the box, I reopen my door, set the offending gift on the small table just inside my entry and turn to lock the door and walk down the stairs. I'll deal with those later. And by deal, I mean consider them thoroughly before I eat them. Okay. I might eat a few. They don't need to go to waste.

Someone (let's pretend we don't know who) drove almost a half hour each way to Dayton or further to buy individual flavors of Jelly Bellies. We have the mixed bags here at the grocery and pharmacy, but specialty bags have to be purchased in the larger surrounding cities.

He went out of his way to buy me jellybeans—my favorite ones—and then secretly left them on my doorstep wrapped up in a bow of my favorite color.

Enough of this ruminating. I will never solve the riddle that is Rob Baldwin. And today, I have bigger problems to solve. Like what I'm going to do about the salon now that Frieda lives in Florida full-time.

Jayme said they're starting to put mason jars on store counters today. I appreciate the thought, but that's like trying to mop up a flood with an eye dropper. It's a sweet gesture, but it's not going to do the job.

When I walk into the Dippity Do, Angie's the only other hairdresser in the building. She's a single mom of twins and her chair is right next to mine. Angie's sitting at her station styling her own hair. Sometimes I think she comes in early just to have a moment of peace to herself.

"Hey," she says as I walk toward the back to hang my purse and grab an apron.

"Hey. When's your first customer?"

"Not until ten. You?"

"Nine thirty. Can we talk?"

Angie smiles at me through the mirror. "Sure. Pull up a styling chair."

I sit at my station watching as Angie continues to section out her hair and twist it around the iron, leaving long spiral curls hanging loosely all over her head.

"I need to figure out what to do with this place," I tell Angie.

"Yeah. I can't believe this happened. What are you thinking?"

“I don’t know. If we don’t find someone to buy the business, we’ll close. Please don’t mention anything to the other stylists yet. I’ll give them a month’s notice if it comes to that. I still have a month or two until I have to start giving notices and I’m hoping for a miracle or something.”

I almost tell Angie about the crazy idea my friends came up with a few nights ago, but I hold back. They’re sweet to try to pitch in, but it’s going to take a lot more than a town fundraiser to save the salon.

I don’t even harp back to the disaster that is Ella Mae. Angie witnessed that scene live and in person. I’m hoping something else captures Ella Mae’s interest—and soon. Then she’ll move on, and I’ll be a blip instead of the latest prop in her quest for notoriety and virtual world domination.

“What would it take to buy the salon?” Angie asks.

I tell her the amount, including insurance, purchasing the existing equipment and supplies, and the licenses I’ll have to pay for in my name. Okay. Not me, whoever buys this place.

She lets out a low whistle.

“It’s not a million dollars, but with my budget it may as well be.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t come up with that either,” she says.

We sit quietly. Angie finger combs her curls and mists her hair with spray, flouncing her hairdo with her hands from the bottom when she’s finished. She turns to me when she’s done looking at herself in the mirror.

“Don’t give up quite yet.”

“I’m not.”

The bell over the shop door jingles. I look toward the front of the salon and then glance at Angie who raises her brows and gives me a knowing glance.

Rob walks in like he owns the place. For a moment I wish he did. No, I don’t wish that. My relationship with him has enough complications without him becoming my new boss.

“I’m just going to ... um ... I’ll be folding those towels that came out of the dryer,” Angie says.

“Thanks,” I say.

Angie stands and walks to the back room, waggling her fingers at Rob over her shoulder. “Hey, Rob!”

“Hey, Angie,” Rob answers her.

Then he turns his attention to me. “Hey, there,” he says in that voice that could possibly melt butter, or rubber, or probably an I-beam, and definitely

does melty things to my heart.

“Hey yourself,” I say, trying to act as if we didn’t kiss within the past week.

“Can we talk?”

“Here? Now?”

“I had been thinking that, yes. It would explain me showing up here, now.”

I laugh despite myself, and he smiles at me when I do. I picture the jellybeans and I’m sure my face says something like, *You got me Jelly Bellies.*

“Funny thing,” I say. “I almost tripped over a box this morning.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. Someone left some jellybeans on my porch. Think it could have been Cooter?”

“Probably,” Rob says with a fried-chicken-eating grin spread across his face.

“Or maybe it was Jesse”

“Jesse?”

“Yeah. Probably Jesse. He knows my favorite color is turquoise.”

“How does he know that?”

“We go way back,” I tease.

I notice the little tick in Rob’s jaw even though I’m joking.

“Anyway, I plan to thank him properly.”

“You can thank me properly,” Rob blurts.

“Why would I do that?”

Rob clears his throat. He puts his hands in his pockets and looks me in the eyes. His lips pinch and his brow draws together. “I came to apologize, Laura.”

“For what?”

“For the other night. It was presumptuous of me to break in and install locks on your door, and ... the rest of it. I shouldn’t have ... Anyway, what I’m here to ask is if we can start over.”

“Start over?”

My stomach does a little flip and my heart thrums. Rob has no idea how he looks right now. He’s mildly nervous, but he comes across as insanely confident. His well-worn jeans fit him just right, and that T-shirt he’s wearing hugs his biceps and chest in ways that remind me what it felt like to be held

in his arms only days ago. His eyes are stormy today—they always look turbulent and mildly untamed when he’s passionate about something.

“As friends.”

My heart dips. *As friends.* He wants to start over as friends. That’s good, right? I can’t be more than friends with Rob anyway, no matter what my heart feels like when he’s around. And he’s extending friendship. I should be happy. Friendship is better than avoiding him. If we’re friends, I can eventually move on.

“Friends,” I repeat numbly.

“I’ll earn your friendship, Laura. I know you can’t trust me right now, and I don’t blame you. But will you give me a chance to earn it?”

Angie starts belting out a Beatles tune about the sun from the back room. She’s one of the most salt-of-the-earth people who works here. Her customers confide in her and she doesn’t turn around and spill the tea. She’s probably trying to subtly inform Rob and me that she’s overhearing everything right now.

I lower my voice and walk toward the front door. Rob follows me. Angie continues to sing, sounding more like Yoko Ono than the Fab Four with her screeching rendition of the song. She’s singing some *doo doo doo doo* part and I can picture her dancing along with her singing.

Rob glances back toward the storeroom and breathes out a light chuckle. I smile back at him, grateful he’s here even though I should be more resolute, more formal, more of everything I’m not right now.

We’re standing at the entrance of the salon, facing one another—just like we faced one another in my apartment this past week.

“So what’s your big plan for friendship?” I ask quietly.

“My plan?”

His face looks oddly guilty when I ask that.

“Yes. Knowing you, there’s some sort of plan.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well ...” Rob hesitates for a moment. Then he says, “Maybe just not avoid one another for starters.”

“I can do that,” I say, hoping I can.

If I’m going to give Rob a chance to be a friend, I have to let him near.

“Good. Great. That’s good.”

I chuckle. I love seeing Rob slightly disarmed. He’s usually so calm and composed, just the right amount of a commanding presence, while still being relaxed and unaffected by things that turn most people on their ears. Or at

least that's how he seems to me.

"So. Friends," I say, extending my hand.

Rob clasps it as if we're sealing a deal, only my heart obviously doesn't realize we've bargained on friendship. His callouses graze the soft skin on the inside of my wrist and I almost shiver from his touch.

"Oh, and I'm sorry to hear about Frieda and the salon," Rob says.

"Yeah." I say, looking down where our hands are still joined.

I look up and our eyes meet. Rob gently releases my hand. Not quickly, like he's in a rush to get away from me, but oh so slowly allowing his fingers to drag gently across my palm as he lets go, as though he wants to keep touching me.

But he's giving me what I need: friendship.

It may be what I need, but it's nowhere near what I want.

LAURA

Weariness doesn't begin to describe the feeling overtaking me as I lock the salon door and walk over to where the Pontiac Ventura I'm borrowing sits. She's a true muscle car, only with a lot of rust and an engine that has seen better days. She reminds me of a granny who got a tattoo years ago and now the skin sags around her ink. You get the feeling she was something wild and powerful in her heyday.

I turn the engine. It coughs. Turn it again. The cough comes out more like a choke. Gag, sputter, and finally she revs to life. I'm about to pull out onto State Street when a figure approaches me carrying a brown paper sack and smiling wider than he should be.

"Hey there, friend," Rob says as I roll down the window, keeping the engine on since I probably ought not chance turning it off and trying to bring it to life again twice in such a short span of time.

Friend.

"Hi," I say.

"I brought you dinner."

"What?"

"Dinner. It's the meal people eat after it gets dark out. Often with others, around the table, though that's optional."

"I know what dinner is, thank you very much. I'm just not sure why you're bringing it to me right now."

"I figured your days must be getting longer now that you have to manage the salon and still cut hair. That probably means more cocoa puffs and fewer real meals. So, as your friend, I thought I'd bring you dinner."

“That’s very thoughtful of you.”

The air between us still crackles in a very unfriendly way—not bad unfriendly, just in a way that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention. I mean, look at him. He’s properly ruffled, like he’s had a full day, but also charming and carrying a brown paper bag full of food to me in a dark parking lot. If I were the type to swoon, I’d be needing a settee to fall back on and a large paper fan right about now. Maybe even smelling salts.

My inner Gordon says, “Hey, panini head, are you seriously entertaining romantic thoughts about him?”

Inner Lucy looks at Rob and then tells Inner Gordon. “Have you seen him?” She starts fanning herself—with a paper fan, of course. I hear you, inner Lucy.

“... if you want.” Rob says, obviously finishing a sentence I missed while he was so rudely interrupted by my inner commentary.

“I’m sorry, if I want what?”

“Company,” he says. “I’d join you, or you can just take your smoked chicken sandwich and curly fries home and eat alone in your fluffy socks while binging reality shows.”

“How do you know me so well?”

“I’m a student of all things Laura Lennox.”

That’s a very more-than-friends thing to say. I don’t call him on it.

“What are you going to eat?” I ask, already aware I’m going to have him join me. Why not? I could use the distraction from car problems, work problems, and, well, him. But he’s not going to solve that last one. Maybe nothing will.

“I’ve got my own sandwich in the car. A Rueben with pickles and a side of jalapeno chips.”

He seems so pleased with himself.

“Well, you can come over for a bit. Eat with me. Then I’m probably going to bed early. I’m honestly wiped out.”

“I figured you would be.”

He figured I would be. Which means he’s been thinking about me and how I feel. I have to give my heart a huge whoa nelly before it gallops off into the sunset with Rob.

Rob knocks on the roof of the Pontiac.

“I’ll see you at home. Oh, and sweet ride.”

“It’s my free loaner. She’s a beast.”

“I kinda like women who are beasts,” he says with a wink. “More challenging than the ones who have no character. This girl’s got personality to spare. She just needs someone who knows how to handle her.”

Oh. For. Pete’s. Sake.

Rob’s not playing fair. He’s flirting.

I roll up the window.

Handle that, Rob.

But, as much as I want to fight it, I’m practically buoyant as I veer onto State Street with a paper bag full of two of my favorite foods on my passenger seat.

My phone rings halfway home. I go to hit the Bluetooth to answer and realize this old girl doesn’t know Bluetooth. She’s probably more up for an eight-track. “It’s okay,” I tell the car. “You be you. Rob says you’ve got character.”

I pick up my phone and hit speaker as I answer.

“Hey, buttercup,” my dad says.

He only calls when he’s got big news, or for some holidays. I’m a convenience, or maybe an inconvenience. I haven’t been able to figure out which. Either way, I’m no priority.

“Hi.”

“I’m in Cincinnati on business. Got me thinking about you. I’ve got big news.”

Yep. Big news. Probably should have figured that since the next holiday will be Easter and that’s around three weeks away.

He doesn’t bother to ask how I am. I could be lying on the concrete bleeding to death. He wouldn’t ask. And why my heart wishes he would, even after all these years, I don’t know. I guess we never outgrow the need to have our parents show us we matter.

I hear my dad’s next words, but it’s like someone speaking in a dream.

“You’re going to have a baby sister or brother. Margo’s in Europe on business but when she’s back we want you and Julia to come visit. She’s twenty weeks along and we’re going to do a gender reveal.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Did you just say you’re having a baby?”

“Yes! Isn’t it wonderful? Well, not technically me, of course. I’m not pregnant.” He chuckles as if any part of this is remotely humorous. “Margo’s doing the heavy lifting on this one. But yes. We’re expecting.”

My dad will be fifty-two this year. Margo, the woman he left us for, is

forty-three. I know people have babies at all ages. It's just so hard to wrap my brain around my ten, six and four-year-old nieces having an infant for an aunt.

My dad's voice takes on the tone he used to use when I had gotten myself into trouble. Which, I actually did a lot before he left us. I wasn't so much of a troublemaker as a wild child.

I always got fired up for the next adventure, pushing the limits, and trying to drag my friends into doing something over the line like "borrowing" a tractor in the middle of the night to drive through town, or jumping into the reservoir in temperatures under forty degrees.

I haven't said anything to my dad since he presented his "happy" news.

He fills the silence. "You and I need to put the past behind us, Laura. I know I hurt you. But I'd like it if you'd give me a second chance."

I'm tempted to instruct him as to how apologies work, but it's not my place. And he's probably too old to learn new tricks and too enamored with his new family to care if he gets it right with me.

I stare out my window as I approach my home. Rob's out along the front curb casually leaning back against his red pickup with his legs crossed at the ankles looking like the poster child for *you know you want this*.

"I've gotta run, Dad. Congratulations on your news."

"Laura, did you hear me?"

"I heard you. I've got someone waiting for me. I'm going to let you go."

My dad clears his throat. "We'll talk soon."

"K. Bye."

I park in the driveway and walk back toward Rob.

"What happened?" he asks right away.

"What do you mean?"

"You look like someone died."

"Oh. No. Nothing that serious. My mom's ex just called."

Rob doesn't flinch at the way I refer to my dad.

"Oh. How's he doing?"

"Great. He's great. Living his best life, you know?"

Rob puts his arm around my shoulders. I bristle at first, but then I can't help but collapse into him a little. His comfort fills the spot my dad just left raw and gaping.

"Any life without you in it is not his best life."

"Yeah. Well ... Let's go eat our sandwiches."

He gives my shoulders a little squeeze and lets me go. We walk up my steps and I hand Rob my bag of comfort food while I turn the key in the lock. He follows me into my apartment.

I move around putting my purse on a hook, kicking off my shoes, and grabbing two plates out of the cabinets. Rob comes up behind me. He pivots me so I'm facing him, and I don't resist. For a moment I'm afraid we're about to have a repeat of last time he came over. His nearness simultaneously consoles me and lures me in.

I've still got one plate in my hand. He takes it from me and sets it off to the side on the counter.

Is he going to kiss me?

After all this talk of friendship?

I think I'll let him even though I'll probably regret it.

"Sit down," he says, veering me toward my couch. "You're running around like one of those wind-up plastic chickens that poops candy out its rear."

"Nice visual, Rob."

He smiles that butter-melting smile of his. My insides are goo, humming, sizzling, Rob-induced caramel goo.

"Just sit."

I obey him. No one tells me what to do. I've got this rebellious, self-reliant streak that serves me well and also is my undoing. But, when Rob takes that tone with me, the one that's a combination of caring and bossy, I don't even think twice.

I collapse onto my couch, turn so my legs extend down the cushions and I lean back until my head hits a throw pillow.

"That's more like it," Rob says from my kitchenette.

I hear him moving plates around, opening bags, setting things here and there, and turning on the microwave. My eyes are shut, and I'm tempted to drift off. The next thing I know, Rob's in front of me, holding out a plate. I sit up and take it from him.

"Hold that thought," he says. "I mean, go ahead and dig in, but I'll be right there to join you."

"I'm not an animal, Rob. I can wait for you."

He walks away and the smell of the food wafts up toward me. I pull a fry off the plate. He rewarmed them. They have just the right amount of salt and seasoning. I may moan, or at least hum as I chew the first bite.

“Good, huh?” he says, returning with a pair of my fluffy socks.

“So good. Thank you. Where did you find those?”

“In your drawer. Didn’t you hear me shuffling around?”

“I zoned out. And you went through my drawers?”

“Give me your feet,” he says, taking a seat at the opposite end of my couch and neatly evading my question about him rooting around to find socks.

I turn and put my feet in his lap. He takes the socks I wore to work off my feet and I jerk my legs back.

“Why’d you do that?” he asks.

“I’m sure my feet smell like the hog barn at White’s farm!”

“They don’t. Give ’em.”

“No way! Just give me the socks. I’ll put them on myself.”

“I don’t care what your feet smell like. Just stay where you are. And eat already. Food’s getting cold.”

“What about you?”

“What about me? I’ll be fine. I’m not running a business singlehandedly right now.”

He walks away, turns on my faucet and comes back with a warm washcloth and a hand towel.

“Give me your feet, Laura.”

I can’t help myself. I have to say it. “You’re not being very friendly. I mean this is more than friend behavior.”

“Nope. This is me being a friend.”

“So, you regularly wash Trevor’s feet and put cozy socks on him? Because Lexi honestly never does this for me. Shannon either, unless she’s practicing pedicures.”

“This is me being a friend to you. Now stop being stubborn, eat your food and give me your feet.”

“Yes sir,” I say, lifting my feet and placing them back on his lap while I take a big bite of my chicken sandwich.

I can’t even focus on the flavors of smoke, savory, roast chicken and sauce because Rob’s carefully washing my feet and drying them and then putting my fluffy socks on one by one.

And then, as if I’m not about to keel over from his touch and the awareness that my feet are in Rob’s lap, and the fact that he’s doing for me what no one else has done in years, he starts massaging the arches to relieve

tension. Nothing beats a foot rub after a long day of standing to give cuts and styles.

I close my eyes and moan.

“Feels good?”

“I’m officially in heaven.”

“That’s good. You need this.”

I do. I need him. Too much. But I can’t bring myself to care or muster up the words *stop* or *don’t* or *go home*. He’s just what I need right now. And if this is friendship, he’s on his way to being my new best friend.

We finish our meals. Rob clears the plates and rinses them while I tell him he doesn’t have to, and he continually orders me to relax. Then he comes back to the couch, and we finish watching the island show together, mocking the drama between the remaining ten women and the single millionaire until my eyes start to flutter shut.

Rob never makes a move on me the whole night. He’s the perfect gentleman, and I start to wonder if all he really wants now is to be friends. I should be happy about that. He’s doing a great job at friendship. A-plus for effort. Best chum ever. Good ol’ pal of mine. My feet are in his friendly lap, his arm draped lazily across them. His fingers occasionally making languid strokes across the fuzzy socks on my feet. We’re friendly as all get out.

When Rob sees me starting to doze off, he gives me a light nudge. “Hey, Laura, you’re ready for bed. I’m going to head home. Thanks for letting me come over and hang out.”

“You’re thanking me?” I ask in a drowsy voice followed by a yawn.

“It beat sitting alone and eating at my kitchen table. And you’ve got me hooked. Now I’m going to need to see the next episode of *The Island*. I have to know who gets voted off and if Mandy convinces Brock she’s not really trying to undermine the other women.”

As if Rob needed to add anything to the list of qualities I adore about him. He’s now into *The Island*.

“You can come watch it again another night.”

The invitation slips out before I consider the ramifications. But we’re friends. Friends can hang out and watch shows together—with their feet on one another’s laps and memories of kisses lingering between them. No problem.

ROB

I'm working on a series of contests the OSU College of Engineering asked me to put together for a special segment we're filming later this month. Their students will form teams and compete in the various challenges I assemble.

I give my all, even for this type of task. My mother's voice relentlessly pushes me like an army sergeant in heels, wearing flawless makeup: *Everything you do is a reflection of yourself, Rob. If you want to be known for excellence, then be excellent in every little thing. Live up to your potential.*

A part of me realizes the impossibility of that task, while the part that seems to function on autopilot has adopted it as my mantra.

Excellence in everything.

Yet, I failed Laura.

I can't make my hovercraft levitate for any significant length of time.

And sure, my degree from MIT sits framed on my bookcase, but is it really of any use to anyone while I'm living in small town Ohio cranking out content for a YouTube channel on subjects as insignificant as how to turn your ink pen into a dart gun?

I open my email to compose a quick update to the director of the mechanical engineering program. As my eyes scan my inbox, I see a new email from John Silverberg.

Rob,

Thank you for responding so quickly. One of my associates will be

calling you this week. We plan to send a few people to Ohio to work on a collaborative video with you.

You'll hear from Caden or Fritz to firm up our timeline and details of our expectations. You'll also be receiving an email with a tentative contract to look over.

We're looking forward to working with you.

John

WHAT IS MY LIFE? I'm getting first name basis emails from John Flipping Silverberg. I shoot my fist into the air and whoop loudly. All thoughts of inadequacy seem to evaporate as I reread his words. My next thought is how the person I want most to share the good news with is Laura.

But, with all she's going through at her work and the problems with her car, it could come across as if I'm boasting. Like, "Hey, I know your life is falling apart at the seams right now. But guess what! People from Hollywood are flying to our small town to work with me!"

Yeah. Not going to do that.

Instead, I shoot her a text.

Rob: *Thinking of you. How's your day going?*

She can't always answer right away, since she's often with clients. I'm about to set my phone down when it vibrates.

Laura: *Going better now. Thanks for checking in.*

Rob: *Of course. So, what's new and exciting at the Dippity Do?*

Laura: *You'd think we were running a senior special down here today. They're all here, talking about Cooter's latest escapades, Ella Mae's viral video, and trying to decide whether Glenda should dye her hair blue—as in royal blue—because someone heard that was*

trendy. They all have opinions on it. They're as bad as Ella Mae's followers.

Rob: *I'm dying over here.*

Laura: *Not as bad as I'm dying. Please tell me she won't go blue. She'll look like an eastern blue bird, or the Oh-So-Blue Blue-Raspberry Slush at the Dairyland.*

Rob: *In her defense, it is one of Bordeaux High's school colors.*

Laura: *Go Corn Cobs!*

Rob: *Too bad that vote to change the mascot never passed.*

Laura: *We're serious about our corn. You know that. I'd better go before this hair color decision gets out of control.*

Rob: *I guess I'll see you at the fitting for the wedding later this week if I don't see you sooner.*

Laura: *Sounds good. Thanks for adding a dash of sanity to my day.*

Rob: *That's what friends are for.*

I set my phone down and feel the smile tugging my face wide. Maybe I'm pushing the friend thing too hard. Laura seems to be so much more open to me since I've emphasized our friend status. Scientifically that means I should keep doing what's working. No adjusting variables. At some point, though, every scientist has to push the limits.

I think about Laura nonstop the rest of the day while I finish up a few projects for my "Everyday Objects That Can Be Turned into Spy Gadgets" series. It's around six when Trevor pops his head in at the top of the stairs to my basement.

"Hey! Honey, I'm home!"

"Come on down, dear!"

As soon as Trevor's face appears below the stairwell entrance, he asks. "So, how's Operation Woo Laura going, you swoony guy?"

"Better than Operation Find a Friend Who Doesn't Mock Me."

"You love me."

"Something like that."

I fold up my laptop and clear my projects onto the shelving along my wall.

"Seriously. How's it going?"

"Better than I had hoped it might. Science, my friend. Science. I had my doubts, but once I asked myself the right questions, I realized what I needed

to do.”

“You need to write this stuff down. The male species needs you to unravel the mysteries of dating.”

“Maybe. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. But yeah. It seems to be going well.”

I start to head upstairs. “Did you eat? I’m cooking stir fry if you want to stay.”

“Sounds good. Let me text Lex to let her know I’m here.” Trevor says, following me back upstairs and hitting the basement light switch when we reach the kitchen.

He shoots a quick text to Lexi and then pockets his phone.

“So, tell me all you’ve been doing to win Laura’s heart.”

I pull some veggies and chicken along with garlic, soy, and ginger out of my fridge. Trevor leans back against one of my counters until I hand him a cutting board and knife. He’s a decent cook. May as well put him to work.

“Every day I text Laura a little something. I got her favorite jelly beans for her. Brought her dinner after a long day at work. I’m just showing up consistently with little acts of kindness. Not pushing her. Sneaking in some flirting when it feels safe.”

“Making us all look bad, that’s what you’re doing.”

“What are you even talking about? I’ve seen you pamper Lexi.”

“It’s easy when you’ve waited as long as I did. I never take her for granted. I bided my time and got so good at holding back I didn’t even know what to do once we had the green light to move out of the friend zone.”

“You seem to have figured that out.”

Trevor smiles. I test the readiness of the oil in the pan and plop the aromatics and meat in for browning.

“And how’s the whole Disney, Discovery Channel, Hollywood stuff coming along?”

“It’s coming. Some people have plans to fly out here to do some filming with me.”

“It’s about to be real.”

“I guess.”

“You don’t sound too excited.”

“Think about it. If the thing with John Silverberg becomes something viable, I’ll probably have to move. Maybe. Who knows? I love Bordeaux. This town is my family—maybe it’s more like the Addams family, but still.”

I don't say anything else to Trevor. He's my closest friend, but I don't want to freak him out by letting him know I don't think I can pass up an opportunity with this much clout attached to it.

The offers I got straight out of college were with labs and a few government positions. Nothing called to me. But this opportunity feels custom tailored to me. It's a chance to excel—to prove myself.

“You'll figure it out. You always do.”

“Yeah. I guess I will.”

I toss the veggies Trevor chopped into the pan. Everything sizzles and the fragrant smell of the meal fills my kitchen.

“Get this,” I tell Trevor as I give the ingredients a shake and a light toss. “Say what you will about Ella Mae, but my subscriber numbers have gone up significantly since she mentioned me in her viral haircut video a few weeks ago. She's definitely over-the-top, but I can't complain about the outcome in terms of exposure, which translates into a bigger paycheck for me each month. Who would have thought our audiences would overlap?”

“It's your time to shine. Besides, her followers think you are eye candy.”

“I'm the poster child for eye candy,” I say, sending Trevor an exaggerated smolder and flexing.

“I'm getting a toothache,” he jokes back.

I should be ecstatic. Everything I hoped for is coming to me professionally. And Laura isn't ducking into a bush every time she sees me coming near.

But that's a far cry from where I hope to be with her. If all goes well, in time she'll drop her walls and let me in again. I want everything with her. Bottom line: I want Laura to be the future Mrs. Baldwin. I'm ready to make a life with her.



FIVE DAYS later I'm on my way to Tickle Your Fancy, the formal wear shop that's at the back of the Seed-n-Feed. The formalwear section of the building has a whole separate entrance than the tractor supply portion of the building. But yes. You technically could grab some poultry pellets and fertilizer and then pick out your cummerbund and bow tie on the same outing.

What do you expect? In a town of two and a half thousand, we don't do

too many things requiring tuxes. I'm pretty sure the one I rented for prom may have been worn by my dad twenty-five years earlier. Our photos looked eerily similar. Dad insisted fashion rotates back into style every quarter century. As if my dad knows fashion. Those wide lapels made me feel like I was in a Saturday Night Live remake. I fought the urge to break into a John Travolta dance all night long.

The bridal party's only getting our measurements taken today. The final fitting isn't for a few weeks.

I pull my truck into the Seed-n-Feed and see that old muscle car Laura's been driving while her brakes are being repaired. I don't see any of the rest of the bridal party's cars.

When I walk into the formalwear room, Laura's talking with one of the employees, a young woman who graduated two or three years behind us in high school. Laura sees me walk in and she smiles. *She smiles*. Not a grimace in sight. Not even a wince.

I don't know how long it's been since Laura's knee-jerk reaction to seeing me resulted in that particular smile, but my new goal in life is to bring an unguarded smile to her face whenever I enter a room.

"Hey, there," I say, walking over to her and pulling her in for a hug.

She surprises me by hugging me back.

"Where's everyone else?" I ask when we pull apart.

"Not here yet. I texted Shannon and Jayme and neither have answered."

"We can start with just the two of you," the salesgirl says. Janie. Jenny? I forgot her name.

"Thanks, Joanie." Laura says.

Joanie. Right.

Laura shoots a warm smile in my direction. In a hushed voice she says, "You forgot her name, didn't you?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"You got that look on your face—the one you used to make when you didn't know the answer to a question in class and you were hoping the teacher didn't call on you. You try to come across all cool and approachable to throw the person off their game."

No one gets me like Laura. And even when she's calling me out, I love the fact that she's obviously studied me and sometimes seems to know me better than I know myself.

"You busted me," I say.

She curls her fingers into her palm and brushes her knuckles back and forth over her chest and then pulls them away and blows on them. We both laugh. And I fight the urge to pull her nearer.

The salesgirl—Joanie—pulls out her measuring tape. “Let’s start with you,” she suggests, pointing to me.

“Do we go in the dressing room?”

“No. There’s not a lot of room in there. We’ll just measure you two right here.”

I pull off my coat and follow Joanie’s instructions to extend my arms out to my side, then spread my legs, stand straight, and move into other poses while Laura watches on, not even trying to hide the fact that she’s taking note of all the places the tape measure lands.

When Joanie measures the circumference of my upper arm and announces, “fifteen inches,” Laura lets out a low whistle.

“Impressed?” I ask with a wink.

“Just wondering if you spend all that time in your basement alone doing push-ups or actually working.”

“Come over and I’ll show you what I do in my basement.” I give the slightest wag of my eyebrows.

I’m feeling bold. And this banter’s like our old days—before I left, before she threw up so many barricades, before I broke her heart.

I look Laura in the eyes and she’s blushing. Joanie’s glancing back and forth between the two of us. Honestly, despite the fact that Joanie’s been touching me all over with her measuring tape, I had forgotten she was even here.

“Are you two ...?” Joanie points from Laura to me and back again rapidly.

We both shout “no” at the same time. Then, to my relief, Laura starts laughing instead of clamming up.

“No, no, no. No way,” Laura says, shaking her head rapidly. “Nope. We’re just friends. We were together in high school. We’re not now. At all.”

Joanie tilts her head slightly and says “Oh. Okay.” Then she motions to Laura and says, “You’re next. Come stand over here.”

Laura walks over to Joanie and asks, “Does he have to stay?”

“No. I’m finished with him.”

“I’ll just be out there,” I tell Laura.

I’d like nothing more than to stay and watch Laura getting measured. It

wouldn't only be the opportunity to shamelessly check her out. It's her. I want to be near her whenever I can. But I take the hint and leave the two of them alone.

The next room is filled with shelves and racks full of work gear. I thumb through hangers of Carhartt pants and bins of work gloves while I wait for Laura to finish up.

A few minutes later, she walks toward the area where I'm rifling through safety goggles, picks a pair up, holds them to her face and asks, "Do you think Trevor and Lexi set this up?"

I mirror her, grabbing a pair and looking through them at her. "Set up what?"

"Us being the only two people here."

She tosses the goggles back in the bin.

"I wouldn't put it past them. But, since we are the only two here, the appointment went faster than I planned. Do you have time to grab a coffee before you get back to work?"

"A *friendly* cup of coffee?" she asks. There's a teasing tone to her voice and a glint in her eye.

"Very friendly," I say.

"Hmmm. I think I could spare a half hour."

"Great. I'll follow you to the town square parking lot and then we can take my truck to Bean There Done That."

We walk out of the front door of the Seed-n-Feed together and then I walk Laura to her car, holding her door open after she unlocks it and shutting it behind her. It's a boyfriend gesture and we both know it. She looks out at me through her window and purses her lips to the side while grinning.

I lift my eyebrows at Laura and give her a look I remember always led to more between us when we were dating. She used to say, "You're dangerous, Baldwin," whenever I looked at her like this. Half the time that statement was followed by a kiss that reminded me she was equally or more dangerous than she was accusing me of being.

A woman who holds your heart in their bare hands is exceedingly dangerous. She could wreck me.

Either way, I've got some relational clean-up to do. As Laura drives away, I brace myself for what I'm going to have to attempt with her over coffee.

It's high time.

LAURA

Rob drives behind me to the parking lot across from the salon. It feels like one of the days when I used to talk him into playing hooky so we could go hang out at the river together.

I'm ducking my head as I hop into the passenger seat of his truck.

"Need to pop on a baseball cap and shades?" Rob asks. "It works for Angelina Jolie."

"She doesn't live in a town the size of a postage stamp. I'll pass on the camouflage, but I'm going to slink down a little until we're away from this part of State Street."

He chuckles. "You're allowed to take a break, Laura."

"I know. I just feel badly leaving the other stylists there with so much up in the air about the salon. I need to be present to support them and keep things as normal as possible during these uncertain times."

"They're grown women. They'll live. Don't take on more than is yours to bear."

"Thanks," I say. "This coming from you, who always takes on more than is yours to bear."

"Touché."

It's one of those double-edged traits of Rob's. He's a protector and problem solver, but it can wind up making him so driven and focused on achieving goals that he doesn't settle down and accept the good around him.

Rob doesn't add *that's what friends are for*, when I thank him, which seems to be his theme song these days. He's constantly reminding me we're friends now. I asked for that. I did. And it's great—being his friend.

Rob pulls into a diagonal parking spot on the street in front of the coffee shop and hops out. Before I can fully open my door, he's there, holding it open and extending his hand so I can step out.

