

BOMBSHELLS

A BROOKLYN BRUISERS NOVEL

SARINA BOWEN

BOMBSHELLS

SARINA BOWEN

Copyright © 2021 by Sarina Bowen

Thank you Natasha

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover photo by Wander Aguiar

*This book is dedicated to the [Sarindipity readers' group](#).
You guys keep me showing up for work every day. Thank you!*

CONTENTS

1. [Anyone Get it on Video?](#)
2. [Like the Caribbean Sea](#)
3. [Big No No](#)
4. [An Ocean of Mercy](#)
5. [The Right Kind of Screw](#)
6. [Polish and Brighten](#)
7. [Sniper Speed](#)
8. [Such a Grind](#)
9. [The Tavern on Hicks](#)
10. [Part Mermaid](#)
11. [Never forget a woman](#)
12. [I just jinxed us](#)
13. [Some saves are guesswork](#)
14. [You could do this professionally](#)
15. [The Twist](#)
16. [A little safety pin](#)
17. [Nowhere to hide](#)
18. [Ice Ice Baby](#)
19. [The Whole Catholic Thing](#)
20. [Zambonis](#)
21. [Hockey stop](#)
22. [The Tavern Again](#)
23. [The Shots you never take](#)
24. [Gretsky was right](#)
25. [Marry Me](#)
26. [Darling One](#)
27. [Yes](#)

ANYONE GET IT ON VIDEO?



SEPTEMBER

ANTON

It's a Wednesday afternoon during the preseason, and I should really be in the locker room. But I'm standing in an office in the Bruisers' headquarters, waiting to find out if I still have a NHL career.

Practice starts in thirty minutes. If they wanted me down there, I'd already know, wouldn't I?

My hands are clammy and my heart rate is erratic. So this is what it feels like when fate brings the hammer down. If only I could go back in time and make better choices. I wouldn't be standing here sweating.

Couldn't they just fire me already? I'm dying here.

Prayer probably won't work, even if this is one of those moments when I'm tempted to bargain with God. What would I even say?

Dear Lord—I'm sorry for all the cockiness I displayed last year. You know my stats were great during my rookie season. But then I kinda self-destructed.

I'm sorry I didn't leave the bar earlier all those times when I should have.

I'm sorry about missing the team jet that time in Arizona when I had no business being so hungover in the middle of a road trip.

On the matter of a certain compromising photo, I think we can both agree that the incident with those women was not really my fault. But I do apologize for putting myself in that situation and allowing for that tacky result.

But I am most sorry for the worst sin of all—squandering all those opportunities. You gave me a shot at greatness. But I started my second season on the struggle bus. And after that disastrous game against Chicago, you (in your infinite wisdom) sent me down to purgatory—aka the minor league team in Hartford. I had to watch on TV while the Bruisers went to the playoffs.

This summer I repented. I ran seven miles every day, even on the ones when New York City was as humid and gross as a used practice jersey.

I didn't skip a workout in the gym, either. In the evenings, I've drunk only a single light beer. Did you ever hear the joke about how light beer is just like sex in the bottom of a canoe? Because it's fucking close to water.

Oh hell! I can't even pray like a grownup. I just told a dirty joke to God.

Just then, the door swings open, and my heart plummets as Hugh Major walks into the small room, chest out. He's followed by Eric, my father's cousin, who is also my agent.

And Eric looks *grim*.

Oh shit. This is really happening.

Up until this very moment—when I saw that look on Eric's face—I still held out some hope that, after my strong showing at training camp, they'd give me one more chance.

Fuck my life. I deserve this. But it's still going to bite the big one.

“Well, son,” Hugh says as Eric shuts the door. “You sure had some trouble last season.”

“I know, sir,” I say evenly, because a man doesn't cower from his fate. “My production was not up to my own standards.”

“Nor mine,” he agrees, even as a cold drop of sweat makes its way down my back. “You’re capable of so much more.”

“And I’m going to prove it, even if I have to do that in Hartford.”

“Huh.” He frowns at me. “How about you do it downstairs on the practice rink instead? We’re going to roster you. But you’d better give us something to show for it.”

“Yessir,” I say, my ears ringing with confusion. Did I just hear that right? I’m *staying*?

I glance at Eric’s stern glower for clarification. Why does he look so dark when...

His lip twitches. Then it twitches again.

That Bastard! He knew how this was going to go. He was just fucking with me.

“Keep your head down, kid. You know you’ve got to,” says Hugh.

“I can,” I insist, dragging my gaze back to his. “I got this.”

“Then get down there and show us all.” He gives me a nod and—done with me now—lets himself out of the room to deal with someone else’s drama.

I don’t breathe until he’s gone. I’m drenched in cold sweat. And Eric, that fucker, is chuckling silently. “You jackass!” I hiss. “I about sharted myself just from the look on your ugly face when you walked in here.”

“I *know*,” he says with a snort. “It was priceless. And no less than you deserve. Honestly, Hugh should have yelled a little more and thrown some furniture around. Maybe that would put you into the headspace you need this season. “

“But I *am* in the right headspace,” I insist. “I’ve been there since I got sent down to Hartford in March. Now I’m fitter than I’ve ever been. Even since high school, when I was in lust with a distance runner.”

Eric shakes his head as he opens the door to shoo me into the hallway. “Let me guess—you ran half-marathons every day just to get into her

spandex?”

“Yes.”

“Did it work?” he asks as we head for the stairs leading down to the historic lobby of the renovated warehouse where the Brooklyn Bruisers make their home.

“Oh, sure,” I recall. “Totally worth it. She was skinny, but man did she have stamina.” But I’m getting off topic. “This time I ran for *me*, though. Nobody will be able to outskate me. I’m fit and ready. They won’t be sorry they took this chance.”

Eric stops in the middle of the grand lobby, beneath the video screen showing highlights from last season. “That’s the problem. It’s your third season. They shouldn’t have to feel like they’re taking a chance. You’re not a rookie anymore.”

Well, ouch. “Yeah, no kidding. But things are already different.” I swipe open the door that leads to the practice facility.

“Tell me how,” he says as we enter the tunnel.

“I already told you my new rules.”

“Say it again,” he says. “Loudly. So the gods of hockey can hear you.”

Man, I love Eric, but I hate being treated like a kid brother. There’s no getting around it, though. He was this team’s first Bayer. It’s not his fault that he had to retire at the top of his game, after too many knee surgeries.

They picked me up that same season, so my nickname became *Baby Bayer*, and I can’t seem to shake it. I don’t enjoy the constant reminder that I was the second-choice Bayer.

Then again, my behavior last season helped the name stick.

This year will be different, though, because of these rules I made for myself. “No boozing,” I grumble. “No whoring.” Eric smirks. “And no scandals.”

“Good,” he says. “It’s a start. Although rules are what you make of them. And none of those three things is the real problem. It’s *focus*, Anton. And we

both know it.”

“Yeah.” He’s right. But so am I, because the rules are meant to give some structure to my life. They’ll make me into a different man. A *better* man.

A man who can focus.

At the bottom of the tunnel, I swipe myself into the last secure door at the edge of the training complex. “I gotta suit up now.”

“Good thing,” he says cheerfully. “Have a great practice.”

“I will.” Seriously. I’ll never take this for granted again. Every time my ID card lets me through this door, I’ll say another hallelujah. “You’re still a shit cousin for making me sweat it, by the way.”

“Maybe.” He walks away laughing.

In the dressing room, I head for my locker. It’s right where it used to be, between Drake and Campeau. I’m so ready to buckle down and skate. And I won’t stop until we win the cup in June.

“You’re late, Baby Bayer!” O’Doul calls. “Change, already.”

“Sorry,” I say, preferring not to explain where I’ve been. “Let’s do this, boys!” I slap Drake on the back. “Who’s ready to skate until we puke?”

“You talk a good game,” my friend replies, pulling up his socks. “But I bet you’re really just planning the first big prank of the season.”

“Nah,” I say, tossing my T-shirt into my gym bag. “I’ve retired the whoopie cushion and the rubber chicken.” This will be the year that the hockey blogs know me for my stats, not my reputation as a party boy.

It’s time to settle down. Hell—it’s past time. “Where’s my jersey?” I ask, glancing around the room. It’s not at my station. And I feel an honest-to-God shiver, like the hockey gods are reminding me one more time that nobody owes me a seat in this room.

“Oh, uh,” Drake says, frowning. “Jimbo only made it half way around

before something came up.” He points at a rolling laundry cart in the center of the room. “I found mine in there.”

“Thanks, dude.” I slap my upper body pads on and then cross to the cart. Sure enough, there’s my practice jersey right on top. *BAYER* it reads, number 70. “One better than 69,” I used to tell the ladies in the bars after games.

I reach for the jersey. But just as my fingers close around the fabric, a hand comes shooting up from beneath the other laundry in the cart and *grabs me by the wrist*.

I shriek like a teenage girl at a Taylor Swift concert.

The room erupts with howls of laughter.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” I yell as Castro stands up in the cart, shedding a pile of jerseys. Then I clutch my chest, where my heart is beating wildly. “You will PAY, asshole!”

He doubles over laughing. “Anyone get it on video?”

“Oh ya,” says the rookie Wilson in his big Wisconsin accent. He’s clutching his phone and laughing. “That’ll be a classic. You jumped a *yard*, Baby Bayer. Shoulda gone out for basketball.”

“Assholes,” I grumble, lifting the damn jersey over my head. “You all think you’re so funny.” The whole room is still laughing, even Ivo, the Finnish kid who barely understands anything we say.

I stomp back to my gear and put on my hockey shorts.

“Oh, man,” Drake says, wiping his eyes. “What a way to start the season. How you gonna pay Castro back?”

As soon as I hear the question, my subconscious is making plans. I could steal that lucky peanut-butter sandwich he eats before every game. He might open it up and find a damp sponge in there instead. Or—since we live in the same building and share a laundry room—I could put a new purple T-shirt in his whites laundry and turn all his underwear lavender.

But wait. No.

Slowly I turn to Drake. “I’m not.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to get him back. I’m done with jokes and pranks,” I tell him. Even if revenge does sound nice, because my heart rate is still elevated from Castro’s jump scare, my focus needs to be elsewhere.

“*Sure* you’re done.” Drake rolls his eyes. “You can tell me all about it tonight when we go out.”

“Where?”

“Some warehouse party in Long Island City. Doors open at midnight but the real fun doesn’t start until one, prolly.”

But I’m here to skate. I didn’t bust my ass all summer to get drunk at a warehouse party. “Maybe next time,” I tell Drake. And then I pat him on the shoulder and grab my skates.

The first thing I see when I walk out to the main practice rink is a whole lot of journalists and photographers. They’re here to preview the new team roster and check out the new, expanded practice facility.

“Bayer! Over here!” a photographer calls. I give him a wave and a smile. I’m so juiced for the new season and a new chance to prove myself. The circus-like atmosphere only feeds me.

The second thing I see is our head coach.

“Anton!” Coach Worthington lands his piercing gaze on me. “Good showing yesterday at the track. I had no idea you could sprint like that.”

My chest practically expands from this compliment. “Thank you, sir. I worked hard this summer.”

“It shows. I was impressed. This is the year you settle down and put up the stats you’re capable of.”

“Yes, sir. That’s going to happen.”

“I have some ideas.” There’s a glint in the older man’s eyes. “We’re

going to practice a couple different defensive pairings this year. You'll skate with O'Doul in some preseason games and Tankiewicz in others. Gotta keep 'em guessing. We have so much strength on the blue line. Let's make it all count."

"Yes, Coach. I can't wait." His optimism is contagious. Everyone is buzzing about how this will be a big season for us. It was only a few years ago when the Bruisers were moved to the city and rebranded as a Brooklyn team. The GM got fired, and then the coach, too.

Everybody said Nate Kattenberger was a fool, that an internet billionaire couldn't make a world-class hockey team out of his pricey investment.

They were wrong.

Nate is only part of our story now. Now there's Rebecca Rowley Kattenberger—his wife—who owns the team. We've got a terrific GM, a great staff, and twenty-three players who are determined to get back to the finals this season.

Thank you, Jesus, for making me one of them. And I'm sorry about that dirty joke earlier.

I know I'm lucky to be standing here in this state-of-the-art practice rink in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. It's a bit of a zoo today because the team is holding an open practice. There are little kids in the stands wearing purple Bruisers jerseys. And photographers angling their giant cameras toward the ice.

Practice hasn't started, and most of the guys aren't out here yet. But out of the corner of my eye, I see an unfamiliar skater in full goalie padding. My attention is snagged by the fluid, strong strides of his skating. Goalies have to be phenomenal skaters, but there's something really stylish about this one. I wonder who he is. Some college kid getting a tryout? A draft pick I haven't seen before?

"We're going to run a lot of back-checking drills," Coach says. "Our whole season could hinge on how many fractional seconds it takes us to

recover a lost puck.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” I agree.

The goalie has reached my end of the rink now, where there is a little girl smiling and waving at him. He comes to a fluid stop in front of the plexi. He scoops a puck up off the ice and then shows it to the little girl, sending her into paroxysms of joy. He tosses it over, and the little girl lets out a whoop and leaps for it.

I smile as a reflex, because I was once that kid, desperate for a moment’s contact with one of my idols at the rink.

But then? The goalie unclips his helmet and hauls it over his head, revealing a head of long, thick hair. Hold the phone—this goalie is a *girl*. No—a woman. With rich brown hair and lush olive skin. She shakes out her hair, which seems to be in the process of escaping whatever braid or ponytail that had confined it. Then she smiles, giving the little girl a wave.

And I can’t fucking breathe. Her smile lights up her eyes, which are a warm brown. She is like the living, breathing picture of female perfection.

In a goalie’s pads. Fuck me.

“*Anton Bayer*,” Coach snaps. “We were having a conversation. And now you’re staring at a girl.”

Dazed, I look back in his direction. “Sorry, sir. I just didn’t realize...” The sentence has no rational conclusion. I just didn’t realize that a ten-second look at a woman from ten yards away was enough to make me feel so much. Curiosity. Intrigue. Hunger, even. Who knew I had a thing for goalies?

“Yeah, the Bombshells’ season is starting up at the same time as yours,” Coach says. “It’s going to be an adjustment sharing this facility.”

“Exactly,” I agree, as if I’d been thinking the same thing. And in truth, I had forgotten all about Rebecca’s investment in women’s hockey. “The, uh, new renovation looks great, though.”

Coach grunts his agreement. Over the summer, they’d done a lot of work on the practice facility. The full-sized practice rink—where I’m currently

making an ass of myself in front of Coach—got five hundred additional seats and a new, high-tech roof. There’s a new stadium-worthy scoreboard hanging from the ceiling.

And—this is the wildest thing—an entire new story was constructed on top of our state-of-the-art locker room facility. So our dressing rooms are still there, but there’s a new suite for the women’s team above us.

I’d known all that. It’s just that it hadn’t really sunk in that there’d be actual women here in the building with us. And I really hadn’t anticipated that my brain could be stolen by the goalie on day one.

Lordy, I’m going to have to watch myself. Coach was absolutely right when he said this is my year to settle down and contribute. It isn’t just my sprints that I’ve been training. It’s my mind. I need to be tougher than I’ve been.

Focus, man. Come on.

Coach checks his expensive watch. “Let’s do this, Bayer. We’re starting. Get out there.”

I vault over the wall to get in a couple of warmup laps as my teammates troop down the chute to join me. I lean into my glide, lengthening my stride and stretching my legs. But as I round the ice, something silver glints at me from the surface. I stop, lean down, and remove my glove to pluck some kind of hairpin off the ice. It must have escaped when the world’s most sensuous goalie shook out her hair.

So much for avoiding her. I straighten up and skate hastily toward the end of the rink where I’d seen her disappear. And there she is, helmet under her arm, watching my teammates warm up. She’s wearing a frown now, which puts a crease in her forehead. I have the urge to smooth it out with my fingers.

But that would be creepy and weird, so I speak to her instead. “Excuse me, miss? I think you might have dropped this when you were giving that little girl the puck. Nice move, by the way. You made her whole year.”

The beauty turns, and her eyes widen slightly. “Sorry. Are you speaking to me?”

“Yeah. I don’t know your name. But I found this on the ice.” I hold it out, and her eyes widen again.

“O-oh,” she stammers. “I didn’t...” She catches herself. “Never mind. thank you. I hope you didn’t trip on it.”

“Nah. No worries.”

She reaches out and takes the pin from me, brushing my palm with her fingertips. And just that small contact ripples through me like an electrical current. “Welcome to Brooklyn,” I hear myself say in a husky voice. “Was today your first practice?” That would explain the number of journalists.

“Yes,” she says with a quick smile that I feel right in the center of my chest. “Was it that obvious?”

“What? No.” I laugh. “I didn’t see any of it.”

Behind me, an assistant coach blows the whistle, calling for the first drills.

“But I’m about to have my own practice now,” I add.

“Well, good luck to you, then. I hope it goes better than mine.”

“Thank you.” Still, I linger a moment longer, staring into those soft brown eyes. “You have a nice day,” I say stupidly. Then I force myself to turn and skate away.

I didn’t even get her name.

LIKE THE CARIBBEAN SEA



SYLVIE

It isn't until he skates away that I remember to breathe. Everything about my encounter with the big, blond hockey player was strange.

In the first place, I didn't know a man's eyes could be that brilliant shade of turquoise-blue. I missed the first thing he said to me, because I was wondering how that color was possible.

And then there's the hairpin. I don't wear them, but my mother did. We had the same thick hair, which she wore in pretty up-dos, while I'm more of a ponytail girl.

My mother died a year ago, but since then, I've been finding hairpins everywhere. She leaves them for me to discover.

Yes, that sounds crazy, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. Reality worked a little differently for my mother than it does for other people. She was a deeply spiritual, mystical person. She was dedicated to prayer, joy, and inner knowledge. And her intuition went well past the normal range and right into, well, *freaky*.

I'm convinced that her spirit was just stronger than everyone else's. She was a cosmic force. And even though she's left this earth, she's still sending me frequent signs. Like a silver hairpin on the bathroom sink at home, where

nobody has been but me. And a copper one in the pocket of the dress I wore to her funeral. There was even a hairpin with a tiny jewel on it that appeared on the windowsill one night when I was washing the dishes. I set down the sponge, and it was just *there*.

So the appearance of a hairpin just now at this rink, where I never expected to be, is just more proof of her divine powers. And her nosiness, too. Maman is trying to tell me that she's still beside me, even though I've suddenly relocated five hundred miles from our home in Ontario.

Brooklyn was never part of my travel plans. Fifteen months ago I graduated from college. I had hoped to make the Canadian women's team, but they already had a full bench of excellent goalies, and none of the women's pro teams had knocked on my door.

There were only five teams in the league—that made for ten professional women goalies on a continent of millions.

Then, three months after graduation, my mother died, and I stopped thinking about hockey. Or anything, really. Mourning will do that to a girl.

So I was floored earlier this month when the phone had rung and someone had said, “Hi, Sylvie Hansen? This is Bess Beringer. I'm a sports agent, but I'm also in charge of recruitment for the Brooklyn Bombshells. I know this is last minute. But how do you feel about guarding the net for Brooklyn?”

For a moment, I'd honestly thought I was being pranked.

But Bess had been dead serious. “The season begins in ten days. I realize you probably weren't planning to change your life today. But if it's possible, we'd love to have you.”

“Would I be trying out?” I'd asked, still a little unsure that the conversation was real.

“I have tape from your final playoff game. And I just got off the phone with Sasha Marshall. We hired her, too. And she wants you in front of the net.”

“Sasha Marshall,” I’d whispered. Hearing my college coach’s name had made it real.

“That’s right,” Bess had said. “At the last minute we lost a goalie who decided to play in Sweden. And Sasha thought of you. Can I have her call you?”

And that had been that. Seven days later, I’d been on a plane to New York. I’d barely had time to pack and tell my closest friends that I was leaving Ontario.

There’s one person in particular that I did not tell. Bryce Campeau, a center for the Brooklyn Bruisers, and the man I once believed I would marry.

He’s going to be astonished to see me standing here. If he ever looks up.

The Bruisers are clustered around their coach, listening intently. People expect big things from the Bruisers this year. It’s too early to talk of the championship, but they are well-positioned for the season. Which means I basically have a front-row seat to watch Bryce fulfill his dreams.

He stands stock still in his skates, his whole being focused on his coach’s words. Bryce is the most serious man I’ve ever met. And when he finds out I’ve suddenly appeared in Brooklyn, he’ll—

Okay, the truth is that I’m not exactly sure what he’ll do. He and I have lots of history, but not the romantic kind. He’d lived in our family’s house throughout my teen years, billeted as a junior hockey player on one of my father’s teams.

We’d often had players living with us. They had been brash, silly boys, and I hadn’t paid them much attention. But Bryce had been different from the start. At seventeen, he’d been a man already, with a serious expression and moody, dark blue eyes. Like me, he’d had a French-speaking mother. And like my mother, he was a devout Catholic.

But Bryce was alone in the world. He never met his father. His mother tried her best to give him a good life, he’d said, but by the time he came to live with us, she had died of complications from liver disease.

“She drank. A lot,” he’d told us frankly. “She quit many times, but it got her in the end.”

So there’d been this kid, only seventeen years old when he’d arrived, and motherless. He’d been playing for an Ontario team and could barely understand his coach, or my father, who ran the program.

My mother had taken one look at his solemn face and the gold crucifix around his neck and saw a kindred spirit. She’d basically adopted him on sight. She could tell he needed someone to fuss over him—someone to make foods that he liked and organize his life and sit beside him at Mass on Sunday.

And I’d loved him from the first moment I watched his broody gaze scan my home, taking in my mother’s collection of prayer candles and the carefully set table. He’d walked over to the mantel, noticing that one of Maman’s statuettes had tipped to the side. And he carefully righted it. “Thank you for to bring me here in your home,” he’d said in very halting English.

I’d liked the soft, measured tone of his voice. And I’d really liked that he needed my help with the language. As a French speaker myself, I would often come to his rescue, translating whenever he required it.

My father had required him to speak English at the dinner table. He’d known that Bryce needed to learn. But Maman and I had been his port in the storm. We spoke French when my father was out of the house, and we helped him adjust to life in a new city.

I’d hid my crush on him as best I could. And he and my mother were *thick as thieves*, as we say in English.

Bryce had lived with us for four years. And when, at age twenty, he’d left to play for Montreal, we’d all been so incredibly proud of him.

I’d missed him terribly, but I’d been self-aware enough to know that he viewed me like a little sister. Besides—I was headed off to college at the University of Michigan.

And there had been holidays and summers to look forward to. We had

become Bryce's family, so he spent his free time with us. I'd lived for those moments when he'd watch movies with me in the den, and my mother would spoil him rotten.

Then—a couple years later—my mother died very suddenly. One day she was home with my dad and baking cookies. And the next day she was just gone. She had a brain aneurysm and drove her car into a ditch, dying behind the wheel of her car before the police even arrived.

We'd been devastated. Bryce—recently traded to the Bruisers—was the first person I'd called after my father broke the news. “Sit down, I need to tell you something. Maman is gone.”

The next few days had been a blur. Bryce told Coach Worthington that the mother of his heart had suddenly died, and Coach took the extraordinary step of sending him home to us for a week. He'd missed three games to come to Ontario and hold my hand at her funeral.

My father was beside himself. He'd loved her desperately. “My beautiful rose,” he'd sobbed at the kitchen table the night after the funeral. “I don't know what I'm supposed to do without her.”

Bryce had finally teared up, too. It had broken me to see them so sad, so I'd gone to bed, tucking myself in and wishing I could wake up and have my old life back—the one where my mother hummed to herself in the kitchen while she made tea.

Later, Bryce had come into my darkened room, climbed into bed with me, and held me in his arms. That had never happened before.

“Sylvie,” he'd said quietly. “I want to love like that, Sylvie. The way your father and your mother were to one another. That could be us. Some day we will be together for real.”

“*Oui?*” I'd asked, stunned. “*Vraiment?*”

“*Vraiment,*” he'd repeated. “She wanted me to take care of you.”

“She did?”

“*Oui.* And I promised her I would. You are so special to me. You are

everything. Fate sent you to me. I know it.” He’d said a lot of things that night that I’d never expected him to say.

Then he’d kissed me. I’d already been on emotional overload, but Bryce’s kisses had been the only thing that made me feel better about the terrible, gut-wrenching loss I’d just suffered.

My achy heart had held Bryce’s promises tightly. Thoughts of our future together had sustained me for weeks after he left.

I should have known, though. Words spoken in the dark after you bury someone you love are not weighed and measured like other words.

Our friendship returned to its usual ways: texts from the team jet and the occasional phone call where he would speak to my father and then to me.

I’d thought about him every day, though. Bryce’s whispered word in the dark—*someday*—got me through a lot of difficult hours.

But he hadn’t brought up our future again, and eventually I’d grown impatient. This spring—six months after my mother’s death—I asked Bryce when we could be together for real. “I would come to Brooklyn,” I’d offered. “To be with you.”

It had not gone over well. His stammering reply was not at all what I’d hoped for. My heart sank as he’d uttered phrases like “too soon,” “incredibly busy,” and “focused on my game.”

“When, then?” I’d asked, trying to hold my heart together.

“Sylvie, I don’t know. If you come here just for me, you are all alone much of the time. That is not right. The time is not right.”

Alors. I had fallen for Bryce when I’d been a naïve girl of fifteen. But now, at twenty-two, I am a much wiser woman. I know what words of true love sound like, and they don’t sound like that.

After that dreadful conversation, I wised up. I made myself stop dreaming of a future with Bryce. I went to work in the front office of my father’s hockey organization. I even looked around for nice men to date, trying to get my mind off of *him*.

I didn't find any, though. It was a lonely, quiet time in the house with my father, both of us straining to hear the echo of my mother's voice.

Things began to feel easier for me this summer. Less sadness. More ordinary joy. And just when I'd stopped pining all the time, the phone rang, summoning me to Brooklyn.

So here I stand, twenty yards from Bryce in this beautiful rink, wearing a Bombshells practice jersey. My maman would say that fate brought me to his doorstep once again.

She did, in fact, predict this.

If that sounds crazy, it's because you never met Maman. She believed in fate. So does Bryce, by the way. He is forever seeing signs in ordinary things. So I wonder how he'll feel when he sees me.

As for me, I really don't know what to think. Part of me is full of skin-tingling wonder that I've been sent by fate or God or luck to be with Bryce again. Maybe he'll look over at me and understand that our paths are meant to join forever.

The other part of me knows that it's a long shot. I want to be loved *desperately*. I want to be cherished. I want a man who needs me in his life even when it's inconvenient.

Bryce has already failed this test once. But since I'm here, I think I'll school him on a few things. I'll show him that I'm strong, and that I am full of life and ready to be loved, even if not by him. I could even have some fun with this. I will show him what he's missing. He won't know what's hit him.

If he ever turns his freaking head and looks in my direction.

Someone else turns, though. It's that other man—the one with the eyes like the Caribbean Sea. He glances at me and then gives me a quick smile.

And it's *quite* a smile. My heart might be broken, but my eyes are not. His eyes linger on me for a long beat, and then he slowly turns his face back toward the coach.

But I still feel his attention directed this way. I don't know why, but I

sense his interest.

The back of his practice jersey says BAYER. I've heard that name before. He's a defenseman, and one of Bryce Campeau's friends.

No one else glances this way, though, and I've been waiting here a long time.

So I turn and leave for the brand-new women's locker room.

BIG NO NO



ANTON

“Man, I need calories,” I bellow in the locker room after practice. “Pizza at Grimaldi’s? Who’s with me?”

Bryce Campeau raises a hand and gives me a serious nod.

“Excellent. Leave in ten?” I twist my head around, looking for my buddy, Drake. “Anyone seen the Drakerator? Why did he leave the ice early?”

“Blood-sugar crash,” O’Doul mutters.

“Oh, shit,” I say. Drake is a type 1 diabetic. Managing his condition during peak athletic performance is tricky. Sometimes he gets things a little wrong and starts to crash. And it’s often worse at the start of the season, when his metabolism has to readjust to the daily strain of professional sports.

Hoping to check on him, I head for the treatment rooms. But Drake comes skidding into the dressing room, his face red, looking harried.

“You okay, man?”

“No,” he says shortly. “I just fucked up big time.”

“Damn. You want me to find Doc Herberts?”

“Not necessary. And not what I meant. My blood sugar was a little wonky, so I headed off to find the juice and the test kits I keep in Doc’s office, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well, they moved it.”

“The juice?”

“The whole office!” He throws his arms wide. “It’s upstairs now, on the new floor. So I’m, like, dizzy as I climb those new stairs, and I’m in this hallway I’ve never seen before. I don’t know which office is which, so I start poking my head into all of them.”

“Whoa. Did you find it?”

He winces. “Eventually. But first I found this super-pretty girl in a treatment room, grabbing some tape. So I say, ‘Hey doll, could you help me find Herberts’s office?’” He scrubs a hand through his hair.

“Wait, you called a stranger *doll*?”

“I *know*, okay? But I was using one-syllable words for a reason. Everything started looking yellow around the edges, and I thought I might pass out.” He heaves a sigh. “I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Sorta. Turns out that girl is a *player*. I think she said defense. There was yelling. I didn’t get all the details.”

“Question.” Jimbo, our equipment guy, raises his hand, like a boy in school. “Do they still call her a defenseman even if she’s a *defensewoman*?”

“They could say D-man,” someone suggests. “Oh, wait...”

“Does this story have a punchline?” I ask. A guy could go all day without finishing a thought in this room.

“She ripped me a new one,” Drake grumbles. “She went *off*. And it didn’t help my case that in the middle of her telling me what a turd I am for treating her like a waitress or a puck bunny—her words—I basically staggered away from her, found Doc’s office, and grabbed my juice and chugged it.”

“Oh, man.” I just shake my head.

“So she thought I was an asshole twice—”

“Which you were,” Castro points out. “Even if you were not totally in

control of your faculties.”

“Right. And I just kept on being an asshole, trying to stay conscious while she delivered a long lecture about making assumptions.”

“Assumptions you made,” Castro points out again. “And by the way, the women’s team officially starts today.”

“Wow, thank you for that timely information,” Drake grumbles. “The girl was *pissed*. Now I gotta watch my back every time I walk into this place.”

“Come to lunch with Campeau and me,” I say. “Sounds like you could use the calories. And we’ll guard your six.”

“Thanks, man.” Drake pushes himself off the doorframe. He still looks a little off. I’m thinking we’ll need to take a taxi over to our favorite pizza place.

The three of us leave the dressing room and troop down the hallway together. It still has that new-paint smell from all the work they’re hurrying to finish. We exit via a set of secure doors into a hallway that widens toward a glass brick tunnel. From there, the floor slopes upward from our practice facility to the Bruisers’ corporate offices.

Drake stiffens as we reach the tunnel. “Uh-oh.”

Glancing up, I see three women ahead of us. They’re stopped, as if waiting for someone else to join them. And, whoa, it’s like the Charlie’s Angels of hockey—a blond, a redhead, and the brunette beauty I can’t stop thinking about.

Her face lights up when she sees us, too. I’m just about to call out a happy greeting when my teammate Campeau says, in a shocked voice, “*Sylvie!* What are you *doing* here?”

This is a development I wasn’t expecting.

And if I’m not mistaken, her beautiful smile grows a little uncertain. “Um, *surprise!*” she says as we approach. “A week ago Bess Beringer called me and asked me to be the second goalie for the Bombshells.”

“You—” Campeau swallows. He looks stunned, and maybe a little pale.

“Here?”

“Here,” she says firmly. “In Brooklyn.”

“In Brooklyn,” he echoes like a dummy. He takes a long beat to digest this news. “Where are you staying?”

She puts a hand on her hip. “With you, of course. You have a double bed, right?”

Campeau blanches.

She laughs. “Oh, *monsieur cr dible!* I’m just teasing you. This is my roommate, Fiona. We have an apartment together.” She indicates the blonde.

Bryce finally breathes. “An apartment? Where? Is it safe? There are some places in Brooklyn where you do not want to live.”

“Let me just stop you right there,” the redhead says with fire in her eyes. And when she speaks up, I swear Drake ducks behind me, using me as his human shield. “Isn’t Sylvie a grownup who can decide on her own where to live?”

“But—”

“Do you ask your male friends if their apartments are safe?” she presses.

Sylvie laughs. “Charli, stand down. Bryce met me when I was a silly, impulsive teen. He probably can’t help asking these questions.”

The redhead crosses her arms. “Fine, but on day one I’ve already witnessed two of these guys saying ridiculous things to grown women. And the day isn’t even half over.”

“Hey, Bryce,” I say, squeezing my teammate’s elbow. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your friend? We’re sharing a workspace, right?”

He gives a stiff nod. “Sylvie, meet Anton Bayer, a defenseman, and Cornelius Drake, winger.”

“Cornelius?” the blond woman asks, incredulous.

“Neil,” he corrects.

“Ah.” She smiles, and her eyes dance with humor. “I’m Fiona, also a forward, and the captain of the Bombshells. This is Charli, who plays

defense.”

“And Sylvie is the goalie,” I say, because I can’t help myself. And I can’t stop looking at her. Even in her street clothes, with her hair smoothed after a shower, her cheeks bear the high color of an athlete after practice. She has wide-set brown eyes and the cheekbones of a Swedish supermodel.

But there are lots of pretty women in the world. I couldn’t even tell you why this one makes me feel wild and loose inside. Like I’ve just had three drinks and gotten on a roller coaster.

“Yes,” Fiona says, putting a hand on Sylvie’s shoulder. “We have two incredible goalies. It’s going to be a great season, boys. I hope your stats can keep pace with ours.”

“Oh, bring it on.” I laugh. “How does five bucks a goal sound? You versus me.”

“But we only have twenty games,” says Charli, the woman who Drake is afraid of. “That’s not a fair bet.”

“I’m a D-man, though,” I point out. My job isn’t running up the score.

“How many goals did you have last season?” Fiona asks.

“Five.”

“So you like losing money?” she asks, and the women laugh, which puts the sparkle back into Sylvie’s eyes.

“New year, new opportunities,” I say lightly. “Do we have a bet?”

“Ten bucks a goal. Might as well keep it interesting.” Fiona shrugs.

“Done,” I say, knowing full well that I’ll most likely be paying Fiona some cash every week. If they picked her for captain, she should easily average a goal a game.

But that’s okay with me. I’ll just have to make frequent visits to their new apartment—wherever it is—and pay up.

Forty minutes later we're sitting in Grimaldi's putting away the pizza at a rapid pace. Except for Campeau, who looks shellshocked.

"What's your deal with, uh, the new girl?" I ask as casually as I can. Campeau isn't the kind of guy who gives you a whole lot of info about his past. I've spent a lot of time with the guy, and I barely know a thing about him. And not because I didn't ask.

"Sylvie," he says quietly, like it's difficult to say her name. "I really fuck things up with her."

My blood stops circulating. I barely met the girl, but I don't want to hear that they were lovers. I don't know what's wrong with me. "She's your ex?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Remember when I miss some games last fall to go to Ontario?"

"Yeah, when your mom died?" Drake asks.

"Not my real mom, but the mother of my heart. I billeted in their home as a junior player after my own mother died. And Marie was wonderful. I was very close with the family. Sylvie is Marie's daughter."

"Ah. But something happened between you two?" I press.

"No, and yes. After the funeral we were both very sad. I said some big things to Sylvie, about what the future might hold. I love Sylvie. I would do anything for her."

Brooklyn's best pizza turns dry in my mouth.

"But I should not have said anything. I should not have made any promises. And I should not have kissed her."

The image of Sylvie lifting her head for a kiss wrecks my brain. But after I take a drink of water and get a goddamn grip, I realize that nothing Campeau just said makes any sense at all. "Wait. Why not? If you love someone, why not say so and then kiss the girl senseless?"

He puts his head in his hands. "I was not ready. You already know how hard it is. We have to focus on the game."

"For that girl I would multitask," Drake says, speaking my own thoughts

aloud.

“This season will be everything,” Campeau says. “This one is for all the...” He frowns, searching for a word.

“Marbles?” I guess.

“Yes. I cannot afford to fuck up. I literally cannot afford it. The team offers last month to renegotiate, but I turn it down.”

My water glass stops halfway to my mouth. “Wait. They offered to extend you early?” If the team wants you badly enough, they’ll remake your contract way before the June cutoff.

Campeau nods curtly. “Yes, for a three-year deal. But the number was not very generous. We said no.”

Something goes wrong in my gut. Campeau was Mr. Serious last year, when I was busy fucking around. He got the job done, and the team offered to extend him for three—really four—more years.

And he said *no*? Because of a couple million dollars? “Nate and Hugh are very savvy,” I say slowly. “Of course they’d lowball you a little bit. But you would have all that added security against an injury, or even a bad season.” Even if my cousin wasn’t an agent, I’d still understand this on a gut level. The team offered him a *career*.

Campeau shrugs. “I do not plan to have a bad season. But I also do not plan to propose marriage before it is finished. I need the wins, the cup, the contract, and the girl. In this order.”

Drake and I exchange a brief glance that’s full of *what the fuck?*

“You understand,” Campeau continues. “I need the stats. If I am to give Sylvie a good life, I need a big, multiyear contract. I need to reach the next level.”

That is a story I know all too well. We all need the stats. We all crave the next level. Maybe I’m just a punter, and Campeau is the real deal. But what if the “next level” is an illusion? What if every single day of my career will feel just as perilous as the last?

“Sylvie wanted me to invite her here. She wanted to come to Brooklyn. And I did not offer.” The Canadian sighs. “She stopped talking to me. She makes new friends. She even posted a picture on Instagram with a guy on a date.”

“Cold, man,” Drake says, reaching for another slice.

“No, it isn’t,” Campeau defends her. “We were never a couple. She wanted it. I always knew that. But I was living in her parents’ *home*. A man does not go there.”

“True,” Drake says. “No sticking it to the coach’s daughter. Big no-no.”

“Big no-no,” Campeau repeats. “She was just a teenager when we met, too. I love her. But...” He heaves a sigh. “The time was not right. The time still is not right.”

“But here she is in Brooklyn,” I say, twisting the knife a little. Because I’m still stuck on the whole *I love her but I should never admit it* thing. “What are you going to do now?”

“I have no idea,” he says. “First, I will make sure this place where she lives is safe. If it is not, she can come and stay with me. I have a pull-out sofa.”

“Women love that.” I chuckle. “When they’re in love with you, and you offer them the pull-out sofa.”

Drake snorts out a laugh.

“I am so fucked,” Campeau says.

“Yup! Entirely fucked.” I take another slice of pizza and eat it with gusto.

AN OCEAN OF MERCY



SYLVIE

I strike a match, and the flame leaps forth with a familiar hiss. I tip the glass candle holder and carefully light the wick. Then I shake out the match and lay it on a saucer, since I'm not keen to set my new apartment on fire.

Apart from the unfamiliar location, this ritual is as familiar to me as breathing. It's three o'clock, the magic hour. My mother always lit candles in the afternoon. Tradition holds that Christ died at this hour.

"Google says that three o'clock in Jerusalem is really eight in the morning here," I'd once pointed out during my contrary teen years.

"That is not the point, Sylvie," she'd replied. "A ritual is for remembrance. The meaning is here," she'd said, tapping her chest.

I watch the candle flicker in its cup, and now I understand. These days, I light a three o'clock candle whenever I'm able, and nothing could be a more potent reminder of Maman.

I kneel for her in front of the candle and close my eyes. I say the prayer in French, as she taught me. "*Vous avez expiré, Jésus, mais...*"

It's a comforting prayer. Who wouldn't want an afternoon reminder of an ocean of mercy? I'm basically a lapsed Catholic like my father. And I only say the prayer once instead of the three times the ritual calls for.

But then I address her. “*Maman*, please be careful about hairpins on the ice. Someone could trip.” In the silence of my new apartment, I feel more self-conscious than usual, even though I know Fiona is out shopping for throw pillows. “Okay, a hairpin probably won’t kill anyone, but it’s not a good look. I’m sure you were just reminding me to be patient. Especially with Bryce. The look on his face, though...”

I fall silent, remembering his expression. It wasn’t joyous. First, I saw shock, followed swiftly by confusion. And then discomfort, especially when I made that joke about sleeping in his bed. I swear all the color drained from his face.

“It wasn’t the reunion I’d hoped for,” I tell my mother. “I thought he’d laugh and maybe pick me up and twirl me around. But he just looked like I’d run him over with the Zamboni.”

Sure, I’d expected some surprise. But a small part of me thought he might see it as a sign.

But, nope. He was definitely stuck on the shock phase.

“I could be patient,” I whisper. “If I thought that patience was the issue. And we already knew he doesn’t like surprises.” He’d had too many of those in his life already, many of them bad. Bryce likes order and planning and preparation.

But I’d sprung myself on him, because I wanted a big romantic reunion. Laughter, followed by the kind of kiss that sailors gave their women after returning from war.

I didn’t get it. And after that awkward greeting in the hallway with my teammates, I’d hurried away to regroup.

The candle flickers gently. It’s not a sign. My mother only communicates in lost hairpins and memories. “You did tell me to be patient,” I whisper. “A year ought to be enough, though. He doesn’t love me, *Maman*. It wasn’t real. I wish you were here. I wish you could tell me what to do.”

My voice cracks a little bit. I miss my mother so much that it aches. She

and I were nothing alike, just as Bryce and I are nothing alike. But that doesn't mean we didn't get along. She was so strong and beautiful, and I thought she'd be with me forever. Instead, she was cut down on a sunny autumn day.

Nobody plans to die young. Nobody except my mother, that is. She'd had a will, which I guess is something responsible people do. But she'd also left me a letter.

It began: *Dear Sylvie, if you are reading this, then I have left this Earth. But I will never leave you, my baby girl.*

Maybe I should have waited to read it, because that first line cut me in half. The tears in my eyes made it hard to keep reading. She said so many loving things. And she reminded me to work on my patience.

But she followed that by telling me that I will be loved deeply and completely. And that Bryce was my soulmate.

The letter is tucked away in a shoebox now. It hurts too much to read it. And it won't do me any good to read it again, anyway. Maman was amazing, and many of her words will doubtless prove true.

But as I sit here staring into the candle's flame, I can't help thinking that she got a few things wrong.

It hurts, too.

THE RIGHT KIND OF SCREW



SYLVIE

“You have to admit,” Charli says from a corner of our sofa. “*Bombshells* is a terrible name for a team. What were they even thinking?”

“It’s not terrible at all,” Fiona argues from the other end. “I love it. A bombshell is a sudden revelation. An overwhelming surprise. That’s what we’re supposed to be, in this scenario—the thing that makes New York realize that women’s hockey is great. Plus, you get the alliteration with Brooklyn.”

“But it *also* means sexpot,” Charli sputters. “It’s evil marketing. They think they can only sell tickets by sexing us up. If they print posters with a naked woman riding on a missile, I will quit on the spot.”

“Hey,” I argue from the floor, where I’m stretching my quads on the new rug I bought yesterday. “The logo is a cartoon bomb. No boobs in sight. But if it meant we could be paid more, and that a women’s team could be profitable, I’d almost be willing to play topless.”

I’m joking, of course, for two reasons.

First, I don’t need the money because my bookkeeping job followed me to Brooklyn. “You can work remotely,” my dad had said. “And I’ll cover your apartment,” he’d added during the frenzied twenty-four hour period

where I had to decide if I was going to change my whole life and move to Brooklyn. “Just go and give this thing a whirl. Don’t worry about money.”

And the second reason I’m joking about flashing my tatas for ticket sales is that I’m hoping to get a rise out of Bryce, who’s in my bedroom right now. That’s right, in my *bedroom*, where I always hoped he’d end up.

Be careful what you wish for, though. A couple hours ago he texted me, asking if he could come over. So I washed my hair and put on makeup, as well as a low-cut sleeveless top.

In my defense, it’s a warm September afternoon.

But when he came through the door, Bryce didn’t even give my outfit a glance. He was carrying a small toolbox and a brand new deadbolt lock, the kind you can install above the perfectly functional locks already in place on our door.

He’d given me a perfunctory kiss on each cheek and got straight to work installing the extra lock, while my teammates looked on in amusement.

To be fair, Bryce’s helpfulness is one of the things I’ve always loved about him. All the players who ever lived with us did chores. “This *eez* not a hotel,” my mother would say, pinning a schedule to the refrigerator. Everyone in our home was responsible for taking out the trash or washing dishes or vacuuming the floors, at least when they weren’t on a tour bus in the hinterlands of Canada.

Bryce’s contribution was on another level, though, right from the start. He’d call on his way home from the rink to ask if my mother or I needed anything from the store. He fixed doorknobs that had stopped turning, he hung shelves, and changed the oil in my mother’s car.

“So resourceful,” my mother used to say. “The finest young man I’ve ever met.”

Forty minutes ago, when Bryce had installed the lock on our front door to his satisfaction, I’d brought him a soda and led him into my room for a moment away from the prying eyes of Fiona and Charli.

“Listen, I appreciate your concern,” I’d said. “But I feel very safe here.” I’d sat down on the bed and patted the spot next to me. “I’m only two blocks from the rink. It’s a nice neighborhood.”

He’d sat down, too, but at a respectful distance, his serious blue eyes nowhere near my cleavage. “Your father thought it would be a good idea.”

“Hmm?” I’d asked, distracted by my own agenda. *Kiss me you fool. Why won’t you just lay me out on this bed and make love to me? Finally?*

“The lock,” he’d said, giving me a frown and putting the soda on the bedside table. “Your father worries about you, too. You know...” He’d turned and climbed onto the bed on his hands and knees, making my heart leap. But it turned out he’d only been looking out the window. “*Merde*. You are only on the third floor. And these burglar bars are loose. Someone might climb the fire escape. I will tighten them.”

That had been forty minutes ago. He’s already made a trip to the hardware store for just the right kind of screw.

Although the *right kind of screw*, in my opinion, is not something you can get at the hardware store.

It’s no use, anyway. We have a big team meeting in a half hour—the Bruisers and the Bombshells together. So if I’m going to convince Bryce to ravish me, it’s going to have to be another day.

Having given up, I left him to his screwdrivers and came out here to stretch my sore muscles on the rug and listen to my teammates’ chatter. We’ve known each other for four days, but they’ve been intense ones. I’ve moved to a new city, and I’ve had my first two grueling practices with my new team.

I’m tired, but happy. Playing hockey as a professional? There is no better job in the world. And I like these women. Fiona is just as bubbly and confident as a team captain should be.

And Charli is... not. She’s angry, although she hasn’t told us why. But she’s also smart, with a biting wit that frequently makes me cackle.

The buzzer rings on the wall, and I startle because I'm not used to the sound of it yet.

Fiona pops off the couch. "I'll get it!" She spends a moment on the handset and then presses the button to admit someone.

"Who is it?" Charli demands.

"A couple of Bryce's friends," she says. "He asked them to stop by before we all go to the meeting."

"It better not be that one who called me a *doll*." Charli tosses her red hair. "I still can't believe that. Two hours—that's how long we'd been in the building before one of the self-important millionaires revealed his sexist attitude."

"They'll adjust," Fiona says with a shrug.

"Will they?" Charli points a finger toward my bedroom, where Bryce is still performing his unsolicited home repair.

There's a knock on our door, and this time I get up to answer it. The first thing I see when I open the door is a pair of bright, turquoise eyes. They're smiling at me.

And then they take a slow trip down to my cleavage, before rising back upward.

My cheeks flush, even though I wore this top for that exact reason. "Hello there," I say, just as I notice the object in his hands. It's a toilet seat. "Gosh, is that for me?"

"It is, and aren't you lucky?" I'd forgotten that his voice has a slightly husky texture. I feel it right in the center of my chest. "Some men bring flowers, but I brought a new seat for the throne."

"*Why?*" Charli demands from somewhere behind me.

"Well—" Anton clears his throat. "Mind if I come in?"

I realize that I'm blocking the door while I stare at his pretty eyes. "Of course!" I leap out of the way.

"Campeau asked us to pick up a few things that he thought you needed."

“A toilet seat?” Fiona asks, skeptical.

“Replacement!” Bryce yells from the bedroom. “You do not know who lived here before.”

“Actually, we do,” Drake says, entering the apartment behind Anton.

Charli growls.

Drake moves to stand in the corner, in a pose that positions his hands in front of his testicles. “This is the apartment where Becca and Georgia lived until Georgia moved out to live with Leo, and Becca moved in with Nate. After that, Becca’s sister lived here.”

Bryce emerges from my bedroom. “Thank you for stopping at the store.”

“My pleasure.” Anton tosses the toilet seat—frisbee style—toward Bryce, who catches it. Then he hands me a small bag that contains four nine-volt batteries. “For your smoke detectors,” he says. “Safety first.” He gives me a wink that manages to mock Bryce and look sexy at the same time.

“Thank you,” I say. “You didn’t have to come all the way over. I could have gotten the batteries.”

“We live across the street in 220.” Anton lifts his chin toward the windows, where a luxury condo building is always in view. “Are we going to this meeting, or what?”

“Absolutely.” Fiona claps her hands like the team captain that she is. “We’ll leave in five minutes.” She gets up to gather her practice gear, since the Bombshells have practice after the meeting.

In the silence that follows, Charli and Drake eye each other warily. Anton ignores them both, taking a slow tour around our new living room, stopping in front of the prayer candles I’ve placed on the mantel. “Does this fireplace work?” he asks. “It’s pretty.”

“I doubt it,” I say.

He touches one finger to the blue glass candle holder and then turns around to look at me with those beautiful eyes. “How are you liking Brooklyn so far?”

“It’s gorgeous,” I say a little stupidly. My goodness, he must get a lot of attention from women.

“You’re from Toronto, right?”

“Montreal and then the Toronto suburbs. We left Quebec when I was a little girl. When my father retired. And you?”

“Pennsylvania. But then Colorado, where I played on a minor league team.”

“You ski?” I ask him. Colorado skiing is pretty great.

“Of course!” His eyes dance. “You too? Mont Tremblant? Did I just butcher that pronunciation?”

“Yes.” I try not to laugh.

“Tell me how to say it right.”

“Mont Tremblant. Use your nose.”

He braces his feet on the rug, spreads his arms, and tries again. “MONT... TREMBLANT.”

It’s better this time, but exaggerated, and I hear myself giggle. “We’ll work on it.”

“Awesome.”

At the meeting, I sit down between Fiona and Bryce. When our coach calls Fiona to the front of the room, Anton Bayer slides into her empty seat. I turn my chin to give him a polite smile of acknowledgement.

He gives me a smile so hot that I feel a little flushed as I return my attention to the meeting. Some men just radiate sex appeal, don’t they? I can’t even say why. Something about him just runs hotter than other men.

“Good afternoon!” Rebecca says from the front of the room. “This will be an unusual gathering. I’m well aware how busy you all are. The season will soon be in full swing, and you’ll be off on busses and planes having the

season of a lifetime.”

“We all know who’s getting the bus,” Charli whispers from behind me. “And who’s on the jet.”

“So,” Rebecca says, “I wanted to have the rare opportunity to gather here just one time, as two teams with a common goal—to move Brooklyn hockey forward into a new era.”

We all clap. Even Charli, I think.

“Everyone here could be part of a history-making moment in sports. I mean that. I feel it, too.” Rebecca puts a hand to her heart, and every player in the room is completely quiet. She’s short, with a curvy build. She’s one of those tiny dynamo types. My mother would have said, *she has unique energy*. And everyone present has given her their complete attention.

I’m told that Rebecca used to be the GM’s assistant, before she was ever the girlfriend and then wife of the owner. And well before she owned the team herself. She used to pick up coffee and dry-cleaning for the men who ran this place.

“When I was a little girl,” she says, “I learned that girls take dancing or art classes. I didn’t have any friends who ran track or played hockey. Not one. And I need you all to hear that messaging matters. Everyone in this room heard a different message. Someone gave you the idea that you could be an athlete—maybe your parents or your siblings or a teacher. Even if you had this fire burning inside you from an early age, somewhere, some person showed you what was possible.”

I feel a little teary all of a sudden, thinking of my dad tying my first pair of skates onto my three-year-old feet.

“Everyone in this room has risen to the top of his and her field. That is commendable. But I want to take a moment to illustrate that it means a different thing to be a Bruiser than to be a Bombshell. The salary cap this year for a men’s team is fifty-two million dollars. The salary cap in the women’s league is two hundred and seventy thousand.”

Someone whistles under his breath. And I see Anton wake up his phone beside me. He opens the calculator app and divides two hundred seventy thousand by twenty-three.

I already know the answer, because I worked this equation myself. It's \$11,739. That's the average salary on my team. It works out to a few hundred dollars a week for the duration of the season.

"Jesus Christ," he whispers under his breath.

"Now, gentlemen. I will never tell you that you don't deserve your fame and glory. You sweat for every new rung of this crazy ladder that you've climbed. Your achievement is not arbitrary. The *reward*, however, is. Some people in this room make six or seven million dollars a year. And some of them make eleven grand. Because that is how the screwy world we live in values your contributions."

Rebecca pulls no punches. The room is so silent that I can hear my own heartbeat.

"Who gets to decide, though?" she asks. "It's so arbitrary. Football, basketball, baseball, and hockey all do well on TV. Soccer is not a money sport in this country, but it is in most other parts of the world. I'm sure my husband could draw us up a multivariable equation that explains where the money comes from, and where it goes."

I think I just fell a little in love with Rebecca Rowley Kattenberger.

"As much as I'd like to change the bare facts of the pay equality in hockey, I can't. Not this year, anyway. But that doesn't mean I can't make a few changes and contributions."

She paces at the front. "I'm not allowed to pay my female players amounts exceeding the salary cap. But there are a few benefits we've granted to all employees of Brooklyn Hockey LLC. And these benefits accrue to everyone who works here, because that means that it's not a special stipend for the women. Number one: more amenities in the locker rooms. And healthy smoothies are now always available in the players' lounge."

Everyone cheers.

Huh. I guess millionaires like a free smoothie as much as the rest of us normal people.

“Number two: all employees will carry a Kattenberger 5000 phone, provided by our organization.”

Now the women hoot, because we’ve heard about the Katt phone, and we want one.

“And this is my favorite new benefit—every hour you spend on charity work for the Brooklyn Sports Foundation will be compensated at twenty-five dollars per hour. And we’re going to do some great things this year. Georgia and I have some big ideas, and we’re going to share them with you.”

The blond publicist stands up. “That’s right, guys! We’ve done a lot for Brooklyn charities over the past few years. This year we’ve got a new one. Hang on. Let me just…” She points a clicker at the projector, but nothing happens.

“Let’s guess what it is!” one of the men calls. “Save the whales!”

“Can we sponsor a dog rescue?” Anton calls out. “I love puppies.”

“That’s because you are one,” Rebecca says, and his teammates hoot and laugh.

The screen finally lights up. It reads: *Hockey is for Everyone*. “Each year we participate in this promotion,” Georgia says. “But now we’re going to take it further.” She clicks the remote, and the words fade out and back in again, until it reads: *Sports are for Everyone. Bring it, Brooklyn!*

“When we say ‘Hockey is for everyone,’ it’s wishful thinking,” Georgia continues. “Of course, we welcome all kinds of fans. That will never change. But think of all the boys and girls in Brooklyn who will never get a chance to skate. There are very few skating rinks in New York City. And we can’t give up enough of our ice time to make a real dent. But there are more than fifteen swimming pools in Brooklyn, and yet most of New York’s children never get swimming lessons. There are unused basketball courts and soccer fields, too.”

Rebecca chimes in. “‘Sports are for everyone’ probably seems obvious to all the fitness freaks here today. Which is basically everyone but me.”

“We love you anyway!” someone calls out.

“Oh, I know you do!” she says with a smile. “But seriously—the kids of New York don’t have enough opportunities to move their bodies. And guess what? Their health will suffer as a result.

“The men and women of Brooklyn hockey have a special power as role models. You can show boys and girls in your community another way to be in the world. How it feels to be part of a team. How your body feels different after a hard practice. How your muscles learn to do things that seemed impossible just a few weeks before.”

She clicks the presentation forward. “This year, I want everyone in this room to think of himself or herself as an ambassador for sport. Georgia and I have created several new programs to help us accomplish this goal. And I think every one of you can make a unique contribution. There are signup sheets on the wall.”

At the side of the room, Georgia reveals a whiteboard with several categories on it. *Skating lessons, swim lessons, soccer clinics*, etcetera.

“Look, guys. I know that time constraints are real. You have a big job to do here in this building, and you’re all dedicated to your own success. That’s what I love about you. So the scheduling is going to be tricky. That’s why I’m also hiring a dozen coaches to run these programs for us, so that you’ll only have to drop in when you’re in town...”

A hand shoots up. It’s one of the Bruisers. “Are we really going to teach these kids to play soccer? What if we don’t know the rules?”

“The YMCA coaches will help you out. And if you really can’t mingle with kids, you can stick to the black-tie fundraisers. Your famous faces always bring in the cash.”

“Even Baby Bayer’s face?” some heckler teases.

“Oh, especially his,” someone else chirps.

I just bet it does.

“Our first ticketed fundraiser is coming up in November. But our fitness classes for teens begin in two weeks.”

Charli’s hand waves in the air. “Will the time commitment be significant? Most of us work other jobs just so we can afford to be professional hockey players.”

“It’s only as significant as you make it,” Georgia says. “The Bombshells’ practice schedule is in the evenings, to match with the game schedule. We wanted you to have big blocks of time in the early part of the day for other commitments.”

“And they wanted all that ice time for the men,” Charli says under her breath.

“But no pressure. And if you do participate, you’ll earn twenty-five dollars an hour.”

There are a few more questions and comments, and then the meeting is dismissed. “Bombshells, come and get your welcome packets,” Georgia says. “And don’t forget to look at the signup sheets. You don’t have to commit right this second, though. I’ll move the sheets online after today.”

I head right over to the signup sheets, so that I will have first pick. There are teen swimming instructor and lifesaving coach slots in the middle of the day. I’m a great swimmer, and that sounds like fun. So I write my name down immediately.

At twenty-five American dollars an hour, this is perfect for me. I can earn some extra cash and play with kids. What’s not to like?

“Swimming coach,” Bryce says from right behind me. “Do you know where the pools are located?”

I turn around and offer him the pen. “I’ll find the place okay. Are you going to join me?” If he’s *that* worried about my welfare, maybe he will.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I do not speak enough English to teach people to swim. What if someone struggles, and I forget the word for...” He makes a

frantic motion with his hands.

“Kick?” I try.

“*Oui.*” He puts the pen back on the ledge where it belongs.

Okay. Fine. There goes my opportunity to parade around in my bathing suit in front of him.

His loss, right? I leave him and head over to the table where Rebecca is handing out welcome packets to the Bombshells. The gym bag with our team logo on it—a cartoon bomb with the wick sizzling and ready to blow—is delightful.

Inside, I find a Bombshells T-shirt. On the back it reads: *Underestimate us. That will be fun.* There’s also a brand-new Katt phone with a sleek yellow case, which I know I’m going to be playing with all evening.

Beneath that, I find an invitation on thick, creamy paper for a black-tie benefit dinner to be held in November.

And, finally, a VIP card for the Colorbox Nail Salon, entitling the bearer to a free mani-pedi every week through April.

“Oh, sure,” Charli grumbles. “The little ladies need pretty fingers and toes to play hockey.”

“That’s not it at all,” Rebecca says from right behind her.

Charli, at least, has the good sense to flinch.

“I own that salon,” Rebecca says. “And I always tell people that I think better with my feet in a tub of warm water. So I just thought some of you might enjoy the same.”

“Thank you,” I say quickly. “The perks are really fun. I can tell you’re thinking hard about making this job sustainable.”

“We’re trying,” Rebecca says. “Brooklyn is an expensive place to live. And we’re not allowed to factor that into our salaries. So we’ve made sure that players have access to housing that’s close by. And some meals on the road. We’ll do what we can.”

“Thank you,” Charli says, her chin down, her expression chagrined. “I do

appreciate it.”

She is saved from further explanation by a whistle from Fiona at the front of the room. “Practice starts in twenty minutes, girls. Let’s suit up.”

On my way out the door, I glance once more at the signup sheets. Bryce put his name down for soccer coaching, so we definitely won’t be working together. But right under my name on the swimming sheet, the name *Anton Bayer* has been freshly scrawled.

He seems like a fun guy. The kids will enjoy his company.

That’s got to be why I feel a strange little prickle of anticipation, right? It’s because of his attitude. And not because I’m suddenly picturing him shirtless.

Nope. It’s not because of that. Not at all.

POLISH AND BRIGHTEN



ANTON

I am the last man on Earth who should coach swimming lessons. I don't really like the water. But teenagers should know how to swim, so they'll like it better than I do.

This is a selfless act on my part. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

"Are we going to lift?" Drake asks me on our way out of the meeting. "It's chest day."

"Of course we're going to lift." This is the season where I will take nothing for granted. "Let's go."

The weight room is a little crowded today, because everybody has the same idea. But that's okay. Drake and I make good use of the bench, and I like the camaraderie of the weight room during the season.

Plus, there's gossip. Castro's wife wants to redecorate their apartment. O'Doul picked a date for his wedding. And Beacon got a dog.

"I got a teenager and a toddler," he jokes. "It's chaos already. Why not add a dog?"

"Bring on the chaos!" somebody else yells.

"I don't know," Drake says, adding a plate for my last set. "It's going to be different around here. With the women and all. Now *that's* chaos."

“How do you figure?” I ask. “They have their own weight room. Their own locker room suite, too. They won’t be in your way.” I take a breath and then lift the bar overhead, grunting like a beast.

“But they’re still here in the building,” he points out. “We might have to change our behavior. Clean it up a little.”

“Do you mean, like, fart less often?” someone asks.

“Exactly,” he says gravely.

“Dude, what?” Castro yelps. “Nobody can just *decide* to fart less often. Your ass might explode.”

“But you could do it quietly,” Drake says, and he’s completely serious. If I weren’t pressing nearly three hundred pounds of iron over my body, I might laugh.

“Look,” Trevi says. “You’re overreacting. There have always been women in the building. My wife, for starters.” She’s Georgia, the co-head of publicity. “There’s a female trainer, a female massage therapist. There are women in the front office, the travel department, the GM’s office. A woman owns the whole damn team!”

“But that’s not what he means,” Jason Castro says as he wipes down the leg press. “He means there are women in the building doing his same *job*. They’re not support staff. They’re also the stars of the show. His fragile male ego has taken a hit.”

“It has *not*,” Drake argues. “You’re putting words in my mouth. I simply meant that the tone around here is going to change some. I didn’t say it was a bad thing.”

“You’re *afraid* of the Bombshells,” someone teases.

“Yeah, especially that angry redhead.”

“I’m not *afraid* of her,” he grumbles. “Just, uh, a little wary.”

“Huh. You do look a little pale, my friend,” Leo says. “Have you tested your blood sugar lately?”

Drake gives him the finger and marches out of the room.

I've finished my last set when Drake comes tearing back into the room. "Guys! You're not going to believe this, but the locker room is different."

"Since yesterday?" I ask, skeptical.

"Yeah, there's some strange thing in the toilet stall. A device."

"A strange device," Trevi muses. "Like, a bidet? They were doing some renovations."

"No, it's not a bidet. Look."

A few of the players follow Drake into the locker room, including me. But I was headed there anyway. Soon, we're crowded in front of a toilet stall. "Look," Drake says, eyeing the metal unit on the wall. "What's that?"

Castro is the first to laugh. And then so do I. "It's..."

"Just..." Tankiewicz howls.

"Maxi...pads..." I can't breathe. "And tampons!"

"Don't you have a sister?" Castro snorts.

"But what's it doing in our locker room?" Drake demands. "Are we being evicted?"

"No, fool," Castro says. "Maybe they hung it in here by mistake. Calm down, man. There's nothing to worry about."

Drake crosses his arms, still looking unsettled. "But there are other changes, too. There are cotton balls and Q-tips by the sinks."

"Huh." I strip off my sweaty practice shirt and toss it into a laundry hamper. "That's good. We need clean ears so we can hear Coach yelling at us." I strip off the rest of my clothes and grab a shower stall. The water is the perfect temperature, proving that everything that really matters is still the same.

There's a new shampoo dispenser in here, though, so Drake will probably make a big deal out of that, too. Before, there was just one product in here—a three-in-one soap that was supposed to clean every single part of my tired body. And that was fine.

Now there are choices. The first dispenser contains a lemon-verbena body

wash. The second is a shampoo for dry hair—with avocados and coconut. There's also one for volume, with bamboo extract.

I like both avocados and coconut, so I push the button for that one. Easy choice. My shower takes three minutes, because I'm quick like that.

When I step out to grab a towel, Drake is stepping out of the stall next to mine. "Holy hell. Will I smell like a woman now?"

"Nah," I say. "There's nothing feminine about coconuts. Big, hairy nuts? Come on, man." I grab a towel and toss him one.

"Where will it end, though?" He shakes like a wet dog. "Look, there are new products on the sinks. What is *that*?"

I walk over and pick up one of the bottles. "This one says *Daily Perfecting Cream*. It claims to polish and brighten."

"You could stand to be brighter," Leo cracks. "Try that one."

I give him the finger.

"Careful!" Drake barks. "We can't just spread any random thing on our bodies."

"Then why do you pick up jersey-chasers in bars?" Castro cracks from inside a shower stall.

"I'm serious. You don't know what's in here." He picks up the bottle and squirts a glossy white blob onto his palm. Then he lifts it cautiously to his nose, like it might be radioactive. "Whoa. What is that? Here—smell this."

Trevi emerges from the shower stall. "I have a great nose. I bet I can guess it in two sniffs."

"Wait." Castro steps out, too. "I'm married to a girl who loves her products. I can guess it in one sniff."

"Can not," I argue. That's why I love these guys. We can turn *anything* into a competition.

We all crowd around Drake, leaning in to get the first sniff.

"I'm getting...berries," Castro whispers.

"And flowers," Trevi says. "Gardenia?"

“Oh God. Flowers? It’s worse than I thought,” Drake complains. “Who’s *doing* this to us?”

“Not gardenia,” I argue, taking a deep sniff. “Lilac?”

“Nah.” Trevi smells it again.

That’s when O’Doul walks into the locker room, catching three bare-assed men, nose to nose, sniffing a gooey liquid out of Drake’s palm. “What the fuck, boys? What is that?”

We all straighten up quickly, as if caught with something far more scandalous than bath products.

“Never mind. I don’t even want to know.” He gives us a grumpy look. “Video meeting in ten minutes.”

“But what’s with all the new stuff in the locker room?” Drake presses. He’s like a dog with a bone. “We don’t get it.”

“Hey, just ignore that stuff. Rebecca wants to provide perks for her female players—like shakes and stuff. But the salary cap rules say that she can’t give them anything unless it’s for everyone who works here.”

“Ah,” Castro says. “That makes sense. Although maxi pads in our shitter is a bridge too far.”

O’Doul shrugs. “Not my circus, not my monkeys. But you guys *are* my monkeys. And we need to keep our eyes on the prize, guys. There’s a video meeting for all monkeys in ten minutes.”

“Roger.” I head for the dressing room and my clothes.

Bryce Campeau is sitting on the bench poking at his phone. “Hey, thank you.”

“For what?” My mind is still on maxi pads and gardenias.

“For earlier. Going to the store for Sylvie’s things.”

“Oh. No big deal. How’s that going, anyway?” I pull on my briefs.

“The smoke detectors work, but I do not love the burglar bars.”

“No, man.” I jump into my jeans. “I mean—how is it going with *her*. And you.” I eye my friend, the broody Canadian. He looks uncomfortable.

“She is annoyed with me. But I can’t change the circumstances. I can’t make my life less hectic. It’s not a good time to change our relationship. I can’t give her the attention she deserves right now.”

“So you’re just going to make her wait for it?” That’s cold.

“I only want the best for her. Right now, I can’t be my best.”

“You’ll help keep her safe, but you won’t sweep her off her feet.”

“Yes.”

And I’ve got nothing.

“Will you keep an eye on her?”

“What kind of eye?” I ask, grumpy now. Keeping my eyes on her is all too easy.

“She is very sheltered. New York will be a lot for her.”

“Didn’t she play for the University of Michigan? That’s a huge school.”

“I still worry. Just watch out for her. As a favor to me.”

“Sure, man. Sure.”

I’m a good teammate, and a good friend, even when I think my friends are crazy.

Besides—I plan to be around the neighborhood a lot this season. No more clubbing. No more late nights, and no more scandals. This will be the year when I make everything happen.

I guess it’s just as well that the only woman I’ve been interested in since last spring is basically off limits.

Three rules, I remind myself. Let’s not break ’em.

SNIPER SPEED



SYLVIE

It's my fifth practice, and our preseason is flying by at top speed.

And so is the puck, unfortunately.

The Bruisers' goalie coach snaps a puck toward me. I'm forced into the butterfly position, protecting the five-hole. We've been practicing for forty-five minutes, and I'm dripping with sweat, my muscles shaking.

So I'm slow to recover in time for his next shot. I lunge to the left, deflecting sloppily with my stick. The puck drops to the ice. It's not a goal, but it creates a rebound opportunity that would cost me in a real game.

The coach blows a whistle. "Reset!"

I basically stagger out of the crease to help the other goalies gather up all our pucks.

This practice session is a huge opportunity for me. The Bombshells don't have their own goalie coach, but the Bruisers' guy invited us to work out with his netminders today.

That means I'm practicing alongside veteran star Mike Beacon and up-and-comer Silas Kelly, as well as the other Bombshells goalie, Scarlet McCaulley. She's twenty-five and an alternate for Team USA.

She's also kicking my ass. Our season opener is ten days away, and it's

painfully obvious that I'm not ready yet. Scarlet has spent the last forty-five minutes stopping everything that moves. And the men are also crushing it.

I started out strong, but the pace of this session has been brutal. My instincts are still sharp. I stopped a lot of pucks that the coach slapped my way. But then I got tired awfully fast, and now half the time my body can't close the deal.

It's humiliating. At least Scarlet looks good. The goalie coach won't necessarily go back to his pals and say, *Tommy Hansen's kid is going to sink the new women's team before they even get started.*

"We've got ten minutes left. Let's do some harder shots," Coach says, skating backward. "I always get help for these, because..." He crosses his left hand to his right shoulder. "Already had one surgery to repair the repetitive-stress injury I gave myself shooting on goalies. Don't need to go under the knife again."

That's when two players skate onto the ice from the bench. The first one is Leo Trevi. But when I glance over to see who the other player is, I find myself looking into the sturdy gaze of Bryce Campeau.

It just figures, since Bryce is the other super-frustrating thing about my stint so far in Brooklyn. He's not avoiding me, exactly. We've had lunch together twice. And when I left a message for my father the other day, asking a simple question about the WiFi hookup in our apartment, it was Bryce who rang the doorbell two hours later to fix it for me.

That's exactly the type of attention I'm getting from Bryce. The polite, obligatory kind, followed by two cheek kisses and the occasional text to ask me how I'm doing.

So I'm frustrated—with Bryce, with my performance, and with so many other things. I've only been here for ten days, but so far Brooklyn is a tough nut to crack.

Leo and Bryce line up a series of pucks on the ice. They'll skate past the four goalies, firing on us each in turn. Longer shots provide more reaction

time, but greater force and speed.

Then the drill begins. The coach and his assistant skate through the foreground, obscuring our clear view of the shooters and their setups, while the two players fire at us.

Leo shoots the first puck on Silas, who handily stops it. Then Bryce gets a missile off on Scarlet, who just barely swats it away with the tip of her glove.

Suddenly there's a puck hurtling toward me at high speed. I dive, but miss it as it whistles past my ear and into the net's upper corner.

Damn it. I pick my exhausted self up just in time to misjudge a shot from Bryce, sending that one through the five-hole.

Focus, Hansen, I coach myself. I know I can do this.

It works, too. I get the next one from Leo. No problem. And then I stop three more from Bryce. But as I'm batting away the third one, I realize that the speed of that puck wasn't much to deal with.

And neither is the next one. I watch as he fires a shot on Silas, and then on Beacon, both of them at jet speed.

I have to look away to dive for a shot from Leo. But then Bryce comes back to me and sends me a puck at the speed of a grandmother riding on a donkey.

He's *soft-balling* me, I realize. Bryce can see that I'm struggling, so he's throwing me a series of easy shots. He's *coddling* me.

And I am livid.

It's funny what anger will do to a girl's game. I am ferocious as I stop the next two shots from Leo. And when Bryce sends me another yawner, I slap it back to him so hard and so accurately that he has to dodge out of the way to avoid taking a shot to the nuts, because he's not wearing any pads.

"*Merde,*" he curses softly.

"Whoops," I say through gritted teeth. And I give him a look so bitter that his eyes widen in alarm.

But the boy does not learn his lesson. For the remaining few minutes of

the exercise, he takes it easy on me. After ripping meteors at every other goalie, he sends me pucks that would embarrass a high school center.

I am incensed. I don't need Bryce to humiliate me like this, when I'd been doing a fine job of it without his help.

When the coach finally blows the whistle, calling our session to a close, I gather up the pucks with everyone else.

"Whoa, that was intense," Scarlet says, still breathing hard. "Great session, huh?"

"Yup. Great," I manage. At this rate, I'll spend the season sitting in the corner of the bench opening and closing the door for other players on shift changes, while Scarlet plays every last game.

I wait until the coaches depart. And then I skate up to Bryce, who's moving one of the extra nets out of the way. "What the *hell* was that?" I hiss. "Why would you treat me like a child, instead of an athlete?"

Bryce jerks his head back in shock. "I did not treat you like a child."

"You absolutely did! Don't try to make my life easier, Bryce. That is not why I came to Brooklyn. And that is not what you're supposed to be to me—my protector. You're supposed to—" I bite off the rest of the sentence. *Kiss me. Love me. Want me.*

I don't say these things out loud. I shouldn't have to. And furthermore, we're not alone. When I glance over my shoulder, I spy Anton Bayer crossing through the vestibule, in earshot of everything I'm saying. And his eyes look worried.

Luckily, I don't have to stop yelling at Bryce. I can just switch to French, and insist that he *doesn't ever* take it easy on me in practice again. On penalty of death. Or at least a good maiming.

"Je suis désolé, Sylvie. Je ne veux pas."

He's trying to appease me. But I'm still so angry I could burst.

So I turn on my skates and walk away without another word.

SUCH A GRIND



ANTON

Oh man. The moment Sylvie busts me for eavesdropping on her argument with Campeau, I high-tail it out of the rink.

Not that anyone asked me, but she was absolutely justified in her anger. Anyone could see that he wasn't shooting at her the same way he did for everyone else. That's not what the coach asked of him, either. A player can't grow without practicing at the highest level.

Yet any fool could also see that he'd done it out of love. There's no way he intended to humiliate her. That's just not the kind of guy he is.

I'm still thinking about them when I slip into the back of the video room, where the defensive coordinator is showing us tape in preparation for our first preseason games.

"This rookie sniper was named the MVP of the Junior World Championships in 2018..." Coach drones.

Campeau's thing with Sylvie is none of my business. And signing up to teach swimming lessons with her was probably a stupid move.

My little crush is only going to get worse.

The coach drones on about New Jersey's scoring style, and I try to pay attention.

When Coach is done, I somehow manage to enter the lobby from the video room at the same moment that Sylvie bounds out of the tunnel, heading for the door.

“Hey,” I say, startled by the reappearance of the girl I can’t stop thinking about. Her cheeks are flushed. Stealing glances at her for a week has taught me that she always has high color in her cheeks, as if she burns a little brighter than other women.

“Hi,” she says, slowing her pace as she approaches. “You’re not waiting for Campeau, are you?” The name sounds extra French when she says it.

And maybe I’m a jackass for thinking this, but I’d really like to hear her mutter French into my ear in bed. “Uh, no. No. Don’t know where he is.”

“*Good.*”

She sounds so fierce, I have to laugh. “Walk out with me,” I say with more nonchalance than I feel.

“Are you going to give me a lecture about patience, or gratitude?”

“Fuck no, I don’t give lectures. I’m usually on the receiving end of those.”

Her face breaks into a startled smile, and she follows me out onto the sidewalk. “Well, I probably deserve one. But I’m not in a forgiving mood yet.”

“Are you in the mood for tequila, though? That’s what I offer my friends after a shitty day.” It’s true, too. I’m not one to dole out advice. Who wants to turn into his father?

“I’m not much of a drinker,” Sylvie says, tossing her lush hair over her shoulder. “But I could use some food.”

“How do you feel about spicy Szechuan?”

“I feel *great* about it. You don’t have to cheer me up, though. If you have things to do.”

“Woman, it’s chow time. And you’re saving me from masturbading.”

“Um, what?” she says, giving me a startled look.

“That’s a Frankenword for taking yourself out to dinner alone. Masturdating.”

“A Frankenword?” She gives a shout of laughter and claps a hand over her mouth. “You are ridiculous.”

“True facts. Now follow me, newbie. It’s time for your introduction to the best cheap Chinese food in Brooklyn.”

She hitches her gym bag up on her shoulder and follows me down the street.

Soon we’re ensconced at China Garden and splitting a first course of green dumplings in tangy plum sauce.

“These are *magnifique*,” Sylvie gushes, plucking up another dumpling with her chopsticks. “How did you find this place?”

“Georgia Trevi. She has a thing for dumplings.”

“Bless her. And thanks for bringing me here. I was clearly in need of an intervention.”

“Hey, no problem.” I sound casual enough. But that’s not how I really feel. Sylvie has hovered at the edge of my consciousness these past ten days. Every time both teams are in the practice facility, I somehow manage to hear her laugh, or spot her down the corridor.

And now I have her alone. It’s no crime to buy a girl some spicy noodles and chicken after a bad day, but I feel a little guilty nonetheless. And it occurs to me now that Bryce Campeau hates this restaurant and never comes here.

Thanks, subconscious. Good work.

“You know,” I tell her. “You’re not the only one who’s struggling to

prove herself.”

Sylvie glances up at me. “No? You too?”

“I didn’t have a great season last year. And now it’s all riding on this one.”

She sets down her chopsticks and puts her chin in her hand. “Do you believe in fate?”

“Um...?” Do I? “Not really.” Although every time Sylvie smiles, I’m not sure of anything anymore.

“My mother did. She raised me in a very spiritual household. And now that she’s gone, I think about it all the time. So when I got the call to come to Brooklyn, I thought it meant something big, you know? That my life was on a path to move forward.” She makes an exasperated face. “Ten days in, and I’m not sure anymore.”

“Ten days, huh?” I nudge her shoe under the table. “Well, I guess you gave it a thorough try.”

She smiles at me suddenly, and I feel it warming me like a heat lamp. “No lectures from you.”

“That’s not a lecture. That’s sarcasm.”

She beams. “Fine. So I shouldn’t throw in the towel yet. What is your story? What happened last year?”

I’m not looking forward to telling a pretty girl how I fucked up. But I suppose it’s only fair. “This will be my third season in Brooklyn. My rookie year I worked hard, and I had some early luck, I guess. But then I let myself slide. I took the summer off. And when I came back in the fall, I partied too hard.”

“Oh boy.” She points at the last dumpling. “This one is yours.”

I push the platter toward her instead. I would feed this girl a mountain of dumplings if she’ll just smile at me again.

She nabs it, and—*bam*—big smile. I almost forget what I was talking about.

Oh right. Failure. “It didn’t go well for me last season. My stats sucked, and we were all adjusting to Tank’s style of play.” Tankiewicz is a veteran defenseman we got in a trade a year ago. “He’s a great player, but it caused some adjustment on the ice.”

It was the kind of wrinkle that teams experience all the time. But I’d already been off my game. “I didn’t catch on fast enough. None of my tricks were working. And at the end of January, Coach shipped my ass down to the minor-league team in Hartford.”

Sylvie flinches, even though she’s known hockey all her life, and has probably heard tales of woe like mine before. “You’re back now, though.”

“Yeah, Coach told me if I worked my ass off all summer, I might make it back.”

“And that’s what you did?”

“You bet. I found a trainer here in Brooklyn and basically lived at the damn gym. It was such a grind. But every morning I asked myself whether I wanted a real career, or whether I wanted to be one of those guys who has to frame his jersey and hang it on the wall, because everybody already forgot his name.”

“And here you are,” she says.

“For now,” I add, because I’ve learned not to take a thing for granted.

“My fitness is a problem, too,” she says, pouring more tea out of the pot for both of us. “It turns out that a year of mourning wasn’t very good for my game.”

“Your mother died,” I say quietly. “Campeau told us about that.”

“She did,” Sylvie says, folding her hands. “She and Bryce were very close. It really upset him when she died. And things got kind of weird after that...” She shakes her head and doesn’t say more.

But I’m curious, and kind of a bastard, so I have to ask, “What’s the deal with you guys, anyway?”

She looks out the window, where there’s steady foot traffic past the

restaurant. “We’ve always been good friends. And for a while there I thought we’d be more. But I was wrong.”

My stomach clenches for her. Is Campeau really that stupid? This woman loves him, and he’s unmoved by that?

“Can I ask you a question?” She turns to me with those giant brown eyes. “You don’t have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Anything.”

“Does Bryce have a girlfriend? He should just tell me that. But...” She gulps. “It would help me understand.”

“No,” I say softly. “I really don’t think so. I’ve never heard him talk about anyone special.”

“Including me, I suppose.” Her smile is wry.

“Well...” I have to tread carefully here. But, nope, he never talks about her. “He always said how close he is to your family. I know you all mean a lot to him. But he is also the most buttoned-up guy I’ve ever met. I mean—I’m an open book. An over-sharer. But Bryce doesn’t talk about his feelings.”

She fiddles with the chopsticks’ wrapper. “It’s true. You’re right. He’s a man of deeds more than words.”

“Exactly,” I say quickly.

“His deeds could use some work, though,” she grumbles.

Our waitress appears, placing a heaping plate of spicy Szechuan chicken down on our table, along with a molded bowl of white rice.

“Yessss,” Sylvie says with the gusto of a lover in the throes of passion. “Come to *mama*.”

We dig in, and I have the dual pleasures of spicy chicken and watching Sylvie enjoy the food. We also ordered a noodle dish. And that food doesn’t stand a chance. We both pile food onto our plates with enthusiasm.

“So we’re going to teach some kids to swim next week?”

“That’s the idea.” Sylvie heaps some noodles beside her chicken. “Did you read the handbook? Some of these kids don’t even own bathing suits. So

we're bringing bathing suits with us. And it's not just a course on swimming. It's a lifesaving course. They can apply for lifeguard jobs if they pass."

Wait, what? "They never get in the water, and we're supposed to teach them to be lifeguards? Does that sound plausible?"

"If they're strong enough, a little fearless, and willing to listen, anything is possible." She dives in with her chopsticks.

"Are you, uh, a decent swimmer?" I ask. "I took a lot of swimming lessons as a kid." I leave out the fact that I hated every one of them. "But I've never been responsible for a bunch of wet teenagers who can't swim."

"I went to swimming camp every summer as a kid. I used to race. And I had my lifesaving certificate."

Seems like I should have seen that coming. "Guess I'll be following your lead, then. I'll admit I'm a little worried about teaching non-swimmers to save lives. Won't they be a little freaked out in the water already?"

"That's the point, though." Her forehead furrows in an adorable frown. "The message isn't that you're good enough to swim like kids from the suburbs. It's that you're good enough to save someone's life. It's empowering to be told you can do something that's as difficult as it is important."

"Wow, okay. We'd better do a good job, then." Although Sylvie's competence will go a long way. "I'll do what I can, okay? My schedule is crazy, and I'm not the kind of guy you want in charge of a project like this. But when I'm there, I'll give a hundred and fifty percent."

She studies me with serious brown eyes for a moment. "I get that. And thank you."

"No problem."

"I just have one more question. Are you going to eat the rest of that chicken?"

As I pass her the platter, I think I fall a little deeper in lust.

THE TAVERN ON HICKS



SYLVIE

Anton grabs the check the moment it hits the table.

My competitive streak is triggered by this show of macho behavior. “Hey! No fair. I don’t need you to buy dinner.”

“Didn’t say you did,” he says, slipping a credit card into the folder. “I’m not trying to baby you. I noticed that you hate that.”

My smile is embarrassed, because he witnessed my meltdown earlier.

“But I also happened to notice that we don’t earn the same salary.”

“That’s true,” I admit. “And a problem for women’s sports. But I’m not hurting like some of the girls. I’m the bookkeeper for my dad’s hockey organization, so I brought my job to Brooklyn with me.”

“Still,” he says, giving me a confident smile. “This is my treat. You can buy next time.”

Next time. I think Anton Bayer and I are becoming friends. “Well, thank you. I really appreciate it. And thank you for talking me off the ledge earlier.”

“I’ve been out on that same ledge.” He shrugs.

My new phone starts chiming with texts, and it’s awfully loud. “Sorry.” I pull out the phone. “I’m still getting used to this thing. All the features...”

The texts are from Fiona. Some of my teammates are gathering in a

Brooklyn bar. *It's on Hicks Street! Are you in?*

“Wait until you win your first game,” he says. “There’s a gold star that appears on the screen.”

“I’ve heard about that. It sounds a little silly.”

“Doesn’t it?” He chuckles. “But, man, the Kattenbergers are onto something. After a couple of losses, you’ll be missing that damn thing. I’d do just about anything for the star.”

He signs the check while I read my texts. “Do you know where there’s a tavern on Hicks Street?” I ask. “Is that nearby?”

“Oh, sure. I’ll walk you over there.” He gets up. “That’s the name of the place—Tavern on Hicks. It’s the Bruisers’ second home, on account of being located between the arena and the practice facility. We usually walk there after home games.”

He holds the door open for me, like a gentleman. And we set off down the street together. He’s so ruggedly handsome that a few women on the sidewalk turn and stare.

I’m not immune to it either. It’s not just his face. There’s something so sexual about him, that I feel overly aware of my own body when I’m near him. I keep noticing tiny details about him, and each one is more fascinating than the last. He has golden hair on his strong forearms. And his long-legged gait is almost a swagger.

“You don’t have to walk me there,” I blurt out eventually. “I mean, you probably have other things to do on a Saturday night.”

“Not really. Ten bucks says my friends will be there, too. And there’s practically a print of my ass on one of the barstools.”

“Charming,” I say, trying to play it cool.

“Not that you asked, but this part of Brooklyn is safe enough. Although Bryce would probably suggest taking a taxi home if you leave the bar after ten, and especially if you’re alone.”

I snort, and it isn’t very ladylike. “Bryce would probably like me to take a

taxi all the way to JFK and fly home to Toronto.”

“That isn’t true.”

“No?” I’m not so sure.

“No.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Bryce isn’t insane. And only a crazy man would wish you were farther away.”

My cheeks begin to burn, because I don’t know how to take a compliment from a hot guy.

I’m saved from trying to think of a suitable response by the appearance of the Tavern. “This is the place?”

“Oh yeah. In all its beer-scented glory. On a weekend, both bartenders are working. Pete looks crusty, but he’s actually a cinnamon roll.” Anton stops to open the door for me again.

I step inside and spot the gray-haired bartender immediately. The place is more than half full, and the man looks busy.

“And then there’s Petra.” He nods toward a young, blond woman pouring a pitcher of beer at the end of the bar. He drops his voice even though she’s pretty far away, and there’s a hum of bar noise in the room. “She looks sweet, but she’s made of steel. She keeps us in line.”

Petra looks up, as if she’s overheard. “Hey, Anton!” she calls. “Who’s this? She’s too pretty for you.”