When our skin connects, Rob's familiar warmth seeps into me. I don't want to let go. He's a great hand holder. Some men really aren't.

You've got the limp-fish-handed men, the vice-grip men, and the tin-man men among others. Not Rob. He always made the secretly insecure parts of me feel so much steadier when he held my hand in his.

I release his grip as soon as my feet hit the pavement.

"So. Are you still a white chocolate mocha girl?"

"Til I die."

"I'm still a double shot Americano guy."

"Some things never change," I say, scooting past him into the shop.

The walls of Bean There Done That are covered in reclaimed wood. Booths line the edges of the room with free-standing wooden tables and chairs scattered throughout. We approach the counter together.

"Hey, you two," the owner's daughter Sarah says. "What can I get you?"

We order our drinks and two bakery items. Rob insists on paying. I fight him. He wins. We grab a booth at the far front corner of the shop, tucked out of the way of the rest of the customers.

Once we're seated, Rob looks at me with his business face.

"You look like you've got something on your mind," I say, taking the plastic lid off my cup so I can dunk my biscotti.

"I owe you an apology," he says, gazing at me softly. His grey eyes are stormy again, but lighter today with a dusting of green around the pupil. I could stare into them forever.

"An apology?"

My mind races through what he could possibly have done to warrant an apology to me since the night of our kiss. As far as I can tell he's only been racking up points in the *I'm amazing* column. I can't imagine anything he's done wrong.

"Yeah. It's been a long time coming."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

We stare at one another. It would be easier if we weren't open books to each other, but after growing up together, spending two years dating, and then hanging out with the same friend group for the past two years, there's

not a lot of poker face left between us.

“I was eighteen, Laura. And that’s no excuse, but it’s a reason. I didn’t know what I was doing. The world seemed open to me, and suddenly, that last week before I left, I felt like a ship being held by an anchor when she was about to set sail.

“My mom took me to Columbus, and we had this long talk about my potential and my future. Up until that moment, I never questioned you or us or our plans.”

Rob pauses to peel a chunk off his cinnamon roll. He looks at it like he’s going to eat it, but then he sets it back on his plate. He wipes his hand on one of the paper napkins and then looks me in the eye again. A moment later my hand rests in his. I don’t know how it happened, but he’s got a gentle grip on my hand over the table.

“I started thinking about four whole years and it felt like an eternity to eighteen-year-old me. A lot was going to change during that time. I didn’t know where I’d head after college, or what opportunities I’d have, or what I’d want to do. So, I came to your house like an idiot and called it off without even giving you a chance to talk to me.

“After I dropped the bomb, it was like I couldn’t even stay long enough to hear you talk me out of it or watch you cry, or whatever was going to happen. It was a chicken move.

“The worst part was I missed you like crazy. The ache haunted me constantly, like I had cut off a limb. That whole freshman year I had to fight the urge to call you and tell you how dumb I’d been and how I wanted to take it all back.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I kept remembering the look in your eyes. How you didn’t fight for us. How you just let me go. And, I had to focus on classes. My college experience wasn’t all kegs and co-eds. I had to study hard.”

I just nod. I’m not sure I’m prepared to hash all this out with him.

“Anyway, that’s the explanation, but like I said, it’s no excuse. I know I hurt you, Jellybean. When I came back, I saw it. I’ve seen it ever since. It’s like the daredevil wild-child side of you went into hiding that day. You became so much more serious and reserved. Not that you aren’t still fun. But I see how you are whenever I’m around. You tuck fun Laura in and put up walls. And I don’t blame you. I fully blame myself.”

“We were so young,” I say out loud, but more to myself than anything.

I've held onto my grudge for so long it's like an artificial limb. And even though I recently said yes to friendship with Rob, I still keep the resentment alive under the surface. I don't know what will take its place if I give it up.

I take a deep breath and blow it out, staring out the front window of Been There Done That. "And you aren't fully to blame for that day."

A tear slips down my cheek. I almost curse. I don't want to cry here, not in front of Rob.

He reaches across the table with his free hand and brushes my cheek with his finger while he gently squeezes the hand he's holding.

Neither of us says a word.

I look up at him. "My mom's ex told my mom he was leaving us that day."

"I had no idea."

"I know you didn't."

"I heard about their divorce after I was at MIT, and I wanted to call you, but I figured I lost that right."

"I wish you would have called. You were one of the only people who ..."

Another tear threatens to fall. Darn these tears. I take a breath. Dunking my biscotti a few times, I bite off the soggy piece and let it dissolve in my mouth. I finally look at Rob again.

"You were one of the only people who knew how things had been at my house. You, Lexi, Shannon."

He shakes his head. "I'm a donkey's butt, Laura."

"Good to know."

"Consider yourself warned."

We both chuckle.

Rob picks up the chunk of cinnamon roll he had peeled away and pops it in his mouth.

Am I crazy for holding this against him all these years? All he did was leave for college. I knew he was going to go. But he also broke up with me, without warning. He blindsided me on the worst day of my life. I have every right to be gun shy and angry after a move like that. Still, he's here offering me an apology—one I've waited six years to hear.

I study him. That's no hardship. He's so disarmingly gorgeous. It's almost like he doesn't fit in here in Bordeaux. He belongs on a billboard or the front of some sexy scientist magazine. I giggle to myself.

"What's funny."

“Nothing I’m telling you, that’s for sure.”

“Come on, Jellybean. I’ve stripped down here and bared my soul.”

I think I flush at the thought of Rob stripped down. I clear my throat.

“Yeah. Well, you’re not getting this thought out of me anyway. I was just thinking of you as a scientist.”

“I am a scientist, technically.”

“I know.”

“What’s funny about it?”

“Nothing. At all. So, back to this apology of yours.”

His face darkens, but then I watch his expression shift. He’s here for it—whatever *it* entails.

“I forgive you,” I say.

Three simple words.

Something in me shifts when I utter them out loud. I thought I had forgiven him. I told myself there was a world of difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. I could stop holding the past against him, but that didn’t mean I had to be nice, or let him near.

If I’m honest with myself I never released my grudge. I’ve nursed it like a rare orchid, making sure it had light and climate to thrive.

I needed to keep Rob at arm’s length—because as much as I want him, I saw his true colors the day of our breakup. And I finally acknowledged our situation for what it was. We aren’t equally matched and when it comes to me, I’ll always come second to Rob’s ambitions.

But I can forgive him. And I do.

Rob’s speaks softly and carefully like when you’re pouring out the last dregs of the maple syrup and hoping it fills all those squares on the waffle.

“Thank you.”

He brushes his thumb across my knuckles and smiles warmly at me.

“So,” I say, pulling my hand back and grabbing my biscotti, mostly to give myself something to do that doesn’t involve touching him. “Where do we go from here?”

“I’m going to win your heart.”

I wish I hadn’t just taken a bite of biscotti because I choke and sputter worse than the beast of a car I’m driving around this week. Bits of biscotti fly across the table like a confetti cannon.

Rob swipes a few clumps off his shirt, and I sit here hoping we have an immediate alien abduction. With napkins. Aliens toting napkins and cleaning

our booth before they whisk me away to somewhere far less embarrassing.

“You okay?” Rob asks, ever the picture of composure.

“I’m good.” My voice sounds all gravely and strained. The mere act of speaking feels ragged and raw after the eruption of Mount Biscotti.

Rob hands me some napkins, since apparently, it’s too early in the day for actual napkin-toting aliens to grace our fair town.

“I was saying,” he continues. “I’m going to win your heart.”

“I heard you, obviously. As you can tell by the crumb shower that followed your announcement.”

He chuckles and his dimple pops. “We’ll tell our grandkids about that someday.”

“Our *WHAT?*”

Thankfully I haven’t taken another bite or sip of anything since my throat feels like someone asked a colony of fire ants to march around for their fire-ant parade in there right now. Otherwise, I would have just given Rob the second biscotti spray of the day.

“You know, grandkids. It’s when your kids have kids, and you love them so much more than your actual kids because you don’t have to discipline or have them around full time. Grandkids.”

I roll my eyes at Rob. “How did we go from friendship to an overdue apology to you winning my heart and *grandkids?*”

“It’s always been about winning your heart, Jellybean. Always. I just screwed it up along the way. I’m making up for lost time now, and I’m going to win your heart.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

He doesn’t. He looks hot as molten lava, and kind, and warm, and brilliant, and so very Rob.

“I’m determined to win your heart. Just so you know.”

“You are, are you? You think I’m going to make this easy on you just because you look like that and do all these nice things for me?”

“Look like what?” he asks. As if he doesn’t know.

“I would never assume anything about pursuing you would be easy, Laura. I’m just letting you know I’m up for the challenge.”

I stare him down. “Good. You’re on.”

“Are you saying you don’t think I can win your heart?”

“I’m saying, give me your best, Mayhem.”

I alternated between calling him by his last name and calling him Mayhem even before we dated. It started when he blew something up on the football field in seventh grade. He ended up getting away with it because only a few of us knew Rob was responsible and we weren't about to snitch. He also learned to contain his explosions or take his experiments off school property after that episode.

"Nicknames are good." Rob says with a wink. "You might think you're fighting it, but a part of you is already coming back to me."

If he's right, he's got his work cut out for him. He'll need to show me he's not leaving again. And I don't know if that's even a promise he can make.

Thoughts of us being unequally matched whisper through my brain, but I quickly snuff them out. I love Rob. He's obviously committed to trying to get back together. We know we're compatible in the ways that matter most. But all that only makes a difference if he's sure he'll be here for the long haul. I can't take being left again---especially not by him.

We finish our coffees and walk out onto the sidewalk together. When we're in front of Rob's truck, he steps toward me.

"You're not kissing me right now," I warn him.

"Wasn't even in the plan. Don't rush me, Lennox. I've got this whole thing paced out and you won't make me go faster just because you're eager to move things out of the friend zone."

"Reverse psychology doesn't work on me, but nice try."

"Can't blame a guy for trying. And I was definitely thinking of kissing you. I wasn't going to do it, but without a doubt, I'm thinking about it."

"Well, you're not."

I cross my arms for emphasis.

"May I hug you instead?"

I nod, drop my arms and step into Rob's embrace. He pulls me in and looks down at me. I tilt my head up. His arms contain me—safe and secure.

Rob's eyes have lost their storm. They are cool grey-green pools, inviting and soothing. My rebel tongue darts out to swipe across my lips, and he grins. I stand on tiptoe, and Rob turns his head just the slightest to pull me the rest of the way into a deeper hug. He gives me a squeeze and pulls back.

I want to kiss him. Whatever scientific voodoo magic he's pulling is working because I want to kiss him, and I don't care if he leaves to move to the remote hills of Asia to raise wild donkeys after we kiss.

Get a grip, I tell myself, shocked at my complete change of heart and lack of self-control.

I compromise with myself and place a chaste kiss on Rob's cheek. A friendly kiss. It's almost a kiss a grandma gives their favorite grandchild.

And speaking of grandchildren, Rob's lost his marbles talking about our hypothetical family tree.

The moment my lips meet Rob's scruffy cheek, my body hums. My mouth lingers on his face, soaking up his nearness and the way he smells. It's a weak moment of overindulgence. I can stand here sniffing him and holding him and still swear him off later.

Who am I kidding? I'm an electrical substation with pylons firing off, emitting zaps and fizzles in my stomach, fingertips and mouth just from brushing a kiss on his cheek.

My lips may hum for the next hour.

And that will be fine with me. So fine.

LAURA

I work the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening, but I'm floating. I keep looking at Angie and the other stylists wondering if they can tell my feet aren't quite touching the ground after my coffee with Rob, but I seem to be the only one aware of this complete rearrangement of my center of gravity.

Rob apologized.

He's going to try to win my heart.

Despite the airy feeling of my day, I'm still wiped out and sore by the time I drive up my driveway.

I look up to see Lexi, Shannon and Jayme convened on my landing.

I shut the car door with a large thunk and shout up to them. "What are you three doing here? That landing could cave in, you know. I think max capacity is one and a half people before it sags and threatens to give up on life and come crashing down."

"We've called an emergency friendervention," Shannon calls down to me as I round the bottom of the staircase, wondering if my added weight will be the last thing it takes to send the landing crumpling down.

"What for?" I ask, approaching them slowly.

We started friendinterventions in high school. Whenever one of us felt depressed, overwhelmed or was about to make a seriously bad decision, the other three would convene and swoop in to save the day. Often with baked goods, always with a plan.

"You and your life," Jayme says. Her tone says *duh*.

Lexi adds, pointing at Jayme and Shannon. "Just so you know, I'm not on

their side in this. Well, in two of the three items on our agenda, I'm on board. But not on the last one."

"Let me through so I can unlock my door. It's been a long day. The salon just might be the death of me. But I promise you three will be going down with me if I don't get into my home and put my feet up in the next few minutes."

They issue a collective rush of "I'm sorries" while I open the door.

I try to go through my routine of hanging my purse and coat, kicking off my shoes, and plopping on my couch without seeming the least bit affected or curious as to what's on their minds.

Moving toward my kitchenette, I say, "I've got Cocoa Puffs, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, or Pop Tarts. What'll it be, girls? Oh! And there are frozen burritos."

"We're not here to eat," Lexi says. "And you need better options. Maybe we should order delivery."

"I'm good. I eat at least one decent meal a day nowadays. It's all temporary. I'll go back to salads and grilled meat when this whole thing with the salon blows over."

Lexi has her mom-face on. I pour myself a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and fall onto the couch, propping my sock-clad feet on my coffee table and letting out an involuntary sigh. My friends plop down on either side of me, and Lexi sits cross legged on the floor across from us.

"So, what's this about?" I ask, looking each of them in the eye.

"A few things," Jayme says. "We're concerned. And you look like you've been pulling all-nighters."

"So, you're staging a beauty intervention?"

I hope I don't look that bad. I can't look that bad. Rob wouldn't have gazed at me like he did if I looked the way they are insinuating I do.

"No beauty intervention needed," Shannon says. She turns to Jayme with a chiding expression. "And nice intro." She faces me again. "This whole thing with the salon is wearing on you. We're concerned about the toll it's taking. That's what Jayme meant to say. And your brakes went out on top of everything. And then there's the whole Rob thing."

I dip my face toward my bowl. I don't know what they mean by *the whole Rob thing*, but no one should know about our kiss and the battle that's been dominating my thoughts day and night since then, and absolutely no one should know about his apology and his plans to win my heart. We were in a

secluded booth. The only time I drew attention was when I shouted, “*Our what?*” but that could have meant anything.

“What whole Rob thing?” I ask.

“Meg saw you and Rob at Bean There Done That today,” Shannon explains. “She told Ella Mae you kissed outside the shop before you got in his truck with him and drove away. Ella Mae told Karina, who texted Felicia. So, Felicia called Lexi from Covington to ask if you and Rob are back together.”

“Geesh.” I say into a spoonful of cereal. “And people wonder if the Pony Express was efficient. We’re proof that news can travel quickly, and even across state lines.”

“Well?” Jayme asks.

“Well, what?”

“Did you two go to coffee and kiss?”

She says the word kiss with such emphasis her voice raises a decibel and octave simultaneously. I point my spoon at Jayme and then turn to point it at Shannon. “You two need a life, well, you each need a life, separate ones. Not you, Lex. You have a life. Anyway. My coffee dates should not bring you across town after dark. And yes, Rob and I went to coffee. And no, we didn’t kiss.”

We didn’t technically kiss today, unless you count the kiss I gave him on the cheek. I muffle a smile at the thought of it.

I’d usually let these three know about the kiss Rob and I shared in my apartment and all the details of what he said over coffee, but right now I need less drama and less pressure in my life.

My three closest friends would be like the first people in line when the Harry Potter books came out if I gave them access to that little detail. Slightly obsessed—but probably not carrying stuffed owls and wands or gulping homemade butter beer. At least I hope not.

Shannon’s eyes go wide. She’s always one to get excited over gossip even though she usually keeps my secrets like they’re her own. Not this one, seemingly, but otherwise, she’s always been beyond trustworthy.

“And you,” I say, pointing my spoon at Lexi. “What did you expect, setting me and Rob up to be the only two people getting our measurements taken at the Seed-N-Feed today?”

A sheepish smile ghosts across Lexi’s face.

“We’re on your side, Laura,” Jayme says. “But we lived through Rob

leaving for college. You haven't been the same since—not completely. You not only lost him, you lost your edge. You're the one always saying you can never trust him again. We just want to make sure you know what you're doing.”

“It got so bad when he left,” Shannon says.

“So bad,” Jayme chimes in. “Or so you have told me, since I wasn't here back then.”

“It was. Horrible,” Lexi adds, nodding at them.

“And you were like a half-zombie. And then you started dating everyone but Cooter and Jesse,” Shannon says.

“Not Buddy at the Dairyland or any of the boys still in high school though,” Jayme defends.

“She did stop there,” Lexi agrees. “And she never went to Bordeaux Single Mingle.”

“True,” Shannon says. “She didn't need to, though. Men fall at her feet. Literally fall.”

“Yeah,” Lexi adds. “Remember that time Jimmy Shaller tripped in the hall in front of biology class because he was staring at Laura and didn't see where he was going?”

They're now in a full-blown walk down memory lane. I could slip out and they wouldn't notice my absence.

I raise my spoon in the air. “Okayyyy, ladies. Reel it in. How about we stop reminiscing about my spiral after Rob left and my unfortunate history when it comes to the male species? I'm well aware I serial dated for a while and was miserable.”

“Well, for the record, those two are the ones who want to make sure you're not messing up by getting back with Rob,” Lexi adds, gesturing toward the couch. “I think it would be great. The two of you belong together. It's about time.”

“How is this a friendervention when the three of you aren't even on the same page?” I ask, bringing another bite of Cinnamon Toast Crunch to my lips and realizing I really do need more vegetables in my life.

“And I thought you were on board with me and Rob,” I say to Shannon. “You helped me text him the other day.”

My phone pings with a text. Then another alert. Followed by one more alert.

“Hold that thought,” I say, setting my cereal bowl down and grabbing my

cell.

Rob: *Thinking of you. Just wanted to say thanks again—for forgiving me. And I may never wash that cheek.*

Laura: *Which cheek?*

Rob: *The one you kissed today after I said no kissing.*

Laura: *You didn't say no kissing. You said you weren't kissing me.*

Rob: *And you couldn't resist?*

Laura: *Did you want me to?*

Rob: *I think we both know the answer to that question, hence, my plan for poor cheek hygiene.*

I glance around the room. All my friends are staring at me while I text Rob. I hold my pointer finger in the air and say, “Give me a second.”

Laura: *I've got three sets of curious eyes watching me right now.*

Rob: *Girl's night?*

Laura: *Something like that.*

Rob: *Can I take you out this weekend?*

Laura: *As a friend?*

Rob: *That's totally up to you. You at least need to kiss my other cheek to even things out. My right cheek is feeling very unloved and neglected.*

I can't help smiling when I think of Rob holding me, and the way his stubble grazed my lips. Staying in the friend zone is going to prove to be very challenging, especially when he's blatantly flirting with me like this. I feel my walls crumbling.

Laura: *I need to go before these three grab my phone and start reading our texts. Yes. You may take me out. Not sure which side of the friend line we will be on, but I'd love time together.*

Rob: *Sounds good.*

Laura: *Did you just give yourself a fist pump*

Rob: *It's crazy how well you know me. I'll tell the grandkids about that too.*

Laura: *Going now.*

Rob: *Wait. What time are you closing the salon Saturday?*

Laura: *I'm off early for Lexi's cake tasting and that should wrap up around three.*

Rob: *Great. I'll pick you up Saturday at 4p.*

After I've wiped most of the irrepressible smile off my face, I look up. "I'm sorry guys. I just have to see who these other two texts are from."

"Who was that last text from?" Shannon asks.

"Oh. Um. Rob. He just thanked me for going to coffee with him."

Shannon gives a low whistle. "That looked like some thank you."

I ignore her and check my next two texts.

Mom: *Can you get together for lunch sometime this week? I miss seeing you.*

I take a deep breath. I'll answer Mom later.

Julia: *Karina texted me today saying you and Rob were seen kissing outside Been There Done That. O.M.Goodness. Call me.*

I sigh loudly enough to make everyone stare at me.

"Who was that?"

"My sister. She heard from Trevor's sister that Rob and I kissed. What is with this town?"

"Can you just tell us what happened?" Shannon asks. "I can't believe Meg and Ella Mae and now your sister and Karina and even Felicia knew you went to coffee with him before we did."

"They only knew because this town is such a petri dish! We couldn't get out from under the microscope if we tried."

I pick my bowl up off the table. Everyone sits quietly, staring at me while I chew cereal.

I finally say, "Rob and I are trying out being friends. I've been pushing him away too long. We're just friends, though. Nothing's changed. He's probably going to leave town one of these days, and even if the Dippity Do goes under, I'm never moving out of Bordeaux no matter how insanely nosey

people are.”

I’ve always known Rob could leave. And for some reason, I know I can’t. I’m like one of those plants that’s meant for a certain climate. When you take it out of its natural habitat it goes all brown and shrivels and slumps to its death. I’m on the anti-shrivel program, so I’m keeping my roots right here.

I glance at Shannon. She knows the most about me and my feelings for Rob even though she doesn’t know about our recent kiss or, more importantly, how much I’ve been considering what it would be like to date him again.

“Okay,” Lexi says with a flourish of her hand. “On to the other item on our agenda. “We need to save the salon.”

ROB

I set my phone down after texting with Laura. Saturday at four o'clock can't come soon enough. I've got an idea for something special for our first date. It's probably over the top, but no more so than what Laura used to talk all of us into doing on a regular basis back in the day.

I smile thinking of the way we'd sneak onto local farms or do crazy middle of the night jumps off the old covered bridge into the river below. Laura always pushed the limits. She made our small, sleepy town seem exciting and full of possibility.

And she was mine.

I walk to the pull-up bar over my bedroom door and start doing reps. Laura likes my fifteen-inch biceps. I remember the look in her eyes when we were getting measured, and it makes me push myself harder. Can't disappoint her—in the name of science and all. When you find a variable that works, you lock that thing down.

I'm going to take my time with Laura. If she wants to build a yurt in the friend zone and act like we're living in it as a permanent residence, I'll be the best yurt-dwelling, downsized friend she ever knew. But everyone knows yurts are for nomads. Eventually she'll want something more permanent. At least that's what I'm counting on.

I'm leaving things up to her. I never thought we'd get this far. The last thing I want to do is push her and end up scaring her away.

I drop down from the pull-up bar and start to do a series of crunches with side twists when my phone rings. My heartrate's already elevated, but it kicks up a notch at the thought that it might be Laura.

I look at caller ID.

Mom.

Well, nothing throws a beta blocker on a case of heartthrob like a call from your mother. Am I right?

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetie. It’s been a week since we’ve seen or heard from you. I thought we’d have family dinner. Are you free any of the next few nights?”

“For your cooking? Always.”

“Just for my cooking, huh?”

“You know I’m kidding. I’d love to see you and Dad. I’ve got news to share anyway.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Two things, actually.”

“How about tomorrow? I’ll make chicken and dumplings.”

“You had me at dumplings.”

“I know. I’ll resort to bribing you with your favorite comfort foods if I have to. We’ll see you around six.”

“Sounds good.”

The next day flies by between my work on my invention and some filming for my next segment. I feel like I’m getting close to perfecting the drone design. I had a moment of inspiration in the shower and changed the whole configuration this week.

I was sudsing my hair and belting out the Green Day song, *Basket Case*. That led to me doing air guitar and a drum solo while I rinsed off.

All of a sudden, the title of the song hit me: *Basket Case*. CASE! That’s it! I hopped out of the shower, grabbed a towel to wrap around my waist and dripped my way into the basement where I dismantled the whole contraption and started configuring a case that could collapse and expand to become a drone conversion.

I wonder if this is how Da Vinci worked on his flying machine—wearing a towel and dripping wet with shower water and inspiration.

Yeah. Probably not.

I’ve had my head in the creative process all day, so I’m almost shocked when I look up to see the clock and it’s already five thirty.

Yes, I changed out of the towel and put actual clothes on at one point.

I leave everything out on the table and head upstairs to leave for my parents’ place—the house where I grew up as an only child, four miles from

my current home.

The smell of chicken and dumplings fills the air when I open the front door.

“Hey, we’re in here!” Mom shouts from the kitchen.

I walk in and give both my parents hugs. My dad’s a lawyer, but mom could have taken up that profession easily. She’s persuasive, astute and doesn’t like to lose. I came by my taste in strong women honestly. Although Mom and Laura couldn’t be more different when it comes down to the details of their personalities.

Dad’s more of the thoughtful and steady type. He’s in charge without having to assert his authority. His calm presence makes everyone around him look to him for guidance and direction in most situations. Maybe that’s where I learned how to be a dark horse, to hang back and wait things out. But, I’m nowhere near as inwardly calm as he is.

“How’s my favorite son?” Dad teases as we set the table together.

“I’m your only son, unless you’re hiding something.” I tease back.

“My only and my favorite. Looks like you won all the categories.”

I chuckle. “I’m good. Really good.”

“You look it.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Once we’re seated and passing the serving dishes, Mom asks, “So, what’s your news?”

“Well,” I say, setting my silverware down and wiping my mouth with my napkin.

I look in Mom’s direction. Her gaze gives off this mixed message that’s a cross between scrutiny and anticipation. Her lips are drawn, but her eyes are soft.

“I got an email from John Silverberg that he wants to collaborate on a project. And there’s another small detail.”

“Isn’t he one of the producers connected with several big shows on Discovery and Science Channel?” Dad asks.

“He is. He runs an independent film company but does a lot of collaborative work too.”

“What’s the small detail?” Mom asks with wide eyes, raised brows and a thin press of her lips.

“He said the Discovery channel and Disney each expressed their own separate interest in some sort of syndication of a show including my content

—or me.”

“Well done,” Dad says instantly.

“I knew something like this would come,” Mom says. “You are so special, Robby. And you were made for so much more than this town. Just make sure these people will be able to advance you in a way that best showcases your talent.”

First of all, Mom’s the only one who gets to call me Robby so don’t start getting any wild ideas.

Secondly, it’s important to know Mom has a love-hate relationship with Bordeaux. She was born in Columbus, met my dad in college and moved back here with him when they married.

She could have asked dad to move years ago, so I know the love for Bordeaux wins out more often than not.

But she’s also always pointing out the way our town is *small-minded* or *too gossipy* or *backwards*. I don’t agree with any of those assessments. Well, okay, that gossip part is spot on, but the rest of her perspective is skewed.

There’s no use arguing with mom. Like I said, she was born for the courtroom. Her reaction to my news doesn’t surprise me.

If I told her I had been asked to serve the president, she’d ask on what committee. If I told her the committee, she’d ask if I were chairing it. She doesn’t rest until she or someone she cares about reaches the pinnacle of their potential.

“On the phone you said you had two pieces of news. Are they Discovery and Disney?” Mom asks, with a small smile on her face as if she’s finally allowing herself one weak moment to savor the sweetness of these opportunities and the recognition they represent.

“No. The other piece of news is that Laura and I buried the hatchet. We’ve been hanging out a bit and we’re back to being friends.”

“I thought you two were friends,” Dad says matter-of-factly.

“We’ve been in the same friend group, but I think she rightfully held our breakup over my head all these years. Anyway, we’ve been talking, and she forgave me.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” Mom says. “You two were too young coming right out of high school. A breakup was the best decision. There’s nothing to forgive. Laura was like an anchor, holding you back from sailing forward. The girl didn’t even choose to go to college. She stayed here to be a *hairstylist*.”

The word hairdresser comes out as if Laura decided to make creepy dolls out of people's hair, not cut hair for a living. I chuckle at the image of Laura making voodoo dolls. My mom would probably be the first model she'd fashion since the two of them never did quite see eye-to-eye.

"She's a good hairdresser," I say.

Wow. Way to defend her honor, Rob.

"Yes. She's a very good hairdresser," Mom agrees. "But she's only a hairdresser in a town that doesn't even have three thousand people in it, and most of them live on farms where their haircuts are a matter of not getting hog muck in their bangs. Whereas you are destined for great things. You're leagues above her, sweetie."

I don't like the direction of this conversation. Dad and I share a look.

"I'm glad the two of you cleared the air," Dad says pointedly to me, though I'm pretty sure his words are intended for Mom too.

He looks over at my mom. She stares at him for a beat and then she cuts into her chicken and takes a bite. Nothing more is said on the subject of Laura Lennox for the rest of the meal.

After dinner, I rinse the dishes and hand them to my mom to place into the dishwasher.

We're still relatively quiet until Mom looks over at me and says, "Rob, I'm sorry for the things I said about Laura. She's a fine girl. I don't have anything against her as a person. I did have some issues in high school when she used to lead you to do things you never would have without her influence, but that was years ago. She's not my concern these days. She'll make someone a decent wife someday.

"I just want you to be well-matched. Chemistry, as you know, is momentary and explosive. You don't base your relationship on biology or physics for that matter. You need something more substantial.

"Like geology," I mutter under my breath.

"Physical reactions to a woman can drive a man to make decisions he wouldn't make if he were being more logical. I've always seen the disparity between the two of you and I just want you to choose someone who is more suited for you. But I am truly glad you two are on friendly terms."

She says the word *friendly* with such a strong emphasis on the word *friend* that her eyes bulge and a vein momentarily protrudes from her neck.

I don't tell my mom Laura makes me happier than any person I've ever met. I also don't praise her for using so many scientific terms to try to

convince me to abandon my interest in Laura.

What Laura and I have isn't merely chemistry, though when I'm around her there's something close to a combustive reaction between us.

She's so much more to me than her looks or the way she makes me feel. And I can't help but picture my future with her. A future with plenty of chemistry, biology and physics along with everything else I imagine when I think of her as my wife.

But if I had to leave Bordeaux to pursue an opportunity for advancement, would she go with me this time?

ROB

The next morning, I wake having dreamt of Laura in a lab coat. Her long dark hair was pulled up into a high ponytail and she had safety goggles on. We were mixing chemicals and things were exploding. It was hot. Laura the chemist might be my new thing. Makes me want to come up with an excuse to get her into a lab coat at some point.

What can I say? Scientists have different dreams than the average guy.

I'm at the Dairyland pumping gas when I spot Ella Mae pulling in. I lean close to my truck hoping she won't spot me.

No such luck.

"Rob! Hey! I'm so glad I caught you!"

She runs toward me in what appear to be six-inch heels and a tight skirt that isn't helping the situation the way it pulls her knees together. She's tottering as if she chose to put herself through a self-induced challenge course.

Ladies and gentlemen, can Ella Mae walk on these shoe-stilts with her knees bound? The judges are divided on this one. She manages to arrive at my truck without face-planting, so I give her an inner score of ten for the obstacle course portion of the day.

"Hey, Ella Mae."

Before I know it, instead of answering me, she's whipped out that phone of hers and she's going live.

"Hey, peeps! It's me, Ella Mae. You'll never guess who I found pumping his own gas at our local Dairyland! That's right! It's Rob, the heartland's biggest hottie heartthrob."

I'm what? And yes, I pump my own gas, like every other man in Ohio. Ella Mae's redefining the concept of *too much* as always.

She smiles a phony smile at the camera that shows off both her top and bottom rows of teeth and then she turns that smile toward me.

"Say hi to the peeps, Rob!"

When she says peeps, I picture a room full of fluffy fluorescent marshmallow Easter candy covered in colorful sugar crystals. I've blown some of those up on YouTube before. They are awesome when they melt or explode. If I could blow up this impromptu interview right now, I would.

"Hey," I say, smoothing my hand through my hair and turning to put the hose back on the gas pump.

"So, Rob. Last time I posted about your channel the women went wiiiiild for you."

She growls this lioness purr while mockingly swiping at me with what may be intended to look like a paw. I try to be subtle while backing up a few steps. Ella Mae's crazy just got a steroid injection.

"I got so many comments asking if you are single and ready to mingle."

"Seriously?" I ask her.

"Oh, you know it! You're the scientific community's answer to the Hemsworth brothers!"

"What does that even mean?" I ask her, wishing I hadn't as soon as the words are out of my mouth.

"You are H-O-T, Rob. You are the sex symbol of science."

I'm sure my face matches the red of my truck.

"And he blushes, girls!" Ella Mae says to the camera on her phone. "Don't you just love a man with a chin dimple who can put on a blush through that scruff? Yum-my!"

"Well, this has been great," I say. "But I gotta run."

I hop into the cab of my truck like a man robbing a bank and escaping with the loot, only I'm fleeing with the remaining shreds of my dignity. I picture the town rumor mill after this segment goes live. I can hear Trevor now, purring and calling me a sexy scientist.

Maybe relocating to LA wouldn't be so bad after all.

If Laura were going with me.

That thought hits me like a demolition ball. Would Laura leave Bordeaux to build a life with me where my career has the potential to explode and I can finally capitalize on all that I've poured into making a name for myself? Is it

even fair to ask that of her?

I'm getting ahead of myself. We're still in the friend zone and John Silverberg only asked me for one collaboration project so far.

As I start the engine, I hear Ella Mae shouting from outside my truck, "Bye Rob! Ladies, be sure to check out *Make It, Don't Break It* for more of that sizzling scientist! And remember put the YOU in fab-YOU-lous today!"

I don't have time to figure out who watched the insanity that is Ella Mae today because I'm on a roll with the phone case conversion. I spend the afternoon in my basement.

The mechanics of the design are coming together quickly. I may even be able to launch a test model of it within a few days. I've got the prototype made of materials that are lightweight and collapsible, but I've got plans for something made of recycled plastic if anyone wanted to pick up the design and mass produce it.

Just like yesterday time flies when I'm in the zone, creating and modifying my invention. I look up, stretching my arms and rotating my neck. It's past dinner time.

I head upstairs and grab some bread, meat, cheese and veggies. After I throw together a sandwich, I decide to call Laura. I'm taking her out tomorrow, but the idea of going one more day without hearing her voice sounds like an unnecessary torture.

She answers, "Well, hello there. If it isn't the sizzling scientist."

I groan. "You watched?"

"It's not like I watch Ella Mae," Laura says as if watching her would be incriminating. "I don't even have social media. But Shannon does, and she nearly sprinted into the shop today with her phone held out for me to see the latest. Shannon was in hysterics over the way Ella Mae cornered you."

"Too bad it wasn't funny," I say.

"Oh, but it was."

"Is it okay that I'm calling you?" I ask.

I'm hoping to change the subject but also wanting to make sure this boundary wasn't one Laura wanted held firm. We've only texted so far since we've re-entered the friend zone. A phone call brings us one step closer to a relationship that slides over the line between friends and more.

"I can always hang up and text," I offer.

"It's fine. I'm just sitting here watching TV."

"The Island?"

“Yeah.”

“You’re watching it without me.”

“Are you pouting? I’m sorry. I’m just dying to see what happens next. I didn’t realize you were serious about watching along with me.”

“Dead serious. A man doesn’t joke about The Island.”

“Okay then,” she laughs.

I soak up her laughter like the incredibly smitten man I am, leaning back on my couch and relishing the fact that we are comfortably talking and laughing together after so many years of tiptoeing around the edge of our relationship.

“We could watch together,” Laura suggests.

“I’ll be right over!”

I sit up and set my plate on my coffee table.

“I’m in my pajamas already, Rob.”

“I’m going to be there in record time now.”

“Rob. Seriously? That’s not ...”

“I know Jesse’s routine. I can speed without getting caught. He’s on break at Pop’s right now eating his two slices of pizza and a large orange soda.”

“That’s terrifying,” Laura says with a laugh.

“What?”

“How you know the routine of our local law enforcement at that level of detail. And also the fact that Jesse’s so predictable.”

“Law enforcement is a stretch when talking about that man,” I say.

“Behave.”

“I’m just saying, Shaggy could take Jesse.”

“You mean Shaggy from Scooby Doo? No way! He’s so adorkable. I’d like to think Jesse has more skills.”

“Who always solves the cases? Shaggy. All I know is it’s a good thing the biggest crime we have around here is high-school senior skip day or some mess Cooter ends up in.”

She laughs.

Again.

I can’t wipe the smile off my face.

“Are we watching The Island or talking about local police and their dining habits?” Laura asks me when her laughter dies down.

“Oh, we’re watching.”

“We can stay on the phone and watch together. That way we can have ongoing commentary. It’s more fun that way.”

“I promise it would be way more fun with me there,” I say, hoping she might reconsider having me over. “Just two friends in their pjs watching TV together—I’d even let you paint my nails.”

“You’re bad. Stay put.”

“If you insist. Let me change into my pajamas and heat my cocoa and I’ll call you back.”

“You had to throw the cocoa card out there.”

“You could be drinking cocoa if you were here,” I remind her. “And I would be giving you a foot rub ... or I could bring you a cup.”

“Rain check on that, okay?”

Oh, we’re definitely having a raincheck on that. I make a mental note. Bring Laura cocoa and give her a foot rub. Soon.

“You got it,” I tell her as we hang up.

I change into my sweats and an old MIT T-shirt, heat the milk for cocoa and call Laura back.

When she answers, I say, “So, bring me up to speed.”

She does. I sit back, sipping my cocoa, letting the sound of Laura’s voice fill me. It’s like old times. She’s unguarded. Laughing. Animated.

“... so, Mandy snuck out onto the beach when Brock was there with Sunshine and asked if she could talk to him for a minute right when Brock and Sunshine were about to kiss.”

“Way to set that up,” I say.

“Yeah. It was a total drama move on the part of the producers. But Brock went with Mandy anyway.”

“Of course, he did. I couldn’t hang with that.”

“With what? Being on TV? You already basically are with your YouTube channel. You know, being the heartland’s hottest heartthrob.”

I groan again. “Please don’t remind me. And no. I don’t mind being on TV, just the idea of being stranded on an island with all those women vying for me.”

“Sounds like most men’s dream.”

“It would be my nightmare. I’m a one-woman man.”

“You are, are you?”

Is Laura flirting with me?

“One woman,” I repeat, hoping she understands everything I’m telling

her with those two words.

Laura's quiet and then she says "Okay. Well. You're up to speed. You can turn on the current episode and we can watch together."

"What color are your pjs?" I ask, in a purposely rumbly voice.

"The color of baby puke, or a boring light manilla envelope, or the sand at the reservoir after a bad rainstorm."

"Wow. Those sound ... unique."

"And very not-sexy," she adds.

We both laugh.

"Now get your mind off my pjs or I'll watch alone."

"My mind is officially off your pjs."

It totally isn't, but Laura doesn't need to know that.

We watch the rest of the show in tandem, shouting at characters, giving critique, making guesses as to who will be voted off the island.

When it's over, Laura says, "That was fun."

"It was," I say. "I better let you go."

I don't want to hang up. But it's always better to leave Laura wanting more of me. Right now, I can tell she's open and happy. I don't want to wear out my welcome.

"Yeah. I need to get to sleep. I've got an early morning at the salon."

"And a hot date tomorrow night, so I hear. Something about the Hemsworth of the science community."

"Oh yeah. That. He's alright."

She says it in a flat tone, but I hear her. She's looking forward to the date as much as I am. At least it sounds like she is.

"Goodnight, Laura."

"Good night, Rob."

Neither of us hangs up.

"Oh, and Rob?"

"Yeah."

"They're pink with little white flowers and a tiny white satin bow on each lapel."

She hangs up and I smile like I did the Christmas I got my first chemistry set.

LAURA

I arrive at the local bakery, Oh! Sugar, for Lexi's cake tasting at one. The last time I felt this giddy was high school prom, or the weeks before Rob and I broke up when we were trying to make the most of every last moment together.

No. I'm not giddy about cake, though I do love a great pastry or sweet as much as the next woman.

It's Rob.

Our phone call last night felt just like old times, only more. We're not the eighteen-year-olds we were. We're young adults. He's almost twenty-five. Everything feels so much more real and significant.

It's like the night I drove my car when the brakes started to go out. We're speeding into something I might even want, but I desperately need some way to slow us down and I'm not sure I can find the pedal.

When I walk into the bakery, Lexi, Shannon and Jayme are already seated at a taller table near the display case at the back of the bakery.

"Laura!" Lexi calls out.

"Hey, you three beautiful women."

I give each of them a hug.

"What are our selections today?"

"You're in a chipper mood," Shannon says, examining me like she's trying to figure something out.

"I am. So, what are the flavors?"

"Chocolate raspberry truffle cake, vanilla cake with caramelized peaches and vanilla bean icing, or their lemon drop cake with lavender rosemary

icing,” Lexi says.

“Wow. Let’s get one of each!” I say. “And why isn’t Trevor here to sample with you. He’s the foodie.”

“He said he’s too biased and he wants it to be the cake I want. Plus, he wants it to be a surprise.”

“Could you two be any cuter?” Jayme asks with only a slight twinge to her voice.

“We need to find you a man. You’ve been single for over a year,” I tell Jayme.

“Yes!” Lexi agrees. “We need to find all three of you men.”

I’m silent for a moment, but then I decide I’ve held the details in too long. These are my best friends.

“I don’t need to find a man right now.”

“Laura,” Lexi says. “You do. There’s bound to be someone who can capture your interest and be worthy of your awesomeness.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I think I may have found him.”

My three friends start screaming and squealing. A young mom with her two preschool aged girls glances over at us.

“Calm down,” I say. “He and I are just doing the friend thing for now, but we’re going on a date tonight.”

“Tonight?” Lexi’s voice is still high enough to qualify her for the soprano section of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

“Yes. Tonight. He’s picking me up at four.”

“Well, let’s get this tasting going so you can go beautify yourself.”

“Not that you need it,” Shannon adds.

“Of course, she doesn’t,” Lexi amends. “I’m just saying, give it your best.”

“We’re still in the friend-zone. I’m taking it slowly.” I say.

“Do we know him? Does he live in town?” Jayme asks.

“He can’t live in town,” Shannon answers for me. “We know all the guys in town. The only one she’d ever want is Rob and he’s her frenemy.”

“Yeah. Well, there was Joe. That guy we went on the double date with last year,” Lexi adds. “You know, when I got the mortician with a toupee? And she got Joe who was all ‘Hey, Laura, let me put my hand on the small of your back and kiss your knuckles ... and can you give me a private tour of Bordeaux?’”

Lexi says all this in a mock baritone. I guess she’s trying out for every

section of the choir today.

“Oh yeah. It could be Joe,” Shannon agrees.

I’ve resumed invisibility as my friends carry on suggesting who my date might or might not be.

“Can’t be Jesse,” Jayme adds. “Though, you can’t blame that guy for trying. He’s so hot for Laura he needs a run through a fire hose.”

They all laugh. I sit quietly, smiling.

“Yes. Definitely not Jesse,” Shannon agrees. “He’s nice enough, but not Laura’s type.”

“Could be Duke,” Lexi suggests. “He did loan her that giant muscle car at no charge.”

“Nope,” Jayme says. “Duke has a thing for Shannon and Shannon won’t give him the time of day.”

“He doesn’t,” Shannon says, as usual. “And I don’t.”

There’s a lull. All three of them stare at one another. Then they turn toward me as if remembering I’m here for the first time.

“So,” Lexi asks. “Do we know him?”

“Yeah,” I say. “You do.”

Thea walks out from the back of the bakery. “Here you are! We have three samples for each of you and some water with lemon for cleansing your palate between each. Eat them in order, so all of you taste the same one at the same time. And here’s some paper to note your thoughts.”

She balances her tray and sets the cutest tea plates with small slices of the three cakes in front of each of us and then puts a mini pad of paper and a pencil next to each of the plates.

“Also, I do want to tell you about a new trend,” Thea says. “It’s called the cinnamon bun cake. We basically layer a spiral of flaky dough with the cinnamon sugar and butter in each layer like a real cinnamon roll. Then we frost the layers with vanilla cream cheese frosting. I have samples of that if you’d want to try it.”

Lexi’s eyes go big. I’m pretty sure I know what cake she’ll be choosing.

“Yes, please,” Lexi says. “Cinnamon rolls are a thing for Trevor and me.”

Thea smiles. “You’ve got it. Coming right up.”

When Thea walks away, I drop the bomb. “It’s Rob.”

Then I quickly shove a bite of the lemon cake between my lips as all three of my friend’s mouths literally drop open.

“Wait. Wait. Wait,” Shannon says. “You are going on a date with Rob?”

Rob, Rob? Our Rob? The *he broke my heart, I won't ever forgive him, Rob?*”

“A friend date. Yes.” I say, swallowing the bite of cake as I mumble around it.

“Squeeeee!” Lexi says, re-entering the soprano section.

“Unexpected,” Jayme says. “I love a good plot twist.”

Shannon reaches across the table, pretending to take my temperature by placing the back of her hand on my forehead.

I swat her hand away. “I’m fine. We talked. He apologized. We’ve been texting and chatting.”

No way I’m saying *and kissing* here. Not with how excited they got over the mere thought of us going on a friend-date.

“Oh. My. Gosh.” Shannon says. “This is better than Adam Levine and Behati Prinsloo, or Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel, or Prince William and Kate Middleton ...”

“We got the picture,” I say to Shannon as she continues rattling off celebrities who broke up and reunited.

“You’re glowing. I knew something was up,” Shannon says.

“It’s the forgiveness,” I admit.

Though it’s so much more.

“I held onto that grudge like a security blanket. Letting it go has been the best thing I’ve done in maybe ever.”

Jayme nods as she takes a bite of the lemon cake.

Lexi looks serious. “So, you aren’t afraid he’s going to leave?”

“He might. We’re just friends for now.”

Hearing those words out loud makes the bite of cake I just swallowed turn into a little lemon clump somewhere between my esophagus and my stomach.

“But you’ve got the so-much-more-than-friends glow,” Shannon says.

“I can’t help it,” I admit. “He makes me happy.”

“And that’s a good thing. No matter what happens,” Lexi says, patting my hand like a mother would. Not my mother, of course, but a normal one.

“Anyway,” I say. “We’re here for Lexi and Trevor. Let’s eat this cake. I’ll keep you posted on the details of what happens between me and Rob from here on out. I promise.”

ROB

I try on one more shirt, look in the mirror, take it off and throw it on the bed with the other five laying in a rumpled pile.

“She’s seen you before,” I tell myself.

“Yeah. But this is big. I want to get it just right,” I answer myself.

Isn’t it a sign you are officially losing your marbles when you start answering your own self-talk?

I pick up my phone and call Trevor.

“Sup?”

“I’ve got an important date. I want to make a good first impression. What should I wear?”

Trevor answers me in a British accent that sounds like Mister Carson from Downton Abbey.

“You want my input on your wardrobe choice for a date?”

“You know what? Never mind.”

I almost hang up.

“Wait! Wait,” Trevor says in his normal voice. “If it’s dressy, that grey button up. If you’re going casual, the navy polo. If you’ll be active, wear an MIT T-shirt, even if it’s faded. That gives off the whole I went to MIT vibe.”

“I did go to MIT.”

“Exactly.”

“You are as helpful as ... I don’t know who. Someone really unhelpful though.”

“I gave you three options.”

“True. Thanks.”

“Who’s the hot date with. I’m pretty sure you don’t call me over just anyone.”

I muffle the phone with my sleeve as I’m pulling on the navy polo.
“Laura.”

“What’s that? It sounded like you said Laura. We all know that’s not happening. Unless your scientific method is working its magic.”

Trevor laughs like he just told the funniest joke.

“I did say Laura. We’re going as friends. Maybe. Or not. I don’t know. I asked her out. She gets to determine if it’s as more than friends.”

“Man. That’s awesome. I told you you’re going to need to write a book after this. Where are you taking her? U. S. Grant’s?”

“Nope. Cincinnati.”

Trevor lets out a low whistle. “Nothing screams I want to be more than friends than taking a woman out of town on the first date.”

“I didn’t say I would make it easy on her to stay in the friend zone. I’m doing my part to woo her, remember?”

“Oh yeah, Memaw. I remember. You and Frank Sinatra, you’re all about the wooing.”

I laugh. “I better go. I have to pick her up in thirty.”

Trevor wishes me luck and we hang up. I finish getting ready, grab a jacket from the hook near my door and hop in my truck to drive to Laura’s. My palms are sweaty, and my heartbeat pulses in my throat as I pull into her driveway.

I take a breath and blow it out, then I hop out of the truck and walk up Laura’s steps. She opens the door before I knock.

I’m about to make a joke about her being eager to see me when I get a look at her.

“Wow.”

She does a little spin.

“You look amazing.”

She does. Her hair’s down and she’s wearing a ruffled skirt with brown boots and a cream top. She’s got enough makeup on to let me know she put some effort into getting ready, but it’s still light enough to let her natural beauty shine through.

“You’re so beautiful I have to remind myself to breathe.”

“Friend zone, Baldwin,” she says with a wink.

“Oh, I mean that in a very friendly way,” I tell her, returning her wink.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” she says, looking me over. “Dark jeans and a navy polo is definitely a good look on you.”

We walk down her steps together. I open her door. She hops in and I’m holding back the world’s biggest fist pump. If you’d have told me even a few weeks ago that I would be the man taking her out tonight, I’d have laughed in your face and then gone and sulked in my basement while I channeled my frustration into something scientific. But here we are.

Never say never.

“So, where are you taking me?” Laura asks once I’m buckled in and backing out of her driveway.

“It’s a surprise.”

I look over at her to gauge whether she’s okay with being a little out of control. Surprises can be disarming.

“Okay then, surprise me,” she says.

We drive about ten minutes outside town. Then Laura does it. She turns on the radio and starts singing along to *Señorita* by Shawn Mendes. It’s only a matter of a few lines into the song before she’s moving her arms like she’s dancing salsa, bending them at the elbows and snapping fake castanets in the air while she sways her torso to the beat.

I’m carried back to the nights I’d pick her up for a date. She’d end up dancing and singing in the passenger seat while I focused on driving.

I took it all for granted.

Not anymore.

It’s a new beginning for us.

I start singing along and I lift one hand off the wheel to grasp Laura’s hand as if I’m actually on a dance floor pushing and pulling her in a salsa move.

She looks at me with wonder.

“You joined in,” she says as the song winds down.

“I did,” I say with a smile in her direction.

“Rob?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are we going toward the municipal airport?”

It’s the only civilized thing out this way aside from large farms and ranches along the road.

“That’s where the plane is,” I say nonchalantly, not daring to meet her eyes even though I’m dying to see her expression.

“The plane?”

“Patience grasshopper.”

She lightly swats my upper arm. I indulge myself in a glance her direction, and she’s beaming.

We park my truck and walk over toward a single-engine, ultralight airplane my dad’s friend owns.

“We’re going up in this?”

“I thought it would be better than driving to Cincinnati,” I say, still playing the low-key act off as long as I can.

Laura throws her arms around me. I wrap my arms behind her, catching her in a hug.

She pulls back too soon, smoothing her hand down her skirt.

“This is awesome! But ...” She looks around. “Where’s the pilot?”

“You’re looking at him.”

“What? You’re a pilot? When did this happen?”

“I got my license over the summers between freshman and junior years at MIT. I did some of my practice hours here and some in Massachusetts.”

“This ...” I wave my hand toward the plane as I walk her over to the passenger door. “... belongs to my dad’s friend. I rent it from him, so to speak. I only have to pay gas and cover insurance.”

“Sweet!” she shouts.

I love that she’s not overly impressed. That’s one thing about Laura. When she’s fully herself, she’s one of the most adventuresome, free-spirited people I know. She’s always up for the next fun thing—or spearheading an escapade and goading everyone into pushing their limits to join her.

I hold the passenger door open for Laura, giving her my hand and instructing her to put on the headset once she’s buckled in. Then I round the front of the plane and prepare for takeoff.

Once I’ve run the systems checks, I request to taxi, and we roll down the runway. I explain what I’m doing to Laura through our headsets as we go. She hasn’t stopped smiling since she gave me that hug on the tarmac.

The flight goes smoothly with Laura pointing things out below us and asking questions about various things on the instrument panel and what I’m doing when I push one button or another.

We land in one of the Cincinnati muni airports and hop into the Uber I arranged to be waiting for us.

I open the door of the car and Laura climbs in the backseat.

“Where are you taking me now, Baldwin?”

“You’ll see, Jellybean.”

I climb in next to her and take my first big risk of the night. I reach across the seat and lace her fingers with mine. She looks down at our enjoined hands, then back up at me with one eyebrow raised.

“Friends?” she asks.

“Best of.”

She snickers and looks ahead as if she’s highly interested in seeing where we’re going—which, come to think of it, she probably is.

What she doesn’t do is release my hand. I can barely focus on anything except the feel of her soft skin enveloped in mine.

We drive along the river past Eden Park, a greenspace with flower gardens, walking paths and large cultivated grassy lawns right along the water. We’ll come back here later. The car turns and takes the bridge over the Ohio river toward Kentucky.

“You’re taking me out of state?” she asks.

“It’s all part of my plan,” I say, giving her hand a little squeeze.

“Abduction?”

“Sweeping you off your feet.”

“Oh.”

She doesn’t say anything else, but her face tells me everything I need to know. Her features are relaxed and there’s a light in her eyes. And she’s still allowing me to keep our hands folded together.

The Uber stops at the boat landing, and I hop out, walking around to let Laura out, but she beats me to it and is already standing next to the car when I come around to her side. I thank the driver while Laura looks around.

“We’re going on a cruise?”

“Dinner cruise on the Ohio River at sunset.”

“Pulling out all the stops are you, Mayhem?”

“Guilty as charged,” I say. “You’re meant to be with me, Jellybean. It’s only a matter of time. But it’s up to you when you give in and let yourself fall. I’m just patiently waiting for that moment and every moment after that.”

“And then we go from grand gestures to humdrum?”

“Life with you has never been, and never would be humdrum. And you forget I’m the guy who blows things up. I’m pretty sure between the two of us we have many years of spectacular ahead.”

“And you’ll tell the grandkids about all those years.”

“That I will,” I say with a wink.

I take my next big risk and put my palm on the small of Laura’s back to lead her toward the boat ramp. It doesn’t slip past me the level of risk she’s taking by letting me.

We’re welcomed aboard and I guide Laura to the river side of the boat. We stare out across the water at Cincinnati.

“This is crazy. You’ve officially been watching too much of The Island.”

“Because I’m taking you on over the top dates?”

“Ya think? You rented a plane to fly me to another city so we could eat dinner on the river. How do you even top that?”

“Bungee jumping? A day at Cedar Pointe? Going behind the cages at the Columbus Zoo?”

“Are you serious right now?”

She shakes her head in disbelief, but she’s smiling freely.

“Maybe.”

“I would have been happy going to grab dinner at Mad River Burgers and following it with a round of pool at Cues and Brews.”

“We can do that too. I just wanted to show you I’m all in. Maybe make up for lost time.”

“As my friend.”

“As your friend. For now,” I say, putting my hand over hers on the railing and rubbing my thumb gently over her knuckles.

Laura breathes out a long breath, I remind myself to give her enough time to let her desires and feelings catch up with mine.

LAURA

I'll never forget this day.

We ate a four-course meal, danced on the stern of the riverboat, and watched the sunset over the water. I'd forgotten what a good dancer Rob was, and his skills have only become smoother with age.

Rob called another Uber to take us to Eden Park where he had a friend from college meet us to give us a blanket and a thermos of hot cocoa.

Rob carries the blanket to a somewhat secluded spot on one of the lawns where we have a view of the river and the city lights. He flicks the blanket out and waits for me to sit on it. Then he takes a seat very close to me. So close, his arm crosses behind my back when he gets settled.

I don't ask him to move. A part of me wants to slow us down, and a bigger part can't remember why that's a good idea. I know I don't want to be hurt again, but here I am, with Rob. Under the stars. On a caliber of date most women will never experience in their lifetime.

"I had fun tonight," I tell Rob.

"Me too."

We slowly angle into one another. I follow an impulse and lean my head on Rob's shoulder. He pretends not to notice. We sit like that for a few more moments and then I move my left hand and rest it casually between us on Rob's thigh like it's no big deal to be touching him.

Who am I kidding? My hand keeps sending signals to my brain like, *Do you feel that? Huh-looo. Rob's thigh. That's a nice thigh right there. Mmmm that's nice.*

We haven't kissed, so technically we're on the safe side of the border

between friend-land and the dense and dangerous jungle otherwise known as letting my heart go. I'm dipping my toe into quicksand hoping it won't swallow me whole. Quicksand at the edge of the jungle. If there is such a thing, that's my current predicament. I'll either be in over my head or ambushed.

I'd like to zipline over that jungle and experience the thrill of it from somewhere removed without risking, you know, soul-crushing rejection.

From around my back, Rob's free hand finds my right hand. He does this lazy, gentle tracing thing with his fingers over my skin. So very, very friendly. I could purr like a kitten basking in the sunshine after drinking a pan of warm milk. I'm an oblivious, purring kitten at the edge of the jungle.

"Yeah. A very fun night," Rob says, his voice gravelly and low.

We're motionless. Not statue still, but I'm pretty sure we're both hoping we don't do anything to ruin the fragile thing happening between us.

"So?" Rob says, shifting a little and pulling me into himself as he turns closer toward me. "Did you decide if this is a friend-date or a more-than-friend date?"

"I think we shouldn't kiss," I say, bolstering myself to stay strong.

Inner Lucy crosses her arms and stomps her feet. *What do you mean we can't kiss? He's right there. The man flew you to another city for a date. You danced on the river. And do you smell him? I love s'mores. You love s'mores. Just look at him. He wants a kiss. Let's get s'more!*

Gordon pipes up, because of course he does. *Lucy, Lucy, Lucy. You red-headed Yankee Doodle Dandy! There will be no kissing!*

Rob quietly holds me while my mental committee has their pow wow. The city lights flicker in the distance. Nothing about this scene works in my favor if the point is resisting Rob or letting our relationship build gradually.

"No kissing." I repeat.

"No kissing on the lips?" Rob asks with a playful glint in his eyes.

He lifts my hand from his leg and brings it to his mouth. My hand seems to develop a mind of its own as it follows him like the children behind the Pied Piper.

Rob dips his head and kisses one knuckle, slowly, softly, letting his lips linger for more than a second. He looks up at me through his lashes. "A kiss like that would still be friendly. Right?"

My mouth has gone dry. I have no words.

Rob kisses the next knuckle, keeping his lips there and giving a light

brush over the skin as he pulls away. “I mean, this kiss ...” he kisses the next knuckle, leisurely, delicately, excruciatingly tenderly. “And this one ... are all between friends. Right?” He makes his way down my hand as I watch and feel him with everything I am.

He’s playing the *this little piggy* game, but with extremely hot kisses to my knuckles. And I’m about to cry wee wee wee all the way home.

He sets my hand back on his leg, covering it with one of his hands, securing me there as if he knows I might float away if not properly tethered to something.

Rob’s head lifts so that his face ends up mere inches from mine. His eyes are serious, but playful. “You kissed my cheek as a friend outside the coffee shop. Cheeks should be safe territory.”

Rob leans in, resting his cheek along mine. He pauses there, cheek-to-cheek and then slowly drags backward so the scruff of his five-o-clock shadow gently abrades my face as he slides along. When his lips are near my cheek, he turns so his mouth follows the trail his stubble left behind, kissing soothing kisses over the pleasant sting. His lips linger at several points. He’s in no hurry.

I’m going to win your heart.

He pulls back and gazes in my eyes, vulnerable, but strong. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

I’m aware of the rise and fall of my chest. His eyes hold mine, hold me. He’s not pulling back, but he’s not moving in. He’s giving me the reins.

I breathe out “Not bad at all.”

A knowing smile spreads across his lips. I’d do anything to kiss him. He’s right here. I could kiss him, and we could spend the next few hours wrapped up in one another’s arms under the stars, making out and holding one another.

I take in one long fortifying breath and let it out deliberately. “I still owe you a kiss on the cheek.”

I’ll compromise. Rob kissed my cheek. I can kiss his. I can kiss Rob’s cheek and we can call it a night.

“You do,” he says with a wolfish grin.

I’m the lamb here, in case you weren’t sure who’s who in this scenario. I’m a lamb thinking I’ll outrun the wolf. And right now, my nickname might be mutton chop.

I turn to Rob, inhaling just enough to fill my senses with him. Before I succumb to my instincts, I move quickly and give him a light peck. When I

pull back, he turns the slightest bit and when he speaks his mouth rests right next to mine.

Right. Next. To. Mine. People.

He's right there.

We're a breath away from the kiss I want with every cell in my body.

His voice rumbles on my cheek, his breath skates across my skin and I feel goosebumps rise everywhere as he says, "That's the kiss? Laura. I'm pretty sure you can do better. But, hey. It's your kiss."

I shove him with both palms to his chest and he feigns falling backward from the force of my push. But now, he's lying there, looking up at me, not making any effort to rejoin me in my vertical safe zone. This is going from bad to worse.

"You need to sit up," I tell him.

"How about you lie down. The view from here is spectacular tonight."

I'd think he meant the stars or the city lights in the distance, but he's staring at me so intently I don't think he even knows we're in a park in Cincinnati anymore.

"I ..." I start to protest, but he nudges my wrist so my elbow gives out and I collapse very ungracefully toward him.

He catches me and repositions me in one deft move. I end up tucked alongside him with my head on his chest.

"That's better," Rob says. "Two friends, just enjoying a night outdoors. Definitely not kissing."

I shake my head at his ridiculousness, and he laughs as my stray hair weaves along his stubble. He runs a hand down my head to smooth things out. It smooths nothing. Nothing is smooth—at all.

We're silent again. Rob's heartbeat filling my ears, spreading through me. The comfort of being held obliterates my resolve almost imperceptibly one shallow breath at a time.

We lie there until I can't take it anymore. I tilt my head up toward Rob's face and my lips find his cheek. I leave a kiss there like I'm branding him, doing what he did to me. Not rushing, not pulling back, keeping my mouth on his face and kissing him, allowing myself to take in how he feels against my mouth, scruffy and masculine. I cup his other cheek and move a little to let my lips leave a few soft caresses along his jaw before I snuggle back to nestle in the crook of his arm.

Rob doesn't say a thing. I wait for his snarky answer or his flirtation. He

remains quiet. After a minute or so, his hand starts that lazy pattern on my upper arm, tracing and drawing feather light touches and reassuring strokes. I'm not sure if he's comforting me, himself, or both of us.

After a few more minutes, I reluctantly say, "We'd better go. I have adulting to do tomorrow."

"Yep," Rob says, waiting for me to sit up and then following me.

He grabs the blanket and rolls it in his arms. He picks up the thermos of cocoa. Then he extends his hand toward me. I grab it and we walk to the edge of the park to wait for our Uber. When the car arrives, Rob opens my door. I hop in. He tosses the blanket between us and shuts the door.

A deafening silence lingers between us. It's almost as loud as the rap music the driver has chosen to set the mood for our drive to the airport.

Did I mess up? Did Rob have a change of heart? What's going on right now?

We make our way to the airplane still mostly in a silence I can't interpret. The darkness obscures Rob's face, making him unreadable to me.

Rob helps me settle into the airplane passenger seat. I put on my headset and wait for him. He joins me, runs through the systems checks and drives down the small runway until we're airborne.

At that point all thoughts of us and what happened in the park start to feel vaguely distant. I watch the skyline of Cincinnati become a blur. We fly over farmland and small black squiggles of river with occasional houses and smaller clusters that must be towns. Mostly the view out the plane at night is as unreadable as whatever's going through Rob's head.

When we land, Rob helps me out of the plane, and we walk toward his truck together. All the emotions of our day flood me once my feet hit the ground. Rob holds my door open and then hops in the driver's seat and starts the truck.

I watch the familiar scenery flick by outside my window—rows of spring corn stalks, still growing low to the ground, scattered barns and farms, and then more buildings as we near my neighborhood. Rob's still not saying much. Ever since that kiss on his cheek he's been tucked away inside himself.

Rob pulls into my aunt and uncle's driveway and cuts the engine. He looks over at me through the dim light of the truck cab, loping his arm over the steering wheel and looking better than a man has the right to look.

"Thank you," he says.

"For what?" I ask.

“Going out with me. Giving me a chance.”

“Sure,” I say. “Welp. I’ll see you.”

I unbuckle and start to reach for the door handle.

Rob grabs my wrist.

I turn toward him, my face conveying the questions I’m not asking him.

“I don’t want to mess this up,” he confesses. “I know the mood shifted after you kissed my cheek. I never want to hurt you again. We joke around a lot. It’s one of my favorite things about us. I just want you to know how serious this is to me this time around.”

I stare across the gap between us. His hand still encircles my wrist, holding loosely, but not letting go.

I nod at him, unable to find the words to express everything going through my mind.

“Thanks,” I say.

The word feels inadequate.

“We’re good?” Rob asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “We’re good.”

He smiles more fully. And then he leans across the cab and tugs me toward himself lightly. He gives me the gentlest kiss on the top of my head.

“We’ve got time, Jellybean,” he murmurs into my hair. “No rush.”

I tilt my head up. His lips graze my forehead, down my nose and I find his mouth. When our lips connect, there’s no holding back. We fall into one another. I loop my hand behind his neck and drag my fingernails across his skin. Then I comb my fingers through the short hair at the nape, grabbing it and holding on as he kisses me, and I kiss him back.

Something clicks in place inside me as we kiss. This isn’t the accidental kiss from a few weeks ago—when I still had unscalable walls erected and a well-nursed grudge established between us. I’m unguarded, willing, and vulnerable. My heart isn’t locked away. It’s right here, beating wildly as we kiss and cling to one another.

His lips leave mine to graze my chin, he peppers kisses along my jaw, down my neck, and back through the hollow beneath my ear. He nips at the lobe and then returns to my mouth, giving me a kiss so tender I could cry.

Then he’s moving with purpose, more intensity, and I’m matching him. Our mouths remember the way we fit together. Everything so right. Just as if we were made for one another.