He puts a warm hand on my shoulder. “Just a friend who puts up with me once in a while. This is Sylvie. She’s new in town, and one of the Bombshells’ goalies.”

Petra glances at me. And I swear her eyes narrow a little bit. “Welcome,” she says stiffly. Then she carries that pitcher off without another word.

“See?” he says with a chuckle. “If you need a favor, ask Pete.”

“Got it.”

“If you don’t see your friends yet, there’s a few other things you should

know about the Tavern.” He gives me a serious face.

“Yeah? Like what.” Anton is such a hoot.

“Hockey players carve their names into the paneling on the wall outside the men’s room. You all might need to start your own spot outside the ladies’.” He strokes his chin thoughtfully. “Never order the turkey burger. The fries are great, though. And the nachos are so bad that they’re actually good. With that fake cheese that seems to soak up alcohol at three in the morning.”

“Ah. Never knew that stuff had magical properties.”

“Stick with me. I know things.” He squeezes my shoulder. “You see your friends anywhere?” He glances around, and the heat of his big hand disappears from my shoulder.

I miss it. We *are* becoming friends. He said so himself. I’m grateful. It was not an easy day.

Suddenly I see a hand waving at me from a back corner of the bar. “There they are. At that funny round table.” It’s a C-shaped booth, just the right size for five or six women who need to gossip about their first ten days as Bombshells.

“Bummer. That’s the worst table in the bar.”

“Why? It’s cozy. Nobody can come and bother you there.”

Anton laughs. “That’s it exactly. You’re all stuck with each other.”

“We could make room for you,” I offer.

He shakes his head. “I’m going to go sit with Drake.” He points at a barstool in front of a TV showing a baseball game. “You kids have fun.” He gives my shoulder another quick squeeze. “Thanks for coming out to dinner with me.”

“Oh, please. We both know who got the better end of that bargain.” I give him a grateful smile, and those turquoise eyes smile back at me.

The effect is pretty dazzling. So I give him an awkward wave and turn away, heading for my girls.

They all shift slightly around the circle to make a space for me. “Sylvie! Sit!” Fiona waves me in. Then she leans forward and drops her voice. “Did you just waltz in here with Anton Bayer? What’s up with that? Did I miss something?”

“What? *No.*” As if. “He watched me lose my mind at Bryce a couple hours ago. And then he invited me out as a kind of intervention. He probably assumed it was that, or I was going to hurt some unsuspecting Brooklyn native.”

“What did Bryce *do*?” Fiona asks, her eyes wide. “Did you guys have the big conversation?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s worse.”

“Yeah, that was some serious bullshit,” Scarlet says, swigging her beer. “That man was disrespectful, and whatever you said to him afterwards, he had coming.”

“It was the goalie practice,” I clarify. “He was there to shoot on us. And I was struggling, so he kept sending me easy shots.” When I say these words out loud, they sound stupid and whiny.

But the other women all gasp. “Oh no, he didn’t,” Fiona breathes.

“That *total* dick,” Charli growls.

“It really was that bad,” Scarlet says with a shrug. “If Bridger did that to me, I’d lose my mind.”

“Wait,” I stop her. “Is your husband a hockey player?”

“He was.” She smiles. “He was a *terrific* college player. And we all have shitty days in front of the net, Sylvie.”

I know she’s just trying to be nice, but my struggles are larger than one bad practice session.

Luckily, my dreary thoughts are interrupted by a pitcher landing on the table. “Evening, ladies,” says bartender Pete. “This pitcher of margaritas is a gift of those hooligans at the bar. Welcome to the Tavern, and welcome to Brooklyn.”

“Thank you, Pete,” I say as he sets down several glasses, too. “We sure do appreciate it. Will you tell those hooligans I said so?”

“Absolutely.”

Fiona lifts herself up a few inches so that she can wave a thank you to the men at the bar. “It was your new friend, Anton, and that Drake guy. And Jason Castro.”

Charli growls. “They’d better not be expecting sexual favors.”

“No way,” I say, flipping over a glass and pouring it for her. “Drink this and be grateful. Not everything a man does is a ploy.”

“It’s more like seventy percent,” Scarlet says with a giggle. “But I don’t mind, because my guy is the best there is.”

I pour a glass for Scarlet and pass it over, wondering what it would feel like to be in her shoes—to be unafraid to say “my guy” and know that he loved you and wasn’t afraid to say so.

“It was nice of Anton to send us drinks,” Fiona says. “Does he have a thing for you?”

“Nah.” I pass another glass across the table and then pour my own.

“He’s got a reputation,” Fiona whispers. “For being excellent in bed.”

“Figures,” I say. “His whole sex-on-a-stick thing is a little much.”

“What do you mean?” Charli asks.

“Well, lots of guys are attractive. But he’s just so...extra. Like, I don’t know where to put my eyes, you know? Everything about him is super sexual. And super hot.”

Charli shrugs. “If you say so.”

“All hockey players are hot,” Scarlet says.

“Sister—” Fiona puts her hand on top of mine. “—what if it’s not just him? To me, that sounds like *chemistry*. Between both of you. Do you find yourself suddenly wondering what he looks like naked?”

“What? No.” My face burns, though. Because during dinner I had wondered that about five different times. But it’s only because he’s not my

usual type. He's rougher around the edges than Bryce. He wears his attractiveness differently.

But I'll *never* admit my petty fascination with Anton Bayer's incredible body. It's confusing to me. It must just be hormones or something.

"Be careful with that one," Charli says. "He's a total man-whore. Last year it became a problem—he ended up in the blogs for a hotel foursome he had on a road trip."

"A...*foursome*? That sounds complicated." Does she mean sex between four people at the *same time*? Does that math even work?

I sip my drink and try not to call any more attention to my inexperience. Not that it's anyone's business.

Charli rubs her hands together, because even she isn't immune to a juicy piece of gossip. "The trouble was that one of the women took a selfie while Anton was passed out in the hotel bed with three women around him. This woman sent it to some friends as a trophy, and it ended up on the internet. The publicity department was not pleased."

Three women in a bed with Anton. I turn my head and glance quickly in his direction. He's holding a glass of beer in one strong hand, laughing at something Drake is saying, and I feel several different emotions at once.

There's such *joy* in him, for starters. It's been a while since I laughed as easily as he does. But he reminds me that it's possible.

He intimidates me, though. Somehow I can picture each muscular arm around a different woman at the same time. I'm not sure where woman number three would be in that scenario. But still—confidence practically seeps through his pores.

I can't imagine what it would feel like to be on the other end of that dazzling smile when there were no clothes on that body. A girl could burn right up. Nothing but a little puff of smoke and a wisp of ash left to show for her.

He is really out of my league. And I really must stop staring.

I turn back to my friends and take in their happy faces. My drink is tasty, I'm full of good food, and my teammates are amusing. Life could really be worse.

And I'm enjoying this opportunity to spend time with Scarlet. In many ways, we're competitors. If she ends up starting every Bombshells game, I'll be sad. But she's smart and funny and living the life I hope to lead in a few years.

"We're in Manhattan, on the Upper East Side," she's saying. "I take a ferry across the river for practice. It's not such a terrible commute. And Lucy doesn't need us to walk her home from school anymore, because she's in ninth grade, and wouldn't be caught dead with us, anyway."

"Lucy is your...stepdaughter?" Charli guesses. Scarlet is only twenty-five, and too young to have a daughter in high school.

"Sister-in-law," she says with a smile. "Bridger is raising his little sister, and has been since she was eight. Their parents have passed."

"Awww," Fiona says, and I swear there are hearts in her eyes. "What a guy."

"Lucy is the reason that he had to quit hockey," Scarlet tells us. "He loves that I'm still playing. I run the youth hockey program at Chelsea Piers as my day job. And when Bess called about the Bombshells, Bridger brought home a bottle of champagne and told me to go for it."

There's a moment of silence at our table as we all contemplate the perfection of Scarlet's marriage. Even Charli has a soft expression on her face that I rarely see there.

And then a low voice breaks the silence.

"Sylvie."

I freeze at the sound of Bryce's voice. But I do not turn around. I'm still angry.

A warm hand lands on my shoulder. "Please. I need to apologize."

The fight seeps out of me. I don't want to make *another* scene. So I slide

out of the booth and turn around to face him.

A very familiar set of dark blue eyes greets me. And they look worried. “*Désolé*, Sylvie. I am very sorry for not sending you the same shots that I sent the others. I did not mean to disrespect you.”

“Thank you,” I say stiffly. The hurt is still there, though. I keep attracting the wrong kind of attention from this man, and I don’t know how to break the cycle.

But maybe Bryce does. He takes both my hands in his, and gazes lovingly at me. “I never want to hurt you. I love you. I’m sorry.” Then, just as my heart begins melting into a puddle, he pulls me into a hug. I’m snuggled against his warm chest, and my nose lands at the collar of his shirt, where I get a whiff of the aftershave that he’s always worn.

A soft kiss lands at my temple. “*Désolé*,” he says one more time.

As apologies go, it’s top notch. And so is this hug. *This* is the kind man I’ve pined for since I was a girl. Even though it was never mutual.

When his arms relax, I step back. “Did you eat dinner?” he asks. “I was about to order a burger from the bar. I could make it two.”

“I ate,” I admit. “But thank you.”

He flashes me a rare smile. “Then enjoy your evening, *mademoiselle*.”

“*Merci*.” I sit back down then, to the questioning eyes of my teammates.

“Okay, that was nice,” Fiona says. “But that boy confuses me.”

“Sing it, sister.” Confusing should be his new middle name.

“Although I might know a way you could unconfuse him.”

“Really? How?” I ask a little too quickly. It’s so obvious that I’ve spent too much time wondering how to do that.

“The black-tie dinner and dance that’s coming up—let’s find you a sexy dress, some killer heels, and smoky eyes.”

I blink. “That’s it? That’s your idea?”

“Never underestimate the power of showing yourself in a new light. Men can be simple, visual creatures. You’d be activating the *other* definition of

bombshell, you know?”

Charli makes a face, like she hates this plan. “Why do we have to put ourselves on display to raise money for charity?”

“You don’t,” I point out. “It’s optional. Although the men have to put on a tux several times a year for these things. Donors plunk down a thousand dollars a head to meet the players and shake their hands.”

“It’s basically prostitution,” Charli complains.

“It’s for an excellent cause,” Scarlet says. “With free food and music. Bridger and I are looking forward to it.”

“Fine, but I won’t be showing any skin,” Charli grumbles. “I’m in it for the open bar.”

“I’m in it for the new dress,” Fiona chirps. “I can hear Bloomingdale’s calling my name. Are you with me, Sylvie?”

“I’m in,” I decide. It’s been a long time since I got dressed up for an occasion. And maybe Fiona has a point. “You can help me find the dress. Bryce isn’t going to know what hit him.”

“That’s my girl,” she says, refilling my glass.

I swivel around in my seat and glance toward Bryce. He’s leaning on the bar, deep in conversation with Petra the bartender. He doesn’t notice that I’m studying him and trying to predict his reaction when I arrive at the party in a low-cut dress I picked out just for him.

It occurs to me that Bryce isn’t very interested in dancing. But I’ll convince him.

Another man catches me gazing in that direction, though. It’s Anton, of course, who doesn’t miss a chance to notice every silly thing that happens to me.

He gives me a friendly wink and turns back to his boys.

I pick up my margarita and raise my glass. “To teaching the men of Brooklyn a few new tricks.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Charli raises her glass.

“Cheers!” Fiona yells as our glasses clink together. “Bottoms up, girls. I’ll buy the next round.”

A couple hours later we put Scarlet in a taxi, and we walk Charli to the subway. “Where are you living, anyway?” Fiona asks her.

“I found a place. It’s a few stops away.” She waves off the question. “See you at practice.”

Fiona and I walk home together. The cool air sobers me up.

Or so I thought. When I’m safely in my bed, I have unusual dreams. They’re very sexual. A pair of hands unzips my dress. Bryce says “*Désolé*,” in my ear. *Sorry*. But an apology isn’t what I want, so I say, “Keep going.”

He doesn’t, and I wake up, frustrated.

Thanks, tequila.

When I roll over onto my back, the dream continues. There’s kissing. And strong hands remove my underwear, sliding it down my body in a sensuous pass of silk on bare skin.

Those hands pass over my breasts. And then he kisses his way down my body, thrilling me. My legs are parted, and a hot, eager mouth lands exactly where I want it.

I arch my back and moan. *Yes. Finally. More*. And then I look down to watch this wonderfulness in action.

He lifts his head to give me a smoldering glance. But it’s not Bryce who’s pleasuring me. It’s Anton, with his wicked smile, and those brilliant, heavy-lidded eyes.

I wake up with a start, sweating and turned on. I let out a quiet groan of frustration and notice that dawn has already arrived to leak pale light into my bedroom.

I sit up, grab the glass of water beside my bed, and take a gulp. My body

is deeply confused. In the first place, it forgot how to lunge for pucks. But I'm working on it.

It also craves sex. I blame Bryce and his ridiculous hesitation to take the next step with me.

And Anton Bayer's appearance in my dreams? That's on me. All the man did was buy me some Chinese food and talk me out of my snit. He didn't hit on me. And he sure as hell didn't...

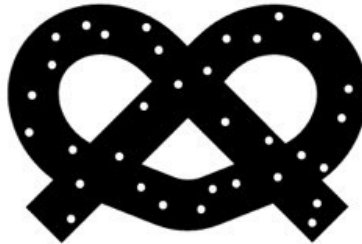
The image that assaults me is so vivid that I clench my thighs together, as if that would soothe the ache I'm feeling.

I drain the rest of the water. When I turn to put the empty glass back down on the table, I notice a hair pin on the wooden surface, glinting in the early morning light.

"Really, Maman?" I whisper. "What on Earth are you trying to suggest? Should I be encouraged? Patient?"

As usual, she doesn't say.

PART MERMAID



Sometimes adulting just sucks.

These are my thoughts as I drive my rickety Volkswagen Bug up my parents' gravel driveway. I haven't been here for most of a decade, and I'm bracing myself in every possible way. Anything could have happened during the intervening years. They could have moved away. (Although that's unlikely.) They could have gotten divorced. (Also hard to picture.)

Conceivably, one or both could be dead.

I don't even know how I'll feel if that last thing has happened. My parents and I didn't part on good terms, to put it lightly. But people can change their ways.

Not all of them do, though.

At first glance, my parents' property looks exactly the same. The little one-story house is still clad in cheap vinyl siding, and its shade of ochre-yellow is just how I remember it.

The tall pines have been carefully pruned of their dead lower branches, which argues for the continued existence of my father, who always enjoyed firing up his chainsaw to tidy things up. Also, Dad's old ride-on mower is visible inside the garage.

He's still around, then. I feel a little hit of relief, which makes no sense. The man will probably shut the door in my face when he sees who's come to

visit. This is going to end badly. I'm already ninety-nine percent sure.

Still, I need to ask for their help. After paying for the gas to drive up from Nashville, I have less than four hundred dollars to my name. And no job. If they turn me away, I'm sleeping in my car again tonight.

It won't kill me, but it's not ideal.

Parking in front of the garage, I get out and almost bleep the locks. I'm so used to parking in Nashville. I haven't lived under these tall pines for eight years.

Back then, I couldn't wait to leave this place. I had my reasons, and some of them were solid. And I used to hate the trees and the winding country roads as much as I hated my parents' attitude.

I still hate the things my parents said to my teenage self. But Vermont looks better to me than it ever did before. I'm ready to live somewhere without smog and traffic. I miss the smell of woodsmoke in the nighttime air, and the sight of the sun setting over the Green Mountains.

Maybe it's weird to feel nostalgia for a place that wasn't good to me. But I'm in the mood to give Vermont a second chance. I'm hoping it gives me a second chance, too. And I'm about to find out if driving eleven hundred miles was a good idea or just plain stupid.

As I approach the house, the front door is already opening. My dad stands on the other side of the screen door, TV remote in his hand, staring at me like he's seen a ghost.

"Hi," I say carefully.

"Roddy," he whispers. He makes no move to open the screen door, but then, neither do I. Maybe we both need a minute to get over our mutual shock.

He looks older. It startles me to catalog all the gray in his hair and the new wrinkles around his eyes.

I'm pretty sure that I don't look like the skinny eighteen-year-old I used to be, either. So he's staring back at me trying to get over that, too.

“You’re back?” he asks, still befuddled.

“Well...” I let out a nervous chuckle. “I’ve been living in Nashville. And yesterday I just got in my car and drove up here without a plan. It took me two days.”

I won’t tell him why I left Nashville. He won’t want to hear about the awful way my relationship ended. Hell, he won’t want to hear about my relationship at all.

“So,” I continue. “I’m happy to be back in Vermont. But I’m kind of starting over. And I was wondering if...”

“Ralph?” my mother’s voice calls from deeper inside the small house.

I have very little time to prepare before she appears behind him. She’s drying her hands on a dish towel, her hair in a messy bun.

My heart gives a little squeeze of familiarity before I can steel myself.

“Roderick,” she whispers, her eyes popping wide. “Oh, honey. What’s happened?”

“Well, not much,” I stammer. “I just needed to get out of Nashville and start over. So I was thinking of doing that here.”

“Here?” She squeezes the dish towel, her eyes alight.

“Perhaps,” I say, trying to sound like it isn’t my only option in the whole world. But if I step over the threshold and stay with them, it has to be because I’m invited. I won’t live with their disdain. Sleeping in the car would be better.

“You want to stay here,” my father clarifies. He’s still holding that TV remote. And he still hasn’t opened the screen door.

It’s not a good sign.

“Just for a little while,” I say. “Until I find a job and a place of my own. I’m a baker.”

“You...what?” my mother asks. “Like, cakes?”

“Bread, mostly. I went to culinary school. I specialize in bread-baking.”

My father squints at me, and that’s another clue this isn’t going to work.

“Culinary school,” he echoes. There’s dismissal in his voice. *Baking is not a real man’s job.* I might as well have said that I’m a ballet dancer, or that I star in a drag show. My father’s ideas of what a man should do with his life are straight out of the fifties.

“No more guitar?” my mother asks. She’s hoping I’ve grown out of being the queer little music nerd my father couldn’t tolerate. She’s trying to sway him.

“No guitar,” I agree, although it kills me a little to imply that I somehow got with Dad’s program and outgrew music. The truth is that I accidentally left my guitar behind in Nashville.

I did outgrow musicians, though. But that’s another long story.

“If you stay...” My father purses his lips. “It’s our house, our rules.”

I swallow hard. “I’m a great house guest. I even cook. And clean up.”

My mother makes a happy sound and reaches for the latch on the screen door. She even elbows my father a little to shift him out of the way.

He doesn’t move, though. He’s still staring at me like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to figure out. “But you’re not... You won’t...” He falters.

“I won’t what?” I ask, already knowing where this is going.

Dad can’t even spit out the loathsome words. “You have a girlfriend?” he asks.

Coward. I shake my head. “I don’t have anybody. That’s why I’m standing on your front steps. I had to leave a bad relationship with nothing but my clothes and a box of books. But I still date men, if that’s what you’re asking. I’m still gay.”

My mother lets out a sound of dismay. And the way my father’s face shutters, I know I came here for nothing.

“You haven’t been to church,” my father says, as if that isn’t a non-sequitur. But to him I suppose it isn’t.

“Not lately,” I admit. “My life blew up, Dad. I have nowhere to go. I’m asking to stay in my old room for a couple of weeks until I can regroup. And

I'd help out around here, of course."

There is a terrible silence while we stare at each other. And then he slowly shakes his head. "Not until you ask God's forgiveness."

It's really astonishing that you can storm out of a house at eighteen in the middle of a shouting match, and then pick right up again in the same place eight years later. We're still trapped in the same dialogue we'd had my entire last year of high school.

"I am humble before the Lord," I say quietly. "But I will not apologize to Him for who I love, or who I am."

My father gives me a disgusted look, as if I just announced my committed worship of Satan. He folds his arms across his chest. The posture is clear. *Go away. You are no longer my son.*

Message received. I feel a flash of the old hurt, but it's followed swiftly by exhaustion. My anger is muted by two days behind the wheel of my car and by already having years of living with his rejection.

Still, I look him right in the eye. *You arrogant fuck. Who says you can judge me?*

My mother sniffs, and I know she's crying. Mom wants me to come inside. But she doesn't want it enough to stand up to him.

That's when I finally realize I'm done here. Probably forever. There is nothing left to do but turn around and leave.

I take one last look at him. But there is no softness there. No affection for the kid he used to love, although I've always been me. I'm the same boy who caught all those baseballs with him in the various yards around the country where we lived when he was in the Air Force. I'm the same son who mowed the lawn and got up early to go fishing, because I craved his attention.

He doesn't even blink. His rejection is unmoving.

So I turn around and make myself walk away.

The sound of the heavy wood door shutting behind me comes even more suddenly than I expect it to. And I have the sudden, terrible urge to spin

around and hurl myself at that fucking door. *Open up, you cowardly fuck!* I might scream. Part of me wants to make a big scene, the way I used to when he lectured me during my senior year of high school.

But the other half of me is already numb. I drove all the way to Vermont thinking I might have a chance. *When God closes a door, he opens a window.* It's the worst kind of cliché, but I wanted it to be true. All the way here I wondered if my breakup was some kind of sign that I was meant to live my life elsewhere. I thought maybe I was sent home again for a reason.

Apparently not, though. This week, when God closes a door, he also engages the deadbolt.

I go back to my car and start the engine again. Might as well have left her running. I do a three-point turn without looking at the house, yellowed pine needles crackling under my tires. It's time to form a Plan B. So I point my car toward the center of Colebury.

I'll bet my father is already watching the playoff game again. Maybe he's treated himself to a second beer, just to wash away the disturbing intrusion of his queer son during the fifth inning.

And my mother is crying into a hand towel in the bathroom. Quietly. So she doesn't make a fuss.

I can't think about them right now. I have more practical problems—like how to get a job immediately. And where to sleep tonight. Best-case scenario—there is magically a job opening at the King Arthur Flour Bakery, where I began my career. But even if they hire me tomorrow, it will be at least two weeks until I could expect to be paid.

I have to figure out how to stay alive for several weeks on a few hundred dollars.

As I drive into town, I notice that my gas tank is almost empty. There goes twenty-five bucks. I drive slowly anyway, taking in the sights, wondering what's changed. Just before the turn into Colebury, I spot a couple of new businesses. There's a bar called the Gin Mill with lots of cars in the

parking lot. That place looks like a good time, but I don't have money to spend, not even on a single beer.

In the same lot, though, there's another business that's even more interesting to me. The Busy Bean. A coffee shop. It's closed now, but I make a note to pay it a visit soon. If it's a big coffee shop, they might be able to use a baker, one who doesn't mind pouring coffee, too.

Beggars can't be choosers. And since I'm *this* close to becoming an actual beggar, I have to keep my options open.

I gun the engine, climbing the hill toward the town square. The houses look a little better maintained than the last time I was here. It's a warm autumn night, and there are people standing outside the old diner, chatting. That place has shined itself up, too. When did Colebury get cute? I'm stunned at how cheerful it looks, with window boxes on the store fronts and every street lamp lit.

My nostalgia bubbles up inside me again like yeast. This is my hometown, even if I never felt welcome here before. I was born here. And even if I spent most of my first eighteen years living on various military bases around the world, I finished high school here, too.

And I like the look of the place, damn it. I feel the pull.

Wouldn't it be funny if I settled down in Colebury right under the noses of my parents? I want to see the look on my father's face when I walk into the diner holding hands with my future boyfriend.

Now there's a happy thought I'll need to revisit when I'm trying to fall asleep in the passenger seat later.

Behind the old diner, I see something that's actually useful to me. A gym. TRY A WEEK ON US, reads a sign in the window.

It's the first lucky break of the day. Or maybe the month, if I'm honest. If the gym has even a half-decent locker room, I can shower there every night. I'll need to look professional while I'm job hunting.

I park my car and get out. *Come on, Colebury. Don't let me down.*

NEVER FORGET A WOMAN



I'm leaning against my car in the parking lot at the gym. I'm aware that just standing around outside the gym defeats the whole purpose of being here, but I'm on the phone, listening to my older brother plead with me to do his chores at home.

"Come on, this is my opportunity to make an extra hundred bucks. You can come into the Gin Mill and I'll buy you a beer."

"How can I come in and drink beer if I'm moving the cows for you?" I ask. People always tell me that I have a grumpy voice. But lately it's extra grumpy when I talk to Kyle.

"Come later," he says. "After chores."

Only Kyle would pretend that's a workable plan. He expects me to abandon my workout, drive forty minutes home, move the cows' grazing fence before it gets dark, and then finish the other farm chores.

Then drive forty minutes back for a free beer? Ridiculous.

And here's the shitty thing—Kyle gets *paid* by our dad for farming. But I don't. "You have two jobs, and Kyle does most of the ranch work," he'd said last year when he'd finally added Kyle to the payroll.

That would make sense if only it were true. But Dad's back problems started getting worse right after that, so I've been pitching in three nights a week. "Let me get this straight. I'm doing your chores for free so that you can

earn money elsewhere?”

“Please?” he begs. “What if I paid you twenty bucks? It’s only a two-hour gig, but Alec says the beer-industry people are big tippers.”

I look forlornly toward the gym. If I’d gotten here ten minutes earlier I would have been inside already, unreachable. I do everything that’s asked of me. *Everything*. And nobody really appreciates it.

“Tell me this—what are your plans for the rest of the week?” I demand. He’s terrible at planning. And I need him to use his head for once, before I lose mine.

“Well, tomorrow I promised Dad I’d take him to the newest *Robot Wars* movie in Montpelier...”

While he talks, my attention is snagged by a man who’s just climbed out of a bright blue Volkswagen Bug. He’s reading the sign on the door of the gym. I can’t see his face, because he’s turned to the side. But I get a good look at his muscular shoulders, which are straining his black T-shirt. And his forearms have terrific muscle definition...

“Kieran?” my brother prompts. “Did you get that?”

No, I was just admiring a dude. I close my eyes and try to forget the hot guy across the parking lot. This is the extent of my sex life—admiring men, and then feeling confused about it. I spent the first twenty years of my life thinking that attractive men were interesting to me only because I admired them as people and wanted to be like them.

But that was only half right. Lately it’s gotten harder to ignore the fact that I also want to be *under* them. Or over them. Or even side by side.

Just as I’m having this bold thought, the guy reaches for the door to the gym. And he turns his body in a way that lets me see his face...

That’s when everything goes a little haywire. Because I recognize that face. It’s been years since I’ve seen it, though. And I’d bet every dollar in my wallet that he doesn’t even know my name.

Thank God.

My face flushes hot and my body runs cold. It doesn't matter that he didn't look my way before disappearing into the gym, or that there would be no way that he would remember me the way I remember him. I still feel a flash of utter shame.

"...so that's why I'll need your help the next few nights," my brother is saying.

"The next few nights," I echo stupidly.

"Look, I know it's a lot. But this thing with Dad's back is a bummer, and there's really no way we can get through the next month without a lot of extra hassle."

I must still be experiencing an adrenaline rush, because I suddenly snap. "Hassle for *who*? You want to pull a shift at the bar, where you can earn extra money and hit on women. And tomorrow you want to go to the movies, but it's with Dad so you think that excuses your lack of planning. And I zoned out for that last thing you said, but I'm sure it doesn't matter. Because unless you said you're going to save babies from a burning building, I can't understand why you think it's okay to bail on me three or four nights in a row."

There is a deep, stunned silence after I deliver this tirade. I never go off on Kyle, although maybe it's time I did. My life is ridiculous. I work like a dog, and I never complain. I never do a thing for myself, and all I wanted tonight was a goddamn workout.

"Well," he says a moment later. Then he clears his throat. "Tell me how you really feel."

I feel like a dick, that's how I feel. A wave of cold remorse washes over me.

"I won't take the bartending shift," Kyle says. Then he hangs up on me for the first time in his life.

Standing here in the gym parking lot, I'm breathing a little too fast and my heart is hammering. I can't believe I snapped like that. Yes, it's time to

stop doing everything my family expects. Standing up for myself is a fine idea. But I didn't have to be a dick about it.

And Roderick Waites is back in town.

My gaze travels back to the gym door. He's still in there. Which means that I just blew up at my brother for nothing, because I'm not going into that gym.

My thumbs are tapping out a text to Kyle before I can even think twice about it. ***Take that bartending shift, I say. It's fine. I'm on my way home to move the cows.***

By the time I get into my truck and start the engine, he's already replied.

Dude. Are you sure? You just lost your shit at me.

I'm sure. But tonight when you get home we have to make a plan for the rest of the week. Because I'm not doing all your chores again tomorrow just so you can go to the movies.

Fine, he replies. Thanks. Later!

I back out of the parking spot and turn the truck toward home. I suppose I could take my dad to the movies tomorrow. But Dad wouldn't want my company, he wants Kyle's. The privilege of being Dad's favorite is lost on my goof of a brother. Kyle is incapable of imagining that life doesn't fart rainbows on everyone the way it does on him.

Something's got to give, I tell myself as I put some miles between Colebury and home. This isn't the first time I've wanted to break out of my rut. I'm twenty-five years old and still live at home. My family is a minefield, yet they depend on me for farm labor.

And—worst of all—I still care too much about what other people think. Case in point: I just ran away from the gym, because of a guy who won't even remember me. That's ridiculous.

But at least I realize that. It's a start.

Back at home, I do all the chores and then some.

First I put the cows in the north pasture. Moving cows is easy enough in good weather. It only requires me to move the portable fence and wave them through the opening. “Go on, enjoy,” I say as they file past me eagerly. Our herd is grass fed, and they don’t need to be asked twice. The long, seedy grass and corn stalks I’m offering are like a recently freshened, all-you-can-eat buffet.

Let’s face it—the cows are easier to handle than any of my family members. They go where they’re needed, no questions asked. But my dog—Rexie—gives the cows a nice loud *woof* just to pretend he’s working hard.

Rexie and Kyle have a lot in common, honestly. They’re both a little ridiculous. They both have an inflated sense of their own usefulness. And I love them both in spite of it.

After the cow parade, I close up the fence and turn the electricity on. Since it’s October, darkness is falling fast. In another couple of weeks we’ll have to set our clocks back, and then it will be pitch dark before five. I’m already squinting as I check the hens’ nesting boxes for eggs, and topping up their water, and I have to turn on my head lamp to connect up their electric fence.

Most of our farming income is made on grass-fed beef. We also grow some corn and organic oats as feed crops. By this time of year, all the crop work should already be done, but Kyle and I still have to bale the oat straw. It would have been done weeks ago, if it weren’t for my dad’s back pain getting worse.

I make a mental note to remind my brother to make the baling a priority. Again. After that, I spend forty-five minutes raking cow shit out of the lower farmyard in the dark.

It’s boring drudge work, and my mind starts to wander. And, fuck, it wanders right to Roderick Waites—the guy who climbed out of a blue Volkswagen and right back into my brain.

I wish I could say I haven't thought about him since high school, but that would be a lie. And if I were a more spiritual person, I'd probably interpret Roderick's reappearance in town as a sign. A wakeup call.

Nobody knows all the tangled things in my brain, but for a split second when I was a teenager, Roderick came close to learning one of my biggest secrets.

The first time I saw him on his knees in front of another guy, it was an accident.

It was autumn then, too. I'd been at a high school football game. It was chilly that night and, last second before leaving for the game, I'd grabbed my dad's jacket from the hook by the door. After shoving my hands into the pockets while standing on the windy sidelines, I'd found a flask of whiskey. My father must have last worn the jacket when he was sitting out in the deer blind with his pals. *Bonus.*

But, of course, I'd had to sneak around to find a place to take a taste.

Leaving the crowd and the game, I ducked inside the door to the school's gym. Under the cover of the bleachers, I drew out my dad's flask, and unscrewed the top. Just as I raised it to my lips, I froze at the sound of whispered voices. Whoever was speaking had entered the gym at the other end of the bleachers.

Their shadowy figures weren't easily visible. But I guessed it was a couple looking for a little privacy for a make-out session. And since a couple sneaking off together wasn't a threat to me, I stood my ground.

I took a swallow of my father's hooch. My first sip wasn't life-changing—it burned going down and made my eyes water—it's what happened next that changed everything.

After screwing the lid on the flask and pocketing it, I ducked out of the gym and into the hallway. Feeling nosy, I walked toward the gym's other entrance, noiseless in my Nikes. When I reached the door, I eased into a position that allowed me to spy on the couple I'd heard whispering to each

other. They were silent now, and I wanted to know why.

When I saw who it was, I swear my heart almost stopped. A varsity soccer player—Jared Harvey—stood beneath the bleachers, bracing his hands on a tread overhead. Roderick Waites knelt in front of him, unzipping Jared’s jeans.

You can bet I didn’t even blink for the next five minutes. I was riveted by the tension in Jared’s body. The muscles in his arms bulged as he held on to the tread, his chest rapidly rising and falling as he watched Roderick tug down his underwear and free his cock.

“Suck it, man,” Jared bit out.

Roderick didn’t hesitate. He grabbed the base of Jared’s dick in one hand and eagerly took the tip into his mouth. Jared made a strangled sound and tipped his head back in pleasure.

I could barely breathe as Roderick hollowed out his cheeks and sucked. And I became lightheaded when he began to bob up and down.

“*Ungh!*” Jared grunted. “Goddamn. Faster.”

Instead, Roderick slowed his pace, looking up at Jared with luminous eyes. And, damn, the sounds he made—the smack and slurp made my teenage brain melt.

Jared’s hold on the tread got shaky and, at last, Roderick picked up the pace. Jared gasped, one of his big hands falling to land in Roderick’s hair. Roderick glanced up at him again, and the eye contact seemed to burn Jared. He yanked his hand back and looked away.

I saw Roderick reach up and tug Jared’s balls with his free hand. No, I *felt* it. I was suddenly, painfully aware of my own arousal, of being so hard that my jeans were uncomfortable.

Jared cursed and shuddered, every muscle locking. His face slackened with release, and Roderick’s throat worked as he swallowed. It was the most erotic thing I’d ever seen in my seventeen years. My heart was thumping and blood pounded in my ears.

And other places.

Self-preservation finally kicking in, I backed away from the doorway and ducked into the men's room across the hall.

In the mirror, my face had been flushed, my eyes hooded and dark. I'd looked like a man who'd seen his dirtiest fantasies brought to life. Because I had.

For days afterward I don't think I had a single rational thought. Both Roderick and Jared were seniors—a grade above me—and it was a good thing we didn't share any classes. I probably would have burst into flames, if I had to speak to either of them. I spent a lot of time thinking about what I saw, and wondering if they were gay.

The weird thing was that I had all those thoughts about them without considering why I was so obsessed. That would take a few more years.

But the story doesn't end there. Two weeks later there was another home football game. As I sat in the bleachers with my brother and our friends, I saw Jared get up and head toward the school. Roderick's dark head passed by the side of the bleachers a minute later.

I'm sure you know what I did next.

"Taking a leak. Back in a few," I muttered to my friends. Then I snuck into the school building and tiptoed down the dark hallway again. I have never felt so much shame as I crept toward the gym. What the hell did it mean that I wanted to watch this?

But curiosity was burning me up inside. Would it be Jared on his knees this time? Or would they do something totally different?

I'm sure I shivered with anticipation as I slowly peered around the gym's door. The picture was the same. Roderick sucking off Jared. Jared gasping and writhing and desperate. I watched every second that I dared.

And that wasn't the last time either. It took a couple more secret trips to the gym before I learned my lesson. I'd known I needed to stop watching, but I just couldn't stay away. Also, it was the final home game of the season, and

what was one more sin among so many?

That last time was different. From his usual spot on the floor, Roderick used one of his hands to unzip his own fly, and he stroked himself while he sucked off his friend. I was dying slowly in my hideout, my eyes glued to his hand on his cock. Jared was almost ready to blow, and so was I—hands free.

But that didn't happen. Because Roderick's gaze shifted in the dark.

He lifted those blue eyes and looked right at me. And his expression told me that he'd known I was there. He'd known it all along.

You would've thought I'd turn around to run, but I froze, my shame complete. And then? He stared at me while he came all over his hand.

God. Even now—years later—the memory gets me hard. The sheer nerve of those boys getting off on school property. They were living, and I was watching.

But *man* did I like watching.

A sharp whistle from the farmhouse breaks my reverie. It's my mother calling me in to dinner. I hang up the rake on the side of the barn, adjust my jeans, and head toward the house.

Eight years later I'm still thinking about Roderick Waites. And I'm still keeping secrets, still doing exactly what everyone expects of me.

Nothing has changed, really. Nothing at all.

I JUST JINXED US



As I kick off my boots in the mudroom, I take a deep breath and try to rearrange my thoughts. I've lived here my whole life, but lately the place really brings me down. "Hey, Ma," I say, after entering the kitchen. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," she says from the stove. Then she drops her voice. "But your father is a bear today. And there's something we need to talk about at dinner."

"Okay. Sure," I agree. Although my father is a bear almost all the time, and we both know it. "Are we making some sandwiches?"

"No, I cooked!" she says. "Chicken casserole."

"Great," I say, mostly meaning it.

My mom's cooking is bland, and that dish is particularly tasteless. She'd never been a great cook, but when her doctor suggested she cut down on the sodium, the menu took a turn for the worse. Chicken casserole with no salt? Trust me, you don't want any. Even Rexie prefers his kibble to mom's casserole.

I'll eat it anyway, though, because I'm hungry, and it's free. For a few years now, I've been saving up to rent a place of my own. My dream is to live in town.

My pile of cash is pretty tall at this point, so when Dad is back to work

again, I can start looking for something cheap. There's even a chance that I'll rent a house in Colebury from Zara, my boss at the coffee shop. She's probably losing her next-door tenant next month. "He was offered a job in another state," she'd said. "If they leave, I'll rent the house to you on the cheap, if you can help me with the yard work and the snow removal this winter." And then she'd named a price that fit my budget, especially if I got a roommate.

Man, I would shovel *acres* of snow to have a place of my own.

Meanwhile, I set the same kitchen table I've set my whole life. It's square, with a joint right down the center. My mother and I always sit on one side, and my father and Kyle sit on the other. It's a damn metaphor if I ever saw one.

"How was the desk job today?" my father asks as he shuffles into the room and pulls out the chair on his side. He says *desk job* the way some people say *acupuncture*. Like only a crazy person would get a job at an office.

"Fine. Busy." I stick to one word answers with him. We have so little in common and don't see eye to eye on anything.

"If they're so busy, why don't they take you full time?" Dad sits down gingerly, accepting a plate from my mother, looking down at the beige blob of food on it with a grimace.

Please don't critique the food, I privately beg him. I can tolerate my dad's ire toward me, but when he picks on my mother, I tend to lose my cool.

"I mean, how can you learn the ad business if you're only there four afternoons a week?" he asks, picking up his fork with a wary glance at his dinner.

"I learn plenty," I say mildly. The truth is that I haven't said much about my job in Burlington. Nor have I said a word about the college course I'm hoping to take this spring. He won't approve. And there's no law that says I have to explain myself to him.

I'm just going to do my own thing and give the bare minimum amount of information to anyone who asks. That's how you keep the peace in this house.

"You didn't go to the gym?" my mother asks, just to keep the conversation flowing.

A wave of discomfort rolls through me, because the question makes me think of Roderick. Again. I wonder if I'll ever be able to think of that guy and not feel embarrassed. "I almost made it to the gym. But Kyle called me and sent me home to do his chores instead."

"It is his night, isn't it?" my mother asks. "Where is that boy?"

"Tending bar for a couple hours, for extra cash." I shovel in some more of my mother's casserole and chew so I won't say what I'm thinking.

"It's good to earn extra cash," my father says, excusing Kyle. "We're going to have a tough season around here."

"Why?" I set down my fork. "Did we lose an animal?"

"No." He shakes his head.

That's when the kitchen door opens and Kyle steps through, grinning. "Am I just in time for dinner?"

"Yes you are!" my father says, smiling for the first time, because his eldest—his boy—is home.

"It's my super power." Kyle hangs his coat on a hook.

"Sally, get him a plate," my dad says.

My mom gets up and makes Kyle a plate, while my brother slides into his chair. He plops twenty bucks on the table in front of me. "Thanks for your help."

"Sure," I grunt, wishing I'd never made a big deal about it in the first place. I tuck the bill into my pocket anyway. My rent fund can use it.

Mom sets a plate in front of my brother, and then takes her seat again. "Since Kyle's home, we might as well talk about this winter." My father's scowl tells me I won't like whatever she's about to say. "Your father is

having back surgery. Soon. He's going to be out of commission for months."

"Weeks," my father corrects gruffly.

She rolls her eyes. "It's a spinal fusion. Major surgery, with a long recovery time."

Spinal fusion. Yeesh. I'll be googling that later, but it already sounds dreadful. I feel a rare pang of sympathy for Dad. But when I look up at him, the steely look in his eyes asks for no pity.

"Okay," I say, draining my glass. "You know Kyle and I will pitch in." I give my brother a sideways glance.

"Yeah, we've got this," he says. "It's good that you're doing this before calving and planting."

"That's the idea," my mother says. "It's going to be a rough time for a little while. But I knew you'd both pitch in. It's the Shipley way."

"Right," I say, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "I can give you weekend afternoons and Mondays. I don't go to the office on Mondays."

"What if you found a job closer to home instead?" my father asks.

Wait, what? "You think that's so easy to do?"

"It has to be easier than driving clear across Vermont to work that desk job. And you're pouring coffee in the mornings. Seems like you could save yourself a lot of trouble and take a job at the hardware store in town."

"So you'd have me quit the Busy Bean and bail on Audrey and Zara? Is that the Shipley way?" The Bean is owned by Audrey Shipley, my cousin's wife. If my mom was gonna pull the family card, it seemed worth mentioning.

My father shrugs, as if I'm being ridiculous. "Audrey can find someone else to sell muffins, no?"

"How about you let *me* figure out the best way to get paid?" I ask, and each word is a little chip of ice. The undertone is perfectly clear, too—if *he's* not paying me, then he can shut the hell up. "I just offered you every spare hour of my week. Is that not good enough?"

“It’s great,” Kyle says quickly. “We’ll figure this thing out, right?”

“Right. But you’ll have to be thoughtful about your schedule. Baling those oats is a two-man job, so you’re going to have to make yourself available when I’m off work.”

“No problem,” he says.

“That means baling and handling the fences even when there’s football on TV.”

“I know. *Jesus.*” Kyle gives me a grumpy look, too.

But I already know how this is going to play out—a long, cold season doing farm work after putting in a full day at my other two jobs.

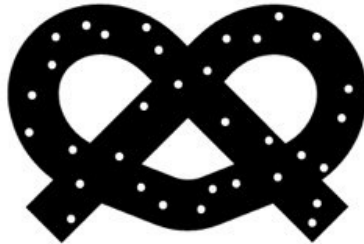
“If we all pull together, it will be okay,” my mother says.

“That’s right,” Kyle echoes. “And cold drinks when the work is done. That’s the Shipley way.”

He makes it sound so simple. Meanwhile, I’m sitting across the table, trying not to scream.

In this house, *that’s* the Shipley way.

SOME SAVES ARE GUESSWORK



I pass a difficult night in the passenger seat of my car.

In the first place, it's harder to find a safe place to park than you'd think. Being invisible isn't easy. I'm afraid to lurk where the cops might notice me. I suppose I could google *homeless shelters in Vermont* and find one.

But I don't want to. When I was eighteen, I spent some time in homeless shelters. I'd rather not repeat that experience. I am never going to be that terrified teenager again. I don't want to go back to that defeated mental state. I don't want to even say the word *homeless*. I'm just between houses at present. At least this time I have a car. I'm locked in and safe.

That's what I'm trying to tell myself, anyway. But sleep is fitful. Every little sound wakes me up. I'm parked behind a dumpster in back of a karate dojo. I keep expecting to see a police cruiser pull up with its lights flashing.