We kiss long enough to steam up the windows. When we break apart,

Rob's forehead rests on mine.

We smile sated smiles at one another.

"I'd better get you inside," Rob finally says.

His voice is low and raspy. I want to record it so I can play it on a constant loop.

Rob gives my hand a squeeze and pulls back to open his door. He walks around and lets me out of the truck. We hold hands as he escorts me to my stairs. If he comes up, all bets are off, and the friend zone might as well be located in another galaxy.

"What was that you said about not hurrying?" I ask him.

"I'm not hurrying, Laura. Which is why I'm not walking up those stairs with you. I'll say goodnight right here."

"Good call," I say.

"Yeah?" He gives me an impish grin. "I'm that irresistible, huh?"

I shake my head at him, and he catches my chin, tilting my head up toward him.

"Goodnight, Jellybean."

He kisses me, but he ends it before we have a chance to go farther than we should.

I could scream, but I also feel incredibly safe. And I haven't felt truly safe with Rob in over six years.

ROB

Lexi's making wedding favors with her friends tonight after work, so Trevor invited me to come hang out at his place. He opens the door with the smile of a man who has everything he wants in life going for him: a job that fits him like a glove, a dream house to renovate, and the woman he loves about to become his wife.

I answer him with the same smile. For once, it looks like my life could be aiming in the direction I always hoped it would.

After my Cincinnati date with Laura, we've talked twice and texted a bunch of other times. I haven't seen her in three days, but we're going to see one another at a bonfire Aiden's throwing Friday at his place. I'm not crowding her, but I'm not backing off either.

"What's that smile for?" Trevor asks.

I follow him into his house and toward the kitchen

"A man can't smile when he sees his best friend?"

"If that's how happy you are to see me, you need to get out more often."

I laugh. "Smells good in here."

"I've been cooking a lot more often lately. Usually, it's for Lex and me after work, but tonight it's you and that fried-chicken eating grin."

"This isn't my fried-chicken eating grin," I say. "This is." I contort my face into a smile that looks like the Joker on Batman.

"Good thing we're having beef," Trevor says with a mock horrified expression. "Seriously, though. You look like nothing could flatten you. Am I to assume this has to do with your date last weekend?"

I feel my eyes join my smile. I can't stop the grin from spreading across

my whole face.

“Oh, Man. That’s awesome,” Trevor says.

“Yeah. It feels like it.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Don’t say anything to Lexi yet. I don’t want to mess things up with Laura and I don’t know how much she’s sharing with her friends yet.”

“Just talking from experience,” Trevor says. “You probably will mess things up with her.”

“Shut it, MacIntyre.”

“Just kidding. In all seriousness, it looks like Laura’s giving you a chance. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“She’s coming to the bonfire and hayride at Aiden’s this weekend.”

“Good.”

“Yeah. Just don’t make it weird.”

Trevor wags his eyebrows mischievously and rubs his hands together. Then he says, “I’m kidding. I’ll support you any way I can. You know that.”

He takes a pan of seasoned cubed pieces of steak, sliced onions and chunks of potatoes out of the oven, sets it on his stovetop and pulls down two plates.

“What are you doing about the Bachelor Auction?” he asks.

“The one for the S.O.S.?”

“Yeah. The salon fundraiser Lexi’s Memaw and my mom thought up.”

“I’m in.”

“You’re going up for auction even while things are getting more serious with Laura?”

“I’m officially still one of the bachelors of Bordeaux. I won’t be for long, if I have anything to say about it. But yeah. I told Laura I was going to be in the auction. She knows it’s for fun. Besides, she could bid on me if she wanted.”

“So could Lexi’s Aunt Glenda. Or worse, Ella Mae.”

I visibly shiver at the thought, and Trevor laughs.

“I’m just doing my part to serve my community,” I tell him.

“Let’s hope it involves Laura feeling generous and being able to outbid the competition.”

I raise my glass off the island, tip it toward Trevor and take a sip. “Here’s to that.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket. An email alert.

“Do you need to take a call?” Trevor asks when he sees me pulling my phone out.

He hands me a plate and takes a seat on a bar stool across from me.

“No. It’s an email.”

I slide it open and see it’s from a Caden McMasters at Sun Valley Productions.

“It’s from the guy working with John Silverberg.”

I keep reading. They want to set up the collaboration. There’s a date and then an attachment with details of what we’ll be doing, when the people will arrive, and an itinerary of the day’s events when they are here. There’s another attachment with a contract for me to sign. I’ll have dad review that. There are certainly perks to being the son of a lawyer.

Trevor sits taking bites of his dinner while I look everything over.

“They’re coming out the Monday after your wedding—in five weeks.”

“Are you nervous?”

I think for a moment. “I’m only nervous because it feels like I have a chance with Laura, and I don’t want to blow it.”

“Have you told her about this project? About Disney, Discovery Channel, your imminent rise to stardom?”

“First of all, stardom might be overstating it. And secondly, no. Not yet. She’s got too much on her mind with the salon. It kind of seems like bragging or rubbing it in her face. Besides, things between us are too fragile to rock the boat with uncertainties, you know?”

Trevor doesn’t nod. He’s continuing to listen with a neutral expression on his face.

“I just want to keep building slowly because things between us feel so good, but still so tenuous. I moved mountains to get us this far, and I don’t know how she’d take the news. I’ll tell her if anything big comes out of the collaboration. This may be a one-time thing. No need to bring it up if that’s all it is.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing. You know Bordeaux. She’s bound to hear that people from Hollywood are in town. That news will rival the year John Legend got his first Grammy. Even though he’s from Springfield, not Bordeaux. You’d have thought he grew up down the street. People go crazy anytime an Ohioan hits the big time.”

“I know. But this isn’t the big time. At least not yet. I just want to let everything come out naturally. I’ll handle it with her based on her reaction. I

don't want to flaunt it right now. She needs me to focus on her stress with the salon and on what's going on between us."

"I hope you're right."

"Me too," I say with a sigh. "Me too."



FRIDAY AFTERNOON I decide to text Laura to see if she wants a ride to Aiden's tonight. It's finally warm enough for him to start hosting monthly bonfires. It's the first one he's had all year and the timing couldn't be better. It gives me another opportunity to see Laura without making her feel pressured.

Rob: *Hey. Do you need a ride to Aiden's? Or want one?*

Laura: *I planned on riding over with Jayme and Shannon.*

Rob: *I'm guessing they won't kiss you goodnight.*

Laura: *Was that your plan?*

Rob: *Up to you. I'm following your lead.*

Laura: *Truth?*

Rob: *Always.*

Laura: *I'm nervous to be around you in front of our friends.*

Rob: *No need to be nervous. Tell me what you want from me.*

Laura: *If it were that easy ...*

Rob: *Don't complicate it. Should we go as friends?*

Laura: *After you pulled a The Island date on me last weekend nothing feels like friends.*

I do a fist pump. Then another. She's saying everything I've only dared hope she'd say. This is actually happening!

Rob: *So, are we officially out of the friend-zone?*

Laura: *I don't know.*

Rob: *Let's keep this simple. I'll drive separately. Meet you there. Friend zone fully intact tonight. If you feel comfortable being more once we're there. Give me a sign. I can even drive you home. Or not.*

I give myself bonus points for not rushing her. She deserves to catch up to

me. She'll be worth the wait. She's telling me with her responses to me when we're together, and even in our texts and phone calls. She wants this. I just need to pace myself.

Laura: *I don't know why I'm not just throwing myself at you like I did in high school.*

Laura: *Gah! Why don't they have delete on text? I wish I hadn't sent that. Don't answer me.*

Rob: *I'm glad you sent that. You're not throwing yourself at me because you're older and wiser than you were then. And I hurt you. Take your time, Laura. I keep telling you there's no hurry. We'll have grandkids one day either way.*

Laura: *You should see the smile you just put on my face.*

Rob: *Thinking of our grandkids?*

Laura: *No! Just thinking of you.*

Rob: *That's probably the same smile I have had on my face ever since last weekend.*

Laura: *Gotta run. My next appointment's here. See you tonight.*

Rob: *Looking forward to it.*

I send the text and do some crazy disco, pop, hip-hop dance moves around my living room. I'm dancing like nobody's watching. And honestly, considering what I look like right now, that's a good thing. Laura wishes she could throw herself at me. We're absolutely moving forward.

At five, I finish getting dressed and hop in my truck to drive to Aiden's. Everyone's not supposed to be there until six, but I'm coming out of my skin just waiting around my house, so I figure I'll arrive early to help set things up or watch goats or do something to keep my stir-crazy self busy.

Aiden and I put out chairs around the firepit, haul wood into the circle he dug out and surrounded by stones for the fire and then he gets the wagon set with hay bales for seating and some throw blankets for when the evening chill sets in.

At around six, cars start pulling in and filling the driveway. Nearly every person under age thirty from our town shows up. Young families, singles, and even a few of our seniors come out even though the gathering is mostly intended for the younger generation.

People bring food to share. Aiden has coolers of drinks in the barn, and

some folks even bring guitars or banjos. In a town with a two-screen movie theater and the reservoir as our main sources of entertainment, events like Aiden's bonfires are as anticipated as the annual Fourth of July *Red White and Blue and Corn Too* parade and street fair.

My skin prickles with a hum of anticipation when Laura arrives. Don't ask me how, but I sense her presence. I turn to see her walking away from Shannon's car wearing a pair of jeans and a flowing blouse. She has a sweater thrown over her arm. Long wavy pigtails fall forward over her shoulders. She looks around. Is she looking for me?

Her face lights up when our eyes meet and then she averts her gaze a little and starts talking to Jayme. When she lifts her eyes again, I wave. She waves back. This feels like the days in high school before I ever asked her out. We were dancing around one another, uncertain of what to do or say, but the attraction was undeniable.

Lexi sees the girls and runs over to them. Trevor comes to my side. He hands me a can of soda. "This will give you something to do with your hands."

"Thanks," I say.

"Let's walk over there."

I follow him like some lovesick teen hoping to ask out his crush, or at least not to bomb things in front of her.

"Hey, Rob," Laura says as Trevor and I approach.

"Laura," I say with far more finesse than I feel.

"Has Aiden started giving hayrides yet?" Jayme asks.

"Not yet," I say. "I think he's waiting for people to start eating and the sun to start dropping a bit more."

Laura shifts so she's just a little closer to me. I keep my eyes on Jayme. I'm like a man approaching a skittish wild animal. Laura could dart off if I startle her in any way.

"Let's eat," Shannon says, breaking the silence that fell over the group.

We move toward the area where people are barbecuing, Laura hangs back by my side, still not talking to me directly. She glances up at me when our friends are finally a few paces ahead of us. I look down at her and smile.

"It's good to see you, Rob."

"It's incredible to see you," I tell her. "Six days is officially too long to go without seeing you."

"Is that right?"

“And those pigtails.”

“You like them?” she asks, twirling one around her finger.

“Let me drive you home tonight and I’ll show you how much.”

She swats my arm and then Jayme looks back at the two of us with a very knowing grin. So, her friends do know about us. That’s a good thing—absolutely a good thing.

LAURA

“**Y**ou look beyond happy,” Angie says after both our early customers leave.

“I let Rob drive me home from the bonfire last night.”

“Mm hmm. That’s what that smile’s about. Are you two officially back together?”

Angie straightens her combs and picks up the mixing bowl and foils from her last appointment.

“Not yet. We’re just trying to see what happens. He took me to Cincinnati, like I told you. And then we texted all week and talked on the phone twice. He even left me two notes. One on my car and one on my door.

“I insisted on meeting him at the bonfire when he offered to pick me up. He kept a respectable distance all night because he knew that’s what I wanted—except on the hayride when he made a point of sitting next to me. Then he drove me home.”

“He seems to be doing and saying all the right stuff.”

“He is. I’m just not sure where things are going. He keeps talking about our future.”

“But?” Angie asks.

“But he’s Rob. He’s ambitious, gifted, and driven. He’s going to end up having opportunities that draw him away from here and he’ll want to chase them when they come. I don’t know if I can bear to have my heart broken at this age. Not by him anyway.”

“Do you want my opinion?” Angie asks, dumping the foils in the trash and shifting the bowl to her other hand.

“I absolutely do.”

“I’ve known you all these years. He’s the only man you’ve really loved. You never stopped loving him even though you gave it your best efforts to find a replacement.

“Let yourself fall. As horribly as things went with Derrick, I will never regret having loved him. I’ve got two beautiful children and some sweet memories. Broken hearts heal. Give yourself the gift of letting go and seeing where things can lead with the man you love.”

I nod, not sure I want to come up with any words right now.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Angie says, turning to go to the back room to rinse her bowl.

As if on cue, Mrs. Baldwin walks in for her eleven o’clock appointment. Yes. Rob’s mom. She surprised me by setting up an appointment last week. She hasn’t been into the Dippity Do in years.

I wave her over. “It’s been a while. Mrs. Baldwin.”

She takes a seat in my chair and explains, “Rob found a hairdresser for us outside town. I’ve been going there.”

Of course, she has. Rob’s mom never has been team Laura. I gave her good reason for that with my constant spur-of-the-moment ideas like, *let’s skip class* or *let’s sneak into the Clawson’s old barn*.

And then there were the episodes where I talked my friends into hijacking a tractor for a midnight drive through town or convinced Lexi to sneak up on Bubba White while he slopped the hogs. We had wild fun, but if I look at it from Mrs. Baldwin’s perspective, I can see how I wouldn’t have ended up in her favorites column by a long shot.

Then I nailed my own coffin by choosing to obtain my beauticians license instead of my four-year degree. That was the final straw for her. Rob’s naturally smarter, more determined, and more ready to make something of himself than I am. She made that clear years ago. Right after Rob left, she made a point of coming in for a haircut, much like the one she’s scheduled today.

She ran through Rob’s qualities as if she were presenting him to an admissions committee at Harvard and then she listed my status in life and held the two up for me to examine. I had to agree. He’s out of my league.

Mrs. Baldwin remains uncharacteristically quiet throughout her shampoo. I don’t feel very chatty either considering I’ve kissed her son into next week several times over the past month. I’m sure she wouldn’t be a fan of that

newsflash.

Once we're back at my chair, Mrs. Baldwin doesn't waste time on small talk. She leads with, "Rob's YouTube channel is really doing well."

"I've noticed."

"I'm sure you have."

She doesn't mention his success from a place of malice. She takes the tone of a woman who thinks the world of her own child and believes everyone should be as in awe of him as she is. Mrs. Baldwin isn't an innately spiteful person. She's simply a woman in a small town who wants the best for her son. And what's best for him, in her mind, isn't me.

"With his inheritance, he's already set for life and destined for greatness," she adds.

I nod, taking my scissors out and combing a section of her hair into a clip.

I didn't know about Rob having an inheritance. It would make sense that he got some money when his grams passed. She never seemed to have much to spare if you judged by her cars and clothing, but I've seen too many odd things around here to assume anything about anyone. People are often not what they appear to be.

Mrs. Baldwin continues. "It would be easy in your shoes to take advantage of Rob's kindness. He has a soft spot for you, you know. High school sweethearts always do. It's that rush of first love."

Whoa. What?

My jaw tenses and I work to release the clenching of my back teeth.

"I would never take advantage of Rob," I say as pleasantly as possible.

Mrs. Baldwin nods at me in the mirror. She looks like she's acknowledging my response. I can't tell if she really believes me.

"You're a bright girl, Laura. Beautiful. Men can't help but be drawn to you. And you know how to use what the good Lord gave you."

I stare at her. This is the second accusation she's made in only a few minutes' time. It doesn't sit right with me. Angie's reading something on her kindle at her station. I know she hears everything Mrs. Baldwin is saying. We exchange a look. Angie's eyes soften. I draw comfort from her unspoken support.

It's settled. I won't scalp Rob's mom.

I snip a section of Mrs. Baldwin's hair, angling her bob just the way she likes it.

"I have no doubt you'll pull the salon through this crisis. You don't give

up when you've got your eyes on a prize."

"Thank you," I manage to say as I let the section of hair I had secured fall from the clip so I can continue cutting.

Why do her compliments seem more like insults?

"Rob will be having opportunities coming up," Mrs. Baldwin says as I move to the other side of the chair to even out the front ends. "Rob's growing—outgrowing this town. I just want you to consider whether he's really a match for you—whether you are a match for him. Or more of an anchor."

An anchor. That's how Rob said he thought of me the week before he left for college—the day he broke up with me. Was his out-of-town trip with his mom the impetus to our breakup? Did she take him to Columbus to sabotage us?

A light dawns on me the way the morning sun cracks on the horizon and the fields all begin to come into view.

The more I think of it, the more certain I am. But I'm also sure of one other thing. And the reality threatens to crush me. Rob's outgrowing this town. And I may not be the woman he needs by his side as he grows. Angie says to let something deeper develop between us. But I don't know if that's the wisest choice considering Rob's inevitable destiny.

Mrs. Baldwin leaves after her cut and I walk into the back room before Angie can say anything. I'm about to convince myself to text Rob and tell him we can't keep pursuing something together when I remember the feel of him kissing me goodnight last night and the hope in his eyes every time he looks at me.

Maybe I don't have to let his mom dictate us.

Maybe I can follow my heart.

Maybe I don't have a choice because my heart is already his.

After work all I want is a Bubble bath followed by some mindless TV with a bowl of cheddar potato soup I picked up at the deli on my way home. I can't wait to reheat that comfort food and let it work its magic on my confused heart.

I lock the salon door and look over at my car and see a tall dark figure leaning against it. All my question marks turn to exclamation points at the sight of him. My pace might quicken a little even though I'm still trying to pull off the hard-to-get approach as if it will keep me safe from the inevitable.

"Hey there, beautiful," Rob says, pushing off my car and gathering me into a hug right here in the middle of town where every prying eye can see.

I ought to push away from him, but he feels too good, and I need this hug after the day I've had. His strong arms hold me, and I feel the heat radiating off him even through his jacket. My heartrate steadies as I breathe in his familiar scent.

We're no closer to saving the salon. Not only did Rob's mom blindside me with her pep talk about Rob's future, I also had a phone call with Frieda this morning. She's moving forward with a sale, but if no one bites, she will have to start taking actions to close the business down.

The donation jars around town are filling, but they won't cover a fraction of what we need. Ella Mae's big online campaign quickly bored her. She raised under a thousand. It's great, but not near what we need. We have a few events planned, but I'm not convinced we'll raise enough.

I cling to Rob, not realizing how strong a grip I have on him until he says, "Are you okay?"

"Long day," I tell him.

He smooths my hair and kisses the top of my head. "Want me to come over and rub your feet while you eat something and watch your choice of mindless TV shows?"

I chuckle. "She's right," I murmur into his shirt.

"Who?"

I didn't mean to say that loud enough to be heard. "No one. Just the fact that you're too good for me."

"That's crazy-talk. You're too good for me, Laura. By a long shot."

Rob kisses the top of my head again.

"Is it the salon?" he asks.

"Partly."

"I can lease the shop space," he offers. "I can afford to buy it. I want to do that for you. If you need me to buy the business or the retail space, you could pay me back over time. Or not."

I snap away from him looking in his eyes with a shocked expression on my face.

I hear Rob's mom's words. *It would be easy in your shoes to take advantage of Rob's kindness.* Did she know he was going to make this offer?

"What? Why? Why would you do that? Not to mention how?"

"You don't have to worry about how. Why is obvious. I believe in you. I love you. I want to support you."

His arms still entwine behind my waist even though I've pulled away

from our embrace. I look into his eyes, and I see it all.

My breath stalls in my throat.

He loves me.

I knew he did. Of course, I knew it. But he hasn't said it since we've been doing whatever it is we're doing here. And the profession flowed out of him so naturally. I try to form the words. To tell him how I feel for him. I can't say it back, even though I want to.

"That's too much."

Everything he said is too much. Not to mention how it confirms the fact that Rob is leagues ahead of me and always will be. Letting him lease or buy the space or the business would give him control and then my shop would be his. And we'd be tied together in ways I can't afford.

Maybe he's doing this to appease his guilt, or maybe it really stems from the love he feels for me. But I know him better than he knows himself. He may not even still be in Bordeaux within six months or a year. The last thing he needs is to tie himself to a small-town hair salon. Whatever his motive, the answer's a resounding no.

"No."

I shake my head, probably looking like a petulant child. I'm determined to keep my feet firmly planted in reality.

"I'm not a charity case. I'm a grown woman and I'll figure this out. You don't need to save the day."

"You're as stubborn as ever."

"And your sweet talk isn't going to change my mind."

I smile despite myself. Then I wipe the smile away, but not quickly enough because Rob gives me one of his killer grins and it warms me from the inside out. Darn this man. He needs to stop being so Rob all the time.

"Think of the customers, Laura," he says, leaning closer, tipping my chin up and running a hand over my hair. "They count on you. The Dippity Do is part of the fabric of our town. Do you want all the blue-haired regulars traipsing to Dayton in the snow and rain for their weekly curls?"

Now he's hitting below the belt. He knows me too well. My soft spot has always been for the seniors in our town.

"I don't. And that's why I'm saving this salon. Not you, Rob. I'll do it. I don't need you."

He nods. Then he pulls me toward himself and kisses me. I stiffen, but only for a moment before I'm looping my hands behind his neck and

responding. We stand in the parking lot kissing while my mind swirls like a June twister.

LAURA

“So, we’ve organized to have eight bachelors for the bachelor auction,” Lexi’s grandma says while I pull a curler out of her hair.

Lexi’s grandma insists everyone in town under age fifty call her Memaw and she treats all Lexi’s friends as if they are her own grandchildren.

Memaw smiles a wrinkled smile at me in the mirror. There’s always playful mischief in her eyes and it makes me wonder if she was the Laura of her generation, coaxing everyone to do something a little daring and over the line.

She’s one of the old-fashioned customers who still come in for a wash and curl every week. If you ask me, most of them come here for the company more than anything.

“If you ask me, we oughta pull a few others up on the stage and make them participate. We’re in the middle of a community crisis. No one should be holding back.” Memaw nods her head as if that’s final.

“Who do you have already?” I ask.

“Aiden, Jesse, Duke, that one firefighter who just moved from Dayton, Brooks, and then there’s two widowed gentlemen who are nearing my age. Jed White and Walt Satterson. Then you got Joe, the grandson of June Graynor, you know, that handsome boy who moved into town last year. I think he got two dates with you before you decided he wasn’t good for you seein’ as you’re still stuck on Rob. And rightfully so.”

My face tingles with the beginnings of a blush and my mouth pops open. I quickly shut it.

“What makes you say that?”

“Oh, Laura, I’m old, but I’m not blind. And you know us seniors. We have too much time on our hands. We know all the comings and goings of you young people.”

She smiles the sweetest smile at me in the mirror. It makes her look far more innocent than she is.

“We got your Rob to say yes, too.”

My Rob.

“He’s single,” I remind her.

“Oh, I know he’s single, though someone said you two have been seen kissing around town these days. But he’s not officially yours yet. You’d better be savin’ your pennies if you’re going to bid on him.”

“I’m sure plenty of people will bid on him,” I say, figuring some grandma will pull out the stops and pay at least a hundred dollars for lunch with Rob at Mad River Burgers.

It’s all for a good cause anyway, no matter how truly hopeless the outcome is for the salon. If we don’t raise enough to save the Dippity Do, Frieda said she’d donate what we collect to charities.

“We’ve got the silent auction filling up too,” Memaw says. “Donut Hole will give coupons for a few free dozen donuts. Pop’s is in for free pizzas. The Dashwoods are giving away a weekend out at their RV on the river. The Seed-N-Feed will be donating some fertilizer. But let’s be honest. The biggest prize will be my cupcakes. I’m bakin’ around six dozen and sellin’ em for a dollar a piece.”

“Whew. Big prizes,” I stifle a chuckle.

Gotta love a town where we bid for an overnight in an RV. And we may even raise seventy-two whole dollars in cupcake sales. Bless these people. That won’t cover one of Ella Mae’s balayage coloring sessions.

Say what you will. The people of Bordeaux try their best to pull together when one of us is in need. You don’t find this kind of community everywhere. It’s one reason I always thought Bordeaux would be my home for life.

An inner voice asks if I’d stay even if it means losing Rob. I don’t know the answer to that question.



THE SATURDAY of the auction I'm up at the crack of dawn, dressed and at the community center toward the outskirts of town by seven. I pull into the parking lot. My friends are gathered near the front doors drinking coffee and chatting.

"What are you all doing here?" I ask, walking up the sidewalk toward them.

Rob strides over to me, holding out a paper coffee cup. "White chocolate mocha."

"Thank you," I say, smiling up at him and taking the cup.

Our fingers brush and his eyes linger on mine. I have the urge to kiss him. It feels so natural, like we never stopped belonging to one another, but everyone's staring.

"We figured you'd need the help," Lexi says as I walk toward the group.

"So you got out of bed before seven on a weekend?" I ask her.

"I can wake early for emergencies and good causes," Lexi answers.

"Which is this, an emergency or a good cause?" I ask rhetorically.

"The salon is a good cause," Shannon answers.

"And an emergency," Jayme adds. "But you're not alone, Laura."

Rob moves so he's standing right behind me. I could lean back on him if I wanted. His posture says *boyfriend*. He emits a possessive protectiveness without saying a word. Rob may be the only person on the planet who can make me feel comfortably small. I don't move and no one seems bothered by the shift in the way we're interacting.

"Put us to work," Trevor says.

So, I do. The rest of the morning we set out tables and extend the stage addition that will act as a runway for the bachelor auction. Then we lay out the donated items for the silent auction, except the cupcakes which Memaw and her fiancé Bill will bring later, and the fertilizer which I asked the Seed-N-Feed to please keep out of the room. No one needed that smell to add to the ambiance of the event.

By ten we're ready. Townspeople start filling the auditorium. Once everyone has a seat, I grab the mic and walk onto the stage, welcoming everyone and explaining how the auctions will work.

The first hour will be open for people to mingle and check out the silent auction items, marking their bids on papers next to items they'd like. A giant fishbowl sits next to the stage where anyone can drop checks or cash for straight donations.

As people mill around, I hear Glenda shout over the murmur of the crowd, “Walt, keep your fingers out of Memaw’s icing.”

Memaw pipes up. “If you want a cupcake, you pay fair and square, Walt! And you wonder why you’re still single and up for auction. The good Lord bless the woman who bids on you!”

Bill whispers something in Memaw’s ear. She smiles up at him and the commotion settles down.

After everyone has had a chance to peruse through the auction items and make their bids, I call them back to their tables.

I hand the mic over to Dave Anderson who will emcee the bachelor auction. I take my seat at one of the round tables with Lexi, Jayme, Shannon and Lexi’s mom.

The bidding starts with our widowers, Jed White and Walt Satterson. The single senior women hoot and holler while the men strut like they own the catwalk. Walt even takes off his suit coat, hooks it on his pointer finger and swings it around over his head.

When Walt starts to unbutton the top button of his shirt, Dave Anderson says, “Okay, Walt. Let’s give ’em a sample, not the whole dish right now.”

Shannon’s in stitches with tears running down her face as she leans over to me. “I don’t think I can get an oil change in this town ever again.”

“It’s definitely going to be an image I can’t soon blot out,” I agree.

Jed, one of our local hog and corn farmers goes for two hundred dollars. Twice as many woman bid on Walt after his geriatric impersonation of Magic Mike. He ends up going for three hundred twenty-five.

Memaw leans over from her table and says to Lexi, “One day you’ll find men like that attractive. Just you wait til you’re my age. I knew those men in school. Walt was somethin’ to see in his football uniform.”

Lexi pats Memaw on the arm while we share an amused look.

Next up is Aiden. He’s a good-looking guy, dark haired like his brother, Trevor. But Aiden’s got a bigger alpha streak in him. His ex-girlfriend Milly’s here, but rumor has it she’s seeing someone from Beaver Creek now, so she won’t likely bid. Aiden’s like a big brother to me and my friends. No one in our group feels anything but admiration for him as far as I know.

Dave Anderson says “Bidding on Aiden MacIntyre starts at fifty. Do I hear fifty?”

Aiden walks out on the extended stage. Strikes a pose, flexes his bicep and winks into the crowd. Usually he’s pretty subdued, so his performance

seems slightly out of character, though he seems comfortable and not the least bit embarrassed.

Shannon raises her hand. “Fifty!”

Ella Mae’s bestie, Meg, who happens to be Trevor’s ex-girlfriend, shouts, “Sixty!”

Shannon looks over in shock and shouts, “Seventy!” to which Meg retorts, “Eighty!”

Memaw shouts, “One hundred!”

Lexi and I look over at Memaw in shock. She leans in toward Lexi, “I figure he could clean my rain gutters. You should know I only have eyes for my Bill.”

Shannon shouts, “One hundred ten!”

I give Shannon an incredulous look. She shrugs. If she has a thing for Aiden, I never knew. Then again, I kept a lot of what’s been brewing between me and Rob under wraps for a few weeks too.

The bidding continues until Aiden finally sells to Shannon for two hundred and fifty dollars. I didn’t think she had that sort of spare cash lying around.

I mouth over to her “We’re going to talk.”

She mouths back, “He gave me a budget.”

Shannon holds up her pinched fingers and moves them in the sign of money and whispers, “His cash.”

She tips her chin toward the stage where Aiden’s hopping off the edge and giving Shannon a big grin. He bid on himself. That stinker. Well, it’s all going toward the salon—or more likely, to charity.

Joe ends up going to Meg for three hundred. He looked at me with a hopeful look at one point during the bidding, but I took Memaw’s advice and saved my pennies. I’m only bidding on one bachelor today.

Jesse goes to Memaw for a hundred. I feel a little bad for him. He’s a good guy even if he has a tendency to overinflate his position as local law enforcement. But at least Memaw will get her gutters cleaned out.

Before Duke comes on stage, Jayme and Shannon start whispering. They seem to come to some agreement because they nod in unison.

In the end they team up to bid on Duke together. Maybe she didn’t want to lead him on, so they’ll go out as three friends. I’ll find out later.

Our newest bachelor in town, Jameson, just joined the fire department. Meg bids on him, making me wonder if she’s trying to start something

romantic.

I don't have time to think about it because Rob's walking on stage looking like a model for Nobleman magazine, the small-town edition. He's wearing a suede jacket I've never seen him wear over a black, fitted T-shirt and olive khakis. I might be drooling. I dab the corner of my mouth to be safe.

"One hundred!" I shout, forgetting I'm surrounded by the town that will never let me live this moment down.

"Bidding hasn't started," Dave says into the mic. "But let's start with one hundred."

"One twenty-five!" a voice says from across the room. Ella Mae.

Not today, Ella Mae.

"One-fifty!" I shout.

Rob looks at me with that smirky smile of his, but then he almost imperceptibly shakes his head. Is he trying to let Ella Mae win this? Over my dead body. She's going down.

Rob's mine.

I look across the room. Ella Mae's phone hovers near her face and her lips are moving. She's sharing this event with her "peeps." Can that woman do anything without filming it?

"One seventy-five!" she shouts.

"Two hundred!" I instantly yell.

Usually increments go up more slowly, by five or ten dollars at a time. This is escalating quickly.

Rob removes his jacket, slings it over one shoulder so he's carrying it hooked on one finger and draped down his back, then he turns and walks toward the back of the stage. When he reaches the end of the runway, he looks over his shoulder and winks.

"Two fifty!" I yell.

Lexi leans in. "You just outbid yourself. Slow down, nelly!"

I hear Ella Mae shout, "Three hundred!"

I'm nearing my limit. Rob looks me in the eyes as he walks down the catwalk in our direction and mouths "Four." Is he pulling an Aiden? Is he trying to bid on himself?

I nod at him. "Four hundred!"

Lexi leans in toward me again. "The girls and I have another hundred between us, Laura. Go to five if you have to."

“Four fifty!” Ella Mae shouts.

Rob looks at me with a light shrug like he wants to see what I want to do. I look at Lexi. She nods.

“Five hundred!” I shout.

Rob’s eyes are locked on mine. I’m pretty sure everyone’s staring between me and Rob. I don’t know because I’m held by his gaze.

The room quiets for a beat. Dave Anderson says “Five hundred, going once! Do I hear another bid? Five hundred twice!”

My heart lodges in my throat. I just know Ella Mae could pull a fast one and outbid me again.

Then I hear the words, “Five hundred! Sold to Laura Lennox!”

I jump up and scream. Lexi, Shannon and Jayme start jumping out of their chairs and shouting too. When I look over, Rob leaps off the stage in one fluid motion and stalks toward me like a panther. A well dressed, male model panther whom I just purchased for a few day’s wages.

He comes to where I’m standing, cups my face with one hand, and pulls me into a kiss in front of half our town. And I don’t fight him. I’m so tired of fighting. I’m doing what Angie said and letting myself fall.

When people start whooping and making catcalls, Rob and I pull apart.

“Five hundred, huh, Jellybean?”

“It’s for the salon,” I tell him.

“I know how much you love the salon.”