Also, my legs are numb, and whenever I try to roll over, I smack my knee against the door.

I doze fitfully. At some point during the darkest part of the night, my thoughts turn to my ex, Brian. He's asleep in our bed right now, sprawled out and comfortable. *His* bed. It was never really ours. I spent three years loving him on his terms. Hiding our relationship in public. Feeding on the scraps of attention he was willing to give.

On some level I always knew he wasn't capable of loving me back, even

though he would sometimes tell me he did. But just as often he'd push me away. He'd "forget" about our plans, or change his mind at the last minute. He did these things just to keep me on edge—to prove that I wasn't really necessary in his life.

Eventually I got clingy and threw down an ultimatum, which he pretended to consider. But then? He cheated just to make sure I knew he was in charge.

That's the Cliffs Notes. And now I'm sleeping in my car, because he froze me out of our bank account the minute I left town. At a gas station in Massachusetts I realized he'd canceled my credit cards, too.

Forget my numb ass—it's hard to sleep when you're questioning all your life choices.

Dawn comes eventually. I blink my bleary eyes and make a plan. First I'll hit the Colebury Diner for a cheap plate of eggs. Then I'll brush my teeth and wash my face in the men's room.

It's a thirty minute drive to Norwich, where I did a one-month internship at King Arthur Flour after culinary school. I'll get there by eight a.m., when they take their first break. My old boss is still listed on the website. I'll dazzle him with my recent experience, and he'll offer me a job on the spot.

And if that doesn't work, I'll cruise by every bakery in Vermont. Something will work.

Two hours later, I leave the fancy new King Arthur facility feeling discouraged. Gone is the cozy, undersized kitchen where I learned to bake sourdough. The new gleaming commercial space was as unfamiliar as the faces in it. My former boss has moved into management and works in a different building now.

"I'll give you a great recommendation, Rod," he'd said when I called the

number they'd given me at the new bake shop. "Go ahead and fill out an application. But I know the baker gets several applications each week."

"Great, I'll do that," I'd said, my heart sinking.

"Come back next month if you're still looking. They always need seasonal help in the retail store."

"Will do. Thanks." I'd filled that application out, which took five minutes.

But now I climb back into my car again and crank the engine. I have never felt so untethered from the world as I do right now. I have no address. No job. And no real friends, either, because they're all coworkers at the job I left behind in Tennessee, or—worse—pals of Brian's.

The scary truth is that if I disappeared from this earth today, nobody would notice, or come looking for me.

Also, I need coffee. Nobody should be expected to solve his not-quite-midlife crisis while under-caffeinated, right?

So I point my car back toward Colebury. *Chin up*, I coach myself. I can't expect my problems to be solved within the first hour of job hunting. I'm the kind of guy who always has to hustle for everything he gets. King Arthur is the biggest bakery in the area, but it's not the only one that could hire me.

I hope.

It's still midmorning when I reach the Busy Bean. When I step out of my car, I smell good coffee brewing. The scent of a strong brew on the piney Vermont air is like a siren's song to me. I approach the door, already filling up with hope. *Come on, Vermont. Give me something to believe in.*

The first thing I notice is the acoustic guitar music humming off the wide-plank floorboards. The scent of coffee is stronger, too. And the place is *adorable*. It's full of mismatched furniture upholstered in dark colors and animal prints. There are snarky sayings chalked onto the ceiling's wide support beams. One verse in particular catches my eye:

Roses are red

Violets are blue

I love my coffee

And if you talk to me before I drink it I will cut you

I let out a happy snort. Is it possible that I've found my people?

Cautiously, I approach the bakery case. I hope it's not full of underbaked institutional cookies and rubbery bagels.

But, nope! It's full of homemade pastries. They're simple—mostly muffins and scones—but they look too good to have been dropped off by a food distributor's truck. My stomach rumbles as I take in the offerings.

“Can I help you?” This question comes from a tall woman with dark, wavy hair. “I recommend the lemon muffins, because my partner just made them, and if you don't have a couple, I'm probably going eat some more of them.”

“I would love a couple of muffins,” I say. Not only am I legitimately starving, but it makes opening up the conversation that much easier. “And a small coffee, black.” I pull out my wallet. Just because I'm broke doesn't mean I can survive this day without more caffeine.

“Dark roast or breakfast blend?”

“Dark roast. Breakfast blend is for sissies.”

The dark-haired beauty laughs. “That will be four fifty.”

That's pretty cheap, honestly. I push a five-dollar bill toward her. After she makes my change, I drop the bomb. “Listen, if there's any chance you are hiring, can I leave my name? I'm a baker by training. But I make a mean espresso, too.”

The woman's hands freeze on the cash drawer. “You're a *baker*,” she says slowly. “Are you looking for part time or full time?”

“Well, full time. But right this second I'm not picky. If I don't find what I'm looking for, I'll have to piece together a couple of jobs.”

“Did he say full time?” asks another voice. A sunny-haired woman appears suddenly in the doorway behind the counter.

“He did.”

The blonde emerges from the kitchen, dusting flour off her hands. “So I guess we’re talking about this now?” She steps out where I can see her. She’s a little thing and appears to be pregnant.

“So…” I’m not even sure what to say. “You might be looking to hire some help?”

“We really need to,” the dark-haired one says. “But we’ve been putting it off. I’m Zara Rossi by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Zara. I’m Roderick.”

“And I’m Audrey Shipley,” says the cute blonde.

“Oh, the Shipleys.” That familiar name perks me up. “I remember your family. They were always winning awards at school and running things at church.” Everybody loved the Shipleys. And there were a lot of them.

“Well, I wasn’t enough of an overachiever to be born a Shipley,” Audrey says. “I had to marry one.”

“Whatever works,” I say, and she laughs.

“Do you both run this place?” I ask, trying to get a feel for whom to impress.

“Yep!” Audrey says, buzzing around behind the counter, straightening the empty cups. She reminds me of a jolly bumble bee. “We’re partners.”

“Oh,” I say slowly, not quite sure what she means by that.

Zara laughs, and it’s a rich, full sound. “Not *life* partners. We just own the business together.”

“Okay.” I let out a nervous chuckle. “Sorry for jumping to conclusions. Tell me what you are looking for.”

“We need somebody full time. Somebody reliable, with good references,” Zara says immediately.

“I can be all of those things,” I promise. “I once did a summer internship with the guys down at King Arthur Flour. That was a few years ago, but they’ll still vouch for me. Lately, I’ve been working in a big Nashville

bakery. I have references there, too.”

Zara nods. “So you’re from Vermont originally?”

“Sort of? I was an Air Force brat. I was born here, but then we moved away. We came back my last two years of high school.”

“You went to high school in Colebury, right?” Zara asks. “I thought you looked a little familiar.”

“And you just moved back home?” Audrey adds.

“Yeah,” I say, trying not to look uncertain. “I want to stay in Vermont, but only if I find a job.” The truth is I don’t know how much time I can give myself to look for work. The safest thing would be to get right back in the car and try to get my old job back in Nashville.

“Why did you leave Tennessee?” Zara asks.

Tell the truth, or lie? It’s not an easy decision. “I got out of a bad relationship. Seemed like driving out of state was the only way to fix it.” That’s understating things somewhat, but they don’t need all the gory details.

“Don’t *grill* him,” Audrey yelps.

Zara laughs. “I managed a bar for five years. Grilling people is how you weed out all the nutters.” She gives me a sheepish smile. “Sorry. But it is.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” I say, hoping to sound agreeable.

“Well, fine,” Audrey says. “Zara is the businessperson. She keeps me from fucking up.”

I bark out a laugh because it seems wrong to see such a sweet-looking human dropping f-bombs.

“But let me tell you a little more about the Busy Bean. We’ve been open for about a year. It’s just been Zara and me and a part-time employee. But he can’t give us any more hours, and we need someone full time. I’m having a baby this winter.” She pats her belly. “And Zara has a lot going on in her life, too. We need full-time help, but we’ve been putting it off because we’re cheap.”

“You do your own baking, right?” I tear apart one of the muffins Zara

served me and toss a bite into my mouth. “Wow. Good lemon flavor.”

“Thanks!” Audrey beams. “We do all our own pastries. But we buy our bagels.”

“I can make your bagels,” I say, putting another bite of muffin into my mouth. “Easy peasy.”

“But would you have to start at four in the morning?” Audrey asks. “That’s why we don’t make bread.”

“Nah. Now, baguettes need a four a.m. start time. But bagels and pretzels don’t need that kind of double rise. I’d use a sourdough starter for flavor, but the rise would come from instant yeast. One rise time. Boil ’em up and bake for twenty minutes.”

“Pretzels?” Audrey asks with a dreamy sigh. “That sounds amazing.”

“You could try me out for a probationary couple of days, and I’ll show you,” I promise. “How’s your oven?”

“It’s all right,” Audrey says. “Nothing fancy like they have at King Arthur.”

“You don’t need a fancy oven to make small breads and rolls,” I say quickly. “The giant oven is necessary for crusty boules and baguettes. In a smaller oven you can bake rolls, bagels, freeform pizza, pretzels, popovers...”

“Pizza!” Audrey yelps. “Now I want pizza.”

“You were just telling me that you had to watch the carbs,” Zara says. “That’s why we agreed to have chicken salad salad for lunch.”

“Plus it’s fun to say chicken salad salad,” Audrey points out.

“So that’s chicken salad—”

“On salad!” both women say at once.

I have a feeling this would be a fun workplace. Besides, if the Shipleys run it, the place is bound to do well.

“Can I have those references?” Zara asks. “I’ll call them today, and then if you were serious about working a couple of days as a trial, I think we

should do that.”

“Sure! Let me grab my résumé out of my car,” I say. “One sec.”

I run outside, where I grab a folder. By the time I get back inside, Zara and Audrey are having an intense, whispered discussion. “Hours, pay, benefits,” Zara is saying. “We don’t have any of that stuff nailed down.”

“We can do some research,” Audrey says. “It’s time, right? I’ll ask May about the legal stuff.”

“Okay, sure.” Zara turns to give me a smile. “I thought we’d procrastinate a little longer, but then you walked in. Maybe it was meant to be.”

I hope she’s right. Because if there’s someplace in this world that I’m meant to be, I haven’t found it yet.

YOU COULD DO THIS PROFESSIONALLY

TUXBURY VERMONT

“Griffin?”

My mother sat down across from me at the big farmhouse table as I chewed the last bite of her home-smoked applewood bacon. My farmhand and I had already finished Vermont-cheddar omelets and homemade bread with butter from our own cows.

Breakfast had been great, but what Mom said next was even better. “I found you some more seasonal help.”

My coffee mug paused on its way to my mouth. “Seriously?”

“I did. And he starts today.”

“You’d better not be teasing.” We were always short-staffed at this time of year, when the grass grew so fast you could practically watch it lengthen, and the bugs waged a full-scale war against my apple trees.

It wasn’t even nine o’clock in the morning, and my farmhand and I had already worked for hours. At dawn we’d milked several dozen cows in two different barns. We always came in for a nice breakfast after the milking, but then it was back to work. For the next eight hours we’d tackle a to-do list of projects and repairs as long as a country mile.

Mom’s promise of a new employee was music to my ears. I lowered the

mug to our dining table and met her gaze. But when I spotted her uncharacteristically tentative expression, I felt the first prickle of worry. Maybe I wasn't going to like the sound of her new hire.

"Angelo called last night," she said.

Oh, hell. Now I knew where this was going. Angelo was a lovely man who attended our Catholic church a couple towns away in Colebury. He was also a parole officer.

"He's dropping off a young man today. Just released. He spent three years in jail for manslaughter. It was a car accident, Griff. He crashed his car into a tree."

The familiar flash of stress that came from running a struggling business bolted through my chest. That second cup of coffee might have been a mistake. "Crashing into a tree isn't illegal, Ma. There must be more to it."

"Well." Her face went soft. "He killed the sheriff's son, who was a passenger in his car. And he was high on opiates at the time."

"Ah." The truth comes out. "So you hired a drug addict?"

She frowned at me. "*A recovering* addict. He got out of jail a month ago, and he's been in rehab since then. Angelo said this kid can make it, but he just really needs a job. He'll stay in the bunkhouse. Unless there's something you're not telling me, our property is a drug-free zone."

Zachariah, our farmhand, gave a snort of laughter. "Coffee is our drug, Mrs. Shipley. But we're in pretty deep."

She reached over and gave Zach's wrist an affectionate squeeze. My mother was good at taking in strays, and Zachariah was her most successful acquisition. But they couldn't all be Zachariahs. I felt my blood pressure notch higher at the idea of adding a drug addiction to our long list of difficulties. Like I needed one more complication.

Since my father passed away three years ago, my mother and I ran the farm together. I made all the farming decisions—what to produce and where to sell it. But make no mistake—Mom kept the place running. She did the

books. She fed me and our farmhand Zach, my three younger siblings, my grandfather and whichever seasonal employees were around. And when apple-picking season began five weeks from now, she'd run our busy pick-your-own business while somehow feeding an army as our workforce quadrupled.

So my very capable mother had every right to make a quick hiring decision, and we both knew it. Still, her choice of hires made me nervous.

"He's twenty-two, Griff." She crossed her arms, waiting me out. "The young man is clean, as they say. He's off drugs. But nobody else is going to take a chance on him. And we'd only take him on for the growing season and through the harvest. Sixteen weeks, tops."

Right. *The sixteen most crucial weeks of my year.*

A smart man knows when to back down to his mother. She'd obviously made up her mind already, and the day was getting on. "Okay," I capitulated. "We'll set him up in the bunkhouse when he shows up. Call me and I'll give him a tour. Let's go, Zach." I stood, grabbing my baseball cap, and Zach did the same.

Carrying our dirty plates, we exited through the kitchen where my sister May was tidying up. She was on summer break from law school. "Did the twins move the chickens?" I asked by way of a greeting.

"Yes, captain," my sister snarked. "They're outside already."

"Thanks." I gave her elbow a squeeze as I passed by to make up for my lack of manners. At times I could be an overbearing grouch, especially during the growing season. And my sisters were quick to call me on it.

"Hey, Griff?" May called after me as I opened the door. "Do you still plan to send Tauntaun off to freezer camp today? I'll need a heads up."

I paused in the doorway. "Good question." Butchering the pig would be a lot of work, and I didn't really have the time. Then again, next week would be the same story, if not worse. "Yeah. We should get it done, unless the day gets crazy. I'll give you some warning, so you can heat the water." May gave

me a salute, and Zach and I went outside.

Scanning the property, I spotted the twins in the back meadow, beyond the bunkhouse. They were moving the portable electric fence we used to keep our chickens safe from predators, and probably squabbling over something. At seventeen, they were a decade younger than I was.

A year from now I'd be paying both their college tuitions, and not a day went by when I didn't worry about it. I gave my property the usual critical glance. The big, aging farmhouse where I'd grown up was in good shape for now. We'd redone the roof and the paint last year. But on a farm, there was always something going awry. If there wasn't a problem with the farmhouse, it would be the stone bunkhouse or one of the dairy barns. Or the cider house or the tractor.

And even if nothing broke down today, there were business decisions in my near future. I needed to reinvest in the farm, yet we also needed cash. Somehow I needed to guide the farm toward greater profitability without borrowing a pile of money.

If only I knew how to do that.

With a sigh, I turned to Zach. "You want the fences or the mowing?" I asked him. There was plenty of work for both of us, so I was happy to let him choose.

"You pick," he said immediately. Zach was a dream employee. He worked like an ox from sunup until supper, and he never complained—I didn't know if he even knew how.

"I'll mow," I said. "But maybe we'll swap after lunch. The new guy'll be here..." *Shit.* "Walk with me a minute?"

"Sure."

I headed across the circular meadow toward the tractor shed.

"We're going to have to keep an eye on this kid. I never asked you to spy on anyone before. But this is a little weird."

He grinned. "It is...colorful. But Angelo's no fool."

This was true. “Now, is there anything I need to know about the Kubota?” Not only was Zach a model employee, he was a skilled mechanic.

“She’s running fine. I’m more worried about the milking rig in the big barn.”

I swore under my breath. Most of our dairy cattle lived across the street on a neighbor’s property. The bulk of our milk went to an ordinary dairy. On our own property, we raised a dozen organic cows, and that milk was sold to friends down the street who made fancy cheese from it.

“Did the pump give you trouble again?” Every farm had aging equipment, because no farmer could afford to upgrade his tools like the rest of the world upgraded their cell phones every year. I was a chemist by training, not a mechanic. So Zachariah was the one who coaxed all our most difficult equipment into performing. And the milking rig was about the most important machine on the whole property.

“It’s not going to last much longer. Some of the gears are stripped, and I can’t find those parts anymore. Odds are we’ll have to taker ’er out back and shoot ’er before New Years.”

I groaned. “Never tell me the odds.”

“Right, Han.”

“Thank you, Chewie.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Chuckling, I walked off through the July morning toward the tractor barn, my head full of worry. I tried to imagine walking a hundred cows across the road to be milked in the smaller of the two dairy barns twice a day. Investing in new equipment on land I didn’t own sounded like a bad idea.

I’d figure it out somehow. I’d have to.

THE TWIST

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

I wore a halter top to be fired.

Since the bigwigs at Boston Premier Group had asked me to appear at corporate headquarters at nine, I assumed I'd be pounding the pavement for a new job by nine-thirty.

I was a trained chef, and a damn good one. But my cleavage would be more interesting than my knife skills to most of the restaurateurs of Boston. I'd already learned this the hard way.

These were my thoughts as I rode the elevator up to my doom.

Getting fired was nothing new for me. I'd been kicked out of two colleges before I turned twenty. Disgusted by my lack of academic achievement, my mother fired me next. She took away my car and withdrew all financial support.

Things seemed to turn around after that. I put myself through culinary school, which I really enjoyed. But now my first job had proven to be a disaster.

As the doors parted on the fifteenth floor, I checked my watch. At least I was one minute early. My mother, wherever she was, would be thrilled that I was prompt to face the firing squad.

Go me!

“Mr. Burton will be right with you,” the receptionist said from behind a beautiful desk outside several C-suite offices.

“Thank you.” Nervous, I slipped into one of the deep leather chairs in the waiting area. I picked up a copy of *Boston Magazine* from the selection of periodicals on the table and hid behind it.

By now, the details of my latest failure would have made it into every manager’s office. Not only had I ruined a night’s worth of business at their top-rated restaurant, my fuck-up had made the gossip pages of the newspaper.

My hands began to sweat on the magazine.

The problem wasn’t my cooking, of course. I was a good chef. A *natural*, as one of my teachers had said. At twenty-two years old I’d finally found something I was good at. And I’d needed this job on my résumé, damn it.

“Audrey!” a voice barked.

Startled, I dropped the magazine and scrambled to stand. “G-g-good morning,” I stammered, shaking the hand that Bill Burton offered me.

“Come with me,” he said, leading the way into his plush office.

My mouth dry, I followed him. He waited for me to sit down in the chair facing his big desk, and then he shut the door with an ominous click.

Shit!

I sat up straight in my chair. I was going to go down fighting.

He sat in his chair and measured me with his eyes. There was a deep silence before he finally said, “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Right. Okay. That was a better opener than “*Get the fuck out of our office building.*” But where to start? “Well, sir...” I hesitated, hating the tentative sound of my voice. *C’mon, Audrey! This is for all the marbles.* “I’m an excellent chef, sir. Top of my class. But BPG keeps giving me assignments outside the kitchen.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Your job title is intern, sweetie. Nobody becomes a great chef without learning the business.”

Sweetie? I had to bite down on my tongue to keep myself from screaming. But now was not the time for a rant. *Deep breaths, Audrey.* “I do want to learn the business,” I said carefully. “But when you toss an intern into a job unprepared, you shouldn’t be astonished when things go badly.”

Flipping open a folder on his desk, he frowned down at its contents. “Six weeks ago your first assignment was tracking seafood deliveries at the fish market. You lasted one day.”

“True.” I’d reported for work at four-thirty in the morning, where a computer system I’d never seen before had greeted me.

“You were supposed to order two hundred lobsters for our flagship seafood restaurant. But you ordered two hundred *gross*. That’s more than twenty-eight thousand lobsters.”

I kept the cringe off my face, but just barely. “Nobody taught me the software,” I insisted.

Bill Burton sighed. “Fine, but software wasn’t the problem last night, was it?”

“Yes it *was*,” I insisted again. “Indirectly.”

He sat back in his chair. “Explain.”

“My latest position has been at l’Etre Suprême.” It was Boston’s only Michelin-starred restaurant, and I’d felt lucky just walking in there every night. Chef Jacques was one of my culinary heroes.

But they hadn’t put me in the kitchen where I could be useful. Or course not. They had me up front, working on the restaurant’s reservations.

I cleared my throat. “The other night, the software over-booked a reservation for thirty CFOs, and I didn’t catch it. There was no place to put them.” When the suits realized we weren’t prepared to seat them in our private alcove, they began abusing the staff and they never really stopped. “And while I scrambled to solve the problem, the rest of the seating and dining schedule went haywire. Orders were lost and meals were delivered out of synch...”

I started sweating just remembering this disaster. Chef Jacques had nearly had a coronary. His screaming could be heard all the way out to the beaten copper bar, where bartenders in elegant vests had poured free drinks to soothe irritated customers.

Jacques did not know my name and was therefore unable to scream it. But that was no blessing, since it takes longer to screech: “Zee fucking wench who makes zee reservations.”

That would be me.

“Go on,” Burton prompted.

“I was mortified that I’d caused trouble in the kitchen.” I folded my damp hands in my lap and looked him in the eye. “My roommate is a pastry chef.” A slovenly one, I could add. I rented a room in his apartment because it was all I could afford. “I wanted to make amends, so I took a big pan of brownies he’d baked, and I brought them to work with me last night. It was a peace offering.” I’d deposited my chocolaty gift in the middle of the kitchen. The staff fell on them like seagulls. “Then I’d gone out to the front of the house to spend the evening working on reservations.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but Burton didn’t need to know that. In between tasks I always headed back to the kitchen. Some women might have trouble staying away from designer shoes or hot actors. My weakness was a star chef in action. I’d rather watch Jacques whisk a balsamic reduction than watch Channing Tatum strip for the camera. So I had a front row seat on the evening’s unfolding disasters. When I’d snuck back to watch, I’d found Chef screaming at the grill cook.

“Zat is not how we treat zeh fish!” he had yelled at Enrique. “You must respect zeh filet!”

I’d cringed as Chef Jacques smacked Enrique on the back of the head. Jacques was an asshole on his best day, but last night he seemed to be wound even tighter than usual.

On the other hand, Enrique *had* been acting awfully sluggish. Normally a

hard worker, last night he'd seemed off his game. If Enrique didn't treat the fish like the governor of Massachusetts, I'd known it wouldn't bode well for him.

Now, if there were any justice in the world, *I* would've been the one wielding the fish spatula. I would have respected the *hell* out of that filet, if they'd only given me a chance. I knew I could cook circles around many of the people in that kitchen.

But no. It had been back to the reservations system for me.

The next I'd seen Jacques he was chewing his salad boy a new one. "Leaves should make pretty *hill*," he'd said, holding a plate in the air for the entire kitchen's inspection. "Zhis is alps after earthquake. Feex it!" He'd tossed the plate onto the steel work table, where it broke in two.

Haute cuisine may be the only industry where the boss is encouraged to behave like a cranky toddler. They pay extra for that, especially if you're a man and from France.

Strangely, the salad guy hadn't looked as put out by his ass-ripping as I'd expected. Instead of leaping to clean up the mess, he pinched a salad leaf off the pile and shoved it in his mouth. Then he did it a second time.

I'd thought it was weird. But I still hadn't guessed why.

"It was a busy night," I told Burton now.

But when I'd stopped by the kitchen again, I could hardly believe my eyes. The salad boy had been slumped over his station, which was freaky enough. But Jacques hadn't even noticed. He'd been busy screaming at the fish cook again, while the mega-horsepower exhaust system tried in vain to remove fish-scented smoke from the kitchen.

Jacques's rant had been unintelligible. When he got angry, his accent thickened. I couldn't make out a word of it.

I'd stood there with my mouth hanging open when the dishwasher stopped beside me, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Awesome revenge, Audrey. Seriously. You're my fucking hero."

Um, what? I'd almost missed what he was saying. As I'd watched, another line cook shoved hand-cut polenta medallions into his mouth. It was as if the whole kitchen lost fifty IQ points and then got the munchies.

"Doesn't affect me, because I've built up a real tolerance. Looks like the salad boy can't handle his weed, though. You should get out now, girl," the dishwasher was saying. "Any second now Jacques is going to figure out who brought in the spiked brownies."

"The spiked—" I'd bitten off the sentence as horror crept up my spine. "Oh my God."

"I'm *definitely* inviting you to my next party. Those were killer." Chuckling, the dishwasher had wandered off to have a cigarette.

And to think that I hadn't even needed a lighter to burn my own career to the ground.

"So..." Burton sighed. "You're saying you didn't know the brownies were spiked?"

"I had *no idea*," I whispered. "There are always baked goods in my apartment. I don't, uh, usually steal them. And I really wish I hadn't this time."

He pushed the file folder away from him on the desk. "I could fire you for this."

"I know that, sir," I said quickly. "But I know I can do better if you give me a second chance." *Or a fifth chance.*

He folded his hands onto the desk blotter and seemed to think it over.

I held my breath. Bill tapped his fingers on the expensive-looking leather blotter and sighed once again. "All right, Audrey. You're heading to Vermont."

"I'm...really? Did you say Vermont?" Did that mean I wasn't fired? Did BPG own a restaurant in Vermont? I didn't think so.

"We can't put you in another front-of-house job. And we can't send you back to the fish market."

“I understand, sir,” I said in my most humble voice.

“But we’re going to give you one more chance, as a favor to your mother.”

“My...*what?*” My mother and I hadn’t spoken in over two years, since she cut me off financially. I’d put myself through culinary school, renting rooms in dives all over Boston. “What does *she* have to do with it?”

“She owns fifteen percent of the *company*,” Burton said in a voice that made sure I knew how stupid I was. “We can still fire you next week. But we’ll give you one more chance at bat as a courtesy to her.”

I didn’t even hear that last bit, because I was still stuck on the bomb he’d just dropped. *My mother owned a stake in BPG?* I’d had no idea. I guess it shouldn’t be a complete surprise. My mother had her hands in moneymaking ventures all over Boston. And since she dined out with business associates four or five nights a week, she knew her restaurants. In fact, when I’d worked the reservation system at l’Etre, I’d wondered if she’d come in for dinner some night.

But an owner? Ugh. I could see how she and the company were a good fit. BPG was ruthless, and so was she.

“Audrey?” Burton prompted.

“Look,” I said, hating the desperate sound in my voice. “I need this job. But keep me because I’m a good chef. Not because my mother has deep pockets. She doesn’t even know I work here.” We weren’t on speaking terms at the moment.

He shrugged, as if it made no difference. “Are you going to go to Vermont for a few days or not?”

“I’ll go,” I said quickly, “as long as you don’t throw out my application for the Green Light Project.” I was in no position to make demands. But if he wasn’t going to let me compete for my own kitchen, I might as well cut my losses and find another job.

Burton startled me by laughing. He actually *laughed* at my dream.

“Audrey, it takes a hell of a lot of savvy to win the Green Light. There are guys who have been trying for *years*.”

I knew that. But I didn't have years. I needed to win BPG's annual new restaurant competition on the first try. “I know it's hard to win.” It had to be. A company like BPG didn't just fund every idea that walked through their door. But I was going to bring them a great idea, and I was going to take top honors. “But promise me you'll let me try.”

“Go ahead and give it a shot.” He spread his hands magnanimously. He was humoring me, I was sure of it. “You never know. Now, let's talk about this assignment in Vermont.” He picked up another file folder and opened it. “I'm sending you to talk to some farmers for me. I want you to help our supplier fill some late-summer, farm-to-table acquisitions. You'll be negotiating prices on two dozen agricultural goods.”

Oh, brother. Here we go again. I was a trained chef. A good one. And yet BPG kept giving me tasks that weren't aligned with my skills, and then yelling at me when I failed.

“Sir, I don't know anything about negotiating.” He could have sent my mom, though. The woman could make a deal with a field mouse and come out ahead.

“Doesn't matter.” Burton grabbed a printout from the folder and tucked it into a BPG envelope. Then he handed it to me. “The goods and the prices are listed right on these pages. All you have to do is stop by each farm and offer to purchase the items on the list. Just fill out the sheet with who's supplying what. These guys will be eager to sell their organic produce to upscale Boston restaurants. It's good exposure for them. Here.”

I took the sheet of paper from him and scanned it. It was a list of farms and addresses. They all had cute, scenic names. Muscle In Arm Farm. Misty Hollow. The Lazy Turkey Farm.

The task sounded easy enough. But I'd worked here long enough to be suspicious. Nothing was ever simple when it came to BPG. “Why aren't we

doing this over the phone?” I asked. It had to be cheaper than sending me off to Vermont in a rental car to go door to door. And a hotel, too? BPG hated spending money. Something about this whole idea was just weird.

“Farmers don’t answer their phones,” Burton said. “They’re too busy growing things. So off you go. Pack a bag and get on the road already. It’s a two-hour drive.”

I stood up, clutching the envelope, hoping for the best.

“Do a good job, Audrey,” he said as I turned toward the door. “If this doesn’t work out, I don’t know if we can give you another chance.”

“I will, sir.”

Two and a half hours was a long time to ponder one’s failings, even if the scenery was beautiful. I wound the rental car higher and higher along a country road on a pretty Vermont hillside. Out the driver’s side window I caught glimpses of the Green Mountains in the distance.

I was still a bit stunned that Bill Burton hadn’t fired me. But the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that my mother’s stake in the company wasn’t the reason. Premier Group was famous for chewing up and spitting out culinary grads. Having their corporate name on your resume was like a badge of honor. It was the Purple Heart of the foodie world. There was even a Facebook group called *I Survived BPG*.

Their business model seemed to *depend* on slaves like me. As an intern, I was expected to work seventy hours a week for very low pay. They called the paycheck a “stipend” only because it sounded better than “slave wages.” If they fired one of us every time something went wrong, there would be nobody left to do the shitty jobs and fetch the coffee.

That’s what I was going to keep telling myself, anyway. Because I was sick of letting my mother influence my life. I’d thought that moving away

from Beacon Hill would be enough to shake her off. Turns out I should have left the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Maybe Vermont was far enough to avoid Mom's bad juju. I hoped so, anyway. Outside my car windows, everything was green. Meadows lined the hillside, and the tree branches that framed the country road created a leafy tunnel. I didn't have the first clue where in the hell I was. But it was very beautiful.

Thank God for GPS, because navigation wasn't my strong suit. Again—put me in the kitchen with a knife and I'm a happy girl. But if you want me to run your business or negotiate your multi-farmer purchase agreement in the wilds of Vermont in a rental car? *Dicey, people.*

According to the dashboard indicator, I was just a half mile from the first grower on my list—the Shipley Farm. I'd known a Griffin Shipley during my first unsuccessful year of college. He was a football stud and party boy, and we'd hooked up a couple of times. I remembered those nights with perfect clarity. Every thrilling moment.

But I hadn't known Griff very well, except in the biblical sense. And I couldn't remember whether he was from Vermont or not. Maybe Shipley was a common name. The man I'd been sent to find today was someone else, anyway. My instruction sheet listed *August Shipley: Apples and Artisanal Ciders*.

I'd picked the Shipley Farm as my starting place not because of the name, but because of the artisanal ciders. Perhaps Mr. August Shipley would let me taste them. If you were drinking for business purposes, it didn't matter that it wasn't quite noon yet, right?

The ciders were the most interesting product on my shopping list, with a few gourmet cheese products tying for second place. Before driving out of Boston, I'd put in a call to Bill Burton's son, Bob. He was the buyer who'd made up the list. "We're a bulk buyer, so we need the bulk price," Bob had said. "The rates on this list ought to do the trick. Call me if you need to

wiggle some numbers around, but we can't negotiate much."

That was no surprise. I was already familiar with BPG's take-no-prisoners approach. But I was determined to make the whole thing work. I needed this job. My arrogant mother had made sure of it when she took away my car and my tuition money. Yet she still emailed me all the time and demanded updates on my progress at adulting. She left voicemail messages, too.

I responded only occasionally—just frequently enough to let her know I was still alive. But I thought about her more than I liked to admit. I often fantasized about the day a restaurant critic would give me a favorable review in the *Globe*. I wanted her to read it. Though I'd probably blacklist her on my reservations list, just because I could.

The dashboard GPS spoke up. "In two hundred yards, the destination is on your right." I sped up. It had been a long two-and-a-half hours in the car.

A moment later, the road turned suddenly from pavement to dirt, taking me by surprise. The little rental car bounced on the rough surface, and I felt a sudden loss of traction. So I slammed on the brakes.

Big mistake.

I skidded, the back of the car swinging its ass over to the right. I experienced a moment of terror as the earth shifted in an unpredictable way. Two seconds later, the car came to a dramatic stop. My teeth knocked together and my seatbelt bit into my shoulder. But I was still clutching the wheel, still vertical. Mostly. The passenger side had dipped into a gully at the side of the road.

Okay. I'm still on one piece. Thank you, baby Jesus.

With shaky hands, I unlatched my seatbelt, opened the door and struggled to climb out of the tilting car. My heart was whirring like a KitchenAid mixer on the highest setting. I had a rush of adrenaline from the loss of control. "Shit!" I swore, standing on wobbly knees on the dirt road.

Trying to get my breathing under control, I eyed the Prius. It wasn't at

that weird of an angle. Maybe I could just drive it out of the ditch.

But when I circled the rear bumper, my heart sank. The back tire was as flat as a fallen soufflé.

Damn it!

And now where was my phone? I opened the car door again to look for my purse. But naturally everything had shifted toward the passenger side and then slid onto the floor. The angle was a bear, so I resorted to lying on the driver's seat and sort of diving for my bag on the passenger-side floor. I got my hands on it, but of course the bag had been open. So I spent the next couple of minutes grabbing stuff and shoving it back in the bag. Lipsticks. House keys. My phone.

Only when I thought I had everything did I finally heave myself up and out of the car again, ass first. When I spun around, my heart nearly failed. A giant, bearded man was standing in the road behind me, muscular arms crossed over his chest, frowning. "Audrey Kidder?" he growled.

The growly monster knew my name. Wait. I *knew* that growly monster. "Griffin?" I squeaked. He looked so different. Five years had elapsed since my freshman year at BU, so it hadn't been *that* long. He'd been an upperclassman and a football star. I was used to seeing him clean-shaven in football pads or holding a red cup at a frat party.

The man standing in front of me was still just as tall and muscular as the football player I'd once known (biblically). But there the resemblance stopped. *This* Griff Shipley was tanned and ripped in a different way. He wore a tight T-shirt reading FARM-WAY and a baseball cap with a tractor on it. His work pants were paint-spattered and worn in a way that did not resemble the faux-aging of an Abercrombie pair, but rather seemed weathered from actual work.

And my God did he fill them out beautifully.

I had a flicker of a memory of the last time I'd seen Griff Shipley. We were in his room at the frat house, and he had me up against his bedroom

door. My legs were wrapped around his waist while he fu—

“What are you doing on my farm?” he demanded. “Aside from driving into my ditch.”

“Your...farm?” I squeaked, feeling hot all over. “I’m, uh, here to see your father. I work for Boston Premier Group. They want to talk about buying produce. And cider. The yummy alcoholic kind.” I was babbling now.

He lifted his chin thoughtfully. “Do they now?”

Get it together, Kidder. I stood up straighter. “I’m the representative. Is your father home?”

Griff lifted an eyebrow. “You’re too late.”

“Really? I can come back tomorrow.” That was a great idea, actually. I needed to compose myself.

“You’re too late, because my father passed away a couple years ago.”

“He...” Griff’s words finally sunk into my addled brain. “Jesus, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” He waited, staring me down.

“So...” I dug into my purse for the list of farmers. “BPG gave me his name. August Shipley. I’m sorry they got it wrong. Are, uh, you the one I should speak to?”

He grinned, and I saw just a flash of the old Griff. “That piece of paper is right. My full name is August Griffin Shipley the third. And yeah—I’m the farmer and the cidemaker.”

My brain struggled to wrap itself around this idea. Football jock Griff Shipley in charge of a business? I hoped his family had other means of income. Griff Shipley in charge of a tailgate party—maybe I could see that. But a farm and beverage operation?

Nope. Not possible.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Can we talk? Do you have some time?”

Griff lifted his big, bearded chin toward the sky and sighed, as if I had just asked for the moon. Then he pinned me with a big, ornery stare. “Time is

pretty scarce, seeing as I gotta pull your car out of that ditch, too. And your tire is probably toast. I have to mow, inspect the fences, milk the cows and slaughter a pig. I have to interview a drug addict and check my apples. But then, maybe. After that.”

“All right...” I shifted my weight, noticing that my cute little strappy sandals had allowed little bits of the gravel road to sneak under my feet. “My thing might only take a few minutes, though. It’s a couple of lines on a page.”

He lifted one giant hand to stroke his beard. “You might have called first. Did you think of that?”

“Good point,” I said gamely. “The BPG buyer told me that it was better to just drive up. He said farmers don’t answer their phones.”

Griff tipped his scruffy face toward the sky and made an unexpected sound which I eventually identified as laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

He crossed his bulky, lickable arms. “Look,” he said. “I have a feeling I know why your man at BPG doesn’t have *his* calls answered too often. His prices are probably bullshit, right? So his new plan is to send a hot sorority girl in a halter top and short skirt to dazzle the poor hicks who grow his food. Your guy thinks I’m a big enough idiot that a nice rack and a bright smile will blind me for long enough to agree to sell apples for a buck a pound.”

Later I would remember this moment as important. Standing there on Griff’s road, I’d gleaned the first prickle of understanding that a flat tire was just the *start* of my buzz kill. A brand new sinking feeling kicked in, because I had a hunch that Griff Shipley knew what he was talking about for once. I opened the price list in my hand to see that the first item on the list was, indeed, *Apples: \$0.99 / lb.*

Fuck. “So you’re saying that a dollar a pound is not the market rate for wholesale apples?” I said it as sweetly as possible, but Griff’s face began to darken like a stormy sky.

“Listen, princess,” he growled. “You can buy shitty, mealy apples for that

price from a giant orchard out west or from a farmer that got swindled into growing only Red Delicious during the eighties and can't afford to re-graft his trees. But your guy wants organic apples, probably heirloom varieties. He wants bragging rights on the menu—apples grown locally in New England with no pesticides and blessed by virgins in the moonlight. That's what he wants hand-lettered on the menu, right?"

"Right," I agreed reluctantly. That was exactly how it worked.

"That does *not* come at a buck a pound. Not from me and not from any of my neighbors."

Uh-oh. My heart sank a little further into the dirt, just like my rental car.

I wasn't a stupid girl. Maybe business wasn't exactly my forte, but I'd always been a good listener. And after listening to Griff rant for a minute, I already knew that when I visited the other farms in this county, every price on my page would be too low by half. And yet my job depended on sealing these deals.

I was so screwed.

"Now let's get your shiny new car out of the ditch, shall we?" Griff was glowering at me. For real. Before today I'd never seen anyone actually glower. It was an expression found only in books, and on Griff Shipley's ridiculously handsome yet grumpy face.

"It's a rental," I said in my own defense. "I can call for roadside service."

Glowing Griff gave a weary sigh. "I'll be rid of you sooner if I do it myself." He raised two fingers to his mouth and blew an ear-piercing whistle. Then he waited while I tried not to think of those fingers and the things they'd once done to me...

"Got a problem, Han?" a voice called from the meadow beyond the trees lining the road. A few seconds later an attractive blond dude slipped between the trees to join us. He was big, too. But where Griff was dark, this man was fair with pretty blue eyes.

Apparently all the people who grew pristine organic food were beautiful

themselves.

“Yeah, we do have a problem,” Griff told him. “We have to pull the princess here out of the ditch and change her tire. Then warp speed her ass back to the Death Star so she can report that the rebels are mutinying.”

“Jesus, I’d forgotten about your *Star Wars* obsession.” That just slipped out of my mouth. But as soon as I said it, the other guy’s eyes opened wide, and the look on Griff’s face made it clear that any further references to our tiny sliver of a past together weren’t going to be tolerated.

Though *tiny sliver* wasn’t good terminology for the boinking we’d done, because nothing on that man’s body was tiny.

Moving on.

“How can I help?” I asked. “I’m happy to get going just as soon as I’m able. After we have a brief discussion about cider and apples.”

“A brief discussion.” He stared me down.

“Yes. You repeat things very well. Good job.” I crossed my arms to match his posture. Maybe I’d been sent to Vermont on a fool’s errand, but I wasn’t going to cash in my chips just yet. If this errand could be saved, I’d save it. My future at BPG was at stake, and one grumpy farmer wasn’t going to have the last word.

“Follow me,” he grunted before turning and marching away.

“Yes sir.” I saluted the back of his head.

The blond kid chuckled to himself and went to look at the deflated wheel of my rental car.

A LITTLE SAFETY PIN

I'm a nice guy. Swear to God. But today it was pretty hard to tell.

Blame it on the stress of running a farm, or the shock of seeing Audrey Kidder there on our road, her legs longer than the drive to town, her fiery eyes staring up at me. Blame it on a sudden spike in the summer day's temperature.

Whatever the cause, I started acting like an asshole at the moment I discovered Audrey's perfect ass sticking out of that car on my dirt road.

Trying to clear my head, I walked her up our half-mile gravel driveway at a death-march pace. But she had on those little strappy shoes, damn it. So I slowed my pace and tried to find my manners. "How've you been for five years?" I barked.

Maybe I hadn't quite remembered how to be civilized yet, though, because she looked shocked by the question. "Um, fine, thank you. I, uh, flunked out of BU. Then my mother sent me to Mount Holyoke where I repeated the performance."

I shouldn't have asked, I guess, because her story made me ragey. I'd busted my ass for four years to keep a football scholarship at BU because I knew it would leave more money in the college fund for my three younger siblings.

But Audrey had been a party girl. Always with her sorority sisters.

Always looking for a drunken good time. Good-time party guy was the part I'd *tried* to play in college, but, meanwhile, I'd slept an average of five hours a night for four years so I could get everything done. Just like I did now.

“—so after I proved to everyone that a college degree was not for me, I went to cooking school where I graduated as the valedictorian. Go figure.”

“Nice,” I said. But Audrey Kidder in a kitchen? That was something I had a real hard time visualizing. She might chip a nail.

“I took the job at Boston Premier Group because I want to start my own restaurant. That's really hard to do—you need backers. If I kiss the ring for a while, they can help me get started.”

Interesting. But now she was just buttering me up in order to get what she needed from me. She worked for a bunch of corporate slimeballs who took advantage of everyone they could. And she wanted my approval? Not happening.

“Why don't you ask your parents for the startup money?” I asked. Audrey was a rich girl. That's why the sorority types had liked her so much. “Can't they help?”

“No, Griff.” Her voice dipped. “As a matter of fact they can't.” And a flash of something dark crossed her face.

Whoops. I'd stuck my foot in my mouth again. “Well,” I grunted. “Let's talk about my ciders while Zach fixes your car.”

“Cool! Can I see where you make them?” Her face lit up like a kid's on Christmas, and I felt a twinge of unfamiliar kinship in my chest. Cider was my passion, and whenever anyone expressed interest, it made me happy.

Then again, the girl really had enjoyed getting drunk back in the day.

“Yeah. Of course. This way.” We passed the farmhouse on our right, then I steered Audrey between the bunkhouse and the dairy barn toward my pride and joy—the cider house. My father had always made artisanal cider, but he made it for himself. Every year he'd sold a few gallons just for fun.

But I'd grown Dad's tiny operation into something much bigger. Pushing

open the door to the barn-like building, I flipped on the old soda lamps overhead.