“I couldn’t let it go,” I tell him.

“Pretty sure that’s not the only thing you couldn’t let go of today,” he winks and pulls me into a hug as everyone around us settles down to hear who won each item in the silent auction.

ROB

I stick around with our group of friends to help Laura clean up from the auction. She has some haircuts later today, so I won't have a chance to see her until tonight.

I keep looking over at her across the room as we fold tables and return supplies to storage closets. When our eyes catch, she smiles. She let me kiss her in front of everyone. That must mean something.

And she bid on me with an intensity I didn't expect. From the look on her face, she surprised herself too. I wish I knew with certainty where we stand and what she's thinking.

We lock up the Community Center and I walk her to her car.

"So, you won me fair and square," I say.

"Well, the girls chipped in to help me. I can't afford you Baldwin. You're out of my league."

"I'm chipping in too," I tell her. "That's what I meant when I mouthed *four* to you."

"Suit yourself."

She's not fighting me. That's a good sign.

"I've got Trevor's bachelor day trip tomorrow. Can I come see you tonight after you get off work? We need to plan where we're going on this date you won."

"Nothing extravagant," she says, looking up at me. "And something local."

"Burgers and pool?"

"Perfect."

She's perfect. I lean in and cup her face, not sensing the hesitation and questions I've been cautiously honoring for weeks.

Laura's eyes invite me nearer, so I pull her toward me. My lips find hers and she loops her hand behind my head, holding us in place and running her fingers through my hair. Her touch sends chills through me. Our kiss feels familiar yet new. She's not holding back.

Laura won't always tell me what she's thinking and feeling, but in this kiss, she's erasing doubts and lines. If I'm reading her right, she's giving herself over to me—giving us a chance.

We pull away from one another and I run my thumb down her jaw.

"I'm going to take good care of you," I tell her.

It's probably the boldest thing I could say to a woman who fights to remain self-sufficient, but I know it's what she needs to hear from me.

Laura leans in and lays her cheek on my chest. I stroke her hair and hold her to me. One hundred things run through my head, but I suppress them. She doesn't need my words right now. She needs me.

"I've got to get to work," she finally says.

"I'll see you tonight. I'll bring something that isn't cereal for your dinner."

"See you then."

She's not putting up a struggle or telling me I can't come by. I don't know what we are to each other, but I'm letting my need for definition and promises simmer on a back burner for now.



THE GUYS all meet at Trevor's early in the morning for his bachelor day out of town. He voted against a traditional bachelor's night party in favor of a day that fits his personality and interests. Lexi's already at his place when I walk up the front porch steps.

"Hey, Lex!" I say, walking over and giving her a side hug. "I thought this day was guys only."

"I'm just taking advantage of Trevor's early morning baking skills. I've got a day with the girls to get ready for."

She hands me a muffin with some sort of streusel topping. Trevor's house smells like a couple of warm spices had a baby.

“If Lex weren’t marrying you, I’d propose. You can bake like no other,” I say to Trevor.

“He’s all mine, sorry Rob. I’m only sharing the baked goods,” Lexi says before she grabs another muffin off the plate and leans in to plant a kiss on Trevor’s cheek.

He turns her face and kisses her on the mouth. A light blush rises on her cheeks, and I think of Laura immediately. As much as I love Trevor, I’d far rather be spending today with Laura than going out of town with a bunch of men.

“Okay, guys. Be safe,” Lexi says as she opens the front door and walks to the other side of the duplex she shares with Trevor.

Trevor’s dad loaned him the family SUV for our getaway, so we pile in, and Trevor puts some music on the radio. The car ride is like you’d expect for a typical day out with five guys. More testosterone than should be contained in a four-wheel vehicle, but lots of laughs and some good conversation in the mix.

An hour and a half later we’re in Cincinnati for our guys’ day, which involves lunch at Skyline Chili followed by a skydiving outing. I’ll let you draw your own conclusions as to how that combo turned out for us.

After a thrilling and exhausting day, the drive home is more subdued than our trip down to Cincinnati. The men surrounding me are weary and content. One of Trevor’s work buddies sleeps to the left of me, and Aiden rides along silently to my right.

I only have one thing on my mind. And it proves to me no adventure compares to the life I want to build with Laura. I pick up my phone and shoot her a text.

Rob: *Thinking of you.*

Laura: *How was your jump?*

Rob: *Amazing. We’ll have to add that to a list of dates I’m taking you on soon.*

Laura: *I haven’t jumped since the summer after high school when you took me.*

Rob: *We’re overdue then. I thought of you all day.*

Laura: ...

Laura: *What are you going to do about that?*

Rob: *We’ll be back after dinner time. Can I come by?*

Laura: *This is becoming a thing with you.*

Rob: *A good thing?*

Laura: *Maybe.*

Rob: *I'll be over as soon as I take a shower. Trust me, you wouldn't want to smell me after a skydive and a day with the guys. Do you want ice cream?*

Laura: *You have to ask?*

I look up past the seats in front of me into the rearview mirror. Trevor's studying me. My irrepressible smile gives me away. I'm obviously not texting my mom. He gives me a smile and a nod. Then he mouths "Go get your girl."

LAURA

This afternoon we hosted a spa event for Lexi's bachelorette celebration. Her sister came up from Kentucky for the day and Karina, Trevor's sister, got a sitter so she could join us.

I'm sitting on my couch staring at my freshly painted toenails thinking about how my three closest friends squealed and went appropriately nuts over the news that Rob and I are officially back together.

I can't bring myself to fully focus on the inevitable demise of the salon. I don't want to see the Dippity Do go out of business. But even the uncertainty of my career seems incapable of popping the bubble of my newly restored relationship with Rob.

I hear Rob's truck pull up outside, and in a split-second my door's open before he's halfway down the driveway. When I step onto the landing Rob's already beneath me.

"Hey," I say.

Maybe I should have stayed inside. I probably seem overeager waiting for him out here.

Rob looks up and in a theatrical voice says, "She speaks. O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art as glorious to this night, being o'er my head."

I giggle. I'm barefoot, wearing an old pair of yoga pants and a baggy T-shirt, knotted at the waist. My hair's in a ponytail. I'm anything but a glorious bright angel right now.

"Are you quoting Shakespeare?"

"Depends," he says, rounding the bottom of the stairs and walking up them with a look in his eyes that makes my skin hum.

He's transformed from literary nerd to wildcat on the prowl in ten seconds flat.

"Depends on what?"

My voice comes out breathier than I expected.

"On whether you like it," he says, making his way next to me and pushing my hair back with his fingertips.

"I think I do."

Rob leans in and kisses me. He keeps his hand on the side of my face and caresses my cheek with his thumb. Then he weaves his fingers into my hair and tilts my head back as he slants his mouth over mine and kisses me more deeply.

When he pulls back, his hand trails lightly down my arm, grazing the skin until he catches my hand.

"Come on inside," Rob says with a little tug to my arm. "I brought chocolate and caramel caribou."

We dish out the ice cream while Rob tells me all about the jump. The highlight being a co-worker of Trevor's who hadn't ever skydived before. It's always fun to take someone on their first jump.

Rob pulls a can of whipped cream out of the bag.

"Want some whipped cream?"

"On my ice cream?" I ask.

He holds the can up near my mouth. "Eventually. You might want a sample first."

I open my mouth and Rob sprays a bite in, which starts out really flirty and fun until he keeps spraying and the whipped cream starts coming out the sides of my mouth. I'm laughing and smiling as Rob smears the excess across my face.

"Oh no you don't," I mumble through my huge mouthful. I grab the can away from him while I'm swallowing and start spraying it at his face. He purposely dodges me. Whipped cream flies all over him and me as I aim for his mouth and keep missing.

We're both covered with dots of white foam and laughing hysterically.

Rob snags the can away from me and holds it over his head. I start jumping for it and he pulls me to himself. I'm still reaching for the can with one arm, but he's keeping it overhead, just out of my grasp. I'm laughing hard enough that I only have half my strength, but I'm still determined to get that can back.

My free hand loops behind his back to steady myself. Now we're clinging to one another and vying for who will get possession of the can from where Rob's holding it out of reach.

His eyes turn stormy and roguish. "You want the whipped cream?"

"No!" I say with a smile, my arm still reaching.

"No? Are you sure?"

I jump a little which only emphasizes the fact that we are fully pressed against one another. Rob's chest and abs crush against me as I reach higher to claim the can of whipping cream. His eyes scan my face. White puffs of the cream dot his hair and shirt and one of his cheeks.

I drop my hand and run my finger across the spot on his face and then lick the glob from my finger. Rob bends in, setting the can on the counter behind us and simultaneously sucking a fluff of whipped cream off my face.

Then he moves his lips to mine. We stand there kissing in my kitchen while our ice cream melts in the bowls on my counter.

Rob pulls away and touches the tip of my nose with his.

"You make me officially happy, Jellybean."

"Likewise, Romeo."

He smiles. Then he grabs a kitchen towel, wets it and starts to clean me off before he wipes most of the mess off his hair, face and shirt.

We take our ice cream to the couch. Rob asks about my day with my girlfriends. He tells me about the guys eating chili and the aftermath of having that meal on the way to the flight.

It's like no time passed between high school and now, only in reality we've missed a whole chunk of life while we were separated and then avoiding one another.

At one point Rob becomes quiet and pulls inward.

"What's wrong," I ask.

My legs are on his lap. He's drawing lazy patterns on my ankle and calf with one hand while the other hand rests across my shins.

"Nothing's wrong," Rob says. "I'm just pacing myself."

"What would it be like if you didn't?"

"If I didn't pace myself?"

"Yeah."

"I'd scare you off."

He looks up with a vulnerable expression in his eyes, tentative and wary.

"I didn't run when you got obsessed with our grandkids."

“I’m not obsessed with them. Just looking forward to them and all the days in between.”

“If that didn’t scare me, what will?”

“I want to commit to you, Laura. I don’t want to be in next year’s Bordeaux bachelor auction. I don’t want you considering whether Joe or Jesse might be a safer bet. I want us.”

He looks down at his hands, studying the movements he’s making with his fingertip.

“Hey.”

He doesn’t look up.

“Look at me,” I tell him.

I move down the couch, so my legs are folded under me, and my knees touch his thigh. He’s staring across the room. I grab his chin and turn his face so our eyes meet.

“I want us too,” I tell him.

“You’re not scared anymore?”

“I’m scared to death, Rob. Nothing frightens me more than the idea of letting you in and having my heart broken again.”

He looks at me with such care I almost cry. He moves his hand to my shoulder and rubs my upper arm gently.

“Well, one thing scares me more.” I say.

I brush my hand along his jaw and run my fingers through his hair.

“I’m scared I won’t give us a chance and that would possibly be worse.”

“So you’ll give us a chance?” He sounds like a schoolboy. He reminds me of the younger Rob I knew before we dated who was far less confident and sexy than the man sitting in front of me right now.

“I’m giving us a chance,” I assure him.

Rob leans in and cups my chin. He doesn’t kiss me right away. He holds my face so we’re only inches apart from one another. It’s one of the most intimate moments of my life.

“I love you, Laura.”

“I love you too. So much. I’ve only ever loved you.”

Rob kisses me so gently, but then breaks away and stares off again as if he’s pondering something heavy. His brow furrows momentarily, but then he straightens his features. I start to wonder if I’m the one moving too fast now. He’s been talking as if our future is a given, but the look on his face makes me wonder if he’s having second thoughts.

Rob's tone becomes serious. "I never want to hurt you, Laura. I want you to trust me."

"I guess I probably should still be wary. But I'm not. I'll admit, being back together feels too good to be true. Sometimes the fear sneaks up on me—like if I let myself imagine the future you keep hinting at, I'm jinxing it. I always thought you deserved better."

"Better than what?"

"Me. This town."

"Both things I love and hope I'm worthy of."

I feign a country accent and say, "Aw, shucks, Mayhem. You say the sweetest thangs."

Rob mimics my drawl and says, "That's cuz I'm sweet on you. You stole mah heart missy."

LAURA

“Can you believe Lexi and Trevor’s wedding is already this coming Saturday?” Mable Clark asks while I take her hair out of curlers.

“I know! It’s exciting,” I say.

I’m scheduled back-to-back until Friday, but Rob and I are still going out tomorrow night. I can’t seem to go a few days without seeing him now that we’re officially giving our relationship a chance.

Tuesdays seem to be the days our seniors come to the salon in droves. Angie and I have two of our regular clients right now. They’re talking about all the latest gossip around town.

Mable’s probably seventy years old, though she’s one of the seniors that has taught me you never ask a woman about their age, weight, or what they had to eat.

“Did you hear that some big wig is looking at Rob’s YouTube” Mabel asks me as I tease her curls out.

“YouTube. It’s You Tube,” Esther Williams answers Mable from Angie’s chair.

“That’s what I said,” Mable insists.

“No, you said Your Tube. It makes you sound out of touch if you don’t use the modern lingo.”

“Well, look around you, Esther. I’m a seventy-year-old woman surrounded by cornfields and men in overalls. If that’s not out of touch, I don’t know what is.”

Mabel pinches her lips and tips her chin at her friend, slightly rolling her eyes. You’d never know it, but these two are best of friends, despite their

banter.

Mabel continues, “But that’s not the point. I’m talking about Rob. And his films he puts up on that Tube.”

Esther crosses her arms and momentarily narrows her eyes as if she could force her friend into compliance through sheer willpower. Spoiler alert: not happening.

I’m dying to hear the details about Rob, but I act as nonchalant as possible.

“Anyways,” Mable says. “This man who helped them MythBusters boys get all their fame is checking out our Rob. Or maybe it’s not that man. It could be another one of them Hollywood guys.”

Why am I just hearing about this now? Why hasn’t Rob said anything? My gut tightens.

“I thought the MythBusters boys got themselves famous” Esther says.

“You really don’t want the gossip do you, Miss I’m gonna correct the bejeeppers outta you”

“Sorry, Mabel. I’ll keep it to myself when you’re dead wrong.”

“If you please.”

Shannon looks up from reading her magazine over at the nail table and mutters, “There were also women on the MythBusters team, not just men.”

Esther nods at Shannon. “Darn tootin’ there were.”

She gives Shannon a wink as Mabel huffs out an exaggerated sigh.

“You women make it near impossible to spread news.” Mable says with feigned frustration.

All three of us apologize simultaneously.

Mable seems appeased.

“Anyways, I was sayin’. There’s a guy who’s name I forget, but he’s from California. Appears he and his team of high-powered people saw Rob on the Tube and they are reaching out to Rob for something or other. They’re flying out here for some sort of collaboration or award or some such thing.”

I tell myself Mabel could be confused. Details can stretch or morph as they run through the rumor mill. I need to fact check before I react.

“Which is it, a collaboration or an award?” Esther asks.

“Well, that’s the part I forgot on account I was thinking of something else for a minute and I missed that detail.”

“Where’d you hear about all this?” Esther asks.

“Well, I just happened to be at the Kroger’s because ground beef went on

sale. Did you know about the sale?" Mable asks.

"Oh, no, I didn't." Esther answers.

"You oughta run down there today before they run out. I got extra to freeze." Mable looks at me. "Did your mama teach you that trick? You buy the meat on sale and then you freeze it. That way you save on your grocery budget. Oh, but do you have a freezer in that dinky apartment of yours?"

"I have a freezer," I say.

Shannon's eyes meet mine over the top of her magazine. Angie smiles at me from her station.

"You don't say dinky," Esther says. "You call it quaint, or charming, or you call it a tiny house. Dinky sounds small."

Mable looks at the mirror to stare me straight in the eye.

"Your place is small. Am I right?"

I nod, not wanting to insert myself between these two.

She looks at Esther, juts her chin out just a little and says, "Dinky."

I have to almost bite my cheek to keep from laughing, and also to restrain myself from trying to steer the conversation back to whatever might be going on with Rob.

Shannon must sense my curiosity. She asks Mabel "So you were at Kroger's?"

"Oh yes. That's right. Well, there I was, filling my cart with packs of meat when Rob's mom rounded the corner. Of course, she was gettin' her share of what's on sale. See, I'm telling you Esther, you've got to get there before it's gone. Anyway, she and I got to chatting and I asked her how Rob is, of course, and that's when she told me about his rise to stardom all on account of the Tube."

Mable turns to me and says, "Laura you really ought to give Rob another chance. Though I heard about the kiss you two had at the auction. That's how it's done!"

"He's a nice boy. And so smart and handsome." Esther adds. "I tried to fix him up with my granddaughter when she visited last Thanksgiving. He had other plans. But, if you two are an item again, I'll hold off on playing matchmaker."

"Mkay," I mumble, looking at Shannon with a plea in my eyes.

"Hey!" Shannon says with more volume than usual. "Did you see this?" She holds up her magazine with a picture of two celebrities and walks over toward my station reading the article aloud. Thankfully everyone's focus

moves from whether I'm dating Rob to some juicy story about an actor's secret baby.

By the time the salon clears out it's after six o'clock. Angie helps me close even though I encourage her leave the closing to me.

"You need to head home. You're a mom. I'm not."

"I can't put the whole weight of this place on your shoulders. My mom can feed the twins dinner every so often. I'd feel horrible all night if I just left you here to clean up. Besides, a job split in half is a job done twice as fast."

"Got me there," I say.

"How's the S.O.S. going?"

She asks me every day, so it's not like today's update will be any more hopeful.

"S.O.S. should stand for Same Offensive Situation, or Still Out Searching, or Sayonara Old Salon."

Angie smiles, but her eyes reflect everything I feel. I may be riding the misty cloud of renewed love, but deep down, when I'm here at the Dippity Do, I know. I want this salon to be mine. Watching it close will be a grief rivaling the one when my dad left our family. The Dippity Do is home to me, and so much more.

"How much time do we have?" she asks.

"Not enough," I say. Then I quickly add, "Sorry. I don't mean to be all doom and gloom. Probably a month at most. I need to give the other stylists a heads up. I just can't bring myself to do it."

"Give them a heads up about where things stand, Laura. Don't call it quits. Just tell them we're looking at a month. They can decide if they hang in or start looking elsewhere.

"We already lost Gloria when this whole thing started, and we've absorbed her clients into the rest of our schedules. Worse come to worst we'll have a waiting list until we close."

"Good idea. I don't want to keep stringing the other hairdressers along. Have you thought of what would be next for you if we close?" I ask Angie.

"Maybe doing hair out of my mom's back house. I'd have to get a license, but I've considered that as an option."

"I thought of doing a mobile service."

"That would be good. Less overhead, but you'd have to deal with all the behind-the-doors crazy we only hear about when customers come in. I bet you could write a tell-all book after a few months!"

We both laugh. I walk to the back room and check the exit door. Then Angie and I walk out front, and I lock the shop behind us.

I could have taken Frieda's parking spot when she moved to Florida, but something about that felt wrong, like walking on a grave the day it's freshly dug. So, I keep parking in the lot at the town square.

I'm thinking about the salon as Angie and I part ways, but I've got a bigger weight on my mind. Did Rob agree to some sort of collaboration that might mean big things for him? And if so, why didn't he tell me about it?

ROB

I pick Laura up at six for tonight's movie. Movies on Main hosts oldies but goodies night every Wednesday, so we're seeing Julia Roberts in *Runaway Bride*.

Laura comes down her stairs to meet me at the truck wearing a pair of jeans that fit her like they were made for her. She's got on a brown lacy top and boots and it takes everything in me not to turn her around and order dinner in to keep her to myself tonight.

"You look ... wow."

"Why thank you, Mayhem. You're looking pretty yummy yourself."

I give her a quick kiss and open her door.

Laura smiles up at me, but there's something incomplete about it. Probably her concern over the salon. I'm hoping a night out together gives her a break from all she's dealing with.

We drive into town and find parking near the theater. There's a small line out front to buy tickets. People in big cities are used to larger theaters with three or four employees, or even a few working the ticket counter and a bunch more at the concessions. Not in Bordeaux.

We have one guy, a local high-school kid working his first job. He sells the tickets. Then, that same teen runs inside and serves the popcorn, sodas and candy. As soon as we're all seated, he runs upstairs and starts the film from the booth. Yep, we're fancy like that.

"Well, lookie here," Mabel Clark says to Glenda Billington from up front of the line in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "Rob's out with Laura."

Mabel cranes her neck and hollers down the line to us. “Are you’uns on your date from that auction?”

I look at Laura, wanting to take my cue from her.

Laura stares back at Mabel, who’s standing right behind Walt Satterson. “Are you and Walt here together?”

“Why no! Land sakes, Laura. You’re going to start rumors that will outlive me!”

Walt leans in toward Mabel, but because he probably needs new hearing aid batteries again, his voice comes out more like a low shout.

“You know we could be here together if you like, Mabel.”

“Oh, hush, Walt. I saw you strut at that auction. Shameless. I want a man who isn’t flaunting everything God gave him all over town. I’m too old for your shenanigans.”

Walt winks at Mabel. Either that or his contact could be slipping. “I think you like my shenanigans just fine. And you know where to find me if you change your mind.”

Laura and I stifle our laughter. She leans into me. Regardless of what Mabel or anyone else thinks, it’s been too long since my arms have been around Laura, so I wrap my arm around her shoulder and pull her in toward me right here in front of God and every one of these nosy townspeople.

I lean in closer, so my mouth hovers right over the shell of Laura’s ear. “Think Walt will teach me his moves? I bet you’d like my shenanigans.”

Laura gives me a playful elbow to the side.

“Behave, Baldwin,” she says in a quiet whisper that comes out husky and makes me want to kiss her before we even make it inside the theater.

“Behaving is overrated,” I tease her.

We purchase our tickets and popcorn and find seats in the middle of the theater. All around us people murmur not-so-veiled conjectures about us being together.

Before the movie starts, Laura spontaneously stands up. “We’re dating again, okay? Is everyone happy? Now mind your business and watch the movie.”

A few people whistle, a scattered clap starts from someone, several others applaud and then it dies off. Laura returns to her seat and gives me a look that says I’d better keep my mouth shut.

I hold my hands up like the very innocent man I am.

“What?” I ask her.

“Don’t say a word,” she warns me.

Her eyes twinkle and the smile she’s attempting to suppress creeps out and fills her face.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I tell her.

I hand Laura the bucket of popcorn and raise the armrest that divides us. My arm goes around her shoulders, and she leans into me as the previews start.

We’re not ten minutes into the movie when Gladys Mueller says, “Oh that Richard Gere. He’s so dreamy!”

“Shush, Gladys,” someone says from a few rows back.

“You shush. I’m just stating facts.”

“It’s a movie. We want to hear the movie, not you,” someone else says.

Laura looks at me through the dark, the lights of the screen casting patterns across her face. I can see the amusement in her eyes.

When the scene comes with Richard Gere reviewing film of Julia Roberts running from her first three weddings at the altar, someone in the back row shouts out, “Run, Julia! Run!”

“Keep it down,” Mabel chides.

Laura quivers against me with silent laughter.

Mabel’s seated a few seats over from Laura and she’s been eyeing us almost as much as she’s watching the movie.

The worst part comes when Julia Roberts runs from Richard Gere, leaving him at the altar.

Half the elderly women in the theater start talking with one another or yelling at the screen.

“Don’t leave him! He’s the one!”

Someone else shouts, “I’ll take you, Richard!”

Another asks, “Who would run away from their own wedding?”

A voice answers, “Frank shoulda run from you when he had the chance!”

Mabel leans over and offers us some M and Ms.

“I snuck ’em in. No one in their right mind should pay the prices they charge for candy when they can pick up three times as much at the Five and Dime and stash it in their purse. I bring my special movie purse on Wednesdays. It’s extra roomy! I got popcorn and pop in here too if you get thirsty.”

We basically only see about three quarters of the movie when you figure in all the interruptions, but as we leave, It occurs to me I’d never want it any

other way. Well, I wouldn't mind watching a whole movie in silence, but I wouldn't trade our town for anything.

Then it hits me, I might be trading this town in if everything goes well with John Silverberg and his team. I stuff that thought down for now. Nothing's on the table but a collaboration.

Laura's quieter than usual on the drive back to her place. I make it my mission to take her mind off all the stress that's probably causing her to retreat inside herself.

"Are you okay? Feeling the weight of the salon situation?"

"It's not just that," she says quietly.

"What else?"

I pull into the driveway and put the truck in park, turning toward her and resting my forearm on the steering wheel.

"A few of the women were in yesterday and they started talking about your channel. Do you have a big collab project coming up?"

I did not expect her to ask about the upcoming filming day, though I should have. Nothing happens around here without everyone knowing.

I answer Laura honestly. "Yes."

Her eyes go wide, and then her face becomes unreadable as her posture stiffens.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

She picks at a piece of thread on the seat of my truck, looking down at it instead of into my eyes.

"I kept wanting to, but with everything you have going on I didn't want to seem like I was bragging. Like, 'Hey, I know the salon might close, but guess what! I got a cool collab offered to me.'

"It's no big deal, just some people coming out to film a few segments with me for one day. You know I do collabs at times or sometimes set up projects for organizations or universities. This is just one of those things."

"So, it's nothing special?"

"It's big, but it's nothing special."

I'm downplaying it. For some reason it feels like telling Laura the group is from LA would make her freak. The collaboration day really isn't anything that special. It's just a cooperative project that will air on both our channels. The bigger deal will be if some kind of long-term offer follows.

Laura studies my face, searching for something.

"What bothers you about me doing a collab?"

She shakes her head and shrugs one of her shoulders as if she's trying to dislodge a thought. Then she blows out a breath.

"I'm a small-town hairdresser. You're a brilliant inventor and rising YouTube celebrity. I feel that gap daily."

I pinch my lips as I piece together something to say. I know I won't convince her with mere words. Beliefs are powerful rudders in our lives. We don't simply change our entire viewpoint when someone reveals a flaw in our perception.

Still, I need to make an attempt at assuring Laura she's my equal.

It's ironic. Most days I wake feeling I have something to prove. I tackle projects and perfect my videos to make my mark in the world. When I started pursuing Laura this time around, I thought she might reject me—and she would have had every right. I didn't feel worthy of her forgiveness even though I knew I was going to fight for it.

Yet here she sits convinced she's less than me.

"You're right," I say.

Laura's face contorts. She expected a fight from me.

"You're a small-town hairdresser. I'm a brilliant inventor, scientist and upcoming YouTube star. Emphasis on brilliant. And don't forget that I'm the heartland hottie ... or is it heartthrob?"

Laura crosses her arms over her chest. "You're mocking me."

"I'm not. At all. I'm trying to shine a light on the two-dimensional way you are painting our relationship. For one thing, I don't see what's so menial about cutting hair daily. You are an unofficial therapist, an artist, and you provide a place of comfort and connection."

Laura gives me one of her rare shy smiles. It reveals her more vulnerable side, and I feel like I cracked through something impenetrable whenever she momentarily softens like this. It's like getting a Doberman to lay on his back and so you have full access for a belly rub. Laura rarely rolls over. She's usually on guard, standing firm on her own.

I caused some of that tendency with my careless breakup. It kills me to witness the long-term impact my immaturity had on her.

"As for you being from a small town, I love that about you—about us. This town is crazier than a group of escapees from an institution sometimes, but they are family—one big, loud, dysfunctional family. I love our town. And I love you. What I do with my brains and creativity makes me happy, but it doesn't make me nearly as happy as you do."

“Stop it,” Laura says, trying to be subtle as she wipes under her eye.

I reach over and follow the path where her pointer finger just swept a tear from her skin.

“Stop telling you I love you, or stop saying you’re amazing, or stop reminding you I’m from a small town too?”

“Stop being so perfect.”

“Done,” I say, making the goofiest face I can come up with.

“You even do that right,” she says, pointing at my crossed eyes and projected tongue.

“I do a lot of things right. Want me to show you?” I tease, leaning toward her and brushing a piece of her hair out of her face.

Laura nods. I lean in and claim her mouth in a kiss—soft and tender. I’m not making moves on her tonight. This is all about showing her we work and giving her some assurance of what she means to me.

When we pull apart, Laura smiles an affectionate smile and says, “Town therapist, huh?”

“And unofficial mayor. I bet you’ve resolved more disputes over the years than all the town council members put together.”

She chuckles softly. “I love you, Rob. It’s simultaneously the scariest and best thing in the world, feeling what I do for you.”

“I’m going to love you until it’s not scary anymore,” I assure her, moving in for another kiss.

This one’s not so gentle. The passion between us ignites. All the intensity that is Laura comes through our kiss. She’s like no one I’ve ever known. I wish she could see herself through my eyes.

“We’ve gotten better at kissing in cars over the years,” she jokes as her mouth leaves mine.

“Still. I think I’d like to keep practicing just to perfect our skills.”

Laura smiles up at me, our eyes locked on one another, my hand cupping her jaw.

Then she quietly says, “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Sticking with this while I work through all my ... whatever it is.”

“I’m here for all of your whatever it is—for the long haul. And you’re here for mine. Don’t forget it goes both ways.”

LAURA

“**H**as anyone seen my shoe? Shoe! My shoe!” Lexi shouts even though we’re all in the same room.

Lexi’s wearing her undergarments and a silk robe with her hair in curlers and a panicked look on her face. She’s hopping on one foot, lifting bags and clothing and frantically moving things around. She doesn’t even need to be wearing shoes right now considering she’s not even dressed.

Shannon, Jayme, Felicia, Lexi and I are gathered at Lexi’s parent’s place getting ready for the wedding. Her mom insisted we’d have more room for the bridesmaids to prep over here, and less chance Trevor will see her before the ceremony.

“Found it!” Lexi’s sister Felicia says, holding the shoe over her head. “Let’s just take that one off,” Felicia suggests, bending toward Lexi’s foot. “And not play Diddle Diddle Dumpling, My Son John right now.”

I look at her with a questioning expression.

“You know, one shoe off, one shoe on?”

“I’ll just set these over here,” Felicia says, neatly tucking Lexi’s shoes by the door.

“Sit here,” I command Lexi. “And breathe.”

I pull out a chair near her vanity table and she plops into it.

“Breathing’s good,” Felicia says. “It centers you. You can start by sitting upright with the best posture you are able to muster, and ...”

I shoot Felicia a look. It’s not time for a YouTube tutorial on breathing.

I meet Lexi’s eyes in the mirror.

“It’s Trev we’re talking about,” I remind her. “You love him. And he

adores everything about you. You could marry him barefoot or wearing one shoe, you could come in on stilts, or flop down the aisle in a snorkel and dive fins.

“It’s all going to be okay—actually way better than okay. Tomorrow, shoes or no shoes, you will be Mrs. MacIntyre, and the two of you will take off for your coastal California honeymoon.

“Then you’ll come back to your life here, only you’ll wake up wrapped in Trevor’s arms every morning to the smell of baked goods instead of having to walk next door to steal one. It’s going to be epic. Just breathe.”

Lexi’s face softens. She inhales and exhales a few times.

“Thanks, Laura. You’re the best.”

Unofficial therapist. Rob’s voice sneaks into my thoughts and I smile.

“And, I have to say. You look like a woman in love,” Lexi says.

“Mmm. Let’s get your hair out of those curlers.”

“Evasion only works on people who aren’t professional journalists,” Lexi says. “Spill the details. Are you in love?”

“I’m in love,” I admit. “And he loves me too.”

I suddenly feel like I don’t have anything to do with my hands, so I start taking the rollers out of Lexi’s hair and carefully brushing the curls into place as I reach over onto the vanity for the hairspray.

Shannon and Jayme let out little squeals of joy until I spear them with looks in the mirror.

“This day isn’t about me. It’s about you and Trevor. Let’s table all talk of my love life until after you come back from the west coast.”

“Deal,” Lexi says. “But we’ve got a firm plan to have a girls’ night when I get home. I’ll want to share everything about our trip with you three, and I want to hear all about you and Rob.”

“You might not want to share *everything*,” Felicia says, her eyebrows wagging.

Lexi blushes and then reaches onto the vanity and tosses a bag of makeup wipes at her older sister.

I try to hold onto the feeling that Rob and I have finally found our way back to one another. I can’t help but wonder what’s next. What if this collab brings more opportunities? Will Rob choose me this time?

I throw myself into finishing everyone’s hair while Shannon does makeup. Then we descend the stairs so Lexi can get into her dress in the living room. After we’re all ready, Lexi’s mom takes pictures and then we

load up and drive to Aiden's ranch where the ceremony will be held.

Trevor's five-year-old niece and six-year-old nephew are the flower girl and ring bearer. They walk down the aisle together. Ashley throws petals with a dramatic flourish of her hand while Sawyer waves to everyone as if he's running for president.

They aren't even halfway down the aisle when Gabbie, my four-year-old niece hops out of her seat and starts walking behind Ashley, picking up the petals with one hand and collecting them in the other. Gabbie runs up to Ashley and says, "Esscuse me. You dwopped these!"

Ashley puts a hand on her hip and pops it out in a move that gives us all a prophetic glimpse into her teen years. She extends the basket and allows Gabbie to drop the now-crumpled petals back in.

My sister hunkers down and waddles toward her daughter as if walking hunched over will make her invisible. She approaches Gabbie and whispers something to her, probably mentioning wedding cake and dancing if she gets back to her seat pronto.

While Gabbie's distracted, Ashley tosses a few more handfuls of petals high in the air for dramatic effect and then takes her seat up front next to her family.

After everyone recovers from the kids stealing the show, the music changes and the men walk out from beside the barn. My eyes catch Rob's immediately. He looks amazing in his dark suit and charcoal tie. My breath catches in my throat. He winks at me and mouths, "You look beautiful." My heart rate doubles and warmth spreads through me.

My eyes don't leave his as I follow Felicia up the aisle and take my place across from him and the other groomsmen.

Could this be us someday? I barely allow myself to imagine it. When you've worked diligently to guard your heart for so long, it's not like one day you simply drop that wall and let hope freely waltz in. I still don't know if Rob will eventually leave Bordeaux for some big opportunity.

And, more importantly, I don't know if I'm the woman best suited for him for life. Our chemistry is undeniable. I love him with my whole heart, and I believe he loves me. But I still think of that one word: *anchor*. I never want to be Rob's anchor.

The ceremony progresses through a small sermon, a song sung by one of the local high school girls who tried out for The Voice, and then the time comes for Trevor and Lexi to exchange their promises and give one another

rings.

I shed a few tears through the vows and their kiss. One of my closest friends is married. It's official. We're old enough to be pairing off and starting the next generation of Bordeaux.

I picture Lexi with a baby and my mind whirls. How did we get here? Weren't we decorating homecoming floats only a few years ago?

The music shifts to what Lexi and Trevor call their song. *Everybody (Backstreet's Back)* by the Backstreet Boys starts blaring from Aiden's sound system.

Don't ask. It's not romantic. But it's so them.

We all do a dance Lexi insisted we learn for this moment. We're popping our arms to alternating sides and then out in front of us like zombies while wiggling our hips as we make our way down the aisle.

As soon as the last of us has made our way down the aisle, the guests start to file out toward the barn where tables and a dance floor have been set up. Rob finds me in the crowd and pulls me aside.

"They did it!"

"They did. Does it feel as surreal to you as it does to me?" I ask him as he pulls me close.

"Yeah. It's something else."

Rob's head turns away from me, but I could swear I hear him say, *We'll be next*. I obviously don't ask him to repeat himself.

"Let's take a walk," Rob suggests.

I take his hand. We're about to round the back of the barn when Felicia walks over to us. "There you two are. You're needed near the main house for pictures."

Rob squeezes my hand. "As soon as photos are over ..."

"We have the dance and toasts ..."

"And the meal ..."

"And cake ..."

Rob audibly groans. "We won't have time alone until after they drive off in the limo."

"This day is about Lexi and Trevor," I remind Rob. "Come on."

"You're right."

We follow Felicia and are almost around the other side of the barn when someone screams. Another scream follows, and then everyone's in an uproar.

A man shouts out what sounds like, "The goats!"

Rob looks at me with a quizzical expression. More shouting fills the air along with a series of random bleats. We both realize at the same moment what must be going on.

A goat rounds the corner, sticks his tongue out at us, turns his head and gives us the side eye out of that slitted pupil of his and bleats, “Mmmmm mmaaahhh.” I promise you I’ll be seeing that goat in my nightmares.

A chorus of bleats—and what even sounds like a series of human shouts coming from the goats—resounds throughout the ranch. When we come in sight of the front of the barn, goats are *everywhere!*

Some are up on tables, nibbling the centerpieces and drinking out of water glasses, stepping on plates and scattering tableware. A few are devouring the cake, which used to be the cinnamon roll special and now looks like a giant mound of crumbs and icing.

One goat looks up at me with the face of a one-year-old at their first birthday party, coated in cake and frosting. Only he’s a one-year-old with a beard.

I hear a scream from a little way behind me and I turn to see a goat standing on his hind legs with his front paws on Lexi’s waist. She’s going down. Her arms flail, grasping at air in an attempt not to topple. Trevor’s trying to catch her. Rob takes off to help, leaving me to watch the carnage.

Aiden grabs the mic from the DJ and makes an announcement. “Everyone, we need to pull together. You see that bigger brown goat?” He points to a goat who’s up on one of the amplifiers looking very supervisory. “She’s the queen of the herd. I’m going to guide her into the back pasture. She’ll start a movement. I need all of you to say, ‘Hey! Hey!’ or just make noises and clap toward the backside of whatever goat happens to be near you. Move from behind them and direct them toward me.”

Aiden hops down, walks toward the queen goat and gives her a whistle. She looks at him for a moment with an expression that seems to say, *You’ve got to be kidding me. This is the most fun we’ve had in months.* Aiden whistles again, calls her by name (Billy Jean) and says, “Move out.” She tips her chin and hops down in a move that would make Rudolph proud.

The chaos doesn’t stop, though the goats seemed to freeze at the sound of Aiden’s voice, like *Ruh roh! Dad’s not happy.* But, being goats, they aren’t quickly deterred from mischief, so they’ve gone back to hopping from chair to chair, knocking things over and mostly nibbling everything in sight, including tablecloths, napkins and cake.

Speaking of the cake, I hear a loud belch from the direction of the cake table.

As the adults clap and yell, the children join in chasing the goats, some of them grabbing goats by the neck, others seemingly trying to see if goats can be ridden like miniature horses.

We herd the goats toward the pasture where Aiden stands with the gate open, Billy Jean remains far inside the fence line with a pouty look on her goat face. Once all the herd has been corralled inside the enclosure, Aiden shuts the gate.

Lexi, the epitome of a beautiful bride, now looks a little more like Ana in *Frozen* when she woke up with her hair askew and drool coming down her face. Lexi's dress has some tears across the front. The material flaps in shreds and her slip shows through several small hoof holes.

"Well, that just happened," Trevor says, looking over at Lexi.

I catch Lexi's eye and a smile breaks across her face. She starts laughing. At first, it's a giggle, but then it bubbles up and soon she's hysterical, bending at the waist, roaring with laughter and wiping tears from her eyes.

When Lexi straightens up, Trevor wraps his arm around her shoulder and kisses her cheek. He chuckles too.

The crowd moves toward the barn entrance where some of the older women from town have started picking up the remnants of Goatmageddon.

"What now?" Aiden asks Trevor and Lexi, a concerned look on his face.

Pop, from Pop's pizza walks over and says, "We'll make pizza! Give me about an hour. I'll send Decker back with the first round."

Thea from the bakery says, "We'll bring the rest of what we baked for today! We've got cupcakes, cookies, and pastries."

A few other restaurant owners catch on to the idea and put their heads together with a group of townspeople. The next thing we know, a caravan of cars takes off for town. We stay behind and the DJ starts up the music.

Aiden shouts, "Let's get this party started!"

Most of us follow Lexi and Trevor inside the barn where they start dancing their first dance to Ed Sheeran and Beyonce's *Perfect Duet*. Rob loops his arm around me as we watch our best friends stare into one another's eyes and sway to the ballad.

Husband and wife.

Rob turns me and pulls me into his arms, clasping our enjoined hands to his chest at the edge of the dance floor while keeping one arm behind the

small of my back. He mouths the words of the song to me. I can't take my eyes off his—slate-grey, mesmerizing, and focused on me with a laser sharp intensity.

The bridal party dance starts, and Rob grabs my hand to drag me onto the dance floor. The DJ plays Heavy D and the Boyz, *Now That We Found Love*.

Rob tries to slow dance to the upbeat song, pulling me close and swaying. I push off him and start doing old school moves and rapping along with the lead singer. He struts around me in a circle, taking my lead and breaking out his crazy, over-the-top movements. Lexi and Trevor make their way over to us and we all dance together.

“What on earth! Those goats!” I say to Lexi over the music.

“We'll have stories to tell our grandkids,” she says with a smile.

Grandkids.

I look over at Rob and for a moment, I see it all. Our wedding, a home together, kids, and eventually grandkids.

“What are you thinking, Jellybean?” Rob shouts over the music.

“I just might keep you around.”

“Good thing because I'm pretty set on keeping you too.”

The DJ changes songs and says, “This one is for the goats!” Michael Jackson's *Billy Jean* blares through the sound system and a roar of laughter fills the barn.

Rob leans in for a kiss and I allow him to tug me to himself while we deepen the kiss and lose almost all awareness of the dance-pop music and crowd of swaying bodies surrounding us. I'm giving myself permission to dream despite the all-too-familiar alarm bells firing off inside me.

ROB

The caravan of sports cars and vans approaches from a distance down the road toward the field where we'll be setting up for the day of collaboration. I'm sitting in the bed of my truck with a cup of coffee enjoying the last moments of morning calm.

Trevor and Lexi left for their honeymoon with Aiden as their chauffeur early this morning.

Married.

I stare off across the field thinking of Laura. She's still acting like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs at times. I constantly remind myself that I didn't know if we'd even get this far. *Patience*. I'm the one who caused her wariness. I need to give her time to trust me again.

The Sun Valley film team from California flew into Columbus early this morning and drove nearly an hour to Bordeaux. Townspeople have filtered in and out of this empty pasture on the outskirts of town all morning as if they come here all the time.

I shout, "They aren't here yet," when a vehicle approaches, which causes most of them to do a quick U-turn.

A few people have had the gumption to get out of their vehicles and walk right up to me to ask when the Hollywood folks will be here. Over the past hour a cluster of vehicles have lined up across the field at a distance, parking along the fence line. Evidently this will be a group participation event.

I try not to cringe at the thought of what might happen when Bordeaux meets Hollywood. Visions of the Beverly Hillbillies flit through my brain.

I'm already mortified, and the day hasn't even officially started. But

we're talking about Bordeaux, and I'm pretty sure before the day is out, half of America will be familiar with our Podunk town, and not necessarily in a good way.

You know that feeling you have when you bring a new boyfriend home to meet your whole family for the holidays. Yep. That's me right now only Hollywood's about to see my hometown in all its peculiar glory.

I've carefully used the phrase, "From the heartland" on all my YouTube episodes to keep my exact location a mystery. I'm starting to question the wisdom of this collaboration with each subsequent appearance of a curious neighbor.

The caravan of rental vehicles turns onto the field. A man parks close to my truck and steps out of a red Porsche. The car looks so out of place in this setting it's almost comical. He lifts his aviators and places them on his head in a stereotypical move that screams *not from around here*.

"Caden McMasters, Sun Valley Productions," he says, extending his hand.

I hop down from the truck bed and shake his hand, "Rob Baldwin, Make It Don't Break It."

"I know who you are, Rob," Caden says with a warm smile.

A few more cars and vans pull in right behind Caden and park randomly in the low grass. Another man hops out of one of the vans and walks toward Caden and me.

"Fritz Wallace," he says.

I introduce myself and Fritz turns to the production team and starts giving out directions. I count heads and realize there are twenty people gathered to work with us. I'm used to occasionally soliciting help from local high-school or college students. Sometimes Trevor pitches in. The Sun Valley team has brought in a next-level entourage.

An old avocado green Cadillac comes barreling down the dirt toward the cluster of vehicles.

Dear God, no.

Memaw hops out of her car with far more agility than you'd expect from someone her age. "Well, good morning gentlemen, ladies."

She's wearing a pantsuit with royal blue polyester slacks and a very bold floral blouse. She looks like the reincarnation of Joni Mitchell, only if Joni lived to need arthritis medication and a daily diet requiring prunes with breakfast.

“I brought cupcakes!” Memaw announces, as if that’s normal at eight in the morning. “You won’t want to leave town without eating one. They win at the fair every year. Rob, put those muscles to good use. Get over here and take this folding table out of my trunk.”

I walk toward her obediently. Memaw has that commanding effect on most of my generation.

I’m pulling the table out when a black PT Cruiser with flames down the sides pulls onto the property. I’d recognize that car anywhere. I remember when Mable got it and all the women in town accused her of trying to bring back her glory days and hog up the attention of all the local widowers in the process.

She kicks up a cloud of dust as she guns it toward us. I instinctively hold up the card table as a shield, as if it will protect me from being run over by Mable.

She thankfully turns at the last minute and pulls up next to Memaw’s car. When she gets out, the two women have a stare-down.

“What are you doing here, Mabel?” Memaw asks.

“I could ask the same of you.”

I look over at Caden and Fritz. They seem amused.

Mabel turns to me. I’m still holding the table like it’s Captain America’s shield. It’s not doing a thing to protect me from the force that is the senior women of Bordeaux.

“I brought pigs in a blanket, juice, and my famous tater tot breakfast bake.” Mabel gives a defiant glare to Memaw and then she surveys the crew standing around waiting to start our day of filming. “I figured you’uns wouldn’t have eaten and you ought to try our home cooking while you’re here in our humble town.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Mabel,” I say.

Memaw spears me with a look, so I add, “And you, Memaw. Both of you. Now we have to get on with filming, so I’ll put the table up and then you can go about your days.”

“Oh, I’ve got nothing planned,” Memaw says.

“Me neither,” Mabel says with barely a nod toward Memaw.

“Suit yourselves,” I say. “But, please, stay out of the way. I wouldn’t want either of you to get hurt.”

Before I can think another thought, a young man walks over and addresses Memaw and Mable. “Hi. I’m Brad. I’m one of the production

assistants. If you'll follow me, I'll have you fill out some waivers. Anyone on set has to sign these."

I mumble, "I hope you have a stack of those handy."

I suspect we may have more visitors as the day progresses. After all, this is the most excitement our town has possibly ever seen.

We mostly spend the rest of the morning setting up lighting disks to redirect the sun, marking off spots where we'll film, prepping the giant tank where I will stand, and running through the production step by step.

By noon we're ready to film the experiment. Our crowd of locals has grown, and an entire row of automobiles and pickups line the perimeter of the field. People are milling around, sitting on their hoods, or in the beds of their trucks. From what I can make out from this distance, a few people even brought picnic lunches.

I'm stripping down to my swim trunks and about to climb into the wetsuit we decided I should wear for safety when Ella Mae's car races onto the field and screeches to a halt next to the Sun Valley rental vehicles. Say what you will about our townspeople, but we do seem to know how to make an entrance.

Ella Mae steps out of her car in a shirt tight enough to threaten to cut off her circulation, a mini skirt and another pair of her death-defying heels. Her hair is curled into a full style, and she's got those false eyelashes on that make her eyes look like they are donning fur coats for the winter. She bats her fluffy lashes at Caden and gives a coquettish nod toward Fritz. Women like her always seem able to sniff out the men in charge in any group.

"I'm Ella Mae," she says, holding her arm out to Caden with the back of her hand facing up.

Caden glances over at me and shrugs as he takes Ella Mae's hand and shakes it.

She lets out a hmph noise. I guess she wanted him to kiss it. Welcome to Bizarrotown, folks. Where else in the world do women under twenty-five expect to be greeted by strangers by having their knuckles kissed? We're not in Regency England.

"As I said," Ella Mae continues. "I'm Ella Mae. You probably know my Instagram at fab-YOU-lous-Ella-Mae."

Caden gives Ella Mae a blank stare.

Oh no.

His confusion and disregard is the equivalent of a red scarf being waved

at Pamplona. Ella Mae's brow furrows as she appears to process the concept that it's possible not everyone knows and adores her. Her nostrils flare almost imperceptibly. I half expect her to paw the ground with one of her feet like a bull preparing to charge.

Instead, she brings a perfectly manicured finger toward her lip and taps it.

"Well. I'll have to educate you." She adds, with a wink of the caterpillar sitting on one of her eyelids. "After you finish all this."

She dismissively swishes her hand toward the dunk tank and cameras and then with a flourish, she encompasses the rest of our setup.

"I'm sure we have a lot to discuss," she says, puckering her lips toward Caden and then turning to walk away with an intentional sway of her hips. Caden's a red-blooded man, so his eyes naturally follow Ella Mae. All the men on the set watch her sashay over toward the line of vehicles along the fence, their heads turning like bits of steel shavings following the pull of a magnet.

When Ella Mae's almost to one of the trucks, she looks over her shoulder and gives a finger wave in our direction. Then she pulls out her phone, holds it up, and starts talking toward it—obviously sharing the moment with her peeps.

"Well," I say to Caden. "That's Ella Mae."

He shakes his head like he's just had an encounter with an extinct creature—one like the giant rainbow-colored tropical bird named Kevin in the movie *Up*. Yep. Ella Mae's our Kevin. Only not nearly as well-mannered.

Once Ella Mae settles herself with the rest of the onlookers, I climb up the ladder and hop over the side of the empty plexiglass dunk tank. I clip into the safety straps extending over the sides of the tank. Several crew members will have hold of the straps in case of any need to yank me up and out.

A mid-sized tanker truck pulls onto the property. The team from Sun Valley Productions takes several large suitcases out of one of the vans. Assistants unzip each one and the tanker backs up until it parks right next to the dunk tank.

Fritz gives the sign for everyone on the perimeter and on set to be quiet. Cameras begin to roll on cue.

I look into the lens of the one right in front of me and begin talking.

"Hi everyone, it's me, Rob from *Make It, Don't Break It*, and today I'm doing a collaboration with Sun Valley Productions. I'm sure you've all seen the Diet Coke and Mentos experiments over the years. Today we are taking

Diet Coke and Mentos to the next level! We're going to test what it will be like to do a life-sized Diet Coke and Mentos combustion—with me in the tank!

“In the truck to my left we have twelve hundred gallons of Diet Coke. That's the equivalent of twenty-five hundred two-liter bottles! This dunk tank I'm standing in holds five hundred gallons. So, hopefully everything works on the first try. Our team has made homemade mentos which weigh twenty pounds each. For the recipe to make your own Mentos at home, see the link in our description.”

I go on to explain how the truck will quickly unleash the soda so that we maintain the maximum impact from the carbon dioxide. Then one of the members of the Sun Valley team will drop the homemade candy in with me and we'll see what happens.

There are inflated safety cushions surrounding the tank, but I still give the “Don't try this at home” disclaimer before pulling down my goggles, popping in a snorkel, and waiting.

The truck hose drops in near my feet and the liquid rushes across my toes and quickly rises up my body. In what has to be less than a minute, the tank fills to my chest level.

Immediately the man on the ladder drops in one Mento, then he's handed another, and he drops it in. He jumps off the ladder and carries it away from the side of the tank.

Everything after the drop happens in fast motion. The liquid level rises to just below my chin. I breathe through the snorkel as the foam starts to swell. I'd be lying if I didn't say my life flashed before my eyes for an instant.

People talk about moments of clarity during near-death experiences. When I woke this morning, I hardly thought I'd be having an epiphany under the influence of a fizzy, calorie-free soft drink bath.

I think of Laura.

Of course, I do.

I don't want to die of Diet Coke and Mentos.

The only thing that matters is surviving the onslaught of bubbling aspartame so I can live long enough to keep making up for the damage I did when I broke her heart. I won't stop until she's sure I'm the man she can trust beyond a shadow of a doubt.

I picture Laura the summer day I foolishly walked away from her. I see her managing to cope while we hung out with our group of friends over the

two years since I've been home.

Visions of the last few months flash like a rapid-fire slideshow: Laura soaking wet outside the salon during the rainstorm, her on my kitchen chair moaning over a bite of my lasagna, fighting over whipped cream in her kitchen, dancing on the boat in Cincinnati, her kissing me, her shouting at me, her kissing me some more.

What? I like kissing Laura. A lot.

I want Laura, and a life with her.

Right now, I'd settle for a solid breath of air.

I start to tread water—well, Diet Coke to be exact—because the carbonation is getting intense. Liquid starts to trickle down my snorkel. I feel the tug of my safety straps. I hold my breath and all of a sudden, there's a huge bang!

I pop up and out as the sides of the tank literally blow open at the seams and pop sprays everywhere at a force that rivals a geyser.

I'm catapulted onto one of the mats as if someone physically threw me. The assistants holding my straps fly onto adjacent mats like cartoon characters. The camera crew rushes backward, tripping over one another and their equipment.

Random bits of plexiglass shoot into the air and land. People shout and scream from all directions.

Memaw's voice carries from across the field. "Thar she blows!"

I lie there for a moment, regaining my bearings. I landed half on a flat slab of the plexiglass and half on one of the inflated mats, which hisses from a punctured hole by my hip.

I got the wind knocked out of me, but otherwise, I think I'm okay.

Caden strides toward me, triumphantly calling out, "That. Was. Brilliant!"

I flop backward onto the deflating mat, allowing the adrenaline to rush through me. Once the on-site medic checks me over, I am escorted to the makeshift shower stall they have set up and allowed to wash off and change into clean clothes while the crew starts to tear down the set.

I'm still slightly shaking from the thrill of the experience when I emerge from the shower stall fully dressed. Caleb walks over to me with Fritz on his heels.

"Rob, that was fantastic. We got great tape from what I can see so far. We'll take it back to the studios and do our edits and then we'll send you a

clip to review. I'm sure you'll be hearing from John soon. He's got plans for something more substantial. He mentioned a job offer in the works before I left. Has he said anything to you?"

A job offer? In California?

"No. Not yet."

"Well, you didn't hear it from me," Caden says with a wink. "We'll pack up and get out of your hair. We're staying overnight in Columbus before flying out tomorrow morning. You could join us for dinner if you like."

Ella Mae comes rushing up and puts her hand on Caden's arm.

In a voice that's intended to charm, she says, "Well, I have to say that's the most excitement we've seen around here in some time, gentlemen. A girl can get pretty bored in a town called bored-ox."

Caden looks Ella Mae over. I give him a bro-code glance from behind her back that hopefully resembles the symbol they put on radioactive waste. Yes, that stuff glows, but it will eat your nose off your face.

Caden smiles politely at Ella Mae and returns his focus to me.

I consider Caden's offer to join the team for dinner. It probably would be a smart business move to take him up on it. But after the day I've had there's only one place I want to be, and eating out in Columbus with a bunch of near strangers isn't it.

LAURA

All I heard all day were tales of Rob's big adventure on the outskirts of town. Rob this. Rob that. Did you know those men from Hollywood came all the way here for Rob?

Rob had told me today's collaboration was big, but not special.

Those were his exact words: *It's big, but it's nothing special.*

Here are things that are big and not special: my refrigerator which only makes ice in trays, that tank of a muscle car I borrowed from the Satterson's, and my sister's maternity sweats.

Today was big *and* special.

I need to know why Rob's withholding details and trying to downplay everything.

My late afternoon clients were so chatty I wished we had installed a television in the salon a few years back when Frieda had considered it. At least then I could have put on a show and kept everyone from going on and on about Rob, Rob, Rob.

Blow by blow, customer after customer the recounting droned on like my own personal ESPN recap, only the Diet Coke and Mentos episode.

"Did you know Rob nearly died?"

"That tank went kaplooeey. A full-blown, real-life explosion. And Rob was right in the middle of it all like a human Jack-in-the-Box! Boing, Boing Boing, Splat!"

"He was like this toy soldier being spewed out of a volcanic science experiment. Pew, Phoom, Kapow!"

"Them Hollywood guys were somethin' to see. And you shoulda' seen

'em runnin' like psheew, psheew, psheew. Trippin' all over one another when that thing blew to high heavens!"

I've never heard so much onomatopoeia in one day. And I can't ignore the risk Rob put himself through for the sake of entertainment—or edutainment as he'd call it.

I'm about to lock up the shop when the cherry on my overwhelm sundae walks through the door.

Ella Mae.

She doesn't have an appointment, which means she's here to gossip or gloat, or both.

"Laura. I'm so glad I caught you before you closed up for the day."

"I'm just leaving," I tell her.

"Well, I'm sure you heard all about the men from LA and about Rob. And when I say men," she fans herself. "I mean M-E-N, men. One of them drove a red Porsche and he was yummy enough to eat."

I smile a wan smile and walk toward the register to lock it. I'll tally the cash drawer tomorrow. I need to make my getaway now.

I click the lights off like a kindergarten teacher—using the gesture as an attempt to gain control of an unruly situation.

"Rob was the hero and star of the day," Ella Mae says, following me toward the front door.

I hold it open for her. She walks out. I turn and lock the door.

"I'm sure he was," I tell her.

"They're offering him a job in California." She pauses for effect.

I steel my features into a mask. I'm the Phantom of the Opera, or a carving on Mount Rushmore, I'm as unreadable as a physician's handwriting.

Who am I kidding? I'm about to lose my marbles. But Ella Mae doesn't need to know that.

"Of course, I'm sure you know about the job offer since you're daaaaating him again."

She draws out the word dating with this long emphasis that makes me want to stick my foot out and trip her and her sky-high heels. Not trip, trip ... just a stumble or momentary loss of balance. After all, it's not fair that I'm the only one losing my equilibrium here.

"Mm hmm," I say, trying to come off both disinterested and noncommittal. It ends up sounding like I'm about to swallow my gum.

"So, you don't know?" Ella Mae presses me.

“Oh, I knew there was a possibility,” I tell her.

It’s not a lie. I’ve known the possibility existed since Rob and I were friends in junior high. That prospect was the very reason I told myself not to fall for him again. He will leave. I even said as much to Lexi a few weeks ago.

And here we are. What do you know? His life has landed exactly where I said it would. He’s too bright not to shine. And I can’t be his dimmer switch.

I won’t be. I’d hate myself if I held him back.

“It’s been a long day, Ella Mae. Do you have a point right now? I don’t want to be rude. I just need to get off my feet and rest.”

“Oh, I understand. I just wanted to share the exciting news and let you know your man did good today. It’s all on my Insta! Oh, goodness. That’s right. You’re still not on social media. Let me know when you change your mind about that. With your man moving up in the world, you can’t stay small-town and small-minded forever.”

My man. Why does the way she says that feel like someone running a cheese grater over my skin?

I sense this savage growl gurgling up my throat, so I swallow loudly. It’s not Ella Mae’s fault Rob is amazing. And it’s not her doing that I’m head over heels in love with him.

Ella Mae turns and walks away. I picture her holding her fingers like a gun and blowing the fake smoke off the muzzle. And that word muzzle makes me think of all the things I’d like to do with a muzzle to Ella Mae. My situation may not be her fault, but she didn’t have to come rub my nose in the painful reality.

On that note, I turn and walk to my car.

I wish Lexi were here. But she’s on her honeymoon, doing married things with the man of her dreams. Instead of driving home, I head straight to Shannon and Jayme’s. I’m smart enough to know being alone in my apartment right now would be a recipe for some serious moping.

I’m turning down Shannon and Jayme’s street when my phone rings. I’ve given Rob his own ringtone. *Rocket Man* by Elton John fills my car.

I debate ignoring him, but I know Rob. He’s persistent like a weed poking up through concrete, or a Jack Russell Terrier digging after vermin. Only in this case, I’m the vermin and Rob’s the dog. I’m the concrete, and he’s determined to crack through my tough exterior.

Unfortunately, there aren’t enough analogies in the world to distract me

from the ringing of my phone.

“Hello,” I say after the fourth ring.

“Hey, Jellybean. I’m at your place with pizza. Where are you?”

“Did we have plans?” It’s a snarky response, I know.

Not his fault he’s amazing, I remind myself.

“Do I need plans to come to my girlfriend’s bearing pineapple and pepperoni pizza?”

His girlfriend.

“You got my favorite?”

“Obviously.”

“What will you eat?”

I’m weak. Sue me. I can have pizza and not be his dimmer switch. Just watch. I’m going to eat, kiss Rob, say goodnight, and let him sail off into his destiny, anchor-free.

Rob’s laugh booms through the phone, rich, deep, and content. He’s happy. The day he became a human cannonball being shot out of a tank of diet soda made him deeply happy.

I need to pack up my pain in a lock box and deal with it on my own time. One day, when I’m old and grey and I can’t even hold scissors to cut hair because my fingers all curl in on themselves, I’ll thank this younger me for making the most of these last days together with Rob.

I can grieve later. Tonight, pineapple pepperoni and the most handsome man in the heartland are calling my name.

“I’ll be home in a minute. I had a last-minute drop-in at the salon who made me late.”

A drop-in I would have liked to drop kick, but that feels less important now that I’m hearing Rob’s voice.

“I’ll be here,” Rob promises.

Not for long, you won’t.

I shove that reality down, aware I’m only postponing pain.

Here’s the thing. If I had to have a root canal, why not reschedule it for next week instead of today? This pain will be patiently waiting like a hungry lion to feast on my heart. Tonight, Rob’s here, in love with me. And I love him.

Plus, lions feasting on hearts. That’s an image we all could have done without, am I right?

I pull into my driveway and take the steps two at a time. Rob’s sitting on

the top step with a killer smile. “Someone’s happy to see me,” he says.

“It’s the pizza.”

“Hard to compete with pineapple pepperoni,” he teases as I put the key in the lock.

Rob holds the cardboard box balanced against his hip while I open the door.

He stays on the porch when I step inside.

“Delivery for a Miss Laura Lennox,” he says in an eerily accurate impersonation of Decker, Pop’s delivery boy.

“Well, come on in,” I say, crooking my finger at Rob and putting a little extra sway in my step as I make my way toward the kitchen.

“Can I collect my tip?” Rob asks, coming up behind me and sliding the box onto my counter.

He moves closer to my back, planting a palm on each side of my hips and turning me so I’m facing him.

“I don’t have my wallet,” I say in an unexpectedly breathy voice, looking at him through my lashes and rubbing my hands toward my pants pockets.

“I’ll take a kiss instead,” he says, leaning in.

“Pizza boys these days ...”

My words are cut off as Rob moves his mouth over mine. He loops his hands behind my back and pulls me toward him. There’s something different about him tonight—wilder and more desperate.

He backs me up toward the kitchenette window, my hands tangle in his hair, rub across his biceps, then his chest and back again. I feel the cool of the wall and the soft of the curtain at my back. His hands grab onto the sides of my shirt and fist the fabric there as we continue to deepen our kiss. Forget pizza. I can eat pizza any day. I need this—him.

Eventually Rob slows our pace. He relaxes his lips and gives me the most tender kiss on the mouth, I almost cry. It’s too sweet. I will never come back from losing him. It’s a fact. I wash that thought away like I’m rinsing a bowl of hair dye down the sink.

Stay here. I tell myself. Be here with him now.

Rob pulls back from me, possibly sensing my severe case of overthinking. If he does, he’s kind enough not to bring it up. He caresses my cheek with the back of his hand.

“You.”

That’s all he says.

“Pizza.”

He laughs. “A guy could develop a complex, you know.”

“In all fairness, you were the man who brought me the pizza, so consider yourself runner up. You’ll always be second in my heart to Pop’s pepperoni and pineapple.”

It’s a boldfaced lie. He’s stolen first like the strongest baseball player in history.

“I’ll take it,” Rob says, turning to pull two plates from my cabinet as if he lives here.

Which he doesn’t ... and never will.

I need to give my inner voices a bottle of melatonin tonight.

We take our slices to my couch.

“So, tell me about your big day.”

Rob winces when he sits down.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I landed on plexiglass. It’s no big deal. I’ve got a bruise that looks a lot like the state of Idaho on my hip.”

I giggle. “Better than Ohio.”

“I don’t know. I’d kind of like a bruise the shape of our state.”

“There’s no accounting for you scientists. So, tell me.”

“It was amazing. Over-the-top. Scary. But, really amazing.”

“I got the blow-by-blow from all the afternoon customers.”

“Yeah. A good portion of the town came out. I wish you could have been there.”

“Me too,” I say, taking a big bite of pizza to keep me from saying or doing anything I’ll regret.

Rob gives me a detailed description of the whole experience. I listen, grab us more slices, and keep reminding myself to stay present. I need to mine this night for nuggets of goodness to tide me over in the months and years to come.

Rob ends his story with a comment about one of the Hollywood guys named Caden asking him to go to dinner in Columbus.

“Wait! You could have been out to eat with the production team tonight?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to go. I just wanted to wind down with you.”

My inner Lucy stands up in her mariachi dress and starts doing the dance she did on the episode where she and Ethyl smashed grapes with their bare feet.

Inner Gordon holds up his hand and says, “I’ll get straight to the point. You’re not going to be a dimmer switch. Rob needs to shine.”

I take a deep breath. I need to ask. “So, what’s next?”

“Next?”

“Yeah. I mean. They edit the tape. You post it. They post it. Then what?”

Rob looks at me with an expression I’d be able to read even if Ella Mae hadn’t come bragging into the shop tonight. He’s hiding something and he’s tiptoeing around my feelings—protecting me.

“I’m a big girl,” I tell him. “What’s next?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest.”

“Okay. So, what could be next? What are all the possible things that could come from this collab?”

I search his face, trying to will him to be open and to share not only the opportunities, but his excitement over them. If I’m going to give him up, I need to be certain he’s going off into the sunset for brighter days ahead and that he’ll be the happiest he can be.

“They talked about a lot of things. Future collabs. Disney. Discovery. A possible job. They’re all over the map.”

“DISNEY?”

My voice probably takes on enough volume to bring my aunt barreling up the steps again. I dial it down a notch, but still I find myself shouting.

“Discovery? As in the CHANNEL?”

Rob nods self-consciously.

“Rob, that’s awesome! You’ve been discovered!”