“Whoa,” Audrey said, her voice hushed. “Those tanks are serious.”

“They are,” I agreed, fighting off the rush of pleasure I felt whenever someone admired my babies. “My cider wins awards.” Okay, *one* award. But I was just getting started. “Any yokel can brew a decent beer in his garage, but it’s difficult to create a cider with any complexity. And there’s a lot that can go wrong, chemically speaking.”

“Uh-huh,” Audrey said, wandering over to my bottling machine and picking up an empty bottle. “Nice label.”

The label was the least interesting thing in the room. “Thanks,” I said tightly. “My brother designed it.”

She looked up quickly, a grin on her face. “I know you don’t give a fuck about the label, Grouchy Griff,” she said, putting it down again. “But marketing matters to buyers. People need to feel good about plunking down a lot of cash for premium goods. They want a *story*, because the story lasts longer than it takes to swallow something.”

“Uh-huh.” This was the kind of mumbo jumbo that made me crazy, because people should be willing to pay for organic quality simply because *it’s the right thing to do*. “So you’re saying the pretty picture means more to your customers than the fact that my orchard isn’t poisoning Vermont’s groundwater with chemicals and petroleum-based fertilizers? And that I pay my employees a living wage?”

She tossed her hair. “Does it matter how I respond? I wouldn’t want to interrupt your sermon.” She came closer, her big blue eyes looking up at me, a challenge gleaming in them. “And don’t tell me you’ve never tried to gussy up your cider house to appeal to the masses. If you don’t believe in marketing, what’s that?”

She pointed at a framed photograph on the wall. It was the first part of an informative display explaining how cider was made. We held tastings here

during our busy apple-picking season. “My sister took that last fall. That’s our fruit in the wheelbarrow. So what?”

Audrey grinned like she’d caught me with my hand in the cash drawer. “The apples in that picture did *not* go into your big, manly cider tanks. These —” She jabbed one pink fingernail at the photo. “—are fancy grade, flawless fruit. You sold those apples to tourists. And in there”—she pointed at my tanks, and raised her voice—“you put apples that look like they got their asses kicked in an alleyway! So don’t even *try* to pretend you have no fucks to give when it comes to marketing!”

Christ on a cracker. The way her shapely mouth looked when she said *fuck* was ridiculously distracting. And I’d just been schooled by a girl who must have paid attention at least once in a while in culinary school.

Weirdly, I didn’t care that much. I just wanted her to say *fuck* again, preferably while riding my dick in the hayloft.

“What?” she snapped. “You’re staring at me.”

“Did you call me Grouchy Griff a minute ago?”

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe. Does it make you want to sell me cider at a competitive price?”

The truth was that I wanted very much to sell cider to the Big Corporate Assholes Group of where-the-fuck-ever. Unlike my fruit, the cider could become a brand name, and it needed to find its special market. If fancy restaurants carried my cider, I’d have an easier time convincing Boston wine shops to stock it.

Taking a small loss on the cider was probably a good business decision. If I could stomach it. “Dare I ask?” I walked closer to Audrey where she stood by the bottler. “What price does your employer expect to pay for a bottle of Vermont’s finest hard cider?”

For a moment she blinked up at me, then licked her lips.

Do not look at her lips. Do not think about them. Do not remember what she once did with... Fuck.

“My pricing sheet says three dollars for a seven-hundred-fifty-milliliter bottle.”

Well, that was a libido killer. “*Three bucks?* So they can mark it up to twenty? You’re shitting me. The bottle and the cork alone cost a buck fifty.”

Her shoulders sagged, and when she spoke again, it was in a soft voice. “I will tell my boss he’s insane, okay? But if you want me to change his mind, you need to give me something to go on. I need information, not another rant.”

Hell, the girl had a point. “All right. First, let’s taste.”

Audrey clasped her hands together. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Right.

I fetched a bottle from the cooler, untwisted its wire clasp and then slowly removed the cork. To preserve the natural effervescence of my product, I used a champagne cork in every bottle. It cost more than a twist-off top, but the product had a better shelf life.

I grabbed a couple of glasses from the tasting counter and poured us each a half portion. Audrey took hers and smiled at me. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I grunted. It was hard to remember the last time I had a drink with an attractive female. A couple months ago I’d broken things off with my fuck buddy, and since then I’d been living like a monk. Tasting cider before lunch in the hopes of making a sale wasn’t exactly a social occasion. But it was as close as I’d come in a while.

Pathetic much?

Audrey held her glass up to the dusty beam of light filtering down through the skylight. “A nice amber color.” She swirled the glass under her nose like a pro. “Pleasant, musky odor. More tannic than fruity.” She sipped, her gaze drifting off to the side as she concentrated on the tart, complicated flavors of my product. I saw her delicate throat pulse as she swallowed. “Wow. That’s some fine apple juice you’ve got there, Griff.”

“What?” I yelped. “Apple j—”

She grinned. “*Joking!* It’s magnificent. I get notes of oak and apricot. Nice finish. I can see why you’re proud of it.”

For a second, my chest swelled from the praise. But then I remembered she was trying to buy the stuff for peanuts. Obviously, she was just buttering me up. “It tastes like eight dollars a bottle at wholesale, fifteen at retail.”

Audrey took another dainty sip while I tried not to find her ridiculously attractive. “I think it’s delicious, and I’d pay your price any day. But the guys I work for are going to fire me if I come back with a number that’s more than double theirs.”

The truth was that I could do a little better than eight bucks. I just wasn’t ready to admit it. “BPG will do really well with this bottle. It’s still cheaper than ninety percent of the wines on their list. And we’re not exactly in Napa Valley. If they want to impress the Beacon Hill set, this is the way to go. The Massachusetts Bay colonists had too little grain to make the beer they’d drunk in England, so they made hard cider instead. This right here is our history.” I held up the bottle.

She took it out of my hand and put it back on the counter. “I may have flunked out of BU, but I did finish the fifth grade, where they taught us that John Adams drank hard cider with breakfast. I get it, okay? You’ve got the perfect regional beverage for my corporate overlords. I shall report back to the Death Star, where Darth Vader will express his disappointment and then strangle me for quoting eight bucks a bottle.”

Damn this girl. Not only did she know her stuff, she was smiling at me now over the rim of her glass. The other two times we’d been this close together, our clothes had come off in a big fucking hurry.

Focus, Griffin.

“I could show you seven dollars. Why don’t you just see what their limit really is?”

“Well…”

Behind me, the door opened suddenly. “Griff?” my sister called. “Angelo

just drove up with the new guy.”

“Be right there,” I said, taking a step back from Audrey. I felt oddly guilty, as if my sister had caught us doing something more furtive than discussing the price of cider.

You wish.

“Hi!” May said, catching a glimpse of Audrey. “Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” My sister’s voice was oddly bright. It was her snooping voice. I’d been hearing it her whole life.

“I thought we had a drug addict to meet,” I grumbled, setting down my glass and heading for the door. Nudging May and her big mouth out of the way, I watched the back door of Angelo’s old sedan open. “Excuse me a minute, Audrey.”

“Audrey?” My sister’s curiosity was in full swing. “I’m May, Griffin’s sister...”

I had no choice but to leave the two of them to chat. I hoped Audrey wouldn’t divulge our former entanglement, because everyone on the farm would be talking about it by dinnertime, even the dairy cattle. But in the grand scheme of things I had bigger problems.

One of them was climbing out of Angelo’s car.

What does an addict look like, anyway? To me he looked like any kid in his twenties. He had a serious face and a lot of tattoos, but so did half the men in Vermont. He was a little thin for farm work. But that was really the worst I could say about my first impression. He pulled a small duffel bag out of the trunk, then lifted his chin to look around.

“Hi,” I said, greeting our friend Angelo. Now here was a guy with a tough job. The next time I found myself grumbling about an invasion of apple maggot fly, I would try to remember that I could be hunting down ex-cons instead.

His dark skin crinkled at the corners of his eyes when he smiled at me. “Haven’t seen you at church lately,” he said, shaking my hand.

“What, now you’re moonlighting as Father Pat’s truant officer?”

He laughed. “Sorry. Occupational hazard.”

“I’ll bet.” I turned my attention to the newcomer, offering my hand. “I’m Griffin Shipley.”

“Jude Nickel.” He had a surprisingly firm handshake. “Thank you for giving me a try. I need the job.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. *Translation: we’re desperate.* “If you don’t mind the outdoors, it’s not bad work.”

“Just spent three years in jail and rehab. I could use a little outdoors.”

His candor took me by surprise. “Well okay then. We pay twelve bucks an hour if you’re living on site, or fourteen if you’re a day worker. Lunch is free for everyone, but those who live with us get docked ten bucks a day total for breakfast and supper. The food is great, though, and we provide a lot of it. Like Guinness World Record quantities.”

“Damn,” said a chirpy voice behind me. “Got any more openings? You pay better than my corporate overlords.”

Audrey was listening in on my little HR speech, and I didn’t know quite how to feel about that. I paid my employees as well as I possibly could, though nobody was getting rich working here. Least of all me.

“That’s fine. All of it,” my newest employee said. He looked older than his twenty-two years. He had tired eyes. “Where should I put this?” He patted his gym bag.

“That’s all you’ve got with you?” I asked, eyeing it.

“That’s all I’ve got, period.” He lifted his chin, challenging me to say anything else on the matter.

“No problem. Let me show you the bunkhouse.”

But first my mother wanted a word. I saw her come out of the back door, her apron on, crossing the yard purposefully to where we all stood around Angelo’s car. I waited while she fussed over Angelo and greeted Jude. “Honey,” she said to this ex-con whom she’d never met before, “I checked

every corner of our house and didn't find any medication stronger than aspirin. Angelo asked me to do that for you. He said it was easier if you didn't have to wonder."

"Uh, thanks," he said, studying at his shoes. "Appreciate it."

I glanced toward the bunkhouse. God only knew what somebody might have left in that bathroom. "I should check the..."

"Already did it," my mother said quickly. "You might want to *clean* that shower more often. There are scarier things than narcotics in there."

Audrey giggled while I cringed.

"I'm Ruth Shipley," my mother said to our uninvited corporate raider. "And you're..."

"Audrey Kidder. I swung by to ask Griff about buying apples and cider for a group of restaurants in Boston."

"Oh!" Mom clasped her hands as if the queen herself had just dropped by. "Will you stay for lunch?" She ignored the look of menace that I aimed in her direction.

"I would love to!" Audrey enthused. "Especially since my car is in a ditch at the bottom of your road."

"Not true," I said quickly. Even as we spoke, I could see the Prius turning slowly up the drive. Zach had already swapped out the tire—although it was likely the spare was a donut, so Princess Perky's troubles weren't exactly solved.

"Wow," she said, her voice awed. "He's a miracle worker."

"He is," I admitted, even if it was just a tire change. "Shoulda been working miracles on my fence instead of your car, though."

"August Griffin Shipley," my mother demanded. "Where are your manners? Since when do you not go to the aid of a stranger?"

I would have preferred that Audrey *was* a stranger. Not that I'd say so out loud.

May socked me in the shoulder. "Grumpy much? Take Jude to the

bunkhouse already, because lunch will be ready soon. Brisket sandwiches and potato salad. Come with us, Audrey,” my sister the traitor said. “We’ll pour you some iced tea.”

After saying goodbye to Angelo, who couldn’t stay for lunch, the women went inside, leaving Jude and I alone. I headed toward the outbuilding where we needed to stash his things, and he followed me. “The bunkhouse is pretty comfortable for what it is,” I said. “It’s been here a hundred years. My great-grandfather built it with the rocks he cleared from the meadow.”

Jude studied the stone building as we approached. “Pretty cool,” he said. “You must not use it in the winter. Too expensive to heat.”

“Not true. It has a hundred-year-old masonry heater. Every two days we build a fire in there, then seal that sucker up. It heats the place into the low sixties even on a sub-zero day. There’s electric baseboard heat to fill in around the edges. We make all our own electricity, too.”

Sustainable architecture was one of my numerous causes. I wanted this farm to be around for a long time. The solar panels had cost a lot, though. I invested right after dad died, before I realized how tight cash really was. Then I invested in my first round of cider equipment, and now I was out on a proverbial limb all the time. One lost harvest and we’d be looking at bankruptcy.

Holding open the front door, I let Jude enter first. “That room on the right is mine. Bathroom’s on the left.” I kicked off my boots and pointedly set them on the rubber shoe mat by the door. “After you’ve been working in the dairy barn, you’ll want to leave your shoes at the door.”

“Makes sense,” Jude said, toeing out of his Chuck T’s. I was happy to see him following instructions. That boded well for both of us. “You sleep out here in the bunkhouse all the time?” he asked. “To keep an eye on the help, I guess.”

“No.” Studying this very jaded young man, I shook my head. “That’s not why. I gave up my bedroom in the farmhouse because Mom is trying to

convince my grandpa to move in. He's about a half mile down the road, all alone since my grandmother died. Every day she asks him if he'll move today, and each time he says, 'Not today!'"

Jude laughed, and it made him look five years younger.

"Anyway, I moved out here a couple months ago, because we thought maybe it would motivate him to give in. But no luck. And anyway—I don't mind it out here with Zach. He's easy company. You'll see. Head straight back. End of the hall."

I followed Jude into the wide bunkroom with high, beamed ceilings. I watched him take in the two sets of bunk beds—one on each side—and a single bed under the back windows. "That's Zachariah's," I said, pointing at the center bed with the *Star Wars* pillowcase—a gag gift from me. "He gets the best spot, because he lives in here year round. During the harvest my cousins will sleep in here, too."

I went over to our one big closet and pulled open the double louvered doors. "Storage space is our biggest hurdle out here. You can have a couple feet of this hanging bar if you need it, and you get one big drawer." I pointed at the built-ins at either end of Zach's bed.

"One drawer is plenty for me," he pointed out as I poked around in the closet for a set of sheets and a blanket.

"True." The guy would need more clothes if he was going to do farm work, though. We got plenty dirty. "Here." I offered him the bedding I'd found. Then I sat down on Zach's bed. "Now tell me what else I need to know about working with you. Is there anything special you need? Any work that you can't do?" I'd never known anyone who was trying to get off drugs, so I couldn't guess his limitations.

Jude turned his back to me and shook out a sheet before answering. But when he spoke, he eyed me over his shoulder. "Angelo brought me here because I'm trying not to move back to Colebury until I have a few more months where I'm clean. Eventually I'll have to go home, but I need to rack

up some more time off the junk. He said your place would be like a halfway house, because I'd be stranded out here. So I'd rather not be sent into Colebury on errands, if you don't mind. There's drugs everywhere, and I just don't want to think about it. Don't want to run into any of my so-called friends."

Yikes. "Okay. Sure. What else?"

"I'm a decent mechanic. Started working in a body shop when I was fourteen. If you need any maintenance work on your vehicles, just ask."

"Thanks. Zach is an engine whiz, too. He's saved me a mint already."

"Well, that's lucky," Jude said. But I swear he looked a little deflated at this news.

"What else?"

He tucked the corners of the sheet over the mattress. "I don't sleep too well. Drugs really fuck up your REM cycles."

"So if I hear you walking around at night, I shouldn't call the police?" I meant this as a joke, but when the words came out of my mouth, I realized they were a poor choice for talking to someone who'd been arrested at least once.

He sighed. "You might find me sitting outside on the porch at two in the morning. I'll try to be quiet."

"No big." I cleared my throat. "Now, don't take this the wrong way, but I say this to every man who ever stays here."

He looked up at me, amusement in his eyes. "Yeah? Hit me."

"My little sister is off limits. I have to say it. She's seventeen going on thirty."

"Aw, man. Don't feel you have to say another word. I get it." He chuckled. "Hey kids, stay the hell away from the junkie in bunk number three."

I was relieved that he didn't get pissed off by my little speech. I gave it to everyone. And this guy had that dark-eyed, brooding look working. Plenty of

girls had probably flung themselves at him back in the day.

Hopefully my little sister wouldn't cast aside her adoration for Zach and shift it to Jude. Zach I trusted. This guy I'd just met. "You know, I used to include both of my sisters in this little warning, but May got wind of it. She hates it when I treat her like a kid. And she has a good right hook, which she's not afraid to use on me."

"Good to know. But hitting on your sisters is not my style. Maybe you wouldn't believe it from a guy who just got out of jail, but I'm a hard worker. Toward the end there I was mostly working hard to feed my habit. But I know how to put in a long day."

"Good. We start at six and end at five, but we take two hours off during the day for meals and breaks."

His nod was stoic. "Got it. Maybe I'll sleep better after a long day, anyway."

"You'd almost have to." I stood up. "I'm heading in for lunch. It won't start for another fifteen minutes, but be on time, okay? Lunch is at one o'clock every day and mom busts her ass to get it onto the table like clockwork, so she wants you to show up on time."

"Yessir."

I paused on my way out of the room. "And don't call me sir. My siblings do it sometimes, but they're just fucking with me."

Jude laughed as I left the bunkhouse.

NOWHERE TO HIDE

Maybe Griff Shipley was a grumpy asshole. But his family was *lovely*. Their bustling kitchen was controlled chaos of the very best kind. Griff's mom was busy slicing up a slab of braised brisket large enough to feed several developing nations, while everyone else pitched in to get food on the table.

Or didn't, in the case of Griff's younger brother, Dylan. Best as I could tell, he was minding a big sterilizer full of jam jars on the stove. He had the tongs in one hand, but mostly he busied himself singing Technotronic's "Pump Up the Jam," and dancing around.

"You are killing me with that song," his twin sister Daphne complained. The two of them looked to be high school aged.

"This is what I sing when we make jam."

She rolled her eyes, her arms braced around a tall stack of plates. She nudged her brother and indicated an open drawer full of linen napkins. "Can you put those on top here?"

He reached into the drawer and piled a handful of napkins on top of the plates.

"We're ten people today," she said. "Put some more on."

"Stop calling me a moron."

She groaned all the way out of the kitchen, and Dylan went back to singing "Pump Up the Jam," changing the line about "booty" to "fruity." And

all the while his mother and sisters moved like ninjas around one another.

The lunchtime bustle in the Shipley family kitchen rivaled a busy night on the cook line at l'Étre Suprême, but it was a hell of a lot cheerier.

The kitchen in the house where I'd grown up could not have been more different—it had been like a large, sparkling tomb. I'd never been allowed to cook anything in it, or disrupt its perfect order. Since my mother had been busy climbing the corporate ladder, she'd played host to guests all the time. But she didn't cook. We'd had a full-time personal chef who made me feel like an intruder if I wandered in there looking for a snack.

I hadn't started cooking until college, when I finally got free of that stifling place. My freshman year I had a rented house with a couple of girls I knew from high school. One of them was a great cook already, and I learned a lot at her elbow. In fact, I'd liked everything about that first year at BU except for the schoolwork. I'd liked our house, my friends, the sorority I rushed, and partying. If I'd spent fewer hours learning to make dumplings from scratch and more hours doing homework, I might have gotten B's instead of D's.

But I hadn't.

Water under the bridge.

Drifting into the dining room, I watched Daphne speed-set the table for ten people. “During picking season we hold lunch outdoors, because we're twenty people then,” she told me.

May Shipley rushed by with a tray of coffee cups and a water carafe.

“How can I help?” I asked her for the third time, following her back into the kitchen. “There must be something.”

“You are so sweet, but we've got this down to a science. We serve a whole lot of food in this kitchen.”

“I can see that.” It seemed categorically impossible that there wasn't something I could do to help, but if she didn't want to assign me a task, that left me free to admire the farmhouse kitchen. The house had to be over a

hundred years old, but it had been lovingly handled. The giant butcher's block table in the center of the kitchen looked as if it had been there since the dawn of time—there were scars and scratches in its oiled surface. But that only made it more beautiful to me.

What I'd wished for as a child was exactly this—a storybook family on a farm somewhere, crammed around the table, a rope swing on an old tree, lacy curtains blowing in the breeze...

Someone had abandoned a small bowl of cherries in the center of the table, half of them pitted. They gleamed like perfect red jewels. "Hey—these are gorgeous. Are they sour cherries?" I lifted the bowl up to my nose for a sniff—occupational hazard of being a chef. Wow. Nothing else had the same rich scent as a cherry.

"Yes they are, and they're terrific in pies," Mrs. Shipley said, lifting slice after slice of brisket onto a platter. "But we won't get enough for a pie until next week. I never know what to do with the first few—it's not enough to make anything. I tossed them into a batch of strawberry jam last year."

"Can I eat one?" I laughed. "Is that rude? You can never find sour cherries at the store."

"Go ahead, honey," Ruth Shipley said.

I popped one in my mouth, and it burst forth with a wonderful sour fruitiness. "Fantastic." The flavor filled me with ideas. I wanted to make chutney from these cherries. Or a gin cocktail. Or a tart. "Damn. I always wanted to live somewhere where there were fruit trees."

May Shipley laughed. "All we've got are fruit trees. Twenty thousand of them."

"Twenty...thousand?"

"That's right. And that's not counting Griff's experimental crops."

It was hard to even form a mental picture of twenty-thousand trees. Humming to myself, I picked up the paring knife and began to pit the rest of the cherries in the bowl. Knife work was soothing to me. Some people

knitted. Some did yoga. I liked to cut things.

A few minutes later I had a tidy pile of pitted fruit. “I suppose you have a compost can for the pits and stems?”

Ruth Shipley looked up from her own work. “That didn’t take you but a minute.”

“Cooking is the only thing I’m good at.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. The compost can is there beside the coffee maker.”

I dumped the pits and then washed my blood-red fingers.

“May!” Ruth called to her older daughter. “Can you find the barbecue sauce in the refrigerator? We need to heat it up. Then we can eat.”

“Sure!”

“Um...” Dylan mumbled in that sullen teenage way. “Didn’t know you still needed that.”

“Dylan Gerard Shipley! Did you finish my sauce and not tell me? Now lunch is going to be late! I can’t serve brisket without barbecue sauce!”

Aw. The younger Shipley brother hung his head. He was a thinner, gawkier Griffin.

I felt bad that he’d been shamed in front of strangers. “I’ll whip up another batch if you need it,” I offered.

Ruth was still staring at her son with a laser gaze, and I was pretty sure the teenager would have been incinerated if looks could kill. “Thank you, honey,” she said to me. “I’d love that. There’s an onion there”—she indicated a bowl on the prep table—“and you can use the same cutting board.”

Yay, a task! When you’ve been told all your life that you’re quite useless, whipping up a little barbecue sauce is a good time. I grabbed the onion and went to town. “Ooh, garlic scapes,” I said, reaching for the green shoots. “I never find these, either.” A quick mince had them falling into tiny discs on the cutting board.

“Yikes,” Daphne gasped, watching my knife move so fast it blurred.

“How are you not missing a finger?”

“Still have all ten, and none have had to be surgically reattached. But the day ain’t over yet.”

As she giggled, the kitchen door opened and Griff Shipley filled the opening with his NFL-sized body. I’m ashamed to say that the rhythm of my knife faltered for just a moment. That chest beneath that tight T-shirt just did things to me.

My traitorous brain was saved from further embarrassment by the look on his face when he spotted me. First a bushy eyebrow quirked, as if he couldn’t believe I was still here. And then he gave me his now-familiar frown.

Ah, well. All that hotness wasted on a grouch.

I dragged my attention off Griff as Ruth Shipley scraped my minced aromatics into a saucepan. “Let’s see,” she said. “A little ketchup, because we’re in a hurry. Some vinegar...”

“You know what would be great in here?” I couldn’t stop myself from suggesting. “Those.” I pointed at the cherries.

“Interesting pick, miss.” She handed me the pan. “Go for it. I need to run upstairs for a minute.”

“Go on. I’ve got this.” I shooed her away and she smiled. At least one of the Shipleys liked me.

Turning my back on Griff, I put the pan on the stove on a low temperature. Then, still feeling his eyes on me, I went to his giant family refrigerator and opened the door. The ketchup was in a huge bottle. It would have to be if they served ten or twelve people for lunch every day. Before adding some to the onions, garlic and butter already in the pan, I sautéed the veggies for a minute to bring out the onions’ natural sweetness.

“What are you doing?” Griff said suddenly from *right* behind me.

“Barbecue sauce. You’re familiar with it, right?” The heat of his body was somehow hotter than the Wolf stove in front of me. I tried to elbow him out of the way, but that was like trying to nudge a Humvee. So I went the

long way around two-hundred-odd pounds of muscle to collect the cherries.

“Strange combo,” he muttered.

“You don’t have to eat it,” I returned. There was a nice sizzle happening in my saucepan now and I grabbed a wooden spoon to stir everything together. “Be a dear and find me some brown sugar, would you?” I asked. “And some vinegar.”

Across the room, his sister May laughed. “He’d need a map and a compass. I’ll grab them. White wine vinegar? Or balsamic.”

“Balsamic, I think.”

The kitchen door opened slowly, and Griff’s newest employee eased tentatively into the room. “That smells really good,” he said softly.

“Thank you!” I chirped, giving Griff a pointed look.

Griff ignored me. He escorted his new employee in the direction of the pantry. “Having the sink over here keeps us out of the way,” he said. “And keeps the cooks from getting cranky.”

“What keeps *you* from getting cranky?” I called after him. “Whatever it is, have some of it.”

All the Shipleys laughed except for Griff.

ICE ICE BABY



CHASTITY

“Please be careful, Chastity. Don’t drink anything that doesn’t come from a sealed bottle—unless Dylan is the one who pours it for you.”

“I’ll be careful, Leah,” I reply. But at the same time I roll my eyes in the mirror where I’m giving myself a last-minute once-over before I leave for my first college party.

The dormitory phone has a long curly cord that stretches *just* far enough into the bathroom. So I can listen to all Leah’s worries and check my look at the same time.

Squinting at my reflection, I button the second button on my blouse. But then I unbutton it again. I want to look attractive, but I don’t need my top to shout: HERE ARE MY BOOBS FOR YOUR PERUSAL.

It’s a fine line.

“Don’t go into the basement,” Leah says. “That’s where all the bad ideas happen.”

“What kind of bad ideas?” I ask, perking up. I don’t remember Dylan’s house on Spruce Street even having a finished basement. But if it did, I’d probably go into it, in spite of Leah’s warning. I’m more interested in bad ideas than anyone seems to understand. And I always have been. It’s just that

my life hasn't afforded much opportunity to try them out.

"Just be careful. Trust your gut. There are men who would get you drunk or high just to take advantage of you."

"I'll be very careful," I promise, just because it's the fastest way to end this conversation.

Leah means well. She's only nine years older than I am, but she considers herself my guardian. Two years ago—when I was nineteen—I ran away from the cult where we both grew up.

I owe her a lot. She took me in, no questions asked, even though we're only distant cousins. Leah cares about me and my future, which is a lot more than I can say about my actual parents. If I'd stayed on the Paradise Ranch I'd be married by now to a fifty-year-old man with four other wives.

Sometimes when people hear this story they say we have a "colorful history." But it's just the opposite. It wasn't colorful at all; it was really drab. And that's why I'm standing here in a burgundy silk blouse I bought secondhand and a pair of tight jeans that would have earned me a beating at the compound.

Leah bought me my first pair of jeans two years ago. I'd put them on immediately, feeling very defiant. Then I'd looked in the mirror and thought: *whore*. Because that's what they used to call me.

I still hear their voices in my head sometimes. I was a whore to them. And all because I kissed a boy.

"Are you coming home this weekend?" Leah asks. By *home* she means her farm in Tuxbury, which is about an hour's drive from the university in Burlington.

"I think so?" I uncap my only tube of tinted lip gloss and touch up my lips in the mirror.

"Did you tell Dylan your idea?"

"Not yet." And that's one of the reasons I'm going to this party at his house.

It's Wednesday, when we have a standing tutoring date. But today he didn't show. I don't have a cell phone, which is probably why I didn't hear from him. He must have called the land line while I was out.

Dylan is a little flighty, but he's a good friend. He hasn't missed a Wednesday yet. That hour of the week is a double-edged sword for me. I love spending time with Dylan. But algebra. *Oof*. It's not my forte. I spend the whole time trying not to look either stupid or heartsick, with varying degrees of success.

I'm probably failing at the first thing, but Dylan has no idea how I feel about him, and I plan to keep it that way.

"I hope Dylan likes your idea," Leah says. "It's got a lot of potential. And the kitchen is wide open on Friday and Saturday nights. Nobody ever wants to claim those hours." Leah makes fancy cheeses, but it's a seasonal business. So she rents out the commercial kitchen in her creamery to other businesses during the winter months.

"If Dylan wants in, he'll pick Saturday," I tell her. "Fridays are reserved for his awful girlfriend."

"Shhh!" Leah hisses. "Won't she hear you?"

"No. She's not here." The biggest mistake of my college career—all four weeks of it—was asking Dylan to help me carry my things into the dormitory on move-in day.

I hadn't even asked, come to think of it. He'd volunteered. He'd driven me to school in his old truck and brought me to the housing office to pick up my keys.

And I'd been so, so grateful. Right up until Dylan carried my one box into the dormitory. I'd been so nervous I'd felt like throwing up, but Dylan had whistled a happy tune as he led me down the hallway to suite 302.

"Open 'er up," he'd said kindly. "Let's see if the housing gods were kind."

They weren't. I mean—the suite is fine. My twin bed is in a separate

room from Kaitlyn's twin bed. We share a bathroom that's just ours. I have a desk and a dresser and a window. I can't complain.

I'd been hoping to be paired with a roommate who would also be a friend, but Kaitlyn had been instantly chilly to me. She'd barely glanced in my direction.

She had not, however, dismissed Dylan. You know that expression—"her eyes lit up"? Well, I've never seen anyone so obviously and instantly in lust. She was like a cartoon character with hearts in her eyes.

"Is this your brother?" she'd asked.

"Just about," Dylan had said with a chuckle. "We live on neighboring farms."

"That's so sweet," she'd gushed.

And then, as I'd put my meager possessions away, she'd chatted him up. I learned all about her life in Manhattan and her troubles at Barnard College, wherever that is. "There was a dalliance with a professor," she'd said with a sigh. "It didn't end well. My family is horrified." She'd given him a sexy grin. "So here I am, banished to the hinterlands to finish school."

"Welcome to Moo U," Dylan had said with a slow smile. "It's not New York City, but we have other kinds of fun."

The very next day she'd asked me for his phone number. "I had a question about which dry cleaner to use. He said to ask him anything."

"I'd be stunned if Dylan ever had anything dry cleaned," I'd said. But I gave her the number, anyway.

Big mistake.

The following week she didn't come home at all on two different nights. At first I thought this was a terrific development. I loved having our suite to myself. But then, just as I was crossing the center of campus and congratulating myself on figuring out a shortcut to the math department, I'd seen them. Kaitlyn had been standing under a tree with Dylan. And then he'd leaned in and kissed her.

No—that isn't even an accurate description. He practically *devoured* her right there between classes in broad daylight. I've never walked away from anything faster in my life.

Three weeks later, and I'm still not over it. I already knew Dylan had a lot of sex. His twin sister refers to him as "the family slut." There are always girls from his high school class hanging around the Shipley farm, riding shotgun in his truck. I'm always jealous of those girls.

But Kaitlyn? Just the idea of her with Dylan makes me insane. It doesn't matter if I express that aloud, either. Kaitlyn is almost certainly at Dylan's house right now. If it turns out that he spent our tutoring hours with her instead of me, that will sting.

But Dylan will make it up to me. He really is a good friend.

"Let me know how it goes," Leah says. "I'd better go and put Maeve to bed. I can hear her begging Isaac for another story."

"Kiss her goodnight for me," I say. "I'll call you about the weekend. I'll let you know if we need to use the kitchen Saturday night."

"Have fun tonight, Chass. Just be—"

"—careful. I know, Leah. I will."

We hang up. I give myself one more glance in the mirror, then I grab my backpack and leave the little suite behind.

I hurry down two flights of stairs, heading for the dormitory exit. It's already dark outside, and I can see my reflection in the glass door. My backpack strap has tugged the silk blouse aside, revealing a tiny glimpse of my bra.

I stop suddenly to fix it, and that's when somebody plows into my back.

We let out twin shrieks.

"Sorry!" I yelp, turning around.

"No, that was totally my fault," the other girl babbles. Her name is Ellie, I think. We're in the same English class. She holds the door open for me. "Your outfit looks fine, by the way. Stop fussing with that collar."

“Uh, thanks.”

“Going on a date? Kinda fancy for a Wednesday night.” We’re heading in the same direction down the sidewalk. “I’m going to the library, because I’m fun like that.”

“Oh, I already spent four hours there,” I assure her. I don’t tell her that I spent all that time waiting for Dylan Shipley to show up for tutoring. “I’m going to a party off campus.”

“*Really*,” Ellie says, grinning. She has a mouth full of braces. Aren’t those just for kids? It’s been two years since I left the cult where I grew up, but there are still a lot of things that baffle me. Twenty-four months isn’t a long time to learn how the entire world works. “You have fun. I’ll be trying to understand Aristotle.”

“Cool.” I don’t know what Aristotle is, either.

She reaches for my hand and tugs it away from the second button of my blouse, which I’m fingering. “Don’t fidget. That’s how buttons come off.”

“Right. But—” I hesitate. “Is this too much?” I wave a hand in front of my chest.

“Too much what? Too much hotness? No. If I had boobs, I’d wear them proudly. Whoever it is you’re trying to impress is going to love it.” She gives me a wave and trots away toward the library. “Have fun!” she calls over her shoulder.

I keep walking, still feeling uncertain. Going to Dylan’s house right now is probably a mistake. I don’t know why he blew off our tutoring session today. It isn’t like him. On the other hand, he has a lot on his plate. And I’m the one who doesn’t have a cell phone.

It’s not Dylan’s fault that I sat there in the library from four until seven thirty, missing dinner like a dummy. But I’ve always been a little dumb when it comes to Dylan.

My stomach had been rumbling by the time I’d given up on him. On my way home, I’d paused outside the convenience store, wondering what a girl

could buy for two dollars. Only candy, really. I hadn't bought anything, but I had bumped into Dylan's roommate, a character named Rickie.

"Chastity!" he'd exclaimed, coming out of the store with a bag full of various kinds of chips in one hand and a bag of ice in the other. "What's up, lady? You coming over later?"

"For...?" I'd only been to their house once before. It's out of the way, which is why Dylan always meets me on campus.

"The party! Didn't Dylan tell you?"

He did not. But I hadn't let it show on my face. "I didn't catch Dylan today," I'd told him. "Do you happen to know where he went?"

"Home to Tuxbury," Rickie had said. "Shit, Chastity. He said he was going to call you. The goats got loose and ate something they weren't supposed to."

"Oh no!"

"Yeah. He got a call and there was yelling, and then Dylan got in the truck and went home. But he's back at nine for the party. Come over. I'm making mulled cider and guacamole."

My stomach had gurgled, and the decision had seemed easy.

But now, as I trudge uphill toward the old Victorian house where Dylan lives with Rickie and another guy named Keith, I'm questioning all my life choices. I'll probably have to make conversation with strangers, which isn't my strong suit.

Or they'll just ignore me, which also sounds bleak.

And then there's my algebra homework which is in my backpack still incomplete. If I turn up now, Dylan is only going to feel guilty for missing our session.

There are two things powering me uphill, though. The first is guacamole. I'd never seen an avocado until I became a nineteen-year-old runaway to Vermont, and I'd been seriously missing out. The second thing is morbid curiosity. In the four weeks since I came to Burlington U, I've had only

glimpses of College Dylan. And I want to know more.

The Dylan I know from Tuxbury is Family Dylan. He milks goats and cows. He whistles in the orchard while picking apples. He takes off his shirt to stack hay. He eats third helpings at the dinner table. He spars with his siblings and takes his mother to church.

And? He's a good friend to me.

College Dylan is different, though. And—fine—even more intoxicating. College Dylan drinks and smokes pot and has (from what I can guess) a lot of sex. Some of it with my evil roommate.

None of it with me.

THE WHOLE CATHOLIC THING



CHASTITY

The temperature has plunged since nightfall, so by the time I reach the house, I'm shivering.

Still, I stand on the front walk for a minute or two, acclimating. It's a beautiful house on a treelined street. There are three floors and several roofline peaks. Dylan says he's lucky to live here. Rickie doesn't charge much rent. Tonight the house is lit up like a Halloween pumpkin, with yellow light glowing from every window.

The windows are closed, but the sound of voices—lots of them—reaches me on the sidewalk. And some music. The sounds of people enjoying themselves. The longer I stand here, the harder it gets to imagine myself walking in there. I won't know anybody besides Rickie and Dylan. And Kaitlyn, who won't talk to me anyway.

I spot Dylan in the bay window. It's not hard. I'm tuned in to the Dylan Shipley channel, and have been since the day I met him two years ago. I'd know his big frame anywhere, and his familiar head of thick, wavy hair. All the Shipleys have brown hair, but Dylan's is kissed with lighter highlights. As if the sun loves him just a little bit more than it loves everyone else.

His back is to me, so I can't see his laughing eyes. But he's gesturing as

he speaks, a beer bottle waving wildly between two fingers, half forgotten. All you have to do is glance at him, and you know he's a fun person.

Fun, and also *nice*. And warm. And hilarious.

Okay. I can do this.

I march up the porch steps and open the big oak door, where I'm greeted by shiny old wooden floors and an arched doorway leading to the living room. Dylan still stands in front of the window wearing his signature outfit—worn jeans and a tight T-shirt. And since it's October, he's pulled a flannel shirt on over it, the cuffs rolled up over his muscular forearms.

“...these goats are little fucking Houdinis. Griff calls me once a day at least to complain. But today they ate all my mom's spinach and kale, so he was shouting at me when I picked up the phone.” Dylan takes a sip from the beer in his hand, shaking his head. “I drove home to calm him down. As if that would even work. And when I get there he wants me to raise the height of the fence, right? So I take a look around...”

I've met the two dairy goats in question. They're wily little animals and cute as heck. Dylan loves them a lot. Maybe even more than he loves his cows.

“...and the fence is *fine*. So I asked Mr. Grumpy if by chance he brought a feed bucket into the goat enclosure earlier? And he's like—‘So what if I did?’ And then I ask if it had the cover on it. And he said—‘How did you know?’” Dylan shakes his head, as if he can't believe the stupidity. “Well, because you're ripping me a new one even though you're the idiot who gave those little fuckers a bucket to climb up onto and *launch themselves over the fence*.”

Everybody laughs a little drunkenly. There are maybe a dozen people in the living room. There's a group on the floor passing around a small pumpkin. Someone has outfitted it with two pipes that stick out of either side. It's a pumpkin *bong*.

You're supposed to take a puff and pass it on. I never have, though. Up

until last month, I'd only seen weed in movies. I'd smelled it in Dylan's truck, without knowing what it was.

College is very educational.

My gaze snags on the couch, which is also occupied. The people seated on it aren't listening to Dylan's story, though, because they're too busy making out. This wouldn't be all that interesting except there are *three* of them. Two girls and a guy. It hadn't occurred to me before that three people could kiss at the same time, but they seem to be managing just fine.

I can't tear my eyes away. The view is both beautiful and complicated. The boy's eyes are closed. I briefly spot his tongue as their lips reconfigure. His hand is up one of the girl's shirts. And that girl has her hand on the *other* girl's breast. As I watch, she passes her thumb over the nipple slowly. It's a hard peak through the T-shirt covering it.

Okay, wow. I wouldn't have thought that would turn me on, but there you go. The truth is that a lot of things turn me on. And they always have. Ever since I turned thirteen, there's been a raging battle between what I'm supposed to be thinking about and what I actually think about.

I really hope nobody can read minds.

Music throbs in the background while Dylan finishes his story about the goats. His mother is mad because they ate her garden greens. "And you practically can't call yourself a Vermont farmer without a nice patch of kale. What will the neighbors say?"

Everyone laughs. My eyes come to rest on Kaitlyn as she passes the bong after her puff. My evil roommate is looking up at Dylan with stars in her eyes.

It's hard to blame her for that, because I probably look at him the same way. It's literally the only thing we have in common.

Kaitlyn gets to her feet as he wraps up his story. She takes the beer out of his hand and takes a swig. It's a way of claiming him, I guess. It makes me want to smack her. "Come on, Dyl," she says the moment he stops talking.

“You said you’d let me play something for you.”

“Yeah, okay. Cool.” They both take a step in my direction. That’s when Dylan lifts his chin and spots me. “Chastity! Hey!” He pulls me in for a Shipley-style, full-body hug—the kind I’m never quite ready for. “God, I’m sorry about this afternoon. Rickie said you waited.”

Ouch. I wish Rickie hadn’t mentioned that.

“It was f-fine,” I stammer as his arms encircle me. There’s a quick press of his hard chest against my body. The flannel shirt he’s wearing doesn’t disguise the muscle underneath.

His hugs always fluster me. I count to three and then step back, so I don’t find myself awkwardly patting his back for too long. That happens sometimes.

It’s been two years since I came to Vermont, and while I’ve figured out a lot of things—like Netflix and nail polish—these little interactions still tie me in knots. On the compound, no man *ever* hugged a girl who wasn’t his wife. We didn’t even shake hands.

These days I’m a decent hand-shaker and there are several people I can hug without difficulty. But Dylan isn’t one of them. I’m so attracted to him that each hug makes me flush like a nervous loser.

“I called,” he says.

“W-what?”

“I called the land line in your suite. Kaitlyn said she’d leave you a note.”

“And I left it,” Kaitlyn snaps. “On the desk. Weren’t we going upstairs?” She gives Dylan a little tug.

“Hang on.” Dylan untangles himself from her and puts a big hand on my shoulder. “Come into the kitchen a minute. Did you eat? Mom sent me home with lentil soup.”

My stomach growls, but the party is too loud for anyone to hear, thank God. With Dylan, I turn toward the kitchen. I can almost *feel* Kaitlyn’s anger radiating toward me.

It's weird, but I feel no guilt. Guilt and I are usually very close friends. But when it comes to Kaitlyn, I live for these little moments of irritating her. Probably because I know they don't matter. She has what I want, and there's a zero percent chance that I'll ever get it.

"Look who's here!" Rickie says from the stove where he's stirring a pot of steaming liquid. It smells like heaven. "The cider is ready, guys. Who's in?"

"I'd love some," I say. That's the scent of Vermont—apples and cinnamon. And weed, I guess.

"Kaitlyn?" he prompts.

"Why not?" She sniffs. "I have to, right? So long as I'm at Moo U, I guess I'll drink the cider and wear a beanie and always use the pronoun of your choice."

"You should be so lucky," Rickie says cheerfully. "Just don't burn your tongue. You're probably gonna need that later." He ladles cider into a row of mugs on the counter. "Here, Chastity. Hey—nice top. Vavoom! Love the fall-themed cleavage."

My face heats instantly. I take a big sniff of the cider to cover my embarrassment. "Smells great, thanks."

Dylan is already microwaving the soup and grabbing bowls from the cupboard. "Soup? Rickie? Kait?"

"Too carby," Kaitlyn says.

"Cider is carby," Dylan points out.

"But I can pour rum into it," she says, taking a mug.

"More for me." Dylan shrugs. "Have a seat, Chastity. Ooh, guacamole." He grabs the serving bowl and plops it onto the table with a bag of chips.

Dylan and I take opposite seats at the table. Rickie parks his hip against the kitchen counter and sips his cider, while Kaitlyn circles, visibly humming with impatience that Dylan seems not to notice.

I will never get over the two of them as a couple. Never. According to his

friends and gossipy family members (never underestimate Grandpa Shipley's powers of observation), Dylan has always been a ride-or-die single guy. Until Kaitlyn ensnared him, that is.

Dylan is the kind of guy who sees the best in people. So while it's obvious to me that she's a shrew, he only sees her shiny hair. And her shiny lip gloss. And her skinny little body clad in expensive clothes.

That's the best explanation I can come up with. Not for lack of trying. And I'm not supposed to care.

Whoops.