He smiles a shy smile.

“It’s okay to be excited,” I tell him, even though a part of my heart feels like I’m turning to stone from the inside out.

We’re quiet for a moment. Rob takes my empty plate and sets it away from me. My feet are stretched onto the coffee table. Rob turns and leans back, dropping his head on my lap so he’s looking up at me with his stormy grey-blue eyes.

We used to do this exact thing years ago. He’d lay with his head in my lap, and I’d run my fingers through his hair while we talked about everything and anything—our future, high school drama, our families, what we wanted to do that weekend.

The cruel irony isn’t lost on me that his head finally rests in my lap when I’m about to lose him all over again.

“I’m glad you told me all that,” I say as I rake my fingers through Rob’s thick, baby-soft hair.

He hums a low rumble like a cat purring.

“That feels so good.”

“Yeah? Maybe if the salon closes, I’ll start a scalp massage business.”

“Over my dead body.”

I lift a brow at him, though I’m sure it looks odd from his upside-down vantage point. I probably look like one of those weird drawings where the eyebrow turns into a mouth and the mouth appears like an eyebrow.

“Anyway, they haven’t made any firm offers. Caden just mentioned today that he heard John say something about a job. He could be wrong.”

“They’d be crazy not to snatch you up.”

“Just because I’m offered a job, doesn’t mean I’d take it.”

“Rob. We’re talking Disney or Discovery! Big leagues.” My voice catches for a moment. “It’s what you were born to do.”

“Maybe. And ouch!”

“Oh, sorry.”

Apparently, the idea of Rob leaving made me yank a little on his hair. I smooth the area where I accidentally released my aggression and gently run my fingertips from his brow to the back of his head again.

“We’re just ... I ... If they did offer me a solid opportunity—which I don’t know if they will—would you think of moving to California?” he asks like it’s the most natural question in the world.

Is he asking me if I would want to move with him, or if I would want to move if I were in his shoes? My heart’s too fragile to ask him to clarify.

“I can’t see myself leaving Bordeaux. It’s all I know—all I want to know. You’ve already left before. You lived in Massachusetts for four years. It’s easier for you to leave again.”

Rob lifts his head, scoots down so he’s sitting right next to me and cups my face in an agonizingly sweet gesture.

He punctuates his words and holds my gaze as he says, “It would not be easy to leave.”

“You have every right to pursue your life and your dreams.”

“You are my life. Would my dreams matter if I lost you to achieve them?”

LAURA

Rob doesn't know what he's saying. He thinks he'd willingly give up everything he's hoped for and worked toward just to be with me. The thrill of a decision to stay and pass up all that's spreading out in front of him would eventually wear off. He'd end up resenting me whenever life became challenging or even worse, boring.

When my dad left my mom, he found a woman who wanted to travel. Margo has ambitions. She's not stuck in a small town—the downfall he accused my mom of during their numerous fights. And Margo didn't hinder my dad from becoming successful.

Half my parents' arguments were over my dad's work schedule and the way it pulled him out of town so often. My mom needed him here. He wanted to be free to pursue more. He got his wish. We paid the price.

Mom was my dad's anchor.

I'll never be any man's anchor.

Especially not Rob's.

Before Rob leaves my apartment for the night, we kiss. The moment between us makes me feel simultaneously full and empty.

The difference I've felt in Rob ever since we stepped over my threshold tonight continues to infuse the air between us. He's palpably vulnerable, and yet more passionate.

I'm pretty sure being shot out of that tank scared him as much as it thrilled him. He's like a man back from the dead, seeing everything with laser-sharp clarity. And right now, in this kiss, I'm the grateful recipient of all that pent up, searing focus.

When we pull apart, our lips are slightly swollen, Rob's eyes are hooded and sexier than I've ever seen them. I can barely see the grey around his widened pupils. Rob cups the back of my head and holds my face near to his.

"I love you, Laura."

He says it on a breath, like he's awestruck.

"I love you, Mayhem. Never forget how much I love you."

It's the most true and painful thing to say, but he needs to know. I won't let my love deter him. But I want him to go forward into his future without a doubt as to how I feel.

One day he'll meet a woman in California. Maybe she'll be a mad scientist like him—like that adorable and brilliant woman on MythBusters. Or maybe she'll be subdued and ready to stay home, bearing his babies and cooking for him while he grabs the spotlight and becomes all he was meant to be.

"Hey. Where'd you go?"

"Sorry. What?"

Rob's still cupping the back of my head. Our foreheads are comfortably resting together.

"My mind just drifted." ... to your wives! Well, your wife. Obviously, you'll pick between Rebecca Pearson and Miss Frizzle.

"You've had a lot of long days lately," Rob says. "And so much on your mind."

If only you knew the half of it.

As if on cue, my phone rings.

"It's Frieda. I'd better take it."

"Hey, Laura," Frieda says. "Am I interrupting anything?"

Only one of the best kisses of my life and one of the last ones I'll be likely to share with Rob. Not much.

"No. No. I'm just having pizza with Rob."

"Oh, then I *am* interrupting something."

"No, we're not doing anything interruptible right at this moment."

Frieda giggles. I'll fill her in later.

"Well, I won't keep you long," she says. "I have news. And I'm afraid it's not good."

I brace myself. Rob searches my face and clasps my free hand in his.

"We don't have a buyer for the salon and we're still significantly short even with the money the town raised, so we're starting the process of closing

the business. We're looking at three weeks, give or take. Then we'll have an auction for the equipment and unopened supplies. I'm so sorry, Laura. We tried."

I tell myself to breathe. I knew this was coming but hearing the words out loud packs a punch anyway.

"I think instead of giving the money we raised for the S.O.S. campaign to charity, we should wait until everything closes and whatever's left should be divided as a sort of severance to you and the rest of the beauticians. You'll need a little something to tide you over until you find your next jobs."

Rob studies my face throughout the call. As much as I need to start building up my defenses against this man, I am infinitely grateful he's here with me while I process the most recent devastating news about the salon.

"This isn't your fault, Frieda," I assure her.

"I know, doll face. And I appreciate you saying that. I still feel like I need to take care of each one of you girls. I was mama hen over that place for so long."

"You still are. We miss you."

"I hear you've been filling my shoes just fine. You've made me proud, Laura."

"Thank you."

"Well, I'll let you get back to your man. I'll call later this week to talk about details."

Frieda and I hang up and I fill Rob in on the gist of what's happening with the salon.

"What will you do?"

"Scalp massage?"

He gives me a warning glance.

"Maybe mobile haircuts. I might look into a job at another salon in a town nearby. I don't know yet. The whole situation feels a bit unreal right now. I think I need time to figure out what's next. And I need to break the news to the other stylists tomorrow."

"But, if someone stepped in and bought the salon, you'd be able to do business as usual?"

"That's not happening." I sigh. "It's been for sale. It was a longshot. It's not like one of our farmers will make his way into town to buy a hair salon. They'd buy the Seed-N-Feed if it were dying, but not the Dippity Do."

Rob hums.

“Maybe it’s time to consider being a hairdresser in California.”

I chuckle an unamused laugh. “I’m not cut for that. I’m a small-town girl at heart. The idea of relocating, I think I’d be miserable there. I wish I could make myself want that.”

“I get it,” Rob says. “I shouldn’t have even pushed you. I know how you feel. It would be unfair to ask you to give up everything that matters to you just to chase me across the country. Besides, I may not even end up there.”

He runs his free hand down my hair. Our other hands are still enjoined. I grip him more tightly as he pulls me in, and nestle my head onto his chest. He holds me and I cry, letting all the reality of our situation wash over me in the fleeting safety of his arms.



I’M CUTTING hair the next day when my phone sounds off with Rob’s ringtone.

“Do you need to get that?” Duke Satterson asks me.

“It’s Rob. I’ll call him back.”

“That sure was something, watching him get thrown from that tank.”

I’ve seen the video now. A few customers who were there shared their footage during morning appointments. It’s still the buzz of the town.

“*Something* doesn’t describe the half of it,” I tell Duke.

I finish shaving along Duke’s hairline and brush the stray hairs from his neck. Then I unsnap his cape and shake it out. Duke places cash on my station and says goodbye. But, before he leaves, he turns and says, “Tell Shannon I missed seeing her here today. I hope she’s doing well.”

“I’ll tell her,” I promise him.

Maybe Duke and I could start a club called The Brokenhearted of Bordeaux. At least the object of his affection still lives within a ten-mile radius, even if she has made a part-time job out of avoiding him.

This morning I told all the beauticians that we have three weeks. No one plans to leave, though we’re all going to look for other opportunities while we keep working up until closing day.

Some of us may end up competing for the same positions. It also means our town will be traveling for cuts and styles from now on. The atmosphere in the salon resembles a wake. A somber undercurrent tugs at each of us even

though it's business as usual.

I pick up my phone and walk out onto the front sidewalk to return Rob's call.

"Hey."

"Hey, Jellybean. I got the call."

"The call?"

My stomach flips, and not in a good way.

"John Silverberg himself called me. He wants me to come out and film a series pilot with a team of people and if that goes well, he wants to film a show that could be syndicated for Disney and other channels.

"There's no promise of this taking off, but John said if it doesn't, they have a place for me on a number of science edutainment shows. He shared three options that all seem equally incredible."

I swallow hard and squeeze my eyes shut.

"That's great, Rob."

A hundred questions swirl through my mind. The one that bubbles up comes out.

"When do you leave?"

"I'm flying out this week to check everything out. They have a team for me to meet with. Interviews, introductions, and it's an opportunity to see whether it would be a fit for me."

"What happens to your YouTube channel?"

I want to ask *what happens to us*.

"I can still film segments as long as they don't conflict with what I'd be doing for my contract with Sun Valley."

I'm numb. Except I've never felt this much in my life. I stare around State Street at all the familiar sights—the town that is the wallpaper of my life. I turn and see the window of the Dippity Do. Beyond the familiar logo the stylists work like it's any other day. Only it isn't.

"I may not take any of these offers," Rob says. "You and I have a lot of talking to do."

"Okay," I say.

Then I realize how lame that sounds on a day when Rob's dreams are all materializing.

"We'll talk. I'm really proud of you and excited for you. You deserve all of this and more."

"See you tonight?"

“Um. Not tonight. I have a girls’ night with Jayme and Shannon.”

“Oh. Okay. Well then, tomorrow.”

I don’t have a girls’ night. I’ve never flat out lied to Rob before, and it feels like I’m swallowing acid. I just can’t talk to him tonight. I will have a girls’ night. Then it won’t be a lie. I’d rather hole up in my apartment alone. But maybe it’s best if I air the situation out with Jayme and Shannon.

ROB

I'm in my basement trying to brainstorm the next segments for Make It, Don't Break It. But I'm going stir crazy.

I finished the drone phone case project three weeks ago, and it works consistently. With all the hype around the Sun Valley filming and potential opportunities they are offering, I haven't even mentioned the progress on the phone case to Laura.

I negotiated a sale of the prototype with a company here in the U.S. and sent the purchase contract to Dad last week. The deal went through yesterday while I was having a near-death experience in a tank filled with diet pop.

I turn off my laptop. I can't focus, so there's no use trying to get any work done. I wanted to be with Laura tonight, but since she has girls' night, I'm alone with my thoughts.

I make a spur of the moment decision to drive out to Aiden's place. He's always the voice of reason and I need the kind of wisdom that seems to come so naturally to him.

When I pull into Aiden's driveway, the lights are on in the main house, but I hear noise coming from across the driveway near the barn. Aiden walks out when he hears me pull up.

"Kind of late for a neighborly visit," he teases. "Maybe being submerged in carbonation messed with your circadian rhythm."

"Should I have called first?" I ask, walking over toward him.

"I'm just giving you trouble. Come inside. I was finishing my evening rounds, taking care of those goats despite the way they ruined my brother's wedding reception. Maybe I should become a shepherd instead of a

goatherd.”

“Yodel lay hee, yodel lay hee, yodel lay hee hoo.”

Aiden’s mouth tips up on one side. “Oh, yeah. I’ve never heard that one before. The whole Sound of Music goatherd joke never gets old.”

I follow Aiden up his back steps and in the back door.

“Well, the wedding all worked out despite your crazy goats. The town pitched in to save the day, as usual.”

“That they did. Want anything to drink?”

“Sure.”

Aiden pulls two beers out of his fridge and cracks them open, handing me one.

I lean my forearms on Aiden’s kitchen island and pick at the label on my bottle. Aiden leans back on the counter across from me.

Aiden’s whole house would make Joanna Gains salivate. The kitchen has subway tile and white hand-painted cabinets over concrete countertops, and original wood floors which have been sanded and finished. Nothing about his place screams “bachelor.”

“So, I heard you and Laura are officially back together. Saw you dancing at the wedding ... and doing a little more than dancing.”

My smile is immediate and full.

Aiden nods.

“I owe you big time. As soon as I changed my approach, she softened. Well, soft for Laura. You know.”

“I do. She’s a firecracker. Always will be. That should keep you on your toes for years to come if you’re able to hold onto her.”

“That’s the thing.”

I take a sip of my beer and look Aiden in the eyes. He doesn’t say anything.

“That group who came out here from California called me today. They offered me more than I’d dreamed of—a pilot, possible syndication. And if those things don’t go through, they have backup options that rival the primary offer.”

“What’s the hitch?”

“I don’t think Laura will leave Bordeaux.”

“So, it comes down to the girl or the job.”

“Basically.”

Aiden nods. Maybe I’m not going to get a booster shot of wisdom

tonight. It still feels good to lay it all out in front of him instead of having a jumble of thoughts rattling around in my own brain.

“It’s not just Laura. I’m questioning everything.”

“I need a little more to go on if you want my input.”

I look out Aiden’s back window. “Like, why do I want this opportunity so badly? What am I trying to prove? And who do I need to impress? Will I really be happy if I move away from here—from all my friends—from her?”

“I don’t know if I ever really wanted to live in California, let alone Los Angeles. Though, one less tornado, thunderstorm or blizzard would not make me complain in the least.”

“Yeah. You get to trade those for earthquakes.”

“True.”

“And I hear you about California. You’d have to drug me to make me move off my farm and into that brand of crazy. The traffic alone would make me homicidal. But I’m not you.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t thought about.”

Aiden’s quiet. Then he says, “Bottom line. I don’t have a woman or a family to consider. If something big came my way, I’d have to ask myself what I’m losing and what I have to gain. Sounds like you’re doing that.”

“I feel like I’ve been chasing a cloud.”

“How so?”

“Like everything I thought mattered ...” I pause, take a sip of my beer. “I don’t know. It’s like everything I thought mattered isn’t really what matters.”

“You’re having your Dorothy moment,” Aiden says raising his eyebrows and crossing his legs at the ankles. He tips his beer at me to accentuate his point as if everyone should know what a Dorothy moment is.

“My what?”

“You know. Wizard of Oz. Dorothy spent all that time running around Oz trying to find something she thought she lacked, and she discovered a few things at the end of that adventure.

“One: if you see monkeys flying, that’s bad news. Two: witches melt from water. And thirdly, and most importantly: there’s no place like home, bro.”

“No place like home,” I echo like a parrot.

“You just need a pair of ruby slippers and you’ll be good to go,” Aiden says with a chuckle. “That doesn’t mean you stay here in Bordeaux. It just means you need to find your worth without chasing down the yellow brick

road. How you do that is up to you. Maybe you move to L.A. Maybe you stay here. Just stop looking for what you've already got."



AFTER TALKING WITH AIDEN, I feel like the fields after a solid rain—refreshed and full of possibility, maybe a little muddy too, but that will settle.

That man was meant to be a father. I hope he finds a woman someday and starts a family of his own. Of course, he'd have to get off the farm to find someone. It's not like a woman's going to land on his porch and fall in love with him. That's our running joke with him, even though he never laughs when we say it.

Wednesday passes with preparations for my trip, communication with the team in L.A. and dinner with my parents. I try to see if Laura will get together since I'm leaving tomorrow, but she says she feels too tired from her long workday.

Now it's Thursday and I'm on my way to L.A. without seeing her before I left. After claiming she had a random girls' night on a Tuesday and then shutting me down on a Wednesday when the only thing going on is Movies on Main, it's obvious what she's doing.

I know her too well not to read the writing on the wall. She's giving me the cold shoulder. I left her once. Now she thinks I'm about to leave her again and she's rebuilding the walls we've begun to tear down.

And, knowing Laura, I can't just call her on it. She'll deny it, or she'll push me further away. I need to think—to strategize. And that's what I'll be doing on my flight this afternoon and the whole time I'm in California on my mission to weigh out my options with Sun Valley.

One thing's non-negotiable. Laura will be a part of whatever decision I make. I lost her once. I'm not willing to lose her again. There's not a future on earth I want to consider without her by my side.

I don't need to validate myself with a Hollywood job or national notoriety. That's probably what would have made my mom happy, but I can't sell my own happiness to buy her approval. That's clear to me now. Seeing how I could lose Laura over the pursuit of my ambition served as a wakeup call.

My flight takes off from Columbus at three o'clock. I have my laptop

open the whole time, brainstorming scenarios that would be ideal for me. By the time I land, I have several proposals ready to share with John Silverberg.

Am I being presumptuous as a young YouTube sensation giving big names in Hollywood counteroffers? Probably. They could find another science hack who has camera appeal and an audience. Granted, I'm well-known and well-liked. That doesn't make me irreplaceable. Still, I know now that I have to fight for what matters most to me.

To say the next three days in California are jam packed would be an understatement. I'm picked up by a driver holding a sign with my name on it and driven straight to the Sun Valley studios in Burbank. Meetings fill my days and dinners and drinks with various executives and writers fill my nights.

I text and call Laura any time I'm not booked. She lets all my calls go to voicemail. She returns my texts, but she's aloof. "I'm happy for you." "Sounds so awesome." "Congratulations. This is what you've always wanted."

I grind my teeth. She sounds like a life coach, not my girlfriend. She could write Hallmark cards with her generic positivity. I want her back—every snarky, sassy, independent bone in her body. This watered-down, self-protected version of Laura is making me insane.

While I wait for my flight to Columbus to board, I text her again.

Rob: *I'm about to board the plane to come home.*

Laura: *Looks like we're ships in the night.*

Rob: *How so?*

Laura: *Frieda sent me a ticket to come visit. Angie and Dolores are covering for me for four days. I just need to get away for a bit and clear my head. So, I'm off to Daytona.*

Rob: *We need to talk.*

Laura: ...

I wait while the dots appear and disappear. She doesn't answer and the flight attendant calls for people in my section to join the line for boarding. I hoist my laptop bag onto my shoulder and walk toward the crowd lining up at the jetway. My eyes don't leave my phone the whole time.

I call Laura. She lets it go to voicemail, so I text her one more time.

Rob: *About to board the plane.*

Laura: *Have a nice flight.*

Rob: *You're ignoring me and it's driving me nuts. Is that your goal here?*

Laura: *No.*

Rob: *We'll talk when you get home.*

Laura: *Bossy.*

I smile. At least she's joking with me. That's always a sign she's still soft toward me.

Rob: *You have no idea. And I miss you. You can run, Jellybean. But you can't hide. We're going to talk when you get home.*

Laura: *Okay.*

I feel a three-day weight lift off my shoulders at that one word: Okay.

LAURA

There's a chronic sharp pain in my heart, like a jagged piece of glass slicing my hope into two brittle pieces.

When Frieda offered for me to come visit, I instantly said no way. I can't get away from the salon, especially not now. Somehow, she wore me down, even calling Angie and another stylist, Dolores, to persuade them to talk me into going. I don't tell Rob any of those details.

I can't bring myself to pick up the phone when Rob calls. Hearing his smooth, deep voice will undo me. I'll weaken and cave. Rob sees through me. Our inability to conceal our real thoughts and feelings from one another is one downfall of having known each other so long and so well. But his insight into me won't change the outcome of our circumstances.

My mom picks me up at the bottom of my stairs to drive me to the airport. I've been making a point of calling her once a week lately. I'm not up to having lunches or dinners together as often as she'd like quite yet. After I accepted Rob's apology, it's like a window opened and I saw all the ways unforgiveness has been like a corrosive poison in my life. So, I'm taking baby steps.

As it did before, my hurt threatens to solidify into anger. I fight the urge to rebuild the walls I so hesitantly tore down after forgiving Rob. It's not as much about him and the future we obviously won't share as it is about the person I want to be going forward.

Living with a grudge dominating my life exhausted me. I stood guard over every interaction and relationship, wary and defended. I don't want that existence anymore.

Did it spare me pain? Not even a little. In the end, loving Rob wrecked me anyway.

Ironically, I'm grateful I allowed him near. The past few months will be some of my sweetest memories ever—once the pain subsides, as it will over time. It has to. And maybe one day I'll eventually want to date someone else.

As soon as I'm on the airplane, I grab one of those tiny pillows that were fashioned for one of the seven dwarves. Maybe Sleepy. Though trying to use them makes me more like Grumpy. The "pillowcase" feels like it's made of something like Kleenex blended with industrial grade sandpaper.

I grab one of the baby blankets the airline provides while I'm snagging a pillow. Would it kill them to make these big enough for an average-size adult? The whole flight I'm going to have to choose if I want to warm the top or bottom half of my body.

And why are there only ten or twenty blankets to be divided between one hundred passengers. Are they trying to incite a mid-air reenactment of Lord of the Flies, the blanket saga?

I'm stashing my carry on under my seat when a man who looks to be about my age pauses just outside my row. He's attractive in a way that would have most women looking him over with appreciation. Sandy blond hair, full lips, kind hazel eyes, and strong, symmetrical features.

"Hi," he says. "I guess this is my seat."

I nod to him and say hi.

"Are you flying home, on business, or coming to Daytona for our famous beaches and night life?"

"I'm visiting a friend," I tell him, pulling my Kindle out to send the message that I'll be reading, not talking on this flight.

"Too bad," he says.

"Why's that?"

"If you lived in Daytona we could connect again."

"Wow. That's pretty presumptuous of you."

"I guess it is. Let's back up and start over. I'm Matt. My family owns a few resorts in Daytona. I do real estate investing. I didn't mean to come off so strongly. I don't have that great of a filter. I'm a work in progress, and that's an understatement."

Matt gives me this warm smile. There's something endearing about this guy. He's like a Labrador off leash, bounding up and licking your face, then wagging his tail in a way that keeps you from being able to get fully offended

or angry.

“So, tell me about you ...”

“Laura.” I fill in for him.

“Laura.” He says my name with a warm smile.

“I’m flying to see someone who’s been like a mom to me. She moved from Ohio to Florida a few months ago. I need a breather from life-on-life’s-terms, so she sent me a ticket to come visit.”

“And when you aren’t jet setting around visiting old friends what do you do?”

“I’m a hairdresser.”

Matt hums.

“Not very interesting, I know.”

“What makes you say that?”

Matt runs a hand through his wavy hair. He obviously uses product and cares about his hairstyle. He keeps it cut close to his head with the exception of the front layers that include longer bangs. It’s a great cut and he wears it well.

“I don’t know what I’d do without my hairdresser,” he says. “I’d look like Jesus. Nothing against Jesus. Just not the look I’m going for, you know?”

I laugh. It feels like sunlight streaming through a basement window. Ever since Rob got the job offers, I’ve been weighed down and defeated. Right now, I have a glimmer of something promising. Life can go on.

This guy, Matt, doesn’t do anything for me in the romance department, even though he’s got charm and looks to spare. My heart still belongs to Rob unequivocally.

“Well, I love being a hairdresser. It’s the way I’m able to build people up and make them feel better about themselves. And it’s not just about the hair, though I love that part of my job. It’s the sense of community the salon gives people. A friend of mine recently said I’m like an unofficial therapist.”

Right before he broke my heart.

“I know my hairdresser is my therapist. I don’t know how I would have gotten through my last breakup without Sissy.”

“Sissy?”

“The woman who cuts my hair. She’s brilliant with a pair of scissors. I wouldn’t let anyone else touch my hair.” Matt pauses and winks. “Well, maybe I’d let you, Laura.”

“You’re a flirt.”

“Guilty as charged. But I don’t flirt with just anyone.”

“Thanks,” I say. Then I add, “I have a boyfriend.”

I don’t know why I say it. I don’t really have a boyfriend anymore, but until Rob and I have the talk, I’m committed to him. Besides, as good as it feels to have a man show interest, I’m not young and dumb.

Matt wouldn’t be the one for me. I’ll need years to figure out if I ever want to give another man a chance. I can’t see opening that door unless I’m truly over Rob, and I can’t imagine ever really being over him.

“Ahh,” Matt says. “The good ones always do.”

“Not always,” I assure him. “Two of my best friends are single and they are both awesome.”

“Where do you live again?”

“That’s not anything I’m telling you.”

“Fair enough,” he says, lifting the cocktail napkin the stewardess laid under his drink and bending to grab a pen from his messenger bag. “But at least I can give you my number. You never know. You might just want to have one more friend in Daytona when you visit. I promise to behave if you friend zone me for good.”

“Somehow I find it hard to imagine you behaving.”

“Now you sound like my sister.”

I chuckle again.

“I can be good,” he promises, scrawling his phone number on the napkin and handing it over to me.

I stare at it for a few beats before I take it. I won’t use his number. But it seems rude not to take it from him.

Our flight goes by quickly. Matt tells me stories of himself and his brothers and various trips he’s taken. He got on this flight after a layover. He had been at a three-day music and arts festival in Canada with some old buddies. Matt’s fun and funny. From what I can tell, I don’t think he’s at a place in life to be relationship material yet. But when he decides to settle down with the right woman, he’ll definitely keep her smiling.

I end up telling Matt about the salon and S.O.S. At one point he offers to invest in the salon to help save it. I laugh. He looks at me with the sincerest expression.

“I’m serious, Laura. I’m an investor. That amount isn’t much considering what I usually invest in properties or businesses. And it’s a unique opportunity—saving a small-town salon.”

“My boyfriend offered the same thing.”

“And you didn’t take him up on it?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always?”

“Seems like it.”

I don’t say anything else about the salon or Rob’s offer. Matt must take the clue because he shifts to telling me about things I should do while I’m in Daytona. I’m pretty sure most of my sightseeing will be done between Frieda’s house and her mom’s retirement community, but it’s fun to hear my options.

We exit the plane and walk to baggage claim together. My heart feels lighter than I have in over a week.

When my bag comes around, Matt grabs it off the conveyor for me. He pops the handle on his suitcase and turns toward me.

“May I give you a hug?”

“Sure.”

He hugs me briefly, surprisingly not making things weird at all.

“Nice to meet you, Laura. Tell that boyfriend of yours he’s one lucky guy.”

“I’ll do just that,” I tell him. “Don’t get into too much trouble.”

He winks and turns to walk away. Frieda’s just outside the double doors. I tug my suitcase behind me and walk toward her.

The almost tropical humidity surrounds me as soon as the doors open. The breeze reminds me how close I am to the ocean. Frieda pulls me in for the biggest hug, not letting go when I push back a bit.

“You’re going to squeeze tears right out of me,” I warn her.

She smiles. “Tears are good for you. They clean out the grief. And who was *that*?”

“My seatmate.”

“Lucky girl. I always end up with old men who had too much to drink at the airport bar and pass out on my shoulder as if it’s a pillow the whole flight. The last guy even ended up drooling and snoring! I should fly for free. Figures you’d get him.”

“He was nice,” I say.

Frieda lifts her eyebrows in a little wiggle.

“Where did you park?” I ask.

“Over in the garage. This way. And I haven’t been away from you so

long that I don't remember what it's like to be rerouted from a topic of conversation by you. I'll drop the hot seatmate subject. I want to hear about Rob anyway."

"Let's talk about the seatmate."

"Not a chance."

The rest of the week feels like an actual vacation, even though we spend a good portion of each day visiting Frieda's mom. We play cards at night with Burt and then I try to sleep in the guest room, though my mind always circles back to thoughts of Rob and the ache in my heart he was meant to fill. Eventually I fall asleep.

Mornings Frieda and I take a walk and then we head over to visit her mom and hang out with the seniors. Even though nothing has changed, by the end of three days I feel a little lighter.

We're leaving the retirement home on my final day in Florida when Frieda turns to me and says, "Time is short. It's almost too cliché to mention. But I will anyway because I don't have any better way to say it."

Frieda looks over at me from the driver's seat and smiles. "Remember when I had to decide between the town I love and the salon I'd built up from nothing and my mom? It wasn't even a question as to which mattered more."

"What are you getting at?" I ask.

"You have to choose. What matters more, Bordeaux and a life you've always known, including your lifelong friendships there, or Rob?"

"It should be an easy choice."

"From where I'm sitting, it is. Let me put it this way. Can you picture living in Bordeaux without him and still being happy?"

"Not yet. But losing him is still fresh. In time I will."

"Like you were after he left for MIT?"

I give Frieda a look. She raises her eyebrows and gives me one right back.

"That was different. I couldn't forgive him then. I've moved past the resentment. This time I'm choosing to let him go. That means I'll get through the pain, given time."

Frieda shakes her head and draws her lips into a thin line. "Suit yourself. Being stubborn is a virtue when you're right, it's only a character flaw when you're wrong."

"Well now. That's deep."

"It's Chuck Noll. He coached the Steelers back in the day. I heard that

quote years ago and it hit me in the solar plexus. So, I kept it in my arsenal for times like this.”

“So, you think I’m wrong.”

“I think,” Frieda smiles over at me as she pulls onto the highway. “That you’d better be sure you’re right if you are going to dig your heels in this hard about something this important.”

We drive in silence for a while. The highway lined with groves of longleaf pine and buttonwood leads us back to Frieda’s neighborhood where modest brick homes are set apart in quarter acre lots.

“I’ve always belonged to Rob.”

My voice cuts through the silence. Frieda nods. She knows.

“As fiercely independent and seemingly unaffected as I can be, I’ve been his since I started dating him. But I’ve never really felt he was mine. I knew he loved me. He still does, but I’ve never felt like I mattered enough that he’d choose me.”

I take a deep breath. Saying everything out loud makes it more real.

“When it comes down to it, people see me as the free spirit. But they’ve got it all wrong. Rob’s the one who can’t be tethered.”

I look out the window as we pull into Frieda’s driveway. Her husband, Burt, is mowing the lawn. He looks up and waves at us.

“I’d be shortchanging both of us if I forced Rob to stay for me.”

“Maybe he doesn’t stay for you. Maybe you leave Bordeaux for him. It’s people, not places, that matter in life. I’m not a huge fan of Florida, but I’m the number one fan of my mama.

“I understand why you’re hesitant to leave Bordeaux. But imagine life there five, ten, twenty years from now. Then imagine that same life with Rob wherever the two of you would end up.

“You’ll know. If you love someone, you follow them anywhere. It’s not like you can’t come back and visit, or people can’t travel to you. Look at us. You’re here.”

Frieda kills the engine and hops out of the car. As if it’s just that easy. In her scenario, I would completely uproot my life and follow Rob across the country. He hasn’t even officially asked me to do that, so it’s a moot point.

But if he did, would I?

ROB

I'm standing on the sidewalk alongside the six lanes that run past the passenger loading zone at the John Glenn airport. The sound of vehicles and voices reverberate off the concrete ceiling and pillars.

It took me nearly an hour and a pastry from Oh! Sugar to convince Mrs. Lennox to allow me to surprise Laura by being the one to pick her up when her flight lands from Daytona.

I've had exactly one hour on the drive here and forty minutes waiting outside baggage claim to consider the foolishness of my decision. Laura's obviously been reconstructing the fortress she keeps around her heart ever since the possibility of me taking a position in California came to light.

Ambushing Laura never works. I may pay for showing up like this. Still, it's been over a week since we've seen one another—that night she ran her fingers through my hair and kissed me like I was her future. I don't think I can go one more day without seeing her. All this separation did was convince me I won't live without her.

I see her exit the sliding glass doors and I also notice the moment she recognizes me and realizes I'm here for her. She's fuming.

I instinctively raise both palms and approach her like I would a snarling stray dog. Not that Laura looks like a stray dog. Despite what must have been a four-hour flight, she's still breathtaking.

She has her long hair pulled away from her face and piled in a messy bun on top of her head. She's wearing jeans, Keds, and a shirt that says *Please Move, I Need to Get Bayou* with a cartoon alligator on it.

"Nice shirt," I say.

“You’re not my mom.”

“Let’s hope not. Especially not after that kiss you gave me last week.”

I wink. She doesn’t even crack a smile. I’m bombing out here, worse than a guy getting four Xs and a lecture from Simon Cowell on America’s Got Talent.

“Blindside is not my love language, Baldwin.”

I’m all in now. I already dove off the proverbial high dive. There’s no turning around. I may as well cannonball and hope for the best. Or maybe I’d have been better off with a half-gainer. I’m just hoping not to belly-flop at this point.

“I don’t think I’m going to move to California.”

“What?”

I grab the handle of Laura’s suitcase to start walking toward my truck. She grabs it back and I stifle a chuckle. She’s adorable when she’s fired up. I don’t love that she’s upset, and beneath the frustration, deeply hurt. But I have a ridiculous hope that we’ve come back from this once, and we’ll make it back again.