"Chass, can we maybe do algebra at breakfast tomorrow?" he asks me now. "I don't have class until ten."

"Sure. Okay. At the dining hall?" Kaitlyn never goes to breakfast, so I won't have to deal with her. It's hard enough looking stupid in front of Dylan. I don't need her scowl, too.

"Yeah, that works." He picks up his soup bowl and drains the last bit.

"Come. On," Kaitlyn urges. "I'm waiting."

I look away, because I know what's going to happen next.

"Coming," Dylan says cheerfully. He pushes back his chair and carries his soup bowl over to the sink, where he rinses it carefully before tucking it into the dishwasher. "Back in a bit," he says to me on his way out of the room.

I dip my spoon in the soup and take another bite. It was nice of Dylan to feed me. He's a good friend. And it's hardly his fault that I want things I can't have.

A moment later, two mugs land on the table in front of me, and then Rickie takes Dylan's seat. "Those two are hard to watch, right?"

Ouch. Either I'm a terrible actress, or Rickie shares my opinion that they're an awful couple.

"She won't last," he says. "I'm sure the sex is great, but he gets easily bored."

“So I’ve noticed,” I mumble before shoving a chip in my mouth.

Rickie flashes me a smile. I like Dylan’s roommate, but he’s a little intimidating. He speaks German and French, and he has an earring. His clothes aren’t anything like Dylan’s. Tonight he’s wearing ripped jeans with black leather boots that would never stand up to farm work. His vintage dress shirt is unbuttoned practically to the navel, exposing some elaborate tattoos.

Some people make my naiveté stand out. Rickie is one of those people.

He pushes a mug of cider toward me. “So what’s your story?”

“What do you mean? I’m just here for the algebra.”

“Uh-huh.” He uncaps a bottle of rum and pours generous dollops into both our mugs. “I mean your real story. Tell me how you got here to Moo U.”

“Don’t you know that part?” I just assumed that Dylan had mentioned my strange story. *Don’t mind my dorky friend. She grew up in a cult and can’t help it.*

“I want to hear it from you,” he says.

“Well it’s *your* Wednesday night. I guess you can spend it on my bullshit if you want to.”

He laughs suddenly, and he looks about five years younger. “I fucking love other people’s bullshit, Chastity. Lay it on me.”

I pull the mug of cider closer to me, considering what I might say. “When I was nineteen, I ran away from the religious compound where I grew up out West. I could only afford a bus ticket to the New York border. And then I walked and hiked the rest.” Thank God it had been summertime, or I would have frozen to death.

“What was that place like? The compound.”

“Um...” What to say? I don’t talk about it that much, because it’s weird and embarrassing. “Let’s see. The only clothing I’d owned before I left was something called the Paradise dress. Picture Laura Ingalls in pastel polyester. Long sleeves, long skirt. With a high collar.” I put my hand up to my throat. “You couldn’t show any skin, because that was sinful. We wore the dresses

with hiking boots from Payless.”

“Oh fuck,” he says, blowing on the surface of the cider in his mug. “So the place was a fashion disaster. But what was it *like*? What did you do all day?”

“I worked at home. Cooking, cleaning, and sewing. I didn’t go to a real school after third grade. Nobody wanted us to be smart, anyway. They only cared about obedience. They didn’t want us out in the sinners’ world, wondering why we couldn’t have all the things that other kids had. Too many big ideas. When I was seven, I asked for a pair of new shoes, like another girl at school had. I got a slap on the face, instead.”

“Wow.” Rickie watches me with obvious fascination. He has hypnotic eyes. They’re gray, with a darker circle around each iris. “So they thought you might figure out that polygamy is illegal?”

“Maybe,” I hedge. “But it wouldn’t matter all that much if we’d known. That’s what brainwashing is for. We sat in church for six hours on Sunday. The preacher spent a lot of time telling us how *special* we were.” I roll my eyes, although my nonchalance is forced. Two years isn’t all that long, and part of me still believes some of the things I was taught.

That’s the part I can’t explain to outsiders. Everything our Divine Pastor ever said was a big load of bullshit. But some of it was really appealing bullshit. I’ll never go back, and I don’t miss the place at all. But I *liked* hearing that I was part of a special mission from God, with a unique purpose in the world.

Say what you will, but it was easier living in a world where I knew the rules. Even if I didn’t always follow them.

“How did you eventually decide to run away from this special, special place?” Rickie measures me with his serious eyes.

“Now there’s a story.” I let out an uncomfortable laugh. “When I was sixteen, I got in some trouble. I got into the back of a car with a boy.”

“You hussy!” Rickie snorts. He’s kidding, but I get tense anyway.

Because the boy and I got caught, and the things they called me afterward were so much worse.

“He got thrown out,” I say.

“Out of the car?” Rickie sips his cider.

“No—out of the compound.”

Rickie stares. “Forever?”

“Of course. The sons can’t ever be alone with the daughters. It’s forbidden. But I, um, wanted to know what all the fuss was about. When they preach at you every Sunday about sin...”

I don’t think I can finish the sentence. My face heats just from the memory of sitting in that garage, kissing Zachariah. His hand had been on my bare thigh. I’d *really* wanted him to take it further. And then? Disaster.

“Sin has always yelled my name, too,” Rickie says with a smile. “Every stupid thing. I did it.”

I can’t help but smile back at him. I take a big gulp of the steaming cider. The rum gives it a sharpness I’m not used to, but I kind of like it.

“So what happened to you? After you kissed the boy?”

“Oh.” I set the mug down.

This part of the story isn’t much fun. After several blissful minutes, we’d been discovered by the worst possible person—my vindictive uncle Jeptha. There had been no chance of him brushing it under the rug. He’d summoned the elders...

“We were punished,” I say, and it comes out as a squeak.

“Shit, Chastity,” says Rickie. “I’m sorry to bring up something painful.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” I say, but my ragged voice makes me a liar. I take a gulp of my cider. “I didn’t see Zach again for three years. The worst part was wondering if he was still alive.” Every night I’d lay in bed trying to imagine what a homeless Zach would do. “I knew nothing of the outside world, so I pictured things I knew from the bible—beggars at the side of the road trying to fill their bellies.”

Rickie's eyes are round. "What did he do?"

"Oh—he hitchhiked to Vermont. You know the Shipley's neighbors, Leah and Isaac? He knew where they'd run away together, and it wasn't too hard for him to find them." But at the time I hadn't known this—I'd thought he was dead. "Zach says getting kicked out was the best thing that ever happened to him. And now he's one of the happiest people I know."

"Uh-huh. But what about *you*," Rickie asks. "They didn't throw you out?"

I give my head a slow shake. "I got a beating. They had to make an example out of me. If you get into the back of a car with a boy, you'll be beaten until you bleed. There were at least ten men taking turns with the strap. I didn't sit down for a week, my ass was so sore."

Rickie's eyes bulge. "*Jesus Christ.*"

But I can't bear to tell Rickie the worst part—that I'd been naked for the beating. That was the real punishment, I think. The toxic cocktail of pain and total humiliation. I don't mind telling Rickie how badly they hurt my skin, but I can't talk about the sound of their laughter. *Slattern*, they'd called me. *Harlot*. *Whore*. I will never stop hearing those voices.

"I still have the scars," I say with forced cheer.

"And so you ran away after that?"

"Nope. I hadn't figured out that I could. But when I turned seventeen, nobody wanted me for a wife, because I was compromised."

Rickie makes a noise of disgust.

"It wasn't, uh, true. But that didn't matter. And here's where it gets interesting—I realized I was going to be a leper, basically. So I asked my stepfather for a job, and he set me up with a really unusual thing—a job off the compound. I became a cashier at Walgreens."

"Now that's living." Rickie grins.

"No—it was! I got to leave every day and spy on the rest of the world. You have no idea how much fun I had selling candy and aspirin. And

magazines—I read *Seventeen* and *Allure* behind the counter. I didn't get to keep the money, though. My father deposited my checks into his account. I never saw any money until I finally learned how to steal some."

"You are a *fascinating* girl, Chastity."

"Oh, please."

"I mean it." He reaches for my empty mug. I don't even remember drinking all that cider. It was gone so fast. "What would your life have been like if none of that happened?"

"They would've married me off to an old man on my seventeenth birthday. I'd get a five-minute wedding during Sunday services. And then I'd leave my parents' home to live with whomever the elders chose for me."

"And then the wedding night." He watches me over the rim of his mug. "I'm guessing birth control was not an option, either."

I shake my head. "I'd never even heard of birth control until I started reading packages at the Walgreens where I worked. Bearing children was our number-one job. They told me that every Sunday."

What I don't add is that I'd been looking forward to it. I used to sit up straighter on the bench when our Divine Pastor spoke about wifely duties. *Lie beneath your husband and give your body to God. Accept his love. Accept his seed. Bring forth a new generation to worship at our tabernacle.*

I couldn't *wait* to lie beneath my husband and accept his seed. When I was six, I asked another little boy to practice with me. He tattled, and we both got spankings. That little boy got tossed out of the compound when we were fifteen. (Not because of me, thank goodness.)

But I still remember his smile. His name was Jacob, and he had clear blue eyes. I always liked the boys too much. Eventually I learned to conceal it, but that was my secret shame. My cross to bear.

It's still true, too. Since those kisses with Zachariah in the back of a car, no other man has touched me. But I wish one would.

Dylan, specifically.

But now I'm very tired of my own bullshit. "It's your turn, Rickie. What's your story?"

He pushes my refilled cider mug toward me with a teasing smile. "I grew up an army brat. Lived in ten places by the time I turned eighteen."

"Is that why you speak German?"

"*Das ist richtig*. And here's the part you won't even believe—I won a spot at the U.S. Military Academy. I did my first year of college there. With the buzz cut and the uniform."

"And *saluting*?" I can't picture Rickie as a soldier. I just can't.

"The whole thing." He chuckles wickedly.

"Why'd you leave?"

"I don't talk about that part."

"*Hey!*" I argue. "I told you my story."

"Did you really?" His intelligent eyes hold mine. "Or did you leave out all the shame?"

Well, heck. I guess I did. We consider each other across the small table. Then he smiles, and it's very kind. As if we understand each other. "A professor basically said the same thing to me this week. Did you take freshman composition?"

Rickie shakes his head. "Is that the one where you have to write a different essay on the same theme every week?"

"Right. The semester's theme is food. So I wrote something about the unseen miracle of microorganisms making milk into cheese. The professor hated it. He said there wasn't enough of me in there."

"I guess you're supposed to bleed for him onto the page." Rickie snorts. "Have some more rum." He holds up the bottle. And I push my mug a little closer for him.

ZAMBONIS



DYLAN

In my bedroom, I pour myself a drop of scotch and listen while Kaitlyn plays a new composition on her acoustic guitar. I swear she played the same thing for me last weekend, but I won't want to be a dick and point that out.

Besides—it's entirely possible that the music is just a ruse to get me alone. Kaitlyn is a crafty one.

"You sound great," I say when she finally sets down her guitar. And it's true. Classical guitar isn't something I understand very well, but she's obviously talented.

"Thank you, farm boy."

That's her little nickname for me. Since it's a reference to the greatest movie of all time—*The Princess Bride*—I should take it as a compliment. But all of Kaitlyn's compliments have a dark side. In this case, it bugs the shit out of her that I really am a farm boy. It's harvest season, and I have to go home every Saturday morning at the butt crack of dawn to help my family for the weekend.

Until this year, I was a part-time student, driving to Burlington for classes. But that had kind of sucked, so when Rickie offered me a room in his house for practically nothing, I grabbed at the chance to be a full-time

student. I get better financial aid this way, so I'm saving money over the long term.

My brother hates this arrangement, though, because he's shorthanded on the farm.

"Play a duet with me?" Kaitlyn asks.

"Nah," I say, because I feel too lazy to get out my fiddle and tune it up.

"Your loss." She climbs into my lap and kisses me. "I missed you earlier. We were supposed to get dinner."

"Trust me," I say, running a hand down her ribcage. She's wearing a velvet top that begs to be touched. "I would rather get dinner with you than go home to be yelled at." I push her hair off her slender neck and kiss the spot under her chin.

She shivers. Kaitlyn is always horny, just like I am. That's why I broke my No Dating rule to be with her. The sex is fantastic.

Also, she'd insisted. *We're exclusive, or we don't fuck*, she'd said the first time I got her naked. Then? She'd swallowed my entire cock to the back of her throat and sucked me dry.

And that's how I ended up half of a couple. It's not the most romantic story. It's no *Princess Bride*. But it works for us, I guess.

I take her mouth in a real kiss. This is what she's been waiting for, anyway. Forget dinner. Kaitlyn tugs my shirt out of my pants and runs her hands up my chest as I give her my tongue. She straddles me, hooking her ankles behind my body, nestling the heat of her core against my thickening cock.

It's pretty great until my friend Keith calls up the stairs. "Dylan! Come and do a shot with me!"

"Ignore him," Kaitlyn whispers between kisses.

For a moment I try. But it's only ten o'clock, and the house is full of friends that I won't get to see this weekend when I'm home selling apples.

"There's Jagermeister!" Keith tries, and I laugh as I break off from

kissing Kaitlyn.

She makes a noise of irritation. “Really? You’re choosing Jagermeister over me? Gross.”

“It’s not *over* you,” I say mildly. “It’s *before* you.”

“Two words: whiskey dick.”

“Oh, please.” I lift her off my lap and set her onto the bed. “It was *one* time.” Rickie got me wasted on absinthe one night last week, and I passed out before I could fuck her. But Kaitlyn won’t go unsatisfied tonight.

She knows it, too. She’s just impatient.

I get up, adjusting my jeans to conceal my semi. “Come on. Bring your guitar if you want.” Kaitlyn likes an audience almost as much as she enjoys being fucked.

We go downstairs together. Keith stops me in the foyer, pressing two shot glasses into my hand. I down the first one, then offer the second to Kaitlyn, who wrinkles up her nose.

“There’s probably wine in the fridge,” I point out.

Without a word, she disappears to go look for it.

Keith trades me the shot glasses for the bong, and I take a deep, slow puff. *Ahh*. That’s when my shoulders begin to unknit. Finally.

Most people love October. This weekend the country roads will be jammed full of tourists who drive up here just to revel in October’s colorful wonders.

But I hate it. The days are short, the nights are dark, and my family’s business runs at one hundred and fifty percent capacity. And I can’t win with anybody. My brother is pissed off at me for living in Burlington. My girlfriend is pissed off at me for running home to Tuxbury each weekend.

“Fucking October,” I say as Keith hands me another shot.

“Yeah. Fucking midterms,” he agrees.

It’s more than that, though. October is the month my father died. It’s been six years, but every October I feel raw. Like I’m bleeding out of every pore. I

have a few remedies at my disposal to dull the ache: booze, home-grown pot, and sex. They're not perfect, but they're the best that I've got.

"So when are you gonna bring home some new cider?" Keith asks. "I love that stuff."

Someone cranks up the Green Day just then, so I have to shout my answer. "Don't know, man. Jagermeister is cheaper." I don't need my brother bitching at me for walking off with some of the fancy hard cider he makes. "There's the bonfire in two weeks, though. Griffin always pours a lot of cider that night. You're coming, right?"

"YEAH!" Keith shouts back at me.

Christ, it's loud. I hope they don't blow out Rickie's speakers. "Where's our fearless leader?"

Keith shrugs. He leans into the living room to look around. "Rickie's right there!" he shouts, pointing. "On the beanbag with your friend from home!"

Uh-oh. Rickie better be taking good care of Chastity. Maybe I shouldn't have left her in the kitchen. And—I can't believe this happened—it sounds like she waited around in the library for me today when I was halfway across Vermont.

I am such a dick.

Stepping into the living room, I survey the wreckage. The party has deteriorated severely in the last forty minutes. Or improved, depending on your viewpoint. The lights are low and the music is loud and everyone looks half in the bag.

Even Chastity, I realize with a start. *Hell.* She never drinks. I hustle over there and look down at where she and my roommate are sprawled out on the giant beanbag chair. "Chastity!" I shout. "Are you okay?"

She lifts her head a little unsteadily. "I'm FIIIIINE," she yells. "Did you know there's people having sex on your couch?"

Rickie giggles. "They are, aren't they? Better be using condoms!" He

shouts. “No messes!”

I’m afraid to look, but I do anyway. And, yup. Rickie’s friend Igor is thrusting lazily into our friend Gretchen, who’s making out with a woman I haven’t met. Although now I’ve seen her bare tits, because she’s caressing them as they kiss.

Right. “Time to go home, Chass,” I say, offering a hand to my friend.

“Why?” she whines. “It’s really comfortable here. Although I kind of have to pee.” She burps.

“Up you go.” I lean down even farther and take her hand. “Hit the bathroom and find your backpack. I’m walking you home.”

“My backpack?” she slurs. “That does sound familiar.” She sways a little as she turns her head to look around.

Uh-oh. I don’t know if she’s ever had anything stronger than the wine we drink at Thursday Dinner, the rotating party my family and hers share. “Bathroom is that way,” I say, pointing toward the kitchen.

“Right.” She toddles off.

I haul Rickie to his feet next. “What were you thinking?” I yell over Green Day’s heavy drum beat.

“I can’t hear you!”

Ugh. I tow Rickie toward the kitchen. “You can’t give Chastity rum! She doesn’t drink at all.”

“Everybody starts somewhere,” he says with a shrug.

“Not Chastity,” I insist. To say that she grew up sheltered is like saying that Mussolini was a little pushy. Chastity didn’t cut her hair until she was nineteen. Before then, she never even wore jeans or swore or used makeup.

“She’s fine, Dyl,” Rickie insists. “I would never hurt your friend. She had, like, three drinks.”

“What’s the problem?” Kaitlyn demands, a glass of wine in one hand and a corn chip in the other.

“Chastity got a little tipsy, and Dylan wants to call the paramedics.”

Rickie rolls his eyes and leaves the kitchen.

“I didn’t say we needed the paramedics,” I grunt. “But I have to make sure she gets home safe.” I pat my pocket, finding my keys there. “Let me grab a jacket.”

“Wait, why?” Kaitlyn whines. “She’s a drunk college student. This town is full of them. She’ll either find her way home, or she’ll wake up on someone else’s floor. Just like anyone else.”

“She’s *not* just like anyone else,” I point out. “I mean, every freshman gets drunk. But they go home to a roommate who makes sure they don’t die. And that’s you, right?”

Kaitlyn makes a face. “My drunk freshman days are long past.”

Right. That’s why it’s going to be me.

I go to the back hall and grab my jean jacket. Kaitlyn sips her wine and watches me. She’s already a junior. Her family shipped her to Moo U after some kind of scandal in New York City. That’s how she ended up in the dorms with Chastity.

I’m the same age as Kaitlyn but still officially a sophomore, since I started part time.

Chastity is actually the oldest of us all. At twenty-one, she’s a year older than I am. But running away from a cult steals your teen years.

“You’re making too big a deal of this,” Kaitlyn says, pointing toward the living room. “Look, she’s fine.”

I walk to where I can see through the doorway. And there’s Chastity, back from the bathroom already and dancing in a loose, crazy freeform way beside Rickie. Every third or fourth beat they bump hips and then laugh.

And now I’m smiling, because that is incredibly cute. Chastity isn’t one to let go very often. She’ll probably have a terrible hangover tomorrow. But right now she’s having fun.

The song ends, and she and Rickie stand there breathing hard. “How do you feel about pot?” Rickie asks, his hands on his hips.

“Never tried it!” Chastity replies.

And that’s my cue. “Another time,” I say hastily. “Did you find your backpack?”

“Yup!” she says.

“Jacket?” I prompt.

She shakes her head in an exaggerated way. “Didn’t wear one.”

“Can’t we take your truck?” Kaitlyn appears behind me. She’s wearing her jacket, so I guess she’s coming with us.

“No, I can’t drive. Too much booze and pot.” I’m barely tipsy, but I won’t risk it. I’m a fun guy, not a stupid one. “It’s a ten-minute walk at the max.” I put a hand on Chastity’s shoulder and guide her toward the door.

“They’re *still* having sex,” she breathes. “Does it usually last that long?”

Kaitlyn snorts, and Rickie chuckles. “Depends who you ask.”

There’s a reason that I’ve never invited Chastity to one of Rickie’s parties. You never know what you’re going to see. I open the front door and remind Chastity to watch the steps. “They’re steep.”

“I can handle a couple of stairs, Dyl,” she says with a sigh.

“It’s cold,” Kaitlyn complains.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” I point out. “The wind off the lake makes Burlington one of the coldest places in Vermont.” I remove my jacket and lift Chastity’s backpack off her shoulder. “Trade you.”

“Why?” she asks as I set the jacket onto her shoulders. “You don’t have to.”

“I’ve got a flannel shirt on. And I run hot. All you’ve got is...” I gesture toward her pretty silk shirt. And I kick myself a little for noticing how good she looks tonight. It’s not the first time I’ve snagged my eyeballs on Chastity’s cleavage. You’d have to be blind not to see how pretty Chastity is, or how stacked.

But it’s bad form to ogle your drunk friend. Luckily, Chastity accepts my jacket and buttons it, shielding that delicious cleavage from view.

We head down the street. It's a crisp, fall night. The lamps inside all the antique homes give the rooms a yellow hue. The air smells like falling leaves and wood smoke, and I associate that smell with sadness.

Because I hate October.

Chastity stumbles on a sidewalk crack, and my hand shoots out to catch her. But she doesn't actually go down, and she quickly shakes off my hand.

Beside me, Kaitlyn is silent and probably fuming. Good thing I know just how to cheer her up. You have to play to your own strengths.

I'm not the most reliable guy. But I am a good time. Sometimes it's enough.

HOCKEY STOP



CHASTITY

The walk home sobers me up a little. One of the loud songs from the party is still playing in my brain, and every few minutes I catch myself humming. Maybe I don't know how to hold my rum, but I had a good time with Rickie. He'd been sillier tonight than I'd expected him to be.

And he didn't treat me like a child, the way Dylan does. I don't need to be walked home like a puppy. The only upside is that Kaitlyn is super annoyed right now.

I swear I'm usually a nice person, but she brings out the worst in me.

When we get to the dorm, I expect Dylan and Kaitlyn to wave goodbye from the door and return to the party. But that's not what happens. They walk inside with me. I press the elevator button because my feet are a little clumsy, and I don't feel like proving anyone's point by stumbling on the stairs.

I have to hold tightly to the remaining shreds of my dignity. Not that there are very many.

Upstairs, Dylan watches me unlock the door with slow fingers. "How's your stomach?" he asks.

"Fine," I insist.

"That's good. I'm going to find you some Advil. If you take it now, you

might not feel so bad in the morning.”

“Good idea,” I mumble. I go into my room and find my flannel pajamas.

I’m just removing my bra when Dylan walks in. “Whoa!” He turns around in a hurry. “Brought you a glass of water, too,” he says, facing the wrong direction.

“Thanks.” Dylan is really so nice to me. He feeds me. He looks after me. Except in the way that I really want him to...

“If you still feel okay at breakfast, we can study some algebra,” he says.

“Oh, we’re totally studying algebra.” I don’t know why he thinks I’m going to be wrecked by a couple mugs of spiked cider. Rickie didn’t think it was a big deal.

I button my top and tap him on the shoulder. “It’s safe to look now.” I take the glass of water out of his hand, and he smiles when he hands me the pills. “Sleep well.” He leans forward and gives me a kiss on the forehead.

A kiss from Dylan. But not the kiss I’m always dreaming about. “Thank you,” I say softly. “You, too.”

He turns and leaves me in my room alone, closing the door quietly behind him..

Tonight was fun and also a little humiliating. That’s how college is shaping up for me. I like the independence, even if Dylan thinks I can’t handle it. And I can’t live with Leah and Isaac forever.

I like the classes, too, even though they’re hard for me. Since I didn’t go to high school, I had to take the GED tests before I could apply to Moo U. Those weren’t so bad. But college courses are definitely a level up.

Especially algebra. I need all the help I can get.

I swallow the pills and drink the water. When I set the empty glass down on my desk, I remember that Kaitlyn had said she’d left a note for me here. So where is it? My eyes rove the desk’s surface. I don’t see a note.

So it’s her fault that I sat alone for hours at the library?

Just when I’m ready to give up looking, I spot it. There’s a row of sticky

notes on the wall just over my desk. Each note has a title and author of one of the books I'm supposed to read for my Small Business class. And on the bottom edge of one of them—in faint pencil—is scribbled: *D can't make it to lib.*

You have *got* to be kidding me. And she thinks I ruined *her* night?

Upset now, I head to the bathroom and give my teeth an angry brushing. Then I stomp back to my room, get into my bed, and shut out the light.

When I stop moving around, I can hear Kaitlyn and Dylan speaking to one another in her room on the other side of the wall. I listen, waiting for Dylan to leave with her. They'll go back to his giant bed and...

Honestly, I spend an embarrassing amount of time thinking about Dylan having sex. Does he tease her as they start to kiss? Is he smiley, laughing Dylan? Or is he just so hungry for it that he's too busy stripping her clothes off to talk or smile?

That second image really appeals to me. If I were the one in the bed with him, I wouldn't want him to joke around. I'd want it to be like a sudden storm on a summer's day. Fast-moving and dangerous, blotting out the sun and beating down its wrath upon my bare body. No time to think.

There's a reason I don't tell many people all the things inside my head.

Last week, as I passed the coffee shop, I'd seen Dylan and Kaitlyn on the other side of the plate-glass window. The coffee shop is where Kaitlyn likes to do her homework. I can't afford to buy coffee that doesn't come from the dining hall, so I never go inside that place. That day they'd been together on a purple velvet sofa by the window, Kaitlyn's head on Dylan's lap, Dylan's hand on her sleek hair. His attention seemed focused on the paperback book in his other hand.

His long fingers idly stroked her hair, and I wanted to stop and watch, fascinated. Their pose said to the world: *We're definitely having sex with each other. But not right now. First, coffee and homework!*

Nobody has ever touched me like that—with casual, sensual ownership. I

have no idea how it feels to be half of a couple.

There's a squeak next door. It's the sound of a window being cranked open. It's a chilly night, so the open window probably means that they're smoking a joint. Another thing I've never tried.

Now I can hear their voices a little more clearly. Kaitlyn's is the clearest. "Why do we always have to go back to your place?" she whines. "You could stay here for once."

"Three words," Dylan's lower voice says. "Queen-sized bed."

"That's not really the reason," Kaitlyn says.

The next bit is muffled, so I find myself sliding out of bed and edging toward my own window. It's already unlatched, so all I have to do is nudge the crank and it opens an inch.

And almost immediately, I wish I hadn't.

"God forbid we're overheard. Why do you fuss over her?" Kaitlyn asks, her voice high and angry.

I sit down on the edge of my bed, my heart in my mouth.

"She's a good friend."

"You just want to watch her take off that low-cut top."

"Kaitlyn!" His raised voice is easy to hear now. "You're ridiculous. Can a single puff of weed make a person paranoid?"

"I see where your eyes go. Right down that slutty blouse."

They're fighting about *me*, and I want to die. I clutch the V of skin above the first button on my PJs, as if I could undo the evening's fashion blunder.

That top *was* too revealing. Obviously. I wanted to be nonchalant and sexy. But I achieved *slutty* instead. Slutty and drunk.

Except... It wasn't Dylan who thought I looked slutty. He doesn't notice me the way I want him to. It was Kaitlyn who noticed. And Kaitlyn who didn't like it very much.

Maybe I'm a mean drunk, because this idea makes me smile in the dark.

Now Dylan's voice goes low and soft. I can't hear their words anymore.

They've probably moved away from the window. I should get up and close mine, but my comforter is warm, and I'm lazy.

I've almost drifted off when a sound from next door floats me back up to the surface of consciousness. It's a keening moan.

My eyes flip open in the dark. I listen. It takes a few seconds, but then I hear it again. "*Ohhh.*" Kaitlyn moans. "*Yes.*"

I'm instantly, catastrophically awake.

It all unfolds within earshot—the terrible, wonderful sounds of Dylan making love to someone who isn't me. At first, I only hear her whimpering moans. They soften her, actually. Each *mmm* and *ahhh* is full of unselfconscious need.

But then? I hear a low growl. The hairs on my arms stand up at the sound of Dylan's voice. I can't understand the words, but her response is a hot gasp. My heart begins to pound. I flatten myself onto the mattress, ears straining.

He murmurs to her again, and the hungry timbre of his voice reverberates inside my ribcage. I'm holding my breath now.

And then it really begins—the rhythmic sound of the bed rocking against the wall.

I break out in a sweat. He grunts, and I shiver. Every little noise he makes is gold. I close my eyes, and I could almost be the one underneath him. My heartbeat syncs to his rhythm. *Inside. Straining. More. Yes.*

"*Please,*" she moans. "*Please.*"

Her begging is the soundtrack of my life. *Please, Dylan.* For once she and I are in perfect agreement. I clench my legs together against the ache. And then I do it again.

I'm a sinner. I've always been a sinner.

Pressing myself into the mattress, I spread my legs, and I imagine his body over me. His hot skin against mine. His tongue in my mouth. His low voice in my ear. My pulse pounds, and my ears strain, and I keep forgetting to breathe.

“Grab the bed rail,” Dylan growls. “With both hands.”

Then the wall practically begins to shake as the rhythm rises. It doesn't stop until a rich, satisfied moan comes from the other room, chorused with my roommate's.

And now I know what he sounds like when he comes.

I don't move a muscle. If I got up to close the window, I might be overheard. If Dylan knew I was listening, I'd die of embarrassment.

But nobody is thinking about me at all right now. I hear only the low murmured voices of lovers speaking to one another from very close range—the closest range there is.

I lay still and try to think of other things. But I'm turned on and lonely, and the room is spinning gently.

It takes a long time to fall asleep.

THE TAVERN AGAIN

ALEC

“Which beer do you think I should try first?” the attractive woman leaning on my bar asks. “The Goldenpour or the Barclay Stout?” She’s pretty. Early twenties, probably. Tight sweater and tighter jeans. I’ve never seen her before, but she gives me a big smile.

Then she shifts her body slightly and bats her eyelashes at my bartender, Smitty.

Beside me, Smitty grins with amusement. Because this girl isn’t just choosing between two beers. She’s what Smitty and I call a waverer—she’s mulling over her choice of bartenders, too.

“Well,” Smitty says, propping an arm on the bar. “Goldenpour is crisp and yeasty with aromas of pear and citrus.” He’s rolling up his sleeves, that fucker, purposefully showing off the colorful tattoos on his forearms.

“On the other hand,” I break in, “the Barclay Stout has hints of cocoa powder and vanilla, a creamy finish, a lengthy tail, and nice *head*.” I actually flex my pecs as I say this, while Smitty tries not to bust out laughing.

“Wow.” She blinks back and forth between us. “Tough decision.”

Competing for women is our little game. I get the girls who want the fit and clean-cut type, and Smitty gets the ones who like ’em tattooed and

dangerous.

There's plenty of female attention to go around. We just enjoy this bit of nonsense.

"Hmm," the girl says. "I think I'll try the Goldenpour first."

"Ah, well," I say quickly as Smitty snorts out a laugh. "He can tap it for you." Smitty gives me a grin and reaches for a glass. She moves down the bar to wait for her beer.

"Can't win 'em all," Hamish—my best customer—says from a barstool in front of me.

"True."

"But the night is still young. As are you, whippersnapper." Hamish is a carpenter. His studio is a hundred yards down the road. In fact, he and I own matching old brick mill buildings on the Winooski River, where we each spend a lot of our waking hours tending to our respective businesses.

His is a high-end woodworking operation, while mine is devoted to mankind's greatest accomplishment: craft beer.

"Plenty of fish in the stream," I agree. And right now I'm more worried about serving all the fish than banging them. It's Thursday night. The weekend onslaught begins now, and I'm more or less ready.

Becky is working the tables tonight, which means Ed Sheeran is playing on the sound system. We have a rule—the waitress controls the playlist. She's making her way around the room right now, stopping to light a candle on every table. The reach-in coolers are stocked. The empty tables are clean.

It's November, so tonight's crowd won't break any records. The Gin Mill is the busiest during ski season and leaf-peeping season. Summers are pretty good, too. But there's a lull during November until the ski resorts open.

Tonight we'll be serving two kinds of customers—locals and foamies. A foamy is a beer tourist—a crazy soul who has come hundreds of miles—or even thousands—to sample Vermont's hard-to-find craft brews.

This year they're all dying to drink Goldenpour by the Giltmaker

Brewery. Rated 99 by Beer Advisor, it's the new Heady Topper—terrific yet impossible to buy. You can drink pint after pint right here at the Gin Mill, or you can wait in line for two hours on Tuesday morning outside the brewery in Waterbury. They'll sell you exactly two six-packs.

Lucky for both me and the foamies, I serve Goldenpour six days a week, along with a dozen other rare Vermont craft brews. To get the word out, I've spent the last year writing to every beer blog and travel website in the world, making sure they know that the Gin Mill is the place to be if you want to taste the best.

And it's slowly beginning to work. My bar is always crowded on the weekends and often on the weeknights, too.

I opened a bar because I wanted my life to be a seven-day-a-week party. Turns out owning a business never really feels like a party. But I love it anyway.

“Need a fill up?” I ask Hamish.

“Nah, I'm good,” the carpenter says. “Thanks, kid.”

“So what beer do you want to serve at your party?” I ask. He and I are planning a retirement shindig for him next month.

“Goldenpour, if you can swing it. But if you can't, that's okay, too.”

“I'll ask. If they say no, I'll bring something good.”

“I know you will.”

The door of the bar swings open, and I glance up out of habit. I make seventy percent of my receipts Thursday through Sunday. If I served food, too, that would even things out a bit.

If only.

The new arrival isn't a customer, though. It's Chelsea from NorthCorp, my beer distributor. “Happy Thursday, hot stuff,” she says. “I brought you a new IPL.”

“Yeah? Awesome.” I lean over the bar, grab Chelsea into a one-armed hug, and plant a kiss right on her jaw. Chelsea is a great girl. Not only does

she keep the Gin Mill stocked with trophy beers, but she also really likes to fuck me. She's my BDWB. Beer distributor with benefits.

Am I living the dream or what?

"Chelsea—Hamish and I have an invitation for you." I pluck a card off the stack on the bar.

"Do you, now?" She gives me a hot glance.

Hamish bursts out laughing.

"To a *party*. Here." I hand her the card.

"Oh, cool." She gives Hamish a smile. "You're the woodworker, right?"

"Indeed," he says. "I'm retiring. Well, sort of. Can't imagine quitting altogether. But I'm cutting back so I can travel. Alec is helping me throw a showing and a party."

"Sounds fun," she says, pocketing the card.

"I need an extra keg that week," I tell her. "Hamish asked for Goldenpour. Would you check if we can score an extra?"

"Sure!" she says in her very bubbly way. Chelsea and I are a lot alike. Always looking for the next party. "You free later?" she asks, shaking her butt to Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You," which is the next tune on Becky's playlist.

"Of course." I'm always free for Chelsea. "I have to close tonight, though." That means I won't be done here until about one, and sometimes she doesn't like to wait up for me.

"Hey—I can close for you," Smitty volunteers as he pours another pint of Goldenpour at the tap.

"Awesome!" Chelsea beams. "Thanks, Smitty!" She bounds off to open the rear door for her delivery guy.

Hamish watches her go. "You just got shaken down by your bartender," he points out.

"I noticed that, too." I shouldn't be paying Smitty the overtime just so I can get horizontal with my beer distributor. But Smitty knows I don't like to

say no to Chelsea.

Smitty is a decent bartender. Mostly. But he's sometimes pushy and kind of a flake. Lucky for him, I have a lot of empathy for the flakes of the world. And, hey, it's already decided. So I'll roll with it. "I guess I'd better make the most of the night, then."

"Oh, I'm sure you will." Hamish drains his beer. "I'm gonna roll. What's the tab?"

"There isn't one," I tell him. "Tonight's your free night." Hamish is literally the only person who gets regular freebies from me. But when I bought this place, he was a huge help. He just showed up one day when I was inspecting the heap of a building I'd bought and feeling panicky. I'm not the best business person. But Hamish offered me tons of information and helped me get contractors at good prices during my renovation.

"Night, man!" I call after him. "Thanks for keeping me company while I open."

"Thanks for never running out of beer," he says with smiling eyes.

Chelsea reappears behind me with her truck driver lurking in the background. "Alec, you gotta put this one on tap right away, okay? I told the brewmaster that you'd give it a try and talk it up."

Did you, now? "I'll swap it out tonight," I say, even though it's an inconvenience. "Set 'er down anywhere, Kevin."

Chelsea smiles, dancing along to Ed Sheeran, then ducking under the bar again. "You love this song, don't you Alec?" She's teasing me, since she knows I don't go in for crooners.

"I love it so hard," I lie, just to amuse her. "This song gets three snaps in a Z shape." I snap my fingers and swivel my hips. It's a little thing I do sometimes, spoofing *In Living Color*. Chelsea is too young to get the reference, but she doesn't care. She gives me a throaty laugh that suggests we're going to have a good time later. "Now let me get my prep work done, so I can beg off early for you tonight."

“Can’t wait,” she says, flipping her hair. “Sign here and I’ll get out of your way.”

I take the clipboard and sign for the delivery. “Later, hot stuff.”

“Later!” She leaves.

Down the bar, Smitty is already deep in conversation with another female customer. He’s pointing at the beer list and describing something with hand gestures designed to show off his tats.

Work hard, play hard. That’s how we roll at the Gin Mill.

A half hour later, though, I’m not dancing anymore. As the tables fill up with the happy-hour crowd, I am pouring drinks at top speed, just trying to keep up with demand.

A bartender’s job is simple enough—sell booze and keep everyone happy. A bar *owner’s* job, on the other hand, is a little more fraught. Lately, the partying-to-worrying ratio is a little lower than I wish. Business is good, and the bar is full of people. But my profit margin is shaky, and I don’t have enough cash to reinvest in the business.

Most nights I spend a fair amount of time watching the crowd, trying to guess what changes would make a key difference. If I take out the pool tables and put in a little stage for music, would that help or hurt? Am I charging too much for the premium beers? Or too little?

None of it will be solved tonight, though. I scan the faces in the crowd, and my gaze snags on a couple in the back corner booth. It’s two women, staring deeply into each other’s eyes. They were in here last week, too.

One of them is familiar to me, and I can’t figure out why. And a good bartender never forgets a face. So for the second week in a row, this is gonna bug me.

I mix two margaritas and pour a half a dozen beers. Between each one I glance into the corner again. The pretty, dark-haired woman is lip-locked to the shorter woman. She has a salt-and-pepper buzz cut, and I’ve never seen her before. It’s the dark-haired woman who’s familiar. I just don’t know why.

But watching her make eyes at the other woman bugs me. It's wrong, somehow.

Yeah, this is gonna drive me crazy.

"Alec," Smitty says.

"Huh?"

The glare he gives me makes his nose-piercing flare. "For the third time, what tap am I changing out for the new lager? The IPL?"

"Um..." I sigh. "There's a new IPL?"

Smitty's eyebrows lift. "Chelsea brought it? Never mind. I'll just decide by myself. I'll rotate out something generic. Cheapskates will have to drink the good hooch."

That's probably going to lead to some complaints, but I don't care right this second. I'm distracted by the couple again, because they're actually kissing now.

"Hey—are you macking on that lesbian couple?" Smitty asks. "You know there's porn for that."

"Oh, shit," I say slowly. "I just figured out who that is." And, yeah, it's bad news.

"A porn star?" Smitty asks.

"No, moron. Her name is Daniela. She's in a relationship with someone I know. And they live together." Last time I heard, anyway. I have a memory for exactly this kind of thing—names and gossip. I was destined to become a bartender.

"Uh-oh," Smitty says.

"No kidding." I watch for a moment longer, just to make sure I'm not imagining it. But I can see their tongues from all the way over here.

"She's cheating on her man with a woman?" Smitty dumps a new bucket of ice into the bin. "Kinda dumb, since we live in a small town."

"She's cheating on a *woman* with another woman," I clarify. "You know May Shipley?"

Smitty stands up, pointing at the Shipley Cider tap. “Like these Shipleys?”

“Yeah, that’s right. May is Griffin’s sister.”

“You gonna tell ’er? Why bother? It’s not like you’re a big fan of the Shipleys.”

He’s right. I should probably just leave it alone.

Another pack of drinkers descends on the bar, and I spend the next ten minutes pouring a lot of drinks. Someone asks for a snakebite, so I half fill a pint glass with Shipley Cider. The musky apple scent makes me think of high school, when I used to help the Shipleys get the last of their crop into storage at the end of every season. Ten bucks an hour. It seemed like a fortune back then.

And then August Shipley fired my father, and our lives went right to hell.

Good times.

Serving up drinks and smiles on autopilot, I consider what to do about May’s cheating girlfriend. Maybe they broke up and I’m worrying for nothing?

As Smitty said, though, it’s a small town. I probably would have heard about a breakup. My sister would have mentioned any big upheavals at the Shipley’s place.

I sneak another look into the corner, and the two women are still going strong.

God, I hate cheaters. Do I call May? Do I mention it to her brother next time I see him?

Nah, not him. Griffin would probably just think I was a gossip. We’re not close. Not since high school, when we were fierce competitors. And definitely not lately, since he broke my sister’s heart.

Funny all the things you can worry about while you’re pouring drinks.

That woman attached to Daniela’s face—I wonder who she is? And how stupid is Daniela, anyway?

“You’re staring again.” Smitty chuckles. “But that is pretty hot.”

“It’s not that,” I growl. “Not sure what to do.” This just pushes all my buttons. I hate cheaters more than I dislike the Shipleys.

Besides, May is the sweetest one of the bunch. A good girl. Quiet. Not as smug as her older brother.

“Nothing much you can do, anyway. And cheaters always get caught.”

Wiping down the bar, I think that over. He’s right, and he’s also wrong. Sometimes a person can live in willful denial for a good long time. My mom, for instance. She probably always knew my dad was sleeping around. But she put up with him even when he didn’t deserve it.

“This is gonna bug you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“Gimme your phone.”

“Why? Last time you had my phone you posted a picture of your ass on my Instagram.”

“It’s a nice ass. But that’s not what I’m doing, okay? Just unlock it and give it here.”

Against my better judgement, I comply.

Smitty takes a rag and wanders slowly through the big room. Candles flicker in crevices in the brick walls. People talk and laugh while music pulses in the background. The place looks great. Opening a bar isn’t exactly curing cancer. But I’m proud of this place anyway.

When Smitty reaches the back part of the room, he wipes a table with his left hand and subtly takes a photo of Daniela and her lover with his right hand.

“That was pretty slick,” I say when he brings my phone back.

He shrugs. “Slick would be if I could’ve also got a photo of my ass without you noticing.”

I jam my phone in my pocket as a group of four guys approaches the bar. “What’ll it be, gentlemen?”

And just like that, the weekend pace kicks back into high gear. First every barstool is taken, and then every table. Smitty fills drink orders as fast as our cocktail waitress can bring them over. And I do whatever needs doing. When you own your business, that's just how the day goes.

I forget about Daniela for a while. I pour beers and swap out kegs and upsell my customers into good Vermont craft brews instead of the shlock they'd drink if it weren't for my brilliance. The Ed Sheeran tunes have given way to an old Santana album and I'm loving life again.

Until I watch the bar door open, revealing May Shipley.

My first thought is: *Oh for fuck's sake*. I can think of only one other time May came to the bar—on opening night. But there she is, her cheeks pink from the cool autumn night.

My second thought is: *When did May Shipley get so hot?* She's wearing a soft sweater and black pants over legs that go on for days. Tall girls really turn my crank. Then again, many women do.

"Hey, Alec!" she says, waving.

I snap out of it in a hurry. "Wow, May! Haven't seen you since the summer."

She gives me a friendly smile, but then starts scanning the room.