I let her pull her own suitcase, remembering what dad always said about choosing your battles wisely. At least she’s walking with me instead of remaining outside the passenger loading area with her arms folded.

“I don’t think I’m going to California.” I repeat.

“Why not?”

“Turns out I don’t really like the beach.”

She gives me the hairy eyeball. What does that saying mean anyway? Laura’s eyeballs are gorgeous. The only hair around them are her naturally full eyelashes which are nearly touching one another the way she’s squinting her eyes to narrow them at me.

You know who has hairy eyeballs? Ella Mae. Her eyeballs look like Muppets.

“Okay. I like the beach,” I admit.

I point down the row of parked cars toward my truck and extend my hand so Laura will give me the handle of her suitcase. She doesn’t.

When we approach the bed of my truck, she hoists the suitcase herself, then she flashes me a warning scowl that tells me she’ll let herself into the passenger seat without me holding her door open. I hop into the driver’s side of the cab and turn the key.

But I don’t drive right away.

“Can we talk?”

Laura shrugs.

“How about I talk, and you stare straight ahead while I tell you what’s on my mind.”

“That works,” she agrees.

I shift the truck into reverse and start navigating my way out of the parking structure.

“First of all, I’m sorry I bought your mom a pastry and bribed her into letting me come pick you up. Scratch that. I’m not sorry. But I’m sorry you feel blindsided.”

I pause, letting my words soak in.

“Forgiven.”

“Thank you. And I love that shirt. It’s so you. And if you weren’t so mad at me, I’d be finding a corner in this parking structure to park my truck so I could kiss you because kissing and holding you is all I could think of this past week.”

I’m glad she’s not looking at me because I don’t want to see her expression as I plow forward.

“I love you. I missed you like someone had cut off my leg ... and my arm, and every other good part of me. Every time something awesome happened in California, I wanted you there. All I wanted was to come home to you and tell you everything that had gone on, all the possibilities and the way it scared the daylights out of me, but also thrills me.”

I dare to sneak a glance at Laura. She’s impassive, but softer.

“I’ve already lost you once, Laura. I don’t want to lose you again.”

“So you’re deciding to throw it all away? You can’t do that!”

I try to speak, but now she’s on a roll. At least she’s talking to me—it’s yelling, but still.

“You were made for this kind of opportunity, Rob. It’s why you went to MIT in the first place. You are brilliant and creative, but you’re one of those geeks who lucked out and got to be smokin’ hot on top of your brains.”

Okay. This I can work with.

“And because you are both hot and brilliant, your fans love you. Well, the charm helps. It helps a lot.”

I’m fighting a smile. Literally, I’m biting a small section of my tongue to keep the smile from breaking free. If I smile, Laura will kill me and bury my body somewhere along State Route Forty-Eight.

“And those people in LA might find another geeky scientist, but they won’t find you. And it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. You could do anything. You could work for NASA or Google or Boeing. But this position suits you so much more. You have to take it, Rob. I won’t let you pass it up just to stay in our unknown, crazy little town so you can build things in your basement.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and gives her head a light bob as if to say the matter’s closed.

“You make me sound so Doc Frankenstein.”

“Did you even hear me?”

“I did. You won’t let me come home.”

“You won’t end up happy here. You’ll live with a constant sense of regret. I can’t be a part of that—of drawing you away from your destiny.”

“Have you heard me?”

My voice takes a more commanding tone. She’s not listening and as endearing as the fiery side of Laura is to me, I need her to listen.

“I heard you.”

“Did you hear me last week when I said I don’t want any future that doesn’t include you?”

“Yes. I heard you.”

“Why are you fighting this so hard? We should be working together. You had every right to be mad at me for the way I left when I broke things off the summer after high school. And you’ve had every right to question my intentions up until a few months ago.

“But now? You don’t have a reason to question me. I’ve left you love notes. I’ve texted. I’ve called you—and kept things just shy of stalker level. Even when I was in California I called and texted you daily. I’ve brought you meals. I sat on those rickety steps waiting for you to come home just so I could gather a few moments at the end of a day with you. And none of that was a hardship, but it should mean something.

“I’ve gone out of my way to show you how much you matter. Because you matter, Jellybean. You matter more than any opportunity to advance my career. What’s it going to take for you to believe me? Why don’t you trust me yet?”

Well. That wasn’t what I had planned on saying.

Laura sits stock still. She’s quiet for nearly a half hour. We sit together with my words suspended between us. I don’t dare say a thing.

When Laura finally speaks her voice comes out smaller and more wary

than I've ever heard her.

"My dad left us the day you broke up with me. He left for another woman—a woman with ambition. She's worldly and she doesn't hold him back. Margo's everything my mom wasn't. You couldn't find two women who are more polar opposites.

"My dad hated my mom for wanting to stay in Bordeaux. He blamed her for his lack of success in the world. And she was always possessive, wanting him to be here more with us and give up everything that dragged him away. They were miserable."

"I know they were."

"I don't want you to resent me."

"I never would."

"You can't say that. Do you think my parents married planning to hate one another? No one starts out a lifetime commitment thinking they'll end up in divorce after years of bickering and vitriol between them. But it happens. I've always known the time would come when you would be called on to greater things. And when that time came, I would have to let you go again."

"So you've decided this for me?"

"I'm looking out for you."

We pull into Laura's neighborhood. I can't believe the turn our conversation has taken. What started with me ready to tell her I'm giving up the opportunity to go to California so we can be together ended with us nearly in a fight.

"Laura, I'm not your dad. And you're not your mom. I'm not the only brilliant and smokin' hot person in this truck. Use your bright mind to seriously think things through. Take your parents out of the equation. We don't have to have their story. We get to have ours. That is if you'll drop your guard long enough to let us."

I put the truck in park, hop out, take her suitcase out of the back bed and wheel it over to her. She takes the handle once I release it.

"You've got some thinking to do," I tell her.

Another part of me jumps up and down inside, flailing its arms and telling me to stop. But we're past the point of holding back here. Something bigger tells me this needs to be said.

"I'm going to give you space to do think—really think about us and about what you want," I tell Laura. "I have definitely not given up on us."

Laura looks at me. Her face usually tells me everything I need to know.

Right now, I can't figure her out.

I shove my hands in my pockets and say, "I didn't expect our conversation to go this direction, but I'm glad it's all out there. Now you need to decide what you want. If you want me, and you're willing to take a risk, we can move to California together or we can stay here together. Or we can move to Maine, become vegans and buy a matching set of Birkenstocks while we make homemade candles on our self-sustaining farm. I don't care what we do. What matters to me is building a life with you. If that's what you want."

I look her in the eyes, keeping my hands in my jeans so I don't reach out and touch her, or pull her to me like every cell in my body is screaming for me to do.

"Ball's in your court, Jellybean."

I give her one last look and then I walk to the driver's side of my truck, hop in and back out of her driveway while she stands still watching me go.

LAURA

T rue to his word, Rob has given me space.

The past week since I got back from Florida, he may as well still be in California, or anywhere for that matter. There haven't been notes or surprise packages on my porch. I've gotten no texts or calls. He hasn't shown up with dinner and foot rub. It's like he's vanished.

And I miss him.

On one hand, I respect Rob's willpower and the fact that he really is giving me time to think things through. On the other hand, I'm climbing the walls with indecision, confusion, and an empty space in my heart that only he can fill.

But I know Rob's right. I have to think about our relationship and what I really want. I've always assumed when Rob left, I'd stay behind and nurse my broken heart. Looking through the filter of my parent's broken marriage I expected unavoidable grief.

We both deserve me giving our future fresh consideration—factoring in him and me and no one else.

Lexi and Trevor came back from their honeymoon. So, tonight we're all gathering at Jayme and Shannon's to have the girls' night we promised Lexi on her return.

I'm pulling up in front of their house when my phone rings. The next-door neighbor kids are running around in the yard playing some form of what looks like a game of tag, only they are wielding pool noodles and badminton racquets and there's a lot of screaming going on. This right here would be why Jayme borrows my key to do her more serious writing sprints.

I park my car and pull my phone off the passenger seat. It's Frieda.

"Hey, beautiful girl."

"Hi, Frieda. What's going on?"

"Do I need a motive to call you?"

"No, but it's after dinner, so I figure something's up."

"Okay. You got me there. I'll skip right to the good news. Someone made an anonymous donation of the exact amount needed to make up the difference of what we've collected in the S.O.S. We don't have to close the salon!"

I grip the steering wheel in one hand and my phone in the other. My mind attempts to roll through the details of what Frieda just said.

Anonymous donation.

The exact amount.

It has to be someone who knew what we needed.

"You know who it is," I say.

"That doesn't matter. And even if I did, it's anonymous. I can't tell you."

I blow out a sigh wondering who in Bordeaux has that kind of discretionary income. I imagine that guy Matt taking the initiative to figure out who I am, then going to the trouble of locating Frieda and contacting her. It's too elaborate and far-fetched. It has to be a townspeople.

I consider one particular hot local scientist and then I have the overwhelming urge to both strangle and kiss him. Not at the same time, of course. I'd strangle him and then resuscitate him and then kiss the daylight out of him. But then I'd want to strangle him again, because he should not have done this. I specifically told him not to.

"Was it Rob?"

I have to know.

Frieda ignores my question. "Their condition is that you take over as owner."

This is so Rob. It has Rob written all over it.

"How did he come up with ten thousand dollars?"

"Laura," Frieda says like she's waving smelling salts under my nose and trying to revive me. "You won't squeeze a name out of me, and it doesn't matter. The point is the salon is saved and you are the new owner."

It's him. I know it in my bones. He went all white-knight, Rambo, Goonies never say die on me and saved the salon.

Frieda and I talk a little longer, though I couldn't tell you much of what is

said between us because my mind keeps swinging on a pendulum between, *I'm going to kill him to How will I ever deserve him?*

I shut the car door and walk up to Jayme and Shannon's. A pool noodle flies at me and bounces off my head just before I make it onto the porch.

"You're it!" one of the neighbor kids shouts.

"Safe zone!" I shout back.

I can't help smiling at life as it should be—kids running around in front yards assaulting unsuspecting townspeople with pool noodles after dinner while friends gather in living rooms. Maybe Rob and I can build something that includes all this and doesn't hold him back. It's worth trying.

After I kill him for overstepping and buying the salon.

A chorus of my three favorite girlfriends greets me as I open the door. And Groucho makes the effort to stand and waddle over to me, making greeting noises that alternate between sounding like he swallowed a canary, an antique rocking chair or a broken garbage disposal.

I bend down, and in my baby bulldog voice I reserve only for this dog, I say, "Who's happy to see me? Is it Groucho?"

He answers by wagging his little nub of a tail and smiling through the folds of skin on his face.

"I'd kiss you but you stink, big boy."

"How many times in your life have you had to use that line?" Shannon asks from the couch.

"Ha ha."

Lexi gets out of her chair to come give me a big hug.

"Welcome back to Bordeaux," I say.

"It's good to be back. California's beautiful, but it's not home."

I try not to take those words to heart. It could be my home, someday. *Baby steps*, I remind myself.

"Well," I say, unable to contain the news much longer. "Frieda just called."

"Just now?" Jayme asks.

"Yep. Someone made an exact donation and the S.O.S. fund met its goal. The salon's staying open."

My three friends cheer and shout out "Oh my gosh!" and "This is awesome!"

When they calm down, I sit on the couch next to Jayme. "I'm pretty sure it was Rob."

“Could he do that?”

“He offered a while back and I forbade him.”

“Why would you do that?” Lexi asks.

“Because. For one thing I don’t want to owe him anything. For another, he may not even be staying in Bordeaux. And because I wanted to make my way without him.”

“Again. Why?” This time it’s Jayme asking.

“I don’t quite know. Probably pride. Maybe fear.”

I don’t want to be self-defended and strong right now. My honesty appears to have stunned my friends into silence. They look like a set of figurines, or the statues in Narnia after the White Witch cast her curse, where the last facial expression the person had remains on their face when they are turned to stone.

I clap my hands to break the spell.

Shannon has the most careful look on her face, and she speaks to me in a gentle and slow voice. “What are you afraid of, Laura?”

“You know. The usual. Rejection. Loss. Reliving my parents’ marriage and divorce.”

Baby steps. Even though these are my closest friends, I’m not usually this open.

“That’s so normal,” Lexi says. “I avoided pursuing Trevor out of fear of those same things. Well, I didn’t fear I’d repeat your parents’ marriage or divorce, but otherwise, yeah. No one wants to face real rejection. Especially not when they’re putting their heart on the line.”

“You’re not your mom.” Shannon says.

“Funny, that’s what Rob said.” I tell her.

“You’ve talked to him about this?” Lexi’s mouth literally pops open.

“We actually had a pretty honest conversation. He left on the note of basically: figure yourself out, Jellybean, because you’re a hot mess, but for some reason I still believe in us.”

“Who wouldn’t believe in you?” Jayme asks, ever the romance novelist.

“Me.”

“Well, then, you’re on an island of one. Oh. With Rob’s mom. I think she doesn’t believe in you two either.” Shannon jokes.

“Why would you want to stay on an island with her when you could join the rest of us on the mainland of Rob and Laura for-ev-ah?” Jayme asks.

I roll my eyes.

“I always felt like Rob was too good for me. Even when we dated way back in tenth grade. I know he was the geekier one while I had all the guys asking me out. But he always seemed too good for me.

“He’s made me see myself through his eyes these past few months. But now. I don’t know. He’s got opportunities to go to California and build a life there. I can’t give up everything I love, my town, my friends, the only place I’ve ever called home, and start a life in California. I don’t even like when there are three cars lined up at the light on Main Street. How would I survive out there?”

“Wait. Why would he buy the salon for you and then move you to California?” Lexi asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Sounds like you two need to talk,” she says.

“We do. But I need to figure myself out first. Now, enough about me. Tell us all about California and your honeymoon.”

“The PG parts,” Shannon adds with a wag of her eyebrows.

We laugh and Lexi takes over the conversation describing the inns where they stayed, the sights they saw, the various beaches and excursions they went on, and how incredible it feels being married.

LAURA

“Dad, hi. It’s me, Laura.”

“I know it’s you, buttercup. I’ve got caller I.D. like the rest of the iPhone toting world. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Um. Well. I wanted to apologize for missing the gender reveal. And. Well. I thought I’d come out to visit. You know? If that’s good. Or when it’s good for you and Margo. Or just you. Whatever. It doesn’t have to be soon. We can wait for a holiday.”

“Slow down, sweetheart. Let me answer. You’re welcome here anytime. We have a guest room set up for you or your sister or both of you, though if she came with Jack and the girls, they’d have to take both the guest rooms and you’d stay in the fixed-up part of the basement. Point is, you’re welcome and we’d love to have you.”

“Thanks.”

Silence fills the line.

“So what was the gender? At the reveal, I mean.”

“It’s a boy.”

“A boy.”

“Yep. Which is great, because I already have two daughters and three granddaughters, and I might like to try my hand at the whole boy-dad thing since I messed up the girl-dad gig pretty royally.”

“It’s not like that gig is up. You’ve got time to keep practicing on that one.”

“Do I?”

“If you want it.”

“You’ll never know how much.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for? I’m the one who left you and your mom and didn’t even have the decency to talk to you about my decision.”

“Well, I paid you back for long enough.”

“Laura, I’m sorry. I haven’t even done a good job of making things right. Though I’ve tried to do right by you from a distance. And here you are coming to me.”

“It’s been a season of learning about forgiveness.”

“Well, you’re teaching your old man a thing or two. When would you like to come out? Or do you want us to come there?”

“I’ll come to you. I’ve got to figure out details about the salon. It almost closed, but then the town raised money, and someone made a huge anonymous donation. And now ... well, now I’m the owner.”

“That’s great, buttercup. You’ll make a great owner. I know you’ll do right by the Dippity Do.”

“You remember the name.”

“Of course, I do. It’s the salon where I got my hair cut for years. Frieda and Burt were old friends of your mom’s and mine. I’m glad you’ve been there for Frieda when things went south with her mom.”

“You knew about that?”

“I’m still in touch with Gene, their realtor. And Burt and I have a few other friends in common. I didn’t burn all my bridges,” Dad pauses and lets out a sigh. “Only the most important ones.”

“They’re not burnt. We just shut them down for repairs.”

“I like that.”

“Well.”

More silence.

“I’ll let you go,” Dad says softly. “Call when you have a date in mind for a visit. And give Rob my regards. He’s a good man, Laura. Almost worthy of you, if you want your dad’s opinion.”

“Thanks. I might just keep him.”

We say our goodbyes. I don’t say I love you when he does. Not yet. But reaching out was something. I’m doing what I need to. Somehow seeing my mom weekly and clearing the air with my dad adds up to me getting ready for

what's next with Rob.

If there is a next for us.

ROB

I'm driving home to an empty house again tonight. It takes everything in me not to turn around and drive to Laura's. It's been two weeks since I've talked to her and over three weeks since I've touched her. But, hey, who's counting?

I'm doing my utmost to give her time and space. She has to be the one to make a move this time.

I chased her. I waited. I wooed.

Whatever, Trevor. I wooed the dickens out of that woman.

And she's worth it all. But she has to figure herself out now. All I can do is respect her enough to give her the space to determine her own mind and heart.

So, I turn onto my street, reminding myself just for today I can stay away from Laura. I'll handle giving her space tomorrow when tomorrow comes. I'm just barely managing to stay away tonight.

I'm brainstorming options to fill the next four empty hours when my phone rings. It's Trevor. My old truck doesn't have Bluetooth, but I'm on a country road outside my neighborhood and Jesse never drives out this way, so I answer.

"Hey!" Trevor's cheery voice tells me he's riding the pink cloud of early marriage.

"You sound entirely too happy."

"Married life, my friend. Married life."

"Remind me why I answered this call."

"Sorry. I'm being highly insensitive. I'll dial back my joy for your sake."

Tell me something good.”

“I sold the drone case.”

“What? That’s awesome.”

“Yeah. I forgot to mention it with everything else going on. The deal went through the same day the Sun Valley people were out here. While you were basking on some beach with your bride.”

“Good memories.”

“I’m sure. And in case I haven’t told you, I don’t want to hear about your honeymoon. Or your marriage.”

“Okay, Scrooge. Should I start rationing coal?”

“Maybe.”

“She’ll come around.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re doing what’s right. And if you’ll recall, all this married bliss of mine was preceded by years of agony—including watching Lex date a bunch of men who should have been on America’s Most Wanted or The Twilight Zone.”

“True. I forget. You two seem like you’ve been together forever. It’s easy for me to blot your friend zone days out of my memories. Still, spare me the sweeter details until I have a little more distance from this season of my relationship with Laura. If we even have a relationship anymore.”

“You do.”

“Do you know something? Did Lexi break the girl code and spill details about Laura. Because I think this would be a time when you could justify sharing something she told you in confidence. Put me out of my misery. Throw me a bone.”

“One. There will never be a time when anything will justify breaking Lexi’s confidence. And two. No. She didn’t tell me anything.”

“Okay. Point taken.”

I’m hitting new lows trying to coax Rob into betraying Lexi just to quell my breaking heart.

“Anyway, congrats on the sale of the drone case.”

“Thanks.”

“What are you doing with the proceeds?”

“I invested them.”

“You bought the salon,” Rob says as more of a statement than a question. I’m shocked at the fact that he seems so certain.

“You bought the salon,” he repeats.

I don’t answer him because I wonder who else suspects that I made the final donation.

“I ...”

I can’t finish that thought because I’m turning into my driveway and what I see has me dropping my phone onto the floorboard of my truck.

I hear Trevor’s voice from below my seat. “Rob? Are you there?”

I shout, “Yeah. Yeah. I’m here. I dropped the phone. Look. I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

I reach down and grope around for my phone. When I lift it, I click it off. Then I hop out of my truck and walk as casually as possible toward my porch.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey.”

I don’t move. I’m about six feet away from my front steps where Laura’s sitting with a large Pop’s pizza.

“I got sausage, olive and onion.”

“What will you eat?”

“Whatever you’re having.”

It’s a loaded statement. We stare at one another. Does she mean what I think she means?

“I’m done thinking,” she says as she stands up. “Don’t just stand there. Our food is getting cold, and you know how I hate cold pizza. Unless it’s for breakfast. I love it for breakfast.”

“Are you eating breakfast here?”

“Not so fast, Mayhem.”

“A man can dream.”

“You can.”

I can? I can! I try to slow myself down, but everything’s pointing toward something I don’t even dare imagine right now.

Dreams mean the future. Our future.

“Come on in.”

“I’d better,” she says. “I don’t know how to do a Decker impersonation.”

“I can still give you a tip,” I say, walking past her and unlocking my door.

“Maybe. Let’s talk first.”

First. First is good. Talk then tips. I can do that.

If there were a little Irishman living in my heart, he’d be doing that jump

where they click their heels together. From the feel of it, there's an entire legion of leprechauns doing some sort of Riverdance inside my heart right now.

"Let me get plates."

I walk into my kitchen and take down two plates. I grab two root beers out of the fridge and offer Laura one. She spreads the pizza box on the table. We each take slices.

"I want to kiss you," I blurt.

Smooth, Rob.

"Me too. But ..."

"I'll wait. I'm just saying. It's really hard to think right now. You're here, and I didn't know if you'd be here ... or what we'd be doing, and then you came with pizza. I've been giving you space, and now you're here. I'm just ... blabbering and making a fool out of myself."

Laura laughs and covers her mouth with one hand to keep the bite she just took from spraying all over.

"It's pretty cute when you blabber."

"Dorky is cute?"

"On you it is."

I take a breath. Then I take a bite.

"So," Laura says. "I did a lot of thinking. First of all, I wanted to kill you after the whole donation thing."

"Kill me?"

"I told you not to save the salon."

"I didn't."

"Rob. I know. I mean, Frieda didn't tell me. But it's pretty obvious. You offered last month. You have the means. Not very many other people around here do, and those who could afford that large of a contribution wouldn't make one. It's okay. I was livid, but then I talked to the girls and I'm not anymore. It's actually sweet. But I was beyond mad—at first."

"No. Laura. You don't understand. I really didn't. I wanted to, but I've messed up enough things with you. I'm trying to give you room and respect. If you wanted to save the salon or let it go down on its own merit, I honored that.

"All I gave was the hundred I dropped in the fishbowl at the community center and the portion of what I paid for myself to go out with you at the bachelor auction. Honest. I mean I do hate the idea of Memaw and Esther

driving to Beavercreek in a snowstorm just to get a wash and curl. But I didn't save the salon."

"Then who?"

I shrug.

Laura sits silently pondering. I can almost see her wheels turning. We both take bites of our pizza. I shamelessly take in the sight of her leaning back in one of my kitchen chairs, her hair flowing over her shoulders, her full lips which I absolutely will be kissing after we clear the air. Her eyes, so intent right now as she puzzles through the mystery. I could study her every minute for the rest of my life and never tire of it.

"No way!" she shouts. "There's no way."

"What?"

"It can't be. Can you give me a minute?"

"Sure. Take all the time you need."

Laura pulls her phone out of her purse and dials someone.

"Hey. I don't mean to disturb you," she says. "Was it my dad?"

I watch her facial expression morph. Her brows furrow. Then they lift. She looks like she might cry and then she smiles a fragile smile.

"You don't have to say anything else. I already know."

She pauses while whomever she's talking to says something.

"I know. I talked to him today. Don't worry. I won't tell him you said anything. Thanks, Frieda. I love you."

She pauses.

"Okay. Bye."

Laura shakes her head. "My dad."

She stares at me, a look of wonder in her eyes.

"My dad paid the difference to the S.O.S fund. I thought you were the one who made that crazy donation. I wanted to kill you, then kiss you, but mostly kill you. But it wasn't you. It was my dad, Rob. My dad bought that salon for me."

Laura looks at me for a long minute. When she starts to tear up, I'm by her side before I have a chance to think about what I'm doing. I squat low in front of her, placing one hand on her knee and reaching up to stroke her hair with the other.

"My dad, Rob," she says through her tears.

I give her a knowing smile.

She looks down at me. Tears gently flow down her cheeks, and she lets

them fall. I've never seen her like this. She's so unguarded. There's a new softness to her features. It's still Laura, but something's changed.

"You can kiss me," she says, wiping a tear away. "We'll talk later. We've got time."

I stare at her, trying to integrate this new side of her into what I already know.

"Would you kiss me already?"

"Bossy."

"You have no idea."

I laugh as I shift my hand, tugging her head toward me. She moves willingly and our mouths meet. Our kiss doesn't start light or careful. We're ravenous for one another—for the reclaiming of our relationship.

Laura grabs the back of my head and holds us together. I'm still squatting down from when I came over to comfort her, and I start to lose my balance. I wobble and she tries to keep our mouths together, but I go down, pulling her with me. It's not even glamorous.

Laura's elbow lands on my ribs. Her other hand braces her fall on the floor. I'm flat on my back. She's splayed half on me, half off.

Laughter bubbles up out of us as we lie on my kitchen floor, our legs still tangled together.

"Let's do that again. I need a do-over," I say through my laughter.

Laura lifts her head, props herself on her elbow and we lock eyes.

She runs a hand across the stubble on my jaw and says, "You can have as many do-overs as you need, Mayhem."

"Really?"

"A lifetime's worth."

EPILOGUE

LAURA

“**S**he thought I’d end up choosing between Rebecca Pearson and Miss Frizzle. Her words. I’m just quoting.” Rob teases.

“Good thing you worked out a deal to stay here and only fly to California once a month for filming,” Trevor says.

“Yeah. The temptation of all those science geeks out in California might have been too much for me.”

“Not to mention the plethora of nineteen-fifties housewife types just dotting the beaches, waiting for the ideal YouTube sensation to come sweep them off their high-heeled feet,” Trevor jokes.

I give Rob a playful smack and shoot Trevor a warning glare.

“I still think Miss Frizzle would make the perfect match for you.” I tell Rob.

“You make the perfect match for me,” Rob says, leaning across the corner of Aiden’s kitchen island and kissing my cheek.

Rob loops an arm behind me and tugs me toward him until I’m tucked in front of him, and his arms are wrapped around from behind me.

Lexi’s laughing and holding her belly. “Stop talking about Rob and Miss Frizzle. You’re going to make me have to ... never mind, I can’t say it in front of Rob or Aiden.”

The back door clatters shut behind Aiden as he walks in from checking the meat on the grill.

“Fifth wheel here. What can’t you say in front of me?” he asks.

“Nothing.” Lexi says.

“She can’t say she’s going to spring a leak.” I say, sending her a

sympathetic grin. “It’s a pregnant woman problem.”

“It is!” Lexi agrees. “I have a new appreciation for all the things my mom endured for me and Felicia now. Pregnancy’s not for the faint of heart. Not to scare you off.”

“I’m not scared,” Rob says.

“Because you won’t be the one carrying our babies.” I remind him.

“First things first,” Aiden says. “Let’s get you two married off. You know. You’ve got the whole sitting in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G thing down pat, as the whole town of Bordeaux can attest. But first comes love ... then marriage ... then the baby in the baby carriage.”

“That’s the plan,” Rob says.

I lean back on him, but he shifts his weight.

I turn to see why he’s moving, and I gasp.

He’s squatting down toward the floor and by the time his knee hits the finished wood planks, tears are springing to my eyes.

It’s not even funny how much forgiving my parents and Rob over the past year has made me into an emotional kaleidoscope, or fountain, or basket case, depending on the day. I cry at movies, laugh more than ever before, and simply feel everything. I’m not complaining. It’s just taking some adjusting to live so unguarded.

“What are you doing?” I ask Rob.

“I think you know,” he says, looking up at me. His eyes are brewing up a storm like no other. His perfect mouth tilts in a delightfully mischievous smile and he’s pulling something out of his pocket. I know what it is, but I still can’t believe it.

My hand flies to my heart without me intending it to. This is really happening.

“Laura Lennox. You’ve watched me make the biggest mistakes of my life. The most devastating and foolish one was walking away from you. You’ve taken me back and given me unlimited forgiveness. You’ve owned my heart ever since before you snuck me into the Clawson’s barn, or drove a stolen tractor down Main at midnight, or dared me to run through White’s cornfield in flip flops and a swimsuit on New Year’s Eve in a snowstorm. You were my first kiss and I want you to be my last.

“You challenge me. You thrill me. You make me a better man. Will you do me the honor of being Mrs. Mayhem? I promise I’ll sometimes make you regret saying yes, but I also promise to make you happier than Mabel was

when Walt Satterson finally asked her on a proper date. I don't want Miss Frizzle or Rebecca Pearson. I just want you. Always have. Always will. What do you say?"

"Man, what a proposal!" Aiden says, shaking his head and chuckling.

I turn my eyes for just a moment to give Aiden the side-eye. Whatever possessed Rob to do this in front of our friends is beyond me.

"I didn't steal the tractor. We borrowed it and brought it back. For the record."

Aiden blows out an amused puff of air and smiles at me.

I look back at Rob who has the most tenderhearted, sincere expression on his face. "I do. I will. I mean, yes," I stutter out.

Rob stands up, his eyes fixed on mine as if we're the only two people in the room. We both watch my hand as he takes it in his and gently slides the ring onto my finger. Then he glances from my hand to my face. "It's Grams' ring. We can pick another one if you want."

I look down at the ring and back up at Rob. "It's perfect."

He leans in and kisses me. His hand caresses my arm. I loop my hand behind his neck and give a little squeeze. We keep our kiss short and sweet because, you know, our friends are all watching.

Aiden starts lightly humming the K-I-S-S-I-N-G song.

Rob pulls his mouth away from mine. "We really need to find you a girlfriend, Aiden."

We remind Aiden of this fact at least once a week.

"Who wants Tri-tip?" Aiden asks, avoiding the subject of romance as usual.

Trevor congratulates me and Rob and then follows Aiden out the back door with an offer to help take the meat off the grill. Lexi walks over to me and hugs me.

The bulge of her six-month pregnant belly presses between us as she tugs me close. "I'm so happy for you, Laura. You two belong together."

Lexi pulls back from our embrace and says, "Congratulations, Rob."

She walks toward the counter to unwrap the potato salad she and Trevor brought and then she carries it into the dining room.

Rob spins me around to face him.

"You said yes," he says in a low voice for my ears only.

I smile. "I did. But can we elope?"

Rob chuckles and brushes a lock of hair away from my face. "Let's talk

details later.”

“I can’t believe you’re mine,” I tell him quietly, running my hand along his face.

Rob tilts toward me until our mouths are a finger’s width apart. And in his warm caress of a voice, he says, “I’m yours, Jellybean. All yours”

Then he leans in and kisses me with a softness that tells me he’s mine in ways his words never could, and I allow myself to relax into his arms.

This man owns my whole heart and I trust him to keep it safe.



Want more of the *Getting Shipped!* series?

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A little note from me to you ...

I grew up in a small college town in southwest Ohio with farmland all around the outskirts, rivers and gorges to play in, and plenty of woods to hike in.

People stopped to chat when they ran into one another in the grocery (while impatient kids watched the ice cream melt in the cart). Neighbor children ran in and out of one another's homes all day long until supper time.

We caught fireflies at night in the summer, sledged down snowy hills on campus, and sat around bonfires on our friends' farms chatting, singing and driving the tractors long before we had any license to drive. (*Shhh. Don't tell.*)

I adore Ohio, so all jokes about the location in *Battle(shipped)* were purely in fun. Ohio culture is kind and the landscape and history is rich.

I love writing books that make people laugh, have a little life lesson tucked away in them somewhere, and end with a happily ever after that gives us all a smile in our hearts. Thank you for letting me share my stories with you.

All the Thanks ...

A story is birthed in one imagination, but it is raised by many hands and hearts.

I want to thank **Emily Poole**, my copy editor. Your feedback made Rob into such a better book boyfriend! I appreciate you!

Kirsten (Kiki) Oliphant, there are no words ...

Okay. I've got a few ...

You are the first and foremost influence on my life as a writer. Your coaching, training, online support, and behind-the-scenes encouragement have helped me grow like NO OTHER.

Beyond that, our friendship is one of my favorite places to hang out in this world. Here's to alligators, Marco Polo, and reading books in tandem.

Readers can (and should) find Kiki's books under the pen names Emma St. Clair for sweet-clean romance and RomCom and Women's Fiction, and Sullivan Gray for paranormal fiction.

Jessica Gobble, You are my bestie and my sister from another mister, pie sharer (okay, we'll work on that one), and soft place to land. And yes, Damon, we're on the phone *AGAIN*. Jessie, I love you. You are my favorite. Thank you for being along for this wild ride. Our read-alouds are some of my favorite times. I would NOT be here without your love and belief in me.

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To my **Awesome Advanced Readers** and the **AMAZING Bookstagram Community**. I am so thankful for the way you support each book I write. Your sharing and celebrating of my work helps get these books out into the hands of other readers.

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Most of all, I want to thank **God** for calling me to be a storyteller and giving me the ability to make others smile and laugh.