"May," I say sharply. I don't even have a plan, except to stop her from experiencing the train wreck in the corner. Nobody deserves that.

But there's no time. It's almost like I can hear the brakes squealing as her eyes lock on the far corner of the room. Her frame stiffens as she spots Daniela. And then her hands ball into fists. She leans forward a little, as if the view might change if she were three inches closer.

"May," I try one more time, as if anything I could say would make this moment less awful.

She doesn't even hear me. Instead, she stomps toward the back, weaving between bodies as she makes her way toward that booth.

And now I'm in motion, too, ducking under the bar, following her,

wondering what will happen. I always thought of May as the quiet Shipley, but now she looks like a heat-seeking missile locked onto a target.

“You cheating *bitch!*” she yells before she’s even reached the table.

Holy god. I’m both impressed and on my guard. Bar fights are rare at the Gin Mill, but anything could happen right now.

Daniela freezes, her eyes popping wide. But the other woman has her practically in a headlock, and is still trying to eat Daniela’s face. Daniela tries to pull back. She doesn’t get very far, though, as her hookup keeps her head caged in a possessive maneuver.

“Let me go, Trace,” Daniela says as May seethes in front of them.

“No,” the stranger grunts. “That’s the whole fuckin’ point, right? I don’t wanna let you go. You were mine first. You’ll always be mine.”

Oh, hell. This train wreck cannot be stopped.

“That is so *touching*,” May spits. “*Except.* As Daniela’s live-in girlfriend, someone should have warned me.” May reaches down and tugs Daniela’s chin, so at least the soon-to-be-ex girlfriend will look at her. “*Pro bono* work, huh? Every Thursday? You’re pathetic!”

“Hey! Watch your tone!” the stranger bellows. She has a voice like our ancient margarita blender—loud and grating. “Get your mitts off my girl.” Then she actually grabs May’s wrist in her paw and twists it sharply.

“Ow!” May shrieks. “You...cuntmuffin!”

My mouth drops open just as May yanks her hand back and cradles it in obvious pain. I see tears in her eyes. But she blinks them away quickly. And then...

Somehow I anticipate May’s lunge. As she starts forward, I start, too. My arms are longer than hers, and before she can grab Daniela’s lover, I fold May into a protective hug. Or a human straightjacket. Take your pick. I tug her backward before she can do something she’ll later regret.

May stiffens in my embrace, looking over her shoulder with startled eyes. As soon as she identifies her captor, she lets out a frustrated breath. “Let go,”

she croaks.

“This whole thing is so shitty,” I say quietly into her ear. “But fighting can get you arrested if somebody calls the cops. And that’s bad for lawyers, right?” Not only did May go to BU for undergrad, she’s an attorney, too.

And, fine, I really don’t want anyone to summon the cops to my place of business. That’s never good.

She blinks once, then seems to relax in my arms. “Okay,” she says softly.

I let her go, and she takes a deep, angry breath. Then she turns toward her girlfriend. (Or former girlfriend?) “Don’t come home tonight,” she barks in the general direction of Daniela.

“She won’t,” the bitch in the booth says. “Daniela says you’re a shitty lay, anyway.”

Apparently my ninja skills aren’t as good as I thought, because this time May lunges before I’m ready. The slap she delivers to the stranger rings out loud and clear. And if any of my bar patrons missed the sound of it, they definitely didn’t miss the stranger’s roar of anger or string of obscenities and threats that immediately follows.

She leaps up onto the booth’s seat to try to get to May, but Daniela is blocking her way, so I have two or three precious seconds to prevent World War III.

I do this by scooping May up—all six feet of her, or near that, anyway—and bodily carrying her toward the door.

The Shipleys are a tall family. Luckily, so are the Rossis. She struggles, but only for a second. And I have her outdoors so fast that a moment later we’re standing in the cool November air, staring each other down.

“Holy crap! That was...” May lets the sentence die.

“Shitty?” I supply.

“Y-yeah,” she breathes. “Jesus. I am a huge idiot. I should have figured this out ages ago.”

“Um...” She’s definitely not an idiot. This girl is *fierce*. But now I’m not

sure how to help her. “Can I walk you upstairs and get you drunk? Owning a bar comes in handy sometimes.”

“Jesus.” May swallows. “That sounds way too appealing right now. But I’m afraid my AA sponsor wouldn’t approve.”

AA? “Fuckity-*fuck*,” I stammer. I’ve just offered to get a recovering alcoholic drunk? “I’m sorry. Shit. I...”

She holds up a hand. “No need to panic. People offer me drinks all the time. But these days I say no.”

“I’m sorry,” I stammer again anyway. *Jesus*. I’m such an asshole.

“For most people, it wouldn’t be such a life-changing suggestion.” She meets my eyes with her light brown ones. “But for me, it’s bad news.”

“Okay.” I’m trying to regroup. “Can I drive you somewhere, then?”

May closes her eyes and leans her head against the brick wall of my building. “I never want to see her again.”

“I’ll bet. That woman was a bitch on wheels.”

“I mean Daniela,” May says, opening her eyes.

I’d meant Daniela, too. But I’m smart enough not to say that right now. “You two live together, right? You need somewhere to go?”

May sighs. “I *have* somewhere to go. My family will throw a parade if I leave Daniela and move back home. They’re going to be *giddy*.” Then her eyes get shiny with tears. “Shit.”

“Aw.” *Mayday!* Crying women are my weakness. So I pull May into a hug. “Tell me how I can help.”

She takes a deep breath. “You have a pickup truck, right? I need to move out. Can I borrow your wheels?”

“Sure,” I say immediately. But I can’t let a teary woman move out of her place alone. Even if she is a Shipley. “I’ll go with you. It’ll be faster that way. Is there much furniture?”

“No.” She steps back. “All the furniture is hers. I just have clothes and books.”

“Okay. So this will be a snap.” She smells like lemons. I mentally slap myself for noticing. Now is not the moment to mack on May Shipley. “Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

“Alec, you really don’t have to. I’m sure you’re supposed to be behind that bar. And I could call my brothers.” She looks, if possible, even more glum saying that. “They won’t be able to hold back their glee.”

“Don’t bother them,” I say quickly. “Come on.” Taking her hand, I tug her away from the wall. “You’re not in any shape to drive.”

She’s right, of course. I’m supposed to be tending bar with Smitty. He’s probably getting crushed in there. I pull out my phone as May follows me toward the truck, and sure enough there’s a text from Smitty already. *WTF? Where’d you go?*

I bleep the locks and try to think. “Hop in. I just have to make one quick phone call.”

As May buckles her seatbelt, I look up at the lit windows of my brother Benito’s apartment. Since he’s home, I pull up his phone number and tap it. “Hey,” I say when he answers. “I’m supposed to be tending bar tonight, but now I have to help out a friend with some urgent business.” I’d explain, but it would take too long. Besides, I don’t even know why I’m bailing out May Shipley. “Could you check on Smitty in a few minutes? See if he’s slammed?”

“Sure?” Benito says. “After I finish my dinner.”

“Thanks. I owe you.”

We hang up and I shoot off a text to another of my bartenders, asking if he’d like to pick up an extra shift tonight. Then I start the truck and turn out onto the two-lane highway, heading south. “Your place is in Randolph, right?”

May snaps out of the daze she’s in. “It is. No... It *was*. I can’t believe it’s going to end like this.” Fresh tears spring into her eyes.

“I sure am sorry. Cheaters are the worst.” My father was the king of

cheaters. I watched him slowly destroy my mother's self-esteem until he disappeared for good when I was fifteen.

"Alec, I don't know why you're helping me like this." She wipes her eyes.

I just shrug, because I don't really, either. "That's what friends are for, right?" Although May and I aren't really friends. She's four or five years younger than I am. We didn't overlap at the high school, although I saw more than enough of her brother.

May reaches over and puts a hand on my forearm. "Well...I really appreciate it. When I straighten my head out a little bit, I'll make you an apple pie as a thank-you note."

"See? I knew I was helping the right person."

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

THE SHOTS YOU NEVER TAKE

MAY

Sitting here on the passenger seat of Alec Rossi's truck, I'm struggling to make sense of what just happened. Watching Daniela kiss someone else? That hurt so much.

I feel like someone took a bucket of very cold mud and threw it over my whole life. It's both sobering and messy. And there's no chance that tonight was some kind of strange aberration. Daniela has been distant for weeks. I suspected she was keeping something from me but I just didn't know what.

Also, my fight-or-flight reaction had startled me almost as much as catching Daniela cheating. Red-hot anger had sluiced through my veins as I stormed toward their table. And when my hand met Tracy's face, it had made a sharp, bright sound.

I'm embarrassed by how good it had felt, and how not sorry I feel now. I'm embarrassed about a lot of things, actually. How naively I gave myself to Daniela, in spite of her bad behavior. How vulnerable I made myself to this kind of pain.

And it happened in front of Alec Rossi of all people. When I was thirteen, I'd had the biggest crush on him. I used to sit at the top of the bleachers at my brother's football games and watch Alec making time with the girls his age.

They'd tossed their hair and preened and laughed, doing anything for a little scrap of his attention.

I can't believe that Alec Rossi just witnessed my life exploding. It's like the frosting on a cake made of awfulness. When I think of how it must have looked to him, a little groan escapes me.

"You okay over there?" he asks from behind the wheel.

"Sure. Just trying to get over my shock."

"I'll bet. I spotted them about a half hour before you came in. Wasn't sure what to think about it."

"Really? You recognized Daniela?" I'm a little stunned that he knows who my girlfriend is.

Was. Damn it.

"Yeah. A good bartender never forgets a face. I'm sorry to say that they were in the bar last week, too. And I wasn't a hundred percent sure that you guys were still together. But tonight I took this photo because I was going to try to figure it out and maybe tell you." He steers to the side of the road, pulls his phone out of the cupholder, and unlocks it. Then he passes it to me.

And there they are. It's a very good picture of Daniela kissing Tracy, her ex. And now I spot another ugly detail. Daniela is wearing a very beautiful black V-neck angora sweater. And now I hurt even worse.

"Ugh." I hand it back. "She was wearing the *sweater*. Fuck."

"What's that?" Alec asks. He pulls onto the highway and we continue on our way.

"I *knitted* that sweater she's wearing tonight."

"You made it yourself?" he asks. "Whoa. There's some gratitude for you."

I just sigh.

"Are you going to be okay?"

That is a good question. "I *will* be." *As soon as my thundercloud of rage passes overhead.*

“Must have been hard to see,” he says in a low voice. “A shock, right? The heartbreak will set in later.”

“That’s the thing...” I clear my throat. “I don’t even know if it will.” Once I hear myself admit that, I realize it might even be true.

Alec waits quietly for me to go on. I watch his big hands grip the steering wheel, while I attempt to sort out my emotions. “We weren’t working out. As a couple.” *There*. I said it out loud. “But I *hoped* we would. I wanted us to. And in the beginning, Daniela was fun.”

“Then what happened?” he asks

“Well...” This part is hard to talk about. “When we got together, both of us were trying to get over other people. You just met Daniela’s ex, Tracy. I’d never seen her in person before tonight. But Daniela told me straight up that Tracy broke her heart.”

Alec makes an impatient noise in the back of his throat. “I can’t really see anyone falling hard for that rude b—” He bites off the end of the sentence. “She’s someone I never needed to meet.”

“Me neither,” I grumble. Although, maybe meeting her like that had been necessary. “The thing is, I really wanted to move on. But I don’t think Daniela really wanted to get over Tracy. That’s why we didn’t work out. I was ready to try to love someone else, and she couldn’t get there. Not that she handled it very well. She was hard on me, when I wasn’t really the problem.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah.” There had been way too many times when she’d been shitty to me, and I had just ignored it. The first time it got really out of hand was last summer, when Daniela got drunk at my brother’s wedding. She’d told my friends and family that I wasn’t any fun.

Come to think of it, Alec had asked me to dance that night. It had only been for a few minutes, but I’d still been flattered.

Now I wonder if he’d been feeling sorry for me.

“I put up with her for way too long,” I say. “But I thought I could wait her

out—that she’d remember the fun we had at the beginning, and realize we could have a future.”

“Dude,” he says. “Lots of people make that mistake—hoping things will just get better.”

“Maybe.”

“My mom spent fifteen years hoping.” He turns off the highway.

“Turn right at the second stop sign.”

And it hits me. This is probably the last time I’ll ever step inside the house we shared. How is that even possible? This morning, on my way to work, I’d thought my biggest concerns were my boring job and wondering if Daniela would remember to run the dishwasher after putting her cereal bowl in it.

“I don’t know how to get my head around this,” I mumble. “I was going to make dinner tonight.”

“Sorry, babydoll,” Alec whispers.

As he turns onto our block, I can’t stop the dark thoughts from coming. My relationship with Daniela had been doomed, but I’d chosen not to see it. I think she was taking the passive-aggressive route—trying to drive me away with her bullshit, so she wouldn’t have to take responsibility for the breakup.

It’s cowardly behavior, and I’m not excusing it. But I wish I’d taken the hint a whole lot faster.

“This is the place?” Alec asks as he kills the engine.

“Yeah.” God, I don’t want to get out of the truck. I just want to crawl under a quilt in my family’s TV den and hide. Preferably with a jug of wine.

But we can’t always get what we want. And Alec is waiting, his big brown eyes worried.

So I get out, putting one foot in front of the other until I’m standing on our little wooden porch. I let myself in with my key, and then jam a thumbnail into the keyring so I can work off the key and leave it behind.

“You sure you won’t need to come back?” Alec asks me. “For mail?”

Forgotten items?”

I hesitate. He’s right. So I keep the key.

“Are you on the lease?” he asks. “Any utilities in your name?”

I shake my head. This place was Daniela’s house before it was mine.

“Good. So that part is easy.” He pushes a lock of hair out of my face and smiles at me. “Come on then, let’s see how quickly we can change your life. Got a duffel bag? And if you run out of space, there’s always the time-honored luggage of high-class relationship fleeing.”

“What’s that?”

“Garbage bags.”

“Oh, Alec.” I snort, and then I laugh.

I’m twenty-seven years old, barely employed, and just a few minutes from hauling all my possessions out of my ex’s house. In garbage bags. Because I only have one suitcase, and it will quickly fill up with law school textbooks.

Alec gives my shoulder a firm squeeze. “Let’s go. Thinking too hard won’t be helpful right now. Show me your books. You’ll do the clothes.”

We get to work.

If you’d have asked me to name a dozen people who might someday move me out of Daniela’s house, Alec Rossi would never had made the list. But I let myself forget that this is the weirdest night of my life and I do exactly as he says. I pack up my clothes and shoes, while he stacks my books in empty boxes I scare up from the garage.

It takes less time than I’d thought to sever my life from Daniela’s.

Alec carts my books outside, and then my clothes. We’ve quickly filled my laundry basket, several shopping bags and—naturally—trash bags for my clothes and a quilt my mother made me.

The bed looks naked now. I had some happy times in that bed, getting in touch with my bisexuality. But apparently Daniela was having happy times in some other bed, too. No wonder she hadn’t made love to me in a while.

For a minute I just stand there and stare at the rumpled sheets, letting the hurt sink in. Last night I'd curled up close to her when she came to bed. But Daniela had rolled away from me, her skinny shoulder jutting up like a wall between us.

When she'd asked me to move in last spring, I'd been so *happy*. I'd thought I'd finally found someone who would be mine forever.

Ugh. I turn my back on the stupid bed. "Let's go," I say.

"Not so fast," he says, putting his hands on my shoulders. "Room by room, okay? Do you have anything in the bathroom?"

He's right. In my haste I'd forgotten about my toiletries. I'm not petty—I leave the new box of tampons we'd just bought, and the shampoo. I take my fancy moisturizer, my toothbrush, and my hairdryer.

Daniela can air dry, damn it.

"What's in there?" Alec points toward the spare bedroom.

"Not much." I walk over and open the door, even though it makes me feel stupid. I had imagined we would eventually need this room for a nursery. I'd wanted us to adopt a baby girl from China. Lately, when I'd brought it up, Daniela would change the topic.

I'd missed every damn clue she'd given me.

My eyes sweep over the mostly empty room, and just as I'm about to shut the door, I spot my knitting basket in a corner. It's dusty from neglect.

"This is mine," I say, retrieving it. There's at least two hundred dollars' worth of yarn and needles in the basket, but I haven't knit anything in ages. Daniela had made a crack about my old-lady hobby more than once.

Goddamn her. Why had I listened to a thing she'd said?

Because you were lonely, my subconscious reminds me.

Oh yeah. That.

Alec takes the knitting basket from my hands. "No suitcase needed for this," he says. "I'll put it in the back seat. You check the kitchen?"

Here, too, I need to grab a few things. A ceramic pie plate that belonged

to my grandmother. A couple of mugs, a rolling pin I'd brought to the relationship. Everything fits into a paper grocery bag.

I leave an entire defrosted chicken in the fridge. Tonight I'd meant to roast it for dinner, but now I bet it will just rot. Daniela didn't ever cook for me the way I cooked for her. She didn't care enough to plan meals or ask me what I wanted from the store.

Taking the chicken would be psycho, right? Who removes a defrosted chicken from the fridge when she moves out?

But it's organic. It cost six bucks a pound.

These are my crazy thoughts as I spot Daniela's new iPhone resting on the countertop. She must have forgotten it again, which happens a lot. In her defense, Vermont's cell service is so spotty that smartphones aren't as useful as they are elsewhere in the world.

I pick up the phone and unlock it—the phone knows my thumbprint, so that I can choose tunes when we're in the car together. For the first time in our eleven-month relationship, I open up the messaging app. I'm not a snoop. I'm a trusting person. But now that my trust has been eviscerated, I'm curious how long her affair has been going on.

Sure enough—right under a thread of messages with me is a thread with “Trax,” as Daniela's ex called herself. (I know way too much about this woman, which meant it was always going to end this way.)

I read the last few texts, and I'm already nauseated.

Trax: Tomorrow can't come soon enough, honey love. I'm so hot for you. Gonna make you scream again.

Ugh! I scroll up hastily to verify that the texts have been going on for weeks. But I scroll one time too many, because I find a picture of Daniela naked on our bed. Her legs are spread, fingertips lightly touching her—

I make a noise of dismay.

“Time to go,” Alec says softly from where he stands leaning against the doorframe. He doesn't say so, but I can tell he's keeping watch. He's trying

to protect me from another brutal confrontation.

And that's a good impulse. I'm done here. Truly *done*. I click the phone off, so the screen goes dark. But that's not satisfying enough. So I open the dishwasher, which Daniela forgot to run. I toss the phone into the top rack, slam it shut, and push the ON button.

"Okay," I say, as the sound of water swishing around inside the machine begins. "I'm ready."

Alec is frozen in the doorway, staring at me. Slowly, the corners of his mouth quirk upward. Then a full smile blooms. "You are a badass, May Shipley. I'm a little in awe of you."

I don't feel like a badass, though, as we roll toward my family's farm in Tuxbury. I only feel like a failure.

"Everything okay over there?"

"Yes. Sorry." I'm a terrible conversationalist. "Just trying to rearrange my brain. My family is not going to be graceful about this."

"What? Sure they will be. They'll be happy to see you." Alec's tone is soothing—the way you'd speak to a crazy person.

"Maybe. But I have quite the rep now as the family fuck-up. When I turn up tonight with your truck full of my stuff, and move back into my old room..." I groan, just picturing their faces. "There will be a lot of handwringing and watching me for signs of stress. I'm my family's only hot mess."

Alec chuckles. "No, you're the family's only *lawyer*, right? If you want to be a hot mess, you gotta try a little harder than that."

This makes me smile, because I like Alec's take on the situation better than mine. Unfortunately, he's wrong. While I might be the only Shipley with a graduate degree, I'm also the only alcoholic. Sometimes they treat me like

I've contracted a novel and potentially fatal disease.

I suppose they're right.

"It will be awkward." I sigh, picturing all the sympathetic looks I'm about to receive. *Poor May. She's lost her way again.* "You know, I think I jumped into living with Daniela too soon mostly because I didn't want to be under their microscope anymore." My family can be hard to take.

"So now you're back under it?"

"Yeah."

"Look on the bright side." He reaches across the cab to nudge me with a warm hand. "Free food and rent!"

The man has a point. Nobody ever starved at Shipley Farm.

Though, as the dark miles roll by, I can't stop myself from replaying the ugly scene in Alec's bar. "Maybe it sounds weird to fixate on this," I grumble. "But I can't believe she was wearing that sweater. If you were going out for a date with the Other Woman, would you wear a sweater your live-in girlfriend made? I spent a hundred hours on that thing, and at least two hundred bucks. It was angora!"

"Good thing it wasn't cashmere."

"Right? Jesus. That would have been four hundred bucks worth of yarn."

"Really?"

"Totally. It actually costs more to knit a sweater than to buy one."

Alec turns his head to give me a quick glance. "Then why knit them? Serious question."

"Because you can make whatever you want. But also out of love. A handmade thing is better than a store-bought thing."

"Not always," Alec points out. "If you ate my cooking you might not agree."

"Fair enough." I smile at his handsome profile. "This is going to sound stupid."

"Try me. I say stupid shit all day long."

“There’s this old wives’ tale that you’re not supposed to knit a sweater for the man in your life. They say that if you knit him a sweater, he’ll never marry you.”

“Ouch.” Alec’s handsome profile frowns. “I hope you don’t believe that. This thing wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t the sweater that did it,” I say quickly. “Of course not. The funny thing is, though, that the wives’ tale refers to a man. I made a joke that it didn’t matter if I gave Daniela a sweater because wives’ tales don’t cover lesbians.”

Alec laughs, filling the cab with a warm, happy sound. My life is falling apart right now, but Alec is still easy to talk to. It must be a gift that bartenders have. Like priests. Sitting at his bar chatting him up sounds like a good time.

Too bad I don’t go to bars anymore.

Before I’m ready, we’re rolling up the driveway of my family’s farmhouse. That’s when I notice that the driveway is packed with vehicles. “Oh, hell.”

“Lotta company tonight?”

“It’s Thursday Dinner.” It’s a weekly family event. It’s not always at our house. But tonight? Of course it is. And earlier today I’d told my mom that Daniela and I weren’t coming.

I groan again. Loudly. Because I’m just realizing something.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m an idiot. Daniela hasn’t been coming with me to Thursday Dinner because of her pro bono work. But there never was a Thursday pro bono meeting. She just picked that night for her hookups so she could avoid coming out to Thursday Dinner with my family.”

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Who wouldn’t want to eat dinner with you?” he asks softly.

“Her, obviously.” The kindness in his voice is a little hard to hear right

now. And god, I want a drink. So badly. But I keep that to myself, because I'm pathetic enough already.

Alec kills the engine. "What's the plan, here? Do you want to stash your stuff on the front porch and come back later?" He's eyeing the farmhouse, where a dozen people are visible through the lacy curtains in the dining room.

"No, it's fine. I'll just go in and get it over with." Alec has already given me enough of his evening. "I'll just haul my stuff in through the kitchen door and chuck it into the TV room." That way, at least, I won't be clomping up and down the stairs while my family eats dinner.

This is going to be awful.

At least I'll get a slice of my mother's apple pie out of it.

GRETSKY WAS RIGHT

ALEC

May and I ferry two loads of her belongings stealthily in through the kitchen door of the farmhouse.

But on our third trip, we're busted by her grandpa as he fills his water glass in the kitchen sink. "Well, well, well!" the old man shouts. He's either hard of hearing or likes the sound of his own voice. "Look who's sneakin' in like a thief in the night!"

"Thieves carry things *out*," May grumbles. "This is the opposite of that."

"Did you finally leave that harpy of a girlfriend?" Grandpa Shipley barks.

May closes her eyes like he's causing her physical pain. "Can you say it louder, Grandpa? I'm not sure they heard you all the way to Rutland."

So that's the end of stealth mode.

"What's this?" Ruth Shipley—May's mother—appears in the room, an empty water pitcher in her hand. "You left Daniela?" Her jaw is practically on the floor.

Poor May.

"Can we talk about it later?" she asks as the doorway fills with more curious faces. "Everyone sit down, okay? Nothing to see here."

There is a beat of awkward silence, and then Ruth remembers she's on a

mission. She carries the pitcher to the sink to fill it. “I assume you haven’t eaten. May, get two plates, honey. Alec, you’re staying for dinner.”

“Yes ma’am,” I say, because Ruth Shipley’s voice is more authoritative than the commanding officers I met during my brief stint in the military.

“Sorry,” May whispers.

I should probably get back to the Gin Mill, but at least there’s a text on my phone telling me that Connor had driven over to pick up my shift. So the bar is doing fine.

And I feel a little weird about just dropping May with her stuff and running away. Meanwhile, the food smells amazing. Ruth is famous for putting up a nice spread, and I’ve never been inside the farmhouse before. The Shipleys used to feed the kids who came to pick fruit on their farm, but they kept us outside, like the riff-raff we were.

In spite of myself, I’m curious. “Let me just close the truck’s doors.”

“Let me...” May says, but I catch her shoulder in one hand.

“I got it. It’s fine.”

Two minutes later I poke my head into the dining room, and it feels a little like walking into enemy territory. My old pal Griffin sits at the center of one side of the table, like a king surrounded by his family and his wife.

I’ve known the Shipleys my whole life. They’re like a postcard family—two boys and two girls—everyone smiling and wearing hand-knit sweaters and singing campfire songs together.

They probably do that for real.

The Rossi clan, on the other hand, is a rougher, trailer-park version of the Shipley family. There are four boys and one girl. We’re louder, and—to my lovely mother’s dismay—a little cruder. We have tattoos and punk-rock T-shirts instead of knit sweaters. We smile, too, but usually while we’re pummeling each other.

“Over here, dummy,” a voice calls.

I turn to spot my sister waving me down. Zara is seated on a bench,

holding Nicole, my toddler niece, on her lap.

“Well, hi kids,” I say, taking the seat next to them. “Fancy meeting you here.”

And honestly it *is* a little weird. Zara is yet another reason I’m not close to Griffin Shipley. She was in love with him in high school, when he never looked in her direction.

But then a couple years ago he did. They had a fling that Griff eventually ended, breaking Zara’s heart all over again.

That’s all over now, though, and Zara has a new man and a baby. She’s probably the happiest of the five Rossi kids. But I still don’t understand how Zara can be so close with the Shipleys now. She and Griff’s wife are best friends and business partners.

I’m still pissed off at Griffin on Zara’s behalf. But my sister is thriving. She and Audrey have a busy coffee shop located on my property, beside the Gin Mill. They rent their building from me, but that’s the extent of my involvement.

I sit down beside her and put my linen napkin in my lap. Mom would be proud.

“Ack,” Nicole says, because my niece is my little sweetheart even if she can’t say “Alec” yet. The baby and I used to spend a lot more time together when they were living in the apartment beneath mine. But now Zara has an historic house in the center of Colebury.

Nicole tries to climb into my lap, but Zara holds onto her hindquarters. “Let Ack eat, okay? You can climb him like a jungle gym later.”

Someone passes me a basket of dinner rolls, and I take one.

“You’re the fellow who owns that new speakeasy!” Grandpa Shipley shouts.

“It’s a bar, gramps,” Griffin says. “Evening, Alec.” He reaches across the table and forks a slab of ham onto my plate. Then he puts one on his sister’s plate, too. “So…” He clears his throat and passes me a bowl of mashed

potatoes. “How is it that you drove May home tonight?”

He gives me a wary look, which irritates me. Griff is sort of a grouch, generally. He gives everyone the side-eye.

May answers the question. “Alec was just in the right place at the wrong time,” she says, scooping applesauce onto her plate beside the ham. “And he volunteered to drive me home.”

“And that place was...?” Griffin waits.

“My bar,” I say between bites. And, wow. Mrs. Shipley’s ham is terrific. I think she smokes it herself. She probably enters those contests at the Tunbridge World’s Fair, where they give out blue ribbons for the best pie and the best applesauce.

When the Rossis go to the fair, we’re only there for the roller coasters and the deep-fried pickles.

There is another awkward silence. I glance around the table at all the gawking faces, and try to figure out what’s wrong. It’s a lot of faces, too. There’s the younger brother—Dylan—but not his twin sister, who’s away at college. And the Abrahams, who live down the road. And Jude Nickel and his wife, Sophie.

They are all looking at May with worry in their eyes. And it dawns on me that if I’d told May a week ago about Daniela’s cheating, she might have been able to avoid a scene at the bar. And she could have chosen the right moment to tell her family, too.

May meets my gaze from across the table. *See?* her expression says. *Told you.*

This awkward silence is all my fault.

Then May breaks it. “There I was, strolling into Alec’s bar, demanding a fifth of whiskey,” she says aloud.

Her mother gasps.

“*Kidding.*” May puts down her fork. “This afternoon I did a real estate closing in Waterbury. So I passed the Gin Mill on my way back south. And I

spotted Daniela's car in the lot."

"Oh," Ruth says, looking relieved.

Griffin nods. "Not like you could miss that car. All those bumper stickers. Kinda militant."

May rolls her eyes. "Anyway. I went into the bar just to say hello. Daniela supposedly has a Thursday meeting." May swallows hard. "I didn't even think it was weird to see her car there because I thought maybe they get a drink afterward, and she didn't say anything because she was being kind—since grabbing a drink isn't something I *do*."

The story stops there for a second while May takes a deep breath. There is silence from everyone, even my baby niece.

"But...then I spotted Daniela in a booth. With her ex-girlfriend. And they were, well, wrapped around each other." She looks down at her plate.

"Oh, hell," Griffin says. "I'm going to kill her."

"Honey," Ruth says quietly. "Are you sure you interpreted that correctly?"

"She absolutely did," I put in.

Pity rises in the room like a mist, and I can feel May's embarrassment from all the way across the table.

"Did you confront her?" Griffin asks.

"You could say that." May looks up, her eyes finding mine, her cheeks going pink.

"Oh-oh!" Zara says. "Were their fireworks?"

"Nah," I say at the same time May says, "Unfortunately."

Cue another curious silence.

"Well, fine," I admit. "May yelled. But who wouldn't?"

"I may have used some very colorful language," May grumbles.

"Oh, honey," her mother says. Maybe the Shipley women aren't supposed to curse.

"I called her a..." May closes her mouth quickly, realizing that she

doesn't want to say "cuntmuffin" in front of my niece.

A bark of a laugh escapes me, and for a split second our eyes meet in a silent exchange of humor.

"Well." Ruth sighs. "I'm so sorry. I guess it's better to know what she's done."

"True." May picks up her fork and plays with the food on her plate. "Anyway. Here I am. Alec took me by the house and helped me make a quick getaway."

"She was cheatin'?" Grandpa Shipley hollers. "On you? What a super bitch!"

"Grandpa," several Shipleys say at once.

"A bitch is a female dog." Grandpa sniffs. "Not a curse word."

"If you put super in front of it..." Dylan starts.

"Quiet, boy," Grandpa snarls. "I'm quite worked up. I think a slice of pie might calm me down."

"I like how you think," I say, and then shove another piece of ham in my craw so I won't add, "*About Daniela as well as the pie.*"

"I'll start the coffee," Audrey Shipley says, lifting her pregnant belly out of her chair.

"I got it!" three other people say at once. This little race to save Audrey a trip to the kitchen is won by Zara. "We need to wiggle anyway," she insists, setting Nicole on the floor.

"Wow." Audrey eases down into the chair again. "I should have gotten pregnant before now."

"The way you two go at it it's kind of a surprise you didn't," Grandpa mumbles into his water glass.

Who knew the Shipley's Thursday dinner was so entertaining? Grandpa is my favorite. He doesn't have the same stick up his ass that Griffin does. Maybe it skips the occasional generation.

I shovel in more of my excellent food and hope they'll leave May alone

now. And maybe I can help by changing the topic. “Hey, Audrey? How’s your new employee working out?”

“Oh!” She pats her round belly and gets a soft expression on her face. “He’s dreamy.”

Griffin snorts beside her. “Tell ’im why.”

“I get to sleep in most mornings now! He opens the coffee shop four days a week. And he’s begun making fresh bread along with the pastries we were making before. Not only is it profitable, but the coffee shop smells like heaven when I roll in every morning at ten.”

“That *is* dreamy,” May says, perking up. “Also, I noticed he’s pretty easy on the eyes.”

Everyone laughs, including me.

“What? Have you seen the man?” she says, smiling for the first time in an hour. “Those forearms. It must be all that *kneading*.”

There’s more laughter. “Get ’is number!” Grandpa croaks.

But Audrey shakes her head. “I’m pretty sure he bats for the other team. Whenever Griffin shows up in the coffee shop it’s not my backside that’s admired.”

“What can I say?” Griff shrugs his big shoulders. “I have a very nice ass.”

“Language,” Ruth Shipley says.

“Ass is just another word for donkey,” Grandpa chirps. “Now is it time for pie? That young fella has finished his dinner.” He points at my plate.

“Why not,” Ruth says with a sigh. “I think I lost control of this meal a long time ago.” She glances at her daughter. “Nice to have you at home, sweetie. We haven’t converted your room into a home gym or anything.”

“Glad to hear it,” May grumbles.

But she doesn’t sound glad.

“How’s business at the Gin Mill?” Griff asks me over pie and coffee.

“Great,” I say immediately. Because I’ll be damned if I complain to Mr. Perfect. “I thought November would be terrible, but the dip isn’t as bad as I

thought. The weekends are still pretty packed.” If only I had a better profit margin. “I’ll always be scraping by until I can expand my revenue sources.”

“I hear you.” Griff smooths his beard with one hand. “We have cider and fruit and milk. Diversity is pretty critical.”

This is something I’ve already learned the hard way. “I think serving food is my obvious next step, but a commercial kitchen costs fifty grand, and then I’d need more people on the payroll.”

“And blowing up the payroll is scary,” Audrey adds. “Ask me how I know.”

Griffin reaches over and rubs his wife’s pregnant belly. “What else you got for ideas?” he asks me.

“Making beer,” I admit. Griff is an accomplished cider-maker, so he’ll understand the appeal. But it’s kind of a pipe dream at this point, because even though my home brew is tasty, I don’t have the facilities to make commercial beers. “I don’t have the cash to invest in that idea, either.”

“You can start small,” he points out, as if I can’t figure it out for myself. “At least with ale. Lagers need more equipment.”

“True.” I’ve thought about it a hundred times already. My uncle Otto has a fermentation tank that’s only in use for about ninety days a year. I have designs on that tank for sure.

“Who wants more pie?” Ruth Shipley calls, and nearly everyone raises a hand.

Except for May, who’s pushing crumbs around on her plate, looking sad.

I don’t get it. I really don’t. May is smart, loyal, and hot as hell. She’s obviously the most lively of the Shipley kids. Who would cheat on her?

Even though I stopped May from punching Daniela or the other woman tonight, a part of me thinks they deserved it.

I eat another piece of excellent pie, certain that Daniela had no idea what she was missing.

MARRY ME

MAY

When I walk into the Busy Bean five days later, Zara is behind the register.

“What wonderful thing am I smelling?” I ask in lieu of a proper greeting.

“Homemade hot pretzels,” she says. “Roderick just took them out of the oven.”

“Can I have one?” I’m practically drooling already.

“Of course. Cafe latte, too? I just made one for Lark.”

I turn around and find my friend sitting on a velvet armchair in front of a little marble table. With her shiny black hair and her golden skin, she has the casual glamour of a movie star. She’s looking out the window with a smile teasing her perfect rosebud lips.

It takes me a second to remember I’m in the middle of a conversation. But then Zara clears her throat.

“Sure!” I say quickly. “A latte would be great. Thank you!”

I pay at the register and take a sip of my latte before I make my way across the room to tell my best friend how badly I’ve fucked up my life once again.

“And then what happened?”

Lark leans forward in her chair, her expression rapt, her dark eyes wide as I weave the tale of my dramatic breakup with Daniela.

“Well, I slapped Tracy.”

“Oh my god!” Lark squeaks, her eyes shining.

“But I didn’t get to do any damage, because Alec Rossi hauled me out of the room.”

“Really?”

“True story.” If anything, my retelling underplays things. Alec didn’t just tow me away. Shock has already made the details fuzzy, but I’m pretty sure he lifted me clear off the ground. “Then Alec drove me home and helped me clear my things from the house, and I haven’t been back.”

“Sure sorry I missed this whole thing,” Zara says, passing our table with a tray of empty coffee cups. “I love a good bar brawl.” She winks and disappears into the kitchen.

“It wasn’t a brawl!” I call over my shoulder, even though I know she was only kidding.

“What I don’t get,” Lark says, stirring her latte. “Is how I had to wait five days to hear all this?”

“Hey now.” I reach down and pick up my knitting from the bag on the floor. “I wasn’t going to interrupt your romantic weekend in Florida with my sob story. And you have to admit—it’s a better tale in person.”

“True.” Lark smiles at me. “But how are you doing *now*—with all of five days to get over it?”

“Well, I’m okay. Embarrassed, though.” I scrutinize the scarf I’ve started knitting for my little sister, Daphne. “The crappy thing is that I have to see Daniela again next week at an alumni function. So I’m sort of bracing myself. But mostly I feel like I’m waking up from a bad dream. She and I weren’t working out. And I’m going to be fine.”

Again, I’m understating things. This has been a long and shitty five days.

But I don't want Lark worrying about me. She and I have enough baggage between us.

"Hmm," she says, her brown eyes on me. "I'm gonna need a little more detail than that. Do you miss her? Is it weird being home again?"

"Well, sure." I sigh. "Everything is a little grim, but not because I'm heartbroken. Breaking up with Daniela is almost a relief, because the other shoe dropped already. The bigger problem is my family treating me like a grenade with the pin pulled."

"Why?"

"Because they've read lots of articles about how to be supportive of your alcoholic family member. I think they're waiting for me to lose my shit and relapse."

"Ah." She frowns into her coffee. "Well that sucks."

"It does. I spend a lot of time with a fake happy expression. Like this..." I put my teeth together in a ridiculous, plastic smile, and Lark laughs suddenly, low and throaty.

And *boom*. There it is—the lightning bolt of attraction I always feel when she smiles at me. My desire for her is so familiar that I'm pretty good at hiding it now. I've been fighting it off since freshman year of college. I've spent ten years trying not to notice Lark's sparkling eyes and the high color splashed across her wide-set cheekbones.

She is so freaking beautiful that my lungs feel a little tight.

It's not a secret, either. Lark knows. That cat has been out of its bag for a year. But we never talk about it, because I don't want to. I know the yearning will never go away. It's my little cross to bear.

To think if I'd loved Daniela even half as much as I love Lark. My breakup would be a real disaster.

"Has she called you?" Lark asks, as if reading my thoughts.

"Once?" I sigh again. "I got one tearful message that night, left for me from a strange number. But no more since."

Lark frowns, maybe wondering why Daniela isn't calling me hourly. But maybe Daniela's relieved, too. Also, her lack of communication might have something to do with me ruining her smartphone. I'm embarrassed about that petty little act of destruction, so I don't tell Lark about it.

I'm actually happy not hearing from Daniela. I really am *done*. I should have left her months ago—as soon as her bad behavior began. We'd been together less than six months when she started putting me down all the time. First in private, and then in front of people.

"Well," Lark says slowly. "I guess it's better that you're not feeling too conflicted right now."

"It is better," I agree. "Small mercies. And thank you for being the only one who has made it..." I check my watch. "Fifteen minutes without saying 'good riddance' and 'what were you thinking.'"

My best friend winces. "I won't say that."

"Even if you're thinking it," I tease.

She smiles. "I'll just say this—I wish I'd been there in the bar when it happened so I could punch her myself for hurting you."

"Thank you."

"And lord knows I dated the wrong person too many times to count." She rolls her eyes. "We all do it."

"But not anymore," I say, putting my knitting down in my lap. "I'm done dating people who don't deserve me. And you're with someone who thinks you hung the moon, so that's it, right? No more big mistakes for us."

"Right!" Lark lifts her coffee mug in the air to toast me. "Cheers."

I take a sip of my own and decide I don't want to talk about my woes anymore. "So. Florida! How was it? Tell me everything."

"Oh, it was great." She takes a big gulp of her coffee, and her eyes shift to the side.

Her dodge is subtle. But I've known Lark for almost ten years and I've memorized every one of her expressions. "What?"

“Hmm?”

“Tell me the thing. Whatever thing you’re not telling me. Is everything okay?” I sit up a little straighter, worried.

She puts the mug down and folds her hands. “Everything is fine. Really. Florida was lovely.” There are spots of color on her cheekbones now.

“Lovely,” I repeat slowly. I’m missing something. “And?”

“And what?”

“I don’t *know* what. You tell me.”

Lark bites her lip. “The timing is shitty.”

“Shitty for what?”

“For *you*.” She lifts those brown eyes and finally levels with me. “Zach asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

Oh.

Oh, wow.

A long beat goes by while I try to process this. My brain offers up a vision of the future—Lark in a white dress, her olive skin radiant against the silk. She’s staring up into Zachariah’s eyes as she promises to be his forever.

And I’m standing right behind her clutching a bouquet and desperate for an entire bottle of vodka.

As I roll the scene forward, it doesn’t get any easier, either. Babies will be next. I’ll be the one throwing the shower for Lark. And when the baby comes, I’ll be Auntie May, holding Lark’s first child against my chest in her hospital room.

Oh, wow. The wave of pain that rolls through me is startling in its power. I’ve imagined all of this before. Not a bit of it should surprise me. I want my friends to be happy together.

So why can’t I breathe?

And Lark is waiting for me to say something. My face is hot and my heart is cold and it is a colossal effort to swallow. “Hey,” I choke out. “That’s amazing! Congratulations!” My horrible fake smile is back on my face and

my eyes are burning. “You must be so excited,” I croak.

Just then, Zara Rossi passes us again. She’s gathering someone else’s abandoned coffee cups from a table. When I glance at her, she’s looking right at me, her face stricken.

Which means I’m doing a terrible job of concealing how steamrolled I feel right now.

Fuck.

I suck in a breath and look my best friend right in the eyes. “Sorry, I just didn’t see that coming.”

Her eyes well. “I said the timing was shitty.”

“No.” I shake my head and then take a deep breath. “The timing is perfect. You guys deserve this. And it’s going to be great. Can I help you plan the wedding? Did you set a date?”

There. That came out sounding reasonably sane. “Does your mom want a big Beacon Hill affair? Do you?”

Lark is watching me with shiny eyes. “Would you believe that I haven’t told my parents yet?”

“Really?” I laugh, and then swallow hard. “What are you waiting for?”

And then it hits me. I know *exactly* what Lark was waiting for. She sat down at this table without an engagement ring on. She isn’t wearing it yet. She hasn’t told her mother because she hasn’t told *anyone*. Not a soul.

Because of me.

Lark wanted to tell me first, so I could put on my stupid brave face and get used to the idea for half a minute before I have to talk about it with other people.

Jesus Christ. How did it come to this? I never wanted to be that delicate flower that others have to maneuver carefully around.

I fucking hate my life right now.

“Look,” I gasp. “You are the best friend I could ever have. And I’m so happy for you.” My eyes are wet, too, though I ignore it. “Is there a ring? I

want to see it. Where did he propose? At the beach? Don't you dare hold out on me." The first tear rolls down my face, and I clutch my knitting in sweaty hands.

Lark hesitates another moment. We're both stuck here in this awful place. *Come on*, I beg her silently. *Help me get through this without forking over a fatal portion of my dignity.*

She reaches inside her purse and emerges with a perfect little velvet box. She cracks open the lid to reveal a rose-gold band with a shimmering diamond solitaire.

"Ooh!" I breathe through my panic. "Put it on. It's perfect."

She does, and it is. "There's no big proposal story, sorry. He asked me when we were waking up at the hotel in the morning," she whispers. "We were just lying there listening to the waves crash outside. Just like that."

"Oh." I sigh with genuine appreciation. Of course he did. Because Zach knew it was the right time to ask her. He didn't need a spectacular sunset, or a flash-mob dancing to their favorite song, or a table at a very exclusive restaurant. Zach and Lark are the real deal.

When they stand in that church and promise each other everything, they'll both mean it.

I wipe my tears with the back of my hand. "Well, that is just perfect. Thank you for telling me first. I'm honored. Now when you tell your mother, and she tries to book the ballroom at some palace on Beacon Hill, I can talk you off the ledge."

Lark laughs with shiny eyes. "Okay, fine."

I smile back as credibly as I can.

"I'm really sorry about the shitty timing."

"Don't be," I say, shaking my head. "If I'm helping you plan your wedding instead of planning Daniela's murder, that's a good thing."

Lark looks down at the ring on her hand. "What do you think about a wedding at the Woodstock Inn? It's fancy enough to please my parents, but

still Vermont.”

“I love that idea,” I say immediately. “It’s Vermont Fancy, if you know what I mean. It should please her, but still be comfortable. And there’s golf. Your dad might go for that.”

“Good idea. I’ll lead with golf.” She smiles, and I match it. For real this time. I love Lark enough to want this for her. Even if it hurts.

A lot.

The rest of the day is a meaningless blur. My fledgling law practice isn’t exactly slammed with business, but today that’s a blessing. Because I don’t actually need to think.

I have to look up some real estate records at the Tuxbury town hall that afternoon, only a few miles away from Shipley Farm. Making the copies I need doesn’t take very long, though. I’m finished by four thirty, and so I knock off work early.

When I walk in to the farmhouse kitchen, my brother Griffin is there, leaning against the counter, deep in conversation with Lark’s fiancé, Zachariah. There’s a plate of cookies between them.

Fiancé. I rehearsed this word in my head earlier, trying to get used to the idea. Their conversation stops the second they notice me. They both glance at me, their eyes wary.

Fuck. I’m so sick of that look in people’s eyes. The *Poor May* expression. And now it’s sinking in that with Zach and Lark planning their wedding, nobody will ever stop looking at me that way. Not for *months*.

I want to scream. But I can’t. “Hi guys!” I say instead. On goes the plastic smile. I don’t even take off my coat. I march right up to Zachariah and plant a kiss on his cheek. “Congratulations. I’m so excited for you.”

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

“Nice pick with the ring,” I say, my bravado holding up. “It’s gorgeous.” Then I steal a cookie off the plate, give them both a wave, and walk out.

A minute later I arrive upstairs in my bedroom, coat and shoes still on. I close the door and throw the cookie right in my trash bin. Then I crumple onto the bed. My eyes sting and a headache teases my temples.

This has been the longest day of a really long week. Everyone who loves me is treating me like an emotional leper. I have absolutely nothing to look forward to.

And I really, *really* want a drink.

This idea settles over me like a wool blanket—warm but irritating. I want a glass of wine, red and plummy. I want the scent of the tannins in my nose as I swallow a hearty gulp. And another. And another. Until the gentle ease of numbness overtakes my senses, and the sharp edges of my life blur sweetly.

I want it so badly. If I could just have a little, that would help. *Just one more time*, my addiction whispers. *Nobody has to know*.

My addiction is such an asshole.

In two hours I’ll get off this bed, and I’ll go to an AA meeting. I’ll sit in a dingy community room at a church and listen to strangers talk about how hard they fought to get sober, and I’ll feel a little less alone.

A little.

Heading out to a meeting will have the added advantage of getting me out of this room. Lark asked me how I was doing today, but I didn’t tell her the truth. I haven’t told anyone, because they’ll only worry.

My cravings are really sharp, and I haven’t wanted a drink this badly in quite a long time.

Living at home is part of the problem. My lowest moments as an alcoholic were lived right here in this room. It happened a year and a half ago, when Lark was kidnapped overseas. She used to have a job with a non-profit agricultural agency. They sent her to Central America, where she was snatched off the street. She was missing for weeks, and I was sure she was

dead.

That's when I climbed inside the bottle and forgot how to climb out. I stopped doing my law school work and ended each night drunk and weepy. I was so destroyed that I didn't even care that everyone saw my breakdown. For years I'd hid my favorite habit, but when Lark was missing, I stopped caring who noticed.

My family was astonished by my behavior. They hadn't noticed before that alcohol was my crutch, because they didn't recognize the urge in themselves. The week before Lark was rescued was the one of great drama, when I finally admitted I needed help. My mother drove me to my first AA meeting, where I cried like a fountain the whole time.

Ah, the memories.

Many people would call me lucky. My addiction didn't cost me my family. It didn't cost me my job, and I didn't have to kill someone behind the wheel of my car, or disappoint too many people before I acknowledged my problem.

I have sixteen months of sobriety.

But this is a rough patch. I'm stuck in this house again. Thinking about Lark again. And wondering how I managed to screw everything up with Daniela.

I feel really lost for someone who's supposedly on an upswing.

My phone chirps with a text, and I dig it out of my coat pocket, needing the distraction. The number is unfamiliar. But when I tap on the message, I recognize the Gin Mill logo on the Avatar. It's Alec Rossi.

How are you doing? he asks.

It's the same question everyone asks me. But for some reason I don't mind the question from Alec. He's just an acquaintance, not someone who expects me to self-destruct under the weight of my recent disappointments.

Also, he's super cute.

I've had better weeks, is my reply.

Alec: Want to hear a joke?

May: I love a good joke.

Alec: I didn't say it was a GOOD joke.

May: I'll take my chances.

Alec: A screwdriver walks into a bar. The bartender says, "Hey, we have a drink named after you!"

Alec: The Screwdriver responds, "You have a drink named Murray?"

May: Is it pathetic that I just LOLed?

Alec: Nah. I love that joke. If you're a really lucky girl, someday I'll tell you the one about the mushroom who walks into a bar. But that one has to be told in person.

May: It won't be easy to wait, but I'll try.

Alec: In all seriousness, is there anything I can do to help? Besides telling you my collection of bar jokes?

I'm about to reply no, when I have an idea. I probably shouldn't ask Alec for another favor. But if he says yes, it will help me out a great deal. And maybe there's a way I could make it up to him.

May: There is one little thing...

DARLING ONE

ALEC

I'm behind the bar again, and Smitty is late for his shift. This happens a lot, unfortunately. And tonight it's a real problem, because I'm not planning to work this shift.

My phone rings in my back pocket, and I fish it out, hoping it's not Smitty calling me to make an excuse. I tug it out and answer. "Hello?"

"Alec?" The voice is weak and unfamiliar. "It's Hamish."

"Hamish! What's shaking?" I feel a pang of worry. The old carpenter never calls me, he just walks through the front door instead.

"I hit a spot of trouble," he says. "I'm laid up for a couple days. Could you feed my cat and lock up my shop?"

"Of course," I say slowly. "Not a problem, man. But are you okay? Where are you?"

Hamish's chuckle sounds embarrassed. "Montpelier Hospital. But it's no big thing. Just a scare."

"Sorry to hear that. I'll check your place in twenty, okay? I'm on my way out about then."

"Thank you, kid."

"My pleasure."

I hang up the call and tuck the phone back into my pocket.

“Problem?” my sister Zara asks from right beside me. She’s tending bar tonight.

“I hope not. You know our neighbor, Hamish?”

“He’s one of my best customers. The man likes lemon-poppy muffins.”

“He said he’s in the hospital, that’s all.”

My sister’s eyes widen. “Oh, shit.”

“He played it down, but he didn’t sound so good.” Also, an hour ago I saw an ambulance pass by when I was taking trash out to the dumpster. Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence?

I keep this fear to myself. “Where the hell is Smitty?”

“Who cares?” Zara makes a face. “I don’t need his help.”

Uh-huh. Right. “So... Did I finish telling you about the new IPA from Hill Farmstead Brewery? Also—there’s a new ale. It’s made from malted barley. Unfiltered.”

“That’s cool, bro,” Zara says, sipping from a glass of club soda. “But I can read the board all by myself, like a big girl.” She jerks her thumb toward the beer menu on the chalkboard over her shoulder.

“But *did* you read it?”

Zara rolls her eyes. “Sweetie, I’ve spent far more time behind a bar than you have. I could run your bar with one hand tied behind my back.” She demonstrates by tucking one hand behind her body and grinning at me. “I could probably do it with *two* hands tied behind my back, but pouring drinks with my boobs sounds clumsy. Good for tips, though.”

“You’re a pain in my ass.”

“Nah. The truth hurts, Alec.”

Okay, sure. I’m having a little trouble handing over the reins to my crazy little sister. The whole family is stunned that Zara grew up to be a competent adult and a great mom.

Not that I’m willing to say that out loud. I value my balls too much.

And I hate admitting that Zara is right. She might actually be a better bartender than I am. Worse—she might be a better businessperson than I am. Her coffee shop is doing great, while I'm still struggling.

Success has never come easily to me. I was the kid who struggled in school—the one who did the homework but still got Cs. “Not the sharpest blade on the tiller,” Uncle Otto used to say about me.

Nobody ever said that I was smart. They only said that I threw the best parties. That's why owning my own business is such a gas. The Gin Mill is the first thing I ever did in my life that has a fighting chance.

Right after high school I tried the navy. But the Rossi family doesn't fare all that well in the military. I lasted less than two years before they discharged me for medical reasons. A bone spur in my shoulder made me unfit for duty. And after I had the surgery to fix it, they'd already processed me out.

Following that, I went to work for a friend's snowboarding tour company. It went bankrupt. Then I got a job as a manager at a ski area that—wait for it—went out of business.

I've always lived cheaply, though. So I'd saved up some cash by the time this old mill went to auction. The price was low because it stood vacant for years after Hurricane Irene flooded the ground floor. I rebuilt parts of the interior with my own two hands. And when I needed capital, I sold an upstairs apartment to my brother Benito.

Benito is the one I originally asked to work tonight, because his commute is just a flight of stairs. But Ben said he'd rather hang out with my niece than pour drinks. So now Zara is tending bar for the first time since I bought the place.

“I want a bonus for doing this favor,” she says, pointing at the beer taps. “How about a four-pack of Heady Topper? For Dave's visit next week.”

My impulse is to say no, just out of stubbornness. “Fine.” I sigh. “Just don't get caught carrying it out.” The law does not allow me to sell beer for

takeout.

“You take me for an amateur?” Zara scoffs. “What did we just discuss?” She turns to me and begins to shadow box.

“Easy, killer.” I grab Zara’s fists and kiss her forehead. “You’ll get your bribe. Although it’s not easy keeping that particular beer in stock.”

“Stop.” She gives me a little shove. “I don’t want to hear about your whoring ways.”

We both laugh, because all good jokes are based in the truth. The reason my bar never runs out of the sought-after craft brews is because the daughter of the beer distributor thinks I’m good in bed.

Although. We had a mix-up the night I had to help May move out of Daniela’s house. I went to dinner at the Shipleys and forgot all about poor Chelsea. One of these nights I’ll make it up to her.

Not tonight, though.

“Where are you going tonight, anyway?” Zara asks, adding a lime wedge to her beverage. “Hot date?”

“Nope. I’m actually going to a law school function with May Shipley.”

Zara blinks. “Wait, really? *You?* Mr. Party Boy visits the legal scholars?”

“Hey,” I complain. “I clean up nice. Don’t you think?” I run my hands down my button-down shirt, which I’m wearing over black trousers. I’m presentable. Though Zara is right—I’m not known for being formal. Or serious. You can take the guy out of the bar, but you can’t take the bar out of the guy.

“You look fine. But you and May Shipley? What’s that about? You don’t like the Shipleys. At all.”

“May’s all right. I was checking up on her, and she had this thing she didn’t want to go to alone.”

“She’s having a hard time,” Zara says as she cuts up lemon wedges, which she does twice as fast as I do. “This breakup is crappy luck. And her best friend is getting married.” Zara shakes her head. “That girl can’t catch a

break. Treat her nicely, okay? She's fragile."

"First of all, May isn't as fragile as you think."

Zara lifts an eyebrow. "You know this how?"

"Well... It's just a feeling I get about her." The way she fought back when her ex's hookup was mean. That took guts. There's just something steely about May that makes my heart go pitter-patter. "She seems solid," I say carefully.

Zara's eyes narrow. "You *cannot* bang her."

That's when Smitty decides to grace us with his presence, stepping out from the back room. "Who's banging who?" he asks, tying on an apron.

"Alec is absolutely not getting May Shipley naked," my sister says.

"Fuck that advice," Smitty argues immediately. "May Shipley is hot. Also, it would piss her brother off. Alec still needs to get even with Griffin for fucking *you*."

Oh, Jesus.

3...2...1...

Zara erupts. "Oh my God, you are a freaking Neanderthal." She grabs another lemon and slaps it onto the cutting board. "Let's have none of your caveman bullshit tonight on my shift."

"*Your* shift?" Smitty says, his voice getting high. "Who works here five nights a week?"

"It's both your shifts," I say, feeling like a kindergarten teacher. "Back into your corners."

I'd forgotten that Zara hates Smitty. She calls him "that cretin you hired." If Smitty gets defensive tonight and acts like dick, she'll never sub for me again.

I wait until Smitty goes into the supply room for a case of beer and then clear my throat. "Smitty gets a little cranky when you talk down to him."

"You want me to pretend to look up to him?" She snorts.

"Just don't pull rank. Even though we both know you're the best

bartender Vermont ever had, he doesn't want to hear it. He's *fragile*."

She looks up at me with a smirk. "Well played."

"Thank you. If you have any issues, text me."

"There won't be any need," she says, and I don't doubt it. My sister isn't easily rattled. "Just focus on May, okay? Ask her for a game plan. A woman always has one." Zara grabs the last lemon and braces it on the cutting board.

"Game plan?"

"If you're supposed to be her date, there's probably an image she's trying to portray. Does she want you to be *you*, or does she want you to pretend to blend in with the lawyers, Cousin Vinnie?"

"Hey now. I'm cuter than Joe Pesci."

She snickers. "Just be a good boy. Don't try to get in May's pants."

"I won't!" Jesus. My rep isn't *that* bad.

Or maybe it is. But I don't get to argue the point, because the front door opens up to reveal May. And then it's an effort not to swallow my tongue. She's wearing a sparkly top cut into a deep V in front, exposing a wedge of cleavage. Then there's her short skirt and black over-the-knee boots. May is a tall girl, so there's a few inches of creamy skin above the boots and below the skirt. It makes her legs look super long. Long enough to wrap around me while we're—

Fucking.

Yikes. *Nope*.

I yank my eyes back up to her face and smile. "Hot damn, lady. That'll drive your ex wild."

May stops in front of me and raises her palms to cover her cleavage. "Do you think it's too much?"

"He does *not* think it's too much." Zara snickers beside me.

"You shut up," I say out of habit.

"Hi, Z," May says. "You're tending bar tonight?"

"Sure am! It's nice to be out where grownups are. Usually I'm at home

with the kidlet right now.” She wipes her hands on her apron. “Run along, children. Have fun making the lady lawyers jealous.”

“Oh, we will!” I assure her. I grab my jacket off a hook and come around to greet May properly—with a chaste hug. “Let’s do this. Can we take my truck?”

“Sure,” May says, buttoning her coat. *Pity*. I’d been enjoying the view. “You’re such a good sport for going to this thing with me.”

“It’s not entirely selfless,” I say, walking her outside and opening the truck’s door for her. “You mentioned cheap wine and cubed cheese with crackers. That’s my weakness.”

“I’ll bet.” She snorts.

She’s onto me. I don’t give a fuck about this party. But my *new* weakness is May dressed in that short skirt. I asked to drive so that I wouldn’t stare at her the whole way there.

As I climb into the driver’s seat I can smell her perfume. And I notice she’s done something with her makeup that makes her eyes look enormous.

“How’s it going at home?” I ask as I reverse out of my spot. *Eyes on the road, pal*.

“Oh, fine, I guess. Except I’m back to square one, you know? Living in the parents’ house. Paying off my law school loans and watching sci-fi movies with my brothers. This was my life when I was sixteen.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I hang out in the same bar every night, and I’m thirty-two.”

“You get paid to do that.”

“It helps.” I drive only a hundred yards or so and then turn off the road. “This will only take a second. My neighbor asked me to feed his cat and lock up for him.”

“Need any help?” May asks, smiling at me.

Gawd, that smile. It’s just the right shape for kissing. But I won’t let it get to me. “You just sit there and look ravishing. Back in a jif.” I hop out of the

truck and jog up to Hamish's big double doors. I open one, and it lets out a loud creak. I love old buildings, and this one is pretty neat. The cavernous space is lit by antique soda lamps hanging from the ceiling. There are giant leaded glass windows and rough-hewn floorboards.

The place has serious atmosphere. And some day I'm going to own it. Hamish and I have a gentleman's agreement that when he's good and ready, I'm buying the property from him. Then I'll own this whole stretch of riverbank, and nobody can wreck it and put in a strip mall or a self-storage place or some other eyesore.

But that day is a long way off. "Here, kitty-kitty!" I yell.

From a dark corner of the shop, I hear movement. But the cat doesn't appear.

"Okay, well. I'm going to leave you some food." There's a stack of cans on the end of a worktable, and I open one of these and plop the food into a bowl on the floor. It smells disgusting. I don't want to leave this can in Hamish's waste basket, so I carry it outside with me and throw it in the dumpster.

I leave a minute later, after securing the big padlock on the exterior door.

"Sorry," I say to May as I climb back into the truck. I point it toward the law school and then hit the button for the stereo. The cab fills with the easy sounds of a Black Keys song.

"Look," May says after a couple of miles. She lays a hand on my arm. Her touch distracts me from the next couple words, but I get the gist of it. "You really didn't have to go to this thing. I don't know why I asked you for *another* favor. I'll owe you for years at this rate."

"It's cool," I say. May has no idea how guilty I feel for not telling her a whole week sooner about Daniela's infidelity. "You can owe me, but I charge interest. Next year at this time you'll owe me four favors."

"If tonight is a disaster, the interest might accrue pretty fast."

"Nah." I glance at her and catch worry lines crossing her forehead. "What

could honestly happen? If Daniela is an asshole, she'll only make a fool of herself, not you."

"Maybe," May concedes. "But if Tracy tries to get under my skin, I'll probably let her."

"Pfft. I'll just carry you out again. Nobody will even notice."

May laughs. "Please tell me there's no photographic evidence of that night. Does your bar have security cameras?"

"Only near the cash register," I promise. "And Benito put an extra camera in the parking lot after Zara's near miss."

"Good idea."

We lapse into silence again. But as we get nearer to the law school, I have to ask. "So—what's the play, here? How jealous am I allowed to make Daniela?"

May turns to study me. "I hadn't really thought about it like that. I really just wanted to have someone to stand next to."

"Okay—so I'm arm candy. That's super fun."

She laughs. "You're a good sport. But—swear to God—just your presence will irritate Daniela. You're a man, and that will make her crabby."

"Yeah? You rebel. Showing up with a man."

"I know, it sounds ridiculous."

"You used to date men, though, right?"

"Sure. And she *hated* that. She held it against me."

"Why? Men are awesome."

"Has anyone told you that you have very healthy self-esteem?"

"They don't have to tell me because I already know. But now I'm curious. Why will Daniela lose her shit if you show up with a guy?"

"She's..." May shakes her head. "She thinks bisexuality isn't real. That when I say I'm bi, she thinks I'm just not butch enough to say the L word."

"Hmm. You're not very butch in that outfit, babydoll."

"Thank you. I think."

“So she thought you weren’t a real lesbian? Or that you weren’t willing to *call* yourself a lesbian? There’s a difference.”

May thinks that over. “The first one. She accused me of not being lesbian enough in bed.”

“What?” I laugh. “That membership card couldn’t be too hard to snag. I’d say if you smooch her cooch, you’re in the club.”

May howls, which is nice, because now I’ve got her laughing. The sound goes right to my balls. “Are you *ever* serious?” she asks eventually.

“Fuck no. But you’d better explain, okay? Tell me more about what sexual technique would convince Daniela that you’re a real lesbian. Feel free to go into a lot of detail.”

May smacks me in the arm. “You only want to perv on the lesbians. Just like a man. You know there’s porn for that, right?”

“You don’t say?”

She laughs again.

“But really—seems kinda wrong to tell your own girlfriend how to be a real lesbian.”

“It wasn’t cool, but I’m more angry with myself for putting up with it. She didn’t like what I like, which is fine. But she didn’t want me to like it either.”

Now I’m dying of curiosity. What could May Shipley like in bed that Daniela thought was wrong? “You’re into bondage?” *Nah*. Daniela probably invented bondage. “Foot fetish? Blindfolds? If you don’t tell me I’m gonna keep guessing.”

“So you can perv.”

“I’m in my happy place right now. You’re sitting over there showing me cleavage and talking about my favorite topic.”

“Sexual shaming?” Her voice is wry.

I stop at a stop sign and look at her. “May, swear to god—I’m sorry she gave you any shit at all. I’m just joking around with you right now, but it’s

not cool that she made you feel bad and then cheated. You don't deserve that."

"Thank you." Her eyes get red, and she turns away so I can't see.

"Don't cry, babe. Gonna make your super-hot makeup run. Can't make the bitch jealous with raccoon eyes. Unless she has a thing for raccoons... Rawrrr."

May laughs and carefully dabs at her eyes. "You kill me, Alec. Thanks for being such a good sport."

It's easy, though. Making her laugh feels like a victory.

"You know how some women say they aren't criers?"

"I guess? Is that a thing?"

"Yeah. But I'm totally a crier. Always have been. I cry when we send the beef cow off to freezer camp or when Mom kills a chicken. I cry over babies and those sappy Super Bowl commercials with puppies and Clydesdales."

"Buy stock in tissues?" I suggest. "There are worse habits."

"Sure. But I had this boyfriend in college who hated it. Whenever I'd cry, he'd get really uncomfortable. It was part of why I stopped dating men. I had this idea that being with a woman would just be easier—that she'd understand me like no man could."

"And?"

"Daniela couldn't stand crying, either." May pulls a tissue out of her purse and blows her nose. "Next time I won't pick a super-bitch and it might turn out okay."

"Good plan, babe." I hold up a hand and she high-fives it.

YES

ALEC

“Which beer do you think I should try first?” the attractive woman leaning on my bar asks. “The Goldenpour or the Barclay Stout?” She’s pretty. Early twenties, probably. Tight sweater and tighter jeans. I’ve never seen her before, but she gives me a big smile.

Then she shifts her body slightly and bats her eyelashes at my bartender, Smitty.

Beside me, Smitty grins with amusement. Because this girl isn’t just choosing between two beers. She’s what Smitty and I call a waverer—she’s mulling over her choice of bartenders, too.

“Well,” Smitty says, propping an arm on the bar. “Goldenpour is crisp and yeasty with aromas of pear and citrus.” He’s rolling up his sleeves, that fucker, purposefully showing off the colorful tattoos on his forearms.

“On the other hand,” I break in, “the Barclay Stout has hints of cocoa powder and vanilla, a creamy finish, a lengthy tail, and nice *head*.” I actually flex my pecs as I say this, while Smitty tries not to bust out laughing.

“Wow.” She blinks back and forth between us. “Tough decision.”

Competing for women is our little game. I get the girls who want the fit and clean-cut type, and Smitty gets the ones who like ’em tattooed and

dangerous.

There's plenty of female attention to go around. We just enjoy this bit of nonsense.

"Hmm," the girl says. "I think I'll try the Goldenpour first."

"Ah, well," I say quickly as Smitty snorts out a laugh. "He can tap it for you." Smitty gives me a grin and reaches for a glass. She moves down the bar to wait for her beer.

"Can't win 'em all," Hamish—my best customer—says from a barstool in front of me.

"True."

"But the night is still young. As are you, whippersnapper." Hamish is a carpenter. His studio is a hundred yards down the road. In fact, he and I own matching old brick mill buildings on the Winooski River, where we each spend a lot of our waking hours tending to our respective businesses.

His is a high-end woodworking operation, while mine is devoted to mankind's greatest accomplishment: craft beer.

"Plenty of fish in the stream," I agree. And right now I'm more worried about serving all the fish than banging them. It's Thursday night. The weekend onslaught begins now, and I'm more or less ready.

Becky is working the tables tonight, which means Ed Sheeran is playing on the sound system. We have a rule—the waitress controls the playlist. She's making her way around the room right now, stopping to light a candle on every table. The reach-in coolers are stocked. The empty tables are clean.

It's November, so tonight's crowd won't break any records. The Gin Mill is the busiest during ski season and leaf-peeping season. Summers are pretty good, too. But there's a lull during November until the ski resorts open.

Tonight we'll be serving two kinds of customers—locals and foamies. A foamy is a beer tourist—a crazy soul who has come hundreds of miles—or even thousands—to sample Vermont's hard-to-find craft brews.

This year they're all dying to drink Goldenpour by the Giltmaker

Brewery. Rated 99 by Beer Advisor, it's the new Heady Topper—terrific yet impossible to buy. You can drink pint after pint right here at the Gin Mill, or you can wait in line for two hours on Tuesday morning outside the brewery in Waterbury. They'll sell you exactly two six-packs.

Lucky for both me and the foamies, I serve Goldenpour six days a week, along with a dozen other rare Vermont craft brews. To get the word out, I've spent the last year writing to every beer blog and travel website in the world, making sure they know that the Gin Mill is the place to be if you want to taste the best.

And it's slowly beginning to work. My bar is always crowded on the weekends and often on the weeknights, too.

I opened a bar because I wanted my life to be a seven-day-a-week party. Turns out owning a business never really feels like a party. But I love it anyway.

"Need a fill up?" I ask Hamish.

"Nah, I'm good," the carpenter says. "Thanks, kid."

"So what beer do you want to serve at your party?" I ask. He and I are planning a retirement shindig for him next month.

"Goldenpour, if you can swing it. But if you can't, that's okay, too."

"I'll ask. If they say no, I'll bring something good."

"I know you will."

The door of the bar swings open, and I glance up out of habit. I make seventy percent of my receipts Thursday through Sunday. If I served food, too, that would even things out a bit.

If only.

The new arrival isn't a customer, though. It's Chelsea from NorthCorp, my beer distributor. "Happy Thursday, hot stuff," she says. "I brought you a new IPL."

"Yeah? Awesome." I lean over the bar, grab Chelsea into a one-armed hug, and plant a kiss right on her jaw. Chelsea is a great girl. Not only does

she keep the Gin Mill stocked with trophy beers, but she also really likes to fuck me. She's my BDWB. Beer distributor with benefits.

Am I living the dream or what?

"Chelsea—Hamish and I have an invitation for you." I pluck a card off the stack on the bar.

"Do you, now?" She gives me a hot glance.

Hamish bursts out laughing.

"To a *party*. Here." I hand her the card.

"Oh, cool." She gives Hamish a smile. "You're the woodworker, right?"

"Indeed," he says. "I'm retiring. Well, sort of. Can't imagine quitting altogether. But I'm cutting back so I can travel. Alec is helping me throw a showing and a party."

"Sounds fun," she says, pocketing the card.

"I need an extra keg that week," I tell her. "Hamish asked for Goldenpour. Would you check if we can score an extra?"

"Sure!" she says in her very bubbly way. Chelsea and I are a lot alike. Always looking for the next party. "You free later?" she asks, shaking her butt to Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You," which is the next tune on Becky's playlist.

"Of course." I'm always free for Chelsea. "I have to close tonight, though." That means I won't be done here until about one, and sometimes she doesn't like to wait up for me.

"Hey—I can close for you," Smitty volunteers as he pours another pint of Goldenpour at the tap.

"Awesome!" Chelsea beams. "Thanks, Smitty!" She bounds off to open the rear door for her delivery guy.

Hamish watches her go. "You just got shaken down by your bartender," he points out.

"I noticed that, too." I shouldn't be paying Smitty the overtime just so I can get horizontal with my beer distributor. But Smitty knows I don't like to

say no to Chelsea.

Smitty is a decent bartender. Mostly. But he's sometimes pushy and kind of a flake. Lucky for him, I have a lot of empathy for the flakes of the world. And, hey, it's already decided. So I'll roll with it. "I guess I'd better make the most of the night, then."

"Oh, I'm sure you will." Hamish drains his beer. "I'm gonna roll. What's the tab?"

"There isn't one," I tell him. "Tonight's your free night." Hamish is literally the only person who gets regular freebies from me. But when I bought this place, he was a huge help. He just showed up one day when I was inspecting the heap of a building I'd bought and feeling panicky. I'm not the best business person. But Hamish offered me tons of information and helped me get contractors at good prices during my renovation.

"Night, man!" I call after him. "Thanks for keeping me company while I open."

"Thanks for never running out of beer," he says with smiling eyes.

Chelsea reappears behind me with her truck driver lurking in the background. "Alec, you gotta put this one on tap right away, okay? I told the brewmaster that you'd give it a try and talk it up."

Did you, now? "I'll swap it out tonight," I say, even though it's an inconvenience. "Set 'er down anywhere, Kevin."

Chelsea smiles, dancing along to Ed Sheeran, then ducking under the bar again. "You love this song, don't you Alec?" She's teasing me, since she knows I don't go in for crooners.

"I love it so hard," I lie, just to amuse her. "This song gets three snaps in a Z shape." I snap my fingers and swivel my hips. It's a little thing I do sometimes, spoofing *In Living Color*. Chelsea is too young to get the reference, but she doesn't care. She gives me a throaty laugh that suggests we're going to have a good time later. "Now let me get my prep work done, so I can beg off early for you tonight."

“Can’t wait,” she says, flipping her hair. “Sign here and I’ll get out of your way.”

I take the clipboard and sign for the delivery. “Later, hot stuff.”

“Later!” She leaves.

Down the bar, Smitty is already deep in conversation with another female customer. He’s pointing at the beer list and describing something with hand gestures designed to show off his tats.

Work hard, play hard. That’s how we roll at the Gin Mill.

A half hour later, though, I’m not dancing anymore. As the tables fill up with the happy-hour crowd, I am pouring drinks at top speed, just trying to keep up with demand.

A bartender’s job is simple enough—sell booze and keep everyone happy. A bar *owner’s* job, on the other hand, is a little more fraught. Lately, the partying-to-worrying ratio is a little lower than I wish. Business is good, and the bar is full of people. But my profit margin is shaky, and I don’t have enough cash to reinvest in the business.

Most nights I spend a fair amount of time watching the crowd, trying to guess what changes would make a key difference. If I take out the pool tables and put in a little stage for music, would that help or hurt? Am I charging too much for the premium beers? Or too little?

None of it will be solved tonight, though. I scan the faces in the crowd, and my gaze snags on a couple in the back corner booth. It’s two women, staring deeply into each other’s eyes. They were in here last week, too.

One of them is familiar to me, and I can’t figure out why. And a good bartender never forgets a face. So for the second week in a row, this is gonna bug me.

I mix two margaritas and pour a half a dozen beers. Between each one I glance into the corner again. The pretty, dark-haired woman is lip-locked to the shorter woman. She has a salt-and-pepper buzz cut, and I’ve never seen her before. It’s the dark-haired woman who’s familiar. I just don’t know why.

But watching her make eyes at the other woman bugs me. It's wrong, somehow.

Yeah, this is gonna drive me crazy.

"Alec," Smitty says.

"Huh?"

The glare he gives me makes his nose-piercing flare. "For the third time, what tap am I changing out for the new lager? The IPL?"

"Um..." I sigh. "There's a new IPL?"

Smitty's eyebrows lift. "Chelsea brought it? Never mind. I'll just decide by myself. I'll rotate out something generic. Cheapskates will have to drink the good hooch."

That's probably going to lead to some complaints, but I don't care right this second. I'm distracted by the couple again, because they're actually kissing now.

"Hey—are you macking on that lesbian couple?" Smitty asks. "You know there's porn for that."

"Oh, shit," I say slowly. "I just figured out who that is." And, yeah, it's bad news.

"A porn star?" Smitty asks.

"No, moron. Her name is Daniela. She's in a relationship with someone I know. And they live together." Last time I heard, anyway. I have a memory for exactly this kind of thing—names and gossip. I was destined to become a bartender.

"Uh-oh," Smitty says.

"No kidding." I watch for a moment longer, just to make sure I'm not imagining it. But I can see their tongues from all the way over here.

"She's cheating on her man with a woman?" Smitty dumps a new bucket of ice into the bin. "Kinda dumb, since we live in a small town."

"She's cheating on a *woman* with another woman," I clarify. "You know May Shipley?"

Smitty stands up, pointing at the Shipley Cider tap. “Like these Shipleys?”

“Yeah, that’s right. May is Griffin’s sister.”

“You gonna tell ’er? Why bother? It’s not like you’re a big fan of the Shipleys.”

He’s right. I should probably just leave it alone.

Another pack of drinkers descends on the bar, and I spend the next ten minutes pouring a lot of drinks. Someone asks for a snakebite, so I half fill a pint glass with Shipley Cider. The musky apple scent makes me think of high school, when I used to help the Shipleys get the last of their crop into storage at the end of every season. Ten bucks an hour. It seemed like a fortune back then.

And then August Shipley fired my father, and our lives went right to hell.

Good times.

Serving up drinks and smiles on autopilot, I consider what to do about May’s cheating girlfriend. Maybe they broke up and I’m worrying for nothing?

As Smitty said, though, it’s a small town. I probably would have heard about a breakup. My sister would have mentioned any big upheavals at the Shipley’s place.

I sneak another look into the corner, and the two women are still going strong.

God, I hate cheaters. Do I call May? Do I mention it to her brother next time I see him?

Nah, not him. Griffin would probably just think I was a gossip. We’re not close. Not since high school, when we were fierce competitors. And definitely not lately, since he broke my sister’s heart.

Funny all the things you can worry about while you’re pouring drinks.

That woman attached to Daniela’s face—I wonder who she is? And how stupid is Daniela, anyway?

“You’re staring again.” Smitty chuckles. “But that is pretty hot.”

“It’s not that,” I growl. “Not sure what to do.” This just pushes all my buttons. I hate cheaters more than I dislike the Shipleys.

Besides, May is the sweetest one of the bunch. A good girl. Quiet. Not as smug as her older brother.

“Nothing much you can do, anyway. And cheaters always get caught.”

Wiping down the bar, I think that over. He’s right, and he’s also wrong. Sometimes a person can live in willful denial for a good long time. My mom, for instance. She probably always knew my dad was sleeping around. But she put up with him even when he didn’t deserve it.

“This is gonna bug you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“Gimme your phone.”

“Why? Last time you had my phone you posted a picture of your ass on my Instagram.”

“It’s a nice ass. But that’s not what I’m doing, okay? Just unlock it and give it here.”

Against my better judgement, I comply.

Smitty takes a rag and wanders slowly through the big room. Candles flicker in crevices in the brick walls. People talk and laugh while music pulses in the background. The place looks great. Opening a bar isn’t exactly curing cancer. But I’m proud of this place anyway.

When Smitty reaches the back part of the room, he wipes a table with his left hand and subtly takes a photo of Daniela and her lover with his right hand.

“That was pretty slick,” I say when he brings my phone back.

He shrugs. “Slick would be if I could’ve also got a photo of my ass without you noticing.”

I jam my phone in my pocket as a group of four guys approaches the bar. “What’ll it be, gentlemen?”

And just like that, the weekend pace kicks back into high gear. First every barstool is taken, and then every table. Smitty fills drink orders as fast as our cocktail waitress can bring them over. And I do whatever needs doing. When you own your business, that's just how the day goes.

I forget about Daniela for a while. I pour beers and swap out kegs and upsell my customers into good Vermont craft brews instead of the shlock they'd drink if it weren't for my brilliance. The Ed Sheeran tunes have given way to an old Santana album and I'm loving life again.

Until I watch the bar door open, revealing May Shipley.

My first thought is: *Oh for fuck's sake*. I can think of only one other time May came to the bar—on opening night. But there she is, her cheeks pink from the cool autumn night.

My second thought is: *When did May Shipley get so hot?* She's wearing a soft sweater and black pants over legs that go on for days. Tall girls really turn my crank. Then again, many women do.

"Hey, Alec!" she says, waving.

I snap out of it in a hurry. "Wow, May! Haven't seen you since the summer."

She gives me a friendly smile, but then starts scanning the room.

"May," I say sharply. I don't even have a plan, except to stop her from experiencing the train wreck in the corner. Nobody deserves that.

But there's no time. It's almost like I can hear the brakes squealing as her eyes lock on the far corner of the room. Her frame stiffens as she spots Daniela. And then her hands ball into fists. She leans forward a little, as if the view might change if she were three inches closer.

"May," I try one more time, as if anything I could say would make this moment less awful.

She doesn't even hear me. Instead, she stomps toward the back, weaving between bodies as she makes her way toward that booth.

And now I'm in motion, too, ducking under the bar, following her,

wondering what will happen. I always thought of May as the quiet Shipley, but now she looks like a heat-seeking missile locked onto a target.

“You cheating *bitch!*” she yells before she’s even reached the table.

Holy god. I’m both impressed and on my guard. Bar fights are rare at the Gin Mill, but anything could happen right now.

Daniela freezes, her eyes popping wide. But the other woman has her practically in a headlock, and is still trying to eat Daniela’s face. Daniela tries to pull back. She doesn’t get very far, though, as her hookup keeps her head caged in a possessive maneuver.

“Let me go, Trace,” Daniela says as May seethes in front of them.

“No,” the stranger grunts. “That’s the whole fuckin’ point, right? I don’t wanna let you go. You were mine first. You’ll always be mine.”

Oh, hell. This train wreck cannot be stopped.

“That is so *touching*,” May spits. “*Except.* As Daniela’s live-in girlfriend, someone should have warned me.” May reaches down and tugs Daniela’s chin, so at least the soon-to-be-ex girlfriend will look at her. “*Pro bono* work, huh? Every Thursday? You’re pathetic!”

“Hey! Watch your tone!” the stranger bellows. She has a voice like our ancient margarita blender—loud and grating. “Get your mitts off my girl.” Then she actually grabs May’s wrist in her paw and twists it sharply.

“Ow!” May shrieks. “You...cuntmuffin!”

My mouth drops open just as May yanks her hand back and cradles it in obvious pain. I see tears in her eyes. But she blinks them away quickly. And then...

Somehow I anticipate May’s lunge. As she starts forward, I start, too. My arms are longer than hers, and before she can grab Daniela’s lover, I fold May into a protective hug. Or a human straightjacket. Take your pick. I tug her backward before she can do something she’ll later regret.

May stiffens in my embrace, looking over her shoulder with startled eyes. As soon as she identifies her captor, she lets out a frustrated breath. “Let go,”

she croaks.

“This whole thing is so shitty,” I say quietly into her ear. “But fighting can get you arrested if somebody calls the cops. And that’s bad for lawyers, right?” Not only did May go to BU for undergrad, she’s an attorney, too.

And, fine, I really don’t want anyone to summon the cops to my place of business. That’s never good.

She blinks once, then seems to relax in my arms. “Okay,” she says softly.

I let her go, and she takes a deep, angry breath. Then she turns toward her girlfriend. (Or former girlfriend?) “Don’t come home tonight,” she barks in the general direction of Daniela.

“She won’t,” the bitch in the booth says. “Daniela says you’re a shitty lay, anyway.”

Apparently my ninja skills aren’t as good as I thought, because this time May lunges before I’m ready. The slap she delivers to the stranger rings out loud and clear. And if any of my bar patrons missed the sound of it, they definitely didn’t miss the stranger’s roar of anger or string of obscenities and threats that immediately follows.

She leaps up onto the booth’s seat to try to get to May, but Daniela is blocking her way, so I have two or three precious seconds to prevent World War III.

I do this by scooping May up—all six feet of her, or near that, anyway—and bodily carrying her toward the door.

The Shipleys are a tall family. Luckily, so are the Rossis. She struggles, but only for a second. And I have her outdoors so fast that a moment later we’re standing in the cool November air, staring each other down.

“Holy crap! That was...” May lets the sentence die.

“Shitty?” I supply.

“Y-yeah,” she breathes. “Jesus. I am a huge idiot. I should have figured this out ages ago.”

“Um...” She’s definitely not an idiot. This girl is *fierce*. But now I’m not

sure how to help her. “Can I walk you upstairs and get you drunk? Owning a bar comes in handy sometimes.”

“Jesus.” May swallows. “That sounds way too appealing right now. But I’m afraid my AA sponsor wouldn’t approve.”

AA? “Fuckity-*fuck*,” I stammer. I’ve just offered to get a recovering alcoholic drunk? “I’m sorry. Shit. I...”

She holds up a hand. “No need to panic. People offer me drinks all the time. But these days I say no.”

“I’m sorry,” I stammer again anyway. *Jesus*. I’m such an asshole.

“For most people, it wouldn’t be such a life-changing suggestion.” She meets my eyes with her light brown ones. “But for me, it’s bad news.”

“Okay.” I’m trying to regroup. “Can I drive you somewhere, then?”

May closes her eyes and leans her head against the brick wall of my building. “I never want to see her again.”

“I’ll bet. That woman was a bitch on wheels.”

“I mean Daniela,” May says, opening her eyes.

I’d meant Daniela, too. But I’m smart enough not to say that right now. “You two live together, right? You need somewhere to go?”

May sighs. “I *have* somewhere to go. My family will throw a parade if I leave Daniela and move back home. They’re going to be *giddy*.” Then her eyes get shiny with tears. “Shit.”

“Aw.” *Mayday!* Crying women are my weakness. So I pull May into a hug. “Tell me how I can help.”

She takes a deep breath. “You have a pickup truck, right? I need to move out. Can I borrow your wheels?”

“Sure,” I say immediately. But I can’t let a teary woman move out of her place alone. Even if she is a Shipley. “I’ll go with you. It’ll be faster that way. Is there much furniture?”

“No.” She steps back. “All the furniture is hers. I just have clothes and books.”

“Okay. So this will be a snap.” She smells like lemons. I mentally slap myself for noticing. Now is not the moment to mack on May Shipley. “Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

“Alec, you really don’t have to. I’m sure you’re supposed to be behind that bar. And I could call my brothers.” She looks, if possible, even more glum saying that. “They won’t be able to hold back their glee.”

“Don’t bother them,” I say quickly. “Come on.” Taking her hand, I tug her away from the wall. “You’re not in any shape to drive.”

She’s right, of course. I’m supposed to be tending bar with Smitty. He’s probably getting crushed in there. I pull out my phone as May follows me toward the truck, and sure enough there’s a text from Smitty already. *WTF? Where’d you go?*

I bleep the locks and try to think. “Hop in. I just have to make one quick phone call.”

As May buckles her seatbelt, I look up at the lit windows of my brother Benito’s apartment. Since he’s home, I pull up his phone number and tap it. “Hey,” I say when he answers. “I’m supposed to be tending bar tonight, but now I have to help out a friend with some urgent business.” I’d explain, but it would take too long. Besides, I don’t even know why I’m bailing out May Shipley. “Could you check on Smitty in a few minutes? See if he’s slammed?”

“Sure?” Benito says. “After I finish my dinner.”

“Thanks. I owe you.”

We hang up and I shoot off a text to another of my bartenders, asking if he’d like to pick up an extra shift tonight. Then I start the truck and turn out onto the two-lane highway, heading south. “Your place is in Randolph, right?”

May snaps out of the daze she’s in. “It is. No... It *was*. I can’t believe it’s going to end like this.” Fresh tears spring into her eyes.

“I sure am sorry. Cheaters are the worst.” My father was the king of

cheaters. I watched him slowly destroy my mother's self-esteem until he disappeared for good when I was fifteen.

"Alec, I don't know why you're helping me like this." She wipes her eyes.

I just shrug, because I don't really, either. "That's what friends are for, right?" Although May and I aren't really friends. She's four or five years younger than I am. We didn't overlap at the high school, although I saw more than enough of her brother.

May reaches over and puts a hand on my forearm. "Well...I really appreciate it. When I straighten my head out a little bit, I'll make you an apple pie as a thank-you note."

"See? I knew I was helping the right person."

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes.